

Coastal Illustrated

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FORGOTTEN PAST

Restoring the Island's
African American Heritage

IGBO LANDING

How the Tale Became Truth



Michael Hulett • Spotlight On: Stephen Doster • Common Fitness Mistakes

What information can be saved and shared about the 150 years of African American history on St. Simons Island since freedom?

This is the guiding question asked by The Friends of Harrington School and the St. Simons African American Heritage Coalition (SSAAHC) as they gather info for a future museum once the historic schoolhouse is restored. "The story of slavery and antebellum plantations in coastal Georgia is fascinating, but the story of African American families after freedom -- their history for the last 150 years -- is equally compelling and important to the history of the Golden Isles," stated Patty Deveau, President of the Friends of Harrington School and a board member of the Coastal Georgia Historical Society.

Through oral history, research in local newspapers and archives, and even on-line websites such as Ancestry.com, volunteers are piecing together a clearer picture of the African Americans who made up nearly 80% of the population of St. Simons Island when the Harrington School was built in the 1920s.

Census records from 1900 and 1920 reveal much about the island's African American families who lived in communities such as Harrington. A majority of these families at this time owned their land free of mortgage. Nearly all the black residents had been born in Georgia. Their parents were also born in Georgia. When the census taker came to the island in January 1900 nearly all the black children between the ages 7 and 16 were listed as "at school." Older family members born into slavery or shortly after freedom might not be able to read or write, but their children could. Ben Sullivan and his wife Caroline could not read or write. However, each of their children could. The parents and children in the Armstrongs, Ramseys, Cuylers, Floyds, Proctors, Wings, and Murray could read and write.

Jobs for African Americans followed the economic opportunities on the island. In 1900 the majority of African Americans were farmers, farm laborers, or day-laborers. Prince Williams was an engineer at the sawmill while forty others listed their occupations as laborers at the sawmill. Tom Lawrence and his neighbor Joe Lee were fishermen. John Ramsey, Sandy Anderson, Richard Harley, Preston Follins, Tom Robinson, Casul Murphy, Sene Shepherd, and Henry Byrd listed their occupations as carpenter. Lewis Wade was a stevedore. John Moore (from North Carolina) was a blacksmith. Grocers included Samuel Dent, Jack Blake and Joseph Follins. Ben White was a truck gardener. Mary Mitchell, age 60, born in 1848 listed her occupation as "Cook." Mollie Fahm was a dressmaker. Charles Wilson listed his occupation as "basketmaker." Four families (Harley, Knight, Johnson and Murray) had sons serving as "soldier in the Philippines."

By June 1920 Norris Stewart along with their boarder Joe Crawford from Florida were the only blacks listed as sawmill workers in the island census. The majority of the African Americans listed their occupation as laborers for "general work." Carpenters listed were John Thomas, Clarence Small, and Richard Harley. Willis Proctor and Tom Abbott each had grocery stores. Some of the women did laundry and cooking from their homes; others went out to do domestic work like washing or cooking. Mamie Life was a public school teacher. Estella White was an ice cream sales girl. Bacchus Magwood was the preacher at the Baptist church. Henry Powell was a fireman on the steam boat. Charles Wilson listed his occupation as basketmaker. Readers of island history will recognize basketmaker Charlie Wilson from *Early Days of Coastal Georgia* published in 1955 by Margaret Davis Cates.

Cates' work in the 1930-1950s gave us numerous photos and stories of coastal Georgia African American families -- the Proctors, the Armstrongs, and the Sullivans. Ben Sullivan's grandson Emory Rooks told Deveau that the frizzle chicken in Cates' book was photographed in Ben's yard on Harrington Lane. Emory Rooks is the great grandson of the Cannon Point and Couper slave Belali "on my mother's side."

