

# The Plains Post 2

Plains, Georgia

Spring 2023



## *Lessons from the farm*

*Carter's boyhood farm*  
Archery, Georgia



# Lessons from the farm

“I say to you quite frankly that the time for racial discrimination is over.”

Governor Jimmy Carter's [Inaugural Address](#)  
January 12, 1971

JIMMY CARTER is a son of the South and of a Southern segregationist, James Earl Carter Sr.

His life's journey ran from a white farmhouse to the White House. He traveled from a racist society through the Georgia governor's mansion to a [Nobel Peace Prize](#) in 2002 “for his decades of untiring effort” to find peace, advance democracy and human rights, promote economic and social development.

Along the way, he chose paths — particularly regarding race — many of his contemporaries didn't.

Carter's mother, Lillian, gave birth to him at Wise Sanitarium, a then-new hospital in Plains where she was trained and worked as a registered nurse. She was the rare white nurse willing to care for black patients, whose rooms were in the small building at the rear, out of sight from Hospital Street. Ninety-eight years later, the whole place is named for her: the Lillian G. Carter Nursing Center.



Jack and Rachel Clark's picture on the mantel of their house on the Carter family farm.

But Carter didn't spend his boyhood in Plains. From the age of 4, he lived on his family's farm in Archery a couple of miles west. It was named for the Sublime Order of Archery, a relief organization of the A.M.E. (African Methodist Episcopal) Church, which helped black families in the South. The Carters were one of two white families in Archery, which had 29 families.

Carter cited his mother and a black woman, Rachel Clark, as among the most important influences in his life. Clark and her husband Jack, a day laborer on the farm, lived in a house on the property.

Today when visiting the Clark's house, a National Park Service recording of Jimmy Carter's voice tells how he and Rachel would walk six miles to a stream to fish together. Sometimes they would take train trips together. And when Carter's parents would go off on trips, he stayed with the Clarks and slept on a pallet on their floor.

“In later years I'd visit Rachel's home in public housing,” Carter's narration says. “Sometimes I'd find  
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*Carter house*  
Archery, Georgia





*Jack and Rachel Clark's house*  
On the Carter farm



# *Lessons from the farm*

— *Continued*

her on a village street. Then, still a queen, her apron sagging with a can of beer, she'd laugh about what good times there had been and tell me what she thought I ought to do in Washington, where I was working."

If that sounds contrived, saccharine, perhaps it is.

Carter "is a practicing public historian interpreting his own legacy," Evan Kutzler told me in his office at Georgia Southwestern State University (Carter's first college alma mater) in Americus, where he's a professor and public historian. When Kutzler came to the university, he lived in Jill Stuckey's boarding house, which I wrote about in the previous newsletter. He was at her table for many of the Sunday evening dinners at which the Carters were guests.

Little in Carter's public record suggests his racial evolution was in progress until the inaugural speech in Atlanta quoted at the top of this story. His first public office in 1955 was on the Sumter County School Board. It was an appointed office — the county's all-white grand jury made them — and it was his late father's seat.

“*Jimmy Carter “is a practicing public historian interpreting his own legacy.”*

The year of that appointment is significant. Just a year before, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its unanimous school desegregation decision in the case of *Brown vs the Board of Education of Topeka*. It said that racially segregated schools, even if they were equal in measurable aspects, nevertheless violated the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment guarantee of equal treatment under the law. The amendment, which also granted citizenship to former slaves, was adopted after the Civil War. All states that seceded had to ratify the amendment as a condition of being readmitted to the union.

Nevertheless, Carter pushed policies to “equalize” Sumter County's clearly inferior black schools — precisely what the court had just banned — by building new schools for black students and providing buses for the first time to get them there. In eight years on the board, including time as chair, he never pushed to abolish the racially separate systems under the board's jurisdiction, according to a local political scientists's study of board minutes, part of a 597-page [National Park Service-funded report](#).

Jason Berggren of Georgia Southwestern said Carter was criticized by whites, however, for supporting a 1961 plan to merge the separate Americus and county school systems, each of which operated separate black and white schools, because they considered that a move toward eventual desegregation. [Voters rejected the plan](#), but the systems [ultimately merged in 1994](#) long after they were integrated.

“I think sometimes the coverage of Mr. Carter is more of a hagiography,” Berggren said. News stories are “kind of like an elevated presentation and sometimes bordering on more of a mythology. They

sometimes stress, you know, the importance of his mother. And she is very important, of course, in understanding who Mr. Carter is and who he was through his career. But I argue that it's also important to understand Mr. Earl Carter's influence. And I think in a lot of ways that Jimmy Carter often tried to live up to his father and to emulate his father, and that included his political involvement."

