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A SHATTERED GULF COAST

## After Hurricane, Eyes on Historic Area

- An endangered black community founded by an emancipated man in 1866 hopes to parlay the recent spotlight into lasting support.

By Elizabeth Mehren, Times Staff Writer

GULFPORT, Miss. — The Reconstruction-era black neighborhood of Turkey Creek was already in danger of disappearing when Hurricane Katrina came to call.

A Wal-Mart and an enormous car dealership had moved close by, taking over land that once held deep woods. A low-income apartment complex popped up, and part of Turkey Creek's old burial ground was paved for a parking lot. The community's lush wetlands were fast filling up — and the nearby airport was looking to expand, which would potentially eat up still more of Turkey Creek's open space.

"It was like an apple that had been eaten," said Derrick Evans, a seventh-generation descendant of the community's founding family. "All that was left was the core. But at least we still had the seeds."

Like the rest of coastal Mississippi, Turkey Creek was reeling four weeks after Katrina. But residents of this venerable settlement also were looking forward — reasoning that the hurricane might bring recognition to one of southern Mississippi's few historic areas to survive the storm.

"Katrina has focused interest and attention on a part of the country that nobody really knows about," said Evans, 38. "The Mississippi Gulf Coast is a heretofore unobserved, unappreciated treasure. And Turkey Creek is one of the most interesting cultural enclaves you will find here."

The community took root in 1866, when a newly emancipated black man named Samuel Evans encountered a small paradise about eight miles from the Gulf of Mexico. There was a roaring creek with a canopy of trees that made it feel like the Amazon. There were alligators, large squirrels and an abundance of wild turkeys.

The land in Turkey Creek was so rich, locals say, that you could plant a pig tail and grow a pig.

Evans purchased 80 acres, and soon his friend Jefferson White bought 80 more. The Evans and White homesteads formed the foundation for a community that prospered while segregation kept it separate from surrounding Gulfport.

Turkey Creek had stores and industry. For generations, most of the men made charcoal or worked in a lumber treatment plant that manufactured railroad ties and telephone poles. The village had its own post office and church, and the first African American school on the Gulf Coast. At its peak, about 1,000 people lived in Turkey Creek.

Many bungalows were built in the early 20th century and passed down for generations. Nearly all of the one-story, wood-frame homes were flooded by Katrina, and about half were badly damaged.

Of the 70 homes and about 300 people in Turkey Creek, just a few of the families are white. Nearly everyone in the neighborhood is related.

"We have always been a living community, since 1866," said Martha Snelling, 56, a descendant of Jefferson White. "We have the same families living here who have been here since the beginning."

Snelling worked with the University of Southern Mississippi to develop an oral history of Turkey Creek. The tapes were destroyed when Katrina flooded the university building where they were stored, Snelling said.

Gulfport largely ignored the small African American settlement nestled within its 70 square miles. The neighborhood had to provide its own drinking water. The city — present population 72,000 — did not pave Turkey Creek's roads or put curbs on its sidewalks.

"We were always sort of isolated," said Lettie Caldwell, 70. "We were hand-me-downs from the past."

Starting about 15 years ago, Derrick Evans said, the city began to target the area around Turkey Creek for development.

"There was bad zoning, bad development and indiscriminate permitting," he said.

Caldwell, for one, said the neighborhood was slow to react.

Two years ago, Evans returned to Turkey Creek from Boston, where he had been teaching civil rights history at Boston College. He formed Turkey Creek Community Initiatives, a nonprofit group that wants to protect the neighborhood by turning it into an urban greenway.

"If you say this [effort] is about me and my mother and my cousin — about black folk and African American history — that doesn't work in Mississippi," Evans said. "If you cast it as an historical area with environmental significance, that could work."

In 2001, the Mississippi Heritage Trust named the neighborhood one of the state's 10 most endangered historic places. The next year, an early Turkey Creek homes joined the National Register of Historic Places.

Neither designation is enough to stop development, said Trisha Miller, a staff attorney with the Washington-based Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, which is advising Turkey Creek as it seeks historical status.

"This was a community that was threatened before the hurricane and was fighting to rebuild itself," Miller said.

Storm damage to many Turkey Creek homes is so extensive that "the city might not say they are up to code, but they could be preserved as historic," she said.

Representatives from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the National Trust for Historic Preservation recently visited Turkey Creek to assess the damage.

"We're on the case," said National Trust President Richard Moe. "It was enormously important in the first place to preserve a community like this, but I think it is even more important given the tremendous losses in this region due to Katrina."

In the living room of the house his grandfather built, Derrick Evans said the legacy of Reconstruction lived on in his neighborhood's strong values.

Rebuilding is an almost insurmountable challenge, he said. But Turkey Creek has an advantage: "One way you could look at it," he said, is "we've been through reconstruction before."