


GULLAH GEECHEE SUMMER SCHOOL
PART I: Origins and Early Development | June 6, 2018

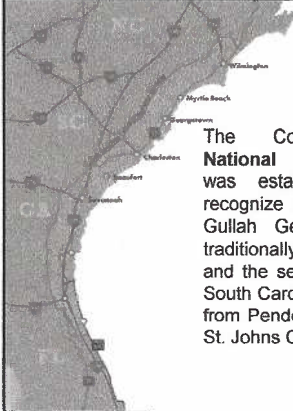


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+ Overview

- West African Origins of Gullah Geechee Ancestors
- Transatlantic Slave Trade through Charleston and Savannah
- The Atlantic Rice Coast
- Incubation of Gullah Geechee Creole Culture in the Sea Islands and Coastal Plantations

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The Corridor is a federal **National Heritage Area** and it was established by Congress to recognize the unique culture of the Gullah Geechee people who have traditionally resided in the coastal areas and the sea islands of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida — from Pender County, North Carolina, to St. Johns County, Florida.



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+ “Gullah” or “Geechee”?

- Scholars are not in agreement as to the origins of the terms “Gullah” and “Geechee.”
- Gullah people are historically those located in coastal South Carolina and Geechee people are those who live along the Georgia coast and into Florida.
- Geechee people in Georgia refer to themselves as “Freshwater Geechee” if they live on the mainland and “Saltwater Geechee” if they live on the Sea Islands.
- In some circumstances, the term “Geechee” has been used as a blanket term to describe people who live in the Low Country, regardless of ethnicity.


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+ Overview

- “Gullah” or “Geechee”: Etymologies and Conventions
- First Contact: Native Americans, Africans and Europeans
- Organization of Spanish Florida + England’s North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia Colonies
- Charter Generation of Africans in the Low Country Colonies

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+ “Gullah” or “Geechee”?



“Although Gullah and Geechee — terms whose origins have been much debated and may trace to specific African tribes or words — are often used interchangeably these days, Mrs. [Cornelia Walker] Bailey always stressed that she was Geechee. And, specifically, Saltwater Geechee (as opposed to the Freshwater Geechee, who lived 30 miles inland).

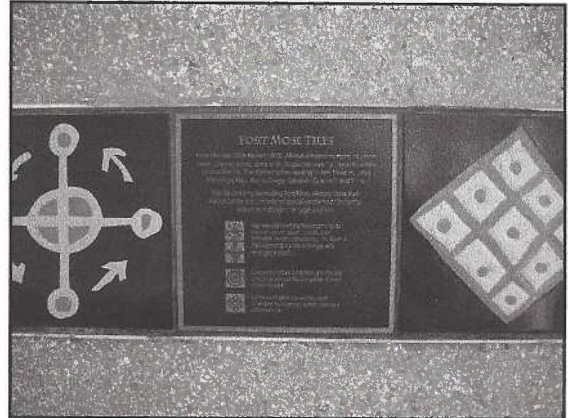
“We thought our speech was a bit more musical than theirs,” she wrote in her book, “because we talked a little faster, with fewer rest stops between our words, so that everything ran together. We’d listen to them and say, ‘Can’t they talk any faster than that? People don’t have all day.’”

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+ What makes the culture unique?

- Gullah Geechee people represent the only African-American group with a unique, long-standing name identifying them as a distinct group of people with a common set of ancestors and a defined, traditional home along the Southeast Atlantic Coast – from Pender County NC to St. Johns County FL.
- They also created the creole Gullah Geechee language spoken nowhere else in the world.
- Finally, the lifeways, folk customs, oral history, literature, crafts, arts, music, and foodways of the Gullah Geechee people – nurtured on isolated sea and barrier islands and plantations – show the strongest continuities with indigenous cultures of Africa (primarily West Africa) and connections to other cultures of the African diaspora – of any African-American community.

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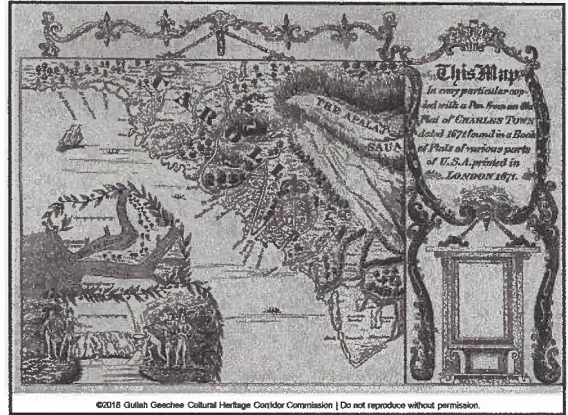
+ First Contact: Native Americans, Africans and Europeans