Delaying school desegregation as long as possible was a widespread Southern response to the Supreme Court's 1954 decision. ["Massive resistance"](#) by local officials meant some [cities or counties attempted to close public schools altogether](#) rather than desegregate. [It wasn't until 1966, 12 years after Brown v Board was decided and nearly four years after Carter left the school board, that 17 black students, known as the Plains 17,](#) enrolled at Plains High School, a previously all-white school in Sumter County.

Even in the present day, nostalgic memories seemed to have been at work in Carter's mind. His narration inside his family farm's commissary describes such stores as mutually beneficial to farm owner and worker — a favor to employees — failing to mention how many farm owners abused the practice for their own gain. "If (workers) wanted to buy their pair of shoes or a shirt or some tobacco, they didn't have to worry about credit because they had great credit since the landowner knew them well," Carter's audio recording says. "And since the landowner knew that when he paid them for their work, he could collect the bill."

Country singer Tennessee Ernie Ford sang mournfully about this kind of lending and the plight of white Appalachian coal miners in his signature 1955 hit ["Sixteen Tons"](#):

*You load 16 tons, what do you get?  
Another day older and deeper in debt.  
St. Peter, don't you call me 'cause I can't go.  
I owe my soul to the company store.*

By tying an employees' economic activity solely to his employer, company stores and sharecropping [effectively re-enslaved some black workers after the Civil War and permanently indebted both blacks and poor whites](#), historians say. I've seen no evidence that Earl Carter used his store for this purpose, and I'm aware of one instance where he hired a black man, sharecropper Sydney Mahone, who had fled an Alabama farm in fear of his life after a pay dispute. Carter may not have been aware of Mahone's situation, but Carter did hire Mahone to work in Archery, his grandson told me.

Sam Mahone joined the [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee](#) (SNCC, pronounced "snick") while Carter was on the county school board. Mahone, who did not know of his grandfather's history at the time, was arrested twice during peaceful civil rights protests and once was sentenced to a county chain gang during "a very, very tense, violent period" in the 1960s.

In 1963, for example, 15 black girls ages 12 to 15 lined up at the main entrance to the Americus movie theater rather than at the back-alley entrance designated for black customers. [The girls were arrested and jailed in the Leesburg Stockade](#) — a squalid Civil War-era jail 20 miles away — for 45 days without charges or informing their parents. A SNCC photographer managed to get some pictures of them through the stockade windows, leading to their release ([here's a 7-minute documentary video](#)).

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*Company store*  
Carter farm commissary



# *Lessons from the farm*

— *Continued*

White Sumter County Attorney William Fortson advocated in 1965 for a bi-racial reconciliation group as a curb against violence. He was presented with a 2,000-signature petition demanding his firing. First Methodist Church in Americus told him he was no longer welcome. [Fortson finally moved his family out of town after his son and daughter were attacked on a playground by boys wielding baseball bats.](#)

"During the Civil Rights Movement, there was no word at all out of the Carter family in terms of civil rights," Mahone told me on Zoom from Atlanta. "He probably would have been run out of town." But Mahone came to trust Carter the politician "from what I read about him in terms of his own experiences in Archery and his relationship with African Americans who made up the town of Archery."

Another Americus Civil Rights figure, the Rev. William Howard, who will figure more prominently in the next newsletter, had no recollection at all of Carter during the early '60s. Howard said he didn't hear of Carter until Carter became Georgia governor when Howard was at Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey.

"I wasn't that drawn to the guy," Howard said to me. "I just heard about him and that he was a peanut farmer. ... But an A.M.E. bishop, friend of mine, [John Hurst Adams](#), said to me, 'Hey, your homeboy's running for president and we're going to support him.' And I said, 'Wow, tell me why.' Because Bishop Adams was someone that I admired. And he said, 'Well, we would like to support a candidate who knows black people.' And he went on to explain to me something of Jimmy Carter's background."

I was treated with unfailing kindness during my five days in Georgia. The convenience store clerk who saw me waiting for the restroom gave me the key to the employee toilet. The night clerk at my motel offered me the bottle of water that was going to keep her company until morning so I wouldn't have to buy some for my CPAP machine. I declined.

The woman in charge of parking at Georgia Southwestern tore up my \$25 ticket. I accepted. In full disclosure, I must say I'm white, have a slight limp, speak the native tongue, habitually say "ma'am," and my rental car had Florida plates.

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... there was no word at all out of the Carter family in terms of civil rights. He probably would have been run out of town.

Bobby Fuse told me he graduated in 1970 as the first black student at Americus High. Retired back home after a career as a public-school administrator in central Georgia and Atlanta, the place he returned to is still engaged in massive resistance to racial integration. Black and white residents gather for the Christmas parade along separate downtown Americus streets.

