MOVING MIDWAY

A Film by
Godfrey Cheshire

98 Minutes, Color & B/W, 2008

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CREDITS
Written and directed by Godfrey Cheshire
Produced by Godfrey Cheshire, Vincent Farrell, Jay Spain
Executive Producer: R.B. Reeves
Chief Historian/Associate Producer: Robert Hinton
Cinematography: Jay Spain
Editors: Ramsey Fendall, Greg Loser
Composer: Ahrin Mishan
Blues Songs by Algia Mae Hinton
Running Time: 98 minutes

SYNOPSIS
In the spring of 2004, New York-based film critic Godfrey Cheshire returns to his home state of North Carolina and hears some startling news from his cousin Charles Hinton ("Charlie") Silver, who owns their family's ancestral home, Midway Plantation. Disturbed by Raleigh's encroaching urban sprawl, Charlie and his wife Dena propose to uproot all of Midway's antebellum buildings – located on land their ancestors the Hintons acquired in 1739 – and move them to an as yet undetermined location.

The idea is a controversial one within Cheshire and Silver's extended family. Some are concerned about the impact on the plantation's ghosts, especially Miss Mary "Mimi"Hinton, an eccentric writer and historian who ruled over Midway when Godfrey and Charlie were children. Charlie also reveals that a recent visit from an African-American man, who subsequently died, has provided evidence for something their family had never suspected: that a liaison between their great-great-great-grandfather and a slave left them with an extensive African American branch of the family.

Back in New York, a letter to the editor of The New York Times Book Review leads Cheshire to Dr. Robert Hinton, a New York University historian in the Africana Studies program who says that his grandfather was born a slave at Midway. While sharing Cheshire's surprise at their chance encounter, Dr. Hinton agrees to join him in investigating not only the past and problematic present of Midway but also the extraordinary impact of the Southern plantation on American history and culture.

Thus begins a double journey. While observing the elaborate, controversy-clouded preparations for and eventual execution of the plantation buildings' move over a visually spectacular landscape of fields and a rock quarry, Cheshire and Dr. Hinton also trace the way the Southern plantation evolved from a crucial economic institution (first worked by white indentured servants, later by African slaves) into a polemically-charged mythic icon that profoundly shaped Americans' ideas of race. Ever-changing, the icon informed a succession of pop-culture milestones: The best-selling American novel and play ever (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its theatrical version), the most popular movies of the silent era (*Birth of a Nation*, supposedly based on Cheshire's family) and the sound era (*Gone with the Wind*), and the most-watched miniseries in U.S. television history (*Roots*).

Each of these cultural landmarks not only reflected Americans' ideas of themselves, but also molded those understandings. Spurred by Roots' powerful account of plantation life from the slaves' point-of-view, many African Americans began to research their family histories and to explore their ancestors' connection to Southern plantations. Extending through time, this interest produces a surprise for Cheshire and Dr. Hinton when they are contacted by an African American New Yorker named Al Hinton, who says his research indicates that his family came from Midway. Al then introduces them to his father, 96-year-old Abraham Lincoln Hinton, who clearly recalls his grandfather, Ruffin Hinton, born in 1848, the mixed-race ancestor whose existence Charlie Silver revealed earlier.

By the time Midway is ready for its reopening party, the family that Cheshire and Silver began with has been redefined forever, and two streams of family memory – long separated by the "great forgetting" that followed the Civil War – have begun to be reunited. This is not the end of a four-century drama marked by enormous tragedy and injustice, of course. At best, the family – like America – is only midway on the long journey from slavery to full racial reconciliation. Yet the good will and sense of delighted discovery that marks Midway's reopening – the first party to which both black and white family members are invited – offer a tentative indication of the way forward.

FACTS TO NOTE:

• It is not accurate to say that Moving Midway represents the discovery of an African-American branch of the Cheshire family. The Cheshires, also an old North Carolina family, were mostly lawyers and ministers, not slave-owning planters. The family with the black and white branches is the Hintons, from whom Godfrey's mother and her family, the Silvers, descend.

• As far as is known, Robert Hinton ***is not*** kin to Godfrey Cheshire or his cousins. Nor is he kin to Al and Abraham Hinton. His ancestors were slaves who were owned by the Hintons and took their name. The same is true of most black Hintons today.

• As far as we know, Godfrey Cheshire ***is*** kin to Al and Abraham Hinton and their many cousins. Their common ancestor is Charles Lewis Hinton (Abraham's greatgrandfather and Godfrey's great-great-great grandfather) who in 1848 fathered a son, Ruffin Hinton, by a plantation slave.

FILMMAKERS

Godfrey Cheshire (Writer, Director, Producer) is a film critic, journalist and filmmaker based in New York City. A native of North Carolina, he co-founded Raleigh's Spectator Magazine and began writing film criticism professionally in 1978. After moving to New York in 1991, he served for a decade as chief film critic for New York Press; his writings have also appeared in The New York Times, Variety, Film Comment, The Village Voice, Interview, Cineaste and other publications. His reviews currently appear in North Carolina's Independent Weekly, where they have won three Arts Criticism awards from the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies.

Cheshire's areas of special interest include Iranian film, the conversion to digital cinema and cinematic representations of the American South. He is a former chairman of the New York Film Critics Circle and a member of the National Society of Film Critics.

Jay Spain (Producer, Cinematographer) is a versatile filmmaker based in Raleigh, N.C., who runs his own production company, The Communications Group, through which he has created award-winning films, commercials, videos and media productions. In addition to producing and photographing several independent dramatic features, he made his directorial debut with Live and Let Go (2004), an acclaimed documentary about a terminally ill man's decision to end his life. He is currently directing and producing a documentary about the life of 1957 Guggenheim Fellow, writer and clinical psychologist Lucy Daniels, titled In Her Own Voice.

Vincent Farrel (Producer) is the founder of Iron Films, a New York-based production company. Since its inception in September 2000, Iron Films has produced films including Until the Violence Stops (by Eve Ensler from the Vagina Monologues, shown at Sundance and aired on Lifetime Television in 2004) and Fur, a narrative feature about Diane Arbus, starring Nicole Kidman and Robert Downey, Jr. Farrell is currently Head of Production at R/GA's Digital Studio, specializing in interactive and digital production for the advertising industry.

R.B. Reeves (Executive Producer) operates Metro Magazine, a successful monthly city regional magazine serving the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill, N.C. area. A native of North Carolina who previously founded, published and edited the weekly Spectator Magazine, Reeves has extensive experience in N.C. journalism, business and fund-raising. A well-known essayist who has won several prizes in journalism, he is also the founder of the Raleigh Spy Conference.

Ramsey Fendall (Editor) is a New York City-based editor originally from Vancouver, British Columbia. Through his work at The Edit Center, he has overseen a variety of narrative and documentary films, including Frozen River (ND/NF, 2008), An American Soldier (Sundance, 2008), The Understudy, Manhattan Kansas (SXSW, 2006), The Garage and Head Trauma. More recent work includes editing on the documentaries Hotel Gramercy Park and Ice Music. His current documentary projects include Seven Studios and Skatopia.

Greg Loser (Editor) attended The George Washington University in Washington, D.C., where he studied film and television. After school he worked briefly in broadcast advertising before returning home to Massachusetts to make his first short film. Since 2005, Greg has lived and worked in New York City where his projects have included documentaries, short films and music videos. In addition to his editing work, Greg created Moving Midway's distinctive graphics, maps and animated family trees.

Ahrin Mishan (Composer) is a musician-filmmaker whose feature work as composer includes Ramin Serri's Maryam and Lodge Kerrigan's Claire Dolan, for which he won the Georges Delerue Grand Prize for Best Music at the 1998 Flanders International Film Festival (shared with Simon Fisher Turner). As a filmmaker, he co-directed and composed the music for the acclaimed documentary short Bui Doi: Life Like Dust. On television, he has composed for First Person (Errol Morris, director), JFK: Reckless Youth (ABC) and Fling (Paramount) as well as the recent series Whoopi! (NBC) and Ed (NBC/Viacom). A native of Los Angeles, Mishan is currently based in New York.

Algia Mae Hinton (Blues Songs by) is a noted performer whose style of Piedmont blues (referring to the Piedmont region of the Carolinas, Virginia and Georgia) has roots that conceivably thread back through plantations like the Hintons' to Africa. Born in 1929 in Johnston County, N.C., she learned to play guitar at age nine and performed as a buckdancer and musician throughout her youth. Yet much of her life was consumed with farm work and raising seven children alone, after the early death of her husband. She made her professional debut in 1978, and went on to become a popular performer at venues ranging from folk festivals to Carnegie Hall. Her debut album, Honey Babe, was released in 1999.

IN THE SOUTH FROM THE INSIDE: DIRECTOR'S STATMENT

When my cousin Charlie Silver told me he and his wife Dena were considering uprooting Midway Plantation's buildings from the ground where they'd stood since well before the Civil War, my first reaction was shock. The idea seemed bizarre, inconceivable, almost sacrilegious. My second reaction, which occurred not too long after the first, was, "I should make a film about this."

Initially, I intended only to get a digital camera and make a family document. But when I told friends in New York about my project, several said, "You should make a real film." In considering what a "real film" might be in this case, I realized it couldn't just deal with one plantation's moving, it would have to deal with the Southern plantation's meaning. This was a subject that had long fascinated me. The plantation was a key institution in the first two and a half centuries of American history, but if you say the words "Southern plantation" to people today, the reactions you'll get are often surprisingly emotional, and veer between extremes of approbation and opprobrium. Such reactions, it seems to me, have less to do with the historical plantation than with the pro and con myths of the plantation developed and disseminated by popular culture, including movies.

From the moment I decided to make a “real film,” I intended to interweave Narrative sections chronicling the family ordeal of moving Midway with what I called Essay sections examining the Southern plantation as a mythic image and its curious, ceaselessly evolving, ever-contentious passage through the American mind.

But almost as soon as I started making the film, these Narrative and Essay elements indicated a third component: Race. And it was at this point that my logical framework for the film seemed to give way to the strange and quasi-miraculous. I was literally sitting in my apartment in New York wondering how the film could deal with slavery when I opened The New York Times Sunday Book Review and read a letter from Dr. Robert Hinton, a professor of Africana Studies at NYU who said he’d grown up in Raleigh. Since Hinton is the name of my mother’s ancestors who built Midway, I could scarcely believe the coincidence, which was compounded when I called Dr. Hinton and he told me that – of all the Hinton plantations in the South – his grandfather was born slave at Midway.

In becoming my primary collaborator, Robert helped fuse the film’s Narrative and Essay sections: He had not only a personal connection to both the past and present of Midway, but also a scholar’s grasp of the plantation’s role in American history and culture. Yet Robert’s appearance was not the last of the surprising twists our story took.

Two years after I met him, Midway had been moved yet we still hadn’t solved the mystery presented by the man who had told Charlie that our family had African American relatives due to a long-ago liaison between one of our ancestors and a plantation cook. One day, Robert received an email from a teacher named Al Hinton in Brooklyn who said he traced his ancestry back to Midway. It was through this uncannily timely communication that I discovered and began to meet many of the roughly 100 African-American cousins I now know I have.

Once again, the film changed in ways I could never have anticipated when I started it. Indeed, it now seems to me not that I told the story of Midway, but that it told its story through me. “If these walls could speak.” Or rather, “If this house could make a movie.”

I find that some viewers pick up on issues that are indicated only implicitly in the film. For example, is “Midway” the set of buildings, the land they stand on, or the fusion of the two? And if you rip the buildings from the land, does the place’s spirit survive? The film doesn’t try to posit final answers here; the questions linger in the air.

Likewise, is the South changing too fast, losing its distinctive culture and character as plantations are banished to make way for anonymous chain stores and strip malls? Or is the region’s rapid homogenization a small price to pay for wrenching it away from a past that includes such a heavy load of injustice, racism and other miseries?

In posing such questions, I realize I am doing so from a self-consciously Southern point of view. Growing up, I was aware that many of my impressions about the region came from movies and TV shows created by outsiders. Whether they caricatured or romanticized the South, they often seemed to miss its essence, its real truths.

That began to change with the rise of independent cinema. From the pioneering works of Ross McElwee and Victor Nunez through films by more recent directors such as Phil Morrison, Craig Brewer, David Gordon Green, Macky Alston and Tim Kirkman, Southerners are finally able to see the region depicted “from the inside,” in all its contradictory complexity, its roiling mix of fact, myth and pure cussedness.

