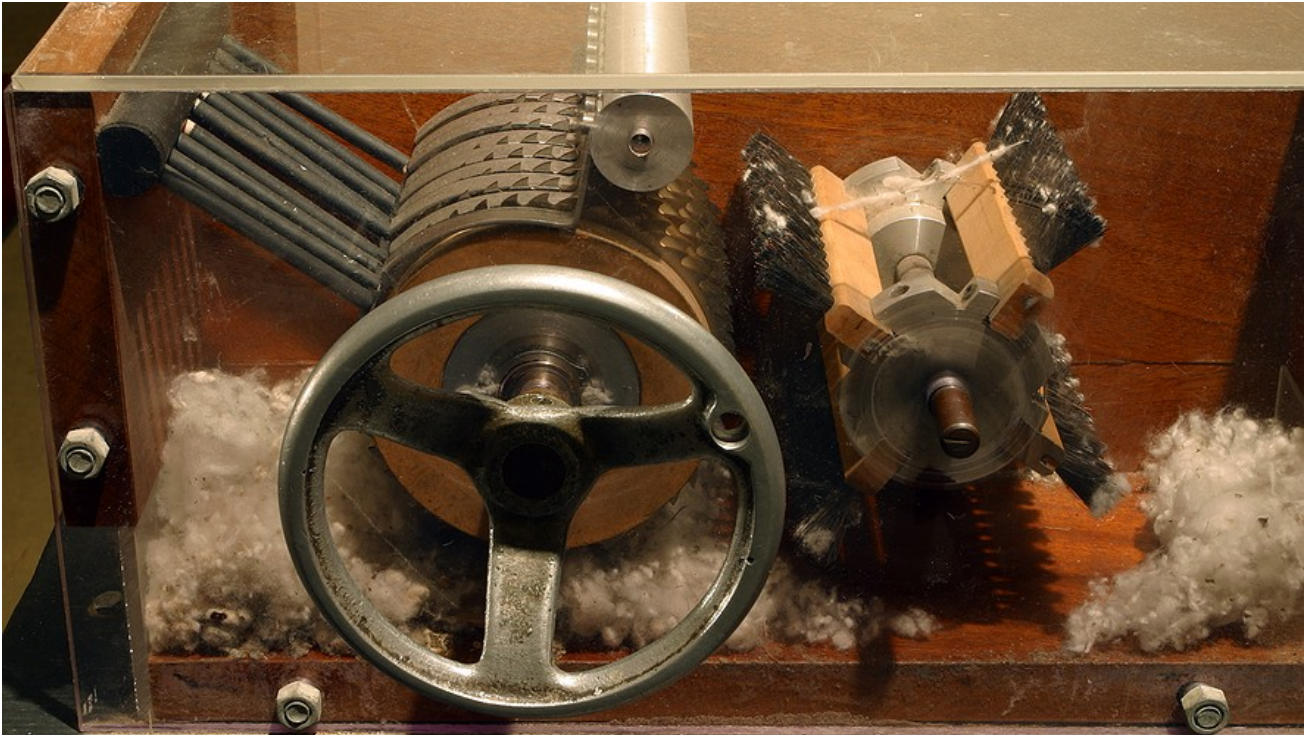


What to do with one of the most important sites in Southern history?

By Dan Chapman, Atlanta Journal-Constitution on 02.29.16

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A model of a 19th-century cotton gin is on display at the Eli Whitney Museum in Hamden, Connecticut. Photo: Wikipedia

SAVANNAH, Ga. — No museum graces the most important site in Southern history. No visitors center welcomes tourists to Mulberry Grove. There's a historic marker a mile away, but the rush of 18-wheelers discourages passers-by from stopping and learning about the extraordinary events that took place at the overgrown and forgotten plantation along the Savannah River.

It was here that slavery was introduced to Georgia. The first woman allowed to possess land in Georgia owned Mulberry Grove. So, too, did Revolutionary War hero Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene. And Eli Whitney built a cotton gin here that radically changed the course of U.S. history.

"The cotton gin breathed life into this institution of slavery, triggered the massive migration of slaves, and set the North and the South on a course to the Civil War," said Todd Groce, the president of the Georgia Historical Society.

Groce, other historians and the Mulberry Grove Foundation want the old plantation recognized and memorialized and, perhaps, turned into a living history center where the world could learn of the seminal events that transpired there.

The nonprofit foundation and Georgia Southern University began an oral history project last year to hear from white and black descendants of the plantation. Fundraising for an archaeological survey of the property is underway.

