

Sidedoor Season 3, Episode 6: Slavery, Freedom, & Grandma's House

[INTRO MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: This is Sidedoor. A podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Haleema Shah.

Haleema Shah: When I was a kid, a lot my summers were spent in the backyard and around the neighborhood's cul-de-sacs. We had a lot of space to do our thing -- even by the standards of suburban Chicago. And I kind of credit that freedom for all the fun that my neighborhood friends and I used to have as kids. Because we caught fireflies, we dug up worms, played four square, and chased some very aggressive geese on our bikes. But, no geese were harmed in this process.

Haleema Shah: Those moments from my childhood seemed unimportant to me at the time -- it was just what we did. But when I take a second to really sit with those memories, I think they tell a much deeper story about my family and who I am.

Haleema Shah: I recently heard a woman named Lavern Meggett talk with the Smithsonian about her childhood. And let me tell you, her's was nothing like mine, but I wonder if she has similar feelings -- maybe a little nostalgia when she looks back on a part of her life that's nothing like today. Lavern grew up on Edisto Island, South Carolina in the 1960s. And every Sunday, she visited her grandmother's hundred year old cabin, which was also on the island.

Lavern Meggett: We played, we ate and we had fun because all we knew we was going to Mama's house and we can run wild when we go to Mama's house because we was outside in this big yard.

Haleema Shah: Lavern and her sister Marvette shared those memories with the Smithsonian as part of an oral history project.

Lavern Meggett: We didn't have anything, so we made everything we played with. We used to play baseball and we had a can for our ball and a stick for our bat and we would stand on the porch and wait for whoever to get out. So, the porch was like our dug out. So, that's what I remember most.

Haleema Shah: But what if you found out that your childhood refuge -- and, well, baseball dugout -- was something that the Smithsonian had been looking for? That's what happened to the Meggett sisters. The home that their grandmother -- and relatives even before her -- were born in is now a centerpiece of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Haleema Shah: So what's so special about a simple wood plank cabin that has housed generations of the Meggetts until 1981?

Haleema Shah: This time on Sidedoor, we'll find out.

[BREAK]

Haleema Shah: The National Museum of African American History and Culture opened in 2016. To make your way into one of their most moving exhibitions -- the Slavery and Freedom exhibition -- you have to take an elevator 80 feet down.

Mary Elliott: So we're gonna take the elevator down and when you get on the elevator you'll see that we go back in time.

Haleema Shah: As you descend two stories, the year goes from 2018 to 1400. And you just heard from Mary Elliott speaking a second ago. She's the best person to go on this journey with because she co-curated the exhibition, was on the team that went searching for the cabin, and has been working with museum since way before it opened.

Mary Elliott: ...downstairs we tell the harsh reality of the nation's history. But that comes with two things: there's human suffering and there's the power of the human spirit. And that power of the human spirit includes resistance, resilience, and survival.

Haleema Shah: And so if you go to see the cabin in person today you walk through over 400 years of racial injustice in America...

Mary Elliott: ...and you see and we start with the story of Africa and Europe, which leads us into the development of the transatlantic slave trade.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: And just as much as this is a story about a cabin, it's also the story of our country. The cabin represents a moment in the museum that sits directly in between the darkness of human suffering and the promise of freedom. It's a crucial bit of real estate in a museum that documents some of history's most sinister chapters, and also celebrates some really powerful moments.

Mary Elliott: And now we're in colonial North America, which allows us to talk about again that shifting landscape and the impact of the people coming into North America and that is broken out by region. Chesapeake, low country, South Carolina, Louisiana, the north -- and then we connect the story of North America to the transatlantic itself.

Haleema Shah: Okay, I realize that when we started talking about the cabin, we introduced it as a place for idyllic childhood moments in the 20th Century. But Mary Elliott reminds us that telling

a story about this cabin, means talking about the what built it: slavery. And the story of slavery is about a system of profit and power, and the people who were exploited by it.

Mary Elliott: So we've come through much of the exhibition and we are now at the slave cabin that we acquired from Edisto Island, South Carolina.

