

The History of the Lands End Woodland, Inc.

In the 1920's, on St. Helena Island, S.C, a group of African American families, led by Dennis Freeman, pooled their resources to purchase 328 acres of land, a property then known as The Baker Place, formerly the Riverside Plantation located on Lands End. Mr. Freeman, who grew up in slavery on the Tom Bee Plantation, convinced other relatives and families on Lands End to invest in property that was being sold on a tax sale. These families wanted a place for recreational activities, to fish and hunt, to have access to firewood, and to provide family burial grounds. It was their stated desire to hold onto this property as a legacy for future descendants. They called themselves the Woodland Club and continued to hold social events to raise money to pay property taxes.

Over the generations as the original founders died, many without wills, the property became vulnerable to developers as the "Lowcountry of South Carolina" became a coveted area for development. In the 1990's, with the help of the historic Penn Center, Inc. (in 1862 the first school in the south for formerly enslaved Africans and today one of the premier centers for the study and preservation of the Sea Islands history and culture) and pro bono lawyers, a genealogical search of all of the founding families was done. The family members were notified and the work of incorporating the organization was begun. As Gullah natives of St. Helena Island with strong family influence and knowledge of the importance of land ownership, all members felt the importance of ensuring that the property would be forever under the ownership of the families of the founders and protected from outside encroachment. In 1996, the organization successfully incorporated the organization as the Lands End Woodland, Inc., a non-profit corporation under the state of South Carolina.

To sustain the property, the members sought revenue from occasional timber farming. Fishing and hunting remain viable activities. In an area adjacent to the cemetery, portions of the original Riverside Plantation house and slave quarters in the form of tabby ruins have been uncovered and are now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. According to archeological review, details of the structures suggest that these buildings may have been built between 1760 and 1780, leading experts to believe that these structures may be some of the earliest historic tabby structures to survive on St. Helena Island.

The mission of the organization is to conserve and utilize the property as intended by the founders. With the influx of development into the area, the impact of increased property taxes and other encroachments, the organization is determined to honor the ancestors by protecting this property for posterity. Land retention in the African American community is an important priority. The goal is to establish long term plans so that future generations will be educated about the history of the property and will work to preserve the legacy of the forefathers. Today, the Board of Directors is pursuing a conservation easement agreement with Beaufort County to protect the natural resources, beauty and unique ecological character of the Woodlands property

in a manner that would permit continuing private ownership of land and its subsequent public use in perpetuity.

In 2002 in the Capitol Column, Congressman James Clyburn said, "I applaud the efforts of the Lands End Woodland Club, who knew the dangers of partitioning and took the necessary action to insure the deed was clear. They went to great lengths to protect their 328 acres." In the wake of a boundary dispute seven years ago between billionaire Ted Turner and the Woodland organization, the Lands End Woodland successfully won their claim and the case and garnered national attention for the small Sea Island community. Clyburn commented, "This is happening to slave descendants throughout the South. As the land is lost, so too is the Gullah culture that once dominated these islands. I have secured federal funding for the National Parks Service to study ways to prevent future loss of this important cultural heritage." In 2005, Congressman Clyburn signed a bill to introduce the Gullah Geechee National Cultural Heritage Corridor into law.

In 2013 the Lands End Woodland, Inc. participated in the "Sustainable Forestry Program" led by the Center for Heirs Property of Charleston, SC and funded by the US Endowment of Forestry and Communities, Inc., USDA/Natural Resources Conservation Service and USDA Forest Service. This initiative has provided intensive educational training in sustainable forestry management for African American forest landowners across the state. As a result, the Lands End Woodland (part of the Woodlands Advocate Institute) has become a Sustainable Forestry Demonstration Forest that will serve as a liaison to the Center for Heirs Property to help other local landowners learn how to increase value and productivity of their property through sustainable forestry management practices. For more information, please contact us: (843) 263-5261.