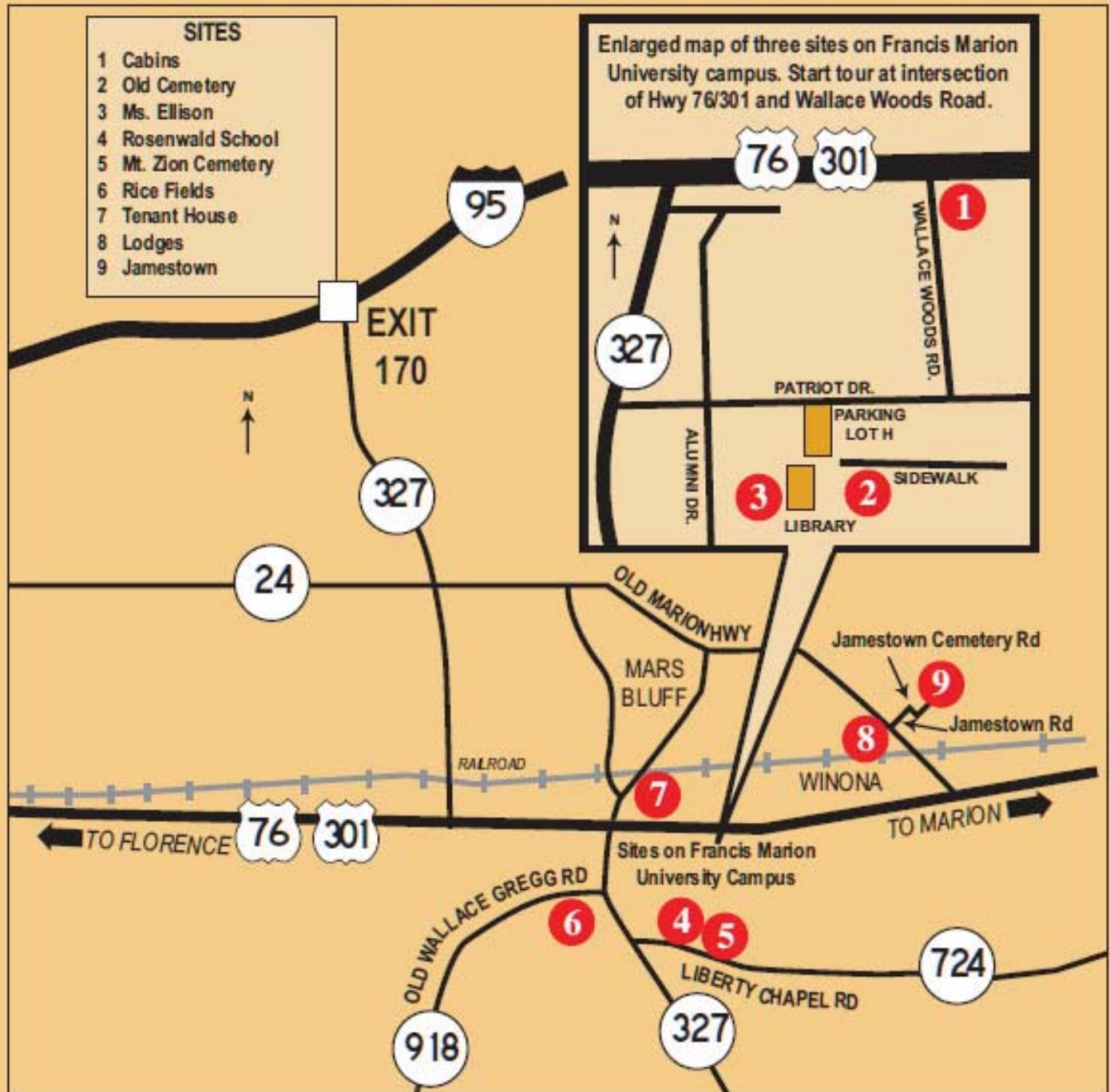




**South
Carolina's
African-
American
Sites at
Mars Bluff**

Florence, South Carolina

African-American Sites at Mars Bluff



African Americans at Mars Bluff

Few African Americans lived at Mars Bluff before the invention of the cotton gin. Regrettably, that invention resulted in many enslaved African Americans being brought to Mars Bluff to grow cotton.