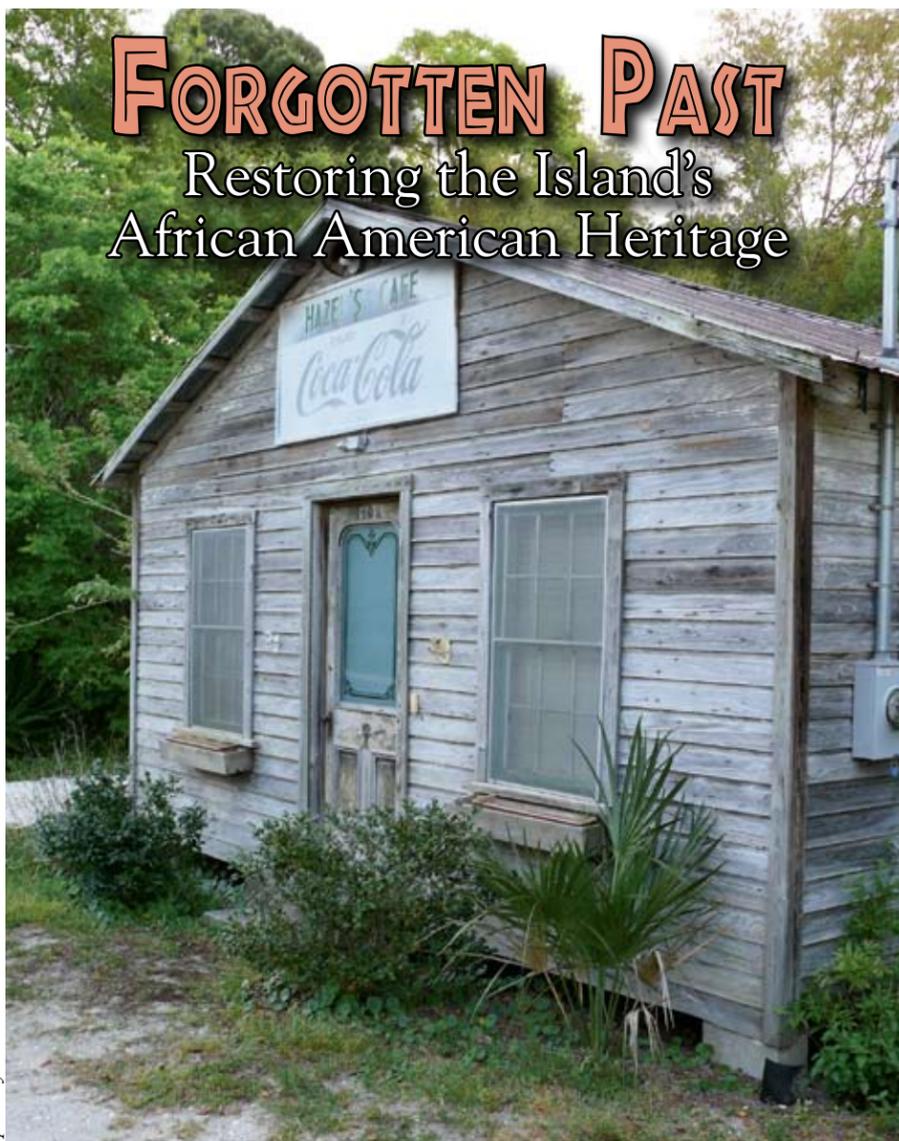


photo by Bob Swinehart

FORGOTTEN PAST

Restoring the Island's African American Heritage

The treasurer of SSAAHC and the First African Baptist Church, Rooks has been very involved with saving the Harrington schoolhouse. His home sits on North Harrington Road "at the other end of the property" pictured in Cates' book.

Re-reading old standards on coastal history with an eye for information about St. Simons Island's African American community has proved very exciting for volunteers.

Writers from the Georgia Writers Project (a WPA initiative) came to St. Simons Island in the 1930s to hear stories about "Africanisms" from former slaves or their descendants. They published their interviews in 1940 in a book called *Drums and Shadows* (now available in reprints by University of Georgia Press). Because the interviewers and photographers were children of white plantation owners, early African American scholars dismissed their work and questioned its value, Deveau explained. However, she pointed out, these criticisms were short-sighted at least for anyone interested in restoration of an African American community. "What

the Georgia Writers Project gave us is a walking tour of Harrington in the 1930s:"

We went to see Catherine Wing, who lives at the corner of the Harrington Road and the main Frederica Highway. Her comfortable frame house was set in the midst of a flower garden and her washtubs were conveniently placed under a grape arbor and spreading live oaks. On the side road stood three stately pine trees from which hung silvery festoons of Spanish moss.

The Wings owned the land where Harrington school stands and it is believed that they built the schoolhouse.

