

A Healing at the Forks

Descendants of an iconic Florence plantation explore a painful past to bring hope to the present

By Javacia Harris Bowser

Every plot of land has a story.

In Florence, Alabama, stories of the land known as the Forks of Cypress often center on the awe-inspiring architecture of the house that once stood on the grounds.

The Forks of Cypress was a cotton plantation with a Greek Revival home near Florence in Lauderdale County, Alabama. Designed by architect William Nichols for James Jackson and his wife, Sally Moore Jackson, it was the only Greek Revival house in Alabama to feature a two-story colonnade around the entire house, composed of 24 Ionic columns. Construction of the Forks of Cypress mansion was completed in 1830, and the property got its name from the fact that Big Cypress Creek and Little Cypress Creek border the plantation and converge near the site of the main house.

People old enough to remember tell stories of where they were when lightning struck the mansion in 1966, sending all but those now-iconic columns up in flames.

But documentarian Frederick Murphy knows this history of the Forks of Cypress is incomplete. A more comprehensive account of the site includes stories of the enslaved people who were forced to work the land — people who include Murphy's ancestors. And this is the story he, and others with ties to the Forks, aim to tell.

This year, descendants of both the enslaved people of the Forks of Cypress and descendants of plantation owners James and Sally Jackson are coming together to address their shared history. The group believes shared moments of honest conversation and connection can lead to reconciliation; that confronting the past can lead to healing and hope in the present. Support for the project — tentatively called The Echoes of the Forks of Cypress — will come, in part, from the Alabama Humanities Alliance's Healing History initiative.

Together, the descendants will visit the cemetery at the Forks of Cypress where many of the enslaved people of the plantation were buried. They'll visit the

churches that some of the enslaved people attended after emancipation. And they'll sit down for a communal dinner. With assistance from the Alabama Historical Commission, which now owns and preserves the site, descendants will also conduct research to learn more about their ancestors.

Murphy's interest in Florence was sparked when genealogical research led him to learn that one of his ancestors — Ferdinand Jackson — was born in the area. He hopes this ensuing project will encourage similar research and initiatives in other communities. Toward that end, he plans to document the group's journey for a short film to be released in 2025.

"There's a certain type of magnetic connection that we have here now because we're retracing the places in which our ancestors once lived and cultivated," Murphy says. "It's about taking up space and broadening the historical narrative that's already there, whether it's good, bad, ugly, or indifferent."

Healing history

The Echoes of the Forks of Cypress aligns closely with AHA's Healing History initiative, which is designed to strengthen communities by helping Alabamians examine their shared history and build connections across racial, religious, or political differences. The Healing History initiative, for example, funded another film documenting similar work done by Black and White descendants of the Wallace House plantation in Alabama's Shelby County.

"We're at a place not just in our state, but as a nation, where there are glaring divisions that seem to be keeping us from moving forward as people," says Laura Anderson, AHA's director of partnerships and outcomes. "But we know that history can be a tool for moving forward, together. So, we call Healing History an initiative — not a program we run ourselves — because we want communities to find their own way into it."

Murphy has also relied heavily on the archives and expertise of local cultural nonprofits, such as the



Left: Plantation house at the Forks of Cypress. Courtesy Florence Arts and Museums. Right: Descendants of the Forks today: Cousins Karen Baynham Curry and Frederick Murphy with Curtis Flowers.

Florence-Lauderdale Public Library and Florence Arts and Museums.

“I think this is probably some of the most important work that we can support from the museum’s perspective,” says Brian Murphy, director of Florence Arts and Museums.

Frederick and Brian Murphy (unrelated) met during Frederick’s initial research about the Forks of Cypress. In 2021, Brian invited Frederick and his cousin, Karen Baynham Curry, to give a talk at the Florence Indian Mound Museum. Their presentation explored the connection between the enslaved Jackson family at the Forks of Cypress and those enslaved at the Cabin Row Plantation located in Montgomery County, Tennessee, which is where Frederick Murphy was born.

Eventually, Brian Murphy hopes to put together an exhibit at Pope’s Tavern Museum that honors the enslaved people of Forks of Cypress by amplifying the voices of their descendants.

“There’re a lot of artifacts from that historical site at the museum, but hardly anything from enslaved people,” Brian Murphy says. “We’re really trying to flip that script and bring in more voices, but we want to do that responsibly, and I think the best way to do that is to get as many descendants involved as possible and really let them lead.”

Brian also connected Frederick to Curtis Flowers, a great-great-great-granddaughter of James and Sarah Jackson. She was eager to be part of The Echoes of the Forks of Cypress project, and was “swept away” by the depth of their research. Flowers hopes that The Echoes of the Forks of Cypress will inspire other communities

in Alabama and beyond to pursue similar projects.

