

D. Paul Sommerville, Chairman

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Dedication of Cherry Hill School – St. James Baptist Church

Language can be lost in two generations; culture and history can also be lost. The Cherry Hill School represents a small, but, important part of the Gullah-Geechee culture and history that can still be preserved. 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 and the buildings and their locations have disappeared from the history books and other 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 others.

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

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 in 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 survived. William P. Clyde, who owned much of Hilton Head Island at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 on Port Royal Island. 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 and gone on to found Tuskegee Institute.

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