

Confederate Camp & Freedman's Farm Trail

After Dolley Madison sold Montpelier in 1844, the estate witnessed many important historic events, few more significant than those of the 1860s. Throughout the winter of 1863 and 1864, as many as 4,500 Confederate troops camped here, part of a defensive line on this side of the Rapidan River (located approximately a half mile to the north). These troops left their camps on May 4, 1864, marching directly into the Battle of the Wilderness, opening the 1864 Lee-Grant campaign.

With the Confederate surrender in 1865, slaves were emancipated across Virginia and the American South and were officially known as freedmen. Montpelier's Gilmore Farm was the homestead of one emancipated family. The restored farm preserves the African-American experience of emerging from slavery and becoming citizens of the United States.



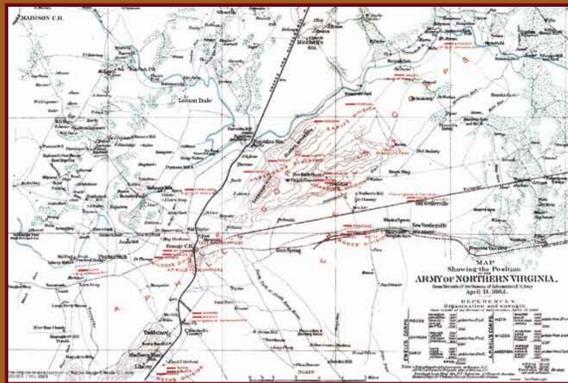
Courtesy of Mount Vernon Press

Confederate General Samuel McGowan

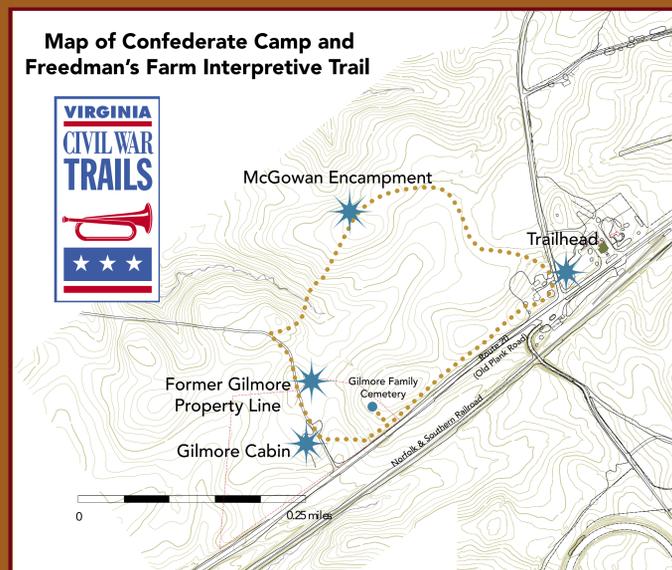
One of three brigades camped at Montpelier was McGowan's South Carolinians. During the winter months, these troops patrolled the Rapidan River and "planked" the road leading to the town of Orange (modern-day Route 20), cutting and sawing trees into heavy boards and laying them over the road's rutted surface. The road improvements allowed the troops to deploy quickly when Union forces were detected in the early morning hours of May 4, 1864, at Germanna Ford, about 30 miles east of Montpelier. Later that morning, General McGowan's 1,500-man brigade was on the march and within 24 hours was engaged in the Battle of the Wilderness. This battle alone claimed one third of McGowan's forces.

1864 Meade Map of Orange County showing Confederate General Robert E. Lee's encampments

Following the defeat at Gettysburg, Lee retreated to Orange County and positioned his army along a 30-mile front behind the Rapidan River. The soldiers built and manned observation posts on high spots, such as Clarke Mountain, to keep watch over Union troops on the north side of the Rapidan. Following the Union army's unsuccessful attempts to move south, culminating with the Mine Run campaign in November 1863, both sides went into winter quarters and waited until spring to resume major operations.