Haleema Shah: And just so everyone's imagination is on the same page, here's what the cabin looks like: It's 16 by 20 feet -- about the size of a one-car garage. So, it's almost a square.

Mary Elliott: It has a hearth, a fireplace that was used for cooking sometimes, but we understand that a lot of cooking was done outside of the cabin. It has a loft area and we know that enslaved African Americans lived in the lower level space but also slept up in the loft area.

Haleema Shah: And if you grew up with 21st Century insulation, it'll be hard to imagine living here.

Mary Elliott: The wind came through, the heat came through, the vermin came through and it has just this front door in the front of the cabin and a window.

Haleema Shah: It was not designed for comfort or security.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: In the 1800s the cabin sat on what was known as a "slave street". They were long rows of meager structures that people would be crowded into. The cabin that Mary Elliott is describing was likely one of nine.^[1]

Haleema Shah: The people who lived in these homes were purchased, and forced to work on a large plantation, called Point of Pines. And at this plantation, the cash crop was Sea Island cotton. It was highly-prized, and its long, silky fibers were woven into the fabrics worn by royals and aristocrats^[2]. And with the free labor of enslaved people, sea island cotton made plantation owners rich.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: As those plantations grew, so did the need for free labor. In 1808, Edisto Island's population was made of 236 whites, and 2,600 enslaved African Americans. Fifty years later, the number of people enslaved on the island grew to 10,000.^[3] And in each of these cabins with only one door, might live nine, ten, even twelve people.

Mary Elliott: Really this was a pen not unlike when you would lock up animals at night. You put those people in there, shut that door, and they don't come out until you ring that bell the next morning. // What did that do to someone's psyche and how did they transcend that?

Haleema Shah: Throughout the harsh conditions that people endured in slavery, these cabins gave people the briefest moments of refuge in their lives. That's what Lonnie Bunch told us. He's the director of the National Museum of African American history and culture -- and he's the one who put the Edisto Island cabin on the list of objects the museum needed to have.

Haleema Shah: If you're a sensitive listener -- or listening with one -- you might want to skip ahead about 15 seconds right here. Bunch is about to share some harsh realities of slavery.

Lonnie Bunch: It tells a story that is as harsh as slavery is. People were raped in these cabins. And so the cabin, because it was not yours, you really were reminded everyday that there was somebody -- a greater power than you.

Haleema Shah: The cabins didn't provide security. But they did provide fleeting moments of comfort.

Lonnie Bunch: Here was the space where you could help raise your children, you could tell folklore. One of the ways you survive enslavement is to be able to dig deeply into your family. Even if that family then gets splintered and sold and it's those evenings when you have a few hours before you fall asleep from being exhausted, it's those hours that mean so much because it's [in] those hours that you're a human again.

Lonnie Bunch: So, for me, the cabin is this place of refuge from time to time, not all the time, but from time to time. It's a place of refuge that much like it's roof covers you from the worst effects of slavery like it does from the sun, but it doesn't always protect, but when it does, family and soul were kept together.

Haleema Shah: They may not have known it, but people who were living in the Point of Pines cabin were on the brink of emancipation. Coming up after the break, we'll take a look at what happened to this cabin -- and to those who lived in it -- as it went from being a shelter for enslaved people, to a home for those who were newly free.

[BREAK]

Haleema Shah: In 1853, a cabin was built on a huge cotton plantation on South Carolina's Edisto Island. It was pretty spare -- it didn't stop heat, spiders, or snakes -- but by virtue of its single front door, it kept people in -- until it was time to labor in the fields.

Haleema Shah: But all of that changed dizzyingly fast in 1861 when Union Soldiers took over the plantation amid the Civil War, which let people who were held in bondage on this plantation, declare themselves free.

Haleema Shah: But for a lot of people who went from enslaved to emancipated, freedom didn't always mean leaving the plantation you were forced to work on. Or leaving the man who you had to call "master." Or even leaving housing that was essentially designed for livestock.

