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**Research Statement**

Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery,  
Resistance, and Abolition Fellowship at Yale University

This past September, I was invited to photograph the Indian Field Methodist Camp Meeting in St George, South Carolina. Founded in 1801, Indian Field has been in session for 217 years as one of many Methodist and Baptist revival camps started during the Second Great Awakening. My photography over the last ten years has focused on understanding rural communities in the United States through their agricultural history and current industry. Photographing Indian Field and other camps provides an opportunity to develop a new body of work related to my existing project *Bare Handed*. Experiencing camp meetings first-hand made me want to thoroughly research the original purpose of the camps before I sought permission to photograph at others. My time at Indian Field revealed that underlying the basic premise of gathering for spiritual teaching were much more complex aspects of Southern life and history. My research for this fellowship would be focused on understanding the true experience of attending camp meetings in the early nineteenth century and the core philosophies expressed there. This research will add historical depth to my presentation of the photographs. Questions that would be explored include: how the camps came into being, how slaves were treated during camp meetings in different regions, what the role of women was at these meetings, and how they evolved to where they are now.

To portray current camp attendees accurately and respectfully, it is important to understand their past. The Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale University Fellowship would allow me the resources and time needed to research the camps' complex history. Ideally, my research would reveal first hand accounts in letters, manuscripts and photographs to confirm statements I have found in articles, books, and dissertations. My initial research online and in the Yale libraries has revealed a paradox and suggests that the camps were places where individuals with little power in society had far more influence and freedom. Yet, it is clear there is more to be learned, verified, and uncovered, especially about the history of camp life in the South.

Indian Field is striking even when empty due to its architecture. The camp community's emphasis on tradition is evident immediately upon arriving given the way the tents are arranged in a dodecahedron surrounding a tabernacle. The rustic "tents" are actually cabins made from simple wood siding with hay brought in to cover the dirt floors. These tents set the scene for the week of festivities and spiritual celebration. While sermons are attended, especially the closing one, meals, spending time with family, and embracing a return to nature are more the goal. There is little use of technology, and kids play games like they would have fifty years ago. Cooking hamburgers and hot dogs is frowned upon, and cooks are hired to prepare meals for the week. People talk about who will cook soul food when the camp's current cooks retire. Spiritual meetings were traditionally held after the harvest, and the types of food that would have been prepared then are still being cooked on wood stoves and eaten today, even if the chicken—fried and served at every meal—is now store bought rather than slaughtered behind the tents. There is a formality to the camp meetings. No one eats with plates on their laps in front of the tent. Instead tables are packed and seated in quick

succession, for as many rounds as it takes for everyone to dine. The importance of status in the family determines your seating—first, second, or third. Campground traditions are run by the matriarchs, down to who eats when, in what order and with what combination of family members. These food traditions led me by word of mouth to seek out Indian Field. Yet I am inspired to return because of the rich history that these camps encompass, and the questions they raise.

The camp meetings began as part of the Second Great Awakening movement, a backlash against the Industrial Revolution and the frontier town settlements that had little by way of organized religion. The ministers' goal was to convert and save sinners with an approach that embraced Romanticism and a return to nature. Revival camps were typically in clearings with the canopy of a few large trees serving as a natural church. The Methodists had an efficient organization dependent on itinerant ministers known as circuit riders who sought out people in remote frontier locations. These traveling ministers rode predefined routes and held camp meetings to bring spirituality back into the lives of the settlers. They established laws and rules at odds with regular town life. The circuit riders were 'common' people, which helped establish a rapport with the frontier families they hoped to convert.

Through the lens of spiritual freedom, these camps saw early attempts at integration between black and white Americans. "Baptists and Methodists in the South preached to slaveholders and slaves alike," and slaves and free African Americans were authorized to serve as preachers in the late 1700's. One of the best-known ministers to ride the circuits was Francis Asbury, and he established Indian Field. After a few years, "Black Harry" Hosier, who appealed to both black and white audiences, joined Asbury. Asbury had originally intended to use Hosier to minister to the African American audiences, and they "came a great distance to hear him, but his delivery was so effective and affecting that his primary audience seems to have been white." Hosier gave the first sermon ever delivered by a black preacher to a white audience at Thomas Chapel in Chapeltown, Delaware in 1784.<sup>1,2</sup>

Although the camps may have granted slaves and free African Americans an agency and power to spread their words and ideas, this sparked fear of slave rebellions among the white slaveholders who in some cases tried to prevent their slaves from attending. There is evidence that ministers insisted on teaching slaves to read and write, and that these camps fostered successful slave rebellions. In his recent dissertation paper "God's Brush Arbor: Camp Meeting Culture during the Second Great Awakening, 1800-1860," Keith Dwayne Lyon explores the experience of different races at camp meeting, and the meetings' role in prompting slave uprisings or rebellion:

*Many Southern slave masters of the 1800s continued to fear the "revolutionary implications" of evangelical Christianity along with its potential for "subversive uses" and the conferral of "an undue agency and subjectivity" to the enslaved. Hence, the slave master of Francis Henderson, a Methodist church member in the District of Columbia, decreed to him, "You shan't go to that church—they'll put the devil in you." After a successful escape from slavery in 1841, Henderson clarified: "He meant that they would put me up to running off." In his groundbreaking work on African American culture, Lawrence Levine observed that even white evangelicalism fostered*

*“egalitarianism and fundamental change” along with its lessons of passivity and obedience while African American evangelicalism leaned more toward promotion of “discontent and ...a different order of things.”<sup>3</sup>*

There are reports that camp attendees were initially racially integrated, yet today in South Carolina they are separated. This is in stark contrast to what is preached. In the final sermon at Indian Field this past October, the minister opened with the line “we are divided not by race, but by racism” and encouraged attendees to embrace differences and heal the divides in our country. It was similar to the sermon in the Indian Field documentary film by Stan Woodward in which a minister states that his predominantly white attendees and the worshippers at the predominantly African American Shady Grove meeting are united by the beliefs they hold in the religion.<sup>4</sup> How much of that divide persists, and what the implications of that might be, are questions I hope to explore both through research and photographs, and spending time at camp meetings. Attendees of Indian Field indicated to me that they are open to change and integration, and one participant commented that in the case of inter-racial marriage, those couples would attend both camps.

Searching the Yale library system led me to find another dissertation, which was later published, by Catherine Brekus, currently a History Professor at Harvard, who researches the role of female preachers, both African American and white, in early nineteenth century America. Brekus writes:

*“Historians have studied women’s religious leadership in missions, Sunday schools, charities, and radical sects such as the Shakers and Spiritualists, but most have assumed that women did not become ministers until after the Civil War.” It turns out that “female preachers were not lone eccentrics, but participants in a larger evangelical culture— both black and white—that sanctioned women’s religious leadership.”<sup>5</sup>*

Brekus explains that “the Awakening transformed women’s traditionally private and familial religious role” into a public role where women were extremely effective. She chronicles the work of early African-American preachers, including Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, Julia Foote, and Rebecca Jackson, and states: “Female preachers appealed to men and women across racial as well as class boundaries.” Salome Lincoln and Nancy Towle preached to interracial audiences in the early 1800’s, and Wesleyan Methodist Laura Haviland became active in the anti-slavery movement and “helped slaves escape on the Underground Railway.”<sup>5</sup>

Jarena Lee was invited to speak to white congregations in many states, such as Maryland, Delaware, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York. When she preached in Smyrna, Delaware in 1823, a group of “seven individuals, white and colored, prostrated themselves for prayer at the end of her sermon.” These female preachers “promised these men and women other-worldly bliss in heaven,” but perhaps more importantly they condemned “the system which oppressed them on earth” and “openly challenged the morality of slaveholding.” Brekus’s research also points to the important limitations of geography and discusses where the female preachers would travel:

*“African-American preachers such as Lee became particularly popular among black slaves in the south. White women preachers rarely travelled to southern states, but Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Elizabeth all believed that God had specially called them to minister to slaves. Although they did not dare to go to states in the Deep South, such as South Carolina or Georgia, they courageously travelled throughout both Virginia and Maryland.”*

Brekus seeks to understand the paradox her research has revealed:

*Despite racial differences, these people seem to have seen themselves as spiritually equal to one another because they were all "sinners" in need of redemption. Moreover, the whites in the group symbolically inverted racial hierarchies by "prostrating" themselves at Lee's feet; they begged a black woman to pray for their salvation. Reversing the roles of "black" and "white," "slave" and "master," they turned to someone who was supposedly "inferior" to them for advice on the most crucial matter in their lives—their relationship to God. In 1824, when Jarena Lee spoke at an African Methodist camp meeting in Denton, Maryland, she was overwhelmed by the number of slaves who had trudged long distances to hear her preach: “Some of the poor slaves came happy in the Lord; walked from twenty to thirty, and from that to seventy miles, to worship God. Although through hardships they counted it all joy for the excellency of Christ; and, before day, they, or a number of them, had to be at home, ready for work; but some said they came as sinners before God, but went away as new creatures in Christ.”<sup>5</sup>*

Brekus's research reveals progressive attitudes in the movement that allowed people to embrace spiritual equality. Yet it raises the question of how the movement changed following the Civil War. My research would focus on how groups of individuals—especially women and slaves—navigated the camps, how they brought about change either overtly or subversively, and in which regions of the United States they were most effective in supporting the abolitionist movement. My research would examine both the past and present experience of attending the camps. How and when did the different camps get established? What was attending those camps like in the 1800's? Ideally, I would uncover letters and other documents to build upon the existing research. I also plan to explore how the camps evolved over time, and changed after the Civil War. For instance, Indian Field served as a shelter for Charleston residents and all but three of the original tents were destroyed and used as firewood. Similarly, Shady Grove endured a fire and was rebuilt in the late twentieth century.

