

Strategic Plan to Promote Preservation of Gullah Geechee Land Ownership in the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor

Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to all the Gullah Geechee landowners, land ownership preservation advocates, and community members who generously provided their time, experiences, and expertise to help us better understand the range of contemporary challenges that threaten Gullah Geechee land ownership. We are also indebted to the South Carolina Aquarium for providing us with conference and planning space when we convened the Commission in February 2020 for our planning session.

We also thank the Gaylord & Dorothy Donnelley Foundation for generously funding this planning work through their Land Conservation fund, which offers grants, technical assistance, and program-related investments to organizations for work that leads to landscape-scale land preservation and stewardship. Their enduring and remarkable commitment to sustaining Gullah Geechee heritage is greatly appreciated.

LETTER FROM THE CHAIR AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

September 2020

Johns Island, South Carolina

In Gullah Geechee culture, land ownership is regarded as the essence of life, as having a “place” for which one’s ancestors have struggled and sacrificed. The ability of Gullah Geechee people to continue to live on their privately-owned land within the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor is critical to the culture’s long-term survival. Family compounds remain the economic and spiritual centers in which Gullah Geechee culture thrives.

This new strategic plan represents a blueprint for how we intend to become better advocates for Gullah Geechee landowners. A key component of it is working with communities, stakeholders and partners more broadly across the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor to provide education and training opportunities, including information and tools for how to retain land. Especially land that is held as heirs’ property. Another critical component is an emphasis on promoting family-centered, land management: an approach which encourages families to come together to collectively develop strategies for keeping generational land in the family.

The threats to Gullah Geechee land ownership are pernicious and persistent. As we finalize this report, Gullah Geechee landowners in two historic communities – Stoney and Phillips – are in danger of losing land due to road widening projects. For too long, historic Gullah Geechee communities have been asked to bear the brunt of poor and often racially-biased local and state planning policies that have encouraged rapid development without commensurate, thoughtful attention to the infrastructure needed to support this growth in population, traffic, and pollution.

Land is also being lost – often for small amounts of money – at tax sales. Landowners with limited means are faced with rising assessments as land around them is developed. Lately, a wave of notices has gone out to Gullah Geechee landowners in Beaufort County notifying them that their land is subject to auction if tax assessments are not paid by October 2, 2020. Forty-one properties owned by Gullah Geechee families on Hilton Head Island may be lost and all except one family owe less than \$9,000 in taxes. We risk seeing on Hilton Head Island what islands like Sapelo Island, Georgia now face: dwindling Gullah Geechee communities struggling to stay connected to and rooted in the land they have owned for generations.

Our new plan sets forth concrete steps that we commit to taking to preserve Gullah Geechee land ownership and we look forward to forming new partnerships to accomplish the work. We are grateful to the Gaylord & Dorothy Donnelley Foundation for their financial support for this planning process and their commitment to land conservation.

Now, we all move forward together.



**Dr. Dionne Hoskins-Brown, Chair
Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage
Corridor Commission**



**Heather L. Hodges, Executive Director
Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage
Corridor NHA**

STRATEGIC PLAN FOR LAND OWNERSHIP ADOPTED

The 2020-2025 Strategic Plan for Land Ownership was adopted by the **Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission** on September 9, 2020.

