

ORIGINS OF THE HARRINGTON SETTLEMENT

How did Harrington get its name?

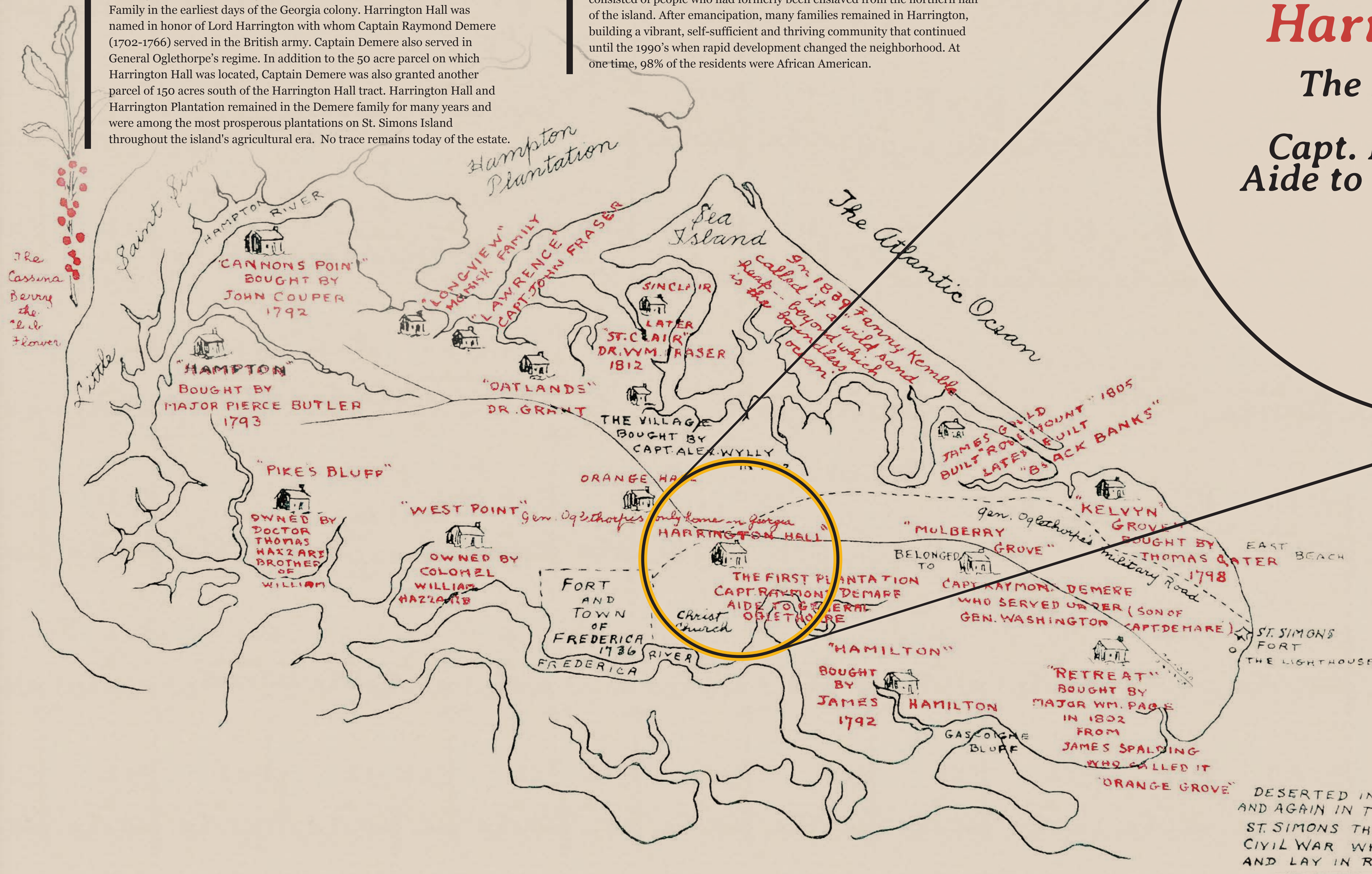
The site of Harrington Hall has been marked by the Georgia Historical Commission as one of the earliest grants on St. Simons Island.

Harrington Hall and Harrington Plantation were owned by the Demere Family in the earliest days of the Georgia colony. Harrington Hall was named in honor of Lord Harrington with whom Captain Raymond Demere (1702-1766) served in the British army. Captain Demere also served in General Oglethorpe's regime. In addition to the 50 acre parcel on which Harrington Hall was located, Captain Demere was also granted another parcel of 150 acres south of the Harrington Hall tract. Harrington Hall and Harrington Plantation remained in the Demere family for many years and were among the most prosperous plantations on St. Simons Island throughout the island's agricultural era. No trace remains today of the estate.

The residential section south of the former Harrington Hall has been known for years as "Harrington". In the years following the Civil War, newly freed African Americans bought land and formed neighborhoods on St. Simons Island. The largest of these communities, Harrington, originally consisted of people who had formerly been enslaved from the northern half of the island. After emancipation, many families remained in Harrington, building a vibrant, self-sufficient and thriving community that continued until the 1990's when rapid development changed the neighborhood. At one time, 98% of the residents were African American.

Harrington Hall

The First Plantation
Owned By
Capt. Raymond Demere,
Aide to General Oglethorpe



DESERTED IN THE REVOLUTION, AND AGAIN IN THE WAR OF 1812, ST. SIMONS THEN FLOURISHED UNTIL THE CIVIL WAR WHEN IT WAS ABANDONED AND LAY IN RUINS FOR MANY YEARS

