

JAMES CITY:
A BLACK COMMUNITY
IN NORTH CAROLINA
1863-1900

By Joe A. Mobley

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THE BENNETT PLACE

By Arthur C. Menius

This report, prepared as an in-house research resource, documents the historical events connected with the Bennett Place, a simple wooden farmhouse in present-day Durham County, North Carolina, that was selected as the site for meetings held in April, 1865, between Union General William T. Sherman and Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston for the purpose of negotiating terms for the surrender of forces under Johnston's command. The agreement reached at the farmhouse by the two generals hastened the end of the Civil War. The report also traces the efforts of concerned citizens to preserve the Bennett Place site as a memorial park, to focus public attention on the historical significance of the property, and ultimately to construct on the site a facsimile of the original farmhouse and exterior kitchen.

James Bennitt¹ (ca. 1807-1878), a yeoman farmer, acquired a tract of land in northern Orange County (now Durham County) in 1846. There he erected a small wooden farmhouse, engaged in diversified agricultural pursuits, and supplemented his income with cobbling, tailoring, and other activities. By the 1850s Bennitt and his family had achieved a moderate level of prosperity. Accounts and records maintained by Bennitt present an unusually detailed portrait of a small antebellum North Carolina farm.

By early March, 1865, when Union forces under the command of General William T. Sherman entered North Carolina, both of Bennitt's sons and his son-in-law had died. Following the Battle of Bentonville (March 19-21, 1865), Confederate troops under the command of General Joseph E. Johnston could no longer offer serious resistance to Sherman, and Federal forces quickly captured Goldsboro and Raleigh. Over the objections of Confederate President Jefferson Davis, Johnston sued for peace. By chance Generals Sherman and Johnston agreed to meet for a conference at James Bennitt's farmhouse on April 17 and 18, 1865. Sherman, fearing a protracted period of guerrilla warfare and believing that he was carrying out the policies of recently assassinated President Abraham Lincoln, proposed to Johnston generous terms for restoring peace to the nation.

¹ James Bennitt consistently spelled his surname with an *i*. The use of the second *e* originated in references to his house in the letters of Civil War correspondents and reporters and was repeated in the works of historians of the era.

Post-assassination Washington was unwilling to accept the liberal terms set forth by Sherman and rejected the agreement while casting aspersions on Sherman's loyalty and character. A potentially tragic stalemate was averted when Sherman and Johnston held another meeting at the Bennett farmhouse on April 26 and agreed to simple, acceptable conditions for terminating hostilities.

James Bennett died in 1878, and his farmhouse passed through the hands of several owners before being destroyed by fire in 1921, leaving only a brick chimney. In 1923 a portion of the land on which the house had stood was acquired by the Bennett Place Memorial Commission, a public association formed for the purpose of maintaining the site as a memorial park. During this period preservation of the former Bennett property became the personal project of Durham attorney and state legislator R. O. Everett, Sr., who labored for many years thereafter to keep public interest in the site alive. In 1958 funds from private sources became available to construct on the site a facsimile of the Bennett farmhouse and kitchen. Two period wooden buildings whose general dimensions corresponded closely to the Bennett structures were moved to the property and altered to conform to the appearance of the originals. In 1961 these structures and their surrounding grounds were designated as the Bennett Place State Historic Site. At present the Bennett Place is maintained and administered by the Historic Sites Section of the Division of Archives and History.