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A Clash of Cultures: The Landscape of the Sea Island Gullah

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The Landscape of the Sea Island Gullah

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ABSTRACT: Home to the Gullah people, the Sea Islands in the Lowcountry of South Carolina and Georgia contain a culturally and ecologically distinct landscape. Descendents of plantation slaves brought to the United States between 1640 and 1850, the Gullah community has maintained a cultural identity that is reflected in a landscape pattern that is often at odds with dominant American culture. By analyzing the history of the development of Gullah culture, the genesis, contemporary meanings, and significance of the Gullah landscape pattern can be read. This article develops an understanding of the Gullah concepts of land ownership, place, community and proxemics, and places those in the context of modern growth management planning issues.

KEYWORDS: Cultural landscape, cross-cultural planning, Gullah, traditional communities

The Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia contain a culturally and ecologically unique landscape, spanning an area approximately 250 miles long and 40 miles wide along the southeastern coast of the United States. The manner in which these lands were settled, juxtaposing the cultures of landowner and slave on large agricultural plantations, reinforced by the physical (and resulting social) isolation, provided the environment for the development of a distinct cultural group. Descended from the extensive slave populations that were brought to South Carolina from Africa and the Caribbean (Littlefield 1991; Pollitzer 1998; Pollitzer 1999), the Gullah communities have dominated the Sea Islands for more than three centuries, from the pre-Revolutionary War era to the present, and remain one of the most studied populations in the United States (Pollitzer 1999).

During this period, the Gullah people have developed a distinctive culture in all its myriad aspects—a distinctive language, traditional foods, religion, music, folktales, social structure and landscape forms and settlement patterns that are different from—if not at times at odds with—the dominant culture of the mainland. Social science and anthropological researchers have long focused on the Gullah people, since the culture shows

more African influences in their self-expression, behavior, and beliefs than any other long-established

large American population group; they are genetically less mixed with white and Native American than most other African Americans . . . [U]ntil a generation ago, theirs was the largest overwhelmingly African American area of the United States; and Sullivan's Island, off Charleston, South Carolina, is often called the Ellis Island of Black America. (Pollitzer 1999, xiii)

Linguists are fascinated by the unique rhythm, tempo, and stress of the Gullah language, as well as its vocabulary and grammar (Joyner 1985; Twining and Baird 1991; Goodwine 1998). Folklorists have studied the verbal arts of folksong, folktale, riddle, etc. (Joyner 1985), and historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists have studied agricultural and agrarian history, social organization, folk architecture, and arts and crafts (Vlach 1991; Ferguson 1992; Vlach 1993) throughout the Gullah community. However, while these various disciplines have each touched on aspects of the physical setting of the Gullah communities, a comprehensive analysis of the meaning and importance of the Gullah landscape pattern has not been developed. With rampant development taking place along the Carolina coast, Gullah communities and their landscape patterns are in danger of being obliterated by contemporary tourism and second home development. Local governments and land use planners are ill-equipped to mitigate these land use changes; since the physical form and landscape pattern of the Gullah communities are poorly understood they are also undervalued.

Landscape form and pattern are one of many expressions of culture. As the physical space within which a cultural group lives, landscape has the ability to either support or thwart social interactions that are predicated on cultural spatial values or proxemics (Hall 1966). Within the last 20 to 30 years, various researchers have noted that increasing development is threatening the culture and traditional lifeways of the Gullah community (Jones-Jackson 1987; Goodwine 1998). New development patterns impinge on the Gullah proxemic patterns, forcing people to move differently through the landscape. Compounding the issues impeding

planning efforts in the area is the continuing distrust of government by the Gullah community, a mistrust born in the aftermath of the Civil War that continues to the present day. In order to sustain the Gullah communities and their distinctive culture, it is critical to understand the genesis of the patterns the Gullah have formed on the land, as well as the complex spatial patterns of their communities. Only through this understanding can both planners and a culturally-mixed political leadership make planning and growth management decisions that support the present diversity of the Sea Island communities.

This study integrates three methods of research to illuminate the landscape and proxemic patterns of the Gullah communities. First, a review and analysis of existing historical, sociological, archaeological, and anthropological research is synthesized to present a complete understanding of the development of the Gullah landscape pattern. Second, primary research of historical documents investigates the development of Gullah concepts of land, their proxemic values, and their attachment to the land upon which their ancestors were enslaved—at times modifying or refuting standing assumptions. Third, analyses of contemporary Gullah settlement patterns through aerial photographs and on-the-ground studies, along with interviews of community members, examine the concepts of land and community in a present-day context. While the review of existing literature and primary documentary research covered the entire Lowcountry region of South Carolina, analysis of aerial photographs, direct observation and interviews were conducted primarily on St. Helena and Wadmalaw islands as case studies of islands with large Gullah populations.

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF GULLAH CULTURE AND COMMUNITY

Why was the development of the Gullah culture and its landscape pattern in the Sea Island communities distinctly different from other black communities in the United States? Five factors unique to the Sea Island geo-

graphical, social and economic structure were at work. Three of these—the importation of slaves directly from Africa, long after it was no longer legal; the fact that people of African heritage constituted a majority of the islands' population; and the isolation of St. Helena and the other Sea Islands from the mainland—contributed to the strength of Gullah culture and community, including their expression in landscape pattern. Two additional factors—the task system of agriculture and the early purchase and allotment of land to former slaves—had specific impacts on the cultural importance of land, the physical expression of the community in the landscape, and the genesis of the continuing mistrust of government by the Gullah community.

