

Toward a more truthful and useful Charleston history

By Charlie Smith, Sept. 2, 2016 [full essay] | When the Charleston County Planning Commission's sub-committee on Historic Preservation announced last year that consultants had been hired to conduct the 2016 update of the Historic Resources Survey, I was initially very excited that we would finally be addressing some of our past failures to protect important historic sites and buildings throughout Charleston County. Realizing that we did not have endless funds with which to work, we began to narrow the scope to a task that was feasible given our limited resources. I was initially not happy at all with the 1940-1975 time frame chosen for the limited study. In my view, the time periods that needed the most study in Charleston County history and which had been the least regarded were the Reconstruction, Phosphate Mining and Truck Farming periods of Charleston County history. To me, the first two periods, reconstruction and the phosphate mining period, were the "Forks in the Road" where we had had the opportunity to make choices for the betterment of ALL people in our community; but rather than choosing to make good decisions for all, we consciously made choices that benefited only a few at the expense of many...bad choices that still affect us to this very day.

Immediately following the American Civil War, Reconstruction laid the groundwork for formerly enslaved people to theoretically enjoy the benefits of freedom defined in our Declaration of Independence. With the removal of US occupation troops from South Carolina that came as a part of a corrupt deal to elect Rutherford B. Hayes President of the United States in 1876, the promise of freedom for formerly enslaved people was essentially dead within nine years of the end of the Civil War. Helping formerly enslaved people was not a freedom that white people cared to facilitate...in the north or the south. People were tired and were more than willing for freed slaves to be forced to take care of themselves...generally without any resources to do so. As one historian put it, in the span of one day enslaved Africans had gone from "being money to having no money". They were powerless as white resistance to black freedom grew to its fevered pitch in South Carolina with the election of Ben Tillman as Governor in 1892 and the adoption of the 1895 State Constitution...the constitution under which we still live today.

Reflective of those attitudes, the phosphate period of strip mining the lands and river bottoms in what are now the Charleston suburbs was one of the most destructive periods in our history both in terms of what it did to rip apart our social structure and what it did to destroy the land and everything in its path. The burden of crushed limbs, sulfuric acid burns and all manner of physical harm fell almost exclusively on formerly enslaved people, poor Italian and Irish Immigrants and prisoners from the South Carolina State Penitentiary. Why do we never talk about the truth of what this did to our families and to our Charleston community? We see the scars that still deface our community daily as we drive blissfully down our older roadways in the lowcountry, but we no longer have ANY collective idea of why those water-filled trenches exist or how the destruction they represent happened or who paid the price.

Reconstruction as a "period in time" gave birth to the phosphate mining industry and to the concept of truck farming, but cold raw racism was the lubrication that made the machinery

of the later periods possible. Many of our own current policies that we live by today were actually introduced during reconstruction. For instance, if we really want our children to understand the roots of South Carolina's current attitude toward public education, then we must tell our children the real history of our city and state that includes "leaders" like Coleman Livingston Blease, the upstate racist who was elected governor in 1910 partly as a result of a speech in which he propounded that "To educate a nigger is to ruin a good field hand." Just a note...if in recording history we do not use the original language of the "leaders" who uttered these statements, we cannot possibly understand or convey the pain inflicted on those at whom the words and language were directed. This was a PROFOUNDLY painful period. To sugar coat what was happening and what was actually said by elected leaders at the time would not be history, it would be fiction.

Charleston has a deeply rooted complicity at every level in the atrocious politics of skin color...from the kidnapping and monetization of abducted human beings, to the forced labor, to the abandonment after emancipation and finally to the corruption of the political system to prevent formerly enslaved people from realizing the freedoms they had been promised. We must come back to this task, we must record the history and we must get it right this time! We cannot continue to build our common future on historic misrepresentations and intentional omissions.

So you may wonder with my interest in Reconstruction politics what changed my mind about the 1940-1975 scope of work that was adopted by the Charleston County Planning Commission being the correct time frame for this study. One public meeting made the difference for me. This past Wednesday evening the County Planning Commission's Subcommittee on Historic Preservation held a public workshop to discuss the findings of the Historic Resources Survey of Unincorporated Charleston County. At that meeting, something astounding happened. As it turns out, many of us, including myself, had assumed that the untold history of the West Ashley area was the "big story" that had consistently been omitted from prior historic surveys of Charleston County. We were not wrong, but Wednesday's meeting made it clear that there had been MANY MORE important omissions that had been deleted from Charleston's history over the same period in time.

As I sat in Wednesday's meeting watching people line up at the door to get in, I noticed something interesting. The vast majority of those present were descendants of those who had been robbed of their freedom a second time by South Carolina's Reconstruction politics in the 19th century and who had been relegated to eking out an existence tied around the waist underwater with ropes digging phosphate rock off the bottoms of our river beds or living in extreme poverty as sharecroppers on plantations turned truck farms with little hope of any financial or political gain. That's when I realized that the people who were in that room Wednesday night WERE the history. They are in fact the only ones left with the ability to truthfully tell the story of what happened to the thousands of Charleston families who have been consistently omitted from our history since emancipation. Once I came to that realization, it was clear to me that limiting the scope of our study to the period between 1940 and 1975 was exactly the right thing to do. We no longer have the ability to record first hand stories of reconstruction, the phosphate mining period or the early days of truck farming because those people are all gone...but we can accurately record the

history of this period with firsthand information if we focus on 1940 to 1975. All we have to do is to start talking to each other...now.

We have a chance to record all the stories that still exist, even if they still exist only in the minds of those whom we hope will convey them to us...but these conversations need to be in a "new language" that is at all times respectful, truthful, employed as resolution and maybe if we are lucky, employed with a little absolution for the families of those who feel as I do about my own family, that my own people were complicit in creating the current situation by their past racist actions toward others who were powerless. As with any "new language", its mastery requires practice so that the truth can be told and history can be accurately recorded. If we start practicing now, we will have some fascinating stories to tell future generations. The important thing to remember in this is that no matter how we got here, here we are! We cannot fix the past, but we have an absolute obligation to future generations to be honest about the past as we retell the stories in our lifetimes.

As we begin to talk about the 1940-1975 time frame of our shared history, we must address the uncomfortable subjects and painful actions endured by people of color in our community...people we knew, people we were often times even related to. We must tell the story of the obliteration of the entire neighborhood of Middlesex for the construction of the Gaillard Auditorium. We must be honest about the 1100 homes that were destroyed by the Gaillard administration in the mid-1960s and never replaced. We must know how the Gaillard administration's "Workable Program" projects created many of the problems faced by the City of North Charleston, a jurisdiction that was created partly in reaction to "refugees" displaced by the construction of the Crosstown Expressway, The Gaillard Auditorium and the I-26 projects. People must know that the neighborhood destroyed by the Crosstown was the power base of Charleston's African American community. The location of that project was NOT arbitrary. We also need to be honest about the role that racism played in the founding of the Town of James Island. We need to know more about the family ties between sharecroppers on James Island and the millworkers in Patchogue, Long Island, New York and why black families left James Island to work in a lace mill in New York when we had textile mills by the dozen in our own state who would not employ them. In short, we all need to talk about our history from 1940-1975 while it is still alive and well in the minds of those who lived it...and then we need to write it down truthfully and employ it as an impenetrable roadblock so that as Charlestonians we never choose the road to exclusion again.