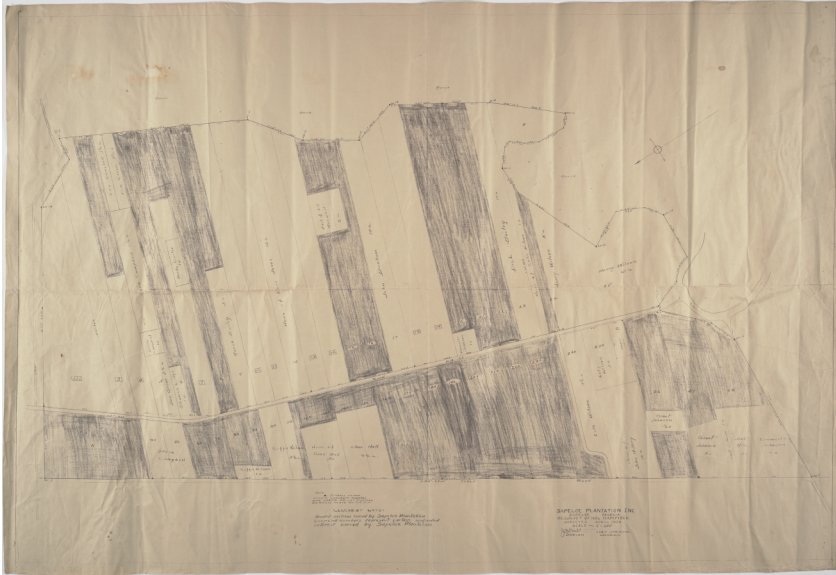




RESEARCH BRIEF #01: Population

January 2023



Map of Hog Hammock in 1938.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Earliest record indicates 66 enslaved Black people in 1791.
- Following Civil War, Black population estimated at 352 in August and up to 900 by December.
- Freedman's Bureau recorded 745 acres of land issued to 25 families consisting of 107 people in 1865.
- Black-owned land estimated at about 1100 acres in five communities around turn of 19th century.
- Black population peaked in 1910 at 529.
- 2010 U.S. Census indicates island population as 51% Black; lowest historical representation.