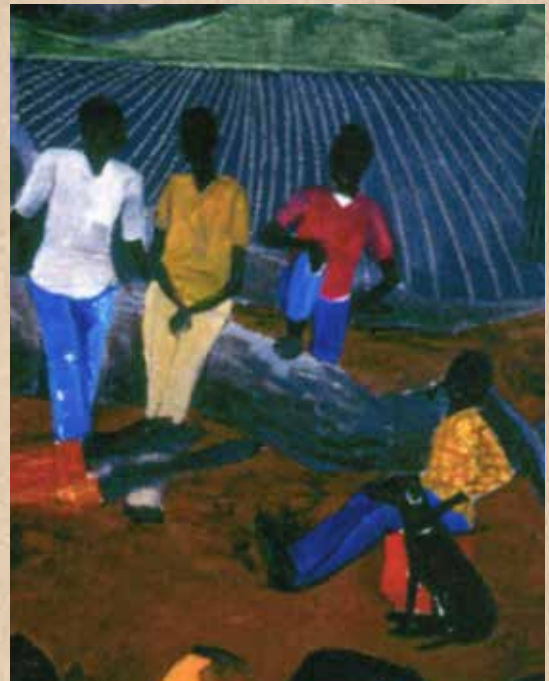
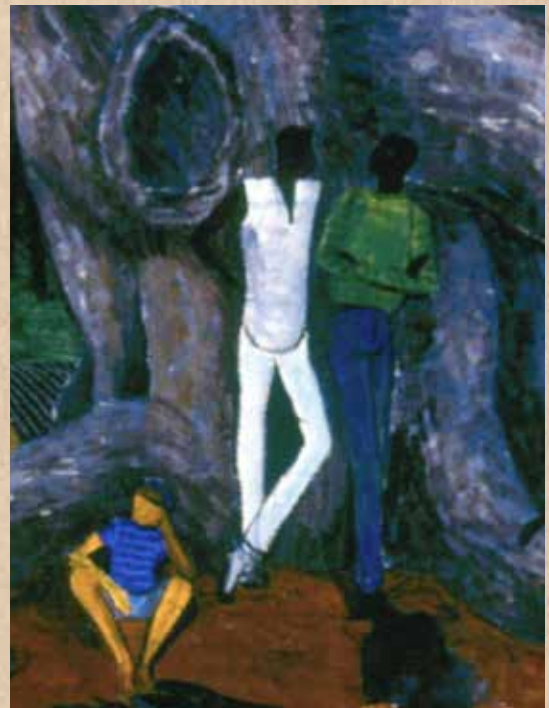
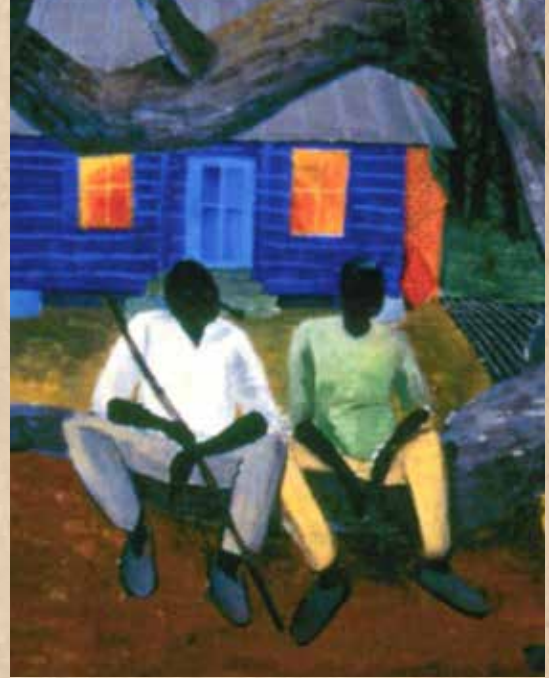
GULLAH GEECHEE CULTURAL HERITAGE CORRIDOR COMMISSIONERS

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Scenes from public, community meetings held in Wilmington, North Carolina – August 2018.



Introduction



ABOUT US

THE GULLAH GEECHEE CULTURAL HERITAGE CORRIDOR

The **Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor** was designated by the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Act, passed by Congress on October 12, 2006 (Public Law 109-338).

The Corridor is a federal national heritage area. A national heritage area is a site that represents a significant story of local, regional, national, and global importance.

The designation of the Corridor as a federal national heritage area recognizes Gullah Geechee people for maintaining their cultural traditions. The intent of the designation is to help preserve and interpret the traditional cultural practices, sites, and resources associated with Gullah Geechee people.

The Corridor was created to:

- Recognize, sustain, and celebrate the important contributions made to American culture and history by African Americans, known as the Gullah Geechee, who settled in the coastal areas of South Carolina, Georgia, North Carolina, and Florida.
- Assist state and local governments and public and private entities in South Carolina, Georgia, North Carolina, and Florida in interpreting the story of the Gullah Geechee and preserving Gullah Geechee folklore, arts, crafts, and music.
- Assist in identifying and preserving sites, historical data, artifacts, and objects associated with Gullah Geechee people and culture for the benefit and education of the public.

THE GULLAH GEECHEE CULTURAL HERITAGE CORRIDOR COMMISSION

The **Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission** is a federal commission that was established by Congress on October 12, 2006, through The National Heritage Areas Act of 2006.

The Corridor and the Commission are funded primarily by government grants from the U.S. Department of the Interior and by private donations. Currently, the Commission has 14 members who reside in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.

The primary duty of the Commission is to implement the Management Plan for the Corridor. See a copy of the Management Plan at <https://gullahgeecheecorridor.org>.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE 2020-2025 STRATEGIC PLAN

The 2012 **Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Management Plan** acknowledged the importance of land and land ownership to the continuation of Gullah Geechee culture.¹ The plan noted the range of challenges that threaten land ownership and expressed particular concern that a great deal of land that is privately owned by Gullah Geechee people is “heirs’ property.” Our Management Plan identified specific actions that the Commission could take to address these issues. But since threats to Gullah Geechee land ownership continued to mount unabated, the Commission decided that a new and more robust set of strategies was needed.

