

The Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission Proudly Opens McLeod Plantation Historic Site

Opening Information and Background

Located on James Island, McLeod Plantation was a site of nearly 300 years of continuous agricultural use, with a rich Charleston history that spanned from approximately 1855 to 1990. The Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission (CCPRC) is proud to open the property as a public historic site for the first time on April 25.

McLeod Plantation is a 37-acre former sea island cotton plantation that was owned by the McLeod family for many years. The property features an outstanding collection of historic buildings, several oak allées, and a rich archeological record. The plantation property also has ties to Revolutionary and Civil War activities.

But perhaps the most significant aspect of the site is its connection to enslaved African Americans, Gullah Geechee culture, and their efforts to achieve freedom and social equality. At the height of the plantation's sea island cotton production, as many as 100 enslaved African Americans lived on the property. "Transition Row," featuring 6 houses built for the enslaved at McLeod, was home to generations of African Americans from the late 1700s through the 1980s. The 55th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, a regiment made up of free African Americans, was quartered in these houses as well. Immediately following the war, the main house served as a regional office for the Freedmen's Bureau and the row of small houses provided homes to freedmen and their families. The stories of these people will be the main focus of interpretation at the site.

CCPRC acquired McLeod Plantation from the Historic Charleston Foundation in February 2011 with the goal of opening it as a county park. Since the acquisition, CCPRC has worked diligently with consultants, a 21-member steering committee, and public input to create a master plan for the historic property. In April 2014, CCPRC hosted a groundbreaking to mark the beginning of new construction and other projects on the site to open it for public use. Work included an extensive inventory and analysis of the property, a stabilization project to secure and seal its historic buildings, and construction of new facilities, signage and parking areas to make the property accessible.

A Brief History of McLeod Plantation

Before it was a plantation, the land on which McLeod Plantation stands was already a historic site. Native Americans occupied the site before it became what some believe was the location of the short-lived James Towne, the second English town built in South Carolina, in 1671. From the 1680s through the 1840s the property exchanged hands several times. During the American Revolution's British siege of Charleston, its fields were headquarters for British General Cornwallis.

In 1851, the McLeod family acquired the 1,693 acre tract. When William W. McLeod purchased the sea island cotton plantation, he could not predict that cotton production would be halted by war in 1862. By war's end, his family's ownership was in question. Following the plantation's evacuation, it served as headquarters for Confederate and Union troops, including the African American Massachusetts 55th Volunteer Infantry.

Within a month of Charleston's surrender in February 1865, the property, under Union General William T. Sherman's orders, was divided into 40-acre lots and granted to 38 freedmen, some of whom were once enslaved there. However, an abrupt policy change returned most freedmen's land to previous owners. To help enforce this policy shift, the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands opened a field office at McLeod Plantation.



*William E. McLeod,
courtesy SC Historical
Society*

Eventually, the children of William W. McLeod regained ownership of the property. The last McLeod to live on the plantation, William E. McLeod ("Mr. Willie"), died in 1990 at the age of 104. He left the property to the Historic Charleston Foundation, who sold it to CCPRC in 2011 for \$3.3 million, with preservation covenants to guide the site's future use as a public historic site.

The history of McLeod's ownership however, tells but a sliver of the plantation's whole story. When CCPRC obtained the site, it was decided that a broader story would be told – that of the hundreds of African Americans who once called McLeod Plantation home.

This is but a sample of the entire history of McLeod Plantation. For the full story, we invite you to join us for guided tours of the property, or download the McLeod Plantation Historic Site App, at any time, free of charge from the Apple App Store.

Prepping the Plantation for the Public

To prepare the McLeod Plantation Historic Site for public access, CCPRC constructed a new entrance, welcome center, open air pavilion, viewing dock overlooking Wappoo Creek, ADA accessible paths, interpretive signs and other interpretive media. Historic preservation efforts included varying degrees of preservation, restoration and conservation of the historic buildings and structures to the main house, six surviving homes built for the enslaved, kitchen and dairy buildings, and the agricultural outbuildings.



