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Subject: South Carolina's most famous house

This coming November, probably in the first weekend, the Beaufort County Open Land Trust will allow tours of architect Frank Lloyd Wright's Auldbrass Plantation, all 20+ buildings.

In 1938 when the Lowcountry land owner Leigh Stevens, a wealthy Michigan industrial consultant, approached Wright to offer the design commission for Auldbrass, Wright's Falling Water, the world's house of the century, had been recently completed. Also, his headquarters for Johnson's Wax, completed about the same time as Falling Water, was getting plenty of attention. Point being, Wright was busy, too busy, but the idea of a complete Southern working plantation could work its way into Wright's schedule.

South Carolina's most famous house, arguably, for more than 200 years had been Charleston's Drayton Hall, 1742, even though no one can prove who was the architect. Most scholars agree the architect was a well-thumbed volume of Palladio's Four Books of Architecture. Almost Palladian purity, Drayton Hall follows the rules. Cited as the best Georgian house in the country, Drayton Hall from the mid-18C on had typically been considered South Carolina's most famous house. Here and now in the 21C, however, architecture critics argue in favor of Wright's Auldbrass as South Carolina's most famous house, now that it's mostly built.

Wright began work on Auldbrass in 1938, and he kept up his efforts until his death in 1959. The name Auldbrass is Welsh for Old Brass, something of a descriptive term for Lowcountry laborers of mixed heritage, a combination of African and native-American.

The site for Auldbrass has had more than 4,000 acres, although to date the land has been reduced to 326 acres.

Movie producer Joel Silver (Die Hard, 48 Hours and the like) has sold about \$13 billion in tickets, and by keeping enough for himself he has managed to develop a Frank Lloyd Wright hobby. Silver bought and renovated the Storer house in Los Angeles, a Wright design with custom concrete block construction.

In 1986 Silver bought Auldbrass for a reported \$148,000, a relative bargain. Having bought original Wright furniture, Silver was shocked he could score a plantation for the price of a couple of tables. On the other hand, Silver well knew what came next: tens of millions of dollars in renovations, upgrades and new buildings. Auldbrass was in deplorable condition. Clemson declined an offer to accept Auldbrass as a gift, knowing something about construction costs in such a project. Fully restored, Auldbrass could make a great conference center, Clemson was told, but first a full restoration was necessary.

For several years in the early 1980s, a group of Columbia-based hunters owned Auldbrass and used it as a hunting lodge. The buildings were falling apart to the point when Silver first walked onto the property in 1986, he said the place was one month short of meeting the bulldozer.

Silver engaged Wright's grandson Eric Lloyd Wright, who had helped Silver with the Storer house in Los Angeles, and soon just about all of the 500 Auldbrass drawings and documents came together.

First to get built was the main house, which took two years. Now there are more than 20 buildings in the plantation, and others are planned based on Wright's grandson's research. The boathouse, for instance, was not in the original plans, but the boathouse looks every bit like a Frank Lloyd Wright design, and it could be easily argued Wright and Stevens would have put in a boathouse once the original plans were complete. It's hard to live on the banks of the Combahee River 20 miles upstream from the Atlantic Ocean and not have a boathouse.

In 1994, a New Yorker article called Auldbrass a \$10 million project up to that time, but another 20 years has resulted in another \$20 million in construction, possibly, considering the scope of the plantation to date.