

# COASTAL HERITAGE

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Gullah's  
Radiant Light

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PHOTO/WADE SPEES



**COOL RIDE.** *A bike festooned with signs of celebration at Heritage Days at the Penn Center on St. Helena Island.*

PHOTO/WADE SPEES



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**CLOSING IN.** Richard Habersham of the Phillips Community in Charleston County stands on a bridge spanning Horlbeck Creek. Sprawling planned communities surrounding the historic Gullah settlement have increased runoff pollution into the creek, he says. PHOTO/WADE SPEES

## Gullah's Radiant Light

By John H. Tibbetts

**O**n a starlit August evening, trucks and cars rumble down Highway 41, which slices through Phillips, a predominately African-American community (pop. 400) in unincorporated Charleston County. "It used to be a lot quieter out here before all this development," says Richard Habersham, president of the Phillips Community Association.

Habersham's family has lived in Phillips since the Civil War-era. Most of the families there date back to the freedmen who purchased land in 10-acre parcels along Horlbeck Creek in 1870 and in subsequent years.

Until air-conditioning became inexpensive a few decades ago, Phillips Community was considered low-lying marginal land, mosquito-ridden, with poor well water and unhealthy drainage.

Today Phillips is just a few miles from bustling Mount Pleasant Towne Centre and within commuting distance of downtown Charleston. Some wooded parcels on Phillips' west side, formerly farmland, have beautiful marsh-and-creek views. Water and sewer lines have been extended into the community. Upscale planned developments—Park West, Dunes West, Rivertowne, and others—

surround Phillips, a doughnut hole in East Cooper's relentless, high-toned sprawl.

Indeed "sprawl and taxes," says Habersham, threaten the historic settlement. "When they build those high-dollar houses, the value of our property goes up too, and it affects our taxes. When taxes get too high, some residents might have to sell and move away."

Phillips residents worry that developers are waiting for the moment to pounce. Habersham and his neighbors fight every project threatening their peace: a proposed road widening, say, or a potential commercial development at the community's edge. "It seems there's always something coming up," he says. "A little battle here, a little battle there."

"People tell us we can just sell out and go somewhere else," says Phillips resident Jonathan Ford. "For the people in Rivertowne and Dunes West, mainly northern people, property is an investment. For us, property is home. You live, you grow up, you die, and you pass it on. We're just trying to preserve what was passed on to us. Our grandfathers and great-grand



## International museum

Fund-raising has begun for a proposed \$60 million International African American Museum, which is expected to open in 2007 on a site in downtown Charleston near the South Carolina Aquarium.

Congressman James E. Clyburn chairs a 36-member steering committee partnering with the city of Charleston to create the museum. "We're doing well with the fund-raising."

The museum would emphasize Charleston's significance as a major port of arrival for Africans in North America and illustrate evidence of African influences in the historical landscape of South Carolina. It would also describe the Caribbean connection with the lowcountry.

The International African American Museum would be part of a new wave of heritage buildings celebrating black American history. At least 25 African-American cultural buildings are being planned across the nation. These include the National Museum of African American History and Culture, authorized by Congress last year and expected to cost \$300 million, to be built in Washington, D.C.; the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco; and the Martin Luther King, Jr., National Memorial, also in Washington, D.C.

"We're telling a challenging story," says Michael Allen, an education specialist with the National Park Service Fort Sumter National Monument and member of the steering committee. "This is an opportunity to look at healing, understanding, and developing relationships. This potential location near the water provides a great venue to talk about the international perspective of Charleston, the African-American experience of Charleston, and how those two help to shape and form and affect the lowcountry, the South, and the nation."

fathers had to work and buy property that they handed down to us."

In 2000, after residents established the Phillips Community Association, Michael Allen, an education specialist with the National Park Service Fort Sumter National Monument, encouraged them to document their own history. Historic and archeological assets in Phillips could provide a bulwark against sprawl's encroachment, Allen told them. "That's a card they needed to play. When I step into any community, I'm looking at what options they may have for preservation." There are several historic black communities in the East Cooper area that face similar pressures, including Hamlin, Scanlonville, Six Mile, Snowden, Whitehall Terrace, and Ten Mile.