FROM BEING TREATED AS PROPERTY
TO OWNING PROPERTY

1879

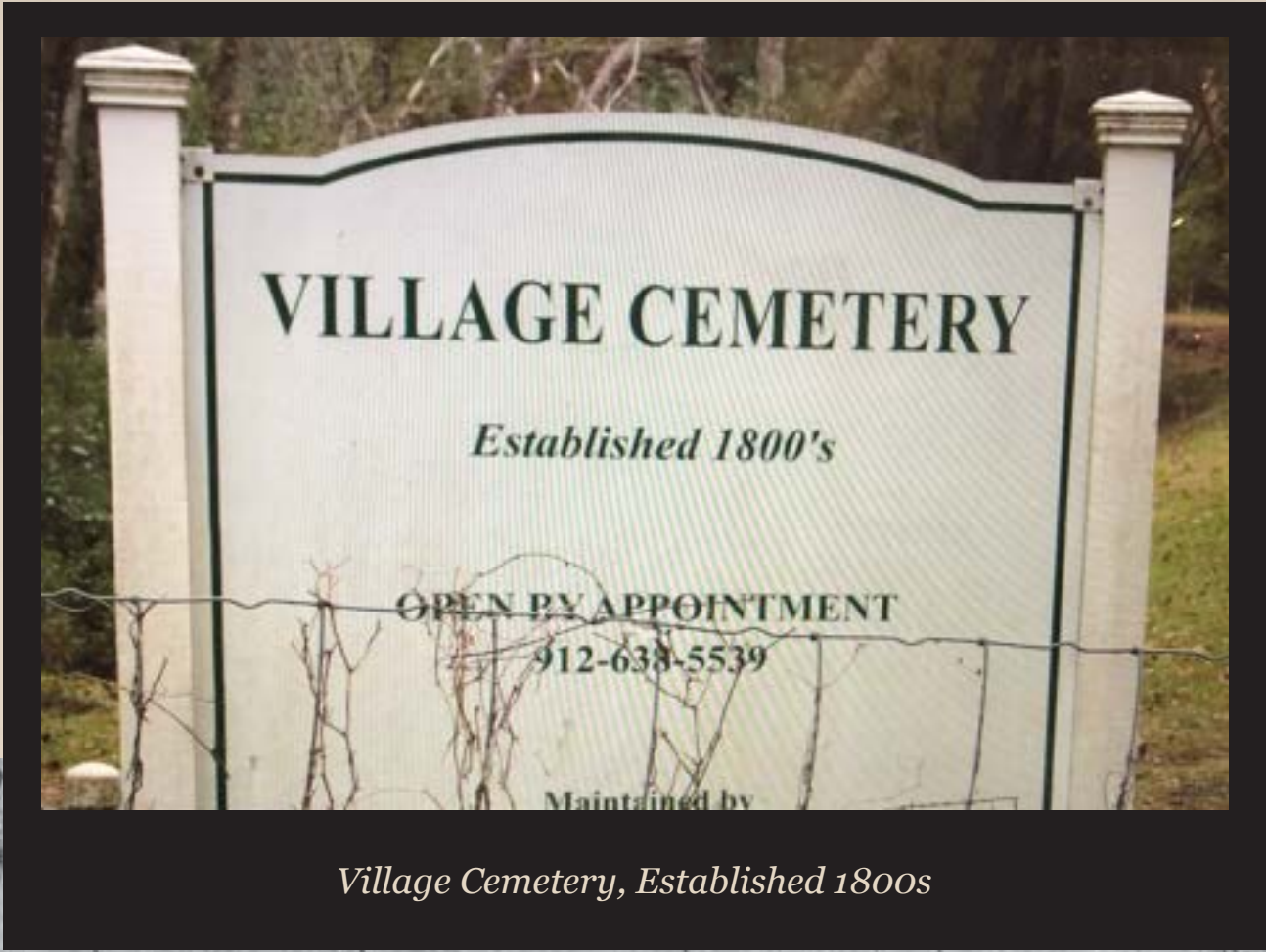
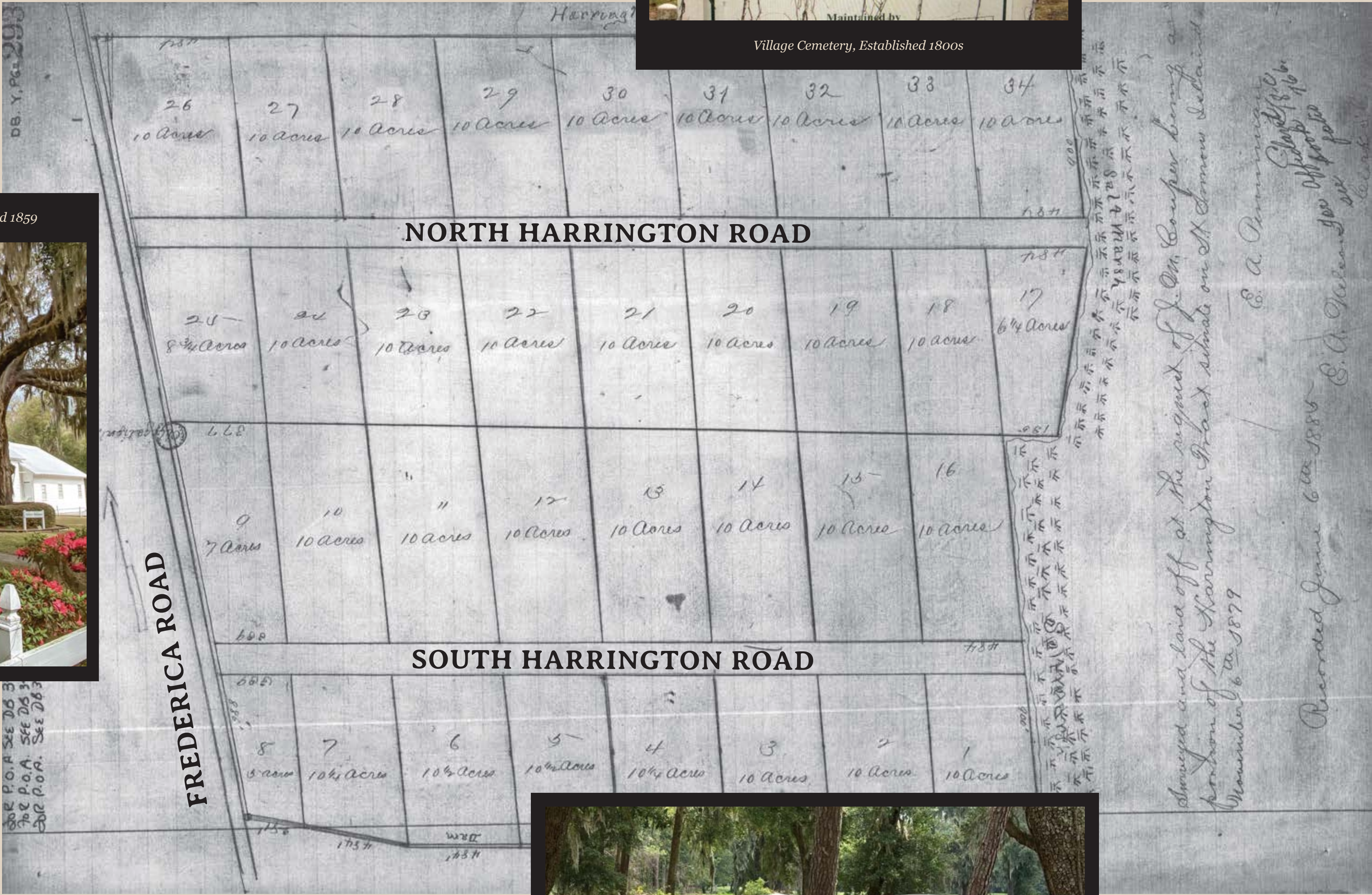
This map represents the Harrington Neighborhood in 1879.

