



# a natural state

**Artist: Arianne King Comer**

## **Video 4: The Land, Part E: Penn Center**

Brown: [Singing] ...down by the riverside, down by the riverside.

Announcer: When the Union troops occupied Saint Helena Island, they found over ten thousand freed slaves who had been abandoned by their owners. Those free blacks, declared war contraband by the United States government, provided the nucleus of what would later be called the Port Royal Experiment. Many of them would be the first students at Penn School, the first school established in the South for the education of free blacks. [Background singing begins]

The task of educating the blacks of Saint Helena was left up to northern missionaries, and the first to arrive was Laura Towne, an abolitionist from Salem, Massachusetts. Towne developed her own education program for the islanders in order to improve their way of life.

In 1863, the Pennsylvania Freedman's Bureau shipped a prefabricated, three-room schoolhouse to the island. It was the first schoolhouse in the South constructed for the exclusive use of former slaves.

The curriculum in those early years concentrated on academics, but later other subjects were added to meet the needs of the struggling community. Classes began to include homemaking, agriculture, and industrial arts.

When it first started, Penn School received a great deal of attention. But with the passage of time, support for the school waned. Its help in educating the freedmen was no longer in the national spotlight.

Despite lack of support, Laura Towne and Ellen Murray kept to their labors at Penn School for over forty years. The two women exerted a powerful influence on the lives of the Sea Islanders, teaching them the importance of saving money and careful habits of crop husbandry.

In 1900, Hollis Burke Frizell, principal of the Hampton Institute in Virginia before coming to Penn, breathed new life into the old Penn School. He incorporated the school, renaming it Penn Normal, Industrial, and Agricultural School, and established a board of trustees.

His hope was to encourage Sea Islanders to stay on the island and develop a farm community. He increased agricultural education and established a school farm to demonstrate better methods of farming. [Background singing ends]

The 1940s was the last decade for Penn School as far as its original functions were concerned. On May 6, 1948, Penn Normal, Industrial, and Agricultural School became Penn Community Services, an agency devoted to community planning and improvement.

In the 1960s, the Penn Center campus received national attention as the location where Dr. Martin Luther King held his Southern Christian Leadership Conferences. The island also became a training center for Peace Corp workers, most of whom would serve in Africa.

In 1974, the campus was designated as a National Historic Landmark. Today, Penn Center still serves the community through academic and cultural enrichment programs that strive to preserve the rich Gullah heritage of the South Carolina Sea Islands.

End.