Catherine told us that Ryna Johnson, who lived about a mile down Harrington Road, was one of the oldest people on the island. Leaving the main highway, we followed the narrow, less traversed side road. It was a heavily wooded section. We viewed the massive-trunked hoary oak trees through a mist of curtain of hanging moss. The fences along the road were covered with honeysuckle and wild grape. Shortly before we arrived at our destination, the road divided to give way

to a growth of towering oaks; then it joined again, resuming its winding trail through the quiet, shadowed countryside... To the left of the road was a small unpainted store operated by Ryna's daughter with whom she lives. Various advertisements on the front of the small building gave splashes of color to the green of trees and foliage. Set back from the store was Ryna's house, surrounded by an expanse of short grass upon which a horse was grazing. The house was weathered with age, as were the vertical boards of the fence that enclosed the garden; here and there in the fence a new unpainted board, regardless of length, had replaced an old, and the top presented an irregular, jagged pattern. The cabin was the usual two-room affair but with a hall through the center and a lean-to in the back. The walls were papered with newspapers, and although there was a motley collection of furniture, everything was scrupulously clean.

Ryna told the interviewers that she belonged to the Coupers. History buffs might recall that "old Rina" greeted the Reverend James W. Leigh and James Couper when they visited Cannon's Point in the late 1870s. Leigh was the husband of Frances Butler Leigh, daughter of Pierce Butler and Fanny Kemble. A photo of Ryna Johnson, her daughter and son-in-law at her home in Harrington appears in *Drums and Shadows*.

A short distance from the Johnsons lived Charles Hunter. Again their description is valuable to those who want to learn about the historical landscape of Harrington: Small house was set well back from the road. The front yard enclosed by a wire fence was planted with a profusion of brightly colored flowers along the sandy walk leading to the house. Across the road to the left was a field which had been planted in corn.

From Hunter's we turned left on a lane flanked by a thicket of low trees and bushes. After about two or three miles we came to a clearing where there was a scattering of houses and sheds.

At this point the interviewers met Ben Sullivan, plowing a field to the left of the road:

He was tall, as straight as a soldier, with a lean agility that bespoke youthfulness. It seemed incredible that this active, intensely agile man was eighty-eight years old.

Sullivan was the son of Belali who was the butler to James Couper. His descendants still live in Harrington.

My newest favorite history book, Deveau said, is *Voices of St. Simons* by Stephen Doster (published in 2008) because he recognized that residents have stories about life on the island and that those stories need to be recorded sooner, not later. Most significant in Deveau's opinion is that Doster recounted stories by both whites and blacks whose families have lived and worked here for generations. "We tell visitors about Neptune Small and the Wanderer, but we do not follow up their stories with information about their descendants many of whom lived in Harrington and some who still live in the area. Doster's book began that process."

Volunteers with the St. Simons African American Heritage Coalition and the Friends of Harrington School welcome stories and photos that will help them build up the wealth of stories about our island's African American heritage.

"In addition to restoring the historic Harrington schoolhouse, we hope we can record the history of the families who lived in the community around the schoolhouse, in Jewtown, and South End," Deveau said.

For upcoming Save and Share Days when volunteers will be on hand to record your family stories and make digital copies of your old photos, go to their website www.ssiheritagecoalition.org. Or call (912-634-0330) or email (friends@ssiheritagecoalition.org) and their volunteers will come to you, visit your elder at home or at the nursing home, or help you record stories and photos at your next family reunion. **U**



Photos by Orrin Sage Wightman in Margaret Davis Cates book *Early Days of Coastal Georgia* clockwise from top left, Ben Sullivan, Neptune Small's house on St. Simons Island, Charles Wilson and A Frizzle Chicken

Passing Along History

Gullah Geechee Tours-Led by Amy Lotson Roberts



Above from left, Ron Upshaw discusses the revitalization of the Harrington School with Janis and Cesar Rodriguez.

Ms. Amy Lotson Roberts was born in Brunswick, Ga., daughter of James and Elethia Lotson. A lifelong resident of St. Simons Island, Roberts has witnessed the morphing of St. Simons Island from a quiet little island to vacation destination that is renowned around the world for one reason or another. The early years didn't have as much traffic, or any stop lights.

"Saint Simons used to be very quiet," reminisced Roberts. "I hardly knew anyone who locked their doors."

Roberts is a veritable font of knowledge about the African American history of St. Simons Island. A life-long resident of St. Simons Island, her tours give excellent insight into another perspective of St. Simons Island history. There are plenty of tours that travel through here but hers is the only island-based tour that focuses on the African American history of the area. There are many books about history also but there is still precious little on the market that talks about black history. Roberts' tours do just that: they will inform tourists and locals alike about black life on St. Simons Island through the years.

