

Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park

Final Summary of Ghosted Structures / Church Archaic Project

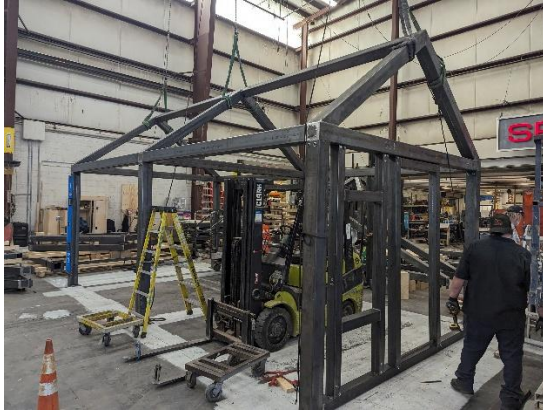
Established in 1862, historic Mitchelville became the first town of self-governing formerly enslaved people in the United States. An “experiment in citizenship” and a “model for reconstruction,” historic Mitchelville succeeded, yet virtually faded from history. Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park, Inc. (HMFP) is a non-profit South Carolina corporation whose mission is to preserve, promote, and honor Historic Mitchelville. HMFP envisions that Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park will become an imaginative and exciting place celebrating the American spirit through the story of this historic community and how that story informs and strengthens the fabric of our shared American heritage.

After years of planning and fundraising, the Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park (HMFP) finally enters the implementation stage of its development with permanent exterior structures that opened in June 2024. The first phase of this development began in 2022 with the installation of three Bateau shaped interpretive panels in the Park. Now, due to the generosity of the State of South Carolina, HMFP was able to move forward with the construction of “Ghosted Structures” that were aligned with the imprint of homes in the historic community and a “Church / Archaic Reflection area, located at the site of one of the four Mitchelville churches that also includes the imprint of a 4,000-year-old Indigenous group.

The goal of this project was to bring these important elements of the Mitchelville story to life for K-12 students, teachers, researchers and the general public. HMFP understands that the important story of Mitchelville is still widely unknown and the more information the organization can provide, the more the general public will understand the history and its importance to the State of South Carolina. Historical accounts say General Ormsby Mitchel organized a contest between his engineers and the refugees, inviting each to build a sample cabin. He selected the house built by the contrabands as the model for Mitchelville’s homes. The Army Corps of Engineers laid out streets and lots. Contrabands built their own homes with lumber and nails provided by the army. In late October 1862, Mitchel reported groups of people building six houses a day.

[Mitchel] called [the contrabands] together, told them they must build houses for themselves. He gave instructions to the engineers, after he himself had selected the site for the proposed village, that they should build a log cabin as a sample. He also told the negroes to build a cabin after their own ideas, and he would decide which to take as a model for the rest of the buildings. The models were completed, and General Mitchel selected that built by the negroes. He then had all the contraband families provided with boards, nails, hammers, etc. and told them to build on each lot which had been set of a house for themselves. The negroes, unassisted by the advice or help of others than themselves, fell to work, and the result was the odd-looking village, which they called Mitchelville.

Philadelphia Inquirer, May 18, 1863



The Ghosted Structures are galvanized steel frameworks representing the assorted designs of the historic Mitchelville homes. The doors and windows feature interpretive panels that are highlighting the daily lives of Mitchelville citizens. These structures align with the original street grid that was designed by the Army Corps of Engineers in 1862. These structures were designed by HMFP, WLA Studio, our Landscape Architects, based in Athens GA and our Interpretive Design consultants, Proun Design, LLC based in Somerville, MA. Mystic Scenic Studios, Inc., based in Norwood, MAS was tasked with creating the structures

at their facility and then they were sent to Hilton Head Island in March 2024. The HMFP team, Dr. Seeber, Proun and WLA Studio worked on carefully crafting the language for the interpretive panels for the Ghosted Structures and the Church Archaic area.

The organization relied on historic interpretations of the houses to determine five designs that best aligned with how the homes actually looked during the historic Mitchelville time period. Our principal archaeological investigator, Dr. Katherine Seeber worked closely with the design team and the construction company to ensure that these structures would be historically accurate and that any historical material / objects would be protected during the installation process. Nix Construction implemented the construction of the Ghosted Structures and the Church frontage.



The Church Archaic Reflection Area is located at the imprint of one of the four historic churches from the Mitchelville area. This interpretive display features a Church frontage complete with steeple and bell made from the same galvanized steel as the Ghosted Structures. The windows hold interpretive panels that highlights the importance of the church to the functionality of Mitchelville. The church was the site of the first educational opportunities, and it served as the “courthouse” and the “Town Hall” for the community. At the time of this report, state permits are in process to complete the implementation of the elements listed in the following paragraph.

HISTORIC
MITCHELVILLE
FREEDOM PARK | 1819-1861
CHURCH-ARCHAIC PLAZA CONCEPT



This open concept display will also feature 1860's styled church benches with Negro Spirituals “burned” into the top of the wood. This area leads into a semi-circular “Seatwall nook” area that will feature Indigenous iconography and a six-foot “core sample” that will feature archaeological replicas from the Mitchelville era and the 4,000-year-old Indigenous nations, the Escamacu and the Cusabo, that we believe to have been living in this area. The ground leading into the “nook” will have a Land Acknowledgement that honors those nations. This area is scheduled to be completed in Summer 2025.



HMFP opened the Ghosted Structures and Church Archaic frontage to the public with a ribbon cutting on June 4, 2025, with Town of Hilton Head Island, Beaufort County and State elected officials in attendance. Senator Tom Davis addressed the crowd and discussed the importance of this addition to the development of Mitchelville. Almost immediately, the organization saw an increase in

visitation to the Park from people in and outside of the Beaufort County area. HMFP acknowledged an increase in school groups and other organized trips to come to see the new addition. Based on evaluation tools and a service called Placer A.I., that tracks visitation to the Park connected to cellphone usage, HMFP has been able to chart a 33% increase in visitors from the previous year.

Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park would like to show its deep appreciation to the State of South Carolina and the Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism for this investment in one of the state's keystone historical stories. This project helped to jumpstart the wave of development at the Park site and the organization moves ever closer to full implementation of the full Mitchelville Plan. Mitchelville is a story of the triumph of freedom over slavery as a way of life, a pivotal point in American history, the start of the enjoyment of citizenship rights guaranteed to other Americans, but previously denied to America's builders, the formerly enslaved. However, it also is a guidepost, reminding us that a country established upon the noblest and highest ideals has fully yet to achieve them, and has much to learn about itself from its own history. With no other site serving as such a template or illuminating the authentic story of the place where freedom began for America's Black citizens, Historic Mitchelville is uniquely positioned to broaden the awareness and recognition of its rich story. Support from the State of South Carolina is allowing HMFP to help visitors appreciate the richness of the State's history (as well as the ways in which we are all interconnected) - and be amazed and appreciative of how everyday people can impact history.

