

# The Houston Museum Project

## *A Savannah River Plantation Praise House and Cemetery*

Location: 8000 Hwy 21, Port Wentworth, GA 31407



### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

*“A look into the past, the cultural heritage of African-Americans during the Civil War/ Post-Civil War Era on the Savannah River Plantations”*

Port Wentworth, Georgia and the landscapes surrounding the Savannah River are rich with centuries of history and cultural heritage unknown to many. The area of Port Wentworth and the many plantations that used to exist along the banks of the Savannah River played an integral part in the early history of Georgia’s establishment, economy, and impact on the world as a whole. For those passing through or locals on their way, there is very little that remains giving evidence to the fact that this area helped to shape our state and the nation, until now.

The Houston Museum site consists of the restoration/reconstruction of a Civil War Era African-American praise house, and preservation of the adjacent Civil War Era/ Post-Civil War Era cemetery that was originally part of a Historic Rice Plantation located on the Savannah River. Houston was located in the areas known as the Richmond-Oak Grove Plantation and Mulberry Grove Plantation, where Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin in 1793. The restored structure/site will serve as a cultural heritage and interpretive educational site as well as a heritage museum containing information about the significant national and local histories of the Port Wentworth area as well as the

history of the Savannah River Plantations. Rich tradition and remnants of the early African-American culture are displayed along with several early graves at the site with markings from the Gullah/Geechee culture. This site exhibits the roots of early African-Americans and their culture during this era of Georgia history and plays an important role in Georgia's Civil War story.

The Houston Baptist Church was organized in 1886 under the leadership of Rev. Ulysses L. Houston, Minister of the First Bryan Baptist Church in Savannah. Rev. Houston attended the meeting at General Sherman's Savannah Headquarters in January 1865 which resulted in Special Field Order No.15 (the redistribution of confiscated coastal land in 40 acre tracts to newly freed slaves). This site is the location of the praise house that existed during the plantation era and named after Rev. Houston along with the remnants of the land tracts and burials of the newly freed slaves. Established in the tradition of earlier plantation praise houses intended to Christianize the enslaved populations of rural plantations, Houston Baptist Church served the African-Americans of Rice Hope Plantation.

"The Houston Museum will focus on the history of the slavery to freedom journey of churches that established their communities through the "Praise Houses," Houses of Worship that were given to the slaves by their plantation owners during the circa - 1850's - 1865. All of these praise houses are linked to the mother churches in Savannah, GA - First African Baptist Church & First Bryan Baptist Church - the first churches built in North America by African Americans. Come out and support the museum - an awesome historical journey." – Patt Gunn, The Geechee Institute

This site is all that remains, by means of physical manifestation and site features, of much of this significant period of early Georgia history. Houston Baptist Church continued to serve the local community until the 1970's. The original structure collapsed in 2007 after a tree fell on the building during a storm in Port Wentworth.

Today, the property is owned by the City of Port Wentworth. The site is in the process of being preserved in partnership with local fundraising efforts and the help of many local organizations including: The City of Port Wentworth, The Port Wentworth Chamber of Commerce, The North Port Wentworth Citizens Council, Habitat for Humanity, The Boy Scouts of America, and The S.E.A.R.C.H. Institute. Through this partnership, phase 1 of the 3 phase project, has been completed. Phase 2 includes the cemetery mapping/restoration and phase 3 includes building restrooms and running water and sewer lines to the property.

The greatest challenge has been funding. Phase 1 has been completed through multiple fundraising efforts over the past two years as well as volunteer labor. The majority of labor came through community volunteers and workers provided by Habitat of Humanity, which supplied 98% of the labor at no charge.

**PROJECT OWNER:**

City of Port Wentworth  
305 S. Coastal Highway  
Port Wentworth, GA 31407  
Phone: (912) 964-4379  
Contact: Phillip Claxton, City Administrator

**OTHER PROJECT PARTNERS:**

Port Wentworth Chamber of Commerce, Inc.  
7532 GA Hwy 21  
Port Wentworth, GA 31407  
Phone: (912) 965-1999  
Contact: Trisha Growe, Executive Director

Habitat for Humanity  
3605 GA Hwy 21 S  
Rincon, GA 31326  
Phone: (912) 826-6433  
Contact: Megan Watson, President

North Port Wentworth Citizens Council  
P.O. Box 18041  
Garden City, GA 31418  
Phone: (912) 964-8617  
Contact: Della Steele, Secretary

The S.E.A.R.C.H. Institute  
7306 GA Hwy 21, Suite 101-107  
Port Wentworth, GA 31407  
Phone: (912) 826-4860  
Contact: Phillip Ashlock, II, PhD., R.P.A.

## **MEDIA COVERAGE:**

### **Savannah Morning News**

“Honoring the Past” – DeAnn Komanecky, May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2008

<http://savannahnow.com/effingham/2008-05-31/honoring-past>

### **Savannah Morning News**

“Historical Praise House on Mend in Port Wentworth” – Michael Atkins, April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2010

<http://savannahnow.com/west-chatham/2010-04-04/historical-praise-house-mend-port-wentworth>

### **Savannah Morning News/Effingham Now**

“Praise House Nears Completion in Port Wentworth” – DeAnn Komanecky, March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011

<http://savannahnow.com/news/2011-03-10/praise-house-nears-completion-port-wentworth>

### **Savannah Morning News**

“Port Wentworth Funds Praise House” – Constance Cooper, August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011

<http://savannahnow.com/accent/2011-08-06/port-wentworth-funds-praise-house>

### **The Spirit Newspaper**

“The Past, the Present, and the Future of Historical Port Wentworth” – Ashley Engelford, September 28<sup>th</sup>, 2011

<http://thespiritnewspaper.com/the-past-the-present-and-the-future-of-historical-port-wentworth-p1850-1.htm>

### **WSAV-TV**

“Slave Praise House Opens in Port Wentworth” – Alice Massimi, February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2012 (with video)

<http://www2.wsav.com/news/2012/feb/25/slave-praise-house-museum-opens-port-wentworth-ar-3299602/>

### **Gullah/Geechee TV - Nayshun Nyews**

“Houston Praise House Re-Opening, Part 1 & 2” – February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2012 (video)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fDxQ5rdKTME>

### **The Spirit Newspaper**

“Port Wentworth Praise House Museum: Phase I Complete” – Ashley Engelford, March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012

<http://thespiritnewspaper.com/port-wentworth-praise-house-museum-phase-i-complete-p2573-97.htm>

### **Savannah Morning News**

“Houston Museum Project Update” – Dinah King, March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012

<http://savannahnow.com/effingham-now/2012-03-01/houston-museum-project-update>

### **Savannah Morning News**

“Houston Praise House in Port Wentworth Rebuilt” – Constance Cooper, March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012 (with video)

<http://savannahnow.com/news/2012-03-06/houston-house-completed>

BEFORE PICTURES



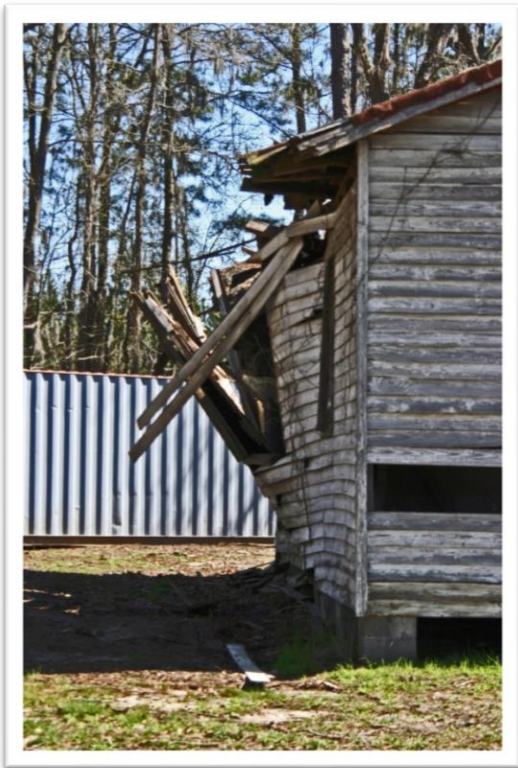
*Houston before  
collapse,  
2006*



*View: Right rear, after  
damage from storm in  
2007*



*View: Left rear, after  
damage from storm in  
2007*



*View: Front left  
2008*



*Ceiling view before  
collapse  
2006*



*Inside main structure,  
after collapse  
2008*

AFTER PICTURES



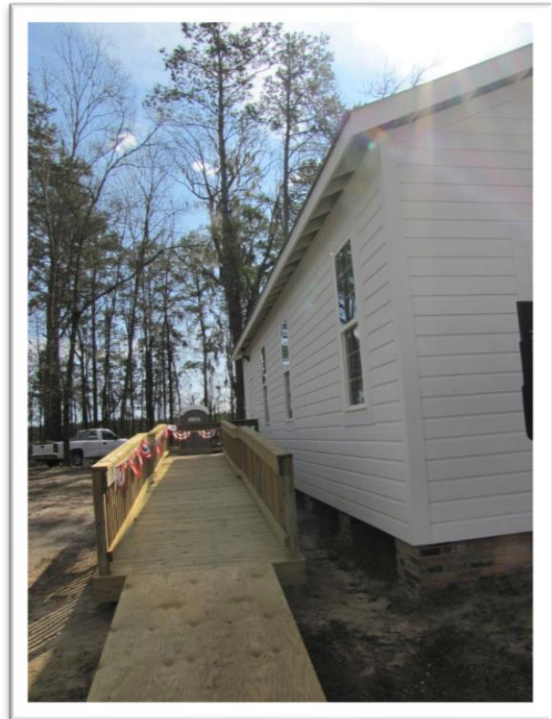
*Houston Open House  
February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

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*View: Front gate  
entryway*



*View: Front left*



*View: Front left side*



*View: Inside Main  
Structure  
February 2012*



*Houston Museum Open  
House – February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

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*Gullah Geechee Institute –  
Saltwata Shouters  
Performance*



*View: Inside entryway*