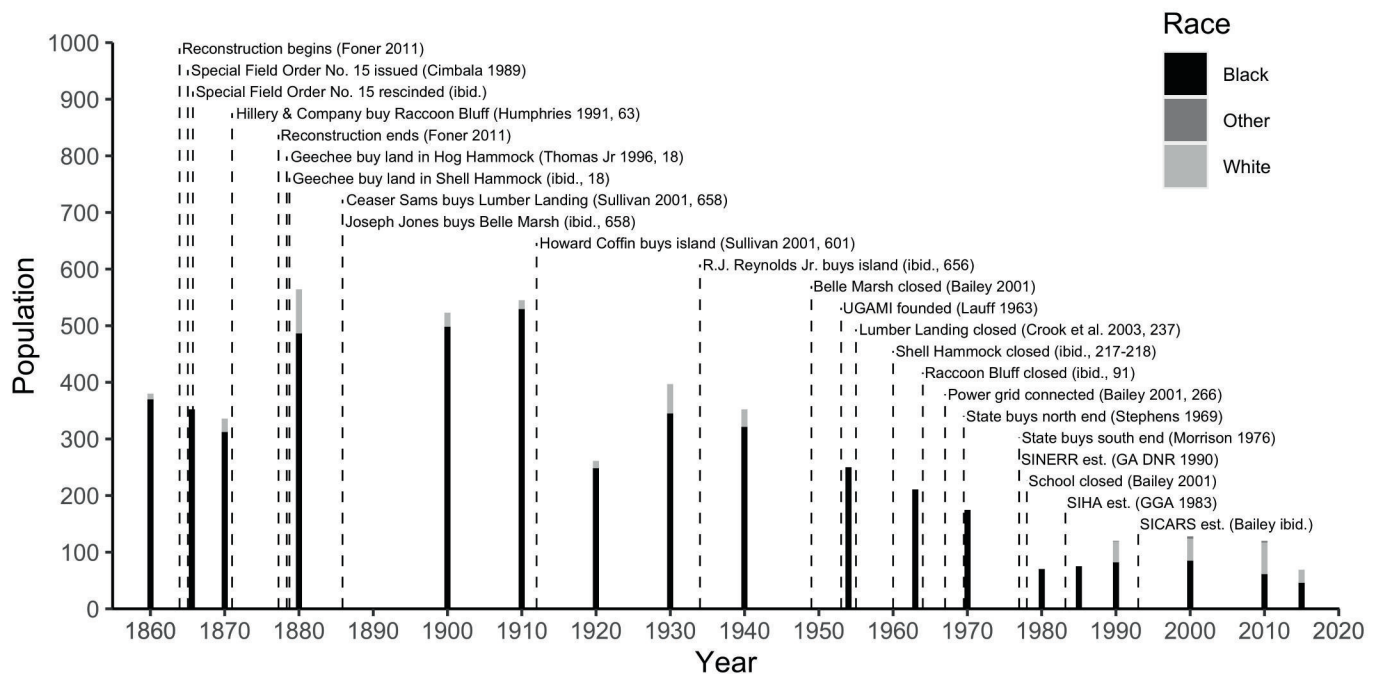
POPULATION CHANGES & EARLY LAND ACQUISITION

Sapelo Island's Black population and Black landownership both steadily increased throughout the 1800s. Following the Civil War and the failure of the U.S. government's attempt at land redistribution through the Freedman's Bureau, Sapelo's Black people persisted and grew to a population of over 500 people owning over 1100 acres of land around the turn of the twentieth century. However, the Black population and land ownership have been in decline since this period. We recommend that the state fund and empower the Sapelo Island Heritage Authority to act to its fullest capacity to preserve Saltwater Geechee cultural heritage and land.

Population Changes

Sapelo's Black population steadily increased throughout the 19th century peaking at 529 in 1910. It has decreased steadily since due to various causes to around 60 in 2015. Early estimates include 66 enslaved Black people in 1791 and as many as 80 in 1802. By 1825, 310 enslaved Black people are reported. Following the Civil War, the U.S. government created the Freedman's Bureau to implement General Sherman's *Special Field Orders*, No. 15, which called for land redistribution to freed people. Estimates include 352 Black people on Sapelo

in August 1865 and as many as 900 by December. Under pressure from former plantation owners and white northern entrepreneurs, President Johnson rescinded SFO, No. 15 in September 1865. Despite the change, Black presence on Sapelo grew reaching nearly 500 people by 1880 and peaking in 1910. Significant decline occurred following two new majority island owners, the first in 1912 and the second in 1934 (see figure). Further decline occurred after the state's purchase in 1969 and 1976 and the school's closure in 1978.



Sapelo Island population 1860 to 2015 with key historical events. Decadal years from 1860 to 2010 are complete U.S. Census data; all other years are estimated from cited sources.

Early Land Acquisition

The Freedman's Bureau recorded 745 acres of land issued to 25 families consisting of 107 people in 1865. Johnson's rescinding Sherman's order likely curtailed most, if not all, of these land allocations. However, Black land ownership grew as freedmen accrued funds to purchase land in five communities. Sapelo's first major Black land purchase came in 1871 via the William Hillery Company, comprised of three freedmen named William Hillery, John Grovner, and Bilali Bell, who bought approximately 650 acres at Raccoon Bluff, divided it into smaller tracts and sold those to several other freedmen and their families. In 1885, Caesar Sams and Joseph Jones purchased two tracts including 60 acres at Lumber Landing and 50 acres at Belle Marsh, respectively. By 1878, formerly enslaved residents began to acquire land in the communities of Hog Hammock and Shell Hammock via purchasing small tracts. An 1891 surveyor's map shows Black-owned land of at least 30 acres in Shell Hammock and 298 acres in Hog Hammock. A 1938 surveyor's map indicates 288 acres of Black-owned land in Hog Hammock (see map). We estimate Sapelo's Black-owned land to have been approximately 1100 acres in the late 19th century in at least these five communities.

Recommendations

The Black population has declined since state acquisition, despite a 1983 law (the Sapelo Island Heritage Authority Act) that recognizes Hog Hammock as "the last community of its kind in the state of Georgia." **We recommend the state fund and empower the Heritage Authority Board to act to its fullest capacity to protect and preserve Saltwater Geechee cultural heritage and land.**

Contributors

Dean Hardy, University of South Carolina
Maurice Bailey, Save Our Legacy Ourselves
Nik Heynen, University of Georgia

Suggested Readings

*Dean Hardy and Nik Heynen. 2022. "'I Am Sapelo': Racialized Uneven Development and Land Politics within the Gullah Geechee Corridor." *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 5 (1): 401–25. *Content for this brief derived from this article and sources cited therein.

Sullivan, Buddy, and Aimee G Gaddis. 2014. "Sapelo Island Settlement and Land Ownership: An Historical Overview, 1865–1970." Volume 3. Occasional Papers of the Sapelo Island NERR. Sapelo Island, Georgia: Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve.