



A Tale of Two Charlestons

THE GREAT-GREAT-GREAT-GRANDSON OF AN
ENSLAVED PERSON REVISITS THE SOUTHERN CITY AND
ITS PLANTATIONS AS THEY RECKON WITH THE PAST

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Quarters for
the enslaved at
Magnolia Plantation
Left: The Aiken-
Rhett House in
downtown Charleston



Living History

BEFORE MY GRANDMOTHER DIED, she would tell me the story of her great-great-grandfather Ervin Bradley. I knew it so well that I could recite it by heart. Ervin was enslaved by plantation owner John Bradley in the Old Salem community of South Carolina, about 100 miles or so from Charleston. When Bradley died, he gave my great-great-grandfather Ervin his freedom in 1849, more than 15 years before slavery was abolished.

South Carolina militiamen would regularly stop Ervin, and he'd become so accustomed to the harassment that he kept a copy of John Bradley's will that divided three plantations, livestock and money—but also granted Ervin personal freedom: "My belligerous [sic] Negro man Ervin is to have his own time consistent with the laws of the state," the will's last paragraph began. "He is not to be appraised when my estate is valued, and no further services are required of him."

And just like that, the freedom part of my family's history was launched.

More than 170 years later, I arrive in Charleston, where my mother and sister now live and where I've visited often. As a Black South Carolina native, I am one of the people whose ancestors' forced labor built a Southern empire of wealth and privilege. I am not what you would call a "plantation kinda guy." I've spent countless hours in Chucktown, but I hadn't visited a tourist attraction in the city since a church trip when I was a teenager. Yet I'm here to examine how the city tells its history, how it can seem frozen in a romanticized antebellum time warp, and how that may be changing, particularly at the historic plantations of slave owners.

It's 4:17 a.m. but I can't sleep. "Which way to the ocean?" I ask a woman at the hotel's front desk. She points. I walk—cobble streets, grand, meticulously preserved colonial homes. Even in my foggy recollections of this town, I clearly remember thinking that it is one of the most beautiful places I have ever set foot in.

I'm soon staring at the ocean in the salty-soft morning breath of God. I wonder if I am inadvertently standing in the same spot where my family's legacy began more than two centuries ago when a ship stocked with stolen Africans docked at the beach of this time machine called Charleston. I wonder if that ancestor informed them in his native tongue that he was not a "plantation kinda guy."

Charleston still thrives on the sweat-stained history of slavery that, for centuries, has been



Clockwise from above: Mother Emanuel AME Church; interior of the Aiken-Rhett House; working area of enslaved people at the Aiken-Rhett House

treated as if it wasn't a primary reason for this city's existence. The plantation tourism industry has created an impressionist painting of this town's history—all color, no shadows. Perhaps that is why it took more tragedy to un-whitewash this canvas and begin the process of telling the city's history honestly. But I must admit—it really is gorgeous.

ON JUNE 17, 2015, A WHITE SUPREMACIST walked into Charleston's historic Mother Emanuel AME Church during Bible study and killed nine Black parishioners. Investigators would later discover that the killer had a particular affinity for the Confederate battle flag, a symbol that had become inextricably intertwined

TOP RIGHT: RICK NCKEE



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with a culture in Charleston. After all, this is where the first shots were fired when 13 states decided they would rather not be a part of America if their citizenship required them to grant their human captives the most American thing of all—freedom.

But with the bloodstained pews of Mother Emanuel, Charleston began to recognize how perpetuating an ahistorical narrative may have glamorized a society built on subjugation. Local leaders pledged to stop glorifying the town's history by glossing over its past. A national reckoning came five years later, with the death of George Floyd.

Before the Civil War, Charleston was the only major American city with a majority-slave population. The state wouldn't have >



a white majority again until the 1920 census. Black South Carolinians and slavery are not part of this city's story. They are the story.

It makes sense that the International African American Museum—or “slave museum,” as it’s colloquially called—will be located here, at the historic Gadsden’s Wharf, where it’s estimated that 40 percent of the African chattel imported into this country first landed. By the beginning of the Civil War, enslaved Africans were the single largest financial asset in America, worth more than railroads and manufacturing combined. At the center of that human-trafficking economy was Charleston, the wealthiest city in the 13 original colonies, the capital of the slave trade.

