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Tracing Transformations: Hilton Head Island's Journey to Freedom, 1860–1865

Abstract:
  The digital tool *Tracing Transformations in a Digital Age* uses mapping and time-aware tools to visually reconstitute the spatial history of Civil War– and Reconstruction-era Hilton Head, one of the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina. In our own time, Hilton Head Island is known as a vacation paradise with pristine white-sand beaches and manicured golf courses. The history of the spatial transformation of the island and its direct connection with the local transition from slavery to freedom is important yet infrequently told, let alone shared in an open-source format. Changes in the island's use, coupled with the natural ravages of time (including a severe hurricane in 1893), have effaced many of the material traces of Hilton Head's past, leading researchers to rely more heavily on other evidence of the area's history. *Tracing Transformations* mines extant archival sources and uses that information to reconstruct the region's visual transformation between the years 1860 and 1865.

Digital Humanities and Art History

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by Dana E. Byrd

with Tyler DeAngelis

Introduction

During the Civil War, South Carolina's Hilton Head Island was the capital of the Union-occupied South, and the place of an early and exciting experiment in freedom for those who had been enslaved on the Sea Island plantations. This fact may come as a surprise to modern readers because in our own time Hilton Head Island is mostly known as a popular vacation destination. But, between 1861 and 1865, the island's social, economic, and spatial organization was transformed from a place that supported slavery into the site of a working military complex and a freedmen's village. The soldiers, sailors, missionaries, and freedmen that facilitated this transformation left behind a vast and far-flung archive of first-person accounts, reports, narratives, and even images.

The most important elements of the historical record extend from plats and maps to letters and photographs. Military records, such as muster rolls, field orders, and plans for union-built structures, form the core of the archive. Another set of these government-produced records includes the plans for developing an infrastructure that created housing and wage-earning employment opportunities for the former slaves left behind, as well as the ones who flocked to the island in search of freedom. Created by military mapmakers, an 1865 map of the freedmen's village Mitchelville and the nearby Union military camp is a rich source of information about Hilton Head's sites, structures, and geographic features. This map is considered so precious that it has been classified by the National Archives as one of its top ten "treasures," and, as such, the original is unavailable to the public; the information used for this project has been gleaned from a copy. Official military histories of regiments from the 3rd New Hampshire to New York's 47th Infantry record troop movement, living conditions, and their members' reactions to the freedmen. Reports, letters, and diary accounts written by northern missionaries who streamed into South Carolina as early as December 1861 to minister to the freedmen provide even more insight into the material life and spatial contexts of the island.

Two sets of photographs help with visualization of the island space. Nearly forty photographic images of the newly freed slaves, plantation structures, military encampments, occupying soldiers, and sailors were produced by Henry P. Moore, a New Hampshire photographer who traveled to the South in 1862 and again in 1863.[1] The town of Mitchelville, as well as a few of

its residents, were captured in eight photographs taken by Samuel Cooley, a transplanted Connecticut photographer who also served as proprietor of a general store on the island. Local and national newspapers prominently featured the events on Hilton Head, and those sources enable the researcher to understand how many Americans were informed about the transition from slavery to freedom. Finally, antebellum plats—scaled maps showing the division of land —inform the researcher about the spatial layout of Hilton Head Island's twenty-four Sea Island cotton plantations.

The intriguing Civil War history of Hilton Head Island is confined primarily to historians and archaeologists, whose knowledge of the subject is based on the aforementioned sources as well as on research into what physical evidence remains at the site. Because most of the aboveground historical structures of the island have been lost to time, weather, and development, archaeologists looking to expand our knowledge of the area have systematically excavated different plots on the northeastern end of the island, beginning in 1986 and continuing to the present day.[2]

The dense and diverse archival record has resulted in several scholarly publications about the place and the period. Published more than fifty years ago, historian Willie Lee Rose's compelling narrative *Rehearsal for Reconstruction* emphasizes the importance of the Sea Islands, including Hilton Head, in the overall conduct of the war and the subsequent reconstruction of the South.[3] Despite the diversity of the archive, however, most scholarly accounts do not provide a holistic analysis of Hilton Head during this period. Rather, they tend to address just one of the several groups of people involved with the wartime transformation. The freedmen's journey from slavery to freedom is rarely described in any detail and is generally not characterized as progressing incrementally over time.

In an attempt to rectify this lacuna, this study, titled *Tracing Transformations: Hilton Head Island's Journey to Freedom, 1860–1865,* uses digital mapping, tagging, and a timeline to investigate the historical archive related to Hilton Head Island. The data constitutes a compilation of the sources above, now placed in a spatial context that is organized by time. As an example, period photographs of Hilton Head are mapped onto the locations where they were taken, thus providing spatial context for these representations of the military complex and freedmen's village. Information about the change of these spaces over time is also grafted onto the map. These photographs, and indeed most of the evidence, whether text or images, includes analysis and descriptive information and can also be used as a source for determining what representational conventions were at work. These changes in the visible landscape are organized by date and are made visible through Esri's time-aware slider.

Gathered from two separate collections—the National Archives and the photographic collections of the Library of Congress—these captioned photographs provide the general reader with an interpreted glimpse of an occupied wartime Hilton Head Island. A related scholarly essay addresses two of the most prominent compelling spatial changes on Hilton Head Island during the war, to demonstrate how digital technology casts new light on both the people and ideologies that shepherded the island from its role as a bastion of slavery to an oasis of freedom. Studying these components—and especially doing so with this enhanced ability to visualize the changes over time—allows for a more thorough understanding of the forces at work during this moment in Hilton Head's history. The project uses primary sources

to recreate a specific and significant era of Hilton Head's history, while also presenting an experimental model that shows how digital media can inspire new approaches to art history and cultural landscapes.

This digital scholarly work consists of the following components:

> Scholarly Essay
> Web Application
> Project Narrative

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Notes

[1] Moore's photographs are in the collection of the Library of Congress; Cooley's photographs are housed at the National Archives. The web application offers readers the rare opportunity to view these photographs together on the same platform.

[2] The actual spatial data that help map the finds of these archaeological investigations are rarely made public. The scholar must rely on summaries of findings to extract information on the excavation sites. Among these sources are: Michael B. Trinkley and Debi Hacker, *The Archaeological Manifestations of the "Port Royal Experiment" at Mitchelville, Hilton Head Island, (Beaufort County,) South Carolina* (Columbia, SC: Chicora Foundation, Inc., Research Contribution 14, 1987); Kenneth F. Styer and Phillip W. Quirk, *Phase II Testing of Site 38BU1967 at the Barker Field Expansion Project, Beaufort County, South Carolina* (Holly Springs, GA: R. S. Webb and Associates, 2003); Christopher T. Espenshade, and Ramona Grunden, *Contraband, Refugee, Freedman: Archaeological and Historical Investigations of the Western Fringe of Mitchelville, Hilton Head, South Carolina* (Atlanta: Brockington and Associates, 1991); and Mitchelville 2013 Excavation, unpublished report (Atlanta: Brockington and Associates, 2013).

[3] Rose's account is more than fifty years old, but it remains the most comprehensive published account of the Sea Islands during the Civil War. Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (New York: Bobbs-Merill Co., Inc., 1964).

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