

The Post and Courier

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



PHOTO PROVIDED

Ercelle Chillis, 96, lives on family land for which the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation helped her obtain clear title. Her father saved for years to buy seven acres for his children and he worked that land until the day he died.

Heirs risk losing Lowcountry land

As the many activities marking the outbreak of the Civil War are held, it seems fitting to remind everyone about an issue that dates back to the most significant outcome of that war — Emancipation and ownership of land by African Americans. Specifically, the issue of heirs' property, an unstable form of land ownership, has left many African Americans vulnerable and at risk of losing their family land forever. Nationwide, research has documented that African Americans have lost 14 million of the 15 million acres they owned following Emancipation.

Heirs' property in the Lowcountry is land that was deeded to or purchased by mostly African Americans following Emancipation but has been passed down through the generations without a will and is therefore owned "in common" by all living heirs without clear title.

Much of this land is rural. All of it is at risk and much has already been lost because any heir can sell his own percentage of ownership (no matter how small) to another person who can force a sale of the entire property in the courts and purchase it for a pittance of its market value.

Why has this come about for so many African Americans? A historic lack of access to the judicial system. Justifiable fear and distrust of those in authority. Lack of education and a misguided belief that owning heirs' property is a safe and secure form of land ownership.

The Center for Heirs' Property is the only non-profit organization in South Carolina that exclusively focuses on providing free, comprehensive education and direct legal services to help the low-income owners of heirs' property obtain clear title and keep their ancestral land.

In the Lowcountry, loss of this land also means the disappearance of the unique, cultural heritage rooted in these historic hamlets and settlements that enrich all of our lives.

Let us direct equal energy, resources and passion to protect what's left of this ancestral land — before it's lost forever,

JENNIE STEPHENS
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