Other outstanding questions I plan to address: when did they become racially separated? And how did the food traditions and cooking at the camps become such a focus that they are still carried on today? Some cooks have worked for the same families for years, with children taking over the cooking when their parents retire. Lastly, I will look beyond South Carolina to other states to learn how current camp traditions and populations change by region. The first camps were reportedly in Kentucky yet many appear to be historical monuments and are not necessarily currently active. A documentary film held in the Yale Divinity School highlights the evolution of the camps that began in Kentucky, but does not point to which are still active<sup>7</sup>.



Through researching independent campgrounds, I will determine which are still active, who attends, and who works or cooks at them. This will help create an accurate portrait of the legacy of the Second Great Awakening. I will identify which camps have permanent structures—the tents at Indian Field have been passed down in families for generations, and although Indian Field has held meetings for over two hundred years, the structures have changed little over that time. I was told by an elder celebrating his seventieth camp meeting that tents are rarely sold. To gain a tent at Indian Field is difficult for a newcomer. Originally, people attended camp and stayed in cloth tents, covered wagons, or built other transitory lean-tos. There may be only a handful of camps that remain which have permanent architecture like Indian Field and Shady Grove.

With current screen-based technology, many families wonder if the tradition of returning to nature to spend time eating and visiting with family and friends will hold the same significance and allure for future generations. To spend time at Indian Field feels like traveling back in time, and yet there are hints of changes coming in terms of the desire to attend.

Part of my goal in photographing rural America, is to photograph industry and rituals that are in flux or in decline, where no one knows when they will disappear. The tobacco barns I photographed in Massachusetts for the series *Bare Handed* were dismantled just two years after photographing them in action. This tenuousness underscores the urgency of capturing what these places and experiences are like now. In terms of Indian Field, families are discussing whether their children will carry on the experience. The teenagers at Indian Field were enthusiastic and open in their discussions about racism in their community, which they would like to see reduced, and noted that they see signs of integration and change “little by little.” However, their commitment to carrying on the tradition is unclear. My photographing Indian Field over time will highlight these changes, while still acknowledging the past.

Lastly, if time permits, I would use my time at Yale to research plantations unknown to the public, and identify buildings that are still standing. Another project I have underway is photographing existing slave cabins and other plantation buildings. Using architectural structures to understand the agricultural history of the US is a common thread in my photography. I have obtained permission to photograph public plantations like Drayton Hall, and will participate in and photograph overnight stays at plantations as part of the Slave Dwelling Project. There are other sites that I have learned about that have existing intact buildings, and I hope the owners see value in documenting the buildings while they still stand.

Before the GLC research fellowship commences, I would be able to photograph a second session of camp life at Indian Field in October 2018, and when presenting my research would include both my research findings and historical imagery along with a photography portfolio of current camp meetings. A selection of images from 2017 is included with this research statement. The GLC fellowship would allow me to show how revival meetings form a microcosm of the country’s current dynamic in terms of gender and race as it plays out in America’s spiritual life. By researching its origins and history, I hope to shed light on its future evolution.

## References

<sup>1</sup> Smith, Jessie C. *Black Firsts: 4,000 Groundbreaking and Pioneering Historical Events* (3rd ed.), pp. 1820–1821. "Methodists: 1781". Visible Ink Press (Canton), 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Morgan, Philip. *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry*, p. 655. UNC Press (Chapel Hill), 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Lyon, Keith Dwayne. *God's Brush Arbor: Camp Meeting Culture during the Second Great Awakening, 1800-1860*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Tennessee Knoxville, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Woodward, Stan. *Indian Field Camp Meeting*. The Woodward Studio Limited, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Brekus, Catherine A. *Let Your Women Keep Silence in the Churches: Female Preaching and Evangelical Religion in America, 1740-1845*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Brekus, Catherine A. *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in American, 1740 – 1845*. The University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Sackett, Schuyler. *Methodist Camp Meetings*, Odyssey Productions, 2007.



































































































