

David Selva

The Gullah Geechee

The transatlantic slave trade is arguably the most dreadful and bizarre period in American history. The misery millions of Africans experienced for centuries vividly illustrates the darkest upbringing of our nation. Communities of enslaved Africans gradually developed over time, with various unique cultures emerging from disparity. Such communities originated their languages, cuisine, art, crafts, and customs that advocated individuality and a beacon of light amid evil.

The Gullah Geechee are descendants of West and Central Africans that arrived in America in the early 1600s. The African community was enslaved predominantly in the coastal Carolina region on rice, indigo, and cotton plantations. Their isolated way of living allowed them to preserve numerous traditions from their ancestors and embody unity with themselves. The Gullah Geechee are distinct from any other enslaved community in the thirteen original colonies, and their rich history is worth a luminous spotlight.

The Gullah Geechee had no economic factor because they were recognized only as commodified flesh. “Their value as humans was nonexistent, and their souls were worth nothing more than cargo from Africa” (Palmer). Enslaved Africans had no autonomous rights, causing them to become the economic factors that benefited the palms of their vicious puppeteers. They developed their language to communicate with people “who spoke many different languages including European slave traders, slave owners, and diverse African ethnic groups” (GGCHCC). The Creole dialect *Gullah* was not easily understood, allowing their community an extent of privacy from their slave owners.

The horrific journey of the Gullah Geechee began once they got kidnapped from African regions where crop cultivation was prevalent and were demanded to suffer at the birth of a new

nation. Those who miraculously survived the voyage from Africa initially landed in Charleston, South Carolina. They rapidly dispersed throughout coastal Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. The region where they spread across is recognized modernly as the “Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor”. The highest peak of the corridor is Wilmington, North Carolina, and the lowest point is St. Augustine, Florida. They encountered burdens such as disease, malnourishment, torture, and death upon their arrival in the new world. “The average adult Gullah Geechee had an approximate life expectancy of seven years before dying” (Palmer). Such minimal life expectancy led slave owners to purchase thousands of more kidnapped Africans and continue a never-ending cycle lasting numerous centuries.

The thirteen original colonies had a percentage of enslaved Africans exceeding two-thirds of their entire population. The Gullah Geechee was just one of the numerous communities that implemented perseverance, tenacity, and resilience while living in their endless torment. The legacy of the Gullah Geechee continues to live on through their art, language, cuisine, and traditions. Creativity for art has been passed down through generations directly from ancestors' hands. Each artwork is “unique to its time, but they all capture a story depicting unity and faith within isolation” (Haupt). Their heritage continues to mark its presence in the present day through festivals where their vigor is celebrated. Leland, North Carolina hosts an annual commemoration for African communities to shine a light on those who built our nation.

I have been enormously fortunate to learn about the fascinating history of the Gullah Geechee. I devote my gratitude to Sean Palmer, director of the Upperman African American Center at UNCW. He is one of the three North Carolina commissioners for the Cultural Heritage Corridor. His passion for the Gullah Geechee and generosity in sharing valuable information with me painted a picture responsible for this essay. Being a Wilmington native has provided me

with perspective about the land I call home. The Gullah Geechee are responsible for the upbringing of my city, and I was unaware of their efforts before doing my research. I plan on learning more about their unique community by attending the upcoming African commemoration festival for the first time. The burning spirit of enslaved communities deserves to be admired for the diligence that allowed our nation to blossom from the darkness of our past. It has been my honor to return the flowers given to us by the brave Gullah Geechee.

Works Cited

“THE GULLAH GEECHEE.” GGCHCC,
<https://gullahgeecheecorridor.org/thegullahgeechee/>

Interview with Sean Palmer. Director of the Upperman African American Center at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. (Commissioner of the Gullah Geechee Corridor) - Jan 27, 2023.

Interview with Dr. David Houpt. American History to 1865 Professor at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. - Jan 13, 2023.