Mission and Objectives

Poplar Grove promotes the spirit of the lower Cape Fear region through education, conservation, and preservation.

We seek to –

reflect upon the practices of a self-sustaining farm, including enslavement, tenant farming, the heritage arts, legislation, and technology

promote the values and traditions of local communities and cultural landscapes as it reflects past, present and future human activity

initiate meaningful dialogue that builds upon the values of respect, empathy, cultural diversity, multiple perspectives, and democratic principles

share the significance and spirit of place as a shared resource by preserving the natural habitat and architectural harmony indigenous to the lower Cape Fear region
The Intimacy of Oppression
& a Gesture of Grace

Presented by Caroline C. Lewis
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This map from a 1938 Federal Works Project outlines Highway 17 and the Atlantic Coastline Railway between Scotts Hill and Topsail Sound. Between the highway and the barrier islands were former plantations predominantly growing peanuts and sweet potatoes.

These plantations—directly north of downtown Wilmington—included salt works, grist mills, brick kilns, mill ponds, and oil mills, and descended from a pre-Revolutionary War planter class, including the Foys, Nixons, Wards, Simmons, and Rhodes, who purchased slaves directly from Africa to settle the land and build estates and amass a great fortune, from here in Pender County, NC, to St. John’s County, Florida, in the production of peanuts, sweet potatoes, rice, indigo, and sea island cotton.

During the Civil War, a map of the area was issued to Union Officers for troop movements to Wilmington. From Sloop Point/Topsail Sound heading south were the plantations of Picket, Burn, Burgwyn, Moore, Carr, Howard, St. George, Hansely, Pope and Williams before adjoining the Foy, Bryant and Sidbury plantations on both side of the highway at Scotts Hill/Rich Inlet. South of the Foys at Poplar Grove were the planters Shepard, Nixon, Davis, Alexander, Everett, Johnson and Colonel Roger Moore.
Today, descendants of these former enslavers still live along this stretch of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor.

And so here at Poplar Grove, we have the planter, Joseph Mumford Foy, direct descendant of James Foy, Sr., who purchased Poplar Grove in 1795. Joseph M. Foy inherited portions of his father’s estate, including the original homestead and an allotment of the family’s enslaved just as his father before him, and his father before him.

When Joseph M. Foy marries Mary Ann Simmons, of Onslow County, in 1839, the couple’s dowry include a few specifically chosen enslaved from their respective families to assist them in setting up their home, and thus keep close the wealth within the family through “natural increase.” Between them are 22 enslaved.

By 1860, Joseph M. Foy will possess 59 slaves through “natural increase” and additional purchases throughout the 1840s and 50s. In the August 30, 1860, Joseph M. Foy writes in “The Country Gentleman” that “the principle crop raised in this vicinity is the pea nut, or ground peas as they are generally called. In my section of the country there are over one hundred thousand bushels raised. We consider them more profitable than cotton, where land is suitable for their culture. They have been a great source of wealth to this section of the country. Good land will produce fifty to seventy-five bushels to the acre” (Johnson 61).

His neighbor and friend, planter Nicholas Nixon adds in the same publication that “the picking and preparing (of peanuts) for market is a tedious and troublesome process, as the best hands will not clean more than two to four bushels per day and those who are inexperienced, not more than half of that” (Johnson 71).
The Foy’s of Scotts Hill were part of the 2% gentry class of the entire south, producing two main sources of protein that supplemented the dietary requirements of the enslaved of New Hanover County’s 1% planter class.

In short, the Foy’s dealt in the service economy of the planter classes, and had been doing so for generations with the talents and skills slaves imported specifically from West Africa — to sow and to reap the “lowly peanut.”

When we think of South Carolina and the lower Cape Fear region of North Carolina, rice first comes to mind. However, the 1860 Slave Population for the Southeastern United States illustrates the number of enslaved in New Hanover and Brunswick Counties, with New Hanover having almost double the population of enslaved as Brunswick County.

The majority of these enslaved populations were located in the northern half of New Hanover County towards Scotts Hill and Sloop Point and Topsail Sound, and west towards Rocky Point, where Nicholas Nixon had another 100+ enslaved out in the peanut fields.

The picture above, dated 1894, are the peanut fields of Joseph Thompson Foy, 2nd son of Joseph M. Foy and inheritor of his parents homestead and surrounding fields that stretched all the way to the inland waterway, two miles east of here.
Inventory of the Estate
of Joseph Mumford Foy

March 31, 1861

Joseph Mumford Foy dies on April 1, 1861. The Civil War begins two weeks later. He is 44 years old, and a wealthy man.

His estate inventory list by first name the following enslaved fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, uncles, aunts, cousins—all of them skilled or soon to be apprenticed craftsmen, artists and farmers.

Their names are John, Rachel, Leah, Jo, Winslow, Izah, Big Leah, Betsy, Kitty, Ruth, Isaac, Peter, Caroline, Abel, London, John, Alice, Katherine, Stella, Mary, Sarah, Mariah, Cornelie, Abby/Abbe, Margaret, Alice, Ben, Alfred, Jo, William, Adaline, Jere, Paul, Henrietta, Bob, Sam, Lucy, Matilda, Toby, Fannie, Hannah, Snow, Daniel, Nathan, Ellen, Dave, Patsy, Dinky, Bill, Ida, Frank, Simon, Jim, Josh, Bernard, Jo, Hannah, Jane, Sallie, and Celia.

This community of enslaved tends to 8 horses, 7 mules, 42 sheep, 250 hogs, and 40 cattle.

The more experienced and trained of the enslaved operate “1 pea machine, 1 steam engine, 1 grist mill,” and another group of enslaved men and boys care for and repair 8 carts, 4 wagons, 1 one-horse rockaway, 1 two-horse rockaway, 1 two-horse buggy, and also a set of harnesses for each, “and in the fields no less than "35 plows, 26 rakes, 40 hoes, and 17 axes.” In the men’s possession are “blacksmith tools, carpenter tools,” which they use daily but do not own.

The inventory list not only demonstrates the personal wealth of the family but the size and scope of the “farm,” in which peanuts, sweet potatoes, and hogs are the main sources of income and managed wholly and expertly by the hands of 59 soon-to-be emancipated individuals. Their forced labor and highly prized skills are publically and financially claimed by their enslavers, while privately their enslavers are completely dependent upon them and indebted to them.
Almost 100 years after the death of Joseph Mumford Foy, Poplar Grove was sold in 1971. The property had remained in the same family since 1795—one of the longest privately owned plantation sites in North Carolina, if not in the entire South. It opened as an historic site in 1980, and during that time, descendants of the Foy family were interviewed and recorded to create a tour text.

The focus was primarily on the white Foy family; however, in 1982, two individuals, Karene Manley and Beverly Smalls, interviewed Nora Foy Brown, whose mother, Emma Harper Foy, and grandmother, Mary Jane Harper, worked as domestic servants in the home of Joseph Thompson Foy, and his wife, Nora, whose namesake she shares.

In the interview, Nora Foy Brown notes that her daddy “worked in the field, chopped peanuts ... digging sweet potatoes and picking up peanuts ... They’d put them in the barn and shut them ... And they had an old Uncle, named Mr. Smith. He had a peanut house, and he’d stack his peanuts in the house in the winter time, and we’d go down there and pick peanuts for 10 cent a bushel and put blankets over them. We used to keep them from getting cold.”

During the course of the interview, Mrs. Brown names various individuals and family units who lived and/or worked at Poplar Grove. She is asked if she remembers “anything about Israel Jackson taking things in a wagon, or a truck to town?”

Mrs. Brown affirms: “Uh-huh, uh-huh, taking watermelon, cantaloupes, used to take them in a mule and cart. My daddy used to carry his on a mule and cart, get up at twelve o’clock at night, and load that wagon, and we would go to town, and at daybreak we’d be in Wilmington.” She was sure to distinguish that Israel Jackson would get the produce “from Mr. Foy and them,” but her father took his own produce down to Market Street.

She attended Williston High School during segregation. She worked at Camp Davis during World War II. She shares her grandmother’s memories of being a little girl, “Oh, they talk about little girls, when they was little girls, and people couldn’t pray. They had to go pray in a pot ... the master wouldn’t let them pray. If he hear them pray, grandmamma would say he would beat them ... but I don’t remember her saying they beat them — her parents.

The interviewer clarifies, “Oh, her parents before them, before Mary Jane? Like her mother, and what was her mother’s name again?” Mrs. Brown replies, “We always called her Maude, but her name was Mary Hines.”
And so begins the journey of finding any information on Mary Hines, and all the names that Nora Foy Brown mentions in her recollections of girlhood spent at Poplar Grove while her mother worked, and tracing those names back to the first names of the 59 enslaved persons in Joseph M. Foy’s estate inventory of 1860.

This journey has provided a most puzzling and enriching opportunity to become intimate with the names of the persons who worked along this section of the Corridor, names which cross reference, intersect, and crisscross again between African American families listed on the 1870 Census of the Harnett and Grant Townships — listed before and after the entry of their former white enslaver.

Because census taking was literally conducted door-to-door in 1870, in 1880 and in 1890, some families are easily located, while others disappear, and others still - reappearing in places like Chicago, Ohio, Texas, California, and Florida.

But Mary Hines? I started with her first, because we have a photograph of her daughter and grand-daughter, and a recording of the voice of her great-granddaughter. And there listed in the 1870 Census of Topsail Township, New Hanover County, is Ruben Hines, Fisherman, and his wife, Mary Hines, with six children listed in their household.

Mary Hines was a born a slave among these coastal waterways and sandy loomy soil, and the extended family of her enslavers owned her cousins, her brothers, her sisters — and some of them lived on the same plantation for life, and some of them were bequeathed to the sons and daughters of her enslavers who may have lived right next door, or sent a little further north along the coast, or a little further south, sometimes within walking distance, but oftentimes to the NC interior and its tobacco fields.
Between the 1870 and 1880 Federal Census, New Hanover County—in a gross act of gerrymandering, splits the largest population of black male suffrage in Northern New Hanover County into Pender County in 1875.

In an attempt to destabilize black political and economic power in Wilmington, the largest population of former slaves are split from the city center.

The new county line of Pender borders the property line of one Mary Ann Simmons Foy of Scotts Hill, a professed Unionist throughout the Civil War, and head of her household in 1870, and whose former slave, Winslow Nixon, had joined the US Colored Troops in 1864, and who returns to start his family in Scotts Hill.

Ms. Mary Ann Foy is by no means destitute after the Civil War, nor does her home become confiscated like the home of the Bellamys in downtown Wilmington. She dies on Christmas Eve, 1875, made fully aware of her status in a planter class of staunch Confederates seeking to take back power by subdividing her property.

In the 1880 Federal Census, the tenant families living and working on this former matriarch’s property continue to farm under the supervision of her 2nd son, Joseph Thompson Foy (33), and his wife, Nora (29).

Six doors down on the 1880 Census, Mary Jane Hines (10) reappears at her aunt and uncle’s house, Mariah and Elias Hines, in the Grant Township of Pender County. Her age is approximate as she was not listed in the 1870 household of Ruben and Mary Hines.
Marriage Certificates and Licenses have been an invaluable resource. For instance, this certificate lists Mary Jane Hines and her new husband, James Harper. They married at the house of the bride’s father in New Hanover County on January 22, 1891.

Intimate details are revealed are these marriage certificates and marriage licenses, oftentimes including the names of the bride and groom’s parents, witnesses to the ceremony, ages, locations of ceremonies, names of churches, and names of ministers.

Notably, the names Mary, Patsy, and Nora are so common in the Scotts Hill area that only repeated viewing of multiple documents can ascertain which mother or daughter belongs to which family group. This is also true of the men as well, except perhaps for the addition of Junior or Senior.
Further information is revealed on the Marriage License of Mary Jane Hines. R.K. Bryant, son of a former enslaver, neighbor and friend of Joseph Thompson Foy, applies for the license.

The groom, James Harper, is from Scotts Hill, age 24, and the son of John Harper and Julia Futch, who reside in Rocky Point, NC.

The bride, Mary Jane, is from New Hanover County, age 17, and the daughter of Reuben and Mary Hines, living in New Hanover County.

Because the bride is under the age of eighteen, she must have the consent of a parent. Her mother, Mary Hines, provides consent. The license fee is $3.00, and gives them one year to marry in the county of New Hanover.
Because the enslaved are bequeathed by name, generation after generation, in the Last Wills and Testaments of extended Foy family members between Wilmington, and New Bern, NC, their family trees continue to contract with more specific detail and expand by successive marriages, births, and deaths.

Further research will determine when Mary Jane Harper begins employment under Nora Foy, wife of Joseph Thompson Foy, but most likely after her marriage to James Harper in 1891.

Nora D. Foy dies a widow on January 12, 1923, and lists possessions in her Last Will and Testament and a desire to divide any usable articles of clothing “between Mary Jane Harper and Mary Eliza Taylor, “if they prove faithful to me.”