Phillips residents have been surprised by what they learned about their history. The community's current boundaries, for example, nearly match that of the original freedmen settlement in 1870. And many of today's 10-acre parcels are identical to the original lots purchased for \$63 apiece after the Civil War.

Dr. John Rutledge, the first physician in the East Cooper area, was the first owner of Phillips Plantation; his brick tomb is located in a wooded patch next to Highway 41. Rutledge's politically influential sons were born on Phillips Plantation: John, a signer of the U.S. Constitution, and Edward, the youngest signer of the Declaration of Independence.

"It makes you feel proud of the history," says Habersham, "that a little place like this had such an effect on the state and the nation."

Not long ago, many black South Carolinians resisted thinking about the past. "My grandfather would say something about white people under his breath," Ford recalls, "and my grandmother would say, 'You can't tell the children that.' She said you couldn't grow up hating people. So they repressed a lot."

Today, Habersham and Ford look back in admiration at freedmen ancestors who struggled and saved to acquire their own lands, and further to the captive men and women hauled as slaves from West Africa to cultivate lowcountry plantation crops—particularly rice. Rice was the driving force of the South Carolina coast's slave-based economy for more than 150 years.

Rice cultivation began in Carolina within two decades after English settlement in 1670, and slaves must have been the first people to grow it in North America, according to a 2001 book by Judith A. Carney, a geographer at the University of California, Los Angeles. Africans formed one-fourth of the colony's population by 1672, and food supplies were often short, so slaves grew rice as a subsistence crop. Europeans later adapted it to a commercial crop for export.

Slaveholders of northern European origin—mostly English, Scottish, and Irish—could not have had much experience growing rice before they arrived in the lowcountry, Carney points out. Rice cultivation is a crop traditionally grown in tropical and subtropical regions. West Africans brought to Carolina, by contrast, belonged to ethnic groups that had grown rice for many centuries across hundreds of square miles.

Africans instructed European settlers in their early efforts to cultivate rice, which later became an immensely profitable enterprise. By the Revolutionary War, in fact, South Carolina's coastal economy relied almost exclusively on exporting rice to Europe.

Super-wealthy and politically connected rice planters became known as the builders of the greatest agricultural dynasties of their era anywhere in the world. Rice planters constructed the mansions of Charleston, Beaufort, and Georgetown. For generations until the Civil War, rice planters were among the most powerful men in South Carolina, seen as brilliant innovators who had taken an unruly land and transformed it into riches.

SINGING PRAISE. Cheryl Shepard said she was thinking, "How good God is," as she sang during Heritage Days at the Penn Center on St. Helena Island.

PHOTO/WADE SPEES



But planters could not have created this wealth without the technical skills and cultural knowledge of Africans who had grown rice in their own native lands.

Slaves on the American “rice coast” had belonged to various African ethnic groups and cultures such as the Ashanti, Fante, Fula, Ibo, Mandingo, Yoruba, and Bakongo. Because they did not speak the same languages, Africans used pidgin English to communicate with one another. Slaveholders required Africans to understand pidgin so they could follow orders in the fields. Over time, this pidgin eventually flourished into a new creole language known in the Carolinas as Gullah and as Geechee in Georgia and northern Florida.

In the early nineteenth century, many newly imported slaves in South Carolina were from Angola, commonly known as “N’Gulla.” “Gullah” could have originally referred to Angolans. But the Gullah people were not just Angolans; they were a mix of African groups.

After the Civil War, the Gullah/Geechee people continued to live in lowcountry settlements from Wilmington, North Carolina, to Jacksonville, Florida. This fertile swath of pinelands, sea islands, salt marshes, swamps, and creeks is known in historic-preservation circles as the Gullah/Geechee Coast.

Forged in hardship, Gullah/Geechee culture—food, religion, crafts, stories, songs, and language—is a fusion of European and African influences. Gullah is the only lasting English-based creole language in North America. Yet its grammar is African, as are numerous words. In the 1940s, the linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner found 251 African words used by Gullah speakers. The Gullah people, in fact, have retained more of their Africanisms than any other black group in the United States.

