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

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

by Dana E. Byrd

with Tyler DeAngelis

#### Project Narrative

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.<sup>[1]</sup> 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.

The multiple archives related to Civil War–era Hilton Head offer a bountiful opportunity to re-create the island's visual and material history from the perspectives of the varied groups of people who lived there. Military sources that range from general orders and quartermaster reports to regimental histories offer information about troop movements, building programs, expenditures, and the experiences of the military men who were stationed in the area. The insights of Northern missionaries are recorded in reports published in pro-freedman periodicals distributed to raise money for the cause, as well as in personal letters and diaries. Archaeological reports capture the traces of material life left behind by the freedmen. And visual sources (e.g., photographs, maps, and drawings) produced by members of all of these groups offer glimpses of the island's transition to freedom.

Traditionally, histories of the island have been limited in scope because they have relied solely on a single type of source. As an example, to study the military sources alone is to neglect the valuable physical evidence of Hilton Head's material culture during this era. When I, together with my student collaborator, Tyler DeAngelis, began work to map the spatial transformation of Hilton Head after occupation of the island by Union troops had begun in 1861, I decided that it was necessary to interpret all possible sources in concert to provide a holistic account of the island's physical changes. From this perspective, we soon found that the amount, variety, and complexity of the historical Hilton Head evidence—a plantation map, an occupation map,

photographs, drawings, archaeological information, and extensive archival data—could not be tapped to its full potential using traditional research and publication tools; the depth and breadth of the information could not be analyzed without the tools used in this new era of digital humanities. Thus, while the first purpose of this research remained the telling of the history of the spatial transformation of Hilton Head Island, a secondary aim became the exploration of the opportunities and challenges of using an online environment for the study of cultural change, in the Civil War and beyond. Of course, we are not the first to do so. Digital humanities already has transformed scholarship, including on the spaces of the Civil War, and even on the military and freedmen occupation of Civil War Hilton Head. Indeed, I have greatly benefitted from such projects, particularly the State of Tennessee’s [Landscape of Liberation: The African American Geography of Civil War Tennessee](#) and [Mapping Occupation](#), by Gregory P. Downs and Scott Nesbit, both of which chart spatial changes related to freedom.<sup>[2]</sup>

After consultation with the staff of Bowdoin College’s [Department of Academic Technology and Consulting](#), I was encouraged to apply for a Gibbons Fellowship, which supports collaborative faculty-student research projects. Eileen Johnson, a lecturer and on-campus ArcGIS specialist, suggested that ArcGIS would be an ideal platform to allow me to visualize my data, and she recommended a student to support me in this work. My resulting collaboration with Tyler DeAngelis, a GIS-trained environmental studies major, enabled us to work together to develop the mapping tool to organize and view the archival data within a geographically oriented framework and to better understand the spatial dimensions of Hilton Head’s transformation.

### **Collaborations**

Tyler and I spent the next eighteen months developing and refining the mapping tool. Tyler’s expertise with the programs and the languages of mapping systems enabled me to see and organize my archival information as data. Because he had limited exposure to art history, I was required to carefully explain my logic and argument, and our exchanges regarding the interpretation and visualization of data sharpened the project considerably. With the conceptual work done, Tyler then began the months-long, time-consuming project of converting the historical sources into data.

Tyler began by georeferencing multiple historical maps of Hilton Head Island. The detail of these maps allowed for the accurate development of GIS features for buildings, land cover, streams, roads, and other physical aspects of Mitchelville and Hilton Head. After these basemaps were developed, it was much easier to get a sense of what was plausible for this project with the given data. At that point, Tyler decided that he needed to learn to use the ArcPhoto extension in order to treat the visual information as data; the extension then allowed him to incorporate archival photographs into our GIS tool, meaning we could now give them spatial references, including direction, height, and a host of other attributes.

For several months we were convinced that a three-dimensional representation would be the best platform for presenting Hilton Head’s spatial changes. To this end Tyler taught himself how to use ArcGIS in three dimensions, which allowed us to begin developing three-dimensional models of Mitchelville from two-dimensional layers, as well as to take the first steps toward integrating ArcPhoto and the 3-D modeling to best visualize what it was like to stand in certain locations in Civil War-era Mitchelville. Together, these varied forms of

visualization in ArcGIS allowed us to combine different historical views of the town—such as maps, photographs, and artifacts—into a single platform.

But although 3-D modeling was an entertaining turn, it did not help us analyze the changes on Hilton Head. It certainly aided our efforts to begin visualizing some elements of our subject matter, but not necessarily in a way that was crucial to our study. As an example, it became evident that many of the changes on Hilton Head occurred on the northeastern corner of the island, and after identifying this factor, we eliminated some wartime archival material that concerned the lesser-populated portions of the island. Although it was difficult to exclude this material, this level of discrimination became an important methodological practice of the project. Accordingly, we decided on a streamlined platform that presented only the key elements of our study. Rather than plotting every data point and including every illustration of the island's features, we made a conscious choice to present a set of curated data that supported my essay analysis. Focusing on the more populated northeastern region of the island, we were then able to zero in on two plantations in particular: Coggins Point and Fish Haul, which were the nexus of the journey to freedom.

