

“From Slavery to Freedom”
An African-American Preservation & Restoration Project

- Grand Opening February 1, 2009 -

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From Slavery to Freedom **The Magnolia Plantation Slave Cabin Project**

This project is being managed by *The Living History Group*
(www.thelivinghistorygroup.com)

Basic Project Overview

Magnolia Plantations slave cabins have a unique history, in which they have been utilized from the time of antebellum slavery through emancipation and the 20th century by African-Americans, both enslaved and free.

Magnolia is also unique in that it was also one of the earliest tourist attractions in the Deep South with its famous gardens and wildlife. As early as the 1870s, Magnolia opened its doors to tourists. This was in the midst of the Federal occupation and reconstruction era of the South. While most freed slaves were either migrating west or working as share-croppers on their former master's plantations, Magnolia could employ free blacks to work in the budding tourism industry as porters for the railroad cars bringing in tourists, gardeners, dock workers for the steamboats, and much more.

The discussion of slavery is often difficult, but it is an important topic that must be discussed openly and honestly whenever plantation life is addressed. Our knowledge and perspective about history is always changing and evolving. Enslaved Africans, and later African-Americans, were able to create a powerful and unique culture despite enslavement. Both the Europeans and Africans were pioneers in carving out an existence in the New World. In many cases they worked side by side, but there were also distinct differences. Slavery existed at Magnolia Plantation for almost two centuries beginning in the late 17th century. It is a fact of historical note that African slaves, and later African-American slaves, would do the majority of the work that built the fortunes of the Drayton family at Magnolia Plantation. During the period of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, some of these enslaved human beings would find their way directly to the Lowcountry from the West Coast of Africa, while others were brought to the area by way of Barbados.

From the 17th century until the early 19th century, West Africans were transformed from merchants, craftsmen, peasant farmers, and cattle-tenders into American slaves. They ate what they were given or could find, not what they wanted. They dressed in the clothes that were given to them, not those they had known in the past. The Africans had to give up their own language and learn to express themselves through other forms of communication. They were stripped of all material possessions as their enslavers attempted to transform them from human beings with a rich history and culture into beasts of burden. But the one thing that could not be erased was their memories.

The things they were taught as children, the cultural system they had grown up in, all of these things would remain part of their consciousness, and they would pass those memories down from generation to generation. By doing so, they created new patterns of

behavior necessary to adapt to their new environment. Melding African traditions from various regions with those of the New World created a culture and language that survive in various forms to this day. These include food (rice, related rice dishes, okra, etc.), music (Gospel, Jazz, Blues, Reggae, Rock & Roll, etc.), literature, poetry, and language (Gullah). Therefore the examination of enslavement, even in a microcosm setting such as Magnolia Plantation, is important to the greater understanding of our world today.

In the overall rehabilitation of these buildings, their interpretation will be a combination of preservation and restoration that includes period-appropriate furnishings to be added to each of the structures once the structural work is completed. Furniture can be an important interpretive tool when trying to illustrate and interpret life inside a home. Furniture can be a dynamic tool that can highlight the economic, social, and cultural life of a family at a specific point in time. Extensive research into the furnishings of African-American dwellings for this area and through these time periods will be accomplished as part of the overall project. A general list of some of the furnishings being considered for each of the cabins is mentioned below.

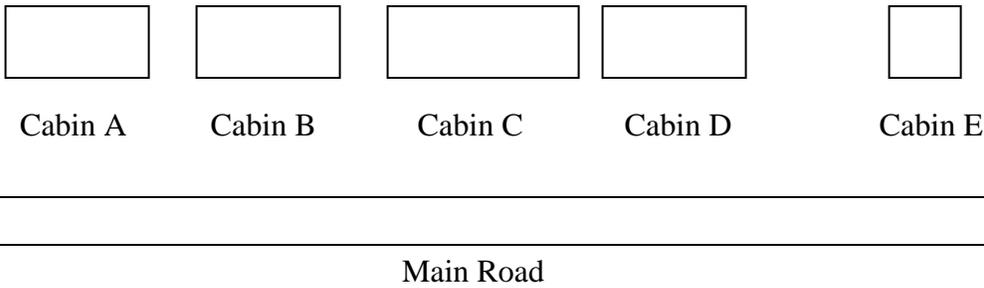
Because of its unique history and the almost constant occupation of these buildings in one form or another, we are pursuing the following in regards to their restoration and interpretation:

- We will be restoring and preserving all five of the buildings to reflect the different time periods of occupation:
 1. CABIN A: 1850 Slave Cabin
 2. CABIN B: 1930 Gardeners Home
 3. CABIN C: 1969 Leech Family Home
 4. CABIN D: 1870 Freedmen's Home
 5. CABIN E: 1900 Gardeners Home
- Build an Interpretation Exhibits Building to accompany the interpretation of the cabins. This building will house exhibits, interactive models, and much more.
- Create an interpretive program for the public
- Create an extensive educational program for school children

While other historic sites have restored similar slave cabins and houses in the past for interpretation, no site has ever restored a series of structures that interpret African-American history from slavery to freedom and beyond. Magnolia has the unique and exciting opportunity to have a transitional interpretive area for African-American history that is certain to garner national attention.

For the purposes of this proposal, the slave cabins in questions will hereafter be referred to individually as Cabins A, B, C, D, & E as seen in the illustration below.

North --->



A basic description of how each cabin will be restored and the work involved now follows.

Cabin A

Cabin A will reflect its original 1850 construction and usage as a slave cabin.

PRESERVATION

One room of the cabin (the right/north side) will be preserved with its ‘patina’ intact. The choice of which room to preserve versus restore is based on which of the two rooms is most intact with the period in question. It will be cleaned, repaired and stabilized as needed to ensure the safety of guests visiting the building. This will include some masonry details, foundation and floor repairs, and other work. The wall planks on the interior will be removed to show how the cabin was originally constructed. These planks will be numbered and saved to be utilized in the other cabin restorations or stored properly.

RESTORATION

Keeping as much of the original integrity of the structure as possible, the second room (the left/south side) will be restored to its 1850 slave cabin appearance complete with appropriate furnishings. This will include the removal of the wall planks and fresh white wash applied. We will give the room a feeling that it is being lived in so visitors will be able to compare and contrast what it might have looked like originally in one room, and see the original patina of how it looks in the other.

Cabin B

Cabin B will reflect a worker/gardeners cabin of the 1930's.

PRESERVATION

The room to the right/north will be cleaned, stabilized, repaired, and preserved to reflect its period of usage in the 1930s. Visitors will be able to view the original fabric of the room and see the bits and pieces of the newspapers still on the walls and ceiling dating from the late 1920s into the 1930s from the New York Times to the local Charleston newspapers.

RESTORATION

The room to the left/south will be restored to the period of the 1930s complete with furnishings, a wood burning stove, and recreated period newspapers plastered to the walls and ceiling.

Cabin C

Cabin C will reflect the life of the Leech family circa 1969.

Cabin C has had the most extensive alterations done to it over the years. It has been completely gutted over time. Nothing remains of the original fireplace and chimney, or any of the original interior walls, however there are interior walls that have been added in the 20th century. A thirteen foot extension has been built into the southern end of the cabin as well as an additional room of the back of the structure. These additions were done during the latter half of the 20th century.

This was the home of Johnny Leech, his father, and later his son Isaac. It has a unique history in that it was lived in through the late part of the 20th century. Therefore it presents a unique opportunity for interpretation as a look into not just the architecture and evolution of a structure, but the story of a family who made it their home for decades.

In 1969, Johnny Leech was living in this cabin with his wife and three children. The cabin still had no running water and cooking as well as heating was done over wood burning stoves. In 1969 Charleston also experienced racial strife with the hospital workers strike, giving this location the opportunity to discuss the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and compare it to the Civil Rights movement of the 1860s.

RESTORATION

More detailed oral histories with both Johnny and Isaac Leech will dictate the complete restoration of this structure, including its furnishings. The hope is that we can restore the entire structure to the 1969 time period.

Cabin D

Cabin D will reflect an 1870's Freedman's cabin.

Cabin D has had extensive alterations done to it in the late 20th century, including the removal of its firebox and chimney, a new wall, floor, and ceiling system, as well as electricity. It has also been raised higher off the ground than the other structures in the process.

RESTORATION

The removal of the late 20th century additions will reveal what is still original underneath and an attempt at preserving as much of that as possible will be undertaken. However, based on the extensive alterations a restoration of the structure to reflect a 1870s Freedman's home, complete with furnishings, is the goal. This would include the lowering of the foundation and the construction of a complete firebox and chimney made from hand-made bricks manufactured on site.