After the Civil War, formerly enslaved people on St. Simons plantations acquired land and settled in several communities, the largest of which was Harrington. Each family secured a plot. This map shows 6-10 acres, sufficient space for a home, garden, cows, hogs, chickens and proximity to fishing. Craftspeople built homes, wove baskets, carved pestles, knitted nets to catch fish, shrimp and crabs, fashioned coops from palmetto stalks to raise the chickens that pecked in their yards.

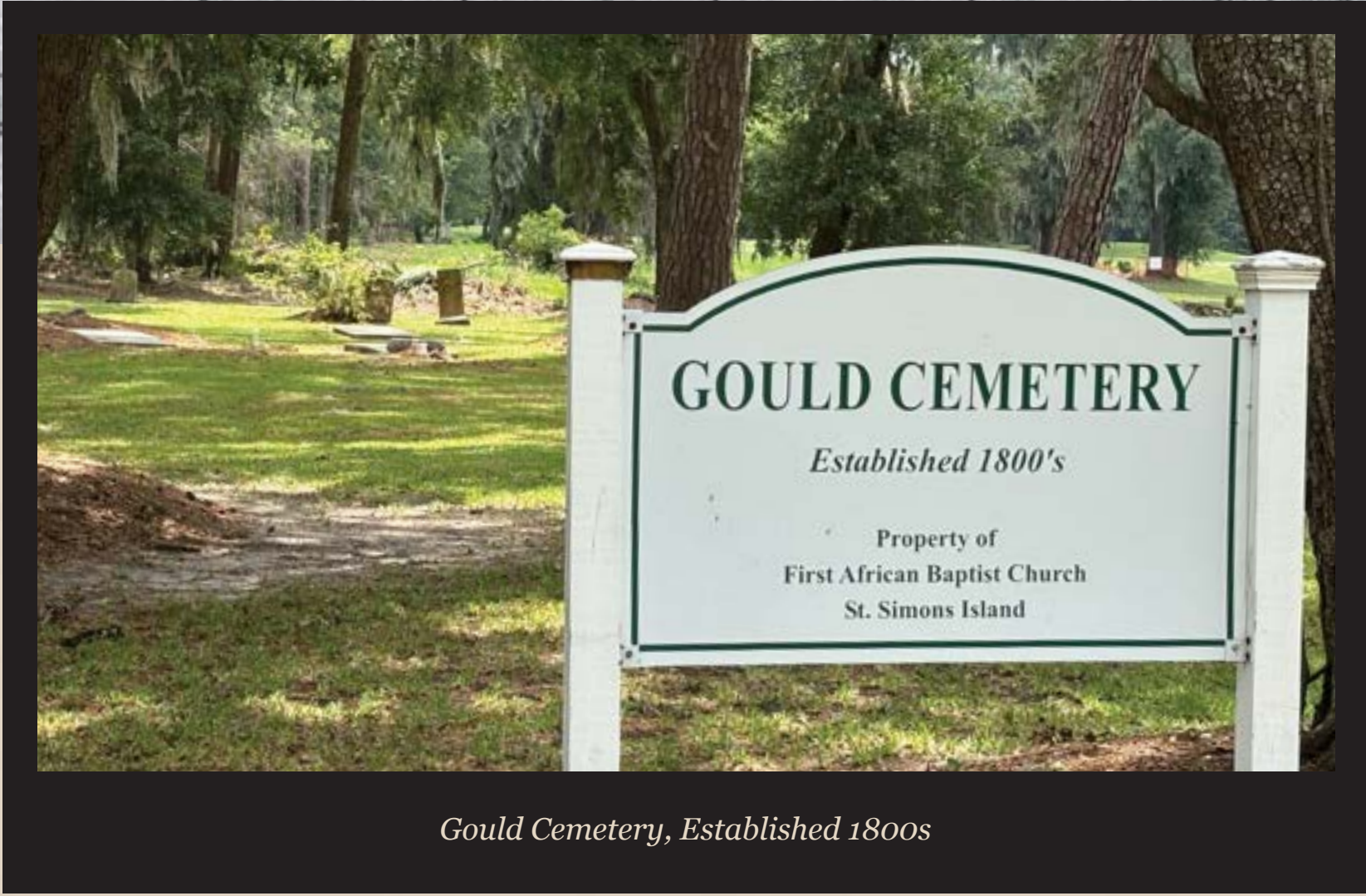
Over the years, Harrington evolved into its own vibrant, self-enclosed entity and by the 1900s, the community had stores, a gas station, roller rink, barber shop, two churches, juke joints, an ice house, a fish camp (Cusie's) and a restaurant (Alfonza's). Harrington families engaged in a variety of professions: craftsmen, laborers, farmers, fishermen, laundresses, domestics, cooks, butlers, store owners, stevedores, midwives, mill workers, deacons, pastors and teachers.

Family Names:

- Abbott
Armstrong
Bryant
Cusperd
Cuyler
Davis
Felsons/Phelsons
Floyd
Hunter
Johnson
Lee
- Loman
Manning
Mathis
Quarterman
Ramsey
Steward/Stewart
Sullivan
Taylor
White
Wilson
Wing/Whing