Gullah culture, however, is indigenous to this country, created under conditions particular to a narrow stretch of coastline in the American South.

Until the mid-1990s, South Carolina museums, plantation tours, and other historical attractions ignored Gullah influences on lowcountry life. Informal history lessons in coastal South Carolina focused on Revolutionary war heroes, antebellum mansions, wealthy planters, and Confederate valor. Slavery seemed a taboo subject, although about 25 percent of all Africans legally carried into bondage in the United States passed through Sullivan’s Island near Charleston.

Some Phillips residents still shrug at the notion that they are part of the Gullah culture. “It’s good that it brings awareness,” says Jonathan Ford, “but I think of Gullah mostly as a tourist draw. You’ve had whites here in Phillips, and they lived in the culture just like blacks.”

It’s common for lowcountry African-American families to have forgotten or suppressed their Gullah heritage, because for generations it was seen as backward. Many Gullah

instead wanted to become mainstream Americans.

Yet many traditions in the Phillips Community reflect Gullah culture. One such tradition is “heirs’ property,” or collective land ownership. After the Civil War, freedmen who purchased land parcels shared them among family members and following generations. As families expanded, many parcels remained in collective ownership. That is, several family members jointly inherit a parcel that lacks an up-to-date title. The original purchaser from the nineteenth century is usually still named as owner. About half of Phillips parcels are heirs’ property, says Habersham.

The problem with heirs’ property is that any heir can go before a judge to gain the value of his property. And often the only way to get that value is to sell the entire parcel. Sometimes land speculators buy an interest from an heir and ask a judge to auction the entire parcel.

Heirs’ property, therefore, is a problem for traditional African-American communities, says Allen. “They don’t want to put the land in one person’s name because that person could go and sell it overnight. They think they’re safer with heirs’ property.

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OPENING SHOP. Adeline Mazyck's sweetgrass basket stand now shares turf with Town Centre in Mount Pleasant. Gullah people have made sweetgrass baskets for nearly three centuries in the lowcountry. But in recent years, the growth of gated subdivisions along the coast has limited basketmakers' access to sweetgrass.

PHOTO/WADE SPEES

But I think they should have their name on the title and not someone who died in 1890.”

Even so, Daniel Pennick, a Charleston County planner, says that heirs’ property may have protected many Gullah communities from development. “Developers don’t want to deal with an unclear title.”

Gullah people view family land as “sacred,” says Pennick. It’s a place of refuge, a place to rest after they’ve seen the world, after serving in the military or working for decades in the North. For others, it’s the place to raise children and grow up knowing aunts and uncles and cousins, the place to spend long summers with grandparents. “Everybody’s your cousin here,” says Habersham.

“We consider land as family,” says Marquetta Goodwine, an activist, author, and musician also known as Queen Quet, chiefess of the Gullah/Geechee Nation. Goodwine lives on St. Helena Island, but she could be talking about the Phillips Community as well: “The reason we’ve been able to survive and stay here is that we look after each other.”

## GULLAH COUNTRY

The antebellum lowcountry, in many respects, was Gullah country. Before the Civil War, slaves often knew the land and waterways better than their masters. Slaves hunted in woods for meat that sustained the plantations, and black watermen dominated local maritime trades, running slave-operated canoes and cargo vessels between town and country. Gullah people worked productive plots of land in their free time and traded goods along the riverbanks, the major highways of their time.

By 1800, about one in four slaves in the lowcountry were skilled tradesmen—blacksmiths, machinists, and carpenters—rented out for work.



But slaves, of course, did not own their skills; slaveholders did. Bondsmen also did not own the land they knew so well, and it was ownership that separated prosperous from poor in antebellum South Carolina. Americans—white and black—understood that holding property was the route to independence, self-determination, and dignity.

So when African-Americans gained freedom in the wake of the Civil War, many were determined to acquire land near where they were born, and they looked to Union leaders for help.

