



Historic Mitchelville: At the Dawn of Freedom

Description

Freedmen town on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina

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***"Those who deny freedom to others, deserve it not for themselves."
Abraham Lincoln***



In recognition of Black History Month, we want to share the story of our fascinating and poignant visit to Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park on Hilton Head Island in South Carolina. Many know Hilton Head as a gorgeous upscale resort island with spectacular white sand beaches, top-tier golf courses, and gated communities. There is much more to this beautiful island, a history we should all learn about.

The rich and turbulent history that occurred on the island during the Civil War played a strategic role in shaping the eventual success of the Union army. The first black troops enlisted in the Union Army were from Hilton Head Island, though they were disbanded just months later.

Another critical piece of history occurred here. Mitchelville was where the first self-governing community in the United States of formerly enslaved people during the Civil War existed. It was a unique and vital experiment predating Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation by several months.



It was our third visit to Hilton Head Island; regretfully, we had never heard of this historic site on the first two visits. Thank goodness for Goggle's search engine advising us what are the top things to do on the island. The Mitchelville Freedom Park is easy to find on the island's North end. It is the quieter part of the island, consisting of mostly older residential neighborhoods.

Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park Address

40 Harriet Tubman Way, Hilton Head Island, SC 29926

- [Mitchellville Freedom Park](#)

Mitchelville Preservation Project

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The hidden coastal town of Mitchelville is coming alive again. With the impressive effort by the Mitchelville Preservation Project, its story is slowly emerging from the shadows of the live oak trees that grace the park. Hilton Head has granted the Mitchelville Preservation Project a lease on 15 acres of land on the coastline north of the island where part of the town once stood. The site has many placards up as well as some replica structures. The Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park offers the public self-guided tours and learning opportunities through lectures, exhibits, tours, and special events. There

are also private tours provided 2-3 days a month. To check out their upcoming programs and events, check out their [official event page](#).

The site will expand over time; it is early in its stages of development. Their website states, “With no other site serving as such a template or illuminating the authentic story of the place where freedom began for America’s Black citizens, Historic Mitchelville is uniquely positioned to broaden the awareness and recognition of its rich story. Actions to do so began more than three years ago under the leadership of HMFP’s Board of Directors, setting sights on an activated Park to more broadly attract and inspire visitors and to instill a deeper appreciation for the significance and the peoples of Historic Mitchelville.”



From their site

“The graphic presented provides a comprehensive view of our plans for the Park, including an 18,000

square foot Visitors Center, an Event Lawn, and eight to ten reconstructed houses representing the orientation and clustering of homes at Mitchelville during the historic period. Our vision is to create an imaginative and exciting place that celebrates the American spirit through the telling of the story of the first freedman's town in America, and that informs and strengthens the fabric of our shared American heritage."

History



Image from Explore Mitchelville site

Let's start with a bit of history. Union Naval forces and Army expeditionary forces in early November 1861 launched an attack on the Confederacy in Port Royal Sound, South Carolina, between Savannah, Georgia, and Charleston, South Carolina. A Union fleet of about 60 ships and 20,000 men sailed from Fortress Monroe in Virginia and arrived off the Beaufort, South Carolina coast. The Battle of Port Royal was one of the earliest amphibious operations of the American Civil War. The attack on Hilton Heads Confederate Fort Walker and other strategic places began early November 7, 1861. By that afternoon, the Union fleet had fired nearly 3,000 shots at the two forts, and the Confederate forces retreated. With the Union capturing the area, Hilton Head became the southern headquarters for the Union army.

As a result of Union troops capturing Hilton Head, hundreds of "contraband" enslaved people on the island began their long road to freedom. These former slaves were not yet free even with the Union capture of Port Royal, where the term for these former slaves, "contraband of war," originated. Some Union Generals even allowed Confederate owners to reclaim their "property," returning many back to slavery. Things, though, were different on Hilton Head Island.

