

# SOUTH CAROLINA SLAVE CABIN HEADED FOR SMITHSONIAN DISPLAY

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EDISTO ISLAND, S.C.—As a cool sea breeze wafted across a 17th century South Carolina plantation that once grew prized sea island cotton, workers this week carefully disassembled, measured and numbered wooden planks from a dilapidated antebellum slave cabin. Once one of about two dozen on slave row at Point of Pines Plantation, the cabin will be shipped north where it will go on display at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture when it opens on Washington's National Mall in two years.

"The reason we collect a cabin like this is it allows you to humanize the slavery experience," said Lonnie Bunch, the director of the museum that has been in planning for a decade. "Often people think about the concept of slavery but they forget this is the story of men and women and children. So this allows us to personalize the experience."

The plantation was carved out of the sea island less than 15 years after Charles Towne, now Charleston, was founded in 1670 about 45 miles to the northeast. The cabin is one of only two



remaining at the plantation and the only one in its original location.

The museum looked at other locations throughout the South for a cabin before settling on the one found on Edisto Island.

"The sea islands are one reason we were interested," said Nancy Bercaw, the curator of the museum, who was on the site Monday as the cabin was dismantled. "The sea island history is so rich due to the fact that communities are very, very, old and multigenerational here."

Edisto Island is in the middle of the Gullah-Geechee Heritage Corridor reaching along the coast from North Carolina to northern Florida. A federal commission has been created to help preserve the culture of the descendants of sea island slaves.

When the Civil War broke out, there were 410,000 blacks living in South Carolina, the majority of them slaves, compared to about 290,000 whites. Along most of the coastal areas, more than half the population was black.

The sea island culture survived for decades after the Civil War because of its relative isolation. Now, however, it's threatened by breakneck coastal growth.

Bercaw said researchers want to find out as much as possible about the cabin to tell its story both during the time of slavery and in the years after emancipation

Toni Carpenter, the founder of Lowcountry Africana, a group that works to document the history of blacks in the Lowcountry from South Carolina to Florida, said an 1851 map of the plantation shows the cabin at its present site. An 1854 plantation inventory showed 75 people were enslaved there. The researchers got a bit of unexpected help on Monday when 76-year-old Junior Meggett came by. He identified the cabin as one that his aunt and uncle used to live in when he was a child.

Meggett said he lived in another nearby cabin in the 1940s until he was grown. That cabin later was destroyed by fire. He described living in a two-room cabin with a wood stove and a small attic and opening wooden window shutters to catch the breeze.

"Boys and girls would sleep in the same room," he said. "You were just glad to have a place to lie down."

Workers from Museum Resources Construction and Millwork of Providence Forge, Va., carefully removed planks from the cabin roof, then measured them, numbered them and wrapped them with clear plastic tape for the journey north.

The cabin will be rebuilt at the company and then fumigated before being disassembled for a second time before it's taken to the \$500 Smithsonian museum and put on display, said Kerry Shackelford of the contracting company.

The cabin was donated to the Edisto Island Museum, which worked to stabilize the structure several years ago. The original plan was to move it to the museum several miles away, but there were budgetary problems, museum director Gretchen Smith said.

"We had given up on our chance of preserving it and then the Smithsonian came along and said they would love to have it," she said. "We would be pleased to have it on our property where thousands could see it. But millions will see it in Washington and learn from it."

Bunch, who spoke by telephone from Washington, said some people are still uncomfortable talking about slavery.

But at the time, he said, "slavery was the dominant institution in America—it colored religion, it colored politics and it colored expansion. It was an economic engine for both northern and southern prosperity. By not talking about it, we neglect a great understanding of who we are."