

PEOPLE SAVING PLACES

WINTER 2021

preservation

The magazine of the National Trust for Historic Preservation

Time and Tide

Sifting through
layers of Black
history on
Edisto Island,
South Carolina



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MAKING



On Edisto Island, South Carolina, a touchstone to the area's Black history has endured for more than 130 years

The House That Hutchinson Built

BY JOE SUGARMAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LESLIE RYANN MCKELLAR



In the late 1930s, when Emily Hutchinson Meggett was a young girl growing up on South Carolina's Edisto Island, she would often walk the three-quarters of a mile from her family's house to her granduncle Henry Hutchinson's property. There, she and her siblings and cousins would play hopscotch or hide 'n' seek.

Sometimes they'd pull a vine off a tree and use it as a jump rope. The adults, including Henry's wife, Rosa, would sit on the house's big wraparound porch, laughing and talking. The kids weren't allowed to partake in the adults' conversation, recalls Meggett, now 88. "Parents back then, they didn't talk so much in the presence of children," she says. "You couldn't sit in their company. When company comes, you better be scarce."

From that porch, the Hutchinsons could survey their 10 acres of land and the marsh beyond. They raised chickens and hogs and grew fruit and nut trees near the house, but they relied mainly on Sea Island cotton for their income. On an adjacent plot, Henry, who had been born into slavery in 1860, operated one of the first Black-owned cotton gins on the island. He prospered by selling the refined product to markets in Charleston, about 45 miles to the northeast, until a boll weevil infestation in the 1920s decimated the island's crop.

Around 1885, Henry had built the Folk Victorian-style house using his own hands. According to family oral history, he had help from a half-brother, Jack Miller, and an uncle named John Pearson Hutchinson. (The latter was a carpenter and unlicensed architect who went on to design Charleston's Central Baptist Church, believed to be one of the city's first churches built entirely by African Americans.) The house was said to be a wedding gift for Henry's bride, Rosa Swinton.

The rectangular, four-room, two-story residence, with its side-gable roof and eaves decorated with stylish Victorian detail, was a good home. It stood on 4-foot-tall brick piers that spared the house from flooding during storms, such as the infamous Sea Islands Hurricane of 1893, which killed at least 1,000 people. As the tempest picked up, around 50 of the family's neighbors huddled in the jam-packed house, sharing food, singing spirituals, and praying until the storm passed.

Regally set off from the road like one of the island's white-owned plantation houses, the Hutchinsons' home was a stark contrast to the one- and two-room cabins where Henry and others born into slavery had lived. It stood as a testament to the hard work and perseverance of Edisto's freedpeople after the Civil War.

Credit Henry's father, James "Jim" Hutchinson, with instilling in his son a sense of independence. During the Civil War, while Edisto Island was occupied by Union troops, Jim gained renown by exposing nine Confederate scouts to federal forces. He later enlisted in the Union Navy, serving on two ships.

After the war, Jim was known as one of the "Black Kings of Edisto," a group of men who had risen out of slavery and become successful farmers, businessmen, and leaders of the community. He was an outspoken advocate for African American voting rights and property ownership and organized a group of more than



Previous pages: Memorabilia from the Hutchinson family. *Opposite:* The Hutchinson House between 1956 and 1960. *Left:* Emily Meggett, a chef known as the matriarch of Edisto Island, inside the house, which was built by her granduncle Henry Hutchinson.



“I thought it was an old barn. I thought, ‘If I were a photographer or an artist, it’s certainly the kind of place I’d like to capture.’” —JOHN GIRAULT

20 freedmen who pooled their money to purchase and then divide some 452 acres on the island.

But the elder Hutchinson was never able to see the house his son built. Sometime between 1882 and 1885, he and a white man, Frederick Barth, got into an argument at a Fourth of July gathering, and Barth shot and killed him. Barth was found guilty of manslaughter but appealed the decision and was later acquitted by an

building, draped with wisteria. He stopped his car and got out. “I thought it was an old barn,” he recalls. “I thought, ‘If I were a photographer or an artist, it’s certainly the kind of place I’d like to capture.’ So I started asking people questions about it, and of course everyone knew it was the Hutchinson House.”

One of those people was Gretchen Smith, director of the Edisto Island Historic Preservation Society. Smith was a friend of the Hutchinson family, including Myrtle Hutchinson, Henry’s granddaughter, who had grown up in the house and loved it dearly. Myrtle, by all accounts, was a force to be reckoned with. A former New York City school teacher, social worker, and Civil Rights activist who attended the 1963 March on Washington, she had earned an award for registering the most voters in her Lower East Side precinct during the height of segregation. There’s a photograph of her with actor Sidney Poitier at the awards ceremony in New York. She was also instrumental in bringing attention to the significance of her ancestral home, securing a place for it on the National Register of Historic Places in 1987 and starting a foundation to help save it.

