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Plantation Pathways Hyde Park Plantation

By Ben Schools

South Carolina's planter elite could often afford at least one secondary residence, if not more — Lowcountry planters might spend summers at a fashionable home in downtown Charleston when the inland air grew hot. Or families of great fortune might construct a number of homes across their various lands. As these families grew larger, this became more common. Hyde Park Plantation was an auxiliary plot to the Ball family fortune but was nonetheless significant to their lives. Though they did not reside there full-time, it seems the land found frequent use and remained in the Ball family for centuries.

Located near Hugger in Berkeley County, Hyde Park Plantation sits at the end of the Cooper River's East Branch. It borders Bonneau Ferry's protected riverfront acreage and is part of the conservation-oriented coalition of properties gathered along the river. Now owned by the Lowcountry Land Trust, its 603.71 acres extends back to S.C. Highway 402 near the Francis Marion National Forest.

In 1740, John Coming Ball acquired 600 acres and finished building a main house three years later. At one point, John Colleton briefly possessed the land before it returned to the Ball family. Then in 1798, John Ball, Sr. built a house to replace the original structure, which burned around the American Revolution. Ball also owned nearby Kensington Plantation, which remained their principal residence, while Hyde Park served primarily as a hunting retreat and family getaway. The house was called a "marooning cottage," where women might meet to socialize or where men could stay the night before a hunt. In addition to its

recreational function, the property was also a working rice plantation and contains 117 acres of old rice fields. Hyde Park grew rice even into the 1900s. It was passed down through the Ball family for two centuries before it was acquired by the Gibbs family and sold to the Lowcountry Land Trust in 2017 for \$3,525,000.

The house sits nestled among live oak trees on a high bluff overlooking the Cooper River and features classic Lowcountry architecture. Built as a getaway rather than a grand plantation home, it stands a modest one-and-a-half stories above a raised masonry basement. It contains four bedrooms, two bathrooms, a living space, library and a full façade front porch with views of the old rice fields. A portion of the former side porch on the south side was enclosed in the 1930s to function as a kitchen wing. The exterior is beaded weatherboard painted white underneath a red gable roof with a central chimney. Throughout the years, the house has seen some renovations, but it still retains an aura of historic simplicity while paying respectful attention to the extraordinary land around it.

The property holds two cemeteries. The Ball family cemetery contains two stone box tombs, one of which is the grave of John Ball, the property's original owner. The slave cemetery dates to around 1797 and includes six wooden markers without inscriptions and two stone markers.

Also on grounds are a manager's house, pole barn and the remains of what could be a smokehouse or an old cookhouse.

The Cooper River Fund, established in 2014 by the South Carolina Ports Authority, provided the majority of funds allowing the Lowcountry Land Trust to



COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

Rural beauty and history at Hyde Park Plantation.

purchase Hyde Park. The Land Trust is able to use this special fund to buy property in the Cooper River corridor with the purpose of managing its land and wildlife, placing it under easement and selling it again. The proceeds from the sale will enter back into the fund. This preservation effort aims to enhance water quality, preserve plant and wildlife and help ecosystems thrive, while preventing development on these sites.

When the Land Trust bought the land, it already had an easement on it, but they intend to add another conservation easement before selling it into private hands. While owning Hyde Park, they have worked to maintain the land, roadways, lawn and house and to care for the hardwood forests. The East Branch of the Cooper River is home to a number of unique properties that cannot be found anywhere else.

"The variability of the landscape, topography changes, hardwood forests and the diversity of ecosystems mixed into the property make Hyde Park extremely special," says Ashton Lamb, North Coast Project

Manager for the Land Trust. "It's almost like you're in the Upstate of South Carolina, but you can walk less than half a mile and be looking out into a broken rice field on a historic river."

Hyde Park lies adjacent to the Bonneau Ferry Wildlife Management Area, which boasts more than 10,000 acres of protected land. So from a landscape perspective, its woodlands are part of a very large swath of forests that will be protected for a long time. These hardwood and pine forests extend far behind the house on the river and remarkably, Hyde Park's current plots, including the old rice fields, haven't changed since the Ball family initially bought the property. Wildlife abounds and offers excellent big game and waterfowl hunting.

"Places like the East Branch of the Cooper River are historically and ecologically significant," says Ashton. "Once you damage these places, you can't get them back. We have to be very careful about the way we plan our actions in these places. This area is a treasure and it would be a shame to lose it, so we

hope people get out there and see it."

The Lowcountry Land Trust partners in as many ways as they can, such as working with private landowners who will own their land with a conservation easement on it. Another noteworthy partnership nearby involves a piece of property containing about 1,600 acres nestled between the Francis Marion National Forest and Highway 41 heading towards Hyde Park. The Land Trust worked with Boeing to restore that property as part of Boeing's mitigation work as they were expanding their plant in North Charleston. Ultimately that property will become a wildlife management area. The Land Trust tries to partner with public agencies as well to share this land with the general public. They employ a range of approaches.

"The landscape of the East Branch is a huge blend of historical, cultural, natural resource and wildlife value," says David Ray, chief conservation officer for the Land Trust. "It is one of the places where we have the biggest opportunities to continue to

ensure the integrity of large landscapes. So that's why we have it as one of our really important focus areas."

Hyde Park is just one of several East Branch properties now under easement with the Lowcountry Land Trust. Like-minded private landowners have sought out ways to preserve this extraordinary area, with its thriving wildlife and vista views, for future generations. And very rarely does such a place come on the market: Hyde Park is currently listed for \$3.4 million.

As property development encroaches from all sides, protected lands are becoming increasingly sparse, but thankfully there are pockets that will remain intact and uncorrupted for a long time. Land and sea, marsh and forest, placed their stamp on Charleston's identity from the beginning. It is through our precious natural resources that we have arrived here today. But these resources that built the economy find far greater ecological value as historical bulwarks in an otherwise disappearing natural landscape. They deserve our protection.