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Black Landowners Fight to Reclaim Land Taken by Feds

A group of black former residents of an area of McIntosh County, Georgia, known as Harris Neck has banded together in an attempt to reclaim the land taken from their families by eminent domain in July 1942. The former landowners and their descendants established a legal entity in 2006 called the Harris Neck Land Trust to work together in an effort to reestablish ownership of their family lands.



The story behind the federal land grab and the fight of the former owners to reverse what many perceive as an injustice has a fascinating history behind it. The land that eventually came to be called Harris Neck was at one time the property of a slave-owning plantation owner named Margaret Ann Harris. In her last will and testament, Harris deeded the lands of her former plantation to her former slave, Robert Dellegall. Dellegall's descendants have lived in the vicinity of Harris Neck ever since, and between 1865 and 1942 had grown to include 75 African American families.

World War II changed the lives of Harris Neck's black families drastically, however. During the summer of 1942, two American tankers were sunk off the Georgia coast, presumably after being torpedoed by German submarines. The federal government decided that it was necessary to build a new Army Air Corps field in the area as a base for aerial surveillance of the coastline. When the federal advance team came to McIntosh County to search for a location, however, members of the county's establishment recommended the land on Harris Neck for the base. This made little sense, since a parcel of land of equivalent size that was largely uninhabited lay nearby.

Members of the Harris Land Trust believe that the county power brokers protected their own land from being taken by the government at the expense of the relatively poor and politically powerless black residents of Harris Neck. The history of these black residents is also a rich one. They are members of a culturally unique group of African Americans called Gullah (also called Geechee) who live largely in the coastal areas and sea islands along the Georgia and South Carolina coasts. The Gullah are mostly the descendants of slaves who, having considerable experience growing rice in their native West Africa, were brought to this swampy coastal area to work on rice plantations. Because of the heavy concentration of so many people of common ancestry in this area, the Gullah people were able to preserve much more of their African cultural heritage than other African Americans.

Agents of the federal government seized 2,687 acres of Harris Neck via eminent domain and gave the



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residents only three weeks to move off their land. According to a 1985 federal report, black residents received an average of only \$26.90 an acre for the land, with white residents not receiving much more, \$37.31 an acre. Its estimated present value is over \$100,000 an acre. Residents were paid only for the unimproved value of their land, receiving nothing more for houses, barns, or crops in the field, all of which were bulldozed or burned.

Following the war, when the base was closed in 1947, the federal government did not offer to return it to its original owners, but instead gave it to the county with the stipulation that it be used as a county airport. The county retained control of the land until 1961, but it was used for a variety of enterprises other than as an airport, some of them of questionable legality. The federal government assumed control of the land once more in 1961, transferred it to the Department of the Interior, and it became a National Wildlife Refuge in 1962 under the operation of [U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service](#). Fish and Wildlife is reluctant to return the land to its original owners because it maintains that the land is a crucial part of the national refuge system.

But former resident Kenneth R. Dunham, Sr., 80, who was a boy when the federal government took his family's land, found the suggestion that Harris Neck's original landowners cannot be responsible stewards of the land and coexist with the wildlife ridiculous. He said in an interview with the *New York Times*: "Wildlife was a part of us all of our lives. In my back door, I could hear the wild geese coming. We left food in the field so they would have something to eat."

The *Times* article noted that regaining ownership of federally protected land would not be easy and quoted U.S. Representative Jack Kingston (who scored 83 percent on *The New American's* latest "Freedom Index") the Republican who represents the area, who has been supportive of the Harris Neck Land Trust's efforts while cautioning its members about the political obstacles they face.

"Environmental advocates can be formidable adversaries," Kingston wrote in a May 25 letter to the trust.

Also quoted in the *Times* report was Deborah Sheppard, executive director of the Altamaha Riverkeeper — a local environmental organization that works to preserve natural resources and wildlife. Sheppard said she was familiar with the history of Harris Neck and sympathetic to the former residents. "People continue to suggest that people from Atlanta with money can live here in an ecologically sound way — why can't people with experience hunting and fishing and living off the land live in an ecologically sound way?" she said. "Those people are rightly suggesting that they have a historic capacity to interact well with their natural resources. And the rest of us haven't."

At a recent meeting of the trust, Kenneth Dunham rose and encouraged other members present: "We're going to move on, and we're going to come on in spite all. Won't that be a happy time, when we all get to heaven? I'm talking about Harris Neck, now."

Amen.

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