Anti Slavery Voices

The Secretary of the Treasury Department, Salmon P. Chase, was a robust anti-slavery voice in the Lincoln cabinet. He sent Abolitionist Edward L. Pierce to Hilton Head to look into the "contraband" situation. Pierce, in February 1862, found 16 plantations on Hilton Head and at least 600 blacks on the

island, many coming from the neighboring Sea Islands. In April 1862, a military order was issued, freeing the blacks from the Sea Islands. Four months later, Lincoln developed his own emancipation plan – officially making the “contraband slaves” freedmen.



Image from Explore Mitchelville site

In the fall of 1862, Union Army General Ormsby Mitchell claimed 150 acres that would later be named Mitchelville in honor of the General. By March of 1863, the town was built, and it was divided into districts for the election of councilmen by the town’s residents, charged with establishing police and sanitary regulations. In addition, “every child, between the ages of six and fifteen years, residing within” Mitchelville was required to attend school – the first compulsory education law in South Carolina.

By 1865 Mitchelville was a vibrant community that contained from 1,500 to 3,000 residents from diverse backgrounds and origins. The houses were often simply built, the residents provided the labor, and the military sawmills provided free lumber. Each home had nearly a quarter of an acre for planting gardens.

“This experiment is to give you freedom, position, homes, your families, property, your own soil. It seems to me a better day is coming...a better day is dawning!”

General Mitchel

Living on their own terms



Image from Explore Mitchelville site

What makes the town of Mitchelville so significant is that these formerly enslaved people could now live on their terms and create their community of political, social, religious, and economic freedom. The

newly minted citizens went about their business with elections, enacting various laws, collecting taxes, and making a living. One of this newly freed community's first priorities was reuniting families. Slave owners often split up families for profit or punishment. Here on Hilton Head Island, these families found each other again and lived in their own homes as a family unit. Adults in the families could walk to their jobs at local forts or towns. Children would attend school and share what they learned with their parents, many of whom had never received any form of schooling.

Free at last: The Civil War Ends



Photo from Harriet Tubman National Historic Park site.

On April 9, 1865, the Civil War ended with the surrender of the Confederate army in Virginia. Celebrations all over Hilton Head began. By this point, word had spread of Mitchelville's reputation as the first self-sustaining and productive black freedmen's town. That led to many visits from dignitaries, including Abolitionists Harriet Tubman, William Lloyd Garrison, and Theodore Tilton. Garrison gave a rousing speech at the First Black Baptist Church in Mitchelville. John Nicolay, Abraham Lincoln's former secretary, was also in attendance. Sadly just days later, Abraham Lincoln was assassinated.

What you will find at the park



The setting at Historic Mitchelville Freedom park is a beautiful wooded area with many stunning Live Oaks. There is an especially large Live Oak near the entry of the park. The educational placards and replica structures are well organized near the main parking lot. There are picnic tables and lots of shade for those who wish to enjoy a picnic. The park sits along the coastline with many trails leading to the marsh's edge and Fish Haul Creek beach. You will find usually find just a few tourists wandering about. The area is teeming with birdlife, and you may have a chance to spot sea turtles.

A pier is off the main area by the parking lot near the rowboat on display. This pier has a Gazebo on the end of it. It overlooks the marshland with houses, and the ocean is in the distance. It is a peaceful setting.



Further into the park is a path down the beach, where you will find a pier to enjoy the views. Wander a bit past the dock to Historic Mitchelville Beach Park, one of the most natural beaches on the island. This area has restrooms, showers, and other facilities.

We meant only to make a short stop but landed up spending a couple of hours. Having the cutest young black cat follow us from the beginning to the end of our visit slowed us down, as we would stop and pet him often. In the end, it was the story of Historic Mitchelville that so fascinated us. What a gift to learn so much while in such a magnificent setting.

The park is free to enter. Hours of operation are daily, 6 am to 9 pm. There are restrooms on-site and plenty of free parking.

Where to stay when visiting the area

Hilton Head Island has a large selection of hotels and timeshare rentals available. The area can be pricey, though. More affordable accommodations can be found off the island or in nearby Beaufort. The beaches on Hilton Head Island are some of our favorite in the world. The white sand is so firm you easily walk for miles on the beach. What is even more fun? Rent a bike for the day and ride along the edge of the surf. It is such an incredible experience. Below are links for Expedia and Booking.com to find accommodations.