The Strength of African Roots

Slavery in the South Carolina Lowcountry began in 1670 with the importation of slaves from the Caribbean. Direct slave importation was banned in the United States in 1810, but continued illegally until 1858 (Pollitzer 1999, Demerson 1991). The Gullah people, who continue to inhabit St. Helena Island and many other Sea Islands today, are descendants of the estimated 213,437 slaves imported directly from Africa during the legal periods of the African slave trade between 1716 and 1744, 1749 and 1787, 1804 and 1807, and of the countless other slaves illegally brought into the country (Creel 1988; Littlefield 1991; Morgan 1998; Pollitzer 1999).

With the rise of rice cultivation in the 1740s, the demand for slaves increased, with a preference for those from the rice-growing areas of Africa (Creel 1988). In addition, the development of indigo in the latter half of the eighteenth century and the cultivation of Sea Island cotton after the Revolution also added to the demand. The slave trade was exceptionally brisk in the period from 1795 to 1804 when nearly sixty thousand new slaves were imported. Known to Lowcountry planters as the "new stock of importations," (Rowland, Moore, and Rogers 1996) the slave population increased 86.5 percent and had a profound effect on the racial demographics of Beaufort District and St. Helena Island.¹

This heavy importation of slaves directly from Af-

Table 1. Plantations in the Lowcountry of South Carolina without a white presence as listed in the census records of 1790 to 1820. Plantations with less than 10 resident slaves were exempt under the law from the requirement for a resident white male.

Year	plantations of 10 or more slaves in the region	# plantations without white presence	total # slaves on these plantations	Mean # slaves per plantation	% plantations without white presence
1790	1, 479	76	4590	65.39	5.70
1800	1, 489	93	5415	56.40	6.37
1810	1, 575	293	15559	66.93	18.90
1820	1, 693	310	19955	72.75	16.73

rica was in direct contrast with the Chesapeake region and the Deep South where slaves were more often purchased and sold within or between the states (Morgan 1998). The result was that the populations of the Sea Island plantations were constantly being reinforced with people of recent African culture and traditions. In effect, the continuous influx of new slaves renewed the remembrance and understanding of African cultural norms. The children of the population imported between 1800 and 1810 would have been alive at the time of the Civil War, thus the antebellum slave culture of this area was strongly influenced, if not dominated, by first- and second-generation Africans with direct connections to African lifeways and traditions (Rowland, Moore, and Rogers 1996). In addition, captives continued to be imported illegally directly from Africa to the region until 1858, reinforcing direct African influences in the slave communities (Demerson 1991).

Racial and Cultural Dominance

During the period of enslavement (and continuing to the present day on some islands), people of African descent greatly outnumbered the white population. By 1708, blacks exceeded whites in the South Carolina colony and by 1740 outnumbered them two to one (Pollitzer 1999). In 1860, the slave population of Beaufort District was 81.2 percent of the total, a proportion of blacks to whites exceeded only by Georgetown County in South Carolina, and by few others in the entire South (Johnson 1930). The result of the large black population was that the European cultural influences of the plantation owners (primarily of British origin), were tempered by the overwhelming numbers of African immigrants and their descendants in the plantation communities. This stands in contrast to other areas of the plantation South where the cultural values of plantation owners were established.

Perhaps even more important than the racial mix was the lack of a consistent presence of the plantation owner or a white overseer. In contrast to other

areas of the South, the Lowcountry plantation owners maintained the common practice of leaving the slave communities without a white presence for extended periods of time, under the supervision of a senior member of the slave community, termed a "driver."² Many early descriptions of the Sea Island plantations found in diaries and travel accounts cite the fact that plantation owners were rarely present between March and November (Davis 1803; Pearson 1906; Salley 1911). In addition, as disease became more prevalent during the 1800s, even white overseers often chose not to be full-time residents.

Although the practice of leaving the plantations without a white presence was illegal, an analysis of the census records between 1790 and 1820 indicate that up to 25 percent of the plantations in Beaufort District were without white oversight, while the figures for the entire Lowcountry region (Beaufort, Colleton, Charleston and Georgetown) ranged as high as 18.9 percent (Table 1).

The result of owner and overseer absence was a high degree of autonomy among the slave population and a reduction in the influence of the plantation owner compared to other plantations throughout the South. This autonomy resulted not only in the ability to develop a strong Gullah culture, to a much higher degree than other slave communities in the South, but also an increased sense of ownership in the plantation itself, and a connection to the land not seen in other regions. This sense of ownership is underscored in a review of accounts written at the time of emancipation and Reconstruction. In these accounts, freedmen of the region often stated a property interest in their former plantation lands: since they had lived and worked the land for generations, they felt they held a moral, if not legal, claim to the land (Nordhoff 1863; Pearson 1906).

Isolation

The third factor influencing the development of the Gullah culture was the geographic isolation that the Sea Islands provided. Well into the twentieth century, many

of the islands were still only accessible by boat. This isolation led to the early development of the distinct identity of slave culture on Sea Island plantations, and provided a microcosm for the culture to develop without significant outside white influences. Other researchers have identified the factor of isolation from whites, reinforced by the continued immigration of native African people, as the two factors which supported the retention of African-inspired social organization long after similar values were lost in other slave communities on the mainland (Demerson 1991; Vlach 1991).

The Task System of Agriculture

Although reinforced by plantation owner absence, the property interest that slave families and communities developed in their home plantations found a basis in the task system of agriculture. As opposed to the gang system (the primary system throughout most of the South), the task system was brought to the Sea Islands from the Caribbean by immigrant planters and their slaves and was quickly institutionalized in the region. Slaves were assigned a specific task for the day's work: once the task was completed, the worker was in control of his or her time (Miller 1981; Rowland, Moore, and Rogers 1996). This system was distinctly different from the gang system where slaves worked in groups under the control of a driver, and were required to work the entire day (Gray 1933).