In 2019, the Gaylord & Dorothy Donnelley Foundation provided funding to develop a five-year strategic plan to further address Gullah Geechee land use and ownership and access to natural resources for traditional uses in the Corridor.

The strategic planning process began in November 2019 with an information-gathering process that included interviews with Gullah Geechee landowners, community organizations, attorneys, nonprofits, and government officials in all four states of the Corridor that work on issues relating to Gullah Geechee land use, preservation, and conservation.

Survey results are shown in the appendices. Major themes in the results included:

- Land is history, culture, and foundation for Gullah Geechee people.
- More community-based groups are needed to encourage land ownership preservation.
- More education is needed about how land is lost.
- Affordable and trusted legal assistance is needed.
- Help is needed to make land ownership economically viable.
- More community-based educators and advocates are needed to assist landowners.

¹2012 Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Management Plan. Prepared and published by the National Park Service, Denver Service Center. Available at gullahgeecheecorridor.org.

The Commission held a strategic planning meeting in February 2020, clarified their stakeholders, mission, goals, and values, and created the following strategic plan for the 2020-2025 period. The plan was tied to three key goals identified by the planning process:

Goal: Encourage the preservation of Gullah Geechee lands and built heritage to foster cultural preservation.

Objectives for this goal included: increase the volume of written information and online materials that provide educational modules or educational techniques; increase the number of pathways, partnerships, and networks through which information (concerning vulnerable properties) reaches the Commission; decrease the rates of annual land loss and the annual loss of built structures, as reported by stakeholders; facilitate or deliver at least one educational program annually in each county in the Corridor; identify and complete at least one advocacy activity in each of the four states in the Corridor; increase the number of experts who could work with property owners in each state.

Goal: Inspire family-centered land management in the Corridor.

Objectives for this goal included: increase media coverage about land ownership challenges and family-centered land management; increase the use of community stories and genealogy as tools for family-centered land management of heirs' property; increase young adult participation in educational opportunities for asset management and cultural programming.

Goal: Promote entrepreneurial land ownership as a form of economic development.

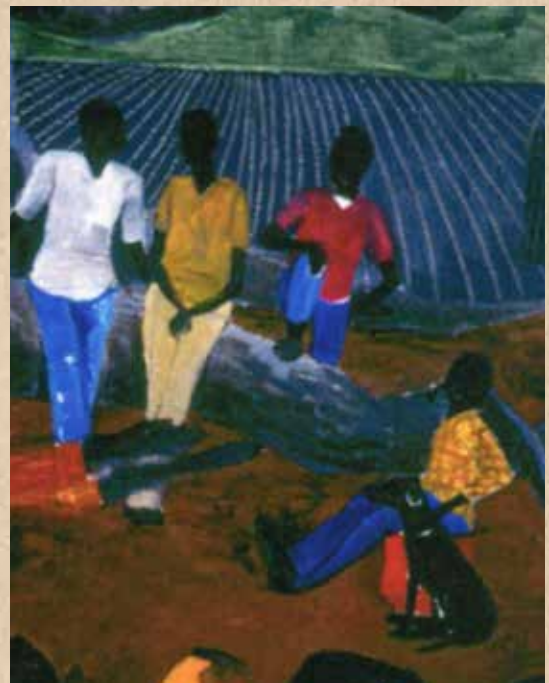
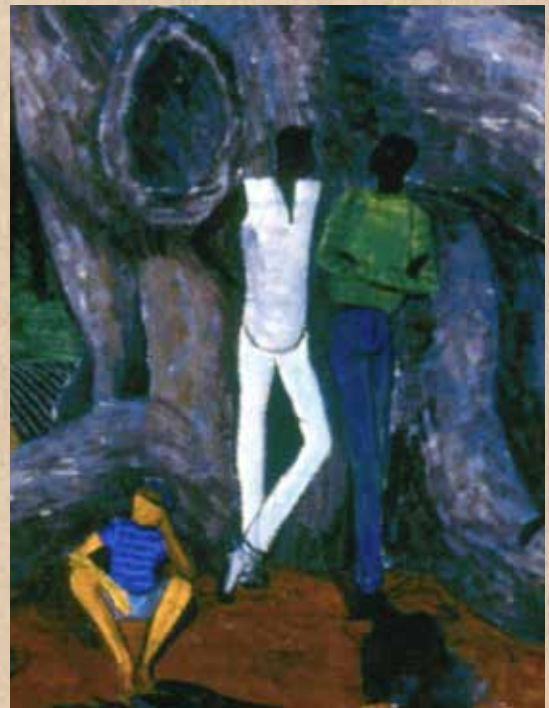
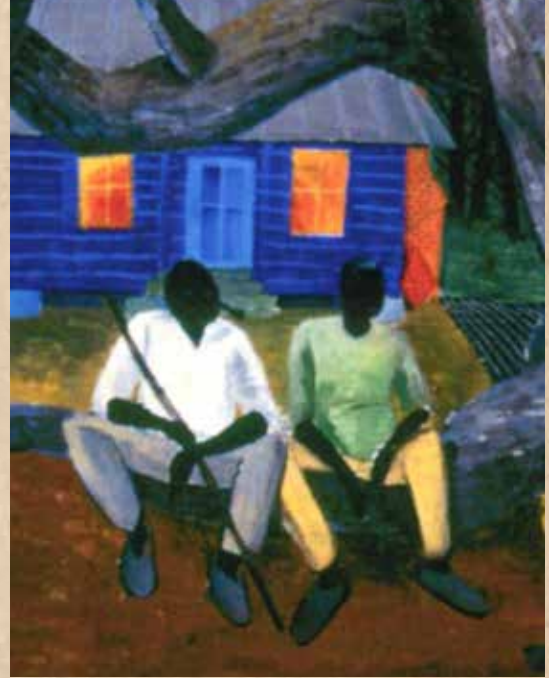
Objectives for this goal included: increase Gullah Geechee purchase of historically important lands and built heritage; increase mentorship opportunities for landowners around finding economically sustainable uses for the land; and increase the number of people who participate in land ownership and economic development training programs.