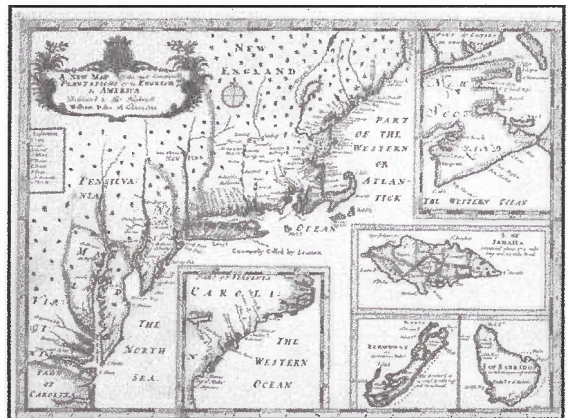
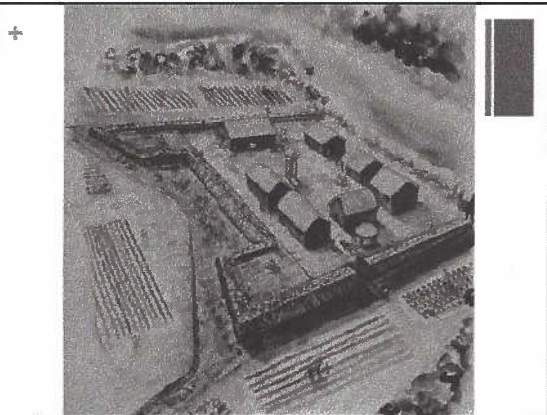
Tomochichi (ca. 1654-1720), chief of the Yamacraw tribe who lived near the Savannah River.

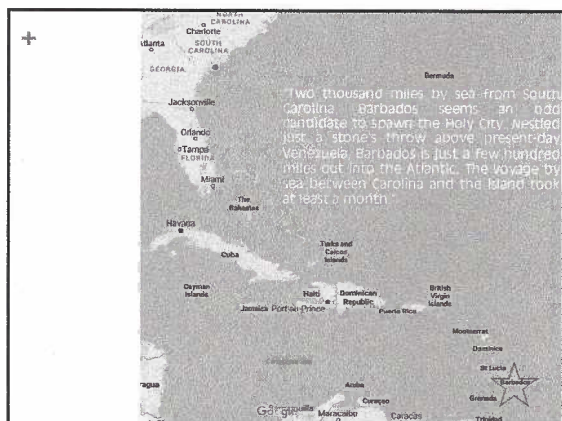
- **2500 BC: Native Americans**
 - Began as migratory tribes and then settled near freshwater sources such as the Savannah (GA) and Waccamaw (NC) rivers.
 - Include Chicoras, Catawbas, Santees, Sewees, PeeDees, Cusabos, Yamasees, Yamacraw
 - Some still remain.
- **16th-17th Century: Africans + Europeans**
 - 1513: Ponce de Leon in Florida (Spain)
 - 1524: Giovanni de Verrazano reaches Cape Fear, NC (France)
 - 1663-1665: King Charles II (England) granted to 8 Lords Proprietors all of the land from the southern border of Virginia to the middle of Florida.

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Charter Generation of Africans in the Low Country

- Only about 4% of Africans trafficked into the New World ended up in what became the United States.
- Diaspora of Gullah Geechee ancestors and descendants.
 - Barbados, Jamaica and Antigua
 - Grenada: "Ternne" people
 - Trinidad: "Merikans"
 - Cuba: liberated who left Florida with the Spanish.



In 1848, during the harvest time in southern Trinidad, growers used five pairs of oxen to pull an African plow. It was owned then by James Fennell, a slave who had been granted land and freedom in exchange for caring the British colony during the War of 1812. Credit: Carolina Gullah Rice Foundation

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First Contact: Native American, European and African

- 1664:** Planter and settlers from Barbados migrated and established a settlement named "Charles Towne" near the mouth of Towne Creek, NC.
- 1670:** Another "Charles Towne" was established on the west bank of the Ashley River by settlers from Barbados and England.
- 1732:** Georgia became the last of the original 13 colonies and was formed out of what once was the southernmost part of SC.
 - Between 1735 and 1750 Georgia was unique among Britain's American colonies, as it was the only one to attempt to prohibit black slavery as a matter of public policy.
- Native American population declines due to warfare and disease. Some sold into slavery in other parts of North America and the Caribbean.


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Charter Generation of Africans in Low Country

- Enslaved Africans came from societies with agricultural traditions and they knew how to domesticate animals and cultivate a variety of cereal, grain and vegetable crops.
- 1670-1690: Africans lived, worked and socialized with indentured White servants and enslaved or freed Native Americans.
- Africans could participate in a range of activities including growing their own food, laboring in livestock industry, producing naval stores and engaging in fur trade.

