

RESEARCH BRIEF #02: Land Loss

March 2023



GEECHEE DESCENDANT LAND LOSS

Descendants owned nearly 1100 acres on Sapelo Island around the year 1900; Almost 300 acres in Hog Hammock in 1891. While still the majority owner group today, Descendants own less than 200 acres now. **More than one acre per year has been lost since 2000** through land sales and delinquent property tax auctions. More than 40% of Descendant land lost over the past 20 years occurred from 2013 to 2015 during a period of elevated effective tax rates. Nearly half of properties with delinquent tax notices since 2010 were heirs' property. Eight properties have been lost at auction since 2010.

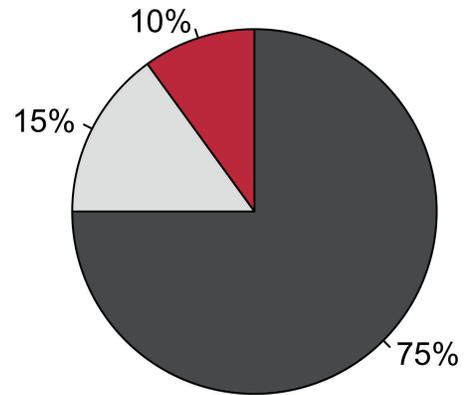
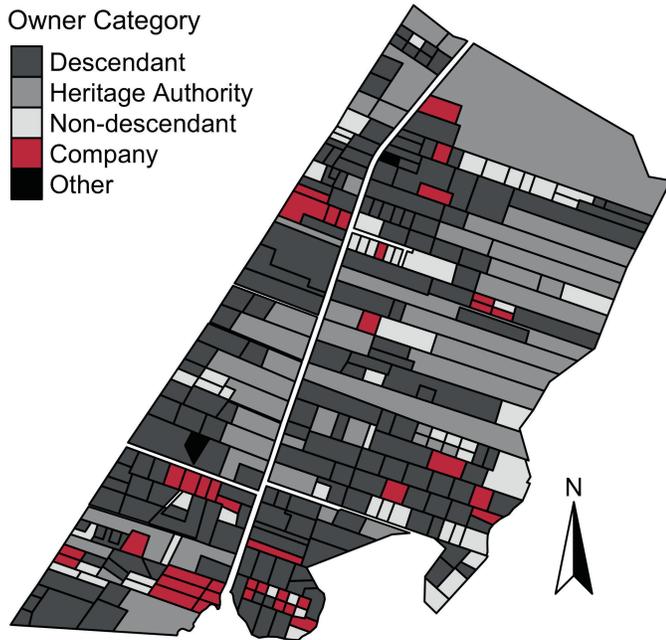
Property Losses

As Mrs. Cornelia used to say, "Without land, what good's the culture." Mrs. Cornelia recognized the threat that land sales where to the survival of Geechee cultural heritage. She even referred to the ongoing process of land loss and dispossession as "cultural genocide" at times. Her concerns are supported by data. Despite nearly 1100 acres of Black-owned land on Sapelo around the start of the 20th century, today we estimate Black-owned land at about 191 acres. Optimistically, Descendants own about 75% of remaining privately-owned land.

However, **since 1999 an average of 1.1 acres of Descendent-owned land has been lost every year with an increasing trend.** According to Tax Assessor's records, 40% (about 10 acres) of Descendant-owned acreage lost since 1999 occurred during the period of increased effective tax rates from 2013 to 2015. This suggests there are real consequences for increased taxes, whether its the rate or effective rate, due to reassessments in the community. Heirs' property is especially susceptible to land loss through tax auctions.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Descendants have lost over 100 acres since about the year 1900.
- Descendants have lost more than one acre per year since 2000.
- Over 40% of acres lost in the past two decades occurred from 2013 to 2015 during higher effective tax rates.
- Over 40% of properties with delinquent tax auction notices since 2010 have been heirs' property.
- Non-descendant land has increased from about 16% to 25% of private land since 2000.



Hog Hammock property holdings by owner category and percentage of private property (excludes Heritage Authority) held by each group. Companies are registered LLCs, INCs, COs, etc.

Heirs' Property & Tax Auctions

Although heirs' property assessment techniques are challenging, a conservative estimate suggests at least 14% of Black-owned properties in Hog Hammock are heirs' property. Of nearly 60 properties advertised for auction due to delinquent taxes since 2010, at least 40% were likely heirs' property. Several properties were delinquent more than once due to a 2011 state-mandated property value reassessment that raised effective tax rates in 2012. Seven of the eight properties that have gone to auction since 2010 were heirs' properties (amounting to eight acres). Six of these went directly to a registered company at auction and now seven of them are owned by a company.

Recommendations

First, we recommend that the state develop policy that increases protections for heirs' property owners. Second, we recommend that the State and McIntosh County permanently protect current descendant residents and their descendants from effective property tax rate increases. The Stephens-Day Exemption in Chatham County is one such policy that could be implemented in McIntosh. Last,

the 1983 Sapelo Island Heritage Authority (SIHA) Act established that, "a black community known as Hog Hammock which is composed primarily of the direct descendants of the slaves of Thomas Spalding" and that "the best and most important use of this area... is to permit said community to remain." We recommend that the State fund SIHA to fulfill its obligations by assisting owners with back taxes, purchasing properties with delinquent taxes at tax sales, and making market rate offers to owners with the right of refusal clause in their deeds.

Contributors

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Suggested Readings

- * Hardy, Dean, Maurice Bailey, and Nik Heynen. 2022. "'We're Still Here': An Abolition Ecology Blockade of Double Dispossession of Gullah/Geechee Land." *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 112 (3): 867–76.
- * Hardy, Dean, 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 these articles and sources cited therein.