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## Georgia Historical Society to host ceremony in honor of 'forty acres and a mule'

Georgia Historical Society will hold a ceremony in Madison Square to recognize Gen. William T. Sherman's famous decision.

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The "Forty Acres and a Mule" painting of the Jan. 12, 1865, meeting was done by Haller Buchanan and still hangs in the Ralph Mark Gilbert Civil Rights Museum on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

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By Chuck Mobley

Georgia Historical Society to hold ceremony in Madison Square to recognize Sherman's famous decision.

The phrase "forty acres and a mule" continues to resonate today, some 146 years after the historic meeting that launched the short-lived effort to turn over hundreds of thousands of acres in South Carolina, Georgia and Florida to just-freed slaves.

The Georgia Historical Society, in partnership with the Georgia Battlefields Association and the Georgia Department of Economic Development, will pay tribute to that landmark event with the dedication of a historical marker on

March 4.

Following are five key facts about the Jan. 12, 1865, meeting, its participants and its aftermath.

-- The two principal figures were two of the brightest stars in the Union constellation, Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. This was not, however, a friendly meeting. The month before, as the Union Army approached Savannah, the troops pulled up a pontoon bridge over Ebenezer Creek before the hundreds of just-freed slaves following them could cross. It's believed that as many as 200 of those African Americans drowned as they desperately tried to cross the creek, an incident that angered Stanton, an avowed abolitionist.

-- The names of several of the 20 African-American ministers who were also at the meeting, particularly Garrison Frazier, Ulysses L. Houston and William Campbell, are still well known, but the rest of them would have likely faded into oblivion, except for the scrupulous notes taken by Assistant Adjutant-General E. D. Townsend. His report, filed on Feb. 1, 1865, at the War Department, listed the ministers and gave brief biographies of each. He also recorded Frazier's eloquent replies to the questions posed to him by Sherman and Stanton. Asked how the government could best help the just-freed slaves, Frazier said, "We want to be placed on land until we are able to buy it and make it our own."

-- The conference was held in Sherman's Savannah headquarters, the house of English cotton merchant Charles Green. Built in 1853 by famed architect John Norris, the house was reputed to be the most expensive private residence in Savannah. It remained in the Green family until 1892 when it was sold to Judge Peter Meldrim. In 1943, it was sold again, this

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time to its next-door neighbor, St. John's Episcopal Church. Now recognized as a National Historic Landmark, it is known as the Green-Meldrim House and is open for tours several days a week.

-- On Jan. 16, 1865, just four days later, Sherman issued Special Field Orders 15. It stated that each freed family "shall have a plot not more than (40) forty acres of tillable land." It gave the African Americans an opportunity to settle and live by themselves along the coast, and on several local islands, including Skidaway and Ossabaw, and it led to the founding of the Freedmen's Bureau. It didn't though, mention mules. But, because Sherman's forces had just marched from Atlanta, there were plenty of them available, and they were handed out as well, said historian Eric Foner. That was the origin of "forty acres and a mule."

-- In November 2001, several months before his death, Savannah civil rights leader and historian W.W. Law listed 10 unmarked sites that held special significance for African Americans. At the top of the list was the Green-Meldrim House. "For the first time in all of American history," Law said about the conference, "blacks were meeting with white Americans to discuss their own welfare. No one had ever asked them their opinion before." Some of the African-American ministers at the meeting, Law pointed out, "had not even been freed until Sherman arrived in the city."

**WHAT THE MARKER WILL SAY**

History of Emancipation: Special Field Orders No. 15

On January 12, 1865, U.S. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and General Wm. T. Sherman met here at the home of Charles Green with 20 leaders from Savannah's African-American churches, including Garrison Frazier, Ulysses L. Houston and William Campbell. The meeting resulted in Sherman's issue of Special Field Orders No. 15, which encouraged the enlistment of freedmen and also reserved coastal land from Charleston south to Florida's St. Johns River for settlement by freed families in 40-acre tracts. The Freedmen's Bureau Act of March 1865 formalized government aid to freed slaves but made no provision for land. After President Lincoln's death, President Andrew Johnson revoked Special Field Orders No. 15, hampering efforts by African Americans to gain economic independence after emancipation. Erected for the Civil War 150 commemoration by the Georgia Historical Society, the Georgia Battlefields Association and the Georgia Department of Economic Development.

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