I hope that the end result of my own exploration in Moving Midway is not regarded as a statement about the region but the beginning of a conversation that viewers will continue outside the theater, a conversation about the possibilities for the future given the ways the South's bloody, mythic past continues to infuse every fiber of its present.

— Godfrey Cheshire

THE FAMILY

Charles Hinton ("Charlie," "Pooh") Silver, Jr., first cousin to filmmaker Godfrey Cheshire, grew up at Midway Plantation and inherited it upon the death of his father in 1979. He and his wife Dena operate a consulting firm that serves the design, engineering and construction industries.

Dena Williams Silver grew up in northern California and married Charlie in 2000. They moved back to Midway in 2001. Dena and Charlie renovated the Beaver Dam plantation, another Hinton family home, while moving Midway.

Elizabeth Silver ("Sis") Cheshire, mother of Godfrey and aunt of Charlie, grew up at Midway Plantation with her older brothers Charles and Sprague and their mother, Bessie Hinton Silver. Sis and her husband, Buddy Cheshire, live in Raleigh.

Winston Sprague ("Winkie") Silver, Charlie's younger brother, lives and operates a marine salvage and construction business in Wanchese, on North Carolina's Roanoke Island.

John Wales ("Possum") Silver, younger brother of Charlie and Winkie, is a successful artist and gallery owner in Manteo, on Roanoke Island.

Betty Wales Silver Howison, mother of Charlie, Winkie and Possum, lived at Midway with her husband Charles until his death in 1979. She now lives in Raleigh.

Margret Silver, aunt to Godfrey and Charlie and mother of Mary, lived briefly at Midway after World War II with her husband Sprague. Maggie died in 2006.

Mary Hilliard Hinton Silver, first cousin to Godfrey and Charlie, is the daughter of Sprague and Maggie Silver. Mary, who used to climb Midway's trees, lives in Raleigh.

Jonas Johnston Carr Silver is the youngest of Charlie's three children. Jonas, a banker, lives with his wife Maiya and daughter Tilly in Raleigh.

Abraham Lincoln Hinton, grandson of Ruffin Hinton, was born in Raleigh in 1909. He moved to New York during the Great Depression and served in World War II. Abraham has lived in the same Harlem apartment for over 50 years.

Al Hinton, son of Abraham, was born and raised in New York and now teaches middle high school in Brooklyn. Al's research into his family history led to the reconnection of the black and the white sides of the extended Hinton family.

Joel Jean Parker, great-granddaughter of Ruffin Hinton, helps organize annual reunions of Ruffin's descendents. She lives in Raleigh.

Sylvia Wiggins, wife of the late Lawrence Wiggins Jr., who told Charlie Silver about Ruffin Hinton, operates the Helping Hand Mission, one of Raleigh's most celebrated charitable institutions.

SIGNIFICANT ANSCESTORS

John Hinton (1715-1784) came to central North Carolina with a royal land grant he secured in 1739. He served as a colonel of N.C. Militia in the American Revolution.

Mingo (171?-18??), a slave probably born in the Senegambia region of west Africa, is thought to have accompanied John Hinton on his first settlement in central N.C. He lived to a great age and was a legendary figure to subsequent generations of Hintons.

Charles Lewis Hinton (1783-1861) was twice treasurer of North Carolina in the 1840s. Family lore says that he built Midway as a wedding gift for his son David. After the death of his wife, he fathered a son, Ruffin, by a slave named Selanie, a plantation cook.

David (1826-1876) **and Mary Boddie Carr Hinton** (1833-1917) lived at Midway Plantation during the Civil War. Her portrait was stolen by Yankee troops, but recovered by slaves. After David's death, Mary ran the plantation for four decades.

Ruffin Hinton (1848-1936) was the mixed-race son of Charles Lewis Hinton and Selanie Toby, plantation cook, and the half-brother of David Hinton. After the Civil War, he owned a farm where some of his kin still live. He fathered 22 children by two wives, Easter and Mollie.