Myrtle died in 2014 at the age of 97, and her granddaughter Arlene, who had also become a close friend of Smith’s, died just two years later. Both Myrtle and Arlene wanted desperately to restore the house, but they knew the costs would be prohibitive, and the foundation hadn’t raised enough money. For Smith, the restoration of the Hutchinson House became a personal charge. “I promised Arlene on her deathbed that we would save the house,” she says. “And it matters to me that I keep my word to her.”

Smith knew that her small organization didn’t have the resources to rescue the home, and the Land Trust was in the business of preserving land, not houses. But Girault thought acquiring the property’s 10 acres would give the organization a foothold on a part of the island where it hadn’t already invested. The house could be saved at the same time.

In November of 2016, aided by the Lowcountry Conservation Loan Fund, EIOLT purchased the property from Myrtle’s son, Steve Esteves, for \$100,000. Two and a half years later, it bought an adjacent 10-acre parcel that had also belonged to Henry Hutchinson.

Some members of the Hutchinson family, including Henry’s great-great grandson Greg Estevez (who spells his last name differently from the rest of the family), were skeptical at first, but also relieved that something was going to be done. Girault invited family members to serve on the house’s advisory board, so



all-white jury. Four of Jim’s children, including Henry, inherited his land and built houses on each plot.

Henry died in 1941 and Rosa in 1949. The house was passed down through the Hutchinson line until the 1980s, when it was rented out and ultimately abandoned.

In the years that followed, the strong island winds and sea air were not kind to the dwelling. Its metal roof leaked. Termites and rot took their toll on its pine siding and structural supports. It was in very real danger of collapsing. Emily Meggett would pass by and sometimes wonder if the fragile structure would still be there the following day.

In the fall of 2013, John Girault, the newly appointed executive director of the Edisto Island Open Land Trust (EIOLT), a local land preservation group, found himself driving aimlessly around the island, trying to familiarize himself with the lay of the land. About 200 yards off Point of Pines Road, up a packed dirt-and-grass driveway, he spotted a deteriorating red-roofed, green-sided



Opposite: The Hutchinson House in 2013. *This page, clockwise from top:* Crew members from Artis Construction at work on the house in September of 2020; Guyton Ash, co-owner of Artis Construction; John Girault, executive director of the Edisto Island Open Land Trust.



“We realized the house fell into the right hands.” —GREG ESTEVEZ

they could share their memories of the house as well as their hopes for its future.

“We realized the house fell into the right hands,” says Estevez, who lived in the home during the early 1970s and has written a book about the history of Edisto Island. “They had the same vision that my grandmother had—to restore the home. To be honest with you, if they had not bought it, I think that the house would have crumbled to the ground. ... They had the resources and the connections to get everything done. Now the Land Trust has partnered with the family. John makes no decision without the family being a part of it. That’s major for us. We still feel a part of that legacy.”

After restoration has been completed (sometime in 2022, depending on funding), the house will serve as a museum and community resource. Smith’s organization will provide research assistance for exhibits about the Hutchinson family and land ownership on Edisto. The house will also showcase the history of the coastal region’s Gullah Geechee people, enslaved Africans whose descendants continue to share a culture of arts, music, food, and distinctive language.

Estevez says the house will help relate how Edisto’s newly freed enslaved Africans, through resilience and economic empowerment, made better lives for themselves after the Civil War. It’s a particularly important piece of history: While at least 13 of Edisto Island’s original 60-plus plantation houses remain, the Hutchinson House is the one of the few intact late 19th-century freedpeople’s homes still standing. (A slave cabin where Meggett’s husband, Jessie, grew up was transported board by board to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture, where it was reassembled and put on display in 2016.)

It would have been a tragedy to lose the house, says Cameron Moon, a curator at Drayton Hall (a National Trust Historic Site in Charleston), who serves on the EIOLT’s Hutchinson House committee. “It is just so impressive. Generally when we think of post-Civil War, I feel like it’s not this grand house that freedpeople are living in. We tend to paint a different picture. The story of this family and the fact that they were able to acquire land and then pass it down through several generations, I feel like that’s a really important story to share. I’m sure there were other houses that were similar, but this one survived because it was in the family for so long. It represents a different side. It’s a success story.”

Before any restoration work could begin, the Hutchinson House first had to be protected from further decay. Late in 2017, EIOLT and a group of volunteers erected a 32-foot-tall canopy over the edifice, and a year later, Artis Construction, which served as the general contractor on the project, donated and installed a structural diaphragm of heavy beams to support its fragile walls. Meanwhile, Girault had been busy raising capital, including private donations from more than 300 individuals. The EIOLT also received grants from the state and the 1772 Foundation, as well as the National Trust’s African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, which provides money to protect and restore significant places of African American achievement and activism.

Girault also contracted cultural resources management firm New South Associates to survey the property. Via ground-penetrating radar and survey digs, the archaeologists were able to identify the location of the property’s original outbuildings, livestock pens, one well, and two privies. (The house lacked indoor plumbing until sometime in the late 1970s or early ’80s.)

What the team did not expect to unearth were more than 50 pieces of broken colonoware, earthen pottery often made by Colonial-era enslaved Africans. It became clear that decades before the Hutchinsons owned the land, it was likely home to an African enslavement camp. Further investigations revealed that the property was probably part of a circa-1683 land grant of some 1,500 acres belonging to Paul Grimball, one of the first English settlers on Edisto Island.

“It makes the site all the more significant,” says J.W. Joseph, a principal investigator with New South Associates. “It’s already significant as a wonderful property that reflects the lives, skills, and architectural talents of African Americans in the post-Civil War era, but the



Opposite, clockwise from top: The house’s interior in November of 2020; Artis Construction’s Parker Stuartz installs a replica window; Interior restoration will happen in the next couple of years.





This page: The Hutchinson House in November of 2020. The porch and Victorian detailing will be restored in the next phase. *Opposite:* Family members (clockwise from top middle) Emily Meggett, Greg Estevez, Cheryl Estevez, Evita Esteves, Jade Esteves, and Gloria Esteves gathered at the house a few days before the roof was added.

fact that it appears to be built on the site of an early African American settlement, and can show the full span of African American history on one site, makes it all the more an important resource.”

The plan for the house’s restoration, as laid out by architectural firm Simons Young + Associates, was to preserve as much of the building’s original exterior as possible. Numerous modifications had been made over the years, so architects used photographs from the early 1900s to glean its original appearance.

Artis Construction essentially disassembled the



In 2019, the Edisto Island Open Land Trust received an \$85,000 grant from the National Trust’s African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund for restoration work at the Hutchinson House. For more on the fund, visit SavingPlaces.org/african-american-cultural-heritage

building’s exterior, painstakingly cataloging every piece of wood while evaluating whether individual pieces could be reused or needed to be replaced. Most of the pine siding was unsalvageable, but workers—all of whom have studied or taught at the American College of the Building Arts in Charleston—were able to preserve or reinforce the majority of the structural elements, which serve as the bones of the house.

Despite its missing windows, leaky roof, and crumbling siding, the house’s interior remained shockingly intact. “That’s the really striking part,” recalls architect Simons Young, remembering the day he first toured the house. “When you walk in it, it’s so well preserved, it throws you back in time. There really wasn’t much that was changed to the core of the house.”

The 368-square-foot first floor contains two rooms and two brick fireplaces, one likely used for cooking at

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some point in the home’s history. By the 1950s, the elegant wraparound porch was removed, and separate front and side porches were added. Several rooms were tacked onto the back of the residence, probably in the 1960s, but they later crumbled after the house became vacant.

A central staircase leads to the second floor, which contains two bedrooms with sloped ceilings. That staircase, which seems to hang unsupported in midair, is Young’s favorite feature. “It’s kind of ingenious,” he says. “There’s no wall beneath the landing, so my first thought when I saw it was, ‘How has that thing not fallen down?’ You have to look hard to see how it’s attached upstairs [from a second-floor joist]. It’s a really unique feature that took a level of craftsmanship.”

Artis completed its \$150,000 exterior restoration in November of 2020. Once Girault’s organization raises additional funding—an estimated \$350,000 is needed—the interior and the remaining exterior detailing will be brought back to their original appearance.

In addition to exhibits within the house, Girault sees the grounds being used for displays on traditional Edisto Island agriculture and rural life. People could also rent out the property for community events and family reunions.

More than 30 Hutchinsons attended one such reunion on the property in October of 2018. Family members, including Emily Meggett and Greg Estevez, wore matching “Hutchinson House” T-shirts and shared stories about the home and their ancestors who had worked its land. Myrtle Hutchinson was very much there in spirit, and her descendants say she would have been especially proud to know what will become of her former home.

“Words can’t explain the feeling,” says Estevez, 56, who lives in Jacksonville, Florida, but frequently returns to Edisto. “The restoration of the Hutchinson House is an answer to our family’s prayer and fulfills my grandmother’s lifelong wish to see this place become a museum to help educate future generations.”

Greg’s younger sister, Gloria Esteves, who lives an hour away in Ladson, South Carolina, also attended

the reunion. She admits that when she was younger, she didn’t understand why her grandmother was so attached to this decrepit old building.

“There was one point when I asked my grandmother, ‘Why are you trying to save all this?’ She looked at me and said, ‘Girl, I watched my daddy [Henry and Rosa’s son Arthur] work these fields until his hands bled.’

“Even when I talk about it now, it overwhelms me. Sometimes I cry when I tell people that because I understood how much it meant to her. It means there’s Hutchinson blood on this land and there will always be.”

JOE SUGARMAN is a frequent contributor to *Preservation*. His last story for the magazine was on the rehabilitation of an old Baltimore lithography factory in the Summer 2020 issue.