CONCLUSION

The Corridor is still experiencing the post-WWII economic development pressures that began 70 years ago when the geographic isolation of the island communities was broken by the connecting bridges to the mainland and the development of the Interstate 95 highway inland. Land and property are still being lost for many reasons. One of the primary reasons for land loss is the intricate and difficult legal process for establishing ownership of heirs' property and transferring it to succeeding generations.

The need to ensure that historical land and property are preserved is urgent for both the Corridor and Gullah Geechee people. If nothing is done, land and property ownership will continue to decline, and elders can already see their history and culture vanishing as a result. Both the 2012 Management Plan and this 2020-2025 Strategic Plan can help Gullah Geechee people to address current economic and legal issues. Both plans can provide guidance on the next steps to help Gullah Geechee people survive another challenge to their existence.

Background



BACKGROUND

The **Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor** is a national heritage area created by the U.S. Congress in 2006². A national heritage area demarcates a nationally distinctive landscape shaped by natural, cultural, historical, and recreational resources. A heritage area tells a nationally important story through its geography, its natural and cultural resources, and the traditions that have evolved within the landscape. Congress has created 55 national heritage areas in the United States, but only the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor has a group of people and a landscape as its subject.

GULLAH GEECHEE PEOPLE AND THEIR LOWCOUNTRY LAND

In the last decades of the 17th century, rice was successfully cultivated in what is now South Carolina, and its production rapidly became the main economic activity on the Lower Atlantic coast. The Gullah Geechee are the direct descendants of people who came from different, often highly sophisticated societies in Central and West Africa, with many coming from the coastal, West African regions we now know as Senegal, Sierra Leone, the Gambia, and Liberia – what was known as the Rice Coast of West Africa. They were trafficked across the Atlantic Ocean directly into Charleston and Savannah, the major ports along a stretch of the Southeast Atlantic Coast where the topography was like the rice-growing region of West Africa. The enslaved brought with them knowledge of how to grow rice. That rice would become the economic engine for the Lower Atlantic colonies and make them some of the wealthiest in what would become the United States.

Tidal rice cultivation was a labor-intensive and technically difficult enterprise. Unlike other crops that require only a clearing of a field before planting, the ancestors of the Gullah Geechee had to clear many acres of land – with their hands, sometimes small tools, and baskets – and then make extensive improvements to it.



²The Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor (the Corridor) was designated by the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Act, passed by Congress on October 12, 2006 (Public Law 109- 338). The local coordinating entity legally responsible for management of the Corridor is a federal commission established by Congress and titled the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission (the Commission). Please note that during the planning process, the Commission made a decision to remove the forward slash in reference to Gullah Geechee people, communities, history, and culture, as it was originally written in the designating law. This change was made in order to represent one culture within the Corridor and to create a unique identity that is distinct from other Gullah Geechee cultural entities.