In January 1865, after completing his march across Georgia to the sea, Major-General William Tecumseh Sherman was alarmed about the tens of thousands of

freed slaves—men, women, and children—who desperately followed his army. In a January 12 letter to a fellow Union general, Sherman complained that just one of his columns of 30,000 soldiers was now responsible for the care of 17,000 freed slaves. With “a large proportion of them babies and small children,” Sherman wrote from Savannah, “had I encountered an enemy of respectable strength defeat would have been certain.”

That same day, Sherman and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton met 20 freedmen—ministers and church officers—in Savannah to discuss how the freedmen could help the Union and themselves during and after the war. Their spokesman was an ordained Baptist minister named Garrison Frazier, 67 years old. Frazier had been a



**TRACING THE PAST.** *Michael Allen, of Gullah descent and an education specialist with the National Park Service, stands where one of three Gullah slave cabins was originally located at the Charles Pinckney National Historic Site. After the Civil War, many Gullah people saved money and bought land on or near the plantations where they had been enslaved. PHOTO/WADE SPEES*

slave until he was 59, when he bought himself and his wife for a thousand dollars in gold and silver.

"The way we can best take care of ourselves," Frazier told Sherman, "is to have land, and turn it and till it by our own labor—that is, by the labor of the women, and children, and old men—and we can soon maintain ourselves and have something to spare; and to assist the Government the young men should enlist in the service of the Government, and serve in such manner as they be wanted."

Frazier's words impressed Sherman, who issued Special Field Order No. 15, which handed over abandoned rice plantations and the sea islands of South Carolina, Georgia, and northern Florida to the freedmen.

The order also provided each family with a land parcel of not more than 40 acres to cultivate. Later, Sherman called for distribution of excess Army mules to freedmen. These orders gave rise to the slogan "Forty acres and a mule."

By June 1865, more than 40,000 freedmen had begun tilling more than 400,000 acres of land in the region. Former slaves believed that it was their land to keep, that they had already earned it with their uncompensated labor. Soon after the war, Radical Republicans in Congress argued that lowcountry plantations must be broken up to destroy the power of the slaveholding class that had driven the country to war.

President Andrew Johnson, however, stopped the redistribution

experiment by pardoning many former rebels and returning plantations to the former owners.

In October 1865, U.S. Army General Oliver O. Howard informed a gathering of Gullah people that land given to them by Sherman was no longer theirs. In a speech to two thousand freedmen on Edisto Island, General Howard asked them to "lay aside their bitter feelings, and to become reconciled to their old masters."

A freedman called out, "Why General Howard, why do you take away our lands? . . . You give them to our all-time enemies. This is not right!"

Since some lands remained abandoned, Gullah people did manage to hold them via the Special Field Order. Others received land in reward for their service in the Union army. Many freedmen, however, worked for years to save enough money to purchase land.

Marquetta Goodwine, who owns several acres with her family on St. Helena Island, points out that after the Civil War, her great-great-grandfathers on each side "bought the very land where they were enslaved."

Small settlements, often as extended-family compounds, were built on the newly acquired properties. Working subsistence farms, hunting, and fishing, the Gullah people survived the intense poverty in the years following the Civil War.

Lowcountry rice plantations, meanwhile, began a long decline. Federal armies had damaged many estates. Preferring to work their own land or hold other jobs, freedmen resisted returning to the rice fields.

Through desperate times, many Gullah families managed to hold onto their property. Landownership kept them free of the sharecropping system that whites used during and after Reconstruction to regain economic power over rural southern blacks.

## ISOLATION TO LOSS

For generations, the Gullah people lived in isolation. Rivers cut off the sea islands from the mainland. Forests and poor roads separated Gullah mainland communities from larger towns and cities. Until the advent of air-conditioning, brutal summer heat and humidity, plus prolific mosquitoes and hurricanes, discouraged many whites from living near marshes and sea islands of the South Carolina coast.

“The only people who wanted the land were Gullah,” says Emory S. Campbell, president of Gullah Heritage Consulting Services, who grew up on Hilton Head Island in the era before a bridge connected it to the mainland. “That’s when the Gullah really gelled in terms of culture.”