"That house on the corner of (what used to be) Proctor Lane (now Mallory Ext.) and Demere used to be owned by Willis Proctor. He owned a store right there and would sell to the local black community," she recollected. "He owned a lot of property on the street." Currently, the old Proctor house is for sale.

Coastal development over the years has forced the demolition of many older buildings that otherwise (by looking at them) could transport one to a certain turn-of-the-century era. One by one, shanties and single family homes were torn down only to be replaced by high end luxury homes and condominiums, strip malls, and shops. Now, there is hardly a trace that features African American history; yet that history was so much a part of this island.

Roberts then started explaining that many of the old houses on Demere had been built for people to rent by a black family named Henry and Nancy Baker. "Back in the 1930s-40s, when white folk came from Waycross—Dublin, for the summer—they brought maids with them and the maids would stay there at the house or in the community with families. Ms. Nancy and Mr. Henry would make money off the rent. Often, the maids would stay here after the summer."



Amy Lotson Roberts with nieces Cassandra and Robin Antoine. Roberts hopes the next generation will continue to see the importance of the legacy of the African American history on St. Simons.

There is an island full of African American history that often gets overlooked. Roberts' tours cover the island and weave a new angle into the fabric of this island's history. Tours start in the Village and migrate north with Roberts telling recounting stories about Emmanuel Church and Hazel's Café along the way. "The interior (of Hazel's Café) has been left just as it always was." Roberts continues the stories of the island as the tour progresses north to Hampton Point and German Town, stops by Jewtown and swings back to the Pier. See where baptisms were performed, learn about Hampton Plantation, the First African Baptist Church, Harrington Hall and how Jewtown got its name. This tour will fascinate and inform anyone interested in the lives of various people who have lived in this community.

In the past few years, there has been a marked increase in interest for Roberts' tours. For larger tours, a bus has to be rented. "A van is definitely on our wish list," Roberts commented. "That way we can accommodate more people on the tours." Every Wednesday ~ 10:00am-12:00pm and two tours on Saturdays. For more information, contact Amy Roberts at (912) 577-3737.

St. Simons Island African American Coalition

The St. Simons Island African American Heritage Coalition ("the Coalition") was founded on October 11, 2000 at the First African Baptist Church on St. Simons Island. The three basic tenets of the Coalition are: land loss prevention, historic preservation, and economic development.

Coastal Development

Over the years, island development has forced much of the African American population off the island. Finally, a core group of African Americans decided that it was time to organize an effort supporting the African American community and keeping the remaining land it has from falling victim to development.

There is not a lot of historical census information on African Americans on St. Simons Island, specifically. For instance, St. Simons Island originally was clumped together under the Glynn County banner along with Jekyll Island and Brunswick. Subsequently, the information ends up being somewhat opaque. Today, however, the 2010 U.S. Census clearly states that we have a total of 12,438 residents on St. Simons, of whom just 352 are African American. This headsmacking statistic brings to light the fact that the Gullah Geechee community has decreased dramatically over the years.

Historic Preservation

Ron Upshaw, President of the Coalition, said it best: "The Friends of Harrington are a supporting unit of the Coalition with the goal of restoring Harrington Graded School house." Plans to preserve the Harrington School House are underway.

Upshaw explained that "at some point, the economy will get better and real estate sales will start up again." According to Upshaw, when that happens, "it'll be more important than ever for the local community to keep their land. With only 352 black people left on St. Simons Island, each person who moves away will affect that segment of the population significantly.

"That is why the Harrington School House is so important," explained Upshaw. "For years, Amy and I worked so hard on keeping the school alive." At one

point, there was discussion of simply putting a marker where the school house is located. "But we were interested in seeing the building as a place people can see and touch, not imagine." Outside of the slave cabins, this school house will be one of the few remaining structures that is related to African American history. The current capital campaign to restore Harrington will take the support of the entire community.

Economic Development

The Coalition also produces the annual Georgia Sea Islands Festival during Juneteenth which to date has acted as the main fundraiser for the Coalition. Amy Roberts has been Executive Director of the Festival since 2002. This popular festival is the one time of the year when the local Gullah Geechee produce a festival on St. Simons Island to educate locals and tourists about the rich culture that is so much a part of this area. This particular event is always a local favorite. Tourists often plan their trips to this area around the festival so they can see the performances, listen to stories, and watch netmaking or basket weaving demonstrations.