At first, rice was grown as a subsistence crop in damp soil without irrigation. Later, the reservoir system, which involved the impounding of freshwater from streams, springs, and swamps, was used for the periodic irrigation of rice fields. This involved situating rice fields adjacent to rivers and streams flowing into the ocean. Through an intricate system of canals, dikes, sluices, and trunks built by the enslaved, the fields were flooded with freshwater that was forced upstream by rising tides. Africans from the West Coast were familiar with the technology of tidewater rice production, and this knowledge was transferred to the New World with their enslavement.

Most plantation owners were reluctant to acknowledge that it was the Africans on their plantations who had the array of technological and managerial skills that were essential to the production of rice. But some owners openly advertised for people from the rice-growing region of West Africa.



Bethel AME Church is among the freedmen's churches established in the aftermath of the Civil War. Churches were often some of the first buildings (along with schools) in new settlement communities. Many Gullah Geechee people acquired land during Reconstruction as part of community-building. Their descendants commonly remain on the land today.



Buckshot's Restaurant, in rural McClellanville, SC, is a small business rooted in the historic Gullah Geechee community, where restaurants are the only contact for many visitors with Gullah Geechee people and their culture.

The achievements of the ancestors of Gullah Geechee people are all the more remarkable in light of the dangerous conditions they endured as they worked in swampy, mosquito-filled rice fields that favored diseases such as malaria, cholera, and yellow fever. Many Africans from the Rice Coast possessed a degree of immunity to malaria that Europeans lacked.

The European planters were often absentee owners who spent the period from early May to late October in the pinelands and the winter social season in their city homes. The result was that many of the plantations were highly "Africanized," and the work of rice production was frequently managed by the enslaved themselves under the direction of a white overseer and a black driver.

The ancestors of the Gullah Geechee arrived in this dangerous new world with a diverse range of cultural, linguistic, and spiritual practices. Because many of the transplanted African peoples did not share the same cultural practices, eventually common institutions, and a synthesized new creole (but still very African) culture and language – now known as Gullah Geechee – emerged on these isolated island and coastal plantations.

The Gullah Geechee can only be understood in connection to their relationship to the land of the Lowcountry, rice cultivation, and their coastal history and heritage. The boundaries of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor are rooted in this history. In 1864, the federal government was struggling to figure out what to do with tens of thousands of displaced people. The Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, told General Sherman to meet with “leaders of the local Negro community” and ask them a simple question, “What do you want for your people?” Sherman called a meeting with 20 of Savannah’s Methodist and Baptist pastors. Their leader, Garrison Frazier, a formerly enslaved minister, had purchased the freedom of both he and his wife. Their answer, as Frazier relayed it, was simple.



Burial grounds, graveyards and cemeteries connected to historic churches are important cultural and heritage sites in established Gullah Geechee communities. Preserving access is an on-going challenge in the face of development and gentrification.



Moving Star Hall on Johns Island, SC, was erected ca. 1917 as a praise house and meeting hall. Few praise houses are left standing and still used, but they generally indicate that an historically constituted Gullah Geechee community is nearby.

“The way we can best take care of ourselves,” Rev. Frazier began his answer, “is to have land, and turn it and till it by our own labor ... and we can soon maintain ourselves and have something to spare ... We want to be placed on land until we are able to buy it and make it our own.” And when asked next where the freed slaves “would rather live — whether scattered among the whites or in colonies by themselves,” without missing a beat, Brother Frazier (as the transcript calls him) replied that **“I would prefer to live by ourselves, for there is a prejudice against us in the South that will take years to get over ...”**

³In the Management Plan, the Commission proposed that the Corridor boundary be defined as “those lands and waters running from the northern boundary of Pender County, North Carolina, southward to St. Johns County, Florida, from the Atlantic coast to 30 miles inland, including all Sea Islands.” This proposed boundary includes Pender County, North Carolina, and St. Johns County, Florida, which were not included in the boundary defined in the designating legislation.

Four days later, Sherman issued Special Field Order No. 15, setting aside a long swath of the Lower Atlantic coast for the freedmen. Specifically, “The islands from Charleston, south, the abandoned rice fields along the rivers for thirty miles back from the sea, and the country bordering the St. Johns River, Florida, are reserved and set apart for the settlement of the negroes now made free by the acts of war and the proclamation of the President of the United States.” These are the essential boundaries for the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor as articulated by Congress in 2006.³



Highway 17 North through Mt. Pleasant is home to many Gullah Geechee communities, including several with sweetgrass basket makers. Now eight lanes wide, the route has become a major corridor for development in Mt. Pleasant. Once lined with stalls where visitors could buy directly from basket makers, the highway has few remaining because the speed and volume of suburban traffic makes stopping difficult.