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Final Thoughts

Make a stop at Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park if you are in the area or considering a road trip that passes by Hilton Head Island. You get a beautiful setting with lots to do. Still, most importantly, you will learn about the journey of Historic Mitchelville and be inspired to continue the legacy of the trailblazers of Mitchelville! Once the grander plan is complete, we will return to see the completed project.



To learn more about “Where Freedom Began,” check out the [Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park website](#).

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Historic Mitchelville Photo Gallery



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Reconnecting with Family

Reuniting with family was one of the first concerns of African slaves who escaped to Hilton Head Island. Slavery split up families. Owners could sell family members for profit or punishment. On Hilton Head Island, and places where freedom seekers gathered, relatives found each other. Immediate and extended families moved into Mitchelville and began creating a community in 1862. Adults walked to their jobs in the town or at nearby forts. Children went to school and shared what they learned with their parents. Elders helped by watching children and tending gardens. Mitchelville families dreamed and worked for a better future.



Woman and child at Drayton Plantation on Hilton Head Island, near Mitchelville, c. 1865. Photo taken by Henry P. Moore. Image courtesy of The Boston Athenaeum.

Less than a
reporter for
Island wrote
families to
Broad River
and finding
island we

The San Francisco Bulletin, January 18, 1862 on Hilton Head Island: A man named David, from Savannah...arms firmly clasped around the neck of a colored woman, she was clasping him just as firmly, a little boy of about eight...hanging on both. David had found his wife Lucinda, and his boy, Frank, who had been sold away from him, and from which he had not seen in eight long years.





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Creating the Mitchellville Community Imprint

Due to the generous support of Women In Philanthropy, Historic Mitchellville Freedom Park (HMFP) was able to effectively implement the "Creating the Mitchellville Community Imprint" project during the Summer of 2019. Field Director, Katherine Seeber, and her team conducted excavations on this site near the Praise House site to confirm evidence of a historic church dating back to the Mitchellville era.

A previous excavation, led by Seeber during the summer of 2018, uncovered the possibility of a structure directly under the Praise House replica. The team dug two trenches on either side of the replica and collected over 1,300 objects to be researched at a lab at Binghamton University in New York. Seeber's findings determined that there was also a 4,000-year-old Native American imprint in this same area. This prompted HMFP to make changes to their master interpretive design plan to create a space honoring the archaic community, Mitchellville, the first self-governed town of those formerly enslaved in the United States.



This research made possible through the generosity of Women In Philanthropy, Hilton F







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SWEETGRASS BASKETS

Weaving Tradition & Enterprise

FOUR HUNDRED YEARS AGO, people from many cultures across West and Central Africa were enslaved and forcibly brought to the southeast coast of America. Some came from rice-growing regions, where baskets were part of the harvesting process. The enslaved men and women continued to sew baskets as they labored on plantations, passing the tradition down to their descendants, the Gullah people. Today, intricate Gullah baskets are considered works of art.



Sweetgrass (*Muhlenbergia filipes*) thrives in the sandy soil of marshes along the coast of the Southeast U.S.



Basket forms reflect different uses. Fanning baskets were for flipping rice grains to rid them of the dry bits of husk.



Each basket begins with a knot of wet grass. The maker then attaches coils of grass, pine, or bulrush and strands of palm fronds.



Artists have moved beyond the traditional form of baskets to make jewelry, napkin rings, lampshades, and other objects using coil-and-sew technique.