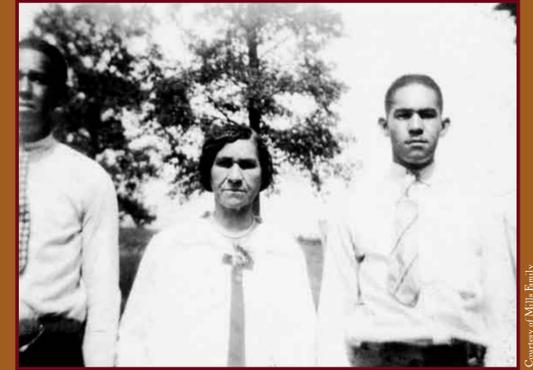


Civil War Atlas



Montpelier Foundation and Design

The Confederate Camp and Freedman's Farm interpretive trail passes through a portion of the Confederate winter camp and leads to the Gilmore Farm, a farm settled by a freedman who was a slave of James Madison's. A direct return path is provided, parallel to Route 20. The round-trip distance is just under one mile, through generally level woodlands. An interpretive sign is located at each star on the map.



Courtesy of Millie Family

1920s photograph of George and Polly Gilmore's grandsons and daughter or daughter-in-law

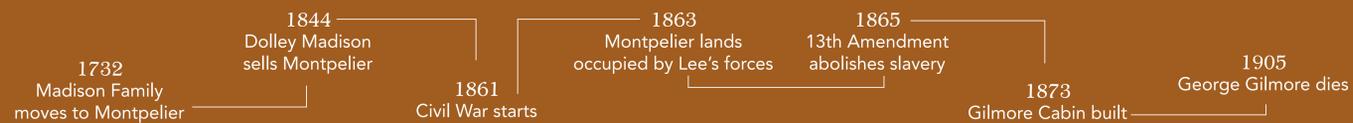
Following the Civil War, thousands of former slaves in Orange County made the transition to freedom. Most emancipated slaves stayed in the area and sought work wherever it was available. For many this meant working on the same plantations where they once labored as slaves—but now earning wages. Owning land was a universal goal among freedmen, and Montpelier's Gilmore Farm is the homestead where one emancipated African-American family realized this goal.

1863 Sketch of Montpelier Mansion made by visiting soldier

Throughout the Civil War, Montpelier was owned by Frank and Thomas Carson, two Irish brothers with banking interests in Baltimore. The Montpelier house was not occupied by Confederate officers as a headquarters, but it was a landmark that drew many visiting soldiers. Frank Carson hosted a ball given by General J.E.B. Stuart at Montpelier, and he allowed the house to serve as a venue for a court martial case where seven Confederate soldiers were condemned to death for desertion.



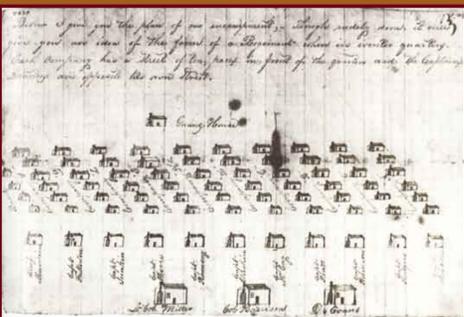
Sketch courtesy of Greenbush Historical Museum Archives



Civil War Encampment



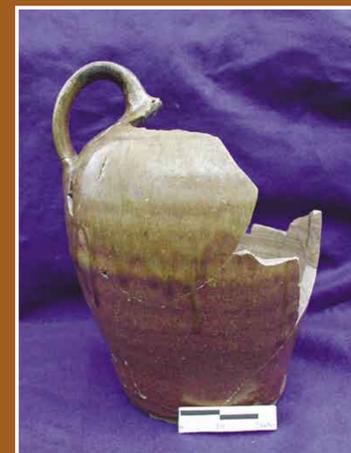
Guided by the discoveries of local relic collectors, archaeologists have found an extensive Confederate Army encampment within these woods. Excavations have uncovered the remains of huts built by the soldiers during the winter of 1863 and 1864. The layout of the camps and the material evidence found during excavations provides a picture of the soldier's daily lives as they struggled through the harsh winter conditions. The camps, almost untouched since being abandoned in May 1864, contain a wealth of information concerning the Confederate Army during the last years of the American Civil War.



Sketch courtesy of the Parr family papers, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina

1862 sketch of the 1st South Carolina Rifles camp, Spotsylvania County, Virginia

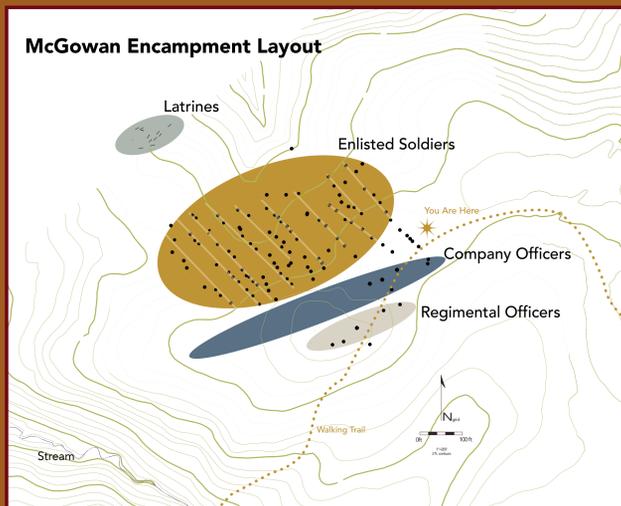
This sketch illustrates how a camp's layout mirrored the organization of a military unit. The soldiers who made up a company camped in a line, six to a hut, making a company "street," with the company commander at the head of the street. The three larger tents shown at the bottom are for the higher-ranking regimental officers.



Montpelier Foundation

Stoneware jug recovered from a soldiers' hut at the McGowan camp

As one of the few food-storage items recovered, this jug documents the sparse diet of the soldiers in this camp. The absence of food containers indicates that McGowan's troops probably did not have access to condiments, preserves, liquor, or pickled foods. In addition, only a small amount of animal bone has been found, suggesting that the diet of the troops consisted mainly of rations of corn meal, bacon, and hardtack.



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Map of Hut Sites in the McGowan Encampment

Approximately 500 soldiers were camped in these woods. The orderly layout of the camp follows the military plan, with the company streets extending down the hill in front of you. Keeping the men organized by company in camp strengthened the bonds between the men, helping to build the cohesion needed in battle. The camp layout also made quick deployment possible — McGowan's soldiers assembled for the march to Wilderness with only 30 minutes of preparation.



Reconstructed hut site located at the White Oak Museum, Fredericksburg, Virginia

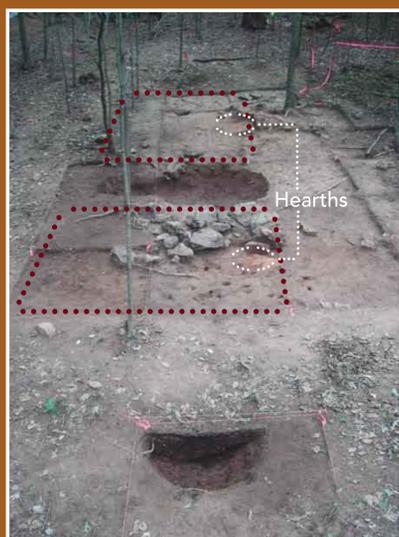
Soldiers were provided only the barest of essentials to construct their huts (their issue tents and about two dozen nails). They obtained the remainder of the materials—including timbers, clay and stone—from the woods and surrounding area. The huts measured 12 feet square and served as a shelter for five to six soldiers.



Montpelier Foundation, Matthew Reeves

Completed archaeological excavation of two hut sites

Archaeologists removed more than a century and a half of accumulated topsoil to reveal the undisturbed site of two huts, outlined in red. The rock mounds are the remains of the chimney base with the hearth appearing as a red patch of clay, scorched by the months of fires. The pits outside the huts were excavated by soldiers to obtain clay for daubing the chimney and timber walls of their huts. The pits were then used for the disposal of ash and other trash.



Montpelier Foundation, Matthew Reeves

Post-Emancipation



With emancipation, African Americans found themselves in a complex situation. By law, slavery was abolished, promising freedom and citizenship, but few owned land or had resources to support themselves, and prejudice against them was widespread. Yet, many newly emancipated slaves stayed in the area and took advantage of economic and social ties developed prior to emancipation to obtain a livelihood.

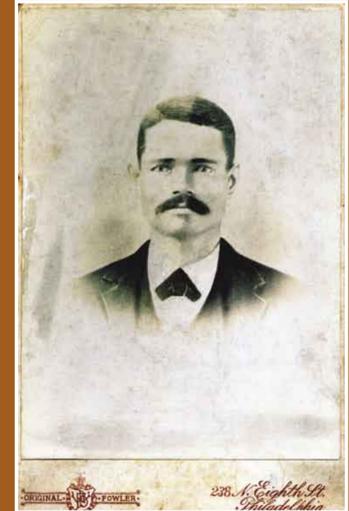
This sign is located at the edge of the 16-acre Gilmore Farm. The Gilmore property ran from this sign to present-day Route 20. The acquisition of land brought African Americans independence and self-sufficiency, confirming their status as new citizens of the American nation.



Courtesy of the Virginia Richmond History Center

Interior of freedman's home, Richmond, Virginia

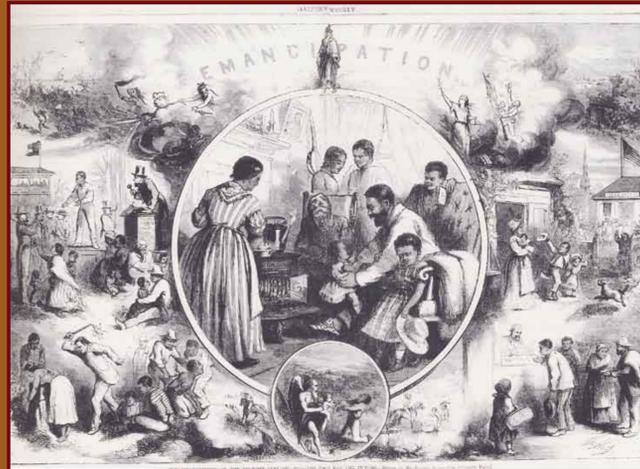
Emancipation brought little improvement to the material lives of African Americans. Many left slavery owning nothing more than the furniture brought from their slave cabins, the clothes on their back, and a few household utensils. Two decades after emancipation, African-Americans' economic status had slowly improved, but was far below that of local whites. The average value of farms owned by African Americans in Orange County in the 1880s was one-tenth the average value of farms owned by whites.



Courtesy of the Ford

Allan Jackson, Orange County freedman

Most newly emancipated slaves stayed in their locality, and worked to create new lives for themselves by establishing homes, earning wages, and reuniting their families. One such freedman was Allan Jackson, pictured above, who settled to the west of Montpelier. By the 1880s, his home had become the center of a thriving community known as Jacksontown, which consisted of as many as 15 households, a store, a school, and a cemetery.



Harper Weekly

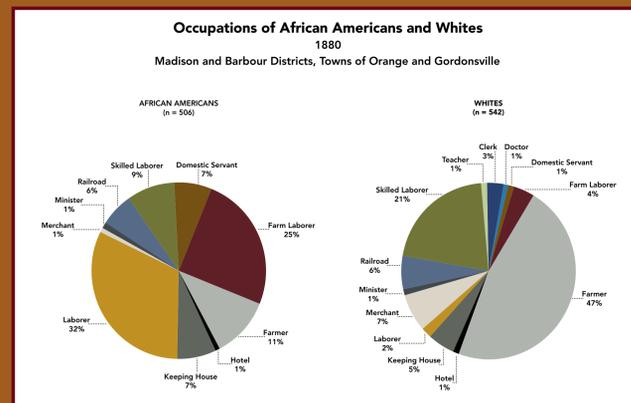
Late 19th-century photograph of African-American farmstead, Richmond, Virginia

For freedmen, one of the most meaningful opportunities offered by emancipation was owning land. Land enabled a family to build their own home and have their own land, giving them some self-sufficiency and security. In western Orange County, within two decades of emancipation, nearly 30 percent of African-American households owned or leased the land on which they had built their homes.



Courtesy of the Virginia Richmond History Center

The great majority of freedmen in Orange County were farm laborers. A comparison of the occupations of African Americans and whites, based on the 1880 census, shows a majority of blacks making their living as laborers while most whites were farmers. Farmers owned land, determined their own production and were able to grow much of the food needed for their families. By contrast, laborers worked as farmhands and were dependent on the farm economy for jobs and income.



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Harper's Weekly illustration "Emancipation of the Negroes," January 1863

Soon after the Civil War, the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the Constitution were ratified, abolishing slavery, defining citizenship to encompass emancipated slaves, and extending voting rights to emancipated slaves. The promise of citizenship, however, was curtailed with the end of Reconstruction, and would not be realized for well over a century.