Many Gullah Geechee communities are on waterways with scenic and desirable locations, leading many residents to fear the loss of land and the culture rooted in it.

Land is still widely considered the most valuable of all Gullah Geechee cultural assets. It has always been the base for economic and social development. After slavery ended, family farms were often the primary source of income. Gullah Geechee landowners were able to develop a self-sustaining economy based on the small-scale production of cotton, subsistence agriculture, and truck farming supplemented with fishing and harvesting shrimp and oysters. As a result, many were able to avoid the hazards associated with tenant farming and sharecropping systems.

Preserved along the beautiful, coastline of the Atlantic Lowcountry is the nationally important story of the history of Gullah Geechee people – a powerful story of how they shaped this distinctive landscape over the course of centuries, their remarkable Creole culture and the West African traditions that remain deeply rooted in it.

Gullah Geechee is recognized as one of the great, foundational cultures of the United States and is honored for the sheer number of Africanisms that they have preserved.

Like, the hundred-year-old praise houses that still stand on St. Helena and Johns Islands as a testament to the vivid, spiritual life of the enslaved – the “ring shouts” recalled the African religious rituals of their homelands and gave brief reprieves from the horrors of enslavement. The ring shout is believed to be the oldest surviving African American performance tradition in North America.

It’s a heritage that shines through in the patiently, hand-crafted sweetgrass baskets that reflect ancient West African weaving traditions, and which are made from natural materials found only along the coast.

It is a history that is forever memorialized in burial grounds and cemeteries that are over a century old. The graves still reflect Gullah Geechee homegoing traditions carried over from West Africa, such as decorating them with personal mementos associated with the family members in addition to objects such as shells and clocks, which carried symbolic significance.

This history is memorialized in dishes like red rice, a Lowcountry favorite that calls to mind jollof rice and indelibly connects today’s Gullah Geechee chefs to the cookpots of ancestors and contemporaries in West Africa. Or the acres of rice fields that are still an indelible feature of our Lowcountry landscape – drive down Highway 17, the old Savannah Highway, and you can stand in them, silent and verdant memorials to the unfathomable sacrifices and inspiring perseverance of Gullah Geechee people.



Gullah Geechee culture is rooted in the land and draws visitors from around the world who want to experience it and visit the people and communities. The Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor helps protect and preserve this cultural landscape.

But most importantly, there are Gullah Geechee people who have resided for hundreds of years along the coasts of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. However, their families and their way of life are in harm's way as land and homes are at risk of being lost in many cases because of a heirs' property ownership system – a traditional form of collective, land ownership where land is passed down through generations – that runs counter to our federal and state relief systems where access to help may be denied because of the inability to demonstrate clear title and ownership.

The history and the future of Gullah Geechee people are inextricably tied to their land. We welcome your support to help us raise awareness about what is at stake and join us in our work to help protect and preserve our Gullah Geechee communities, heritage, and lands.



Many Gullah Geechee heritage festivals are tied to the people and history of communities. The Riceboro Rice Festival in Georgia introduces attendees to the Gullah Geechee rice culture. Festivals are also important homecoming events, inviting departed descendants back to ancestral lands.

THE GULLAH GEECHEE CULTURAL HERITAGE CORRIDOR COMMISSION AND LAND PRESERVATION

National heritage areas are managed by a local entity; in this case, the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission partnership with various stakeholders and partners. These stakeholders and partners include individual citizens; local, state, and federal governments; and nonprofit and private sector groups. Together, these entities work to preserve the integrity of their distinct landscape and local stories so that current and future generations of Gullah Geechee people understand their relationship to the land.



This collaborative approach does not compromise traditional local control over, or use of, the land. Using this approach, national heritage areas are instead based on their constituents' pride in their history and traditions, as well as their interest and involvement in retaining and interpreting their special landscapes. The integrity of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor NHA and our preservation work is predicated on the need to sustain private Gullah Geechee land ownership broadly, locally, and regionally.



The annual Sweetgrass Festival in Mt. Pleasant, SC, introduces locals and visitors to the Gullah Geechee tradition of sweetgrass basket-making in nearby Gullah Geechee communities.

In 2012, the Commission adopted a Management Plan for the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor that acknowledged the importance of land and land ownership to the continuation of Gullah Geechee culture.⁴ We also noted the range of challenges that threaten land ownership and expressed particular concern that a great deal of privately-owned Gullah Geechee land is heirs' property.

