Watch meeting, Dec. 31, 1862–Waiting for the hour/Heard & Moseley, Cartes de Visite, 10 Tremont Row, Boston: courtesy of www.loc.gov

WAITING FOR THE HOUR

Watch Night & The Emancipation Proclamation

Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission Lays Plans for Linked Observances

GULLAH GEECHEE CULTURAL HERITAGE CORRIDOR
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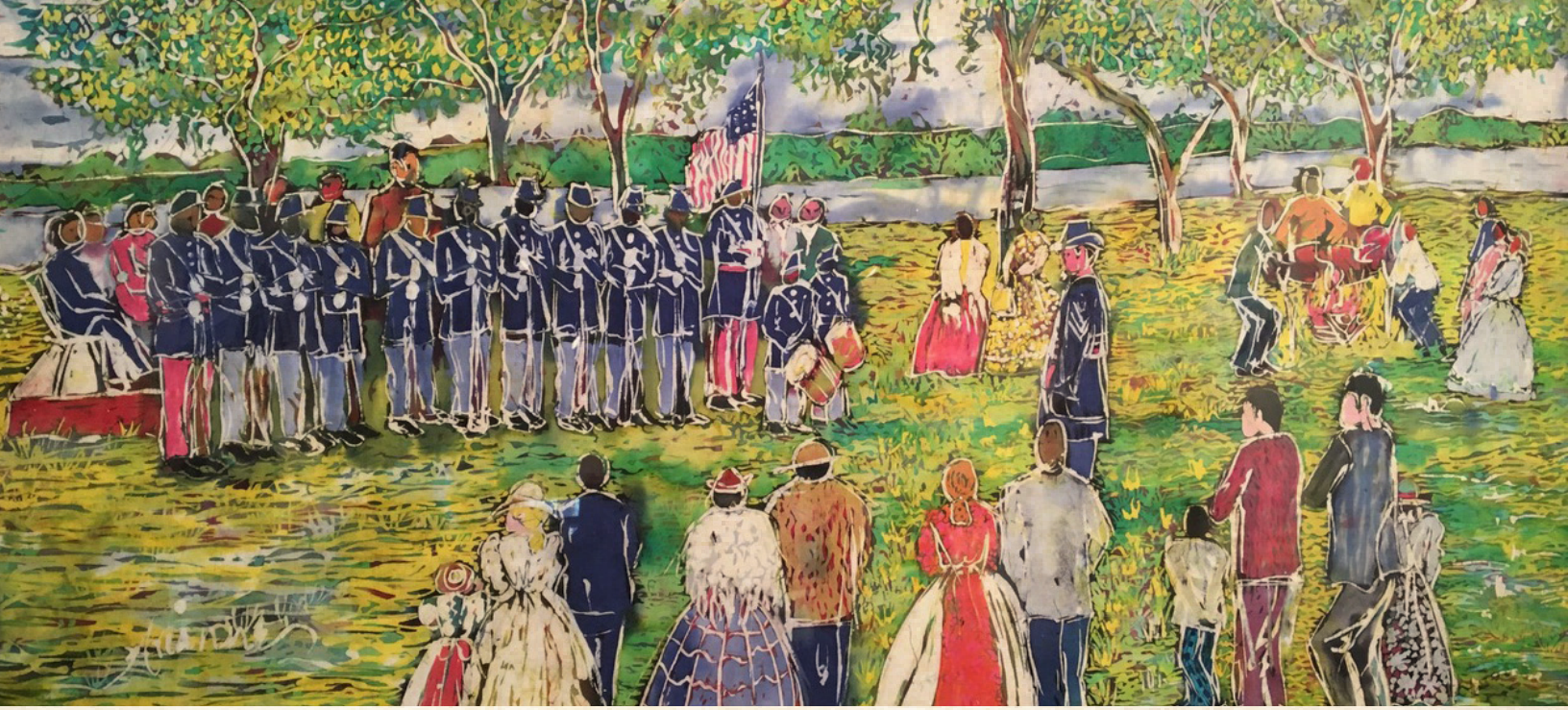


Fiber Art—titled 'Emancipation Proclamation 1863" by Arianne King-Comer. Courtesy of Arianne King-Comer and Penn School Collection at Penn Center.