Village Cemetery, Established 1800s



Gould Cemetery, Established 1800s

40 ACRES & A BROKEN PROMISE

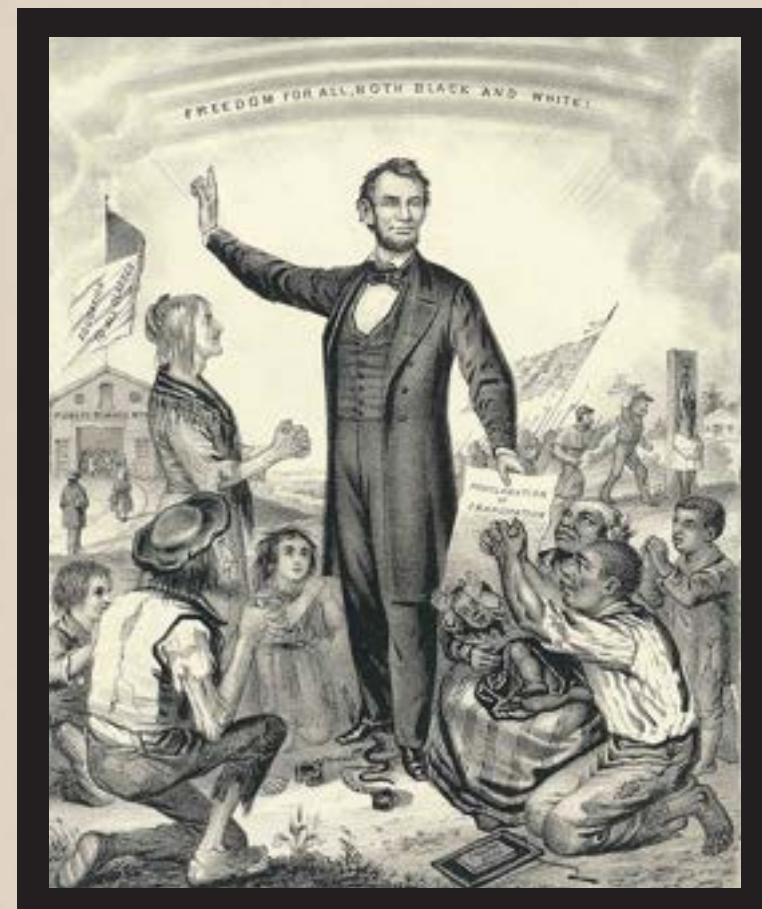
Significant Dates of Black Land Loss

1864

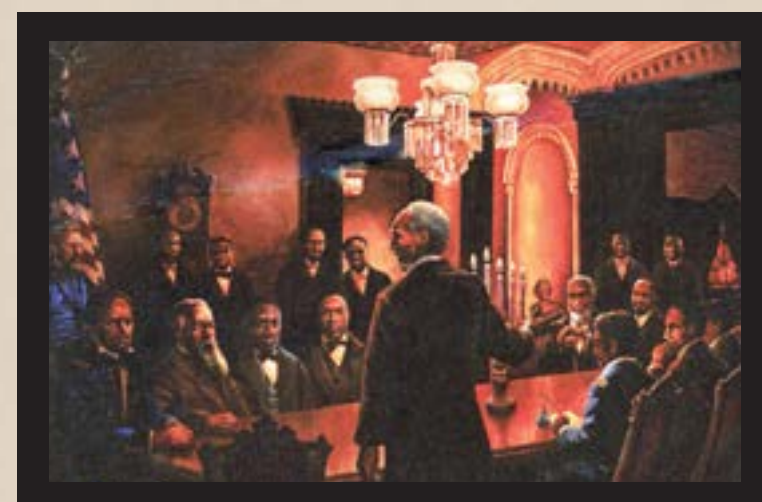


During Sherman's March to the Sea, thousands of newly freed slaves were following the Union Army and attempting to cross the swollen and icy Ebenezer Creek near Savannah. Trapped between charging Confederate forces, estimates suggest that hundreds, possibly thousands of men, women and children drowned in the freezing waters.

1865



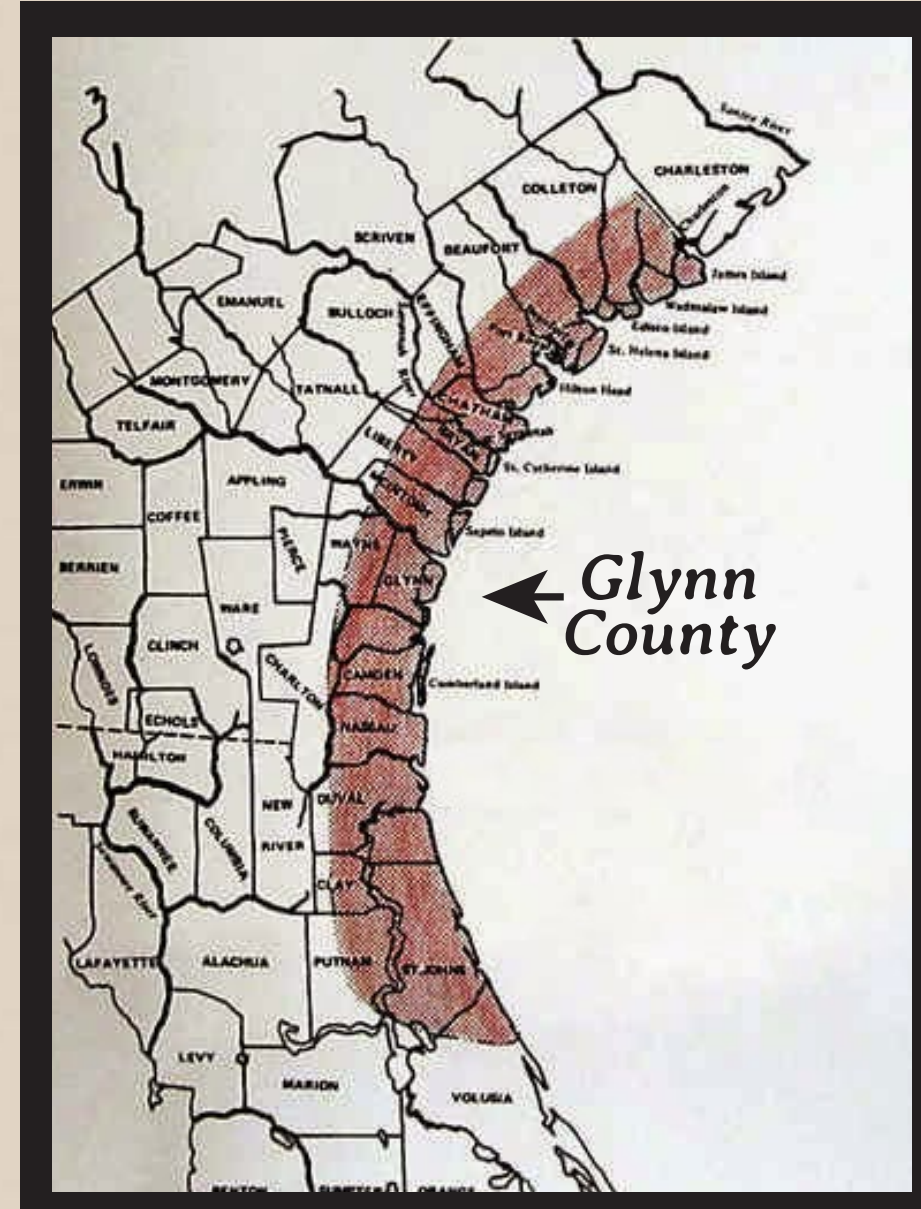
The 13th Amendment abolishes slavery and involuntary servitude.



