

# The Rest of the Story

*A young filmmaker is bringing his skills to bear on a historic plantation.*

**On a bright morning** this past autumn, award-winning documentary filmmaker Antony Cherian sat down for his first meeting with the staff and manager of Varner-Hogg Plantation State Historic Site. The site is best known for the decorative-arts collection displayed in the plantation house, which includes historic paintings and furnishings — especially ceramics, furniture and textiles — selected by Ima Hogg, the daughter of former governor James Stephen Hogg, who donated the property to the state in 1958. But for the next few months Cherian, a doctoral student at the University of Texas in Austin, will keep his focus on the role African Americans have played in the park's early history.

Thanks to a major grant, Cherian aims to contribute new information to Texas Parks and Wildlife interpretive resources in this regard. "It's the most important historic site in the state of Texas," he says. "There are so many stories here — from the Karankawa people to the days of the sugar plantation to the Hoggs and the oil industry. There's been slave labor and prison labor on the site, which hasn't always been credited or appreciated, and our job is to reconcile what has happened here in the past with what we've got here today."

Cherian isn't the first to address the complex history of the Varner-Hogg Plantation. Building on early preservation plans and numerous oral history projects, former park superintendent Jeff Hutchinson and other TPWD staff have worked to address the site's myriad cultural heritage; additionally, Cary Cordova, another University of Texas graduate student, has written two studies on the lives of slaves at Varner-Hogg.

Cherian is receiving generous institutional assistance, having been named the inaugural scholar-in-residence for the Project in Interpreting the Texas Past. With monies coming from the Houston Endowment and Summerlee Foundation as well, Cherian will receive nearly \$30,000 in cash and equipment to help complete research that will culminate in a documentary film, an interactive DVD and an updated interpretive Web site for Varner-Hogg.

Walking the verdant plantation grounds with Cherian and current Varner-Hogg site manager Kandy Taylor-Hille, there are some clues as to how to address topics such as slavery and the sugar industry, Ima Hogg's philanthropic legacy and the discovery of oil on the property — a breakthrough that earned the Hogg family almost \$40,000 a day in crude,



Graduate student Anthony Cherian will focus on the role African Americans played in the history of Varner-Hogg Plantation State Historic Site.

notes Cherian. For instance, archeologists have uncovered the foundations of three slave cabins, and the bricks used to build those structures can still be found on the property. In fact, park staff often use such items to help illustrate the diverse heritage of the site, and Taylor-Hille acknowledges that tours can become even richer with Cherian's help.

For Cherian, asking questions comes with the territory. In addition to ferreting out details from the Ima Hogg Papers collection at UT's Center for American History, he has been interviewing West Columbia community members concerning the legacy of African Americans and slaves, in particular, at the plantation. His previous documentary, "Truth I Ever Told," co-directed with Mark Westmoreland, was funded in part by TPWD; the film presents an oral history of an African American farming community in Washington County, Texas. The film won the 2002 Zora Neale Hurston prize in African American Studies from the American Folklore Society. Cherian is obviously enthusiastic about his latest project.

"We want all the site's visitors to draw a connection between the history here and their lives today," says Cherian. "It's an epic story, but Varner-Hogg has the history to tell it."

— Dan Oke