According to Georgia Department of Education statistics, in Sumter County where 49% of the population is white, only 7% of public-school students are white and 78% are black. In Americus,



private [Southland Academy](#) has [452 students in 12 grades, all but eight of whom are white](#).

“At some point, (Southland) figured out that they've got to move away from the ‘all-white’ designation,” Fuse said on a Zoom call. “They realized that ‘We've got to get some black kids in here.’ ... They always make sure they have one or two (black) boys and girls over there.”

Southland’s website touts a 100% college acceptance rate for its seniors, but state statistics rank the local public schools [210<sup>th</sup> among Georgia’s 221 districts](#) in combined math and reading proficiency. The county’s majority white school boards have a history of cutting property tax rates for education, which critics say was because white members were paying tuition for their children and grandchildren to attend Southland and had no incentive to support more resources for black schools.

[Jimmy Carter was among those critics](#). “What the school board attempts to do in Sumter County is hold down expenditures to a bare minimum in order to keep property taxes low, without any real consideration for the quality of education for public-school children,” he said.

After the Supreme Court in 2013 struck down part of the Voting Rights Act, which had prevented most Southern states from changing voting laws without federal approval, the school board districts were redrawn. [The nine-district board with a 6-3 black majority became seven seats with a 2-5 black minority](#).

A federal appeals court in Atlanta held in October 2020 that the [new districts were unconstitutional](#) under a surviving part of the Voting Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination because of race. The 2020 election a month after that decision produced a [4-3 black majority school board](#). Last November’s election did not change the board’s makeup.

I did not ask Plains Mayor Boze Godwin about the county school board, but he chose to use local education as an example in explaining his answer to my question whether the nation is in a better place today than it was during Carter’s White House years. Godwin said it’s worse.

“I think they're doing the children a big disservice by not giving them a good, solid education to survive in this world — math and history and English and stuff, just basic education,” he said. “Kids coming in now, they can’t even make change.” He said the reason for this educational failure is because “politicians nowadays are concerned with their ideology rather than the operation of the country.”

Fuse didn’t blame Carter, either, for what he agreed was a nation now in worse shape.

“I think very little can be laid at his individual feet, or anybody else's individual feet,” Fuse said. “We have spent, African Americans have spent, so much time on — and to a degree, the press or the media or society as a whole — in misrepresenting Martin Luther King Jr., for example, or (Congressman) John Lewis. The accolades that King Jr., gets are almost saintly as opposed to the common man. It's not Carter. It's all of us. All of us, whites and blacks, have retreated from trying to live in a better country. We expel people out of state legislatures who talk about saving children's lives. That's where we are. And there's not any one politician, it's all of us as ‘people of goodwill.’ We just have not done enough to continue to make the world a better place to live.”





*Remains of Archery*  
Half-mile west of Carter farm





*St. Mark A.M.E. Church*  
Archery, Georgia



# Who did I interview?

EVAN KUTZLER grew up in Tennessee and boarded in Jill Stuckey's house for two years in what she labeled the "Conception Room" in Plains. It's named for the fact that Earl and Lillian Carter,



Evan Kutzler

Jimmy Carter's parents, moved into that room when they were first married. He was a guest at many of the Sunday evening dinners Stuckey hosted for the Carters, "When I've tried to start down tougher conversations (with Carter), those doors have closed," he said. "And I made a choice early on that I would do my research on the side. I wasn't going to force questions at dinner or at a community event that would change my kind of place within the Plains community. I'm not his biographer. I also had to live there." Here's his website: <https://evankutzler.com/>

JASON BERGGREN has been to Sunday School a lot. Squeezed in with the various political science courses he teaches at Georgia Southwestern is one on Religion in American Politics, which is useful in Jimmy Carter country. As part of his research on Carter, Berggren began going to Carter's classes at Maranatha Baptist Church in 2009, his first semester at GSW, and figures the last one he went to was 2017. Carter's last was in 2019. "I always told people that if you ever get to Plains, it is going to be a lifelong memory and treasure, that you're going to have to be able to see a former president in action, see a former president speak on a regular basis, sharing intimate aspects of his life and sharing it with the public."



Jason Berggren



*Train*

Carter farm crossing, Archery





*Mule at lunch*  
Carter farm

**SAM MAHONE** now is retired in Atlanta, where he worked as a state archivist and owned an art gallery specializing in African art. He first met Carter at the Americus-Sumter County Civil Rights Movement's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in 2013 honoring Carter, and which Mahone chaired. He did not know then that his grandfather had worked on the Carter farm. Mahone discovered that at a funeral a few years ago. "I learned about the relatives, other relatives, who lived there during that time and were actually buried there in the cemetery. I went down to the cemetery and found about seven or eight headstones, including my grandfather's." He is currently working on the Americus Civil Rights Museum and Interpretive Center, which will be located in the old Colored Hospital in Americus.