Memorializing the South's tortured past, though, is never easy. The cotton gin, after all, single-handedly led to the importation of hundreds of thousands of slaves and spread America's "darkest stain" across the region. And scholars even question whether Whitney himself "invented" the gin.

Ever since nine African-American churchgoers were killed in June in Charleston, S.C., in what authorities call a hate crime, Southerners have been searching their collective soul to understand how and why we honor the past. South Carolina and Alabama took down Confederate battle flags from Capitol grounds. The University of Texas moved a statue of Confederate President Jefferson Davis into a museum.

Civil rights groups in Atlanta have called for the removal of Stone Mountain Park's Confederate flag, as well as its massive bas relief carving of Davis, Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson.

Groce, at the invitation of The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, joined three other historians for a rare visit in December to Mulberry Grove. A fifth historian, Hugh Golson — whose family once owned the plantation — was interviewed the following day in Savannah. Bill Brown, the director of the Eli Whitney Museum and Workshop in Connecticut, chimed in by phone to discuss the significance of Mulberry Grove.

All six historians said the plantation should somehow be memorialized.

"This is sacred ground," said Vaughnette Goode-Walker, whose Savannah walking tour details the city's embrace of slavery. "It should be remembered. People need to know what happened here."

Added Stan Deaton, the historical society's senior historian: "It is the most valuable property in the state."

It was nothing but swamp and bluff when Gen. James Oglethorpe settled a dozen miles downriver in Savannah in 1733. Slavery was illegal in the colony, but that didn't stop Patrick Mackay, a Scottish officer with a plantation across the river in South Carolina, from ferrying the first boatload of slaves to work the rice fields on what would become Mulberry Grove.

A few years later, Ann Cuthbert became the first woman in Georgia to legally own land when she took ownership of the property. Her second husband grew mulberry saplings used to make silk. He also cultivated rice until the Revolutionary War, when the patriotic Liberty Boys chased him back to England.

After the war the Georgia Legislature appropriated 5,000 guineas to buy Mulberry Grove and an adjoining plantation for Greene "as a reward for his patriotic activities in Georgia," according to a circa 1930s account by the Works Progress Administration. Greene died of sunstroke in 1786, leaving his wife, Catherine, with dozens of slaves and huge debts.

After two brief visits by George Washington, a more propitious visitor descended upon Mulberry Grove. Whitney, a recent Yale College graduate, had accepted a position as a tutor for a wealthy South Carolina planter. The job, though, fell through. The Widow Greene invited Whitney to Mulberry Grove.

A farm boy with a penchant for fixing things, Whitney was intrigued by the difficulty separating upland, or short staple, cotton from its green seeds. In 1793, he built a cotton engine (or gin), which consisted of wire teeth in a wooden box that when rotated separated fiber from seed.

Whitney envisioned gins across the South with growers paying him 1 pound of cleaned cotton for every 5 pounds ginned. He built a large model gin on Mulberry Grove. A patent, though, proved elusive as replicas of his design proliferated.

The impact on the nation was profound.

“It was the beginning of American prosperity,” said Brown, who runs the Whitney museum. “Did it come at the expense of slaves and indigenous people from Georgia to Mississippi? Sure. Let’s be humble about that. On the other hand, it just so happens that’s how we begin as an economy. There was nothing else its equal in our early American history. The Industrial Revolution doesn’t bloom until that moment in Georgia.”

Catherine Greene, beset by debt and a long-lasting economic depression, sold Mulberry Grove in 1800 for \$15,000. A succession of owners grew rice and other crops — but not cotton.

Golson, a pre-eminent Savannah historian, says his fifth-great-grandfather bought the 2,000-acre plantation with 2,000 slaves out of bankruptcy in 1856. Zachariah Winkler became one of the region’s biggest rice growers until the Civil War sundered the farms, economy and slavery. Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman’s troops burned Mulberry Grove on Dec. 10, 1864.

Winkler’s descendants rented out the land to small farmers and timber companies. Chemical giant BASF bought the plantation in 1975. Golson, as a kid, rode out there on weekends to camp while his father hunted.

In 1985, the Georgia Ports Authority acquired the 2,400-acre property. It later sold half for warehouse development and put the rest into an easement prohibiting development. A portion of Mulberry Grove had already been listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

“The layers of history are unbelievable,” said Golson, a retired high school history teacher and Savannah school board president. “What Whitney created supercharged cotton production and slavery. We can’t ignore the man. At the same time, we have to document the damage done.”

It isn't easy visiting Mulberry Grove. Permission first must be given by the port authority. A four-wheel-drive truck is then needed to maneuver the rutted, oak-lined avenue surrounded by swamp and vine-tangled forest that leads to a bluff overlooking the Savannah River. A pile of bulldozed red bricks is all that remains of the plantation home.