Other researchers have theorized that since the "task system allowed the slaves the free time to form their own communities, develop and practice their religion, devise their own amusement, provide extra sustenance for their own families and even acquire wealth, through the production and barter of wares" (Rowland, Moore, and Rogers 1996, 353), a strong economy developed in the slave community (Taylor 1924; Stewart 1996). That economy fostered a sense of identity and a degree of self-determination unusual in American slavery (Dennis 2000), and families could, at least to a certain extent, work together as an economic unit, strengthening the bonds of family and community.

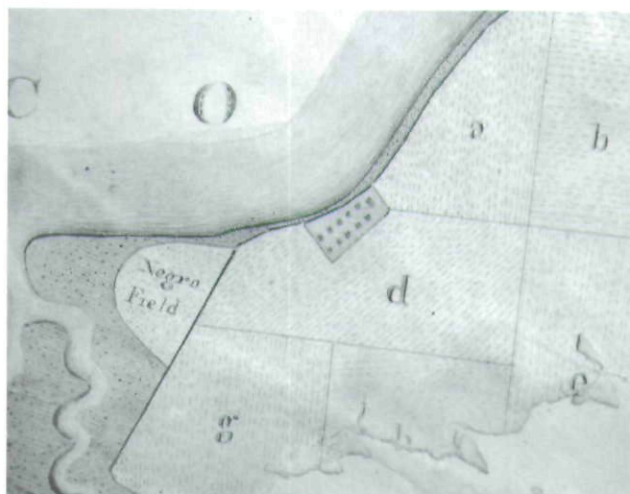
The task system of agriculture in the Lowcoun-

try region was, at its essence, bound to the shape and metrics of the plantations. Due to the periodic requirements for flooding in the rice fields, the landscape was divided into roughly rectangular areas, circumscribed at their boundaries by ditches and canals. Within these larger boundaries, each field was divided into smaller sections of about a quarter acre in size. These smaller areas of land came to be called 'tasks,' since they served as the unit of definition for the amount of work a slave was required to complete (hoeing, weeding, planting, harvesting). Outside these fields, in the irregular margins, lay plots of land termed "slave fields" or "negro fields." Historic documents of the period contain various references to the cultivation of these fields by slave families in their "off" time (Bremer 1853; Collins 1854; Olmsted 1904). Along with the cultivation of vegetables and field crops, many raised their own livestock, trading within and without the confines of their plantation, often selling to the owner of the plantation. Other researchers have stated that most slave families cultivated four to five acres of land in corn, potatoes and other crops (Johnson 1930; Stewart 1996), however a detailed review of original Lowcountry plats indicates the acreage may have been closer to one half an acre per adult.³ While plantation plats of the region typically show detailed field layout and acreage, few plats include slave land in their field schedules. Only two existing Lowcountry plats contained this level of information, including acreage figures and the location of the slave lands (Figure 1). The lack of further documentation of slave lands can be explained by the discrepancy between state law and regional custom: although South Carolina slave laws did not recognize the rights of slaves to own property (Stroud 1856), regional custom did recognize the right of slaves to own significant accumulations of property and pass it on to their heirs.

Land Acquisition and the Port Royal Experiment

The final and perhaps most significant historical factor in the development of the distinctive Gullah community and landscape was the purchase and allotment of

Figure 1. A fragment of a circa 1800 plantation plat from Prince William Parish, Beaufort District, showing the location of slave (negro) fields on the plantation. (Register of Mesne Conveyance 4564, Charleston)



land during the Port Royal Experiment and later, during and after Reconstruction. Current complexities of land ownership and planning within the Gullah community can only be understood within this context of how the Civil War impacted land ownership patterns.

In October 1861, seven months after the first shots were fired on Union troops in Charleston, the Union successfully occupied Hilton Head Island, St. Helena Island, Edisto Island, Port Royal Island and the smaller islands between, an occupation that was to last until the end of the war (Rowland, Moore, and Rogers 1996). The occupation caused an evacuation of Sea Island planters and left over 10,000 slaves behind on their plantations (Roper 1965). Not yet legally freed, the former slaves were termed "contrabands," referring to their status as confiscated property of the plantation owners. The Union government seized control and title to the plantations, under the authority of government seizure for the non-payment of a newly imposed tax. Under the auspices of the Secretary of Treasury, Salmon P. Chase, the Union embarked on a social experiment that was to last for the remainder of the war.

Titled the "Port Royal Experiment," this action served as a prelude to and a test of policies for the later occupation of the southern states during the Reconstruction Era (Pearson 1906; Rose 1964). The Treasury Department attempted to manage the growing of cotton on the abandoned plantations by employing former slaves for wage labor. Despite a significant number of mistakes, short-sighted policy, and interference from the troops stationed in the area, the effort was nonetheless somewhat successful (Pierce 1904; Pearson 1906). From the point of view of several groups—northern abolitionists, the army, and southern politicians—the status of contraband slaves was a problematic issue. Widely varying political interests caused quick shifts in

public policy and resulted in a series of broken promises to the former slaves.⁴

Historical and Legal Basis of Land Division in St. Helena

In the published record of land divisions and sales, it is unclear exactly how and when the 10-acre grid so characteristic of St. Helena was established (Figure 2). St. Helena Island is the only area of the confiscated plantation lands that was resurveyed and sold in this fashion. A square-grid resurvey of the land that remained in government hands after the initial sale is cited by Rose (1964), however, there is no mention of this action in other published sources. More clearly documented is another preemption system devised in late 1863, in which General Saxton encouraged freedmen to build houses on land in order to retain squatters' rights (Rose 1964). To prevent exploitation by northern speculators, the preemption program included an eligibility requirement that potential buyers must reside in the area for at least six months prior to purchase.⁵

Public policies were contradictory and changed frequently as political power shifted, but between 1862 and 1865 at least some freed slaves on St. Helena, Port Royal and Lady's islands came into land ownership through the combination of auction sales, preemption settlement and rent-to-own programs (Johnson 1930). Although a thorough study of land records for the period has yet to be completed, a few examples have been documented, most notably by Magdol (1977, 175) on the Edgerly and adjoining Red House plantations on Port Royal Island. By January 1864, freedmen of the area had filed preemption claims for 6,000 acres, however most of this land was never acquired. In a final attempt by the Department of the Army to allow for a reasonable distribution to the resident freedmen,



Figure 2. St. Helena Island showing parcel boundaries overlaid on a 1998 aerial photograph of the island. Note the prominent Civil War Era grid of parcel boundaries, particularly in the center of the island.