Following the massacre at Ebenezer Creek, Union General William T. Sherman and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton met with 20 Black ministers in Savannah and posed the question “What do you want for your own people?”



Field Order No. 15 commanded that 400,000 acres of abandoned land along the coasts of SC, GA and FL be redistributed to newly freed families in up to 40 acre plots.



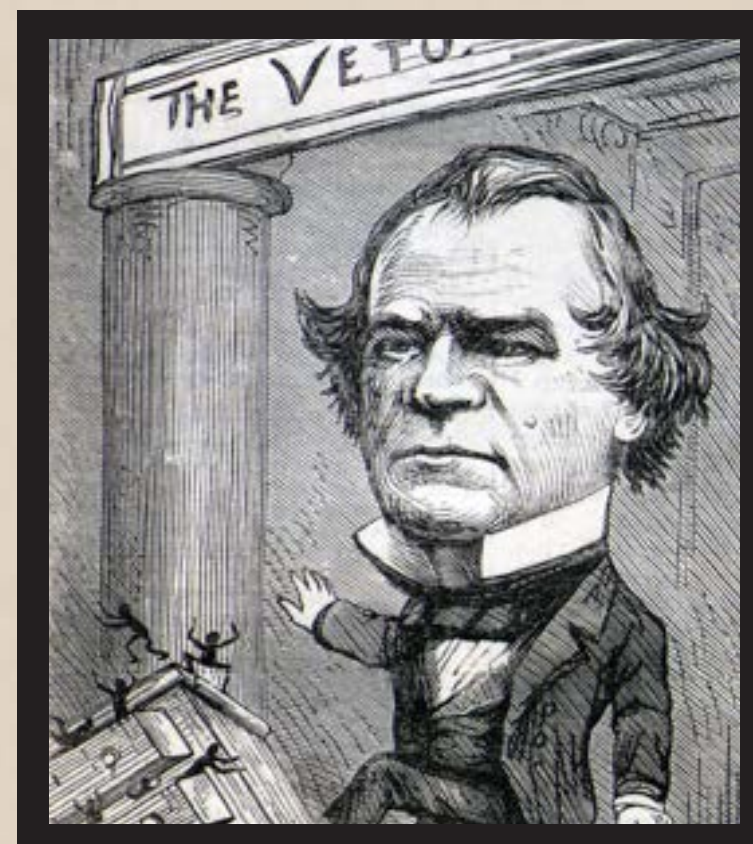
Congress set up the Freedmen's Bureau in March 1865 which was responsible for the management and supervision of matters relating to refugees, freedmen, and abandoned lands. BUT, Congress allows The Freedman's Bureau to sell only 5 to 10 acres to freed slaves.



Tunis Campbell was appointed by The Freedmen's Bureau to supervise land claims and resettlement on five Georgia islands: Ossabaw, Delaware, Colonels, St. Catherine's, and Sapelo. Georgia planters, who received pardons from U.S. president Andrew Johnson, regained control of these islands in 1866. HOWEVER, Campbell quickly purchased 1,250 acres in McIntosh County and established an association of Black landowners to divide parcels and profit from the land.



President Abraham Lincoln is assassinated and succeeded by Vice President Andrew Johnson.



“40 Acres and a Broken Promise”—President Andrew Johnson REVERSES Field Order 15 returning land given to freed slaves back to original plantation owners.



The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) is founded.

The Southern Homestead Act allowed for ownership of property by blacks but excluded Georgia.

1868

14th Amendment - gives citizenship to blacks.

1877

The Compromise of 1877— marked the end of Reconstruction, restoration of “home rule” in the South and loss of federal protection for African American rights. This ushered in devastating Jim Crow laws which enforced segregation and discrimination.

1910-1970

Black Migration – 6 million African Americans move out of the rural South due to poor economic and social conditions where Jim Crow laws and racial segregation denied African Americans political rights and opportunities.

