

A Brief History of the Gullah Community on St. Helena Island

Gullah communities can be found on the Sea Islands of coastal South Carolina and Georgia, northern Florida and southern North Carolina. Descendants of former slaves brought to the United States from the west coast of Africa between 1650 and the Civil War, they developed a unique culture and way of life. Those living on St. Helena Island live in one of the most intact Gullah communities remaining today.

The Gullah (also called Geechee) historically inhabited a region called the “Sea Islands” of South Carolina and Georgia approximately 40 miles inland from the coast. Today they share the region with people escaping the cities, many from the north. Retirement and second homes, along with vacation communities are vying for land particularly along the ocean shores. This has often set the Gullah communities at odds with the influx of development, and put in jeopardy an important part of American culture.

Vast areas of salt marsh and a rich ecosystem of plant and animal life characterize the region. Areas of upland form the islands, which are connected by tidally influenced rivers and creeks. Even today, the economy of the Gullah community is closely connected to the land and water: fish, shrimp, shell fish, fresh produce, and the raw materials for making baskets are all still gleaned from the land and water. Historically, the sandy soils of St. Helena were suited to Sea Island cotton production, a prized, long-staple cotton that was cultivated primarily after 1790. Prior to 1790, crop production was a mix of indigo, upland rice and corn. With the primacy of cotton, the fields were fertilized with crushed oyster shell and the muck from the salt marsh – the remains of the decomposed grasses. Cut grass, or salt marsh hay as it was termed, was also used for mulching on the sandy soil.

Farther inland on the Sea Islands, the tidal action of the brackish river waters, and the more clayey soil supported the growing of Carolina Gold rice, the primary crop in the Low Country. Rice was an important and highly valuable crop, so slaves from the rice growing countries – Senegal, etc., - were the most highly desired for the Low Country. Thus most of the African heritage of the region comes from the area between

Slavery was different in the Low Country, different than anywhere else in the United States. Because of rice culture, the task system was used. A certain amount of work, usually defined by an area of land, was assigned to each slave for completion. Once that task was completed, the slave was released from work and could engage in their own pursuits. Slave families were typically given a small area of land, about a half an acre, to produce food or crops for their own use or for sale. As a result, slave families had the opportunity to save money, and later buy land.

The Civil War had a different impact on the Low Country region of St. Helena than anywhere else in the US. Since Northern troops took the region from Hilton Head to Beaufort in 1861 and held it throughout the war, slaves were released and became

“freedmen.” The plantation owners and their families fled, and the Northern Army confiscated the plantations.

For the former slaves of St. Helena Island, access to land ownership came before the Civil War ended. The confiscated plantations were resurveyed into 10-acre parcels. These parcels were sold through auction before the end of the War, and the freedmen often banded together with their money to buy their former home plantation lands. As a result, before the end of the Civil War former slave families from Island plantations had acquired a considerable amount of land. That is what created the distinctive pattern of 10-acre squares of land on St. Helena Island that can still be seen today.

Today land is the basis of individual and community stability. Land has been passed down from generation to generation, often without a will, rendering it a communal family asset. This practice of intergenerational transfer is the antithesis of western practice, which intends to define a specific owner. While legally problematic, this form of land transfer allows the creation of intergenerational communities with strong social ties. It is a form of “social security,” that families rely on – people take care of each other, and family member who leave the region always have a place to come back to in the community.

Family members join a compound usually through the “gift” of a piece of land from a family member. “A dollar, a deed – love and affection,” governs the process. The result is dispersed communities of closely related families.

Given the close family ties that are part of the compound, a neighborhood is made up of several compounds that are home to related extended families. The web of relations in a neighborhood widens, but is still based on family ties. Neighbors socialize in front yards, often around a fire even today.

As is often the case with minority communities, the Gullah community is largely invisible to outsiders. Villages and business centers are uncommon. The public description of an unseen heritage is provided by the occasional historic marker and heritage museum such as the one at Penn Center on St. Helena Island. Invisible heritage equates to lack of value, and the communities are paradoxically being forced out by the pressures of tourism, retirement and second-home development.

Today the region is attractive for vacationers, and retirement and second-home communities. Therefore, development pressure on traditional Gullah communities is intense, often displacing the Gullah communities such as on Hilton Head Island.

