

# **Gullah Geechee**

## **History, Language, Society, Culture, and Change**

Since scholars are not in agreement as to the origins of the terms Gullah and Geechee, the vernacular use of the terms will suffice for the purpose of this study. Gullah people are, therefore, 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. “Geechee” has also been used in a derogatory manner to show disdain for an African-American, from the Low Country region, regardless of specific location.

Gullah/Geechee people of today are descendants of enslaved Africans from various ethnic groups of west and central Africa who were forced to work on the plantations of coastal South Carolina, Georgia, North Carolina, and Florida. Gullah/Geechee people are survivors - unique groups of African-Americans who lived near the coast and on barrier islands that were separated from the mainland by creeks, rivers, and marshes. Because of their geographic protection from outsiders and strong sense of family and community, Gullah/Geechee people maintained a separate creole language and developed distinct culture patterns, which included more of the African cultural tradition than African-American population in other parts of the United States.

The isolation of these sea island communities from outsiders was vital to the survival of Gullah/Geechee community cultures. Although Gullah/Geechee people traveled to and from the mainland and to nearby islands, outsiders seldom came into their communities, especially after the Civil War. The isolation of Gullah/Geechee people which began in colonial times in response to tropical fevers later became an isolation of choice. People chose to come back to their homes, their families, their language, and their way of life - a slow-paced life among majestic trees, tidal marshes, and dirt roads traversed by ox and mule carts - places where small boats, horses, mules and feet were the primary forms of transportation. Thus, within these rural communities, people were able to maintain their language, arts, crafts, religious beliefs, folklore, rituals and food preferences that are distinctly connected to their West African roots. The islands were accessible only by boat until the first bridges were built around 1950.

Coastal development, changing job markets, and population shifts have forced many Gullah/Geechee people to leave their ancestral family lands. The traditional economy of farming, fishing, hunting, and small-scale marketing of subsistence products has been replaced by a suburban and resort service economy. These

**changes threaten Gullah/Geechee cultural survival and their distinct identity as a people who have survived since colonial times.**

**Many traditional Gullah/Geechee communities have been lost to real estate development, encroachment by outsiders, and the resulting economic hardship. The remaining communities have become models for understanding negative as well as positive impacts of burgeoning tourism and large scale economic development in coastal regions of the American South. Despite the losses of recent decades, the Gullah/Geechee people remain a testament to the power of human adaptability and survival amid major stresses and assaults from many fronts in the rapidly changing economic environment of the modern world.**

**The first inklings of massive impacts on post-Civil War Gullah/Geechee cultural stability came during the 1920s and 1930s when wealthy industrialists from the North discovered the abundant wildlife and mild winter climate of the Low Country and adjoining islands. Magnates, such as Bernard Baruch, R. J. Reynolds, Howard Coffin, and Tom Yawkey, bought failed rice plantations from their bankrupt owners and established hunting lodges for themselves and their friends. In some cases Gullah/Geechee people who were living on this land were allowed to continue their farming and/or work for the new landowner, while other new owners forced black people from the land.**

**With land ownership tangled in years of subdivision of property among families and inheritance of land without recorded wills (heirs/ property), Gullah/Geechee people could not prove their ownership rights to their home sites. As years passed and more people died in testate, the property became more entangled in communal ownership. Many were forced from their land and/or the land and waterways where they had traditionally farmed, hunted and fished to supplement their tables and their incomes.**

**The pressures began even earlier for Gullah/Geechee people who were involved in commercial fishing. Proximity to the sea fostered an early tradition of seafood harvesting, ranging from cast netting to small-scale commercial shrimp boats. Economic gain from catching and selling seafood began before the end of slavery and continued into the 20th Century. The African-American shrimping fleet was a major factor in the development of commercial fishing in the region. Competition came from more sophisticated fishermen with greater capital resources. According to Benjamin Blount (2000) the formerly self-sustained Gullah/Geechee fishing boat captains were largely replaced by others and their role reduced to that of laborers in the fishing industry. Pollution from the expanding timber industry, recent catastrophic hurricanes, and pressures on commercial fishing worldwide have also contributed to further decline of the maritime economy of Gullah/Geechee people.**

**The military has also played a significant role in the process of change. The Marine Training Center at Parris Island in Beaufort County, South Carolina, was constructed during the 1880s. During World War II, traditional Gullah/Geechee**

lands in McIntosh County, Georgia, were used by the federal government for coastal defense purposes.

The great transformation, however, began in 1957 when Charles Frasier launched the construction of Sea Pines Plantation on Hilton Head Island. The availability of air conditioning suddenly made the sea islands appealing to affluent people. It was not very long before other developers joined in, and resorts sprang up all over the island. Although only about 20% of the island was actually owned by Gullah/Geechee residents, much of the remaining land was owned by absentee landlords who allowed free access to their property. The absentee landlords quickly sold out to developers. Between 1950 and 2000, the South Carolina Low Country counties increased by 151% while the national population as a whole increased by only 86%.

Before construction of Sea Pines Plantation, Gullah/Geechee residents had been free to hunt and fish all over Hilton Head Island. Suddenly fences and gates blocked much of the land. Residents were cut off from their hunting and fishing grounds as well as their traditional burial grounds. Fences meant that Gullah/Geechee islanders could no longer “go in duh creek” to get supper. The Sea Pines story has been repeated many times over on islands all over the study area. Nick Lindsey, local historian, asked an old friend on Edisto to talk about the differences between the “old days” and today (2000).