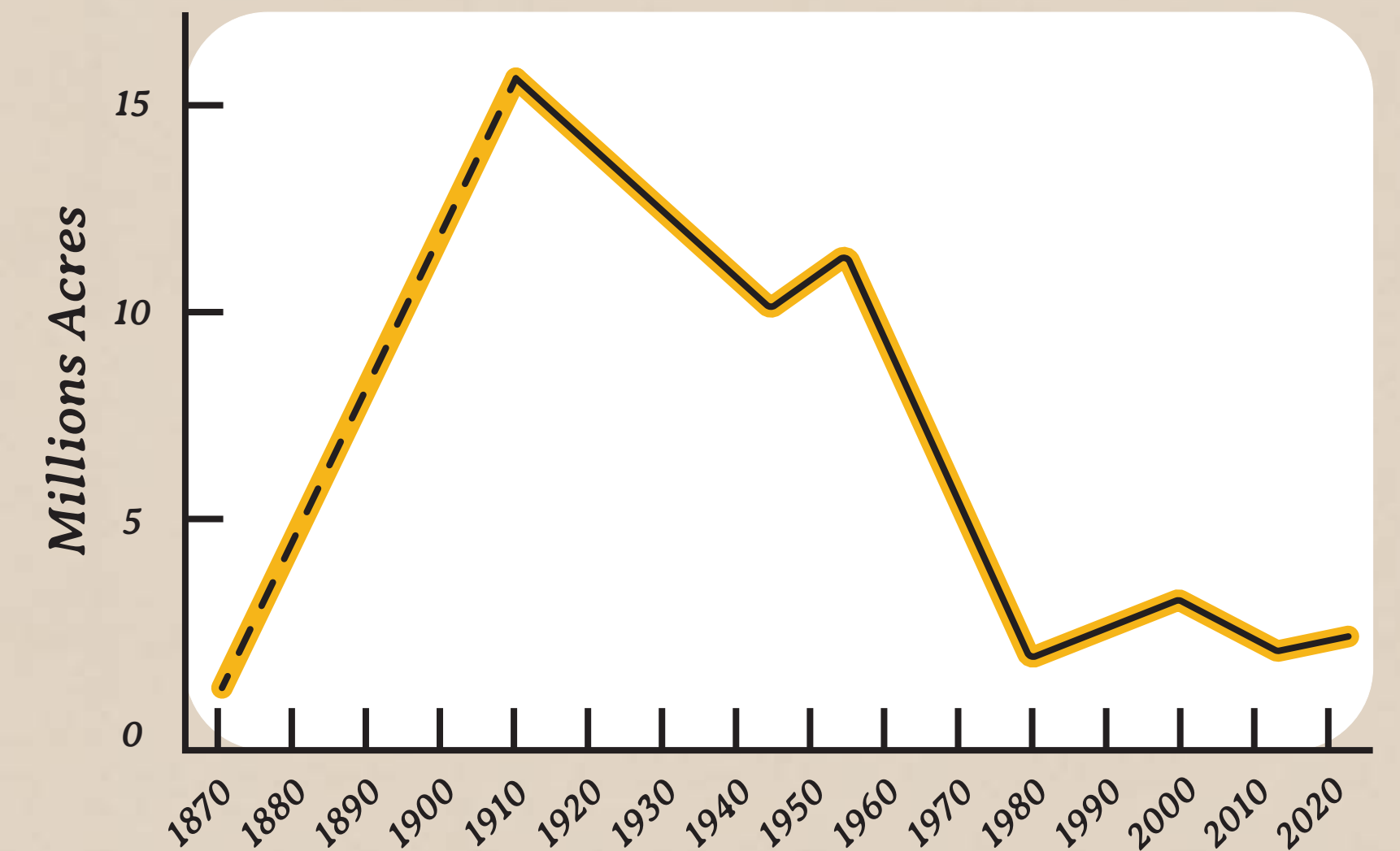
1864 to Present Day



“The Chicago Defender” was founded by Robert S. Abbott, who was born on St. Simons Island near Harrington. Abbott played a significant role in the Great Migration from the rural South to the urban North. “The Chicago Defender” disseminated

information about job opportunities and better living conditions, and attacked racial injustice, particularly lynching. Pullman porters would sneak bundles of the newspaper on the trains and drop them off at barber shops and beauty parlors to be distributed to southern blacks.

BLACK-OWNED LAND IN THE U.S.



In the US, Black land ownership hit an all time high in 1910:
Over 15 Million acres. 14% of all farm owners were black.
925,000 farms owned by blacks.

1973

“Only 6 Million Acres” published by Robert S. Browne, founder of Emergency Land Fund (ELF).

1992

Land ownership falls to 2.3 million acres.

2020

Land ownership falls to 1 million acres.

EVERYDAY LIFE IN HARRINGTON

1951

“Margaret Davis Cate & Orrin Sage Wightman’s Early Days of Coastal Georgia” gave us numerous photos and stories of coastal Georgia from the 1930s to 1950s. African American families are seen in this panel at work, at play, surrounded by family and neighbors and offer a glimpse into everyday life in Harrington.

The Harrington community was close-knit and self-sufficient built upon a foundation of faith, family, fishing and farming. Families grew their own crops, hunted in nearby woods and fished in nearby Village Creek. Growing one’s own food and sharing it with others fostered a sense of community, mutual aid, support and cultural preservation.

Church

Church was central to the community and Harrington had two churches – First African Baptist Church on Frederica Road and The Holiness Church on South Harrington. African spiritual practices were interwoven with Christian beliefs, evident in worship styles, which included call-and-response singing, ring shouts and spirituals. Church gatherings were not just for worship but also served as crucial social events, where community members supported each other and discussed important matters. Baptisms were conducted in the tidal area at Village Creek at the end of South Harrington. Obligation Pond was named for the site where baptized believers took their obligation to the Lord. Obligation Pond was filled in for a housing development.

Family

Family and kinship were essential to the Harrington Community. Extended families often lived close together and children were cherished, raised and cared for by the entire community. Elders were highly respected, serving as keepers of tradition and wisdom.

Education

Education was highly valued, but access to quality schooling was often limited due to segregation. The Historic Harrington School, formerly known as the “Harrington Graded School” was built in 1924, where children were taught a rigorous curriculum in grades 1-7 including Bible verses, math, music, art, reading, writing and science using native plants. Beloved teachers, Adrian Johnson and his wife Luetta drove to Harrington from their home on the South End of St. Simons along with other South End schoolchildren.

Crafts and Traditions

Art and craft traditions, such as rice pounding, basket weaving, cast net weaving for fishing and the the use of medicinal plants were important aspects of daily life. Charles Wilson, who lived in Harrington, was a sought-after out craftsman known for creating baskets, a skill with deep African roots. These baskets were not only practical but also considered works of art. Quilting, pottery, barrel making, carpentry, boat building, and masonry also played a role in both daily life and the community's economy.

Music and Entertainment

Enslaved Africans brought their musical traditions to the American South. Spirituals blended African musical elements with Christian hymns. Work songs helped coordinate labor and communicate messages and set the work pace. Families were singing mostly among themselves at home, during work, in church, in school yards and on front porches. One hundred years ago Lydia Parrish, wintering on St. Simons, took notice of these rhythms and organized the “Spiritual Singers Society of Coastal Georgia”. She was instrumental in finding venues for the singers to perform locally. She published a collection of songs “Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands” in 1942. Bessie Jones, the famed singer, joined the group that was later named The Georgia Sea Island Singers. The group performed most notably at the Newport Folk Festival and at Jimmy Carter’s inauguration. Juke joints, live music and juke boxes provided access to the latest R&B, blues, and early rock and roll. The Do Drop Inn, Trocadero and Morrison’s were the local establishments in Harrington to go to and gather, relax, and enjoy music and dancing.



“DON’T ASK WON’T SELL”

