

Jessica C. Hutcheson
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William Cronon
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Ease on the Land

To sit on the porch of the tiny house on John's Island, cracking pecans in the homemade pecan-cracker and surveying the lands in front of you, is to believe that you have finally made peace with the history and nature of the South. The lands feel open—the yellow knee-high grasses, the shimmering ponds edged with towering loblolly pines, and, in the distance, broad expanses of salt marsh stretching out to the river and finally to the sea. There is a naturalness to this place, more than just nature, but a feeling of “naturally” belonging. It is a place without the hum of an air conditioner, without the intrusion of any noises beyond the incessant calling of chuck-wills-widows in the night and the deafening hum of cicadas. The massive live oaks draped in Spanish moss, the scent of camellias blooming, and the rich tea-colored water of the creeks convey more than beauty, something deeper. This is a place that feels like history. It looks, smells, and even tastes ancient—there is no other word for the feeling. And yet, no place I've been feels more natural, more completely at ease and untouched by human hand than this.

The scents of history and the vision of nature mingle sweetly. But beneath the cloying smell of camellias (and they are planted after all, by William Humphreys with his passion for prize breeds), there is distinctly the sense that nature and history are warring here. Despite the tranquility and appearance of naturalness, the Humphreys property is quite managed. And this management, with its broad brush strokes, has managed to obscure the history of the land. Beauty has seduced the eye away from the history. To see the land in all of its history, you must imagine this place without the homemade pecan-cracker, even without the pecan tree, and look instead at the soil, the gentle slopes that furrow under the waving grasses, and try to uncover the history written upon this land.

The land is simply a small corner of a small island. It is approximately 125 acres, but only 75 acres of those are contiguous high land. The remainder lies beneath salt marsh and on outlying islands amidst the marsh grasses. There is a small house, an old hunting cottage built in the 1930s, surrounded by camellias, rhododendrons, and live oak trees. In front of the house are fields of grass which lead to two small ponds. If you cross the ponds, you reach the “waterfront,” a strip of land which follows the contours of Alligator Creek. To the east of the house are the woods, a large stand of maritime forest. The property is bounded on two sides by marsh and creeks, and on two sides by woods and vegetable farms. The whole is tucked at the very southeastern edge of John’s Island, at the confluence of the Kiawah and Stono rivers.

John’s Island is a horseshoe-shaped barrier island south of Charleston, South Carolina, separated from the mainland by the threads of Bohicket and Church creeks, as well as the Kiawah and Stono rivers. It is part of a network of sea islands along the coast of South Carolina. As the glaciers of the Pleistocene era melted, deep rivers formed to carry their runoff to the ocean. When ocean levels rose at the end of the Ice Age, these valleys flooded with water, leaving remnants of land just slightly separated from the main body. John’s Island fronts no ocean; it is protected from the wind, tides, and salt spray of the Atlantic by other islands. By coursing through networks of marsh and river, it is possible to reach the ocean from John’s Island, but it is a stable island shielded from the worst effects of oceanic forces.¹

The stability of the island, in addition to the relatively easy access to Charleston attracted the attention of settlers from the early days of Carolina settlement. It was, however, the soil and the climate that would guarantee its prominent position in agricultural development. The coastal zone of South Carolina is humid and subtropical; the growing season stretches to 295 days per year. Many crops—rice, indigo, cotton, corn, tomatoes, cucumbers, and melons—were grown profitably on the sandy soils of John’s Island through the course of its history. In the colonial era, Solomon Legare, a French Huguenot fleeing oppression in Europe, arrived in 1686 to stake a claim to some of John’s Island’s land. As they displaced the Kiawah, Stono, and Etiwan Indians

of the region, planters like Legare gradually developed a system of plantation agriculture, centered around staple crops, and supported almost entirely by the work of black slaves imported from Africa. By 1790, during the rice and cotton booms, John's Island was completely enmeshed in the economics of slave labor. The census in that year recorded only five percent of households on the island without slaves. There were 600 white residents of St. John's Parish commanding a labor force of 4,660 black slaves.ⁱⁱ