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Charter Generation of Africans in Low Country



- 1669:** Fundamental Constitutions of South Carolina outlined a plan for the government and social organization that recognized slavery and specified in Article 110 that "every Freeman of Carolina shall have absolute Power and Authority over his Negro Slaves, of what Opinion or Religion whatsoever."
- Africans arrived in South Carolina at the same time as the English and often on same ships. They had spent time in England, other English and European colonies – especially Barbados.
- Some were born in the New World.


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Emergence of Rice Culture

- Rice cultivation became the main economic activity.
- Altered character of the physical landscape and density of the enslaved population.
- First grown as a subsistence crop in damp soil without irrigation.
- Later, planters adopted the reservoir system: impounding of fresh water from streams, springs, and swamps to periodically irrigate the fields.
- By mid-1700's, tidal flow or tidewater method was employed.

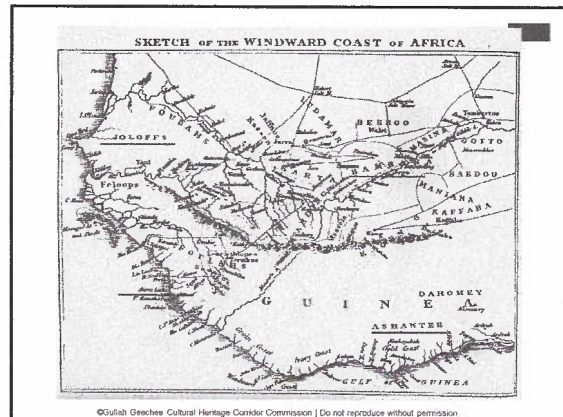
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+ Emergence of Rice Culture




- Rice fields planted adjacent to rivers and streams flowing into the ocean.
- System of canals, dikes, sluices and trunks used to flood fields with freshwater forced upstream by rising tides.
- Africans from the Rice Coast of Africa were familiar with the technology of tidewater rice production and that knowledge was transferred to the New World with their enslavement.
- Had the array of technological and management skills essential to the production of rice.

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+ Emergence of Rice Culture

- Led to dramatic increase in number of Africans trafficked into Charleston as rice cultivation spread.
- By 1770: the U.S. Rice Coast extended from Cape Fear NC to St. Johns FL – and the Black population greatly exceeded the White.



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+ Transatlantic Slave Trade


- "The unpleasant truth is that there could hardly have been successful rice culture in South Carolina without the strength and skills of enslaved Africans." – Charles Joyner (1984)
- Possessed wide range of skills: agricultural production, metallurgy, irrigation techniques, herding and the cultivation of crops like beans, peas, okra and yams.
- Resistance to malaria. Plantation owners often deserted the plantations during mosquito season and enslaved Africans managed plantations without supervision.

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+ The Atlantic Rice Coast

- As rice became more and more prominent in the economy, slaves from the rice growing regions of Africa became highly prized for their technical knowledge and skills in rice cultivation and irrigation.
- Some West Africans had experience in clearing swamps, building dikes, and using the tides to irrigate fields.

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The captives were warehoused in forts or large castles or held in open barracoons (outdoor prisons) at "slave ports" such as Goree in Senegal, James Island in the Gambia River, and Bunce Island in the Sierra Leone River.

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+ Middle Passage



"The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably loathsome, that it was dangerous to remain there for any time, and some of us had been permitted to stay on the deck for the fresh air; but now that the whole ship's cargo were confined together, it became absolutely pestiferous. The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us.

This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died, thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable."

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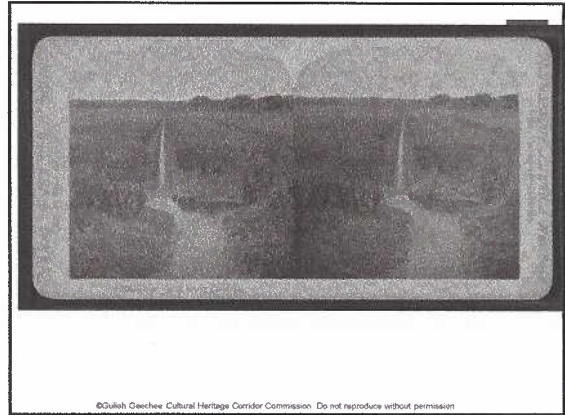
+ Middle Passage



I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat. I now wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me; but soon, to my grief, two of the White men offered me eatables; and on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands, and laid me across I think the windlass, and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely.

I had never experienced any thing of this kind before; and although not being used to the water, I naturally feared that element the first time I saw it, yet nevertheless, could I have got over the nettings, I would have jumped over the side, but I could not; and besides, the crew used to watch us very closely who were not chained down to the decks, lest we should leap into the water: and I have seen some of these poor African prisoners most severely cut for attempting to do so, and hourly whipped for not eating."

