



BY IVY LAMB

# Seeking the Seeds of Freedom

The Mitchelville Preservation Project works to restore a cultural landmark.

**O**n Hilton Head Island, an empty plot of land holds an invisible history: the story of America's first planned community governed by freed slaves.

Wiped away by time and coastal storms, the freedmen's town lived on only through artifacts and islander's stories until the Mitchelville Preservation Project stepped in to preserve this important piece of American history.

### A Hidden Past

Historic Mitchelville traces its roots to the Civil War. In 1861, Union soldiers captured Hilton Head Island from the Confederates. In the wake of victory, Union forces found hundreds of "contraband" slaves on the island. Many more escaped slaves, seeking freedom, sought refuge on the island. The army housed them in bar-

racks, but living conditions soon became intolerable, and in 1862 (a full year before the Emancipation Proclamation) the military issued an order to officially free the ex-slaves.

General Ormsby Mitchel created a town for the freedmen. Each family was given a quarter-acre lot, and the town had roughly 1,500 residents. A radical experiment for the time, Mitchelville allowed newly freed slaves to run their own self-governed community, with elected officials, taxes, and what was likely the first compulsory education law in the South. In a time of deep uncertainty, Mitchelville's residents proved that a people who had been



trapped in bondage for 250 years could redefine the meaning of freedom in America.

### Rebuilding a Legacy

After the war, Mitchelville began to dissolve as the army and many residents left the island. The great hurricane of 1893 destroyed most of the remaining buildings. Today, the Mitchelville Preservation Project's talented and enthusiastic 17-member board of directors aims to rebuild the site as a commemoration to the freedmen who lived on the island.

Working with community partners, including Beaufort County's Rural and Critical Land Preservation Program, the board secured a lease on 35 acres of town-owned land where part of Mitchelville once stood. Plans to build the Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park on this site are underway. The park will allow visitors to envision what life was like in the 1860s for the freed slaves.

The park will include on-going archeological digs and genealogy research, replicas of the

freedmen's cottages, school, and prayer house, as well as commemorative statues. A welcome center will house interactive exhibits and special events.

Although the park (estimated to cost \$7-10 million) is still in development, the Mitchelville Preservation Project is also holding events to raise awareness about Hilton Head's past. On October 22, the inaugural Mitchelville Forum brought together, for a Civil War Sesquicentennial Commemoration Event, American History and Civil War scholars from across the nation to discuss the lasting impact of the community at Mitchelville.

Designed to inspire and enlighten both visitors and residents, the Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park will become a vital part of the Lowcountry's Civil War attractions by creating a lasting physical memorial to the struggles and perseverance of the men and women who worked to create a more inclusive definition of freedom.

Above counter-clockwise from top right: Barracks housing prior to Mitchelville; Mess house for laborers; Refugee quarters; Preliminary Master Plan for the Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park.

To learn more about the Mitchelville Preservation Project, including ways to donate or volunteer, visit [mitchelvillepreservationproject.org](http://mitchelvillepreservationproject.org). All donations are fully tax deductible. The Mitchelville Preservation Project, Inc. is a 501(c) 3 organization.

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