The planters of John's Island prospered throughout the antebellum years, combining growth of cotton and rice with indigo, corn, and livestock-raising. John's Island's plantations doubled and trebled, the slave populations swelled, and the land became increasingly marked by rows of cotton and paddies of rice. The interior of the island remained the domain of feral pigs, lean cattle, and subsistence farmers, but the loamy, sandy soil of the riverside properties proved ideal for the raising of cotton and rice. By the eve of the Civil War, a descendent of the original Solomon Legare with the same name owned a massive plantation on the lands surrounding and including the Humphreys piece of property. Sol Legare owned 1100 acres between Abbapoola and Alligator Creek, in addition to 1000 acres near Legareville and 324 acres at Hanscome Point, also on John's Island. In 1860, the total value of Legare's real estate and property was \$387,477 and he owned at least 230 slaves and 59 slave houses.ⁱⁱⁱ

Walking the bounds of the Humphreys property, it is impossible to discern the history of plantation agriculture upon the land. I found no trace of Sol Legare's legacy within the written or environmental history of the property. I don't know what was grown there or how it affected the land. It is highly likely that the land supported a long-staple cotton plantation, in part because the water sources are too salty for rice cultivation. There is a long-standing suspicion in the family that cotton is the reason for the denuded quality of the soil. The garden yields puny tomatoes and must be continually nurtured with manure and compost. Only these tomatoes and the very slight undulations across the fields marking old crop rows indicate any history of agricultural activity.

As you leave the fields and head east across the property, you walk along tractor-mowed paths surrounded by dense thickets of wax myrtle, holly, palmetto, and cedar. Nearly half of the land on the property is covered with a maritime forest of live oak, cassena, and loblolly pine. These are the native plants of the region, but the forest is far from stable. The undergrowth is thick with shrubby plants and brambles, although there are a few tall, mangled live oaks and many younger loblolly pines. Hurricane Hugo in 1989 devastated the forest, knocking down the tall pine trees and uprooting many of the water and live oaks. In the intervening years, wax myrtle, cassena, and pines have sprouted back—the same species are returning to the forest for years of peace punctuated by enormous tropical storms. According to William Humphreys, Hugo was scarcely different from the storm of 1957, and probably little different than the storms of 1890, 1893, and 1911. It is likely that as these sapling pines begin to poke up into the canopy layer, another storm will roll up the coast and rip down many of them. Hurricanes mark the landscape, but more in their regularity and cyclic quality, than by the vindictive power of any one named storm, however reviled.

When you reach the eastern edge of the property, you are standing at the edge of a marsh, surrounded on three sides by acres of *Spartina* grasses. In the near distance to the east, there are a few small houses, owned by other white landowners at this edge of the island, but there is no sign of the town of Legareville. Solomon Legare in 1838 began selling small house lots at the coastal edge of his property. A small summer village of houses and chapels for planter families was built for the healthful retreat of approximately 25 local white planter families.

By 1861, however, the Confederate army ordered the evacuation of Legareville and all the sea islands south of Charleston as Federal gunboats and troops moved into the waters and lands nearby. By early 1862, the white population of John's Island was completely evacuated, save for the few young white men who formed a militia corps, the Stono Scouts, to protect their land and monitor Federal troop movements. Legareville was the northern end of the Stono Scouts' picket line and on the very edge of the Humphreys property, you can discern their

activities. There are between ten and fifteen deep holes in the earth, with cabbage palmettos and young pines growing up around them. These pits mark gun emplacements, filled with oak leaves, but still leaving deep impressions on the land. Here, at this point, the Stono Scouts stood watch over the mouth of the Stono River, anxious for any sign of Federal advance from their base on Edisto Island up the river to attack Charleston. With ten or more cannons in place on this peninsula, the Stono Scouts hoped to delay the advance of the army upon the home port.