Stabilization of the Gin House

To make this project come to life, CCPRC worked with a variety of organizations. Site preservation and the development of historic interpretation was accomplished with assistance and input from the Historic Charleston Foundation, the Friends of McLeod, and other local, state and federal organizations, including the National Park Service. CCPRC also worked with landscape architectural planning firm The Jaeger Company and local architect Glenn Keys to assist with master planning and stabilization.

As a historic property, protecting the existing historic features of the site and structure was extremely important and required precise planning. This included ordering a paint analysis to determine the original colors of the historical structures, archaeological monitoring to avoid disturbing existing artifacts, dealing with asbestos abatement, as well as handling necessary permits and permissions.

The Visitor Experience – “Transition to Freedom”

What many people in the Charleston area are familiar with when it comes to McLeod Plantation is the McLeod family itself, who owned the property - off and on during wartimes - for over 130 years. The history of McLeod’s ownership however, tells but a sliver of the plantation’s whole story. When CCPRC obtained the site, it was clear that a broader story should be told – that of the hundreds of African Americans who once called McLeod Plantation home.

As a bold and rare example, this site declines to tell the well-known manicured story of the grand old South and its plantations. Rather, it gives voice to all of the plantation’s inhabitants, including those who lived there during and after slavery, and their efforts to realize freedom, justice and equality within a culture that denied them those rights and unsuccessfully sought to eliminate their humanity. McLeod Plantation presents an emblematic story illustrating how American society strives, but has yet to fully understand and come to grips with its past.



*Caretaker Stephen Forrest,
Courtesy SC Historical Society*



Transition Row

At McLeod Plantation Historic Site, guests are able to walk through the main house to see where the McLeods and those they enslaved as personal attendants lived and worked. Visitors will see where Confederate officers debated tactics, where African American soldiers celebrated emancipation of their people, where freedmen’s families lived without whites present for a time, and where one of the last sea island cotton planters lived and died.

The homes of Transition Row reveal a glimpse into the lives of its enslaved inhabitants, emancipated people, and their descendants as they strove to overcome inequality during the 20th century. One home, converted into a

worship place for a non-denominational mission in the 1980s, explores the importance of community, religion and spirituality to Lowcountry African American Gullah people.

Guests to McLeod Plantation Historic Site will have the opportunity to:

- Tour the homes and compare the McLeod family home with those built for enslaved families
- Learn about daily life and the relationships among men, women, and children who lived and worked here before and after slavery
- Study the cultivation and importance of sea island cotton
- Gain insight into the plantation's strategic importance during the Civil War and the role of the free black Massachusetts 55th Volunteer Infantry in emancipating enslaved people
- Examine the influence of the Freedmen's Bureau at McLeod Plantation and throughout the South
- Trace the emergence of Gullah Culture in the Lowcountry
- Explore worship and spirituality in the lives of McLeod Plantation's residents
- Draw parallels between the changing relationships among McLeod Plantation's residents and in American society during the 20th century
- See how people dramatically changed the natural history of the plantation's landscape through time

Main Buildings and Locations on site

For further details on these buildings, see the McLeod Plantation brochure and map.

- **Welcome Center** – Newly constructed in 2014
- **Dairy and Kitchen**
- **The “Big House”** (McLeod Home)
- **Transition Row** – this row of houses served as homes for many people throughout the life of McLeod Plantation. One of these buildings will be interpreted as a **Home of the Enslaved**. Another building will serve as an example of a **Tenant Home**, a home of freed people who lived on the site until 1990. A third will be interpreted as a **Worship House** and will explore Gullah Geechee spiritual traditions.
- **The Gin House** (still undergoing stabilization) – learn how Sea Island Cotton was cultivated and prepared for sale
- **Cemetery** - Over 100 people are buried here
- **Wappoo Creek Landing** – where sea island cotton was once transported to Charleston for sale
- **Pavilion** – Newly constructed in 2014. Available for rentals.
- **The McLeod Oak** – thought to be more than 600 years old



The “Big House”

Fees and Operating Hours

Starting April 25, McLeod Plantation Historic Site is officially open to the public Tuesday through Sunday from 9 a.m. – 4 p.m. A “soft” opening will take place the week prior.

Site admission is \$10, or \$6 for children ages 3-12. Children 2 and under are free. Charleston County Parks' Gold Pass Members will receive up to 4 people per pass onto the property when showing their Gold Pass. For more information on Gold Pass benefits, visit GoldPassMember.com. Dogs are not permitted at the site.



Grand Opening Ceremony

An invitation-only grand opening ceremony will be held on Friday, April 24.

The public is invited to the official McLeod Plantation Grand Opening Ceremony on Saturday, April 25. Site hours will be 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., with most activities taking place between the hours of 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. This celebration will feature tours throughout the day, plus a variety of activities including: ongoing demonstrations about cotton production, domestic life, and US Colored Troops encampments and drills; stories of the Sea Islands; and a performance by the Charleston Symphony Orchestra's Spiritual Ensemble.

Because of the expected number of visitors on April 25, attendees are encouraged to park at James Island County Park. From there, a shuttle will take visitors to and from McLeod Plantation throughout the day. The shuttle is free of charge; McLeod admission fees will still apply.

Interpretation, Tours, and Special Events

Visitors will start their experience at the site's Welcome Center. Here, visitors can join in on 45-minute-long guided tours that begin on the hour (10 a.m., 11 a.m., 12 p.m., 1 p.m., 2 p.m. and 3 p.m.). Tour experiences will vary based on the tour guide, so visitors are encouraged to attend multiple tours in order to learn the full history of McLeod Plantation.

Self-guided tour opportunities are also available. Guests are encouraged to download the McLeod Plantation Historic Site "Transition to Freedom" app for free any time at the Apple App Store to see images and hear the voices of those who lived there. The app may be downloaded to personal devices, but Apple devices will also be available for use at the Welcome Center.



For an even more in-depth look at McLeod Plantation Historic Site and its wide-ranging history, visitors are encouraged to attend special programs and events scheduled at the property throughout the year. Advance registration for programs is recommended, and registration fees include admission to the site. Registration for programs and a full list of upcoming programs are available via CharlestonCountyParks.com or by calling 843-795-4386.

Upcoming programs in May include: (admission included in price of program)

Unveiling McLeod Plantation Historic Site: The 55th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment

Saturday, May 2, 10:30 – 11:30 a.m. (Course 36874)

Saturday, May 16, 11:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. (Course 36875)

Or Saturday, May 30, 1:30-2:30 p.m. (Course 36876)

Following the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, African Americans from the North and the South joined the fight for freedom. We'll explore the experiences of this African American regiment, after Charleston's fall, while it was headquartered at McLeod Plantation. Fee: \$24/\$20 Charleston County Resident Discount (**CCRD**)

Praise House to Play Ground: Call and Response Music

Saturday, May 9, 1 – 2 p.m. (Course 36872)

Or Saturday, May 23, 11 a.m. – 12 p.m. (Course 36873)

This musical style, popular at places like McLeod Plantation, found its way to the worship house and into the games children play. Come prepared to sing and play! For ages 5 and up. A registered and paid chaperone is required for participants ages 15 and under. Pre-registration required. Fee: \$24/\$20 CCRD

The Preservation of McLeod Plantation Historic Site

Thursday, May 14, 7 – 8 p.m. (Course 36877)

Historic preservation architect Glenn Keyes will discuss the work his firm undertook to stabilize and preserve the interiors and exteriors of the buildings at this site. Fee: \$24/\$20 CCRD

Rentals

McLeod Plantation Historic Site and the pavilion on Wappoo Creek are available for special event rentals.

Reservations are being accepted now for events that start in June 2015 onward. For more information on rentals, call 843-795-4386.

Custom Tours

To schedule a custom tour of the site for your group, please call (843) 762-8018.

Further Details

For even more information on the site, please see official McLeod Plantation Historic Site brochure (enclosed), visit our CharlestonCountyParks.com/McLeod, download the McLeod Plantation Historic Site app for free at the Apple App Store, or call 843-795-4386.



Media Room: CharlestonCountyParks.com/McLeodMedia