Development, Density, Cultural and Community Loss

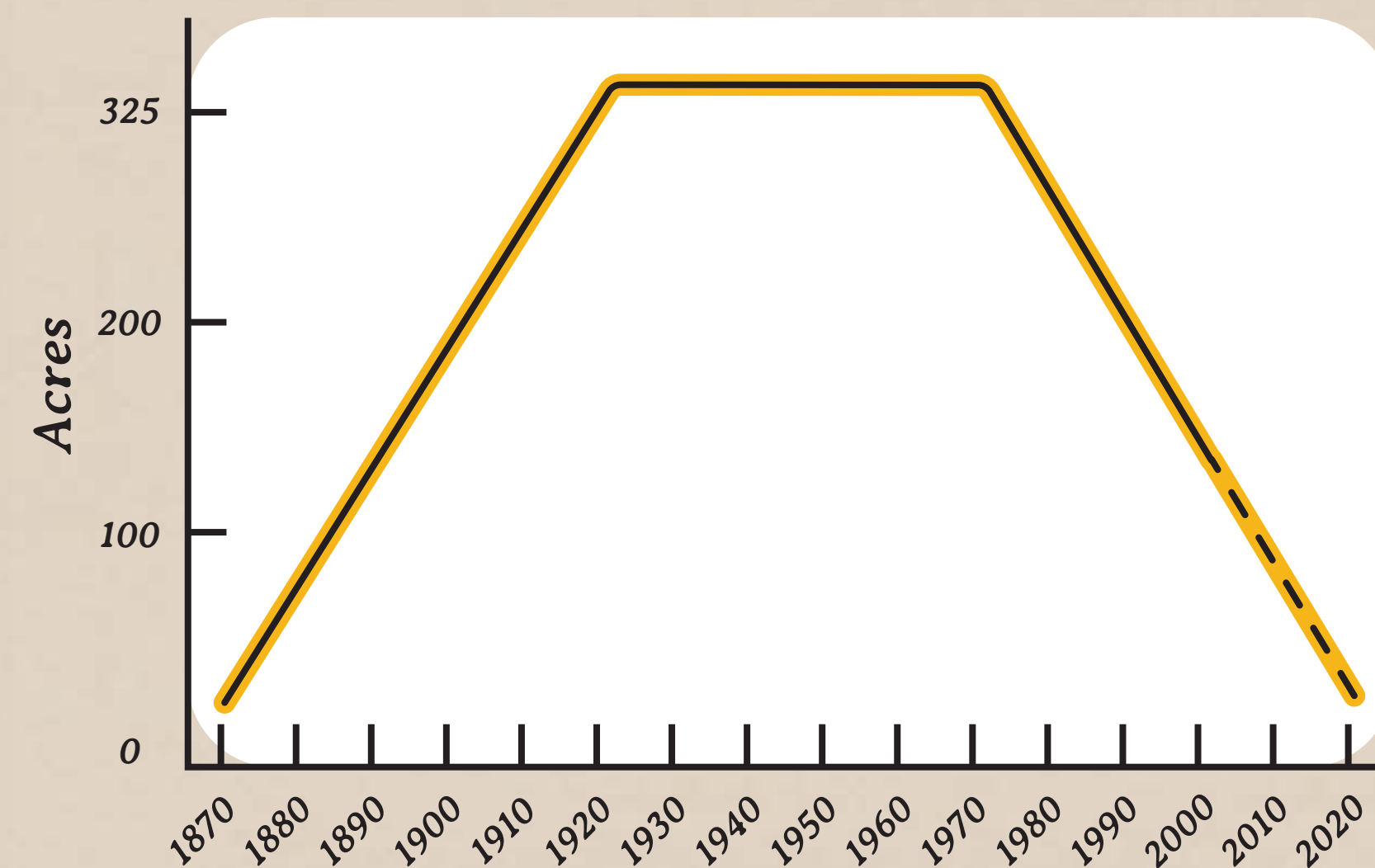
For most of the 20th century, Harrington families still owned the majority of their property handed down from post Civil War times. Across the United States, most black farmers and property owners saw a steady decline in ownership starting in 1910. HOWEVER, the Harrington neighborhood was still relatively intact.

For many years, the handmade “Don’t Ask, Won’t Sell” signs were seen almost everywhere in the once predominately African American communities on St. Simons Island. With painted-on lettering, the signs were nailed to high branches of trees or tacked onto the sides of buildings and fences – a response to the real estate explosion in the early 2000s, when property values began soaring and when developers and realtors tried to secure the last large landholdings in historically black communities.



Mrs. Elouise Spears is among the Harrington residents who became tired of strangers knocking on her door and pressing her to sell. She put up a “Don’t Ask/Won’t Sell sign in her yard. When interviewed nearly twenty years ago, Mrs. Spears said “I put the sign out because I don’t want to be bothered again.” A retired registered nurse who attended the Harrington School, Mrs. Spears passed away in 2020 at the age of 90.

BLACK-OWNED LAND IN HARRINGTON



Starting in the 1970s, pressure from real estate developers, changes in zoning and rising property taxes caused many African American homes and properties in Harrington to be sold for subdivisions. One of the first such subdivisions was Village Creek. Residents who did not want to sell their heritage put up yellow “Don’t Ask/Won’t Sell” signs in their yards.



In 2000, The St. Simons African American Heritage Coalition was formed by a group of concerned citizens to preserve African American culture and slow down the threat of encroachment by developers.



In May 2004, Isadora Hunter chose to donate her land to St. Simons Land Trust to preserve the one-room schoolhouse and 12 surrounding acres of “sun-dappled forests and ponds” so the property would be protected from developers.

Harrington residents are direct descendants of the enslaved peoples who had worked on Georgia’s barrier islands during the plantation era. Harrington families who have owned large tracts of land since the end of the Civil War are determined to hold on to their property.