*Everything change up now. In the old day, money? Take him or leave him, be all right. Now? Must have him now. Everything change up now.*

Novels such as *The Water Is Wide* and others by Patrick Conroy (1972) expressed the distinctive beauty of his beloved Carolina coast in a way that appealed to people worldwide. Although it was not the author’s intent, the popularity of these stories hastened the influx of people to the area. There was a resulting population shift on the Sea Islands from the traditional rural black majority to an affluent white majority. This change brought intensified racial prejudice and segregation to islands where Gullah/Geechee people had lived for years in relative isolation from the outside world. Although Daufuskie Island, which Conroy called Yamacraw in his novel, still has no bridge to the mainland, but nearly half of the island has been lost to resort development. The delineation between resort and rural agriculture is dramatic.

Resorts, golf courses, and coastal suburban development on the islands led to steadily increasing property values and skyrocketing taxes. Island economies changed from rural subsistence farming to a service-based economy. Native islanders were often unable to bear the tax burden, and many were forced to leave their homes. Not just Gullah/ Geechee people but all islanders of modest means, black and white, have been adversely affected by the rising taxes caused by development and population growth.

With the loss of land and easy access to fishing and hunting, came a loss of Gullah/Geechee self sufficiency and autonomy. Displaced and landless Gullah/Geechee people increasingly turned to hourly labor, out-migration, or both. Although some islanders chose to remain in the vicinity to work in the resort industry, they soon found that only minimum wage service sector jobs were available to them. Low income forced these resort workers to face ever-increasing commuting distances required to find affordable housing.

During the 1960s, as the number of outsiders relocating to the islands rose to a peak, there was a second major out-migration of Gullah/Geechee people to the North. They were essentially pushed from their homeland by loss of land for agriculture, lack of job training, lack of skilled jobs, and few opportunities for advancement (Lemann 1992). Many of these people sent their children home to the islands in the summertime, so that the youngsters could get to know their relatives and experience the simplicity of island life. Others, however, may have forever lost the connection to their ancestry and culture. It is interesting to note that some of the people who left in the 1960s are now returning to their roots and are among the most active in trying to preserve Gullah/Geechee community and tradition. Some of the “returnees” spoke with the field research team and expressed a strong, almost irresistible, spiritual need to return to their ancestral roots in the Low Country.

The construction of Interstate 95 in the mid 1970s was a major factor in the transformation of coastal zones. I-95 is the New York to Miami corridor and is thus one of the most heavily traveled interstate highways in the United States. Coastal regions of the study area, other than specific resort developments, were still relatively remote and isolated until after the construction of I-95. The highway not only gave easy access to Hilton Head Island and its neighboring resorts in South Carolina, but also created access to pristine islands and beaches. Development along I-95 in Georgia has been slower to occur, perhaps because the highway lies along the inland edges of great salt marshes. These marshes are likely to be viewed by uninitiated tourists as “swamps”, rather than as the highly productive ecosystems that they, in fact, are. Almost 50% of the remaining salt marsh along the eastern seaboard of the United States lies along the Georgia coastline and much of it is currently protected by government agencies.

The Sea Islands are not the only areas at great risk. Mainland Gullah/Geechee communities are also threatened by increasing coastal development and population growth with the resulting encroachment into rural neighborhoods. Once there were several postbellum freedmen communities in or near Mt. Pleasant, SC, in upper Charleston County. Among these are Phillips, Greenhill, Snowden, and Scanlonville. Greenhill and Snowden, though surrounded by suburban development, appear to be holding their own. Both Scanlonville and Phillips are under serious threat and have sought help from the South Carolina Department of Archives and History to be designated as Historic Neighborhoods. Both communities have been thwarted in their preservation efforts by the lack of standing historic structures at least fifty years old, as ordinarily required for National Register status.

Scanlonville was formed as a voluntary association of freedmen, who sought to be landowners. Robert L. Scanlon purchased the 614-acre Remley Plantation at auction and held the land in trust for the Charleston Land Company. By 1870 the land had been platted into home sites, farm lots, and a communal park and cemetery. The cemetery has been approved for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, but cannot be officially listed until a lawsuit involving the property is resolved. Developers want to move the graves so that the historic site can be used as waterfront residential property (Trinkley 2001), which would effectively eliminate the historical significance of the property under existing criteria of the National Historic Preservation Act. Both Scanlonville and Phillips have been thwarted in their preservation efforts by the lack of historic structures.

### **National Significance of the Gullah/Geechee People and Their Culture**

The Gullah/Geechee people of the Low Country and Sea Islands of South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, and North Carolina are a distinctive people. They are also the only African American population of the United States with a separate, long-standing name identifying them as a separate people. They are distinct among African American peoples in this development of a tradition that depends as much upon maritime resources as upon land resources. Historically they are speakers of the only true African American creole language of the continental United States.

Gullah/Geechee people are the most African of African Americans in physical type, language, and culture; yet they are a uniquely American cultural type formed by the fusion of African cultural heritage and American experience. Through the diffusion and expansion of their population, the Gullah/Geechee people have become the source for many elements noted in other African American cultures. Of all African American cultures in the United States, the folk customs, oral history and literature, crafts and arts of the Gullah/Geechee people show the strongest continuities with indigenous cultures of Africa. The Gullah/Geechee culture also bears strong similarities to creole and maroon cultures of the Caribbean.

In many respects the Gullah/Geechee cultural region directly parallels that of the Afro-Carib Garifuna people of Belize. The "cultural space" of these Garifuna people was selected in 2001 by UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, a distinction for which the Gullah/Geechee people themselves might qualify (Global Garifuna Network, Electronic Document; UNESCO, Electronic Document).

Thus, Gullah/Geechee cultural heritage, eating habits, cooking styles, music, language and traditions have made significant contributions, not only to the lives of southerners but also to all Americans. Recognizing the pivotal place that Gullah/Geechee people, language, folklore, and culture have occupied in African American scholarship.