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"These fields are surrounded by more than a mile of earthen dikes or 'banks' as they were called. Built by slaves, these banks ... were taller than a person and up to 15 feet wide. By [1800], rice banks on the 12½ mile stretch of the East Branch of the Cooper River measured more than 55 miles long and contained more than 6.4 million feet of earth ... This means that ... working in the water and muck with no more than shovels, hoes, and baskets ... by 1850 Carolina slaves ... on [tidal] plantations like Middleburg throughout the rice growing district had built a system of banks and canals ... nearly three times the volume of Cheops, the world's largest pyramid."

-University of South Carolina archaeologist Leland Ferguson

+ The Atlantic Rice Coast

- Rice plantations were large operations with independent internal economies – not unlike the manor system of the Old World. Agriculture was not, therefore, the only skill required to keep the plantation operational. Many enslaved men and women had been skilled artisans in Africa – blacksmiths, potters, coopers, carpenters, fishermen, miners – and brought valuable skills to their new homeland.
- Many enslaved women had knowledge of herbal cures, nursing the sick, and midwifery. Some enslaved were trained to perform specialized trades after they arrived in the colonies. All of these skills contributed to the financial success of the plantation and the wealth of the planter.

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"We has a right to the land where we are located. For why? I tell you. Our wives, our children, our husbands has been sold over and over again to purchase the lands we now locates upon; that the reason we have a divine right to the land ... And then didn't we clear the land, and raise the crops of corn, of cotton, of tobacco, of rice, of sugar, of everything?"

-Bayley Wyat, 1866


+ The Atlantic Rice Coast

- When New World slaves planted rice in the spring by pressing a hole with the heel and covering the seeds with the foot, the motion used was demonstrably similar to that employed in West Africa. In summer, when enslaved moved through the rice fields in a row, hoeing in unison to work songs, the pattern of cultivation was not one imposed by European owners but rather one retained from West African forebears.
- And in October when the threshed grain was "fanned" in the wind, the wide, flat winnowing baskets were made by black hands after an African design. Rice planting on the Windward Coast of Africa had been a time of celebration, a time of renewal and promise.

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+ Resistance

- Mortality rate of enslaved Africans from disease and hazardous conditions often exceeded the number of births on a plantation.
- Also endured extreme punishments and inhumane work conditions.
- Many sought every opportunity to resist and escape: arson, sabotage and complete insurrection.
- Revolutionary War: some earned their freedom by actively supporting the British. Possibly as many as 10,000 found freedom and some found their way back to Sierra Leone and West Africa.



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+ DNA Baskets | Mount Pleasant SC

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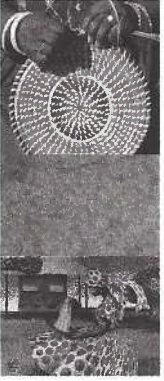
+ Emergence of Gullah Geechee Culture

- Arrived with diverse range of cultural, linguistic and spiritual practices.
- Once on the plantation, the numbers of new arrivals often overwhelmed the proto-Creole culture of earlier arrivals.
- Because many of the transplanted African peoples did not share the same cultural practices, eventually common institutions and a synthesized new Creole culture – now known as Gullah Geechee – emerged.

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+ Rice and Identity

- Rice was not only the favored staple food of these enslaved, it also was a part of their cultural identity. Rice came with them in the slave vessels and was processed during the voyage by captive women aboard the ships.
- Gullah Geechee traditional foodways feature, among other West African produce, transplanted rice, greens, peanuts, benne, sweet potatoes, and okra.
- Fish dishes and spices, also imported by enslaved Africans, manifested in new recipes using locally available foods and seasonings.



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+ Language

- Prominent among the distinguishing characteristics of Gullah Geechee identity is a unique form of speech that has traditionally been referred to as "Gullah" or "Geechee," a distinctive Creole language. While the Gullah Geechee language has been developed, adapted, and spoken over the past, roughly 250 years, from an outsider's perspective it has historically been derided as substandard, or "broken" English.
- Beginning with Lorenzo Dow Turner's groundbreaking work, *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (Turner 1949), the language has increasingly come to be appreciated, even by outsiders, as a legitimate and remarkable language in its own right. Unfortunately, it is also an endangered language.

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+ Next Webinar | June 20

The quest for freedom, equality, education and recognition.

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+ Emergence of Gullah Geechee Culture

- Foundations of Gullah Geechee culture rested on the ability of enslaved Africans to adjust to reproduce themselves while creating and sustaining family, community, linguistic and spiritual institutions.
- Their isolated existence on remote plantations, density in the general population and proximity to port cities and major commercial centers also facilitated the development of Gullah Geechee culture.
- But it is not a monolithic and its manifestation varied from region to region, from rural to urban areas.

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+ Part II: Quest for Freedom, Equality and Recognition

- Civil War
- Reconstruction
- "Jim Crow"
- Race and Civil Rights

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