The IAAM (slated to open in 2022) plans to tell the story of Africans in the Americas and throughout the diaspora. It will not merely be

Above: Quarters for the enslaved at McLeod Plantation
Right: A burial site at McLeod

a collection of artifacts and exhibits; it will feature a Center for Family History that hopes to advance the study of African-American genealogy and unlock a past that has been obscured for millions of families of African descent. Much of that genealogy will certainly be tied to the human capital that funded the mansions of Charleston and built the plantations beyond, which is where I’m headed.

“**T**he very first time I came to Charleston was in 1975,” explains Dr. Bernard Powers. “I was visiting Fort Sumter. At this time, they gave you a mini-lecture focused on the coming of the Civil War, all the reasons for war—the cultural differences between North and South, tariffs, states’ rights—and not a single word about slavery. It apparently had no role!”



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Powers is the director of the College of Charleston's Center for the Study of Slavery. On this night, he is one of three panelists discussing "Perspectives of the Historical Narrative: Balancing Charleston's History in the 21st Century" at the historic Aiken-Rhett House, a sprawling antebellum mansion in downtown Charleston that was once home to slave owner and South Carolina Governor William Aiken.

After the event, a representative from the Historic Charleston Foundation shows me

around. Acquired in 1995, the property features artwork, photos and architecture that impressively reflect 200 years of history, during which over a dozen unpaid captives cared for the two or three white people living in the 24,000-square-foot behemoth. Aiken also owned a pair of rice plantations outside the city, where he enslaved another 800 human beings. Yet Aiken's story was the only one that was told—at least until recently.

In 2016, in order to fulfill the promise to Mother Emanuel AME Church, a team of archaeologists started surveying the slave quarters and found more than 12,000 artifacts. By 2018, the Historic Charleston Foundation began telling the stories of the dozens of enslaved people who lived in the cold, dank "servants quarters" behind the home. ➤



As we end our evening, I ask my tour guide when the last descendant of an enslaved person lived there. “The mid ‘80s,” he says.

“Wait. That was more than a decade after the end of the Civil War, which means—”

“No ... The 1980s,” he interrupts. “But it may have been the 1990s.”

AFTER THE TOUR, I DRIVE 12 MILES north to visit my mother and sister. We haven’t seen each other in a few months and we sit up until 1 a.m. laughing until my mother starts dozing off. A certified genealogist, she is the one who uncovered most of my family’s history, including the legendary will that set Ervin free. Just before I leave, I ask her if she ever found Delia.

She has not. Before John Bradley died, he split his considerable fortune among two sons and three daughters. According to the will, the bulk of his 89 enslaved humans was handed over to his daughter Elizabeth Long Bradley, including one he referred to as “Delia the Nurse.” For years, my mother has been

trying to find descendants of Elizabeth or her husband, John McLeod. She knows they were in the Charleston area or Lowcountry because Bradley’s “belligerous Negro man Ervin” was headed there on foot from Sumter County.

The newly freed Ervin was obsessed with Delia the Nurse. But after particularly brutal interactions with two different counties’ slave patrols, he eventually gave up looking for her. He was broke, homeless and without food, and only had his freedom because he was the kind of slave no father would burden his children with and no man would want on his plantation: Ervin Bradley could read.

“Delia the Nurse” was Ervin’s pregnant wife. He would never see her again.

“SOME PEOPLE SEE THIS HUGE, beautiful house; some see the slave cabins,” explains Shawn Halifax, interpretation coordinator at the McLeod Plantation Historic Site, located five miles from downtown Charleston on rural James Island. “Even your eyes are interpreting history.”

I’ve been told the McLeod Plantation is the model for what the plantation tourism industry should look like. That’s because McLeod Plantation tours aren’t about the property’s two-story home, but rather the life of the enslaved, their daily routines and how their stories make history more complex.

I opt for a guided tour with a couple from Pennsylvania—a history professor and his wife—and a large family visiting from Utah. Halifax and his team are intentional about teaching the real story of James Island, where more than 2,500 Black Americans worked “under violence, or the threat of violence,” according to the tour guide, providing the labor for around 200 James Islanders. The guide tells the story of the plantation through the eyes of Leah, who was purchased by the owners of the McLeod Plantation shortly before the Civil War. Leah’s descendants would live on the property until the 1930s.

