



**Georgia African American
Historic Preservation Network**

Reflections

Volume XI, No. 3

July 2013

THE SLAVE DWELLING PROJECT COMES TO GEORGIA

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Joseph McGill has seen many buildings that are important sites for interpreting U.S. history in his work as a field officer with the National Trust for Historic Preservation. He became interested in slave dwellings because he observed “the buildings that we preserve and interpret in this country are usually iconic, architecturally significant and are usually associated with a proclaimed hero...however, in focusing on these buildings we tend to neglect a major part of the American story.” So, for the past decade, McGill has been on a journey to recognize places that once were occupied by enslaved people in America. McGill was convinced that these historic resources associated with slavery still exist in northern and southern states, and he began the *Slave Dwelling Project* to bring greater awareness to their interpretation and significance in American history.

McGill began his journey with a simple premise: he finds extant slave dwellings and asks the stewards of these places if he can spend the night in them. This journey has taken him to 44 slave dwellings to date in the states of Alabama, Connecticut, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas and Virginia. The stewards of these places range from house museums, plantations, historical societies, nonprofit organizations, colleges, government entities and private individuals. When McGill sleeps overnight in these places, he is accompanied by fellow Civil War

re-enactors, academicians, staff who interpret these sites, students and persons who are descendants of enslaved people and slave owners. Current uses of the buildings range from guesthouses, storage facilities, museums, studios and offices.

Sleeping in slave dwellings has resulted in several positive outcomes, most notably attracting new audiences to have conversations about slavery. Another outcome of this project is improved, diverse programming at many of these sites



Joseph McGill, Jr.

that mobilizes local communities and attracts the heritage traveler. Lastly, McGill implemented an online chronicle of each stay that can be accessed at www.lowcountryafricana.com. These blogs also provide a social media platform for people who accompany him to comment on their stays in these dwellings.

The *Slave Dwelling Project* first stay in Georgia was in April 2012, when Joe McGill and fellow 54th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry re-enactor James Brown accompanied him for a



This circa 1850 slave dwelling was used by house servants for the E.P. Williams family in the Nacoochee Valley. Today, it is the African American Heritage Site at the Sautee Nacoochee Center in northeast Georgia.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

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visit to the *African American Heritage Site*. This slave dwelling has been preserved by the Sautee Nacoochee Community Association (SNCA), and is part of a campus of buildings that comprise the Sautee Nacoochee Center in the Appalachian Highland region of Georgia.



*Joseph McGill (foreground) and James Brown (background) were the featured speakers at the **African American Heritage Site**. They were dressed in their USCT 54th Massachusetts uniforms for the program. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque*

The slave dwelling is located in the Sautee Nacoochee Valley, an area encompassing over 2,500 acres in White County. Cherokees occupied this section of Georgia until the Treaty of 1819, when they were forced westward on the Trail of Tears. In 1822, Major Edward P. Williams and his family from North Carolina were among the first 61 whites to migrate to the Nacoochee Valley after the Land Lottery of 1820. The Williams family focused on subsistence farming, and his son, Edwin P. Williams, purchased over 2,300 acres that he managed with an enslaved population. E.P. Williams became a major landowner by 1861, and he owned 18 enslaved people in the valley during the Civil War.

A surviving structure from the Williams family was a circa 1850 slave dwelling. The dwelling was originally located adjacent to the family main house where it was used by house servants. This use continued after enslavement until the twentieth century, when Williams' family descendants added a bath, bedroom, kitchen and a front porch. The granddaughter of E.P. Williams lived in this modified slave dwelling as late as the 1930s. Years later, the dwelling had deteriorated significantly when it was donated to SNCA.

SNCA faced many preservation challenges in saving the slave dwelling. One of the conditions when they accepted the dwelling was that the endangered structure be moved. Additionally, the cabin stone chimney was leaning into the structure. While assembling a team of preservationists to stabilize the structure, SNCA also engaged the residents of Bean Creek, the place in the valley where African American freedmen settled after the Civil War.

Preservation of the slave dwelling initially focused on removing all additions to the structure that did not contribute to its interpretation as a 16-by-28-foot cabin. Rock mason David Vandiver reassembled the original stone chimney while other researchers uncovered historic photos. Jim Johnston, the descendant who donated the cabin, covered the roof with hand-split, 30 inch, white oak shingles fastened with cut nails. The Appalachian Regional Commission provided funding for Phase I preservation initiatives. The cabin was moved to a nature preserve during this stage of its preservation, but ultimately was relocated to the SNCA campus.