General Sherman issued "Special Field Order Number 15" on January 16, 1865, declaring that land be set aside for settlement on:

The islands from Charleston south, the abandoned rice fields along the rivers for thirty miles back from the sea . . . Each head of family could preempt a plot of not more than forty acres of tillable ground . . . On the islands . . . , no white person, unless military officers and soldiers detailed for duty, will be permitted to reside. . . . [T]he sole and exclusive management of affairs will be left to the freed people themselves, subject only to the United States military authority and the acts of Congress. (Johnson 1930, 188)

In addition to Sherman's order, the federal government set up the Freedman's Bureau on March 3, 1865 (Cox 1958), with dominion over all land held by the government through abandonment or confiscation. Small pieces of this land were allotted to the freedmen and later leased to them, but the question of title and ownership continued to be an issue for former slaves seeking to purchase land (Pierce 1904). Title to the lands outside of the Beaufort area was not clearly in the government's hands, and, after Lincoln's assassination, Sherman's Field Order and the Freedmen's Act were revoked by President Andrew Johnson. Many plantations that had been claimed by resident freedmen in other areas of the Sea Islands and across the South were re-confiscated by the federal government and either sold to the former plantation owners or to the highest bidders.

In spite of the government's contradictory and changing policies, by 1870 much of the islands were owned by a society of free black farmers who had an opportunity to become self sufficient. On St. Helena Island, many of the land grants made under General Sherman's Order—as well as the previous auction sales, pre-emption settlement and rent-to-own programs—were never rescinded. The pattern of small holdings which remains on the land today is much more pronounced on St. Helena than on other islands such as Wadmalaw, where land rights were subject only to Sherman's order.

The seemingly random patchwork of ten- and twenty-acre landlocked parcels that remains on St. Helena is thus the manifestation of an era of government experiment reconciling social policy and the determination of the Gullah to keep their land, and by extension, their family, intact.

CONCEPTS OF PLACE, LAND, AND COMMUNITY

While there is general agreement that the influences for Gullah folkways came from Africa (Ferguson 1992; Pollitzer 1998 and 1999), it is also generally understood that the community is distinctly American in its cultural expression (Ferguson 1992; Goodwine 1998). Many commentators have debated the depth and impact of African influences (Elkins 1959; Phillips 1966; Frazier 1974), however, the most recent writings support the development of the Gullah culture as a creolization of African, Native American and European influences into a distinctly new and different American culture (Magdol 1977; Blassingame 1981; Genovese 1981; Joyner 1981; Ferguson 1992). It should be noted that the resulting creolized culture was not static, but continued to develop (within the physical constraints of island isolation) in interaction with the Euro-American culture of the slave holders, and subsequently with predominantly white communities from Reconstruction to the present day. This continual adaptation of the culture and its expression in society arises from the fact that cultures are vulnerable to the forces surrounding them: to endure, a community must be able to pass its shared society and values to the next generation (Miller 1981).

Three aspects of landscape are critical to understanding the physical forms and pattern characteristic of the Gullah culture: land ownership patterns, concept of community, and proxemics. Features of Gullah land traditions and patterns pose challenges and opportunities to culturally sensitive planning, land conservation, and regulation in the Sea Islands. Three types of sources support these findings: 1) a synthesis of the writings of historians, sociologists, and anthropologists that an-

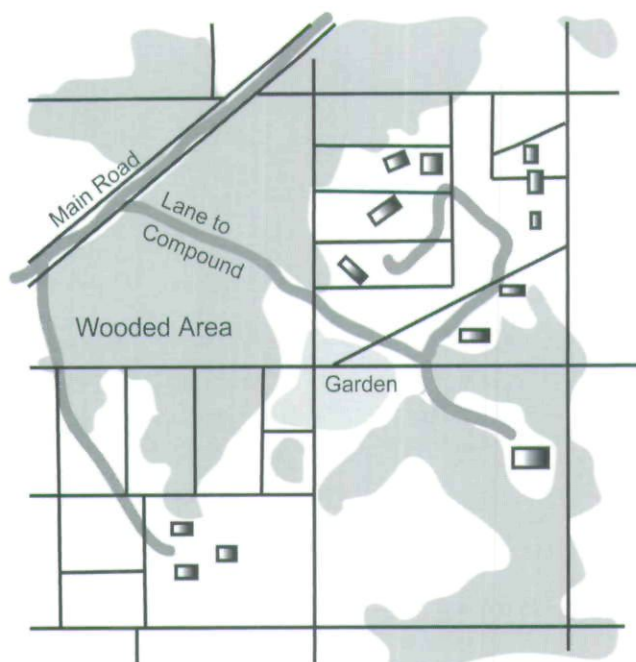


Figure 3. Sketch of a typical family compound site, showing clustered arrangement of homes and subdivision of original parcel. Driveways leading to the homes are organic in form.

chor key findings within the development of the Gullah cultural landscape pattern; 2) the strengthening and tempering of these findings with primary documentary research; and 3) personal interviews and observation in the community between 1995 and 2001. Primary documents were reviewed for the Lowcountry region of South Carolina, including a comprehensive review of plantation plats between 1760 and 1860, slave and plantation laws, and a variety of published and unpublished diaries, letters, plantation account books, slave narratives and travel narratives.

