

Pinopolis Basin's People After the War ~

Last week I reported on one of many black cemeteries that were displaced by South Carolina Public Service Authority's Pinopolis Basin (we call it Lake Moultrie today). Since that time, I found an interesting report that describes the desperate conditions that prevailed among the negro population in the Basin . . . and elsewhere in the Lowcountry. Neither pen nor photos can fully portray those conditions adequately, however, I found this report helpful in providing a better understanding of the situation.

The report goes on to say that there were probably five hundred black families who lived together in extremely dilapidated, unsanitary one-and-two-room cabins. Unfortunately, I don't have the photos to show that were probably at one time with this report, as they would give you a faint idea of the miserable state of these flimsy constructed shanties.

Reported were the rotten, leaky roofs, the crumbling clay chimneys, leaning crazily to one side or another, the wide holes and cracks in the walls through which wind, rain, and cold may come in during wintertime, and of course, there were always clustered around the sagging steps, a horde of ragged clothed children.

We have heard so often that freedom is the inalienable right of every man, and it would seem that all slaves were but receiving their just rights when emancipation came . . . but, for the negro families who were released from their owners in this Basin, freedom was thought of as a tragedy by many, if not all.

The majority of slaves who were brought up dependent upon the protecting care of their master, these Pinopolis negroes were entirely incapable of leading successful, self-directed lives, even if there had been some, who through superior ability or initiative might have done fairly well as to self-support, there were no industries for them to enter, no business opportunities in this secluded and undeveloped portion of Berkeley County.

The only means of livelihood was that of seeking out a precarious living from the soil, and with little knowledge of the proper methods of agriculture, and with practically no equipment for livestock or farming implements, this occupation yielded them no financial returns and scarcely food enough to supply their families. It is said that oftentimes, in early spring, when corn and potatoes were gone, that they supplemented their food in the interval by gathering maypops and made soup to stave off starvation until the new crop came in.

Although a few of the negro farmers own small ten-acre tracts in their own names, most of them are petty tenants who suffer from the ills and evils of the absentee landlord system.

We must not attach any censure to the former slave-owner or their descendants for the pitiable plight of these negroes. For many years after the War Between the States, the plantation owners were in dire poverty themselves. The fine old ancestral homes had been burned or had fallen into decay; practically everything of value had been swept away by the ravages of the conflict, and the white man had such difficulty in maintaining himself that it was beyond the bounds of possibility for him to aid the negro.

As time went on, most of the younger generation of the once wealthy white families were forced to leave this section and migrate to other, more lucrative fields of endeavor, thus the absentee landlord, yet no one can blame them. One must remember that practically everything, materially, had been stolen, burned, and/or destroyed.

And so, the Pinopolis Basin negroes lived on in their destitution and moral degradation. There were no government agencies, nor was there organized charity to help them, and in the almost three quarters of a century since emancipation, these people have remained stationary and stagnant.

But . . . now, at last, comes something new into this Basin, the great Santee-Cooper Project has made its entrance there.

These black men have been informed that they will have to leave their dilapidated shacks and move elsewhere. When told of this, they childishly and submissively inquire, in their native Gullah tongue, "Where is we gwine?" and that was the momentous question asked by both black and white. "Where are we going?"

Those who really had at heart the good of these poor folks would not like, nor want to see them again turned loose into a wide and unknown world. All would like to see them resettled in decently constructed buildings upon lands adjoining the Basin. And . . . since negroes, no different from whites, are happier when living among their own kin and friends, hope is that they will be transferred to their new homes in congenial family and church groups.

Having lost property, similarly, to the Cooper River Rediversion Canal Project, and seeing others lose theirs, I concur, "What reclamation project, rehabilitation program could be more worthy than this?"

Hope was that it could, and would, be done fairly and properly. This, one of the last frontiers in our country, had been left untouched by the progress of modern civilization, with hope that it may be reclaimed at last.

The last sentence in this report says, "Let us make the coming of the Santee-Cooper Authority a blessing to the negro population of the Pinopolis Basin." I concur, and conclude with a big AMEN!

Edited by Keith Gourdin

Reference / Resource: Author unknown



Photo courtesy South Carolina Public Service Authority, 1930's



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