Further, and “Under the same conditions I want Mary Eliza Taylor to have the bureau with four square glass in spare room and Mary Jane Harper to have the bedstead in room over the dining room - also the springs on the bedstead.”

I cannot comment on how common it is for an employer, or “mistress” of the home, to mention her domestic servants in a Last Will and Testament, but it does highlight at the very least the fondness she had for these two women, Mary Jane Harper and Mary Eliza Taylor, and also her suspicion that it was perhaps not reciprocated.
Mary Jane Harper lives another 20 years after the death of her mistress, Nora Foy. Research reveals that her daughter, Emma Harper, marries David Foy. They have several children, including twin girls, one of which does not survive. Later, another girl is born and named Nora Foy. The intimacy of oppression under the supervision of her former employer and now his nephew, Robert Lee Foy, Sr. leads to this small gesture of grace.

Robert Lee Foy, Sr. continues to employ both Mary Jane Harper and Emma Harper Foy, and soon the Depression will strike, and the farm becomes harder and harder to maintain. Still, families lived on seafood, cured pork, corn bread, biscuits, and Hoppin’ John, according to Robert Lee Foy, Jr.

Mary Jane Harper dies January 1, 1942. Her parents are listed as Reuben Hines and Mary Douglas.
Mary Jane’s husband, James Harper, dies on April 15, 1944. He is 61 years old, and listed as a farmer. His granddaughter, Lenora Pridgett, is the informant. She does not know the parents of her grandfather, and so they are listed as FATHER: Unknown; MOTHER: Unknown.

And this unknowing is how I began this journey. What could we ever know about the lives of the enslaved? Of these 59 unnamed men, women and children in the 1860 Federal Census? The task seemed not just daunting but impossible.

When the Harpers die, their entire history seems buried with them in Pollocks Cemetery, just across the street, and a little shy over the Pender County line. No doubt, their history was buried very purposefully on one side of the road, while kept very privately on the other of the road.

The segregated train depot across the street, the segregated buses coming up Highway 17 to Jacksonville — this history is our history, and it may have taken Poplar Grove 40 years since its opening in 1980, but we do know the name of James Harper parents now—they are John Harper and Julia Futch, and they lived west of here in Rocky Point, NC.
There are now approximately 10 family trees from the names of the enslaved, and there are more folders with the beginnings of others, in an effort to name the names of the African American families who lived and are still living along this coastline in Pender County.

Descended from slaves imported from Africa to grow peanuts, through apprenticeships passed from father to son, mother to daughter, these men and women understood the value of their art and craft, of science and engineering, fishing and hunting, carpentry and brick-making, timber harvesting, millwork, weaving, basketry, and producing crops that would feed the masses.

These men and women had agency despite the heavy cloak of oppression by their enslavers, because they had community, had family, had a network of support. These men and women knew intimately the inland waterways and estuaries of their great-grandparents, received and communicated the latest information from Haiti, Jamaica, Brazil, London, Baltimore, Charleston, New York, and as soon as they were free, took with them all of their intellect, all of their skills, to open businesses, run for political office, finance homes; they were bankers, lawyers, doctors, teachers, barbers, laundresses, students, living and working in the very place they had lived for two centuries in New Hanover and Pender Counties, and like that, in one day, in downtown Wilmington, NC, on November 11, 1898 were massacred, so great was their influence in building community in their community.

There names are in family photo albums, in gravesites, in Bibles, on photographs, on deeds, on certificates, on diplomas — this isn’t just the material for one Gullah exhibit in one room at Poplar Grove, this is material that we want to display on a massive scale.

And it must be a collaborative effort, because I am only one point of view, among many, among us are descendants whose history needs to be shared, deserved to be shared and celebrated, and I thank you for allowing me this time today to share a little about what has been whispering in these trees, in the walls of that manor house, on the floors of that tenant house, and in the streets of downtown Wilmington.

In the words of Joseph Mumford Foy, *Union Forever*. Come see that big house after this meeting, and see what the hands of a few very skilled men built from the ground up. On a side note, it should look somewhat familiar—the plans and materials of plantation homes constructed in the 1850s along the Corridor have similar features. Poplar Grove’s manor house is almost identical to the McLeod Plantation in Charleston, SC, without being turned about to face another direction.

For more information, please visit our website, www.poplargrove.org, where there is so much more than these few minutes I have shared with you.

Thank you, and welcome again to Poplar Grove.