Mosquitoes as big as black flies swarmed one recent, warm afternoon. I-95 hummed in the distance. If not for the lovely view across the river and into the South Carolina marsh, Mulberry Grove wouldn't leave much of an impression.

Solomon Smith begs to differ. He's a Georgia Southern history professor and vice president of the Mulberry Grove Foundation, which unveiled big plans a decade ago to raise \$8.7 million to build the Eli Whitney Center and re-create plantation life.

Little fundraising and uncertain leadership thwarted the foundation's dream. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which owns thousands of nearby acres as wildlife refuges, once tried to buy Mulberry Grove. Holly Gaboriault, the regional director, said the agency would again consider acquiring the plantation and, perhaps, building an interpretive center.

Curtis Foltz, who runs Georgia's ports, said the authority recognizes "the historical significance of the site" and "will continue to cooperate and support proposals that further memorialize the site."

Each of the six historians told the AJC that Mulberry Grove should be preserved, archaeological digs allowed, and natural or interpretive trails built. Goode-Walker, the tour guide, said a dock could be built so boats could run tourists upriver from downtown Savannah. Groce, the historical society president, said guided tours, a la Historic Jamestowne in Virginia, might be plausible.

"It's one thing to read about history; it's another to go to a site and feel what it was like," said Georgia Southern's Smith. "There's so much history here that it would be a loss if nothing's done."

But the site's inaccessibility and absence of historic structures makes it difficult to envision a memorial. Whitney's revised reputation doesn't help, either. Latter-day scholars say that cotton gins had existed for decades and that Whitney's wire-toothed contraption was just the latest incarnation, albeit one copied and used extensively across the South. Angela Lakwete, an Auburn University professor, writes that the deification of Whitney propagates the tidy, yet false, interpretation of a woebegone South dependent upon Northern ingenuity for its economic survival.

Yet there's little disagreement over the impact Whitney's gin and others had on the South's economy. In 1790, Georgia and South Carolina produced roughly 1.5 million pounds of cotton. At the onset of the Civil War, the South produced 2.3 billion pounds, accounting for nearly 60 percent of the nation's exports by revenue.

About 700,000 slaves toiled in Virginia tobacco fields or South Carolina rice plantations in 1790. Four times as many slaves worked the cotton plantations and other farms that stretched to Texas by the time the first shot was fired at Fort Sumter.

“Standing out here is like ground zero for the antebellum South with its different meanings for white and black people,” said the historical society’s Deaton. “Some will say, ‘It evokes bad memories and we should not linger on it.’ For many, it would be troubling and raises issues of guilt and recrimination.”

The South’s history, though, can’t be disentangled from its present, as recent events in Charleston, Atlanta, Montgomery, Ala., and Austin, Texas, make painfully clear.

“During my walking tours people don’t know that Mulberry Grove is here or why it’s here,” Goode-Walker said. “People don’t really want to deal with history anymore. But they should. We need to tell the whole story.”

Quiz

- 1 Read the first four paragraphs of the article. Which of these paragraphs BEST reflects the central idea that the events at Mulberry Grove had national effects?
- 2 Which of the following sentences from the article BEST develops a central idea?
 - (A) The nonprofit foundation and Georgia Southern University began an oral history project last year to hear from white and black descendants of the plantation.
 - (B) The cotton gin, after all, single-handedly led to the importation of hundreds of thousands of slaves and spread America's "darkest stain" across the region.
 - (C) Civil rights groups in Atlanta have called for the removal of Stone Mountain Park's Confederate flag, as well as its massive bas relief carving of Davis, Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson.
 - (D) "Standing out here is like ground zero for the antebellum South with its different meanings for white and black people," said the historical society's Deaton.
- 3 According to the article, each of the following has contributed to Mulberry Grove's historic significance EXCEPT:
 - (A) its ownership by important historic figures
 - (B) its importance in the growth of slavery in the United States
 - (C) its importance in the origins of slavery in the United States
 - (D) its importance in the demise of slavery in the United States
- 4 Which of the following statements BEST represents the relationship between the hate crime in South Carolina and Mulberry Grove?
 - (A) Mulberry Grove and its history of slavery and racism served as the inspiration for the hate crime in South Carolina.
 - (B) The hate crime has drawn attention to the negative history of Mulberry Grove, to the exclusion of the positives in its history.
 - (C) Both represent a history of racism that has led to increased questioning of whether Southern history should be memorialized and honored.
 - (D) The hate crime has led to an increased call for the removal of all Confederate paraphernalia, while the plantation represents the best of Southern history.