Expanding Membership Base and Board

Sharing this rich history is particularly important with the younger generation for it is they who will be carrying the torch forward. It's very encouraging to the Coalition that the younger generation such as Roberts' nieces, Cassandra and Robin Antoine, have been involved with Harrington School House for a couple of years. The thin threads of memory are fraying with the passing of each elder. As long as the younger generation continues to be involved, the culture continues to exist.

In addition to creating a more "intergenerational" membership base, Upshaw mentioned that he'd like to see the membership and Board expand and become more inclusive. A wider membership base will involve greater representation of the island population and will make the Coalition more visible to the public.

Questions about and support for the Coalition can be sent by going to: www.ssiheritagecoalition.org or contacting the Coalition at 912-577-3737. [M]

Timeline of the African American Decline of St. Simons Island

1920s-1980

The invention of the automobile and construction of bridges made transportation to the island much more convenient. Along came more tourists and second home landowners. These bridges, roads, and new home construction started raising the real estate taxes. Many of the Island's African American residents could no longer afford to live on St. Simons Island (or had passed away intestate, thereby making it very difficult for heirs to retain the property) and had to sell the land of their ancestors. Also contributing to the "Gullah Geechee diaspora" was the invention of air conditioning in the late 1920's for the retail customer. Naturally, this made island living much more palatable to the city-born and bred citizen looking for a little getaway cottage on the ocean.

1980-2000

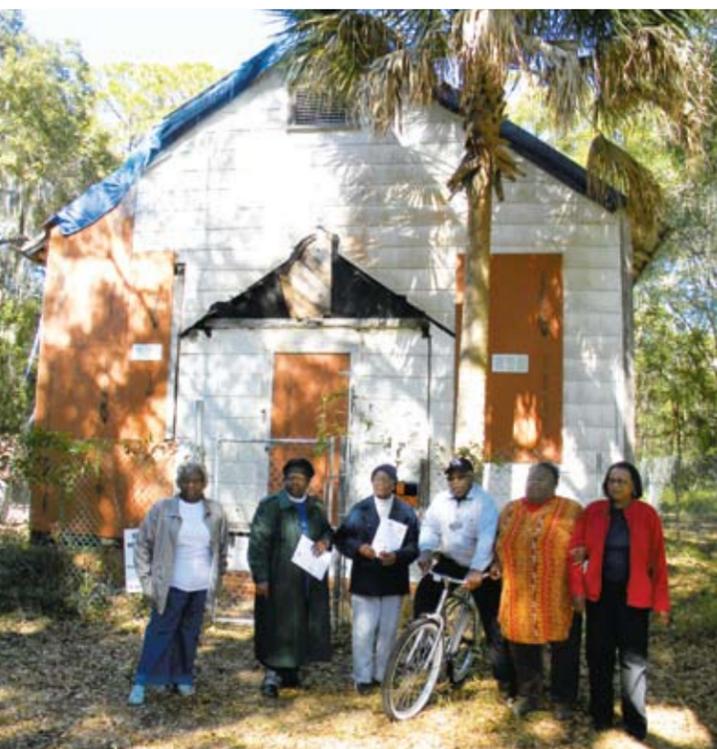
Development was relatively slow until about 1980 with the beginning of the infamous Bull Market. Tourism increased and real estate was purchased and sold at unprecedented levels—levels which are not likely to be revisited in this lifetime. This vast real estate boom is one of the reasons so many blacks moved off the island. Some passed away and their descendants chose to live and work elsewhere or start a family while others died intestate. In 2000, it became more apparent than ever how important it was to preserve and protect the land owned by the African American community. Subsequently, the Saint Simons Island African American Coalition (the "Coalition") was founded.

2000—Founding of the Coalition Land Loss Prevention

On October 11, 2000—In light of the island gentrification and in an effort to hold onto the land of their ancestors—the Coalition set out to educate heirs about property inheritance and how to handle it. The members of the Coalition learned to write wills, record expenses and income for taxes, and sign up for energy assistance 2012 and going forward

Whereas St. Simons Island was once almost 80% inhabited by African Americans, it's amazing to think that those statistics are more than diametrically opposite on the scale today. There are fewer and fewer buildings that stand today with any history. "That's why the Harrington House is so important," stated Upshaw. "It's some place you can see and touch."

So while land loss prevention and historic preservation are both important missions of the Coalition, it is also equally important for this area to be economically viable for the African Americans who live here. Roberts mentioned that she would like "us to own more property so we can encourage our folk to go into business."



Harrington School students gather to share memories at their former school.

Stories compiled with the help of Patricia Deveau and Susan Durkes