Campbell retired in 2003 as executive director of the Penn Center, an outgrowth of the famous Penn School, established

by missionaries in 1862. The Penn School educated local blacks until the early 1980s, when it became a community-development center, offering youth programs on Gullah culture and housing local history exhibits and demonstration projects.

“I spoke Gullah all my life and I wanted to go to the Penn School,” says Campbell. “My brothers and sisters went to Penn School, and they stayed for six months, and when they returned home they no longer spoke Gullah. The Penn School was a place that transformed people from slavery to freedom. It transformed African to mainstream American.”

Campbell sought this transformation because the Gullah people were objects of ridicule. Mainstream American blacks considered the Gullah language as “broken” English. “Everybody would laugh at me” for speaking Gullah, says Campbell. Now scholars recognize Gullah as a fully mature creole language.

Because the culture is so rich in African influences, Gullah fasci-

nated anthropologists, linguists, and folklorists. It is probably the most thoroughly researched black culture in the United States.

Yet Gullah traditions faded after developers began building resorts on the South Carolina sea islands in the 1960s, and tourists and retirees poured over the new bridges. Suburban development sprawled nearer mainland settlements in the quiet nooks and crannies of the coast. Racial integration, the civil-rights movement, and economic opportunities diluted the Gullah’s isolation.

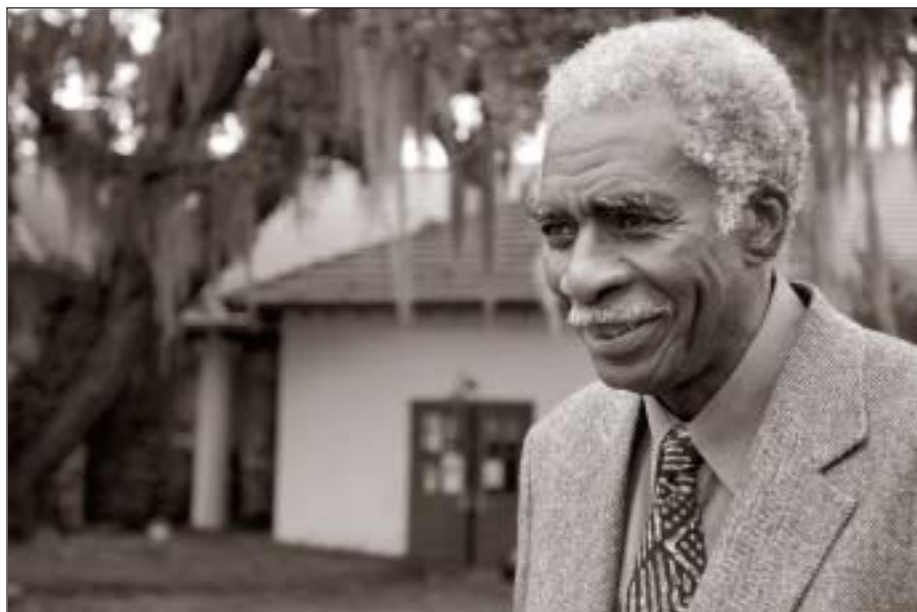
Today some elders still speak Gullah, but their grandchildren often regard it as old-fashioned, as the quaint speech of a passing generation.

Still, a few Gullah strongholds, particularly on the sea islands, are thriving. Much of St. Helena Island is still owned by Gullah people, whose culture is celebrated each year in a festival located at the Penn Center there.

## THE INHERITANCE

From the early 1950s until his death in 1994, essayist and novelist Ralph Ellison gained renown as a chronicler of African-American culture, which he described as steeped in tradition and complexity. Black culture, he argued, touches every aspect of American society, stimulating and redefining music, language, sports, food, literature, clothing styles, and the nation’s civic morality and ideals, particularly through the anti-slavery and civil-rights movements. But until the 1980s, Ellison’s views were at odds with many intellectuals—black and white—who viewed African-American culture as virtually destroyed by slavery and segregation.