Concepts of Land and Land Ownership

The Gullah community has faced a number of threats to continued land ownership due to the problem of "heirs' property." Heirs' property resulted from a process in which land passed down through successive generations without recording title changes. The land was typically held in common throughout the generational transfers, so that no individual or small group of individuals had clear title. It is generally accepted that this resulted from a high level of illiteracy in the community and from successive generations dying intestate (Jones-Jackson 1987).

This accepted understanding of the origins and problems of heirs' property does not recognize a fundamental cultural norm with respect to land ownership that exists within the Gullah community. Originating in both African traditions and the system of land distribution after the Civil War, the Gullah concept of land

ownership is both complex and radically different from the dominant white community. As was traditional in Africa (Twining and Baird 1991), land is understood within the Gullah community to be held in common ownership by the family. All members of the family, including the extended family, have a partial interest in the property. Therefore, it is not uncommon that 200 or more descendants of a family can claim ownership of the land. As described by Pollitzer, "cooperative organizations evolved among blacks in the Sea Islands after emancipation; following kinship lines, relatives purchased land near each other. On Wadmalaw Island, land is not normally sold but passed on by an unwritten contract; when one moves, he relocates where a relative offers land" (Pollitzer 1999, 131).

It is critical to members of the Gullah culture that their pattern of land ownership be protected. Historically, it has served as a culturally relevant form of social security system—subsistence agriculture and fishing provide food security, while the proximity of an extended family provides help and social support when needed. With children raised by an extended family network, parents can ensure a quality of life for their family.

Concept of Community

The second unique feature of the physical form of the Gullah community is the family compound (Figure 3). In the Gullah community, the family is strengthened by the close functioning of family groups shared by rela-

tives and functioning as one unit, an extended family that predominates in cultural importance. It is not uncommon to find as many as eight to ten buildings centrally located on a piece of land, in an organic arrangement, with little obvious distinctions of property boundaries. This pattern contrasts with the predominant American suburban pattern of a linear arrangement of rectangular lots along a street corridor, and the plantation villages that preceded the development of the compound.

Without understanding the cultural context, outsiders view these settlements as peopled by individuals with little care for their environment and living too closely together. However, there are entirely different cultural constructs at play, requiring an understanding of the importance of landscape dimensions and features necessary for healthy social interaction and support of the community.

Proxemics: Island, Plantation, Compound, Home

The Gullah culture categorizes its place in the physical landscape through a hierarchy of space that descends in scale from a specific island, to plantation boundaries, family compound, and then the home of each household.

Plantation. It may perhaps seem incongruent to the outsider that the Gullah community continues to define places on the Sea Islands in terms of the boundaries of plantations that enslaved their ancestors. However, as discussed earlier, the task system of agriculture fostered a sense of ownership in the plantation land. Also, during slavery, allocating an area of land to each slave or slave family, was, in essence, an awarding of land ownership whether or not it was legally recorded in a deed. What is not clear in the relatively meager surviving literature of plantation life is whether the specific plot of land used by each slave remained constant over the years, and whether that plot was handed down through inheritance. In the 1930s, Woofert wrote of the importance of plantation boundaries:

Within the island there is a definite persistence of the old plantation boundaries as local geographic divisions. Although the ante-bellum Plantations have long ceased to be units of ownership, they still constitute units of local community division. Each plantation has a local pride and the rudiments of a community organization. In describing their place of residence, the inhabitants do not say St. Helena Island, but "Tom Fripp Plantation." (1930, 8)

Patricia Guthrie, in her work with the St. Helena Island Gullah community in the seventies and again in the nineties, found that many of the residents were descendants of former St. Helena slaves, and that some plantation members still resided on the residence sites first occupied by their ancestors (Guthrie 1996). These findings are perhaps not surprising when viewed in the context of land acquisition during and after the Civil War.

There are two other aspects of the organization of the plantation that are critical to the Gullah community today: traditional burying grounds and common community access to the water, no matter who owns the land, to harvest fish and shellfish. Both concerns were mentioned repeatedly by residents in public meetings, and in personal interviews. Various pre-Civil War plantation plats of the Lowcountry (Figure 4) and written sources indicate that slave cemeteries were covered in trees, and the graves were not marked, increasing the confusion of new residents today: "[the burying-place] was an unfenced quarter of an acre of perfectly wild, tangled woodland in the midst of the cotton-field, half-way between here [the "white house"] and the quarters. Nothing ever marks the graves, but the place is entirely devoted to them" [From a letter of H.W.'s, June 5, 1862] (Pearson 1906, 65).

Compound. Although the former slaves often remained on their home plantations, they resettled themselves over time into a new physical pattern termed a compound. When and precisely how this movement occurred requires further study in historic land records.

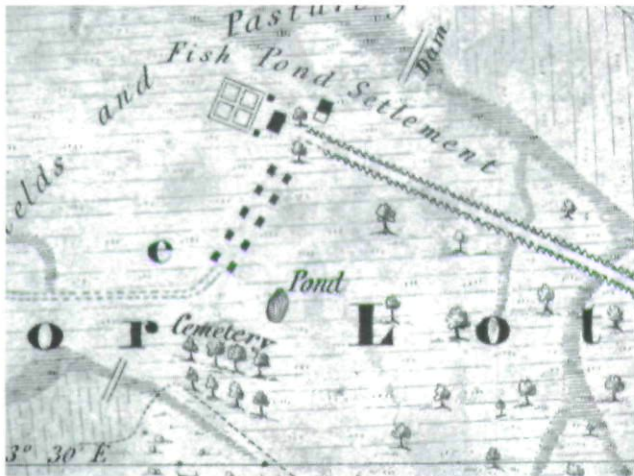


Figure 4. A slave cemetery indicated on a 1790 plantation plat from St. John's Parish, Charleston District. The depiction shows a treed area for the cemetery. (Register of Mesne Conveyance 4852, Charleston)

In reference to the residents of St. Helena Island, one sociologist remarked: "When the lands were sold to the Negroes, cabins in [alignment along both sides of] 'de street' . . . as the plantation quarters [for the enslaved] were formerly known, were moved to the center of the ten acre patches scattered all over the plantation" (Woofter 1930, 213–214). However, this description of the resettlement is not supported by other documentary sources.