SNCA received a Tourism Product Development grant from the Georgia Department of Economic Development for Phase II preservation initiatives. This tourism grant created resources for part-time positions while the project was underway. The cabin overhang and handicap accessibility was constructed, along with landscaping and exterior exhibits.



Joseph McGill demonstrates use of his weapon during the evening program. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

When Joseph McGill and James Brown visited the *African American Heritage Site*, a crowd of 129 people assembled for their evening program. Lawrence Dorsey, a Bean Creek resident, provided a human backdrop for the program while he lit lanterns around the cabin dressed as a freedman.

Dressed in their 54th Massachusetts uniforms, James Brown performed a monologue that documented his quest for freedom both as a runaway slave, soldier and a freedman. McGill's presentation focused on his quest to raise awareness of the significance of slave dwellings in the interpretation of African American sites associated with antebellum history. He commented on the valor demonstrated by the 54th Massachusetts soldiers on Morris Island. Both men demonstrated how their weapons and equipment were used during the Civil War. Local musicians played the banjo while participants enjoyed a lite meal. That evening, James Brown, Caroline Crittenden, Joseph McGill, Sabrina Dorsey

and Stacey Allen stayed after the crowd left for more conversation. Stacey Allen, a young descendant of the Williams family and their slaves, slept in the dwelling with James and Joseph.

Because the *African American Heritage Site* is regularly used for living history programs, McGill thought this dwelling was more “adorned” than many he had slept in, as the structure had one bed, a fireplace and cooking instruments inside. He was also surprised to learn about the Bean Creek community and he was very pleased that Stacey was from this community and was a descendant of the slave owner and enslaved people connected to this dwelling. The following morning, Joseph, James and Stacey rejoined the community for a pancake breakfast at the Sautee Nacoochee Center. “Both James and I left with the promise that we both would return if invited.”



Tabby number two is the slave dwelling that Joseph McGill slept in during his stay on Ossabaw Island. This tabby cabin and two additional ones were residences for enslaved people on the North End Plantation.
Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

The *Slave Dwelling Project* second stay in Georgia was a visit to the tabby slave dwellings on Ossabaw Island in May 2013. This stay was McGill’s first overnight trip to a barrier island, so the planning and public programming for the event required a slight variation in that the island is only accessible by boat.

The Ossabaw Island Foundation and the Ossabaw Island Education Alliance are the stewards for Ossabaw Island, a 26,000 acre site near Savannah that is comprised of forests, wildlife and historic buildings. The State of Georgia purchased the island in 1978, and today it is Georgia’s first Heritage Preserve.

Paul Pressly, director of the Ossabaw Island Education Alliance, conducts interpretive programs to



Paul Pressly

educate visitors about the indigo plantation that was established on the island by John Morel in 1760. Today, three tabby dwellings remain on the North End Plantation where enslaved people once lived.

Paul Pressly crafted a visit from the *Slave Dwelling Project* that incorporated both the stories of enslavement and freedmen on Ossabaw Island, as well as life on the mainland in the Pin Point community. The weekend event started at the Pin Point Heritage Museum. Joseph McGill provided a presentation about the project to other Savannah partners. The Ossabaw Island Foundation also used the public event to announce a new partnership they had formed with Bethesda Academy and the Pin Point Heritage Museum to share their respective stories.

Twelve people participated in the overnight stay on the island, and tabby cabin number two was the place where Joseph McGill would stay with two additional visitors. Toni Battle came from California, where she is involved with the Legacy Project. The second visitor was writer Tony Horwitz, author of *Confederates in the Attic*.



Joseph McGill comments about the tabby cabin’s construction for two families separated by a common fireplace.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

When the group arrived, Pressly led a walking tour of the North End Plantation and the three surviving tabby cabins. Then, the group took a truck ride to Middle Place, where tabby ruins from that plantation co-exist with buildings constructed for artists as part of the Genesis Project in the 1960s. After dinner, the entire group participated in blessing the cabin where Joseph, Toni and Tony would stay for the night.

McGill ended his weekend by speaking on Sunday at Sweetfield of Eden Baptist Church in Pin Point, but Sarah Ross offered an unscheduled stay on Saturday night at the slave dwelling at Wormsloe Plantation. To his surprise, that dwelling is now used as guest quarters. Conversations are underway for a future return visit to Wormsloe with public programming, a key element of the *Slave Dwelling Project*.

These two dwellings are examples of how enslaved people lived in the Georgia mountains and on a barrier island. Interested stewards of other dwellings can contact Joseph McGill on Facebook at The Slave Dwelling Project or Twitter @slavedwelling.