Ellison, however, warned against looking to Africa for the most important roots of black American culture. Blacks and whites for centuries have been



**HOLDING ON.** “Land ownership was key to freedom and independence for the Gullah people” following the Civil War, says former Penn Center Executive Director Emory S. Campbell during Heritage Days on St. Helena Island. “They were so serious about freedom. They knew what was important.” PHOTO/WADE SPEES

entangled in their American experience, which remains closer-at-hand than their African or European heritages. Blacks, Ellison said, should celebrate their contributions to and borrowings from white culture, and should emphasize the American aspect of being “Negro-American.”

In an interview in 1971, Ellison said: “You get Negro-Americans walking around top-heavy from trying to Africanize themselves when that which is authentically African in them has come down to us through more subtle ways, and we are not the only inheritors of it. I’m afraid white southerners inherit a hell of a lot of it too.”

Others have argued that African sources of American black culture deserve far greater attention and study than they’ve received.

In a 1999 book, Charles Joyner, a Coastal Carolina University historian, holds both views in balance. After describing the “Africanity” of American slave heritage, he points out that slaves and their descendants helped form a unique culture in the New World. “Africans,” he wrote, “were creative in Africa; they did not cease to be creative when they became involuntary settlers in America.”

African-American history, however, was largely denied in the lowcountry until a decade ago, some experts say. “When I came here in 1994, the plantations were still talking about ‘servants,’ and the ‘servant quarters,’ not about the slaves,” says W. Marvin Dulaney, a College of Charleston historian and director of the Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture. “The plantations were painting this crazy image that there were no slaves here. There’s a great difference between a servant and a slave. In Charleston, there was almost no African presence in the city in terms of how (history) was interpreted. I talked to (the plantation directors) and told them they needed

to do a better job of recognizing the African-American presence, and they seemed to respond.” Now some historic plantations have tours that describe antebellum Gullah life.

During the past decade, Dulaney and Avery Center staff have created exhibitions on slavery and the African-American experience in the lowcountry. Dulaney has also pushed for reopening of the old Slave Mart Museum.

The U.S. Park Service, especially through the efforts of Michael Allen, has also sought to bring African-American contributions to the forefront.

At the request of U.S. Representative James E. Clyburn, the National Parks Service has completed a major study of the Gullah/Geechee coast and potential for historical tourism, economic development, and educational projects there. The Park Service study recommends establishing Gullah/Geechee interpretive sites on U.S. Highway 17 near Mount Pleasant, at the Penn Center, and in McIntosh County, Georgia.

In May 2004, the Washington, D.C.-based National Trust for Historic Preservation named the Gullah/Geechee Coast as one of America’s 11 Most Endangered Historic Places. This designation also brings national recognition to Gullah culture, says Allen.

Clyburn subsequently introduced the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Act (H.R. 4683), which would implement the Park Service’s suggestions. The act would establish a Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor and create a commission to help federal, state, and local authorities manage the corridor and its assets. The legislation would authorize \$1 million in annual funding over 10 years, calling for one or more interpretive centers at appropriate locations within the Heritage

Corridor. “We hope that this could be really significant in increasing heritage tourism,” says Clyburn.

The Park Service’s study and Clyburn’s bill “acknowledge the invisible people of the area,” says Dulaney. “It could bring money and help the Park Service protect some specific places along the coast dealing with African-American history. And it will provide an impetus for some of the other organizations—plantations, museums—to do more in that respect.”

Now, Phillips Community leaders hope to gain acknowledgement from state and federal agencies as a historic site, though they are not relying on government help. “Every (rural African-American) community I’ve talked to has some kind of preservation effort underway,” says Cynthia Porcher, principal researcher on the Park Service’s study. “They are not sitting back waiting for something to happen, but they don’t have access to big bucks.”

“There’s a strong sense of pride,” Allen says. “People say, ‘Our great-granddaddy purchased the property that we’re still living on. That’s because of the sacrifice of someone a hundred years ago. There may have been bad crops or he might have almost lost the land due to taxes or the Klan might have tried to run him off, whatever. So we’re still living on great-granddaddy’s land, and we’re still paying the taxes.’”

At first glance, an African-American rural community resembles a random scattering of modest houses. Rural lowcountry blacks were not wealthy; they did not leave monuments or grand homes.