By August of 1864, however, the Stono River was filled with Federal gunboats and Major Jenkins of the Stono Scouts feared for the worst. Rather than permit the property of Legareville to fall into the hands of the enemy, he ordered the Stono Scouts to burn their own houses at Legareville.^{iv} The summer village was gone, and it was never rebuilt. The guns were carried away from this edge of the marsh, but the deep pits remain. Civil war collectors and men with metal detectors periodically ask permission to dig up bullets. They find odd bits of metal and bring them home. The fort remains a landmark on the property, although mostly as a resting place to enjoy the view of marsh and river on walks around the land.

In the years after the Civil War, the plantation lands of the Legares broke apart and small pieces were bought by various farmers, both black and white. According to family history, the Humphreys land passed into the hands of a black family, the Fludds, who began truck farming, planting small crops of perishable goods for sale in the Charleston markets. The Fludds were part of a larger pattern on John's Island that coincided with the end of the war. In 1860, scarcely 60 farming units had existed on the island, but by 1870, there were over 400, with the majority owned by black farmers.^v Rumor also reports that a Freedman's Bureau School was erected on land adjacent to the Fludds. Diligent search on foot and in archives by different members of the family has failed to turn up any trace of the school, although the older relatives remain sure of its existence.

By the 1930s, the social and racial geography of John's Island was shifting again, however. Black farmers had slowly accumulated property throughout the South, reaching a

plateau of 20%-30% ownership in South Carolina by the early decades of the twentieth century.^{vi} The boll weevil hit South Carolina in 1914, however, and inflicted fatal blows on the dwindling long-staple cotton industry. During the years of the Great Depression, the Fludds finally were forced to abandon their cultivation of cantaloupes and sell their two farm plots on John's Island. The purchaser was a white doctor, William Frampton, who worked as a physician for the Southern Railway and wanted a nice plot of land for hunting on the weekends.

The Fludds now live down Legareville Road towards the interior of the island. The Legareville marked on the current USGS maps is not the summer resort of wealthy whites, but a rural village of cinderblock houses, mobile homes, and a small AME church. The residents are almost entirely African-American, and their access to the lands surrounding the old Legareville is prohibited. At the edge of Legareville, the road suddenly ends and becomes a soft sandy road, marked clearly with a sign that reads Private Property, No Trespassing. The land beyond is filled with acres of tomatoes, picked by Latino migrant workers, run by a tenant farmer, and owned by the Hay family, descendants of the Legares. To reach the Humphreys land, you must pass through the new Legareville, past the No Trespassing signs, into the tomato fields, and finally to the gate which marks the property. This is the current geography and economics of the land: whites own most of the waterfront property, and blacks live in the interior of the island. The old Legareville of white planters has been replaced by a new African-American Legareville.

Dr. Frampton brought very different desires to the land than had the owners of the previous two hundred years. He didn't need or want any products of the soil, except for incidental ducks, deer, and pheasants. Frampton and the successive owners, including the Humphreys family, have manipulated the landscape in very distinct ways, all for the purpose of pleasure. Frampton's first initiative was the building of a pond. He transformed the marsh that separated the two major pieces of land into a pond by damming the flow of water through the marsh. By pulling a drag pan behind a mule, the marsh was transformed into a "borrow pit" to build a causeway, and then filled with water to make a small pond. The pond attracted ducks

along their migratory flyway: buffleheads, mergansers, scaup and widgeon. While the marsh had yielded only scrawny rails, wrens, and sparrows, the pond attracted a wealth of targets for the sportsman. In addition to dragging up the marsh to build a pond, Frampton put in a dock along Alligator Creek, which could be reached by walking across the new dam. To complete his weekend getaway, he built a small hunting cottage, just two rooms with a porch overlooking the property. Next to the porch, he hung a Southern Railway locomotive bell, attached to an old gas lamp post from the city of Charleston.

