

HISTORY INTERACTIVE #1: 40 Acres and a Mule

BACKGROUND

- After consulting with a group of leaders from the Black community in Savannah, Union General Sherman has issued Special Field Order No. 15.
- **The order redistributed 400,000 abandoned acres of land, in 40-acre plots, to newly freed Black families. Later, Sherman agreed to lend Black settlers army mules as well.**
- Tunis Campbell, a Black Northern abolitionist, has been put in charge as superintendent to help settle freedmen and women on St. Catherine's Island on the Georgia coast.
- Campbell has split up the island into 40-acre plots for each family.
- Northern missionaries and abolitionists have created freedmen's aid societies, which have donated clothing, seeds, plows, and hoes.
- Before the war, you lived with your family on the Sea Islands of Georgia. You were enslaved and worked on the coastal plantations for some of the wealthiest slave owners. While you worked in the hot sun, the plantation owners usually retreated to better weather in Savannah, Charleston, or New York. The cotton you grew was sold, and the profits made the plantation owner one of the wealthiest people in the country. They lived in luxury, while you barely survived. Even when the plantation owners left the plantation, they hired overseers to make sure you continued to work. If you didn't do as you were told or tried to escape, you were subject to severe beatings, whippings, and possibly even death.
- When the Union Army came to the Georgia coast, the plantation owners — this time, you hope, for good. **You have claimed 40 acres of land for your family. Now what?**

Tunis Campbell has convened a community meeting. Three main questions come up:

1. **What will you grow, food or cotton?** Many in the North want you to produce cotton to sell up North. Northern industries depend on a supply of cheap cotton from the South and they want you to continue selling to them. Your Northern allies believe the cash from cotton will help you better your lives and communities. But you can't eat cotton.
2. **Do you want to have a school?** Freedmen's aid organizations are willing to donate schoolbooks and money. But even so, you will still have to spend time and money to pay teachers and build a school. You will have to commit to sending your children to school — rather than having them work with you in the fields. Can you devote time and money to build a school when you need every hour and every dollar to survive?
3. **Should you form a militia?** The old owner of your island is back in town and demanding that his land be restored to him. Many of you are worried that the community might become a target for Whites on the mainland. Campbell suggests that the community pass a law to keep white people off the island and set up an armed militia.

Discuss one of these questions with the others in your group and jot down your thoughts to share.