

A new strategy to help heirs keep family lands



[Robert Behre](#) [Email](#) [@robertfbehre](#)

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Louis Manigault, II talks about how the Center helped his family by educating them about sustainable forestry practices that led to the decision to clear cut this family plot outside Moncks Corner.

MONCKS CORNER — Over the years, the Manigault family amassed more than 100 acres on four parcels outside town, and parents Louis and Hester farmed the land to teach their nine children about hard work.

The family once raised about 35 pigs, a dozen cows, many more chickens as well as soybeans and corn.

But when the children grew up and moved out, and as the Manigaults grew older, the farming tapered off. Their son Louis Manigault II said he planted only about 10 acres of corn this year.

But the family members have a new strategy to keep their land productive — and in their own hands. They have begun managing it as a forest, and their story illustrates how passing property

down from one generation to the next involves more than tending to wills, probate and legal details.

“My dad has already deeded everything to his kids, but we as a collective unit manage everything together,” Louis Manigault II said. “Every year, we’ll be getting revenue from some piece.”

Promoting family forests

The Center for Heirs Property was founded in 2005 to help families like the Manigaults retain their property.

Most of these families are black and have had relatively less education and income, but they have property, sometimes lands that have been held in the family for several generations.

The nonprofit operates between Georgetown and Beaufort, and its original work focused on preventing the loss of heirs’ property and resolving heirs’ property issues — work mostly legal in nature.

In 2008, it broadened its approach to help families retain their land by making the best financial decisions as far as managing it, said Jennie Stephens, the center’s director.

That work kicked into a higher gear when the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities gave the center a grant in 2013 to begin a sustainable forestry program.

Carlton Owen, the endowment’s director, said the endowment wants to preserve and promote working forests and to help create well-paying jobs from those forests. The Center for Heirs Property received one of four grants aimed at reaching out to minority forest owners.

Nationwide, 11 million families own the bulk — 56 percent — of the nation’s forests, but Owen said he wants to expand the diversity of people who are advocating for them.

“If we can attract more active managers of forest land from the African-American community and the Hispanic community as it grows, then we can keep the importance of forests on the public’s agenda,” he said. “I don’t want you to think we’re doing this out of the goodness of our hearts.”

‘Don’t sign anything!’

The center hired Sam Cook to direct its new Sustainable Forestry Program, and he reached out to black landowners across the Lowcountry and got 40 families to commit to the program.

Each had to pledge to attend workshops that would teach them how to use free help from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Natural Resources Conservation Service — and how consultants with forestry expertise can help.

Louis Manigault II said a consultant his family hired was crucial in helping them determine which lands should be clear cut, which should be thinned and how often.

Still, his father was suspicious at first, and Cook has had to take time earning the trust of the Manigaults and other families.

When he first visited the Manigault home, Louis Manigault heard Cook talking in the next room and cried out, “Don’t sign anything!”

Cook said that of the 130 landowners he contacted about the program, only two knew of the federal help available.

“The landowners have received something out of it,” Cook said. “They’ve learned about something that’s new that has been there for them. They can truly work themselves out of poverty and share with other members in the community churches and organizations around them that can help them move forward.”

Cook said all 40 in the program are successful, “though not everyone is moving along at the same pace.”

From financial drain to economic asset

Incentlee Lemon also participated in the classes and got guidance for thinning out 25 acres her family owns outside St. George. Like the Manigaults, the Lemons once raised cattle on their property, but that ended after the children finished college.

“It really made me knowledgeable in terms of maintaining and utilizing the land for economic growth for my future, for my grands and so forth. I don’t have any grands, but hopefully I will be getting a grand pretty soon.”

Success stories like these have both the endowment and Center for Heirs Property looking for ways to continue and expand the program.

Owen said he is inspired by the story of Vander Green, who learned about the center’s Sustainable Forestry Initiative just as he had put a “for sale” sign on part of his land off Chicken Creek Road in Jamestown.

“All he (Green) was doing was paying his tax bill every year,” Owen said.

When he learned how he could make an income by managing it as a forest, the sign quickly came down.

“We need more Sam Cooks out there talking to these landowners — people who have credibility and respect and know how to reach out and look like the landowners,” Owen added. “That’s vitally important.”