Haleema Shah: Here's Mary Elliott again. She co-curated the Slavery and Freedom exhibition at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Mary Elliott: Think about this: Slavery ended -- reconstruction period right after emancipation -- you have where African Americans now became sharecroppers, tenant farmers. They're back living in those same slave cabins, but now it's supposed to be this -- and I'm using air quotes right now -- it's supposed to be this "employer-employee relationship." Really? How do you shift overnight with that?

Haleema Shah: The Reconstruction Period that followed the Civil War meant going from enslaved to sharecropper. It brought the rise of Black codes, which were passed by state legislatures, to regulate the freedoms of African Americans. And, that period also saw the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan.

Haleema Shah: For those of us who know the history of Reconstruction, and the later Jim Crow era, this moment of new freedom feels daunting. Because records show a sense of elation with freedom from enslavement, but later history shows that there are strings attached.

Haleema Shah: And that's exactly where this home sits in the museum: On the brink of two periods. Behind it? Slavery. Ahead? Emancipation.

Haleema Shah: So like so many others, the formerly enslaved had to learn to work with their new, but often limited freedom. Some things did change, though. Namely, their homes.

Mary Elliott: And, so many of these folks ended up living back in the same slave cabins, retrofitting those slave cabins, filling those holes through the planks of wood with newspapers.

Haleema Shah: And it's not that they moved to the city and lived somewhere else, though some did. But for the ones who stayed on plantations, they started customizing their spaces. And they did what so many of us do when we try to make a place our own. They painted, wallpapered, and even used newspaper to insulate.

Mary Elliott: It was whitewashed at some point, but the blue "haint paint" was used by African Americans with the notion that it helped to ward off spirits.

Haleema Shah: The inside of the cabin was altered, too.

Mary Elliott: It was just one large open space on the inside. The African American family who ultimately lived in that cabin after slavery put up a wall or partition that broke the cabin up into two sections.

Haleema Shah: But the most important change? The formerly enslaved built a second door at the back of the house, which means something. Here's museum director Lonnie Bunch again.

Lonnie Bunch: So, the second door is a concrete manifestation of freedom. So, on the one hand this is about slavery, but it's also about freedom. It's also about how do you redefine yourself because you're not going to pick up and go, you're going to be in that same place, but how do you say, "I am not the person that was owned yesterday."

Haleema Shah: So, Emancipation, which officially became law on December 18, 1865 -- gave a lot of people agency. But, it didn't transform life immediately. They were still living in poverty, but Bunch says that with freedom comes a brighter future.

Lonnie Bunch: What I also want people to get is to understand that as difficult as this history is, it's ripe with optimism. It's ripe with hope. Because the belief is if you can survive that cabin, there's a lot more you can survive.

Haleema Shah: And for over a century, people continued to call this cabin home. During those years a lot happened on Edisto Island. Reconstruction, Jim Crow laws, the distribution of land to African Americans -- and then the seizure of it. In later years, hurricanes, the end of cotton farming, and the construction of resort homes all impacted life on this low-lying island of South Carolina.¹

Haleema Shah: But, for people who have spent time in the cabin more recently, the structure wasn't just about survival -- it was also about joy, love, and family. Which brings us back to the Meggetts.

Lavern Meggett: It wasn't a cabin to me, it was home to me. So, it's a little mixed emotion, you know, when you say a slave cabin because to me that was mama's house.

Haleema Shah: Lavern and her sister Marvett have early memories that go back decades.

Lavern Meggett: I was probably about three or four years old and my dad used to take us to Mama's house. And on Sundays we would go and my dad would cut up wood for Mama because they heated by the woodstove, so he cut up wood.

Haleema Shah: Visiting the cabin in the 1960s and 70s was fun for the Meggett kids. It didn't have electricity or running water, but what they cared about was having space to play.

Lavern Meggett: We played, we ate, and we had fun because all we knew we was going to Mama's house and we can run wild when we go to Mama's house because we was outside in this big yard.

Haleema Shah: They got to be kids. And had fun doing things that were chores for their older relatives.

¹ <https://www.edistoscenicbyway.org/history.cfm>

Lavern Meggett: And, we like to pump water because the longer, the more you pump it, the colder the water got. So, that was fun.