Mary Hilliard ("Mimi") Hinton (1869-1961), Godfrey and Charlie's great-great aunt, lived at Midway her entire life, inheriting it from her mother, Mary Boddie Carr Hinton. A prolific writer, historian, genealogist, artist and anti-suffragist, she bequeathed Midway to her great-nephew Charles Hinton Silver, Charlie's father.

MOVERS AND SHAKERS

Mike Blake, a third-generation house mover, supervised the moving of Midway Plantation. His firm Blake Moving Co. is based in Greensboro, N.C.

Rick Lambeth, restoration contractor and expert on historic structures, prepared Midway's buildings for the move. He is based in Louisburg, N.C.

Joel T. C. Williams, of Raleigh's Williams Realty and Building Co., Inc., is the general contractor who oversaw the moving and restoration of Midway.

Richard Hall, who runs Richard Hall Designs in Raleigh, designed the new kitchen and other additions to the "new" Midway.

Doug Boyd was Mayor of Knightdale, N.C., during the moving of Midway and the construction of The Shoppes at Midway Plantation, a shopping center. Both locations of Midway are within the town limits of Knightdale, which abuts Raleigh to the east.

Mike Chalk was Mayor Pro Tem of Knightdale during the moving of Midway.

Big Ed Watkins sold Charlie Silver the land for the new Midway. An entrepreneur, Big Ed no longer owns the popular downtown Raleigh restaurant that bears his name.

Tammy Arnold and her daughter **Brandy Hughes**, of Tammy's Touch Cleaning Service, did not believe in ghosts before becoming intimately acquainted with several while cleaning Midway. Tammy lost a number of employees who couldn't handle the ghosts.

THE EXPERTS

Robert Hinton teaches Africana Studies in the Department of Social and Cultural Analysis at New York University. A native of Raleigh, he did his Ph.D. dissertation at Yale on the transition from slave to free labor in areas of eastern North Carolina that included Hinton plantations. Robert, who lives in Brooklyn with his wife Annie and daughter Phoebe, is Moving Midway's Chief Historian and Associate Producer.

John Hope Franklin, the renowned dean of African-American historians, is the James B. Duke Emeritus Professor of History at Duke University in Durham, N.C. His many books include From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African-Americans, The Free Negro in North Carolina and The Militant South. He is the recipient of numerous honors including the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Lucinda H. MacKethan is the alumni distinguished professor of English at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. Her books include The Dream of Arcady: Place and Time in Southern Literature and Daughters of Time: Creating Woman's Voice in Southern Story.

Bruce Chadwick lectures on American History at Rutgers University and teaches writing at New Jersey City University. Among his several books, The Reel Civil War traces the evolution of the Plantation Myth from the beginning of American movies through Roots and subsequent films and TV shows.

Harry L. Watson is professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and director of UNC's Center for the Study of the American South. An expert in antebellum and North Carolina history, he is the co-editor of the journal Southern Cultures.

PRAISE FOR MOVING MIDWAY

Critic's Pick! "Extraordinarily rich. Takes up the agonies and ironies of Southern history with remarkable empathy, wit and learning. " -A.O. Scott, *The New York Times*

"[four stars] a potent meditation on our nation's past." -Elizabeth Weitzman, *NY Daily News*

"Enthralling … a roaring good time." –Ella Taylor, *Village Voice*

"Brilliantly fuses criticism and storytelling." –David Edelstein, *New York Magazine*

"Tenderhearted, tough-minded, witty and wise, *Midway* is moving indeed."
–Nathan Lee, *The Village Voice*

"A-! (Cheshire) demonstrates how popular mythology works its way into our private imaginations."
–Peter Rainer, *Christian Science Monitor*

"A fascinating story…boasts some quirky comic moments, but it's most notable for furthering the all-too-serious discussion of the South's racial legacy." –Mark Jenkins, *NPR*

"Could move you to happy tears." –Stuart Klawans, *The Nation*

"A-! Thoughtful, graceful, compassionate."
-Lisa Schwarzbaum, *Entertainment Weekly*

"A drama that has implications for us all…It is sad, funny, disturbing, warm…an emotional odyssey."
–Denise Sherman, *Eastern Wake News*