⁴2012 Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Management Plan. Prepared and published by the National Park Service, Denver Service Center. Available at gullahgeecheecorridor.org.



HEIRS' PROPERTY

Gullah Geechee land has and continues to be lost through a range of mechanisms: some legal and some unlawful. These mechanisms include eminent domain actions initiated by governments, rising property taxes and tax sales, and fraud. Development forms an ever-present challenge as the demand for coastal land grows, driven by an influx of Americans moving to the Lower Atlantic coast. Complicating the ability of Gullah Geechee landowners to respond to all these challenges is both the complexity of the financial instruments and laws relating to land ownership in the United States and because much of their land is owned as heirs' property.

We adopt by reference the following discussion of heirs' property from our Management Plan. Under heirs' property, all family members own the land as "tenants in common," which gives each family member undivided property rights. If a family member dies, however, the ownership passes down to the living heirs, who are determined by the probate laws according to the laws of most states. For the land to legally pass from the estate of the deceased ancestor, that deceased person's estate must be probated to ensure the deceased person's debts are paid before the property passes to the lawful heirs.



Most states have a time limit to probate a deceased person's estate without having to go to court. If the ancestor dies without a will, then he or she is said to have died "intestate," and no will is required to probate the estate of the deceased ancestor. The probate process can usually be completed fairly inexpensively, and the land is then transferred to the heirs, either the intestate heirs or those who are named in the will.

Ancestors who have died with a will often include a clause that the land is not to be sold so that the family will always have a "place." When probate is not completed in the time required by the state, then the property becomes "heirs' property," for which one must go to court to determine the owners and divide the land. This action, called a "quiet title action," is usually very expensive, depending on how many generations have passed since the ancestor's death. The land is usually divided on the generational level on which at least one heir is still alive.



Gullah Geechee foodways like crab rice and shrimp and grits represent a coastal cuisine rooted in African and Lowcountry culture. Fishing and hunting have long provided sustenance and livelihood in Gullah Geechee communities, often found near rivers or the ocean. These communities are now prime development targets.

Traditionally, heirs' property has been managed by families through "word of mouth" by verbally transferring interest to other family members without the benefit of a written deed. In some cases, a deed has been used in an attempt to transfer interest between family members. A quitclaim deed simply transfers one's interest in land to another person without knowing if that person has an interest or what the interest percentage is.

Quitclaim deeds are used when the titleholder is deceased, and the heirs then attempt to convey their interest to another person. Warranty deeds cannot be used to resolve land ownership because they cannot document who "owns" the land.

Heirs' property involves numerous other legal and financial issues that entangle property owners who do not secure scrupulous legal representation, which can result in the loss of land ownership. Issues include reimbursement for taxes, partitioning or dividing the property, appraisals, surveys, attorney fees, timber sales, easements, and paying those heirs that do not want to share the land the value of their interest. Another obstacle facing heirs' property interest-holders is the added pressure from real estate developers who convince some heirs that do not have a very strong connection to the land to sell their interest to those outside the family.

Any heir has the right to go to court and demand his or her share of the value of the land. However, if the heirs in possession of the land (or those who want to keep the land within the family) cannot pay those heirs for their interest, the court can sell the land, often at fire-sale prices.

If a developer or other interested party convinces at least one family member to sell his or her interest, the action allows the developer to own a right in the property and then to have lawyers challenge the rights of the heirs to stop them from building on the family parcel or purchasing the entire thing. This has led to many families losing their land due to "forced partition sales" in which judges ask them to settle the matter among themselves, and when that is not done, all parties are forced to have their land sold, and the subsequent profit is divided according to the interest that each party is entitled to by judgment.

Carrots and green onions from the third-generation, Gullah Geechee-owned Fields Farm on Johns Island, SC. Farming would provide economic self-sufficiency for some in Gullah Geechee communities who acquired land after the Civil War and were spared the hazards of sharecropping.





Representatives from the Gullah Geechee communities of Wando/Mt. Pleasant on a panel at the Mt. Pleasant Library in 2018 educating the larger community about their history and culture. A common concern: losing land and way of life.

Recent progress has been made in slowing the loss of heirs’ property thanks to the efforts of a range of legal and other advocacy organizations. This includes adoption in some states of the Uniform Partition Heirs Property Act, which expands heirs’ rights in partition actions. However, the most difficult aspect of this approach can be to get the family members to agree to a land retention strategy. Some of the heirs may have very different intentions. For example, some may live elsewhere and never have visited the parcel or have maintained an understanding of the cultural importance of retaining family land.