Sam Mahone

**BOBBY FUSE** is nearing the end of his term as chair of board of commissioners of the Housing Authority of the City Americus. When he was allowed to pick previously all-white Americus High School in the



Bobby Fuse

first year of a "freedom of choice" plan to partially integrate schools, he — as an accomplished timpanist — was looking forward to playing in a marching band for the first time. Instead, he was relegated to the beginners' band his first three years. His senior year, the longtime band director resigned. The school music program was taken out of the school and put in hands of parents in their private homes. "So that trick was used to deny me the opportunity to be a marching band member. And it was all because they didn't want to take on the danger (of having him in their homes)."





*Field trip*  
Carter farm



# Notes on photos

All photos in this newsletter were shot in Archery, location of the Carter family farm where Jimmy Carter grew up.

**CARTER'S BOYHOOD FARM** — Undoubtedly, under National Park Service care, the farm presents a more idyllic scene today with its mown grass fields and maintained structures than it did when Carter lived and worked there with the people who were toiling over crops, animals and equipment beginning at 4 a.m. Dirt was a bigger feature of the landscape then. But what this place does well, despite its museum neatness, is convey an appreciation of how hard it was to work farmland.

**CARTER HOUSE** — I did not spend much time inside other than to note there was a primitive shower — a bucket suspended overhead in a metal-lined enclosure — and a table set with food in a dining room in the front of the house that was used on Sundays or when guests came. Jimmy had his own bedroom.

**JACK AND RACHEL CLARK'S HOUSE** — I expected it to be pretty basic, but the impression that lingered with me was the wood siding. There was no insulation on the interior side, and it can get uncomfortably cold some nights, even in southwest Georgia.

**COMPANY STORE** — The store's normal hours were Saturdays, but if you wanted to buy something at another time, it would be opened for you.

**REMAINS OF ARCHERY** — The community is not part of the historical park. Except for these houses and the church, located north of the railroad tracks, most of the settlement is gone. South of the tracks was where most of the families lived. Also gone from south of the tracks is the Johnson Home Industrial College, which was founded in 1912 by William Decker Johnson, an A.M.E. bishop, to educate black students.

**ST. MARK A.M.E. CHURCH** — This present-day church is still active. I left several voicemails for its pastor before my trip and asked other contacts to put in a word for me, but she did not return my calls. The cornerstone for this building is in the inset picture. The [African Methodist Episcopal Church](#) was founded in 1787 (two years before ratification of the U.S. Constitution) in Philadelphia, the first Protestant denomination founded in the United States by black people. Worshipers who were members of the Free African Society were pulled off their knees while praying in white Methodist churches, demonstrating "just how far American Methodists would go to enforce racial discrimination against African Americans," the [church's website history says](#).



**TRAIN** — This freight train is running westbound from Plains on the Georgia Southwestern Railroad immediately across the road from the Carter farm. As I mentioned in the previous newsletter, which had a picture of the depot in Plains, this railroad was once the Seaboard Coast Line, which I worked on during summers home from college. When Jimmy Carter and Rachel Clark took their train trips together, they boarded the Seaboard Air Line Railroad (it merged with the Atlantic Coast Line when I was in high school in the 1960s) here at a platform that now serves tourist trains. It is unlikely they sat together, however. [Jim Crow laws in Southern states requiring separate areas for black and white passengers were enforced until 1965](#), when Carter was a state senator.

**MULE AT LUNCH** — Before tractors and other mechanized farm equipment came into use, mule power was essential on Southern farms. Jack Clark's primary responsibility was caring for these animals and, according to the park service information, his was the only job at the farm that worked seven days a week.

**FIELD TRIP** — Two busloads of kids from the Sumter County Primary School (note the red SCPS T-shirts) were visiting the Carter farm the day I was there.

**MORNING HAS BROKEN** — Another view of the Carter farm looking east toward the commissary. The song of this name was made famous in pop music by British singer-songwriter [Cat Stevens, Muslim name Yusuf Islam](#) ([YouTube video](#)). The tune is Bunessan, a Scottish Gaelic melody, and English writer Elizabeth Farjeon composed the lyrics, based on the creation story in Genesis, in 1931. It's hymn 469 in The Presbyterian Hymnal but also in many other hymnals.

*Morning has broken like the first morning  
Blackbird has spoken like the first bird  
Praise for the singing, praise for the morning  
Praise for them springing fresh from the world*

*Sweet the rains new fall, sunlit from heaven  
Like the first dewfall on the first grass  
Praise for the sweetness of the wet garden  
Sprung in completeness where his feet pass*

*Mine is the sunlight, mine is the morning  
Born of the one light, Eden saw play  
Praise with elation, praise every morning  
God's recreation of the new day*





*Morning has broken*  
Carter farm