The interpretive opportunity to discuss the work that former slaves were doing at Magnolia Plantation at this time is compelling. Most former slaves were working on their old plantations as tenant farmers and share croppers. However, in 1870 Magnolia Plantation opened its doors seasonally to tourists to view the extensive gardens. Therefore these former slaves were working as gardeners, porters, and servants in an early tourism industry.

Cabin E

Cabin E will reflect it's original 1900 appearance when completed.

Based on the construction of Cabin E, it is estimated that the original building was built between 1880 and 1900 and originally had a front porch. Three additional rooms were added to the structure over time between the 1930s and 1980s. The current plan is to remove these additions, rebuild the front porch and restore it back to its original 1900 appearance. This structure was lived in up to 1999, which represents the last occupancy of any of the structures on this street.

RESTORATION & PRESERVATION

The main room (and only room) of the original structure will be restored to 1900, preserving as much of the original fabric in place as possible.

ORDER OF WORK & PROGRESS

Archaeological work was begun in January of 2007 with the bulk of the field work completed by June of 2007. Field laboratory work continued until May of 2008. Analysis of the more than 10,000 artifacts from the 18th and 19th century will continue until the fall of 2008.

Construction work began on the cabins in February of 2008. The cabins will be restored and preserved in the following order:

1. Cabin D
2. Cabin E
3. Cabin A
4. Cabin B
5. Cabin C

The construction phase should be completed by October of 2008. The furnishing and landscape phase of this project will begin following the building renovation phase and should be completed by the end of December of 2008.

The grand opening for the public will take place on February 1, 2009.

OVERALL INTERPRETATION OF “THE STREET”

Interpreting the differences and variations between the time periods each of these cabins represent both in architecture and furnishings, as well as the lifeways of the people who once lived there, will be accomplished utilizing a combination of interpretive approaches. These will include:

1. **Interpreters:** Trained interpreters will be on-hand for public programs and to guide visitors through the cabins and answer questions.
2. **Daily Scheduled Programs:** Regularly scheduled daily programs will be presented seven days a week on “The Street.” These programs will consist of visitors sitting on benches at the edge of “The Street,” with the full view of all five structures. The interpreter will then present an approximately 30 minute program that gives a general overview on both the history of slavery at Magnolia Plantation, the life of the African-American people that lived here, and a history of these structures and the time periods they reflect. It will also present the cultural contributions of African-Americans to our present-day culture.
3. **Self-Guided Paper Pamphlet:** A printed pamphlet with basic historical information and information on each cabin with a map and diagrams will be made available to the general public so that they can tour the cabins at their own pace

and leisure. Any additional questions they might have can be answered by the living historian stationed at the site.

4. **School Programs:** Special school programs will be made available to school groups dealing with African-American history and the history of slavery with special emphasis on third and fourth grade students who are required by South Carolina's curriculum standards to study slavery and African-American history. These programs will last approximately two hours and will be both interactive and engaging as well as addressing the key state curriculum standards.
5. **Landscape Interpretation:** The surrounding landscape will be utilized to interpret life at these cabins as well. A vegetable and medicinal herb garden will be recreated behind Cabins A & B. These types of gardens have existed behind these two dwellings as late as 2005 and will contribute to the overall interpretation of African-American life during the period enslavement as well as freedom. "Swept streets" will be maintained in front of Cabins A & D as was the custom. Eventually, livestock might be maintained behind the cabins as part of the interpretation in order to illustrate an active and living landscape. Therefore, the landscape will not be a sterile canvas, and its interpretation will be both sensitive and reflective of the time periods interpreted in each of the different cabins.
6. **Interpretive Center:** One of the long-range goals of this project will be the construction of an interpretive center that will present exhibits dealing with the history of slavery as well as the overall arc of African-American history at Magnolia. These exhibits will include archaeological artifacts recovered on site that relate to the topic; photographs; original letters and documents; oral histories; and interactive models depicting the various industries that existed at Magnolia and run by both slaves and later freemen.

The location and design of said structure will be sensitive to the historic context and location of the cabins. The center's location will be separate from that of the cabins and the immediate surrounding landscape so as to not interfere with their architectural continuity.

The combination of all of these programs and interpretation will give visitors a unique experience and perspective on the arc of African-American life at Magnolia Plantation. This project, entitled *From Slavery to Freedom*, is unlike any other African-American program in the United States, one that is both compelling and empowering.