

**CHATHAM COUNTY HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION**

**REGULAR MEETING  
110 EAST STATE STREET**

**ARTHUR A. MENDONSA HEARING ROOM**

**May 7, 2008**

**2:00 P.M.**

**MINUTES**

**CCHPC Members Present:**

**George Cohen, Vice-Chairman  
Jane A. Feiler  
William Haynes  
Stephen T. Lindell  
Pamela G. Lossing  
Christian Sottile**

**CCHPC Members Not Present:**

**Daves Rossell, Chairman  
Vaughnette Goode-Walker  
Lisa L. White**

**CCHPC/MPC Staff Members Present:**

**Beth Reiter, Historic Preservation Director  
Janine N. Person, Administrative Assistant**

**I. WELCOME**

The meeting was called to order at 2:10 p.m.

**II. INTRODUCTIONS**

**Mr. Cohen** asked everyone to introduce themselves.

**III. GUEST SPEAKER - Jeanne Cyriaque, African-Americans Program Coordinator**

**Ms. Reiter** introduced Ms. Cyriaque who came from the State Historic Preservation office where she is the African-American Historic Preservation Network representative.

**Ms. Jeanne Cyriaque** stated that she works in the State Historic Preservation office where she coordinates the African-American programs in preservation. She said that her job came about because there were volunteers statewide that were trying to preserve various African-American projects. They were known as the Georgia African-American Historic Preservation Network. Her job was created to be the staff liaison to the State Historic Preservation Office. It takes her on a variety of adventures working with different groups within the state. Not long after she started in 2000, she learned that the National Park Service was doing a feasibility study on the Gullah/Geechee culture. She became interested in the project and today it is an interest and passion, and she has been appointed to the Gullah/Geechee Commission.

She showed a slide of Harris Neck which is a long-standing Gullah/Geechee community, and during World War II the nation thought that Harris Neck had a good strategic point for its defense. It is now a National Wildlife refuge with beautiful marshes that were once places where Gullah people used to live and work. When slavery first started, many slave traders went to West Africa to find slaves to import into the United States. At first Georgia prohibited slavery and South Carolina became the recipient of many Africans from West Africa because they had knowledge and skills in rice production. The production of rice preceded cotton. Today, many African-Americans can trace their ancestry to West Africa and the slaves were brought to British North America, the Caribbean, South America, the port of Charleston, and later to Savannah.

In Georgia they lived on barrier islands and part of the National Heritage Area includes Chatham County. It starts at Bryan County, then Chatham, McIntosh, Glenn, and Camden Counties, and almost to Florida. The coastal communities include: Savannah River Plantations, Ossabaw, St. Catherine's, Sapelo, Darien, St. Simons, and Cumberland. People lived in the barrier islands during the 18<sup>th</sup> century and vast plantations were started that experimented with rice production and later Sea Island cotton. In Chatham County, many Gullah people can trace their heritage to various Savannah River Plantations. Many of the tribes spoke different languages and due to isolation they developed a language known today as Gullah. There are many people today that debate why it is called Gullah/Geechee and some of the theories are related to the Ogeechee River and/or because some people say that they are Geechee's and not Gullah. When the park service did the feasibility study, it took about three years to study the whole culture from Wilmington, North Carolina, to Jacksonville, Florida, and the term was used interchangeably which is why it is called Gullah/Geechee today.

The rice kingdom started on Tybee Island and went as far south as St. Mary's with the entire barrier islands producing rice. The Gullah culture is very deep-rooted in faith and there is a praise house that still exists in McIntosh County. During enslavement, the Gullah people worshipped in praise houses. The praise house is located next to Mount Calvary Church in Eulonia, a place where the shout is practiced that is a definite Gullah/Geechee form of worship that is done by the McIntosh County Shouters. They practice what is called a "ring shout" with a "baser" who establishes the beat for the shout while the other men do hand clapping to establish a rhythm and the ladies perform the ring shout. It is not to be confused as a dance because it is meant to be religious and they don't lift their feet off the ground while doing the ring shout. The ring shout is performed on New Year's Eve at a watch night service all along the corridor at different churches. She said that Mr. Lawrence McKiver is the patriarch of the McIntosh Shouters and the group includes Mr. Freddie Palmer and Mr. Venus McKiver, who performed during the Ossabaw Island symposium in Savannah.

There is a family from the Harris Neck Community whose daughter, Ms. Mary Dawley Moran, was taught a song by her mother that she would sing, but she did not know the meaning. During the 1930's researchers came after the depression to do the Georgia Writer's Project and recorded the mother singing the song. There was one African-American linguist, Mr. Lorenzo Dowell Turner, who did initial research for his doctorate on the origins of the song. He believed that the song had African and West African roots to it. Many years passed and Ms. Dawley was still singing the song and teaching it to her family. After the Harris Neck people were moved out they came back and settled in Townsend near Harris Neck. The research was continued on the connection of the linguistics of this particular song, and they came back to Harris Neck and found Ms. Dawley. A team of people went to West Africa and tried to trace the tribe from which the song originated. They found a woman called Jubati, and she sang the exact song. The family had a reunion in the 80's in West Africa and learned that the song is a funeral dirge. This song is one way they can document Gullah/Geechee culture.