The selection of locations for the new settlements is important with respect to landscape patterns and features as well as social ties. Historically, housing patterns on the plantations reflected an owner's view of the slaves' social status and place in the world order. An analysis of Lowcountry plats between 1760 and 1860 revealed that the slave quarters of the field hands were located at a distance from the main house, with intervening obstacles such as roads, fences, and vegetation heightening the separation. Written sources identify, and the review of the plats confirms, that the distance between the main house and the quarters was usually at least one quarter of a mile (Pearson 1906), and the quarters were almost never located close to river or shoreline frontage.

The location of the compounds closely mirrors the location of the slave quarters. To outsiders, water frontage may seem prime property for home sites, yet members of the Gullah community have typically chosen inland sites for the location of their family compounds, mirroring the locations of slave communities. Whether land is considered suitable for a dwelling depends on its location and family connections:

While to non-Islanders it might appear that any number of land parcels would do for a dwelling, for Islanders only specified pieces of land prove suit-

able. . . . [They] tend not to change dwellings simply because they have inherited land or in some way have gained access to property that to outsiders seems appropriate for a house. For St. Helenians, a piece of land becomes desirable for a dwelling if it is situated in close proximity to appropriate kinfolk. (Guthrie 1996, 74)

In contrast, the layout of the homes in the slave quarters was extremely different from those of present-day compounds. Then, they were almost invariably placed in equidistant linear rows, two to four homes deep (Figures 5–8). It is unclear how slowly or how quickly the organization of physical space changed, although photographs from the WPA Writers Project in the 1930s provide evidence of the more organic form that is prevalent today (see Figures 9 and 10).

Why then, did the cultural expression of home placement change so radically from straight lines to an organic, irregular pattern? Before emancipation, the pattern of spatial order indicative of social relations in the Gullah community was masked by the dictates of the plantation owners. It can be argued that once those dictates were removed, a pattern that more closely reflected the social proxemics of the Gullah community developed.

Researchers (Twining and Baird 1991; Vlach 1991; Ferguson 1992) have identified significant similarities between the arrangement of Gullah family compounds and African precedents and have suggested that these indicate the direct retention of a cultural artifact. Some have gone on to point out that a loose, organic pattern in some Lowcountry plats is indicative of this retention, and have postulated a direct connection to African settlement types (Twining and Baird 1991). However, the thorough analysis of the Lowcoun-

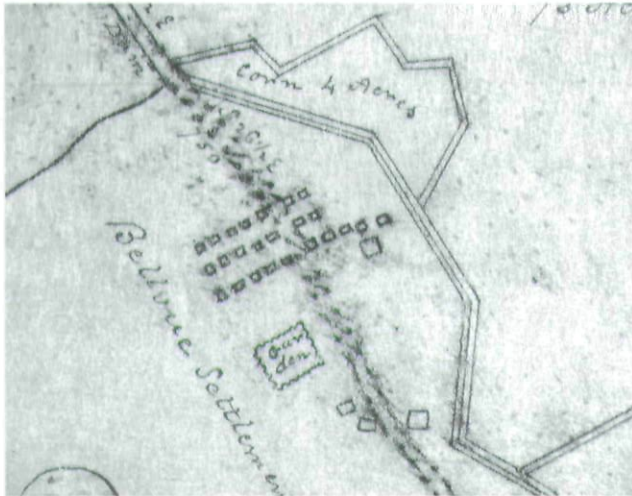


Figure 5. An 1852 plat showing slave quarters in three rows, with no plantation owner's house on the plat (Register of Mesne Conveyance 2126, Charleston).



Figure 6. A 1797 plat showing slave quarters to the lower left of the main house in 3 partial rows (Register of Mesne Conveyance 1541, Charleston).



Figure 7. An 1820 plat showing slave quarters in two rows at upper left with no plantation owner's or overseers house on the plantation (Register of Mesne Conveyance 4314, Charleston).

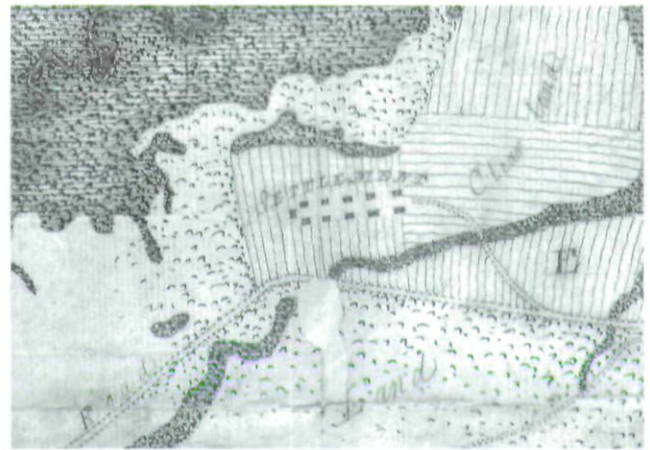


Figure 8. A 1792 plat showing slave quarters in two rows. The driver's house is at the left end of the rows (Register of Mesne Conveyance 4320, Charleston).

try plats revealed that this type of pattern is extremely rare (Figure 11), occurring in only 4 of the surviving 351 plantation plats.⁶

The extended period of time, spanning several generations, which the slave community lived in a pattern imposed by the plantation owner negates the argument that the Gullah compound is a direct cultural retention. While it is valuable to note that the traditional African physical pattern of space more clearly reflects the actual proxemic norms and social interactions that take place in the Gullah community today, the landscape pattern of the Gullah can best be described as an evolving spatial design that supports the social and proxemic norms of the culture, once a dictating force had been removed.