Little is known about where the ancestors of Mars Bluff African Americans had come from in Africa. It is estimated that 43 percent of African Americans brought into South Carolina in the early years were from rice-growing areas of West Africa and 40 percent from the Congo-Angola region. There is a good chance that many of the people at Mars Bluff had ancestors from these two regions.

The journey from Africa to the New World, and on to Mars Bluff, could have taken generations to complete. They may have been taken first to the West Indies, Virginia, the South Carolina coastal region, or other pine belt communities. They may have lived in one of those places for years—or for several generations. Probably very few African Americans at Mars Bluff were African born.

Of the European Americans at Mars Bluff, most settlers were English, Scotch-Irish, or Welsh. Throughout most of Mars Bluff's history the African-American and European-American populations were about equal. Most African Americans were in close contact with European Americans. Consequently, pine belt African Americans spoke a dialect that was much like Standard English and their African customs were blended with European customs.

The story of African-American life at Mars Bluff is best told by Alex Gregg, who was born at Mars Bluff in 1844 in a house just like the houses at Site One of this tour. As an old man, Gregg would sit on his porch and tell stories to his grandson, Archie Waiters. Years later, Waiters told the stories to a younger person, Amelia Vernon. This is the African tradition of oral history, whereby each

generation tells its history to the next generation. Alex Gregg supplied a rare clue, a possible connection between someone at Mars Bluff and a specific ethnic group in Africa. He said that one of the first people buried in the graveyard (Site #2) was named Mariah Malinka. The Malinke were an ethnic group who, in the thirteenth century, had contributed to the development of Mali, a kingdom widely respected for its scholars and its efficient government.

Gregg said that when he was a slave his work was to clear land, and women had to do the same heavy work—digging up and moving tremendous stumps. They worked from sunrise to dark and then went to a common kitchen for supper, which consisted of mush and milk. Only then could they go to their cabins for a few hours of sleep before beginning another day of work. They had Sunday off except for the times when they had to pull fodder on Sunday.¹

Though the conditions were harsh and sometimes brutal, the dignity seen in Alex Gregg's face shows that African Americans, who were firmly rooted in a vigorous African cultural heritage, were able to lead exemplary lives.



Alex Gregg
1844-1938

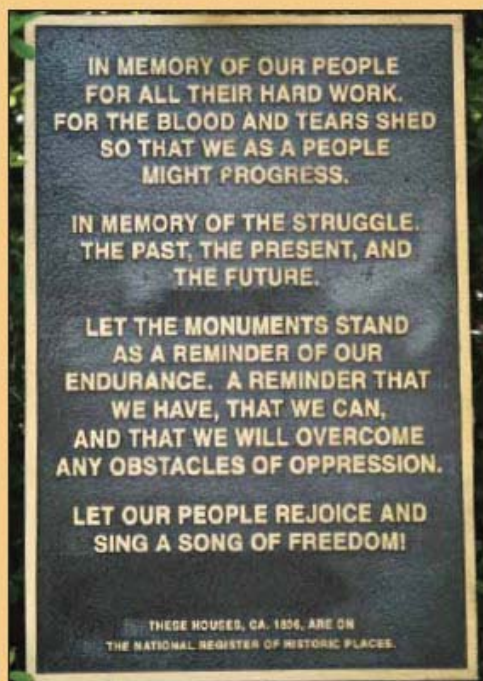
¹Mars Bluff oral history is taken from [African Americans at Mars Bluff, South Carolina](#), by Amelia Wallace Vernon (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1993).

Site 1 Cabins, ca. 1836

Ms. Catherine's house is one of two remaining hewn-timber cabins (ca. 1836) on Francis Marion University campus. African Americans built eight of these cabins and lived in them while enslaved. At that time the cabins were in a cotton field, lined up on either side of a sandy road known as The Street. After emancipation, the cabins had rooms added and some were moved to scattered locations on the farm. African Americans were obliged to live in them for another eighty years. Ms. Catherine (Mr. and Mrs. Archie Waiters) lived in this house from the 1930s to the 1950s. Now restored to its original size, the cabin is furnished with articles that were used by Ms. Catherine and one of her neighbors.