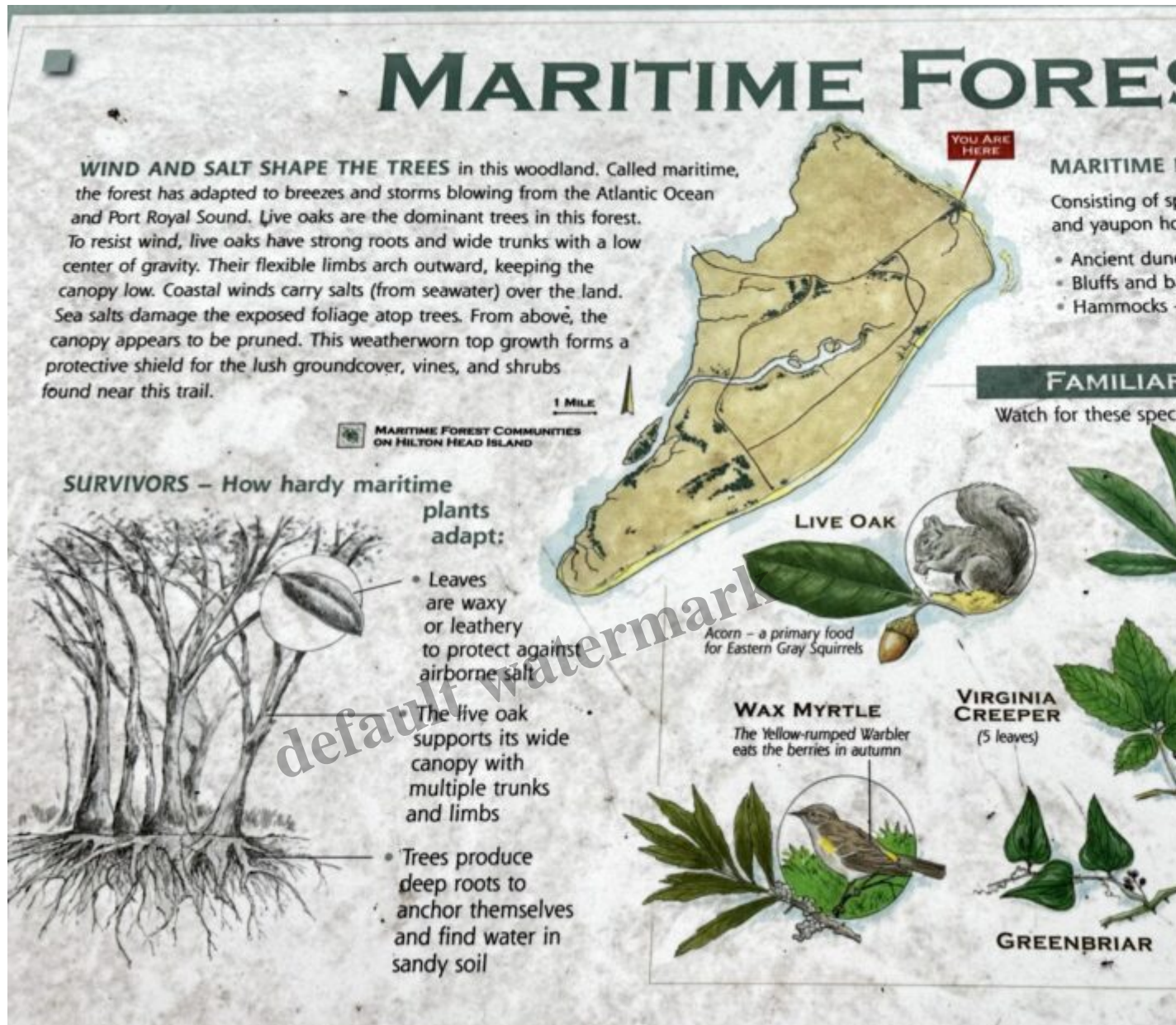




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MITCHELVILLE

Building a Home

IN THE FALL OF 1862, Union Army general Ormsby M. Mitchell claimed this site as a town for formerly enslaved men, women, and children. Within a few weeks, the residents had created a grid of streets and, using materials supplied by the army, built houses on identical quarter-acre lots. The town became known as Mitchelville. It eventually became home to 1,500 people, who, for the first time ever, could live according to their own terms.