The contemporary family compound is the most visible expression of the Gullah culture on the land.

Formed by a group of household structures loosely arranged in a cluster, the compound is the center of family and societal relations. However it is not the nuclear family but the extended family of people both closely and remotely related that live in close proximity and association in a compound. Demerson identified the extended family as the norm in the Sea Islands, "where all members of one family, their close relatives, and people remotely related live or have a right to live as long as they can satisfactorily show evidence of kinship" (1974, 135).

Ideally, a couple strives to establish a dwelling site in the yard of the husband's parents. Houses in a yard are within calling distance from each other and are arranged either side by side, one in front of the other, or juxtaposed in a curved arrangement. The yard of a



Figures 9 and 10. Photographs taken in 1938 in the vicinity of Charleston, South Carolina, showing homes of the Gullah community in an organic cluster. (Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, LC-USF 34-50509-D and LC-USF 34-50543-D)

house might contain no additional houses or as many as four or five separate houses or mobile units. (Guthrie 1996, 75)

Descriptions of the family compound structure in the literature for various Sea Islands are consistent in their social structure and their physical layout (Demerson 1991; Smith 1973; Moerman 1974; Guthrie 1996; Pollitzer 1999), and agree with direct observations made by the authors between 1995 and 2001. In a family where agriculture is the major economic pursuit, cleared farmland is usually located not far from the compound. Even when large-scale cultivation is no longer an extended family's economic focus, often one or more members of the compound will maintain a garden adjacent to one of the family's households (Demerson 1991). Although

each household functions separately, the close association and relationship of the members of the compound promotes the function of the compound as a unit. Family groups often purchase land in common (Pollitzer 1999) and this is certainly consistent with the history of land acquisition after the dissolution of the plantations. Traditionally the compounds were built to share a common yard that was kept as a hard-packed, earthen ground that was swept daily. Maintaining a communal dirt yard was once routine for black families in the South (described in detail in Westmacott 1992), and Jones-Jackson (1987) identified the practice as traditional in most West African villages. However, this practice is dying out on St. Helena. Today, hard-packed dirt yards are being replaced with mown grass as the predominant ground cover in the yards.

Figure 11. An 1821 plantation plat of a site on Edisto Island in St. Paul's Parish, Colleton District showing an unusual organic arrangement in the slave community. (South Carolina Historical Society, 33-68-23, Charleston)



A CLASH OF LANDSCAPE PATTERNS: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

The South Carolina Lowcountry, particularly in Beaufort and Charleston Counties, is currently one of the fastest growing coastal areas in the country. The growth pattern can be characterized by large scale landscape conversions to single-family resort and retirement communities, and developments are typically marketed as exclusive and gated to enhance a perception of safety. In addition, the most valued amenity offered is waterfront property.

For the Gullah community, although compounds are not built with water frontage, water access is a traditional right for all members of the community. Access to the water is key to subsistence living that relies on fish and shrimp as a major protein source. The clash of property expectations and patterns is exemplified by the difference in expectations of access across private lands: "On St. Helena, if you do have waterfront property, then everybody has access, and that is the only reason local people get upset when outsiders move in. It is not that they do not like northerners or outsiders, but when outsiders buy waterfront property, they consider it theirs, and people are not welcome to walk through" (Guthrie 1996, 14). This is a classic example of two diametrically opposed cultures: traditional access becomes inaccessible when individuals outside of the Gullah community purchase property. The valuation of land for building sites is similarly opposed: Gullah family compounds are rarely built on the water, although water frontage is highly valued by the Euro-American community. Thus, land that possesses an invisible web of traditional use may be perceived as vacant by outsiders; development causes conflict when those traditional use patterns are broken or denied.

Access to cemeteries is also a point of contention. Many of the traditional burying grounds are invisible to the outsider, causing difficulties with new developments and particularly gated communities. Traditional cemeteries, in many cases with unmarked plots, are still considered sacred. The practice of unmarked graves has continued to the present:

When someone dies, the brush is cleared away for the funeral party and the actual burial. . . . Also, during these cleanup sessions, if the graves are unmarked, older residents remind the younger ones exactly who is buried where. In this way, the names of many of the deceased are remembered, though most graves remain unmarked. Thus, the cemeteries provide a focal reality that in many ways symbolizes the social meaning of belonging (Guthrie 1996, 23).

However, the cultural clash is much broader than issues of access and sacred space. The greatest challenge for land use planning and growth management centers on the form and placement of the family compound. The Gullah tradition of maintaining a family compound for an extended family in a multi-generational, multi-house pattern defies most zoning ordinances in rural areas. Land ownership patterns, concept of community and proxemics are at odds with the norms that standard zoning codes represent. Land ownership in common versus land ownership by an individual, the primacy of the multi-generational extended family versus the primacy of the nuclear family, and the organic form of relatively tightly spaced settlements versus rural zoning at a minimum of two units per acre (Beaufort County, 1994), all cause friction for the continued growth and development of the family compound.

How can these two divergent patterns be recon-

ciled? The Beaufort County Comprehensive Plan (1999) suggests one approach by creating a family exemption for the subdivision of lots. Most of the family compounds are located in rural areas, many with severe limitations for septic systems. To allow families to continue to build in traditional, affordable patterns, the plan proposes that family members be allowed to subdivide or lease land at a higher density than the underlying district through a simplified subdivision process using community septic systems to resolve the issue of soil limitations. This approach has not been codified to date, and has a significant drawback: it is difficult to define the limits of family in a culture in which kinship ties are broad by North American standards. Alternative approaches could utilize cluster zoning and transfer-of-development-rights ordinances to trade density for protected open land. However, particularly in terms of the cluster ordinance, linkages would have to be made to protected open space, sometimes at a distance from the compound site.

