



Foundation Document Overview

Reconstruction Era National Historical Park

South Carolina



Reconstruction Era Collection – *Mine Eyes Have Seen The Glory* by Sonja Griffin Evans

Contact Information

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Purpose



RECONSTRUCTION ERA NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK, in Beaufort County, South Carolina, preserves and interprets the resources and complex national stories of Reconstruction—African Americans' quest for freedom, the challenges resulting from the abolition of slavery, and the struggles to redefine the nation during and after the Civil War.



Significance

Significance statements express why Reconstruction Era National Historical Park resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- In November 1861, while the Civil War raged in the background, Beaufort County became a birthplace of Reconstruction as one of the first places in the United States where formerly enslaved people began defining freedom on their own terms.
- Because of the early occupation by the United States military and implementation of Treasury Department policies in 1862, many African Americans were able to acquire land in Beaufort County, and through political and social organizations many held on to their lands, despite challenges from former landowners. In this setting land ownership and control over agricultural labor was the way to sustain community life, cultural identity, and economic independence.
- On January 1, 1863, an elaborate ceremony and historic reading of the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed all slaves in states then “in rebellion” against the United States, took place at Camp Saxton, a Union encampment at the Smith Plantation. Camp Saxton functioned as both a recruiting post and training ground for the 1st South Carolina Volunteers, one of the first African American infantry regiments mustered into Federal service during the Civil War.



Significance



- One of the most influential African American politicians during Reconstruction, Robert Smalls, a Beaufort native and former slave, had a political career that spanned the entire Reconstruction era including advocating for free compulsory public education, representing South Carolina in the United States Congress in 1875–1887, and fighting against the disenfranchisement of African American voters.
- Participation in the political process was a defining component of freedom during Reconstruction. In Beaufort County, African American communities mobilized for the right to vote, and when enfranchised in 1867, African American men, many of them Civil War veterans ready to defend their civil rights, exercised their right to vote, becoming a driving force in politics both locally and nationally.
- Once freed, many African Americans in Beaufort County wanted to worship in churches and join organizations that reflected their communities. The Brick Baptist Church—also known as the Brick Church—was built by enslaved Africans in 1855 for the white planters on St. Helena Island. After the white population fled from the Sea Islands in 1861, freed African Americans began to make this church their own.
- Freed people sought education since it had been denied to them for so long. Northern missionaries including Laura M. Towne and Ellen Murray provided access to education for the formerly enslaved, leading to the establishment of Penn School in 1865 on land donated by former slave Hastings Gantt.
- In the 20th century, the Penn School evolved into the Penn Center and remains a crucial place for education, community, and political organizing. As a meeting place in the 1950s and 1960s for civil rights leaders, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the staff of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Penn Center links the democratic aspirations of Reconstruction to those of the modern civil rights movement.

Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Brick Baptist Church**
- **Darrah Hall at the Penn Center**
- **Camp Saxton**
- **Oral Histories, Archives, and Museum Collections**
- **Partnerships and Collaboration**

Reconstruction Era National Historical Park contains other resources and values that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.

- **Old Beaufort Firehouse**

Related resources are those that may be part of the broader context or setting in which park resources exist; represent a thematic connection that enhances the experience of visitors; or have close associations with park fundamental resources and the purpose of the park. Related resources may be fundamental to the park, but they are not owned by the park. Many resources related to the Reconstruction era were identified and documented as part of “The Era of Reconstruction, 1861–1900: A National Historic Landmarks Theme Study.” As mandated by Congress, Reconstruction Era National Historical Park and the Reconstruction Era National Historic Network will serve as a national platform for telling the story of Reconstruction by conducting research, producing and disseminating educational and promotional materials, and providing technical assistance to federal and non-federal entities interested in being a part of the Network. The following related resources in Beaufort County have been identified for Reconstruction Era National Historical Park.

- **Penn Center National Historic Landmark District**
- **Beaufort National Historic Landmark District**

Description

The Reconstruction era (1861 to 1900) was a time of extraordinary transformation in the United States, as the nation grappled with how to reunite the country after the Civil War and how to protect the rights of millions of newly freed African Americans. Following the Civil War and to set the nation on a new footing, Congress passed three constitutional amendments, the 13th, 14th, and 15th. The amendments permanently abolished slavery, promised birthright citizenship and civil rights, and prohibited race-based discrimination in voting. Central to Reconstruction was the former Confederacy, where the impact of slavery's abolition was felt most strongly and where the experiment in racial equality was attempted most extensively. There and across the nation, African Americans faced steep obstacles as they attempted to claim their newly won rights. Many of Reconstruction's promises went unfulfilled, but the ideas and institutions developed in that era provided a crucial framework for the civil rights movement 100 years later.

Despite the importance of Reconstruction, many Americans know very little about it. What they do know is often outdated or inaccurate. Historians once portrayed the period as a failure and defined it narrowly as the years between 1865 and 1876. Now they examine the era's broad triumphs and also its long reach. During this period, Americans debated profound questions: What did freedom mean? What kind of country would this be? What kind of political system should govern it? What were the rights of citizenship, and who could be a citizen? They struggled earnestly—if not always successfully—to build a nation of free and equal citizens. Reconstruction is often called the country's Second Founding. To this day, the outcomes of the vast political and social changes of the Reconstruction era remain visible across the landscape.

One place that embodies the themes of Reconstruction with special merit is Beaufort County, South Carolina. The significant historical events that transpired in the City of Beaufort, the Town of Port Royal, and the neighboring Sea Islands make this area an ideal place to tell critical national, regional, and local stories of experimentation, potential transformation, accomplishment, and disappointment.

The park was first established as Reconstruction Era National Monument via presidential proclamation on January 12, 2017, and redesignated as Reconstruction Era National Historical Park by Congress on March 12, 2019.

The park boundary includes approximately 65 acres of land in three different locations within Beaufort County. Approximately 16 acres of land, or interests in land, are controlled by the federal government. Key places include: the Brick Baptist Church and associated cemetery (an approximate one-acre historic preservation easement) on Saint Helena Island; Darrah Hall and associated easements (approximately four acres) within the Penn Center National Historic Landmark District on Saint Helena Island; a portion of the site of Camp Saxton (approximately 11 acres) on lands currently administered by the U.S. Department of the Navy at Naval Support Facility Beaufort in the Town of Port Royal; and the Old Beaufort Firehouse (approximately 0.10 acre) located within the Beaufort National Historic Landmark District in downtown Beaufort. Along with the park's redesignation, Congress established the Reconstruction Era National Historic Network in 2019 to connect places including existing NPS units and programs across the U.S. that are important to the Reconstruction era. The collection of historic sites in Beaufort County, South Carolina, along with other nationally significant sites outside national historical park boundaries, provides a unique opportunity for visitors to understand the complex history and explore places associated with the Reconstruction era.