After the tour, Halifax tells me how he has traveled the country to craft a plan for interpreting the plantation’s history. Charleston County Parks has invited James Island’s descendants to participate in every part of the site’s decision-making process, including incorporating their oral histories into telling the landmark’s actual story. It is an innovation he hopes will reflect the McLeod Plantation’s true past.

Our conversation lulls, almost awkwardly, but then Halifax breaks the silence: “Let me show you something.” We walk across the ➤

Above: An enslaved person’s grave at Magnolia Plantation
Right: Wetlands at the Magnolia Plantation



Living History

I am not a particularly spiritual person, but I could feel myself getting closer to something.

street into a heavily thicketed area. Halifax tells me to watch my step, but I already know where I am headed. I am not a particularly spiritual person, but I swear this is true—I could *feel* myself getting closer to something. When we stop, we are in an unkempt, overgrown area sprinkled with gravestones pointing in every direction.

Black people are buried here. I realize that the McLeod name is ubiquitous, but I can't help but wonder if I'm a descendant of one of them. A week later I check the McLeod Plantation's list of people who were enslaved there. One of the names sends my heart racing: "Delia and her unrecorded children."

“WHY IS SANTA AT THE SLAVE place? I ask myself as I pull up to the entrance of the Magnolia Plantation on a sunny day in December. “Is this where he gets his Black elves?”

Founded in 1676 by the wealthy Drayton family (who still own the site), the Magnolia Plantation touts itself as Charleston's “most visited plantation.” When you think of plantations, you're thinking of this place. It sits on the Ashley River and features boat rides, botanical garden tours and a tour of the plantation centerpiece—a three-story antebellum home that looks like a Bob Ross painting.

Because of its gorgeous garden, Magnolia is coveted as a wedding location, hosting hundreds of ceremonies a year, and often multiple weddings in a day. On the day I visited only two were scheduled. Still, throngs of visitors were touring the 390-acre property by noon.

Magnolia, like all plantations, is a contradiction. On one side of the expansive property is a veritable celebration of how much wealth a family can accumulate if they had the benefit of owning an unpaid labor force. Across the property, one can glimpse traces of the human cogs who built it.

Joseph McGill, Magnolia's history and culture coordinator, gives the enslaved people held here a living history. He knows of what he speaks. His Slave Dwelling Project has taken him across the country, living and sleeping in slave quarters in 25 states.



He takes me to a clearing to see the graves of those who had been enslaved here, where I learn that the people who built the generational wealth were not necessarily given burials as much as they were put in holes and covered with dirt—like things.

While Magnolia gives plantation tours, hosts weddings and presents a version of the owners' history, it also hires people like McGill, who give a separate tour, “From Slavery to Freedom,” on the history of the plantation's enslaved. He is careful to note that part of why the plantation tourism industry whitewashes the past is because “that's what visitors want to see.” According to the Charleston Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, tourists poured a record \$8 billion into the city in 2018. Tourism—and in large part, plantation tourism—is a key part of Charleston's economy.

“Some of these plantations are at least putting forth the effort to tell a more inclusive story,” McGill says. “And because they're putting forth that effort, you catch some of those folks by surprise.”

I take one of the hourly plantation house tours with a large group of awestruck tourists from Tennessee. After explaining how the Draytons arrived in Charleston a century before the Revolutionary War and



Top left: Magnolia
Plantation main house
Above and left:
Quarters for
the enslaved

built their fortune growing rice, the guide opens the floor to questions.

“Whose idea was it to grow rice when rice is from the Far East?” asks a woman in a syrupy Southern drawl. “Did they bring Asians over to show them how to do it?”

“No, ma’am,” responds the guide. “The slave people on the west coast of Africa have been growing rice there for centuries. So they are the ones who had the knowledge and taught the planters how to do it.”

I decide not to ask why the planters were called planters if they didn’t know how to plant.

On the porch, I find the only African-American visitors I would see that day, both veterans, a husband and wife from Iowa. “My wife and I just came to spend some time together,” the tall, perfectly postured man tells me. “She read the reviews and they were good.”

After I tell him that it is probably time for his tour, so he should go inside, he shoots me a funny look. “Nah, I’m here to tour the slave cabins,” he says. “I would never go in that house. It’s probably haunted.”

As we both chuckle, the woman who asked the question about Asian rice planters marvels at the size of the wraparound veranda.

“Isn’t this all just to die for?”

If only she knew. **AW**