“It’s connecting with and talking to real people whose lives have been shaped by this place and to try to understand and hear things from another point of view,” Flowers says. “What better way is there than to talk about doing something positive in a divided world?”

Frederick Murphy is grateful for the collaboration with Flowers.

“She has played a tremendous role in validating previous research and providing insight from the angle of her ancestors,” Frederick Murphy says of Flowers.

When he visited Florence, he and Flowers became fast friends over plates of her lasagna.

“It was the epitome of Southern hospitality — breaking bread and having conversation that required empathy, inquisitiveness, and critical thinking,” Murphy says. “We are forever connected.”

Looking back and moving forward

Frederick Murphy isn’t just a filmmaker; he’s also a licensed mental health counselor. And his Forks of Cypress film is part of a long line of projects he’s done exploring historical trauma in African American communities, as well as the healing power of knowing your history. His work includes a pair of films — one exploring the lives of less-heralded Jim Crow survivors, the other addressing race and reconciliation. His work is also part of *Clotilda: The Exhibition* at the Africatown Heritage House in Mobile.

Most recently (and with support from AHA’s sister organization, Humanities Tennessee), Murphy helped



Cousins Karen Baynham Curry and Frederick Murphy, descendants of Ferdinand Jackson, enslaved at the Forks.

to curate *King Iron*, a traveling exhibit created by the Tennessee African American Historical Group that examines the little-known story of enslaved iron workers of Tennessee. Many of these workers also had ties to the Forks of Cypress.

Some might question how history — especially history centered on slavery, forced migration, and the generational inequities they produced — can help people move forward.

But for Murphy, studying slavery and segregation isn't just about examining stories of oppression. It's about uncovering stories of resilience, stories of people who persevered and built community against all odds.

"If we don't have access to research that and tap into that whenever we're having a hard time, then I feel like it's very difficult for us to heal and have a true depiction of the beauty that we all hold inside," Murphy says.

Indeed, that healing is for all. Because examining our past is about conversation, not conflict. And conversations don't need to be hostile to be honest.

"This isn't the Hatfields and McCoys," he says. "We're here to share information to further our humanity and further our educational palate and understanding."

And from this foundation, bonds can be built.

We've all heard the adage that those who forget their history are condemned to repeat it. But AHA's Laura Anderson believes the importance of history is even more personal than that.

"I didn't feel comfortable on the earth until I understood history and my own personal place and my family's place in it," she says. "It brought such a strong sense of rootedness, like I could handle anything after I understood the context in which my life was taking place."

It's this same sense of grounding that Murphy wishes for the descendants of the Forks of Cypress and beyond.

"We hope to screen this film in multiple communities, not just in Alabama," he says, "because this isn't just an Alabama story. It's a nationwide story."

AHA's Healing History initiative

You don't have to look very hard these days to see the distrust and divisions in our communities. But we believe those divides can be bridged — and that the past can move us forward.

AHA's Healing History initiative is designed to strengthen our communities, workforces, and state by helping Alabamians examine their shared history and get to know each other better. Across race, religion, politics, and all the supposed dividing lines that shouldn't keep us apart.

The initiative launched in the fall of 2023, thanks to seed funding from partners such as the Alabama Legislature, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and Regions Bank. We are thrilled to support community-initiated projects like the Forks of Cypress and public events like *Woven Together* (see page 51). But the core of this initiative pairs history with facilitated group conversations to explore what we have in common, while acknowledging — with civility — what divides us.

"Healing History is not just about the past. It is about the present and what futures we will start writing for ourselves today," says Kathy Boswell, AHA's Healing History coordinator.

The entry point to the initiative is an immersive experience called *Past Forward*, which takes participants on a specific walk through history. Participants learn how policies from the past can still affect our communities and our relationships with neighbors and colleagues today.

"We're looking at how we got so divided," Boswell shares. "Not who is to blame, but what are the contributing factors to our divisions today? And what can close those divides? It's the relationships we make with each other. It's sharing stories. Asking questions. Suspending judgment. Having the courage to listen."

AHA also has begun offering half-day and whole-day Healing Circles that allow people to connect, share, learn, and be curious across differences. Most exciting of all, AHA and the Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham started a 10-month cohort experience this year that expands on the Healing Circle model. Since February 2024, 22 individuals have been meeting on a monthly basis to build relationships and bridge divides.

"The impact has been amazing," Boswell says. "This group has spent time, listening deeply and creating a space of courage to share their stories. Understanding has been the key. Not persuasion. Not arguments. Just by sharing and listening, individuals are moving past assumptions and hearing the truth about one another. People are seeing each other differently. There's respect. There's dignity. And, best of all, new friendships."

Join us: alabamahumanities.org/healing-history