

Museum Around the Corner

Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

One of the most important facets of life in Georgetown County and the Lowcountry is the history of Gullah Culture, sometimes called Gullah Geechee. An excellent source of information is Dr. Charles Joyner's, [Down by the Riverside](#), a description of slave life in All Saints Parish during rice cultivation. The subject is so broad as to render it impossible to cover every aspect in this space.

Although each tribe of West Africa had its own language, religion, foodways, art, medicine, music, clothing, folklore, etc., a common bond was rice cultivation. When they were thrown together into slavery, all the elements of their cultures were mingled together along with the English language and customs in their new surroundings. This new Gullah language was partly English with some elements unique to their former way of speaking. An example of Gullah language is from author Joel Chandler Harris' stories that show how English words were shortened for the Gullah language, such as Brer Rabbit meaning Brother Rabbit. In hearing Gullah spoken, it would seem to be a foreign language, but to read printed Gullah, context can quickly be recognized.

One reason that has caused the Gullah Culture to stay strong along the South Carolina coast is that after the War Between the States, when the slaves were given freedom, some of them went to the sea islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. They stayed isolated out there until the 20th Century with nothing to dilute or influence the culture.

In Africa, the cultivation of rice had been practiced for centuries. Their knowledge and experience were far ahead of our relatively recent introduction to the grain. Africans would hollow out a tree trunk to be the conduit to flood and drain the rice fields, and in America, a new concept called rice trunks or trunk docks was developed. Thus, the work "trunk" was attached to this new technology. A set of gates on each end of a long rectangular box was installed in an embankment along our fresh water rivers. This engineering feat brought better control to flooding and draining. The depth of these tidal influenced rivers was used at peak high and low tides to flood or drain the fields.

Slaves went out to remote ricefields in March to plant rice and did not return to the plantation until they brought the harvest in September. In 1822, a severe hurricane took the lives of over 300 slaves. This terrible loss prompted the building of circular brick towers which were used for shelter when the weather threatened. These storm protection towers have about a ten foot clearance at the base for the storm surge and one door with a ladder to enter. These buildings seem to be unique to the Santee River Delta, the southernmost extent of Georgetown County. Only one remains intact today and is used as a hunting lodge. It is amazing that they knew in 1822 that the round form is aerodynamically right to deflect the wind.

Sweetgrass baskets are another facet of Gullah Culture. A familiar sight in the Lowcountry, these utility pieces were originally used on the plantations as work baskets for any purpose necessary. Any size or shape could quickly be sewn. This skill was brought over by the enslaved Africans and continued to be made here. In the South Carolina Lowcountry, they are composed of pine needles, sweetgrass, and bulrush which are beach grasses. They are woven together using strips from the Palmetto tree fronds. Sweetgrass is increasingly harder to find because of development encroaching on the areas where it grew. In the mid 20th Century, this craft was elevated to a folk art. Booths can be seen along Highway 17 near Charleston and farther south where Sweetgrass makers sell their baskets of all sizes and shapes.