The formerly enslaved could finally earn money for their labor. Mitchelville residents worked for the Army and earned extra cash by selling the fish that they caught or the vegetables from their gardens. Today, some Gullah people maintain small farms.



Free to openly practice religion, the people of Mitchelville founded three churches. All three continue to flourish.



Houses varied in size, design, and style, reflecting the individuality of each builder.

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*"I fish in the same places my father
and my grandfather fished.
I've taught my son to cast a net.
I've taught my grandson to cast a net.
The culture is not dead."
—Wilson Morán*

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THE BATEAU

Navigating a World of Water

FOR CENTURIES, people living on the Sea Islands have relied on the bateau, a small, wooden, flat-bottomed vessel. Sturdy and stable, it nimbly moves through the connected creeks, rivers, and bays of Port Royal Sound. Many islanders are Gullah, descendants of enslaved West Africans, and have maintained their ancestral traditions of sewing and hand-casting fishing nets. Outfitted with a bateau and a net, a skilled fisherman can bring in a decent catch.



Port Royal Sound is home to a wide variety of fish, as well as shrimp, oysters, clams, and blue crabs—all under threat due to climate change.



The bateau resembles traditional West African fishing boats, but "bateau" is French for "boat." French colonists used flat-bottomed wooden boats to explore the Americas in the 1600s.



The Gullah community hopes to preserve its traditional fishing grounds for future generations, working with government organizations to restore salt marshes.



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THE SALT MARSH OF FISH HAUL CREEK



ATLANTIC BLUE CRAB



FIDDLER CRAB



WHITE SHRIMP



MARSH PERIWINKLE SNAIL



RACCOON

A PRAIRIE OF GRASS AND TIDEWATER, this salt marsh surrounds Fish Haul Creek. Here, high tides move slowly inland through the creek and its tributaries. Rising saltwater eventually spills over the banks and deposits suspended silt and organic matter. In this sediment plants have grown for centuries, forming a broad wetland. Low tides occur 6 hours, 12.5 minutes after high tides. Ebb (outgoing) tides expose productive feeding grounds for birds, and transport nutrients and animals to join the offshore food web. The salt marsh ("salt" from saltwater + "marsh," a wetland with few trees) changes continually, but it is always Hilton Head Island's most productive wildlife habitat.

FISH HAUL CREEK

A remnant of an ancient shoreline, this inlet heads inland on a course parallel to the present ocean shoreline.



MANY MARSH HABITATS

Fish Haul Creek provides food, water, and shelter for diverse wildlife. Can you locate these habitats?

- 1 Mouth of Creek: Fish Haul Creek empties into Port Royal Sound, forming mud flats sought by shorebirds.
- 2 Tidal Creek: Home for fish and other marine life, the creek holds water most of the time.
- 3 Tidal Pool: Water-filled depressions are favorite hunting grounds for wading birds.
- 4 Low Marsh: Smooth cordgrass tolerates flooding by saltwater.
- 5 High marsh: Plants such as black need regular tidal flooding.
- 6 Salt Pan: Sandy areas where saltwater plants can tolerate the saline (salty) soil.
- 7 Wrack: Piles of decomposing cordgrass into the marsh.
- 8 Hammock: Small tree islands in or near migratory songbirds.





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Scan for a video
Harriet Tubman
visiting Mitchellville

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A Mitchelville House

In September of 1862, General Ormsby Mitchel set aside some land on General Drayton's Fish Haul Plantation for a village for the contrabands (former slaves) who were working at Fort Walker. He asked some Army engineers to build a log cabin as a sample. He also asked the contrabands to build a cabin after their own ideas. After the models were completed General Mitchel selected the one that had been built by the contrabands. He then provided the contraband families with boards, nails, and tools and instructed them to build on the lots which had been marked off. You are looking at an example of a Mitchelville house which also would have included a garden plot for raising vegetables.









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[VRBO](#) is now under the Expedia group's ownership, which many were worried about, but it hasn't panned out to be a concern. It is a massive network with access to all lodging forms should issues arise. Joelle has used VRBO for many years with her family and has had no problems with it.

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