Almost as important as maintaining the compound pattern is regulating the development pattern of new communities. For example, the Beaufort Comprehensive Plan (1999) recommended that new gated communities, which are antithetical to the waterfront-, cemetery-, and community-access norms of the Gullah, should be discouraged. This recommendation has also not yet been implemented, probably due to the overwhelming force of development activity. However, the identification of historic points of public access to the water and other locations on the island can be identified, and the dedication of easements protecting the access may be identified as high priorities in the subdivision approval process. These easements could also be protected by outright purchase or donation to the County, or by purchase or donation of easement to a local land trust.

In the foreword to the book *When Roots Die*, Charles Joyner (1987, xiii) quotes Charles Fraser, developer of Sea Pines Plantation on Hilton Head Island:

It is a wise thing, for those who need money, to elect to sell. Every black family that sells a portion of their heritage that was maintained with great struggle and great effort by their parents and grandparents and great-grandparents, and uses part of that heritage to send a child to engineering school or to boarding school, is making an investment in the future of that family. I wish more of them would do it.

This statement by a prominent local developer exemplifies the crux of the clash of cultures evident today on the Sea Islands. Without an understanding of the cultural differences in land ownership, meaning, community, and family, it will be impossible to reconcile the needs and desires of both cultural forces in a manner that protects the right of the Gullah community to sustain their traditions and continue to evolve as a community. Even though some commentators express certainty that the Gullah culture will survive (Jones-Jackson 1987), without that change and evolution, and perhaps growth, the "destructionment" of the culture and community that Goodwine (1998) describes will become complete.

NOTES

1. Beaufort District originally encompassed present-day Beaufort, Jasper, and Hampton counties. Present-day Beaufort County is a smaller portion of Beaufort District, including Daufuskie, Hilton Head, Harbor, St. Helena, Lady's, Parris, and Port Royal Islands and some adjacent mainland areas including Bluffton and surrounding area, and Sheldon Township.
2. Although this practice of leaving a plantation under the control of a driver has been cited in other works (Vlach 1993; Morgan 1998), the full extent of this absenteeism and its implications for cultural development has not been fully explored. A review of slave laws in South Carolina reveals that as early as 1712, the practice of leaving a plantation without a white presence was strictly prohibited:

That no person whatsoever . . . shall settle or manage any plantation, cow-pen or stock, that shall be six miles distant from his usual place of abode, and wherein six negroes or slaves shall be employed [sic], without one or

more white persons living and residing upon the same plantation (1712).

By 1722, with the threat of slave revolts, the law had been modified to cover any plantation, and required the presence of a white male "living and residing upon the same plantation" (1722). The law was periodically updated (1726; 1735; 1740; 1800; 1819; 1842), and by 1800 was linked to annual tax collection; in 1800 it was relaxed slightly to allow for 6 months residence, reflecting the extreme peril that whites perceived from mosquito-borne disease during the summer months. However, notwithstanding the continued reiteration of the law, and repeated calls in the legislature for stricter enforcement of the laws (1793; 1794; 1823; 1823; 1825c.; 1829; 1835), the decennial census returns (beginning in 1790) indicate that the practice of leaving plantations without a white presence was extremely widespread.

3. This calculation is based on the field-acreage figures from the two available plantation plats that show Negro fields, and the census data that can be attributed to the plantation.
4. A series of moves and counter moves began on May 9, 1862, when General David Hunter emancipated the slaves, only to be overruled by President Lincoln (Pease 1957). Lincoln drafted a preliminary emancipation proclamation of his own on July 22 (Rose 1964), however, that move was not finalized until the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution was passed in 1865. At the same time, the army, desperately searching for additional recruits, reversed an earlier promise and drafted the men into the army (Pease 1957; Roper 1965). The men were discharged on August 10, 1862, followed by voluntary recruitment on August 25 (Pease 1957). In particular, the policy regarding the distribution of confiscated plantation land was murky; promises of land for the former slaves were followed by reversals. To finance the ongoing war, land sales were scheduled by the Tax Commissioners for March of 1863 (Pease 1957). Although policy initially dictated that the freed slaves would have first rights to purchase the 76,775 acres for sale, 60,296 acres were retained by the government and the remainder sold to the highest bidder (Rose 1964). Edward Philbrick, the superintendent of the Port Royal Experiment, managed to purchase 11 plantations, about one third of the land available on St. Helena Island (Rose 1964). Some smaller holdings were purchased by individual freedmen, and several plantations totaling about 2,000 acres were purchased cooperatively by groups of freedmen pooling their money (Rose 1964).
5. Despite its paternalistic overtones, a description of the pre-

emption program shows the confusion these changing land ownership patterns engendered among former slaves:

Outside of our plantations, the people for once are excited with good reason. In the most awkward, incomplete, bungling way the negroes are allowed to preempt twenty and forty acre tracts; so everybody is astir, trying to stake out claims and then to get their claims considered by the Commissioners. These gentlemen meanwhile are at loggerheads, the land is but half surveyed, and everything is delightfully confused and uncertain. Still it is the beginning of a great thing,—negroes become land-owners and the door is thrown open to Northern immigration. Years hence it will be a satisfaction to look back on these beginnings,—now it is very foggy ahead and very uncertain underfoot. (Pearson 1906, 249)

6. All available plantation plats in the South Carolina Low-country area (Beaufort, Berkley, Charleston, and Georgetown counties) held in public repositories were reviewed for this analysis: Register of Mesne Conveyance, Charleston; South Carolina Historical Society; Charleston Historical Museum; Caroliniana Collection, University of South Carolina; South Carolina Department of Archives and History; and Middleton Place Archives.

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