

D. Paul Sommerville, Chairman

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Dedication of Port Royal Agricultural School, Port Royal Island, SC

Language can be lost in two generations; culture and history can also be lost. The Port Royal Agricultural School represents a small, but an important part of the Gullah-Geechee culture and history still remembered. African-American education has been an ongoing struggle for over 150 years. During that time, there were many brave and noble efforts and experiments to achieve educational parity with the white community.

Unfortunately, many of those brave pioneers in African-American education have been forgotten, the buildings and their locations have disappeared from the history books and our collective memories.

Who remembers the small, but critically important schools that existed on Hilton Head Island, Coosaw Island, Port Royal Island, St. Helena Island, Lady's Island and other Sea Islands?

African-American education in the Sea Islands began with the Port Royal experiment in 1862 when missionary teachers were recruited by the United States government to come from their comfortable homes in New York and Boston to a war zone and, create from scratch, a practical education system for freedmen and women and their children.

Beaufort County was ground zero for emancipation and reconstruction and those efforts continued into the Civil Rights struggles of the 20th century.

My own family history in Beaufort County dates from 1862 when my great, great grandparents, Rubin and Rebecca Holmes, staunch abolitionist, and my then 10-year old great grandmother, Abby Holmes Christensen, arrived on Hilton Head Island by steamship from Boston to become educators in the yet-to-be-constructed schools that would comprise the Port Royal experiment.

Over the next 100 years, many educators and philanthropists worked tirelessly to bring education to the Gullah-Geechee community. Penn Center on St. Helena Island has survived. William P. Clyde, who owned much of Hilton Head Island at the turn of the 19th Century, built the Clyde School on Hilton Head Island. Julius Rosenwald, CEO of Sears Roebuck, built several schools for southern poor, including one, long forgotten, on Coosaw Island.

My great grandmother, Abby Holmes Christensen, built and funded the Port Royal Agricultural School, which we are memorializing today. She travelled to Tuskegee Institute where she recruited Joseph Shanklin to run the Port Royal Agricultural School. Joseph Shanklin studied

under George Washington Carver and Booker T. Washington, who had gotten his degrees from the Hampton Institute in Virginia, and gone on to found The Tuskegee Institute. Today we have with us graduates of the Port Royal Agricultural School as well as children of graduates. We also have with us descendants of Abbie Holmes Christensen including my Mother, Carroll Christensen Eve. At noon today, my cousin, Anne Christensen Pollitzer, will give a detailed talk on the school at the Beaufort Yacht and Sailing Club, located on Lady's Island. I encourage any of you who can to join us.

Gullah-Geechee education in the Sea Islands has a rich and vibrant history that must be preserved and the dedication of the Port Royal Agricultural School here, today, is a critically important step in that process. Much more remains to be done.