The streamlining of the platform (i.e., presenting only the key elements of the project) enabled me to explore the ways in which the cultural landscape of Hilton Head plantations were changed by the occupation of the military and the freeing of the enslaved workers. By limiting my data, it was much easier to see patterns otherwise obscured. My revised question then became “How can we capture the experience of this spatial transformation?” I decided that by combining two analytical fields—the geography of Hilton Head and an analysis of the living patterns of the plantation owners, Union forces, missionaries, and freedmen—I would take an important step toward the larger goal of representing the elements of the transformation.

### Object Lessons

The *Tracing Transformations in a Digital Age* tool has become the driving force in my Hilton Head research, with my analysis and interpretation of the subject not just creating the tool but being shaped and informed by it as well. Of particular use are the photographs, which are helpful as I decode how particular Hilton Head sites were used by different groups. In Samuel Cooley's photographs, we see which properties were of value to the Union military and US government, and we learn much about the people who transformed, built, and occupied these structures, which included military complex buildings and freedmen housing. Similarly, the photographs of Henry P. Moore show us how the people used this land under the auspices of the Northern-run Department of the South. The tool thus helped me in my immediate project of analyzing spatiotemporal changes on the wartime plantations. Because the map can be manipulated in nearly an infinite number of ways, I illustrated the essay with select map images presented in Graphic Interchange Format (GIF). These GIFs provide evidence for the article's interpretative claims and model the map's functionality for the reader, encouraging further exploration in the article's interactive map component.

I am conscious of scholar Johanna Drucker's assertion that the digitizing, organizing, and devising of metadata are always acts of interpretation and “carry interpretative inflection”—that is, “they are not neutral or value-free, and each privileges one aspect of a digital artifact at the expense of others.”<sup>[3]</sup> With Drucker's caution in mind, I hope to have expanded the canon rather than limited it. This project lives up to the expectations of those working at the

crossroads of digital humanities and social justice in its attempt to reconstitute a more holistic history of a place and a moment in time.

### **Future Developments**

The Sea Islands hurricane that struck the area with a fury in 1893 may have demolished much of Mitchelville's physical historical markers, but *Tracing Transformations* now enables us to re-create the spatial changes of Hilton Head during its federal occupation between 1861 and 1865. The year 2015 marks 150 years since the mapping of Mitchelville, and as a result of this anniversary and the efforts of [local activists and descendants of the freedmen](#) who settled on the island, the site has enjoyed renewed attention.<sup>[4]</sup> It is my hope that *Tracing Transformations* will participate in this celebration to memorialize the island's history, as well as be a continued source for more nuanced analysis of this vital era.





I expect this project to evolve as more sources are uncovered and analyzed. Several important caches of data related to Civil War-era Hilton Head remain to be incorporated into the tool, including those resulting from modern excavations of the area. In 1987, archaeologist Michael Trinkley and the staff of the Chicora Foundation excavated a portion of the Mitchelville site, and the archaeological firm R. S. Webb and Associates has also surveyed the area for data. In 1991 and again in 2013, archaeologists from Brockington and Associates excavated two different portions of the town. If this archaeological data were made public and the results could be incorporated into *Tracing Transformations*, we could further expand our understanding of this important location.<sup>[5]</sup> Imagine if the data were aligned on the map: Might we gain even greater insight into the way in which the freedmen organized themselves? Could we learn, for example, if Mitchelville had neighborhoods based on class, occupation, or even the origins of its residents? The evidence available now is weighted toward the northeastern corner of the island, but might we hope to add more data to flesh out the story as other regions of the island are studied? Looking beyond the war, we might learn whether the plantation owners who returned to the island and reclaimed their estates were successful in keeping their plots together or whether their losses during the war prevented them from retaining their holdings. Answers to these vital questions can come through an expansion of the mapping tool through further research.







For now, *Tracing Transformations in a Digital Age* is not just an important step in the effort to visually reconstitute the forgotten material and spatial history of Civil War- and Reconstruction-era Hilton Head; it is also a methodological tool that is helping open up new ways for art historians to think about interrogating space, as well as providing a window of access and information to a larger interested audience.


### **About:**

*Tracing Transformations* presents georeferenced spatial data in the form of an online multimedia map that incorporates a range of archival data, including an 1865 map of the area and photographs from the Library of Congress and the National Archives in Washington, DC. This tool is meant to be used to better understand the relationship between the people who inhabited Hilton Head Island during the Civil War and their geographic surroundings. It is also interactive: layers can be turned on and off, made semitransparent, and in other ways manipulated so the user can explore the intersection of geography and visual history.

Upon opening the map, zoom in to the Hilton Head Island area of the map and, if necessary, reposition this section with the cursor so the Hilton Head Island area is visible.