“Profound, inspiring, heartfelt.” –S. James Snyder, *New York Sun*

“Oddly compelling…satisfyingly Faulknerian.” –Kyle Smith, *New York Post*

★★★★½! “Fascinating … a superbly crafted cinematic essay on the evolving South and a profound commentary on America’s culture and its roots…a beautiful and poignantly personal film.”
-Alliance for Women Film Journalists

“Weighty, lighthearted, of historical import, and thoroughly entertaining.”
–Harvey S. Karten, *Film Journal International*

“An eye-opening family drama… surprisingly timely this election year.” –Ronnie Scheib, *Variety*

“Cheshire strikes gold … pulls back the lace curtains on the legacy of the Old South and shows that there are two sides - or more - to every story.” -Betsy Pickle, *Knoxville News-Sentinel*

"Evocative, whimsical, earnest, intelligent and homespun, Moving Midway entwines family memories and memorabilia with resonant context, while examining pop-culture images of plantation life (Uncle Tom's Cabin, Gone With the Wind, Roots). At the movie's core, though, is the house, from its founding through the grueling haul to its new rural home-a bittersweet feat wrapped in historical ironies that culminate in an integrated family celebration." -Gene Santoro, *American History Magazine*

“Knockout documentary. May be the most moving 98 minutes you’ll spend in a movie theater this year. ”
–Kurt Brokaw, *The Madison Avenue Journal*

Relocating a Plantation, And Reconnecting A Divided Racial Past
By Ellen Maguire, Special to *The Washington Post*

Godfrey Cheshire, a Manhattan film-critic-turned-director, and Robert Hinton, a professor of Africana studies at New York University, bonded immediately when they met 4 1/2 years ago. Both men had grown up in Raleigh, N.C., though with radically different perspectives.

Cheshire, who is white, speaks of wide lawns and country clubs; Hinton, who is black, recalls public housing projects and segregated schools. But both men trace their ancestry to Midway, a onetime tobacco plantation where Cheshire's great-great-grandfather owned Hinton's grandfather, a slave.

"I wish I didn't like Godfrey," says Hinton, 67, in an interview at his Brooklyn apartment. "But I do."

The push and pull of their freighted relationship fuels "Moving Midway," Cheshire's first film, which played at the New Directors/New Films festival in New York last year and was being released on DVD last month.

The documentary was already underway when the pair met. Midway's Greek revival-style plantation house, built in 1848 on land that has remained in one family since 1739, was being relocated a few miles to escape the encroaching sprawl of interstates and super-stores. Cheshire was filming the journey -- with the added ambition of mapping the complex cultural legacies of Southern plantation life.

In a coincidence that Cheshire calls "miraculous," he spotted a letter by Hinton in the New York Times Book Review. Cheshire knew the surname -- it was the same as Midway's original owner, one of Cheshire's forebears. A phone call revealed their shared heritage.

"I knew I had to include the African American experience in the film, but I didn't exactly know how," says Cheshire, 57, whose relatives still use euphemisms such as "our faithful retainers" to describe the family's slaves of bygone years.

Cheshire and Hinton began an intense, ongoing conversation about history and race. As far as they can determine, they are not kin -- a fact they seem to regret -- although, as Hinton notes, "my people were slaves of his people for 150 years, and it's hard to imagine that the line was not crossed at some point."

Hinton, who has a doctorate in history from Yale, joined the documentary's team off-screen as an associate producer and historian, and on-screen as a sharp and sympathetic foil to Cheshire's dispassionate narrator.

The resulting film is a scrupulous mix of memoir, engineering primer and historical analysis. Mostly tough-minded, sometimes funny and occasionally tender, the documentary also parses the ways in which Americans embrace or dodge the specter of slavery. Cheshire's original impulse -- to deconstruct the Southern plantation -- yields a complete re-imagining of his family: With Hinton's help, he eventually discovers a hundred or so African American cousins he never knew he had.

Through archival footage and interviews with Hinton and other scholars, Cheshire begins by tracing the evolution of the Southern plantation from its birth as the cornerstone of the Southern economy to its transformation into a celluloid icon. Myths are debunked: Tara in "Gone With the Wind" was, for the most part, the creation of a scenic painter; the Ku Klux Klan appropriated the white supremacists' costumes from D.W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation" -- not the other way around.