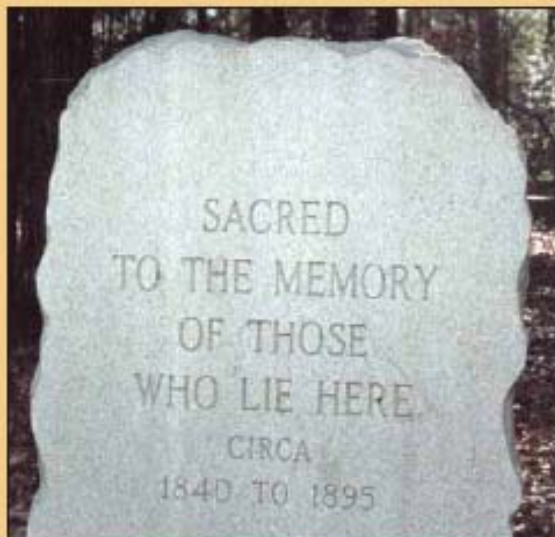


The second hewn-timber cabin (ca. 1836) is called Ms. Tena's house. Ms. Tena Waiters lived in it from the 1920s to the 1950s. For over one hundred years it stood on The Street, just west of where the library stands today. Now it is beside Ms. Catherine's house on Wallace Woods Road. It contains displays about how African Americans worked in the cotton fields, how they built the hewn-timber cabins, and how they practiced small-scale rice farming using knowledge they brought from Africa.



The cabins are listed on the National Register of Historic Places and are dedicated to the recovery and preservation of the African-American heritage. They serve as a continuing reminder of the wisdom, dignity, and integrity of the people who lived here and of the gift they left for us—our African cultural heritage. The inscription on the memorial sign in front of the cabins was composed by a Francis Marion University student.

To see interior of cabins by appointment or to learn when cabins are open to the public, phone Karl McAlister at (843) 661-1311.



Site 2 Old Cemetery

The old African-American cemetery (ca. 1840) associated with the hewn-timber cabins is east of the Francis Marion University library. Only two stones were standing there in the late twentieth century. One of the stones is inscribed: "To the memory of Samuel Nelson Brown, son of R. C. & S. L. Brown, born Sept. 20, 1854." There were more stones in this cemetery early in the twentieth century, but lumbering in the area destroyed them.

The brick wall around the area where the two small gravestones were located was erected in 1984 to acknowledge that there was a cemetery here and that this was the area where tombstones could be found. A large stone placed at the site is inscribed: "Sacred to the memory of those who lie here, circa 1840 to 1895." The stone for Nellie Brown (born in 1818) was placed here in the 1980s. Though the exact site of Nellie Brown's grave is unknown, she is known to have been buried in this cemetery.



**Fanny Ellison
1878-1943**

Site 3

Ms. Ellison

Back in the 1920s, the Ellison family lived in Ms. Tena's house just west of where the library is now. Ida Ellison Zanders recalled that her mother's garden was north of the house, toward where the science building now stands. Her mother always planted rice on the low side of her

garden. Out of seventeen African-American rice growers identified at Mars Bluff, Ms. Ellison was the only female rice grower. Perhaps her ancestry was from an area of West Africa where rice was considered a crop that women grew and men would have nothing to do with it.

Site 4 Rosenwald School

The Mount Zion Rosenwald schoolhouse preserves one of the most exciting chapters in the history of African-American education. Back in 1913, Booker T. Washington persuaded Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears Roebuck, to help build six schoolhouses in rural Alabama. That small beginning kindled hope all across the South in African Americans who had never had a schoolhouse for their children. Over the years, Rosenwald offered to cooperate with communities to build more and more schools. Before he died, he had helped to build 5,000



schoolhouses. This school at Mars Bluff was built in 1925 and was used until 1955.

Although officially listed as the Mars Bluff Colored School, it was known as the Mount Zion Rosenwald School because it was across the road from Mount Zion Church at Mars Bluff and the people of this church had been very active in securing the school.

Today the building is on the National Register of Historic Places and Mt. Zion Church is making progress toward getting it restored.

Site 5 Mt. Zion Cemetery

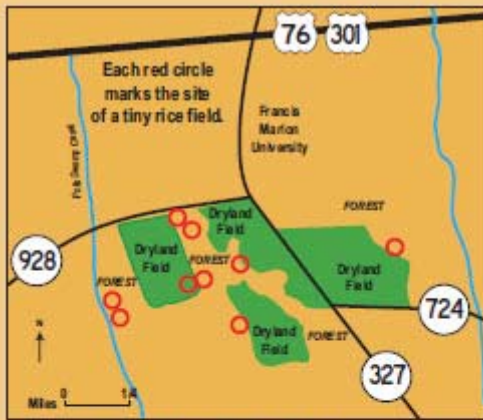
Located 0.3 miles east of Site 4



Early African-American cemeteries, before 1865, were generally located in forested areas because the landowners wanted all of the cleared land for the growing of crops. When Mt. Zion Church received a deed for one acre of land in 1876, a new type of cemetery was possible. Now cleared land could be used for burials.