Another way they celebrate Gullah/Geechee culture is that a conference is held annually in Brunswick called Celebrating Our Coastal Heritage. Speakers are brought from all of the state programs to talk with the participants, as well as professors from the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD). They toured a number of churches because the church is very important to the Gullah/Geechee culture being the major way to connect from Ossabaw through Pin Point. In Savannah, the First African Baptist Church and First Bryan Baptist Church had a lot of Gullah/Geechee people in their congregations in their initial stages. The Rizzley School complex was

started after the Civil War by Captain Rizzley, and the tabby cabins have been restored by the Casina Garden Club at Gaston Park. There is a retreat slave hospital that still exists on a golf course today. Many of the built resources associated with this culture are now endangered up and down the coast. The hospital was restored by the golf course but the Gullah/Geechee burial ground adjacent to it can only be accessed by permission. There is a school house in a community called Herrington on St. Simon's Island and there are efforts to restore the school house. They have created a partnership with the St. Simon's Land Trust to protect the land around the school house. They interact with other organizations like the Society for Georgia Archaeology who focuses their annual meetings on specific topics like Native Americans or African-Americans. There is a project on Ossabaw Island with the restoration of three tabby cabins through a partnership with others, and it will allow them to interpret what life was like on the barrier islands. Today, Thomas Butler King's plantation is a waterfall management area and they have a rice tower that is a reminder of what existed at one time. In the waterfall area there is evidence of rice dikes along the coast. The St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church is built out of tabby and was built around 1860 before the war ended, so that the Africans on the rice plantation would have a place to worship. On Sapelo Island there were once several Gullah/Geechee settlements all over the island, and in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century when R. J. Reynolds purchased the island, gradually the Gullah/Geechee people were moved to a community called Hog Hammock, which is where they live today. This is the most intact Gullah/Geechee community because the only way to get to Sapelo Island is by boat. Roads and bridges created a climate where development came to all of the communities that existed. The culture is celebrated annually in October on, "A Cultural Day", and they take about 1,000 people to Sapelo Island. At the festival you eat Gullah traditional foods, hear music, see the shouters, and see exhibits related to the culture. For the last three or four years the St. Simon's African-American Heritage Coalition has revived the Georgia Sea Islands Festival.

She said that when the park service did the three-year study from about 2001 to about 2004, they did a feasibility study and received additional help from the National Trust who listed the Gullah/Geechee culture as one of its most endangered resources. The National Heritage Area is unique because it encompasses regions of four states. They became the National Heritage Area in October 2006 which encompasses all of the barrier islands, includes six counties from Wilmington all the way north to Jacksonville, and four states. The National Heritage Area is the first in the nation dealing with African-American cultures, and after the designation they meet informally through all of the states to establish a commission whose mission would be to develop an interpretative plan. There are five commissioners in Georgia, Jamal Toure, Debra Mack, Althea Sumpter, Charles Hall, and herself. In South Carolina, because they have a larger area and Gullah population, they have six commissioners, and the remaining states have five commissioners. There are approximately 25 people and they recently held their first meeting. The National Heritage Areas receive appropriations from Congress, and each heritage area receives one million dollars from Congress each year for the life of the commission, which is about ten years. Over the commission's life there will be several people that will be commissioners'. She said that Pin Point and Sandfly were definitely Gullah/Geechee communities and they will be supporting all of their efforts to preserve their districts and their culture.

**Ms. Reiter** asked if the Commission would be giving any grants.

**Ms. Cyriaque** stated that ultimately they would be in a position to give grants. She said for the first year Congress appropriated \$467,000 and that they are just getting organized. They have visited other National Heritage Areas, had their first training by others who have done this, and they have grant programs.

**Ms. Reiter** asked about the other Heritage Areas.

**Ms. Cyriaque** stated that some were the Cane River National Heritage Area from Louisiana, some were state-wide like the Tennessee National Heritage Area which is the entire state, and they hope to have grant programs to support organizations and their programs.

**Mr. Haynes** asked if Mr. Paul Pressley had spoke to them about the grants.

**Ms. Cyriaque** stated that they just had their first commission meeting but was sure that he would. She said they will be developing a management plan for interpreting the region and would be the first effort. Each heritage area has to have a management plan and Congress does not continuously award National Heritage Areas money without an interpretative plan for the region. It will include historic resources, cultural events, and sites associated with the culture throughout the region.

**Ms. Reiter** stated that what was said about the song was interesting.

**Ms. Cyriaque** stated that she met all of the commissioners for the first time about two weeks ago and they are a talented group of people where many are from academia with a specialty in this area. Some are linguists, some are professors of history, and lots of people are from different non-profits who promote the culture in various ways. She said that Mr. Jamal Toure, who is a Savannah commissioner, does historic tours, performances, and lectures. Ms. Althea Sumpter is the ethnographer, Ms. Debra Mack is an anthropologist, and they are representative of the commission as a whole. Many are Gullah descendents; she is not a Gullah descendent, but two-thirds of the commission are.

**Mr. Cohen** thanked Ms. Cyriaque and stated that as they progress to keep everyone informed because they would love to know where it goes with the direction of the Commission in doing their work.

#### **IV. COMMISSIONERS' ITEMS**

There were none.

#### **V. MEETING MINUTES - April 2, 2008**

**CCHPC ACTION: Mr. Lindell made a motion that the Chatham County Historic Preservation Commission hereby approve the minutes as submitted. Mr. Haynes seconded the motion and it passed unanimously.**

#### **VI. ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business to come before the Chatham County Historic Preservation Commission, the meeting was adjourned at approximately 2:45 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

Beth Reiter for Ellen Harris,  
Preservation Planner

**EH/jnp**