Modern footage then reveals the Southern plantation's legacy of racism within the director's own family. Cheshire's cousin Winston "Winkie" Silver, who grew up at Midway Plantation, casually uses an ugly epithet to describe the African American companions of his childhood, yet insists "they were family."

"The planter class needed slaves for economic reasons, so they constructed the notion that people with black skin were inferior," Hinton says. "Once that idea gets deep into your culture, it takes a long time to get out."

Cheshire, who still considers himself a Southerner despite having lived in Greenwich Village for 17 years, captures other relatives epitomizing post-slavery North Carolina attitudes, from quirky (will moving the house antagonize a resident plate-tossing ghost?) to quixotic.

The director's mother, Elizabeth Cheshire, who says her ancestors treated their slaves kindly, attends a Civil War reenactment. On a field of costumed soldiers, she describes the primary crux of the conflict to Hinton as "the idea of states' rights to govern themselves" -- not slavery. To which Hinton replies, "I'm perfectly happy to keep watching them fight the war as long as they keep losing."

Why doesn't Hinton confront her directly? "A Southerner would never disagree with his elders," he says later in an interview at his apartment.

Make that a "Southerner-in-exile," because Hinton says that, as a black man, he feels most at home in New York City, where he has lived for 7 1/2 years with his wife, Annie Sailer, an artist and choreographer, who is white.

On-screen, Hinton, who worked briefly as a reporter at The Washington Post in the late 1960s, mentions the lingering ramifications of North Carolina's Jim Crow era. Off-screen, he elaborates: The severity of his degenerative medical condition, spinal stenosis, might have been lessened had he had routine medical care as a child, he says; instead, the first doctor he saw was in the Army. "I can barely walk now," he adds. His condition has worsened since the film was made.

Cheshire says that the biggest challenge of his life lay in the editing room, where he wrangled 200 hours of raw footage. In one suspenseful sequence, Midway's plantation house is moved in one piece over open fields and a rock quarry to a wooded 50-acre site -- a Herculean effort to preserve the past.

Up north, though, the past is being plumbed in a new way as Cheshire discovers, through Hinton, his family's biracial side. Word comes of a 96-year-old man living nearby in Manhattan. His name is Abraham Lincoln Hinton, and he is the great-grandson of one of Cheshire's white ancestors and a Midway Plantation slave.

Camera in tow, Cheshire relishes the opportunity to meet his family's black patriarch and dozens of cousins previously unknown to him.

Abraham Hinton (no relation to Robert) still considers himself a Southerner, too, despite having lived for half a century in a public housing project in Harlem. In a recent interview at his apartment, Hinton, now 99, described passing Midway Plantation house regularly as a child, accompanied by the knowledge that although its white owner was his relative, he was implicitly barred from visiting. "That's just the way it was," he says with a good-natured shrug.

A reporter points out that a white relative, Charlie Silver, now owns the valuable house that in a fairer world might have been bequeathed to black family members. "Well, that's good," says Abraham Lincoln Hinton. When pressed, he smiles and adds: "That's good -- for Charlie."

Al Hinton, Abraham's son and a Brooklyn schoolteacher, shares his father's passion for family history. He sees the descendants of Midway as "more alike than different," and has fostered efforts to keep his white and black cousins in touch. The film clips of Winkie Silver, whom Al Hinton has never met, do not upset him: "Frankly, I'm surprised when a white person in their 50s or 60s from the South isn't a racist," he says.

Near the end of the film, Midway owner Charlie Silver has the Hintons -- Abraham, Al and Robert -- and Cheshire, along with about 20 other white relatives, over for a celebration at the house's bucolic new location. For Cheshire, Midway Plantation has moved far from its ugly past, though he suggests that his family -- like his country -- still has a long road ahead if racial reconciliation is the destination.

One of film's strongest scenes is captured here by the director's fly-on-the-wall camera, as the two arms of the family gather awkwardly at the entrance to the meticulously restored mansion.

Abraham Lincoln Hinton, the Harlem resident, is invited inside the house that was built for his slave-owning ancestors by his slave ancestors.

Glancing at the front door, he considers the invitation with a mixture of disbelief and anticipation.

"Come in?" he asks, repeatedly. "I can come in?