Yet a deeper investigation tells a story of sacrifices and accomplishments across generations. History is revealed in family and community traditions, in land use, stories, food, and language. To see these places for what they are, “you must look,” says Allen, “at history with new eyes.”

# Gullah Spirituals

provided roots of American gospel songs

Some of the most beloved American spirituals emerged from the talents of the Gullah people of coastal South Carolina. Slave songs such as “Michael, Row the Boat Ashore,” “Roll, Jordan, Roll,” “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Had,” and “Blow Your Trumpet, Gabriel” were first written down in the Port Royal area or Charleston during the Civil War but later transformed and popularized worldwide.

In 1862, an educational mission of concerned northern whites and blacks was sent to Port Royal and nearby islands after the area had fallen to Union troops. These missions were designed to aid newly freed slaves. At this time, few northerners—or inland southerners—had encountered antebellum Gullah language and culture.

Working on St. Helena Island, a pair of young northern teachers, one white and one black, contributed to a historic book, *Slave Songs of the United States*, published in 1867, which codified the lyrics and melodies.

The person most responsible for bringing Gullah music to national attention was Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a white abolitionist who served as a colonel in the United States’ first regiment of African-Americans, the First South Carolina Volunteers.

In an *Atlantic Monthly* article in June 1867, Higginson described returning to army camp at night on horseback and hearing groups of freedmen “chanting, often harshly, but always in the most perfect time.” He wrote down the words and melodies, hoping to capture the varied songs. “Almost all their songs were thoroughly religious in their tone. Nothing but patience for this life—nothing but triumph in the next.”

Later, a group of young black singers from Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, known as the Fisk Jubilee Singers, brought many of these spirituals to the attention of the American public and eventually to Europe.

But the spirituals popularized by the Fisk Jubilee Singers are different from those that the Gullah people have sung for generations, says Marquetta L. Goodwine, an activist, author, and performer also known as Queen Quet, chiefess of the Gullah/Geechee Nation.

Northerners who documented Gullah spirituals misunderstood some of the lyrics and the spontaneous nature of the songs, says Goodwine. While slave songs were religious, they also served as ways for slaves to communicate plans to escape and the level of danger that escapees would face at any particular time. The songs could be both warning signals and outlets to express the horrors of slavery.

The rhythms and musical structure of Gullah spirituals are also different from the popularized versions. “Go Down, Moses,” is almost always sung in a grand, stern legato in the Americanized version. But in the Gullah tradition, songs often change during the performance to reflect the changing mood or meaning of the piece. A somber, dirge-like melody can be transformed in mid-song, building into rapid meter, accompanied by “sea-island claps” and foot stomping as the sing-shouting turns ecstatic and percussive. ♡



## INSPIRATION BOUND.

Music is an integral part of Gullah heritage. This girl participated in the Community Sing event at the Penn Center on St. Helena Island in 1986.

PHOTO/WADE SPEES

# African contributions to rice planting

In the early decades of the twentieth century, some elderly former rice planters and their descendants wrote memoirs of the antebellum era. As supporters of the southern Lost Cause, the memoirists viewed rice planters as heroic and ingenious. Slaves, by contrast, were usually seen in these accounts as rough implements or simple brutes used to grow rice, the crop that stimulated the lowcountry's wealth and power before the Civil War.

Memoirist David Doar, in 1936, described the "insuperable difficulties by every-day planters who had as tools only the axe, the spade, and the hoe, in the hands of intractable negro men and women, but lately brought from the jungles of Africa."

Starting in the mid-1970s, however, historian Peter H. Wood, author of *Black Majority*, paved the way for the current understanding that slaves provided much of the knowledge that made initial rice cultivation successful in North America.

In a 2001 book, Judith Carney, a geographer at the University of California, Los Angeles, takes this argument further, illustrating that virtually all of the crucial early innovations and techniques of antebellum rice culture had antecedents or inspiration in West Africa.

"There is a very strong probability that the early technology of rice growing in this country should be attributed to Africans who brought over knowledge from the rice-growing

areas," says Richard Porcher, a botanist at The Citadel and a collaborator with Carney. "Africans had grown rice in all kinds of environments."