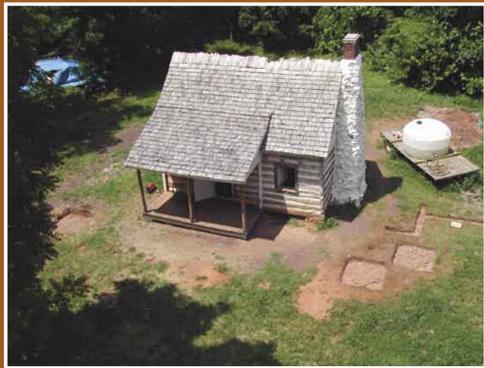


Gilmore Farm



George Gilmore, born a slave on the Montpelier plantation about 1810, was freed with the Federal occupation of Orange County in 1865. With his wife Polly and three children, he established a small farmstead near the plantation where he had been enslaved. Over time, they purchased 16 acres of land from Dr. James A. Madison, grand-nephew of the President. Three generations of the Gilmore family lived here prior to its sale in 1920.

Today, the cabin and farm illustrate the history of the African-American transition from slavery to freedom, and document their hard-won success in purchasing land, building their own home, and establishing new lives after emancipation.



Overhead shot of archaeological excavation units opened in yard of the Gilmore Farm

In 2002, Montpelier archaeologists discovered a series of cobblestone surfaces in the yard. Confederate Army artifacts were found with them, suggesting the cobblestone surfaces may have been constructed by the Confederate Army as part of the 1863-1864 winter camp. A camp hut may have served as the Gilmore family's first home after emancipation, since they built their cabin in the spring of 1873.

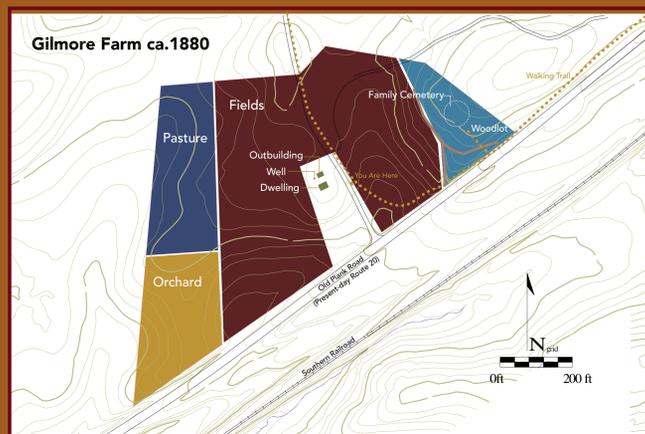


Glass beads, buttons, straight pins and safety pins recovered by archaeologists in excavations under the cabin

These items had fallen through the floorboards of the cabin during the first 30 years of the Gilmore occupation. They corroborate family tradition that Polly Gilmore worked as a seamstress and dressmaker. Earning cash to purchase necessary supplies was the responsibility of every member of the family, whether male or female, young or old.

1920s photograph of Gilmore Farm

At the time of this photograph, George and Polly Gilmore had died and their son William occupied the farm with his family. He made several improvements, enlarging the home with a one-room frame addition, planting an orchard, and keeping bee hives. As citizens and landowners, George and Polly were able to pass on the achievements of their hard work to their children, enabling them to build more successful lives.



Gilmore Farm, ca. 1880

The layout of the Gilmores' 16-acre farm has been reconstructed based on the 1880 agricultural census, 1937 aerial photography, and recent archaeological surveys. In 1880, the Gilmores owned one horse, one milk cow, five pigs, and 11 chickens. They farmed 12 acres, planting two acres in corn, which produced 40 bushels that year, and three acres in wheat, which produced six bushels. The remaining seven acres were probably planted in vegetables and fruit for the family and fodder for their livestock. The farm provided for the family's basic needs, but little more.



Archaeological excavations inside Gilmore Cabin, 2001

Gilmore family descendants have kept their connection with the family homestead. In 2001, they volunteered their time to help Montpelier archaeologists conduct excavations inside the cabin, helping to recover the hundreds of beads, pins, buttons and other items that had slipped between the floorboards of the cabin.

