

# Gullah Geechee Corridor's Management Plan is Meaningful to Many

*Ronald Daise*

THE GULLAH GEECHEE CULTURAL HERITAGE CORRIDOR COMMISSION'S long-awaited management plan means many things to diverse groups. The 272-page document, with a CD of appendices, details the vision, mission, goals, and interpretive themes. All are meaningful, provocative, and timeless. The significance of this document, I believe, is captured in the words: "Gullah Geechee mean a lot!" Expressed in Gullah Geechee, the words must be spoken quickly and in one breath. No, subject and verb do not agree in number. Yes, the statement is triumphant. It resonates with the commission's vision: "An environment that celebrates the legacy and continuing contributions of Gullah Geechee people to our American heritage." It conveys, in part, that Gullah Geechee culture means many things; it is significant and should be celebrated.

The management plan identifies and has sparked discussions about numerous cultural resources and ways to utilize them to advance heritage tourism. This is being accomplished through partnerships for projects and programs with grassroots organizations and small community sites as well as large-scale businesses, governmental offices, and individuals. The corridor's implementation framework is "Tellin We Stories!" It is hoped that visitors will experience culture, crafts, celebrations, legacy, and rice heritage through authentic accounts provided and presented by Gullah Geechee people and community residents.

Partnerships must align with the corridor's three implementation tiers: education, documentation and preservation, and economic development. The Gullah Geechee's initial partnership with the B.N. Duke Scholars Program of Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, incorporated each of these. Fourteen rising sophomores served in a ten-week summer internship program in Horry and Georgetown counties of South Carolina. They, in part, assisted community organizations to create museum exhibits, conduct oral histories, document Gullah Geechee sites for tours, work with Gullah Geechee youths, and create a "Grand Strand Gullah Geechee Brochure."

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The six interpretive themes which potential partner sites may incorporate are: “Origins and Early Development”; “The Quest for Freedom, Equality, Education and Recognition”; “Global Connections”; “Cultural and Spiritual Expression”; “Gullah Geechee Language”; and “Connection with the Land.” Ways in which partner sites can convey interpretive themes to visitors include educational programs, exhibits, interpretive signs, artwork, living history/live interpretation, performances, workshops, and lectures. Buildings, districts, neighborhoods, landscapes, restaurants, museums, welcome centers, and places of worship may apply as partner sites.

Partnership programs will contribute toward attaining the three implementation tiers through projects involving education, research, interpretation, business development, “explore the corridor,” community outreach and training, environmental sustainability, cultural documentation, and preservation. Colleges or universities, performers or storytellers, festivals or special events, historians, tourism agencies or guides, or chambers of commerce may apply as partnership programs. Approved partner sites will receive official partner signs, and approved partners will be posted on the corridor’s website. For more information about the corridor and partnership applications, visit [www.gullahgeecheecorridor.org](http://www.gullahgeecheecorridor.org).

Great things are happening as interest and awareness grows. The commission participated on a float in the 2013 presidential inaugural parade in Washington, D.C. The South Carolina State Fair coordinated a “Gullah Geechee Day” on October 12, 2013, and the state of Georgia is proclaiming October as Gullah Geechee Awareness Month. The College of Charleston has provided the commission office space in downtown Charleston, South Carolina, and plans are to have an executive director on board in October. By fall, in each of the 27 counties within the corridor, highway wayfinding signs will be installed and informational banners and brochures will be placed at welcome centers, National Park Service (NPS) sites, US Fish & Wildlife Service sites, and historic sites.

The commission is grateful to Congressman James E. Clyburn for sponsorship of the legislation. He stated, “It took more than seven years of work to get the bill passed into law,



Basketmaking is an important part of Gullah Geechee cultural expression. Left: A maker at work (courtesy Charles Pinckney National Historic Site); right: A finished basket (courtesy Jud McCranie/Wikimedia Commons).

but today the commission is working hard on efforts to preserve and promote the nearly 400-year history of Gullah Geechee culture that is the core purpose of my initiative. The sites, sounds and tastes of Gullah Geechee culture have been slowly vanishing along the coasts of North and South Carolina, Georgia and Florida.”

For centuries, the words “Gullah” and “Geechee” were used as invectives that brought shame and embarrassment to many. The management plan includes an interpretation framework to raise awareness, understanding, and appreciation for the history of Gullah Geechee people, their contributions to the development of the United States, and connection to the African diaspora and other international cultures.

Produced as a collective effort by the commission and NPS since 2007, with developmental assistance from NPS Denver Service Center, the management plan is based soundly on feedback given by the public, stakeholders, prospective partners, and Gullah Geechee community and grassroots organizations. In fact, public engagement has been the driving force behind the management plan. Through feedback from 21 public scoping meetings throughout the corridor in 2009, this implementation theme was selected: “Enlighten and Empower Gullah Geechee People to Sustain the Culture.”

With pride, the commission acknowledges that public engagement also paved the way for the corridor’s development and thanks the following organizations that worked toward that end.

For its establishment in 1990, Charles Pinckney National Historic Site in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, gathered themes and stories that reinterpreted Gullah history in neighboring communities. Afterward, it extended outreach for similar reinterpretation to other sites throughout the South Carolina Lowcountry. The Gullah Consortium, a group of about 20 individuals from historic sites and Gullah Geechee community and grassroots organizations throughout the Lowcountry, formed in the late 1990s and continued with public scoping meetings about Gullah history and heritage in a larger and more comprehensive way.

In 2004, the National Trust for Historic Preservation designated the Gullah Geechee coast on its 2004 List of America’s Most Endangered Historic Places. In that same period, NPS effectively engaged the public for the publication of its *Low Country Gullah Culture Special Resource Study and Final Environmental Impact Statement* in 2004. The document expanded the purview of Gullah and Geechee culture and heritage to the coastal communities of South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, and North Carolina. Congressman Clyburn sponsored the bill for the corridor’s establishment in 2005. It became law in 2006, and the management plan was approved by the office of the secretary of the interior in 2013.

Michael Allen, NPS community partnership specialist at Fort Sumter National Monument, Sullivan’s Island, South Carolina, has been involved with the corridor’s journey before its inception. “My 13-year journey in the process of developing the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor,” he said, “has been a labor of love. I am eternally grateful for the support of the National Park Service, Gullah Geechee communities and people, and the many stakeholders that have collaborated to create the only National Heritage Area in America that will forever preserve, protect, interpret, and sustain Gullah Geechee culture for future generations to experience.”

The commission is pleased about the ongoing enthusiasm and is working to ensure the interest of youths. After all, the plans voiced in the management plan very soon will sustain their culture and that of their descendants. We want all to echo the sentiment: Gullah Geechee mean a lot!

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