The Legend icon in the upper left  offers information about the symbols and features of the map. Below it, the layers icon  allows you to turn the symbolized layers on and off. While in the Layer List, you can click the drop-down menus along the left  for color-coded legend information; the arrows on the right  will allow you to adjust the transparency level of each layer. These tools make it possible to compare two layers that overlap. You can turn layers on and off by checking/unchecking the box next to the layer name in the layers list. To close the Legend or Layer List windows and make the map full-screen again, you click the double arrow at the bottom right of the window.

The buttons at the top left of the map allow you to zoom in  and out  and return home . To the right of these buttons (from left to right), you can choose between different basemaps , measure distances , and return to this information about how to use the map .

To find out more information about specific locations and individual sites, apply the “Photographs” layer and click on one of the colored points on the map to open a pop-up window that includes textual explanation and a photograph of that location. From there, you can click “Zoom to” at the bottom left of the pop-up window and see the selected site in more detail on the map. You can enlarge the pop-up window with the identifying information about the location by using the “widen” button , and you can see larger versions of the photographs by clicking directly on the images to open them in new windows. You can browse through all of the images and text by choosing the arrow in the upper right corner of this new window.

The slider along the bottom of the map adds the element of time. Select the layers you would like to view (the “Plantation Boundaries ca. 1861” and “Mitchelville Land Cover” layers work particularly well together) and use the timeline slider to see changes over time.

### Explore!

This application supports all modern browsers and is designed to work across devices, scaling from large to small windows. However, readers with browsers sized smaller than 256 pixels will not have access to the map’s full functionality (for example, pop-up windows will be abbreviated) and may wish to change their browser’s screen resolution. It is designed for use in tandem with the [Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide](#) scholarly essay “Tracing Transformations: Hilton Head Island’s Journey to Freedom, 1860–1865,” which highlights key data and insights from the digital component.

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## Notes

[1] First and foremost I wish to thank Tyler DeAngelis ([tdeangs\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:tdeangs[at]gmail.com)) for his calm, capable, and steady production; there would be no digital component without him. Tyler, a 2015 Bowdoin College graduate, is a specialist in biology and environmental studies, and is proficient in ArcGIS. At Bowdoin College, a host of colleagues and digital specialists, including Jen Jack Giesekeing, Eileen Johnson, and Jennifer Snow, were also crucial to the project’s progression. My art history colleagues, notably Pamela Fletcher and Peggy Wang, asked incisive questions that prompted new lines of inquiry. The talented Jen Edwards, Martha Janeway, Kathi Lucas, and Ann Ostwald deftly handled logistics. At Bowdoin College, two sources of funding—the Gibbons Fellowship and the Andrew Mellon Foundation—funded Civil War Cluster—provided vital project support. At *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, I am grateful to Emily Pugh, who initially suggested that I undertake this project, and who then continued to support it with knowledge, experience, and plenty of enthusiasm. Project manager and publication developer Elizabeth Buhe encouraged me throughout the process while extracting the best possible product. Petra Chu, Isabel Taube, and Allan McLeod gave important feedback and carefully shepherded this project through the production process. Finally, the generous support of the Mellon Foundation, which has provided *NCAW* with a three-year grant to build capacity in new technologies in scholarship, made the publication of this article possible.

[2] *Landscape of Liberation: The African American Geography of Civil War Tennessee*, <http://tnmap.tn.gov/civilwar/freedmen/>, published January 2015 by the Tennessee State Library and Archives, the Fullerton Geospatial Lab at Middle Tennessee State University, the State of Tennessee OIR-GIS, and the Tennessee State Museum; and Gregory P. Downs and Scott Nesbit, *Mapping Occupation: Force, Freedom, and the Army in Reconstruction*, <http://mappingoccupation.org>, published March 2015.

[3] Johanna Drucker, “Is There a ‘Digital’ Art History?” *Visual Resources* 29, nos. 1–2 (March–June 2013): 5–13. For more on the promise of digital humanities and social justice, see Jen Jack Giesekeing, “Steps Toward Recognition Through Openness and the Virtual,” *Fifty Years Later: The Portrayal of the Negro in American Painting*, Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 2014, <http://bcma.bowdoinimg.net/index.html>. Pamela Fletcher has also reflected on the challenges and opportunities of digital art history; see her “Reflections on Digital Art History,” *Re-Views: Field Editors’ Reflections*, June 18, 2015, <http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/2726>.

[4] See Jennifer Schuessler, “Taking Another Look at the Reconstruction Era,” *New York Times*, August 25, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/25/arts/park-service-project-would-address-the-reconstruction-era.html>; originally published under the title “Reconstruction, Reconstructed.”

[5] In 2013, archaeologists found evidence of several houses on the southwestern edge of Mitchelville. They believe these were some of the last homes built in the town. In addition, researchers found wells and a large garbage dump near this cluster of housing. These may have been community facilities used by several households. 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 Investigation 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).

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