HISTORY

For enslaved people before the Civil War, freedom was always too much to be expected. But it was never too much to hope for. In September 1862, President Abraham Lincoln sparked a surge of anticipation by releasing his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. The order put southern states on notice to surrender, threatening, if they did not, to free all who were in bondage on January 1, 1863.

The text of the preliminary proclamation was printed in the Charleston Mercury and other broadsheets throughout the South, copies of which were secretly acquired and read among knots of people in bondage by those who'd dared at great risk to become literate. Freedmen, especially those on the Sea Islands around Port Royal Sound, South Carolina, made grand plans to celebrate the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863 with parades, speeches, music and feasting. One of the largest of these celebrations attended by African Americans and whites, took place in Port Royal on the site of what is now the Naval Hospital. Hope was contagious as word spread of this momentous day.

The preliminary proclamation stated that "on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State... in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free...."

On New Year's Eve, 1862, those enslaved in the South gathered in plantation praise houses, churches and meeting halls, as did others as far away as Boston—where Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth gathered. The day they had never expected to come was here, and they wanted to give watch and bear witness to the coming of midnight and freedom.

"The proclamation changed everything," Douglass wrote in his autobiography. "It was one of the most affecting and thrilling occasions I ever witnessed..." Charlotte L. Forten, an educated, free African American who had left the north to come south to work at the Penn Center School in South Carolina, declared that January 1st, 1863 was "The Most glorious day this nation has yet seen."

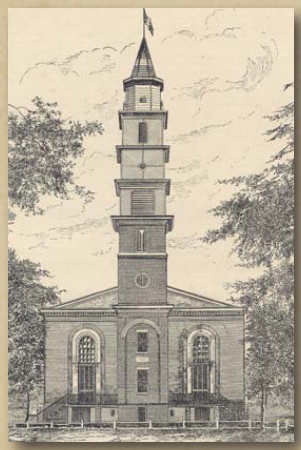
The honoring of Watch Night and Emancipation Day celebrations are traditions that have threaded their way down through the decades and the lives of successive generations to us and our time. Black churches and such seminal institutions as Penn Center have been key to keeping their light aflame. These traditions are deeply rooted in Gullah Geechee culture in the narrow corridor of the Sea Islands where freedom first came to enslaved people. The passage of years has marked local observances in different ways, sometimes linking the two events, elsewhere observing them separately or losing the meaning of Watch Night's origins. Together or separate, dressed in new garments and practices or old, these sacred commemorations are still a part of the fabric of the Gullah Geechee culture.

Though Watch Night has continued to be observed in one form or another, it would appear its original tie to the Emancipation Proclamation has been largely lost. This moment in our history calls us to re-establish the original link, as the Emancipation Proclamation is one of the foundational national documents in American history. It stands with the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Constitution in declaring who we are as a people.

GULLAH GEECHEE VOICES

Victoria Smalls grew up on St. Helena Island and attended her first Watch Night with her family when she was eleven. "The anticipation of the reading of the Emancipation Proclamation still fills me with a great sense of pride and dignity every year. It's a time of putting our best foot forward," she says. Today, Smalls is deeply committed to promoting the observance of Watch Night. Smalls is also a commissioner of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor that has launched a new outreach program to promote the observance of Watch Night and the honoring of the Emancipation Proclamation.

John Gardner remembers going to his first Watch Night services on St. Helena Island in junior high school. "It was what you did," the retired human resources administrator said. "Even when I was in college and my friends would come home, we always went to Watch Night services. It's a time of reflection, acknowledging what you've been blessed with and have enjoyed during the year. The church was dimly lit, often with candles. There were meditations and prayers. It would be absolutely quiet the last thirty seconds. When the midnight hour struck, everybody was up, joyous, hugging one another."



First African Baptist Church, Bryant, Montgomery & Saint Julian Streets, Savannah, Chatham County, GA.