Haleema Shah: For Lavern and her sister Marvett, memories of the cabin also brought memories of feeling full and taken care of.

Lavern Meggett: When we got to Mama's house there was always food. There was bread or whatever -- whatever momma cooked. We ate.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: Eventually, the Meggetts moved on, though. The last family member lived there in 1981. Time and gravity took their toll. It was falling into disrepair. And, the local historic society did what they could, but it was getting really expensive to maintain.

Haleema Shah: So, the National Museum of African American History and Culture came searching at just the right time. Here's director Lonnie Bunch again.

Lonnie Bunch: I first started looking for slave cabins when I was a curator of the Museum of American history in the 1990s. So, I've been on more plantations than anybody probably ever could voluntarily, right?

Haleema Shah: So, just imagine how Lonnie Bunch, Mary Elliott, and the rest of their team felt when Edisto Island's historic community was happy to give the cabin to the Smithsonian.

Lonnie Bunch: Oh, I think they were both on the phone was probably Mary, and then Nancy, you know, screaming in the background -- and then Nancy talking and Mary screaming in the background. I think they were both so excited and so pleased.

Haleema Shah: But it wasn't going to be easy to bring a dilapidated cabin all the way to the National Mall. Here's Mary Elliott again, who was there in person to witness the first step of the cabin's journey to the Smithsonian.

Mary Elliott: At the time that we took the cabin apart there, we realized there were two six foot snakes just above the doorway, and there were spiders as big as your hand.

Haleema Shah: Before it arrived at the museum, it had to be pulled apart, plank by plank.

Mary Elliott: They put tags on each piece of wood. So they took it apart like a puzzle and then they put it back together like a puzzle.

The Smithsonian's team, the Meggett family, and residents of Edisto Island got together witness the cabin coming down -- and they sang.

[AUDIO]

Mary Elliott: When they took all the pieces apart, they carried it to Virginia, and then they did the conservation work, and they put it back together.

Haleema Shah: Today, the Point of Pines cabin sits at the Smithsonian, in testament to a critical chapter in America's story. Mary Elliott says that in this cabin, she feels the presence of those people who passed through it.

Mary Elliott: When we went to the storage space where they had done the conservation work and they had the framework up -- standing in that space, that was the moment that caught me off guard. Because I literally walked in and I stood in the middle of this frame and I literally could close my eyes and I felt like I could hear the people in the building. I felt like they were right there with me. Like they were literally standing next to me and I'll never forget that.

Haleema Shah: Even if you haven't had the chance to see the cabin, the legacy of slavery is an everyday reality. Lonnie Bunch says it's something that speaks to all Americans.

Lonnie Bunch: You know, as a historian, for years I never knew anything about my own family. Never thought about that. That's not what you do. You know, you write about other people. And I remember when my father's sister died -- my father was very upset -- that we began to, he asked me about the family, and I said, "well, let's do some research." And I found that one of my ancestors was an enslaved woman named Candice Bunch who lived in a cabin, much like that. So, when I look at that cabin, while I see the story of enslavement writ large, I see my own family and I marvel at how people who started in that cabin could directly shape who I am.

Haleema Shah: That one cabin was home to so many people, and tells so many stories. Which is why it was so important for the museum to have.

Lonnie Bunch: And so, whenever I look at that cabin, I feel an unbelievable obligation to work hard, to make sure their stories are told, to build a place that will help all Americans better understand who the people were that were shaped by cabins like that.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. If you want to see the Point of Pines cabin, you can find it in the National Museum of African American History and Culture's Slavery and Freedom exhibition.

Haleema Shah: Sidedoor is made possible by funding from the Secretary of the Smithsonian, as well as the Smithsonian National Board. The Smithsonian relies on support from listeners like you to do all the amazing work you hear about on Sidedoor. If you've been enjoying Sidedoor,

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Haleema Shah: Our podcast team is Justin O'Neill, Jason Orfanon, Jess Sadeq, Greg Fisk, Lara Koch, and Lizzie Peabody. Extra support comes from John Barth, and Genevieve Sponsler. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and other episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

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