

# Penn Center

Island of Opportunity

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• 1862 •

Once the first artillery shell exploded over Fort Sumter and the opening shots of the Civil War had been exchanged, the fires of passion, long smoldering in the hearts of many Northern abolitionists, burst into flames as well. A few determined young women—many of them Unitarians or Quakers—were more than eager to do whatever they could to ease the plight of the Southern slaves. Some were driven by idealism and a true sense of duty; others sought opportunity for meaningful work, largely denied to women in the 1860s. But, like soldiers for enlightenment, they bravely headed south with lofty ambitions of righting the wrongs of slavery. Among the earliest of these women was Laura M. Towne. She was sent to South Carolina in April of 1862 by an abolitionist group in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, calling itself the Freedmen's Association.

Alone and carrying only a few possessions and meager supplies, Laura stepped off the steamer onto the island of St. Helena in Beaufort County, close to where Union troops had established their first victorious stronghold in Port Royal the previous year. On this isolated, rural island were approximately 10,000 abandoned slaves, left behind when their masters fled, as 12,000 Union forces landed on nearby Hilton Head Island.

Although the Emancipation Proclamation would not be

read by President Lincoln until January 1, 1863, the black population of St. Helena was essentially (if unofficially) liberated. They lacked two main ingredients for achieving self-sufficiency on their island home: education and title to their own lands. Laura Towne had come to address the first of these issues—education.

It was ironic that St. Helena Island would be her assignment for administering the first of the "remedies" for slavery, as St. Helena was where slavery had been introduced to America in 1526. The Spanish named it Punta de Santa Elena when they landed there in 1521. English planters arrived on Hilton Head Island in 1663. After their war with the Yemassee Indians ended in 1718, they were able to use nearby St. Elena for growing crops, primarily indigo. By the time of the American Revolution, "St. Helena" (as the island was now called) had been settled for 200 years. All the while, its use had been mostly agricultural. Its population was largely dominated by West Africans imported to work there as slaves.

The St. Helena that awaited Laura Towne must have looked intimidating, if not Rousseau-like in its natural beauty. In addition to the vast cotton fields that gave mute testimony to the slavery long practiced there, she witnessed a variety of animals and lush vegetation. Wild varieties of yellow jessamine, Cherokee roses, cassina berries, iris, and wisteria were growing in abundance. Palmettos and ancient live oaks were thriving along the marshes and tidal creeks, as they had for eons.

In this rich, natural, and isolated environment, St. Helena's black culture was able to remain apart from the distracting influences of other settings. Many of the islanders' West-African traditions were passed on through consecutive generations unaltered. For instance, St. Helena residents retained their distinct "Gullah" language—a uniquely altered blend of African, Native-American, Spanish, French, and English words. So did the famous Gullah basket weaving—so associated with the South Carolina Lowcountry—which originated with African

tribes from the Gulf of Guinea down to the Cape of Good Hope.

Laura found her way to the abandoned house on the Oaks Plantation, which provided her first shelter. Eventually, one room of the old house served as her school. The first job, however, was serving the blacks' immediate need for medical care. As it happened, she was in a limited position to help in this capacity as well as start a school. She had been educated at the Women's Medical College in Philadelphia, and her training helped her quickly become the island's "doctor." She dispensed medical care as best she could and served as a midwife while setting up classes for her school.

The enormity of the task must have been overwhelming. She wrote back to the Freedmen's Association in Pennsylvania asking for help, and the following June another teacher, a Canadian-born Quaker named Ellen Murray, arrived. A third teacher, Charlotte Forten, was an African American from Salem, Massachusetts, who arrived in October that same year. Only the diaries of Charlotte Forten and Laura Towne survive as records of the first years of what is known as "the Port Royal Experiment." Miss Forten left after the first year due to ill health, but Miss Towne and Miss Murray stayed on for the next forty years of their lives.

The women called their school "Penn Normal" in honor of William Penn and their home state. Their students were a mix of ex-slaves and their descendants, refugees of war, and a few African captives who had been brought to America just before the start of the war.

Part of the success of the Penn Normal School may have stemmed from the fact that much of the Civil War's calamity and disruption took place "offstage" from St. Helena Island. Even while hostilities with Northern troops continued on the mainland, the black community on St. Helena was largely self-governing. After freedom was finally theirs, life changed very little on St. Helena. The exception was the issue of land ownership.

One of the first orders issued by Gen. William Tecumseh

Sherman in preparation for Reconstruction was Special Field Order No. 15, which appropriated the South Carolina sea islands for use by freed slaves. He assigned Gen. Rufus Saxton the formidable task of identifying the head of each black household and assigning each of these men "forty acres of land and the temporary use of a military horse or mule."

St. Helena's blacks continued living on the land as they had before—working the same fields some of their ancestors had worked as slaves—only now *they* were the landowners. Even through the end of the nineteenth century, most of the landholders on St. Helena were the grown children or the grandchildren of former slaves who originally had been granted land by the newly victorious Federal Government.

Laura found the blacks on St. Helena to be eager learners. School enrollment quickly outgrew the one-room space allocated in the old plantation house. They moved into the island's brick Baptist Church, which had been built by slave labor back in 1855. But soon that space was too small as well. Miss Towne purchased land, and an early version of a prefabricated school building was sent to South Carolina by the Philadelphia-based sponsors. The unassembled building was shipped all the way to Beaufort by boat.

Although the school was a great success, the money from the Freedmen's Association soon ran out. Miss Towne was forced to pay the other teachers from her own meager salary, but the school struggled on despite the hardship. When Miss Towne's health began to fail in 1900, help arrived in the personage of Mr. P. W. Dawkins, a follower of Booker T. Washington and a man generally considered to be a leading authority in African-American education. After Miss Towne's death in 1901, he became Superintendent of Industries at Penn Normal and organized the islanders into farmer's "conferences," like those he'd seen at Tuskegee Institute. Self-reliance was the key, he emphasized. He also instituted a school farm and opened the door for industrial education at Penn.

Carpentry, blacksmithing, wheel wrighting, basket weaving, harness making, cobbling, and mechanics followed suit. By 1909 a full-time agricultural instructor was on the faculty, and the school adopted the name Penn Normal Industrial and Agricultural School. Graduates had the option of continuing their schooling to become teachers, and many went on to work in the county schools scattered throughout the sea islands.

For the most part these small-scale but successful farmers were spared the closed economic cycle called "sharecropping," which bound generations of Southern blacks to poverty. They were also spared the political and societal insult of segregation, as the blacks had always been in the vast majority on the island. What they lacked economically they made up for with the confidence that came from owning their own land. Whites—and their Southern segregation—stayed away from St. Helena, as it was believed to be too swampy and malarial for safe habitation. The Southern culture played out its story into the twentieth century without much participation from St. Helena, even though it was the largest of Beaufort County's sixty-five separate islands.

In 1948 Beaufort County finally took over the financial responsibility of education on St. Helena Island. Classes at Penn continued until a public school was built. The last graduates from Penn Center received their diplomas in 1958.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, Penn's campus became a major retreat for civil-rights groups headed by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. During the early 1960s Dr. King and his staff met there often to plan strategies for social change. Not the least of these planning sessions resulted in the March on Washington, D.C., in 1963. A private retreat for Dr. King was built on St. Helena, but the leader was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1968 before he had the opportunity to stay there.

Over the years the school's role as a catalyst for self-reliance has become a beacon of hope for generations of black South Carolinians. Penn Center, as it is now known, is a

conference center for educational, religious, and cultural development used by students and scholars from all over America. Penn Center was designated as one of South Carolina's three National Historic Landmark Districts in 1974.