Ned Roper grew up on James Island. "I'd heard about the Emancipation Proclamation in the community coming up, but I didn't know of it as part of Watch Night," he says. Nevertheless, Roper and ***Charlotte Dunn***, his older sister, grew up attending Watch Night services on New Year's Eve. "Church started at 9 pm. There was always an overflow crowd, young and old," Dunn says. "People prayed, sang and acknowledged those who'd passed on during the year. Then there was a sermon. At 11:45, four men went to each corner of the church, and the pastor would call out, 'Watchman, Watchman, tell me the hour.' And the watchmen would call out the time," she says. "During this period, the congregation is on its knees in the dark praying. It is a very sacred time. It does something to your soul. At midnight, the lights are turned on and the congregation passes from the darkness into the light, from the old year to the new, and people are filled with hope and exhilaration."

Charlotte Dunn said that in her church the link between Watch Night and the Emancipation Proclamation came later. "It had been lost. But this now is a time of education."

Reverend Edward Alston, too, grew up attending Watch Night services in Beaufort, SC, and always knew of its origins. "Since becoming a pastor, I realized that for the current generation, the younger folk as well as the older, not everyone knew about the connection between Watch Night and the Emancipation Proclamation." Rev. Alston has been pastor at Queen Chapel Church on Hilton Head Island for twenty-two years. "What I do is give a brief history of it, both verbally during the service and in written form, stating the significance and the history that ties it all together, so that they can carry it away." He makes a point, also, during the service to read a passage from the Bible in Gullah, a profound underscoring of the link between the heritage of the past and its celebration today.

"Every round is going higher and higher," says ***Reverend Mary Smith***. For twenty-one years, she was pastor of four different African American Episcopal churches in Beaufort County. "I knew more than my mother did. My kids know more than I do. And my grands and great grands know more than their parents do. This younger generation is smart. We had hard labor when I was coming up." Rev. Smith grew up on Johns Island, SC. She admits that she didn't know back then the link between Watch Night and the Emancipation Proclamation. "So, I got to learn the story before I can tell the story." She's now working with the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission to help preserve and spread the word about the celebration of Watch Night and its tie to the Emancipation Proclamation.

Georgia Sea Island Singers

GULLAH GEECHEE TRADITIONS

While many of the continuing traditions in Gullah Geechee communities throughout the sea islands have survived without notice, some have been highlighted more publicly. The cities of Savannah and Charleston have been active over the years in maintaining the traditions by celebrating Watch Night and the Emancipation Proclamation. ***Reverend Matthew Southall Brown, Sr.***, pastor emeritus of St. John Baptist Church - the Mighty Fortress has been the long time leader and champion of Emancipation Day celebrations in the Savannah area. *The Charleston Emancipation Proclamation Association* has sponsored its annual New Year's Day parade for years. And the *Penn Center* on St. Helena Island, SC, coordinates a community-wide effort, is actively engaged in historical research to preserve the heritage and is providing wider education about the events.

JOIN US THIS YEAR!

The Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission welcomes people of all faiths and backgrounds to join us this year to re-invigorate the tight link between Watch Night and the Emancipation Proclamation. We encourage anyone with knowledge, stories, or historical documents regarding Watch Night and Emancipation Proclamation celebrations to contact us. We also welcome those interested in hosting events or assisting with the planning effort.

843.818.4587 • www.gullahgeecheecorridor.org

Reading the Emancipation Proclamation H.W. Herrick, del., J.W. Watts, sc.; loc.gov

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Frank O. Smith is a writer who resides with his family in South Portland, Maine. His novel, Dream Singer, was a finalist for the prestigious Bellwether Prize for socially-engaged fiction. **Donna Healey, Ph.D.** is a Clinical Psychologist in private practice in Brookline, Massachusetts. As undergraduates at the University of California Santa Cruz, both enrolled in the Extramural Education Program, which allowed students to provide full time voluntary service while receiving academic credit. Frank spent a quarter in service for the Gullah Geechee people on Daufuskie Island, SC, and Donna spent a quarter in a rural African American community in the San Joaquin Valley, CA. After graduation, Frank returned to live with local residents and taught at Mary Fields Elementary School. Donna returned to UC Santa Cruz to administer the program, where she guided the placement of students in communities in CA, NM and SC.

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