While the burials here date back to the nineteenth century, this cemetery also has a number of more recent grave markers which were made by leaving the top of the burial vault exposed above the ground and ornamenting it with motifs that seem to be derived from ancient Africa. Among the motifs are wave-like patterns and geometric designs. Also common is the use of silver or blue paint, sometimes with tiny flecks of reflective material to catch the light.

A small obelisk marks the most notable grave, that of A. H. (Tony) Howard. Elected as a representative in 1876, Howard was one of the few African Americans who had the distinction of serving in the South Carolina legislature during Reconstruction. He was also an outstanding local leader in Mars Bluff. He was the major trustee involved in the 1870 purchase of land for the first African-American school at Mars Bluff and in the 1875 purchase of land for a Methodist church. Howard was one of the few African Americans who was able to acquire well over a hundred acres of farmland in the decades following the Civil War.



Site 6 Rice Fields

As recently as the 1920s, African Americans at Mars Bluff used African knowledge to grow very small plots of rice. Many were as little as a third of an acre or smaller. They used low, water-retentive land and relied on nature to furnish the water in the form of rain or water that settled there from higher land.

In many other inland communities throughout the South, African Americans were also cultivating small plots of rice, however this practice has not generally been acknowledged. Also, it is rare to have identified, in one inland community, seventeen African Americans who grew rice as recently as the 1920s. The map shown here is of the nine rice-field sites that are very close to Francis Marion University. There are six other known sites where African Americans grew rice in Mars Bluff. These rice growers provide a concrete example of people who brought African knowledge to Mars Bluff and continued using it for over a hundred years.

Site 7 Tenant House



The house at 310 North Price Road is a good example of the tenant houses that played such an important role in Southern life from the late nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century. Several features give this house a typical tenant house look, for example, the long narrow porch that is three steps above ground level. This house also portrays the history of the evolution of tenant house construction. The original part of the house was built ca. 1890, with additions ca. 1900, 1920, and 1967. Today, while most tenant houses are decaying into nothingness, this house is in a fair state of repair. It stands less than a mile from the 1836 hewn-timber cabins at Francis Marion University. Together, the two types of construction tell the story of African-American housing at Mars Bluff. All three buildings are on the National Register of Historic Places.

Site 8 Lodges

In the first part of this century, there were lodge buildings all over Mars Bluff. All were built alike—



long, narrow, two-story, wooden buildings with few windows. Today, none of the old wooden buildings remain. The only lodge building in Mars Bluff is this cement block Masonic Lodge, which was built on the site of an old Joint Stock Lodge building at 5934 Old Marion Highway (Hwy 224). Incidentally, the land is still owned by the Joint Stock Lodge.

While this building, dating only to about 1950, is made of cement block and is a little smaller than the old lodges, still it retains the general shape of the old buildings. These lodges, with their roots in ancient West African secret societies, were such an important part of African-American life at Mars Bluff. They should not vanish without a trace.

Site 9 Jamestown

Today, there is nothing left of old Jamestown but a cemetery and the remains of one house. Still, Jamestown deserves to be remembered. It was a kind of paradise—a close-knit, highly-respected community of about twenty neat houses, each with flowers in the yard, a pecan tree, a grape arbor, a smoke house, a garden, fruit trees, and a small plot of farm land.

Jamestown was settled in 1870 when the patriarch of the James family bought land at the edge of the Great Pee Dee River Swamp, one of the rare places where freedmen were able to acquire land. There they raised their own food, hunted and fished in the swamp, and worked on nearby farms when work was available. The community lasted until the two world wars made job opportunities available in the North. The people of Jamestown joined the Great Migration, but they still called Jamestown home and wanted to be brought home for burial. The cemetery covers more than ten acres, but it has few headstones; grave goods were commonly placed on the graves. Cactuses were planted in the cemetery to entangle spirits that might cause harm.

