



Shadow of the Past

This spot is the site of the largest auction of enslaved people in American history — an 1859 event the enslaved called the Weeping Time, in which 436 people were brought to the hammer to pay off the bad investments and gambling debts of Pierce M. Butler, the absentee owner of the Butler Island plantation. The auction was held at a playground of the local elite: the Ten Broeck Race Course, then on the outskirts of Savannah, Ga. It netted Butler the phenomenal sum of \$303,850.

A photograph cannot show you enslaved families herded into sheds that normally held horses. It cannot show you a man named Jeffrey, recorded in one contemporary writer's account begging in vain for his purchaser to also buy his love, Dorcas, Chattel No. 278: "Please buy Dorcas, Mas'r. We're be good sarvants to you long as we live. We're be married right soon, young Mas'r, and de chillun will be healthy and strong, Mas'r, and dey'll be good sarvants

too." A photo can't capture the contribution those 436 people made to the economy of their country, or the gifts and talents they lent it. (As part of the Gullah Geechee community, they were among those who gave the world a song of peace, "Kumbaya.") What you do see are two tracks, intersecting but going in different directions, toward different outcomes — a fitting metaphor, perhaps, for black and white life in America.

In 2008, the Georgia Historical Society and the City of Savannah erected a commemorative marker near this land, but no marker can capture the scars carried by those separated on the auction block. Today the site is home to a large regional plywood and lumber distributor. It also contains the Otis J. Brock III Elementary School, whose students are almost all black. This March, the school was the site of a moving commemoration of the 160th anniversary of the Weeping Time. *Anne C. Bailey*