There were three major stages in the history of lowcountry rice cultivation. Before 1700, South Carolinians began growing rice on dry upland soil, using rainfall to water their crop.

Next, planters found that growing rice in irrigated inland swamps would yield larger crops and greater profits. With slaves' expertise and backbreaking labor, planters built earthen dams to contain water from rainfall or natural springs in inland swamps, creating reservoirs. Within the dam walls, planters installed wooden structures called "trunks," which could be opened or closed to manipulate water flow.



Rice planters had slaves build reservoirs to flood rice fields. Shawn Halifax, interpretive coordinator at the Caw Caw Interpretive Center in Charleston County, stands on a dike between a reservoir and a former rice field, now a cypress swamp. PHOTO/WADE SPEES

The first trunks used in Carolina were hollow logs with plugs.

To create rice fields in adjacent wetlands, slaves cut down massive cypress-gum forests, drained off the water, and also enclosed them with dikes.

Thus were formed side-by-side broad, shallow earthen bowls: the

reservoir and the rice fields. Water flows were manipulated via trunks among the earthen bowls. By the 1720s, profitable rice plantations were using this form of inland cultivation.

Slaves would begin sowing in April or May, pressing seeds coated with clay into the mud with their heels. When the field was flooded, clay-coated seeds were heavier and would not float to the surface, thus allowing the seeds to germinate. In June, slaves drained the fields to hoe or pick weeds. From reservoirs, slaves later flooded the fields again to provide moisture for the rice plants.

At harvest, slaves processed the grain, carefully pounding rice with mortar and pestle, which required a refined touch because grains were easily broken and ruined. Using coiled baskets, slaves would winnow the chaff from the rice.

The techniques and tools used to cultivate and process rice in the lowcountry, writes Carney, were identical or very similar to those employed in West Africa long before Portuguese explorers arrived in the mid-15th century.

Before European contact, West Africans already knew how to grow rice in dry upland areas; how to grow it in irrigated wetlands; how to plug hollow tree trunks as flood-control devices; how to coat rice seeds with clay; how to winnow rice from the chaff with baskets; and on and on.

Only the third major stage of rice production—building rice fields irrigated by tidal rivers beginning in the 1750s—was an innovation that blended European and African technical expertise, says Carney. Yet Europeans may have been imitating African engineering techniques in this case as well. "Even the tidal system was widely used by Africans in mangrove (coastal) areas of West Africa," says Carney. ♡

# EBBS & FLOWS

## Coastal GeoTools '05 Myrtle Beach, South Carolina March 7-10, 2005

Coastal GeoTools focuses on the technical information needs of the nation's coastal programs. The conference's goals are to promote the understanding and applied uses of the geospatial data and tools for studying and effectively managing the coast. Attendees will become better prepared to incorporate technology into their decision-making process. For updates on Coastal GeoTools '05, add your name to the mailing list at [www.csc.noaa.gov/geotools/mailling\\_lc.htm](http://www.csc.noaa.gov/geotools/mailling_lc.htm)

## 97th Annual Meeting of the National Shellfisheries Association Philadelphia, Pennsylvania April 10-14, 2005

It's been 20 years since NSA last met in Philadelphia, and this year's conference is a must-attend event in a center city location. With a return to the mid-Atlantic and high interest in many emerging shellfish issues in this area, the program is expected to be powerful. Early registration and hotel room reservations will be due by March 15, 2005. For more information, visit [www.shellfish.org](http://www.shellfish.org)

## Solutions to Coastal Disasters Conference 2005 Charleston, South Carolina May 8-11, 2005

This is a conference for coastal planners, managers, scientists, engineers, geologists, economists, oceanographers, meteorologists, property owners, elected officials, and others interested in the coast. Conference topics will focus on the science and management of erosion, hurricanes, coastal storms, tsunamis, seismic events, climate change, sea level rise, and wind hazards. For more information, visit [www.asce.org/conferences/cd05/](http://www.asce.org/conferences/cd05/)

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