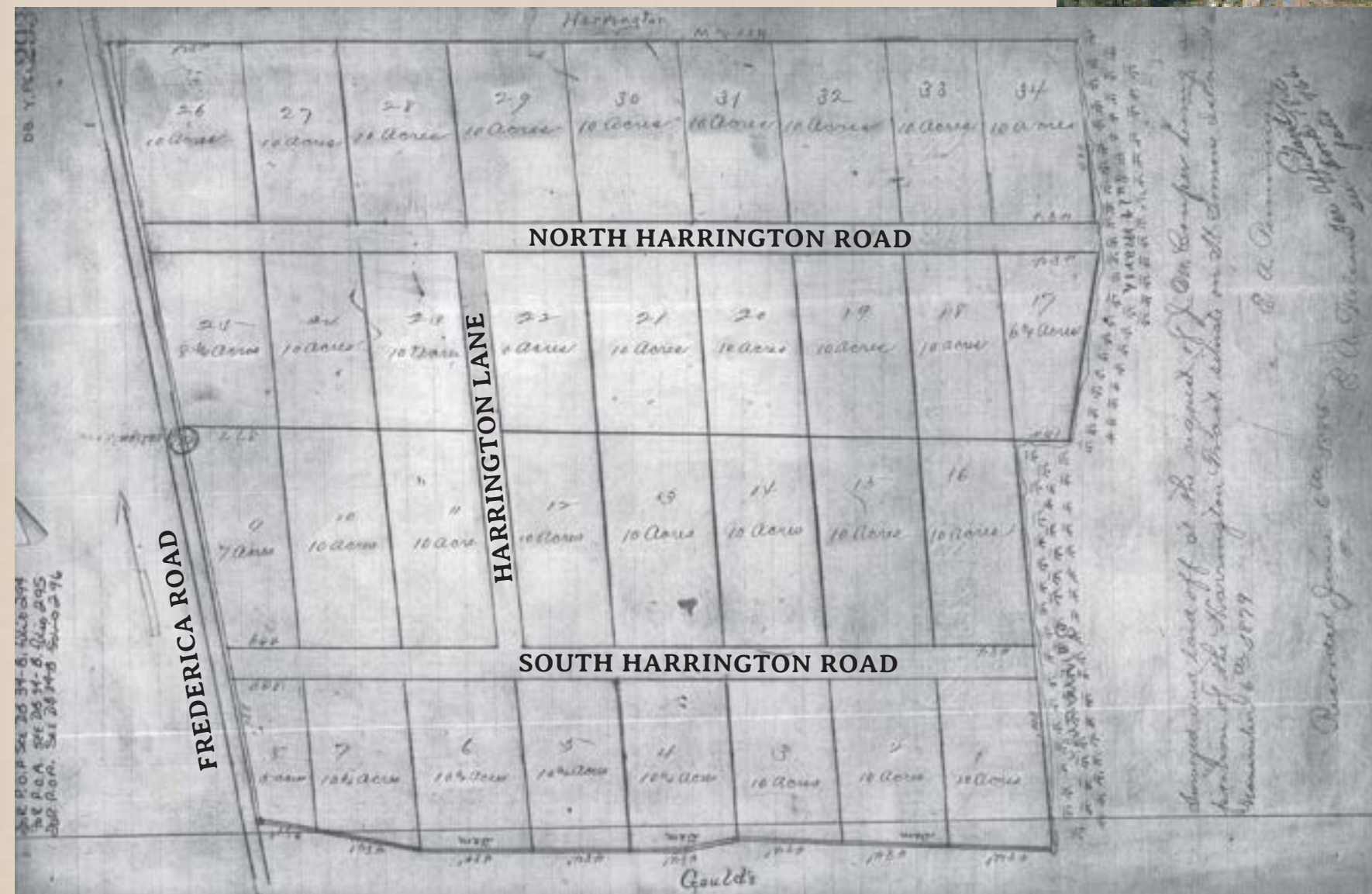
She loved this island and the rich heritage of her community. She also loved her daughter, Natalie Dixon, who inherited the property. Mrs. Dixon moved away from Coastal Georgia for nearly 30 years, but she returned when her mother grew older and when she was reminded of how much she, too, loved the island, the Harrington community, her family’s legacy, and her family’s property. One of the things Mrs. Dixon remembers most is her mother saying to her about those twenty acres of live oak-covered land overlooking the marsh, “Don’t give it away.”

CULTURAL LOSS, COMMUNITY LOSS, DENSITY & DEVELOPMENT

2010



1879



2024

1865

The story of African America families on St. Simons Island after freedom—their history for over the last 160 years—is compelling and important to the history of The Golden Isles. The entire Harrington neighborhood has changed dramatically in just a few decades. At one time, 98% of the residents were African American, and the majority of those were descendants of enslaved people who worked and lived on Georgia's barrier islands during the plantation era. Today, less than 2% of the residents are African American.

1900-1920

Census records from 1900 and 1920 reveal much about the island's African American families in Harrington. A majority of these families owned their land free of mortgage. Nearly all of the black residents had been born in Georgia. Their parents were also born in Georgia.

1910 was the peak of Black farmland ownership—more than 16 million acres nation-wide.

1924

The invention of the automobile, improved roads and the construction of bridges made transportation to St. Simons Island much more convenient. As the Historic Harrington School celebrates 100 years, 2024 also marks the 100 years of the F. J. Torras causeway's completion.



Historic Harrington School



The Opening of F.J. Torras Causeway

1930s

In the 1930's, resorts such as Sea Island and The King & Prince hosted an increasing number of tourists from the mainland and beyond. Soon, residential communities sprang up in coastal Georgia.

New home construction for primary and second homes accelerated as the Georgia coast was "discovered." Island living became more palatable with the invention of air-conditioning.



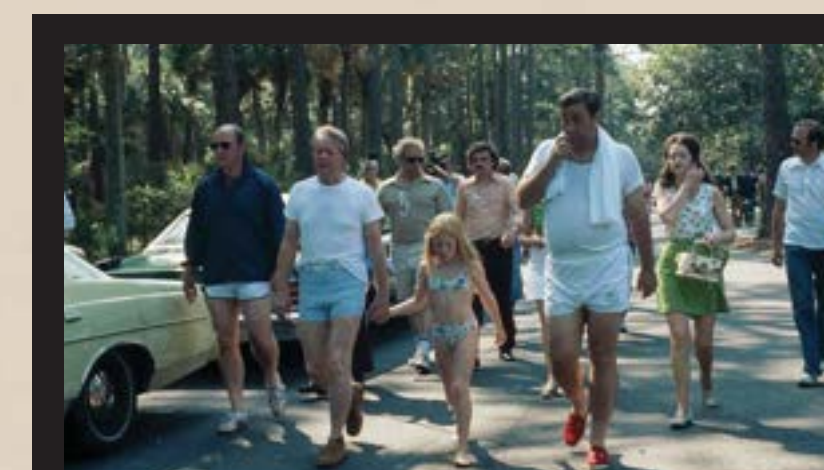
The Cloister Hotel, Sea Island



King & Prince

1970s

During his campaign for President, Jimmy Carter started spending more time at Musgrove, the 1800 acre property adjacent to Harrington. President Carter, his cabinet, Secret Service detail, the press, supporters and family members were known to the residents and business owners of Harrington. "It's like a parade, all that Secret Service" said the proprietor of a local restaurant.



President Carter at Musgrove

1980s

Development was relatively slow until the 1980's as wealth was created with the Bull Market. Tourism increased and real estate was purchased and sold at unprecedented levels.

1990s

Many of the St. Simons African American families could no longer afford to live and work on the island. Families were forced to sell ancestral land as property values and real estate taxes rose to new heights. Family elders passed away without wills making it difficult for heirs to retain the property. The first development in Harrington was Village Creek.

2024

In the 1990's and up until today, pressure from real estate developers, changes in zoning and rising property taxes caused many African American homes and property in Harrington to be sold for subdivisions. Each year, increased density and development continue in the Harrington neighborhood.

Ancestral cemeteries such as Gould Cemetery on Frederica Road are now surrounded by golf courses, vacation homes, resort properties, office buildings and townhomes. Local government promotes development and rezoning with no slowdown in sight.



Gould Cemetery, Frederica Road

THE ONGOING LEGACY OF BLACK LAND LOSS