Apparently Frampton tired of John's Island because he soon sold the property to another doctor, who then sold it in the 1950s to William Humphreys. The land continued to be managed for pleasure. Mr. Humphreys cultivated a park-like place, where enormous live oaks and magnolias were separated by grass. The woods were untouched, but the meadows were mowed regularly with an old tractor. The goal was a retreat for growing scuppernong grapes, riding horses, and hunting and fishing. The duck hunts attracted Mr. Humphreys and his friends regularly, and their popularity is evident in the appearance of two more dams, creating another pond. These dams were built with a drag line and tractor. As long as the drag line was operating, Mr. Humphreys decided to clear away the wax myrtles and small trees that lined the ponds and cluttered the orderly property. By 1957, you could sit on the porch of the house and watch the ducks land on the pond. Mr. Humphreys planted a small vineyard for his scuppernongs and he improved on the fishing situation. In addition to the original dock built by Frampton, known as the Sheephead dock, the family built the Shrimp Dock, the Trout Dock, and the Main Dock.

The fields, the park-like expanses of grass and trees, and the ponds are all artifacts of the management of the land for pleasure. In place of the salt marsh are ponds to attract ducks, although the emphasis now is birdwatching. A lone post remains in the lower pond, a remnant of a duck blind long since dismantled. The new ethic is reflected in the osprey poles erected to attract nesting raptors, and by the gourds and birdhouses put up each spring for nesting purple martins. The fields are periodically burned and mowed, in part to prevent the spread of Bahia

grass, an ornamental Brazilian grass introduced by Mr. Humphreys for horse browse, but now reviled for its invasive monoculture. Careful lanes were cut and maintained through the woods so that walkers can easily stroll. The three dams are wide enough for cars and tractors to pass. The ease with which you can walk the fields and woods are signs of the maintenance of the place—not indications of a peace with nature.

The only disorder on the place is carefully marked off with tomato stakes. A little more than ten years ago, William Hutcheson, a “grandchild of the property,” marked off a square of the field with stakes as an experimental plot where no mowing, weeding, or other tampering could occur. Since then, no human has stepped inside the bounds. In place of grasses, the plot is filled now with fox grapes, prickly pear cacti, a few small oak saplings, and a ten-foot pine tree. It is a tangle of vegetation, much of it with sharp thorns, and certainly an affront to the beauty of the wide grassy spaces. To stand at the edge of the plot and periodically monitor the growth of these undesired weed species is to understand that sitting on a porch and admiring beauty is not necessarily to know nature or history. The apparent harmony and ease of just seventy acres of marsh, pond, field, and forest can fool you into forgetting these enormous, intangible things—nature and history. Perhaps it is not even possible to know seventy acres.

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ⁱ Charles F. Kovacik and John J. Winberry, *South Carolina: A Geography* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987): 25, 40-41; Laylon Wayne Jordan and Elizabeth H. Stringfellow, *A Place Called St. John's: The Story of John's, Edisto, Wadmalaw, Kiawah and Seabrook Islands of South Carolina* (Spartanburg: The Reprint Company, 1998): 2-3; B.R. Smith and D.C. Hallbrick, General Soil Map, South Carolina (Clemson, SC: South Carolina Agricultural Experiment Station, 1979): Soil Map 48.

ⁱⁱ Jordan and Stringfellow, 3, 67, 99.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jordan and Stringfellow, Appendix A, 245, 246, 264-265; Kovacik and Winberry, 41, 89-90.

^{iv} Jordan and Stringfellow, 115, 139-148; copy of Jenkins letter, August 1864, in possession of author.

^v Jordan and Stringfellow, 162.

^{vi} Loren Schweninger, "A Vanishing Breed: Black Farm Owners in the South, 1651-1982," *agricultural history* 63 (Summer 1989): 48-51.