In our Management Plan, we identified specific actions that the Commission could take to address these issues. In the meantime, we have seen threats to Gullah Geechee land ownership continue to mount unabated. We have collectively decided that a more robust set of strategies is needed.

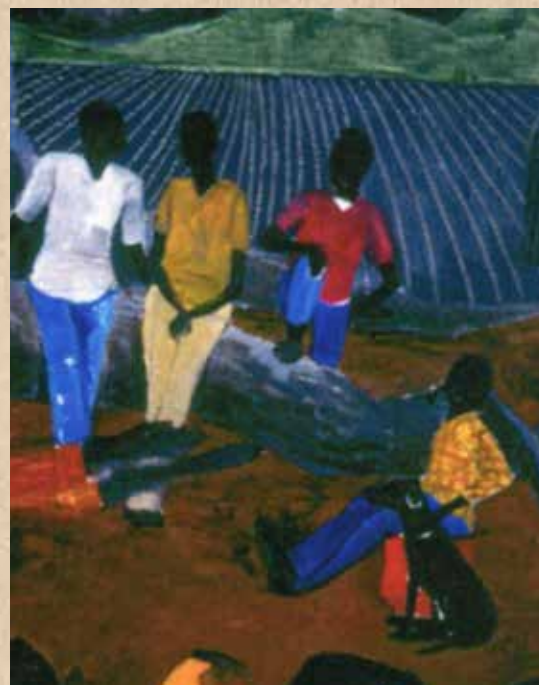
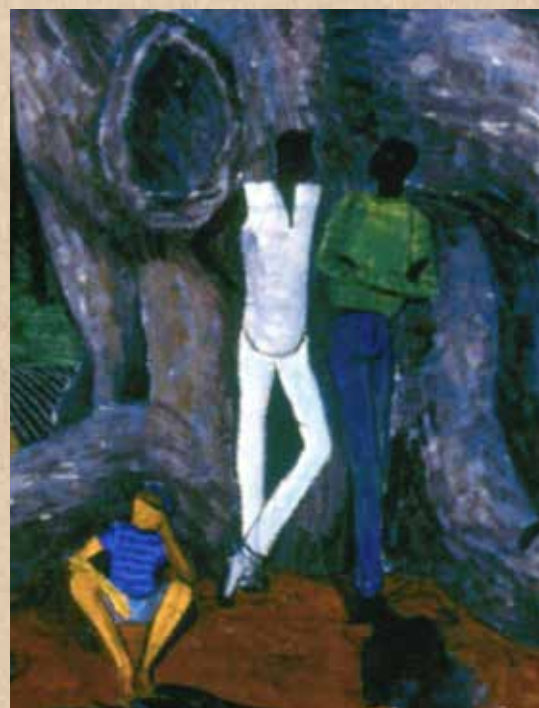
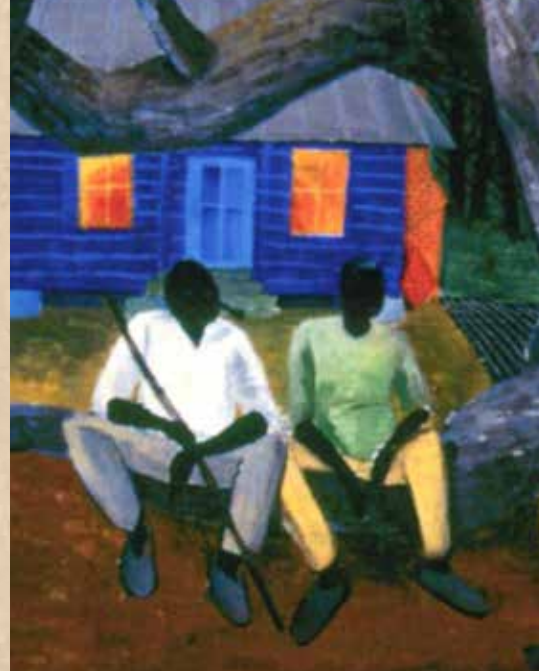
In 2019, the Gaylord & Dorothy Donnelley Foundation provided funding to develop a five-year strategic plan to further address Gullah Geechee land use and ownership and access to natural resources for traditional uses in the Corridor. This plan sets forth these strategies.

Some Gullah Geechee owned land also features historic structures. Louise Miller Cohen has preserved and converted such a house on her Hilton Head Island property into the Gullah Geechee Museum, as well as a site for heritage festivals.



Many historic Gullah Geechee community members who descended from people enslaved on nearby plantations settled near where they had always lived. As plantation owners' descendants have sold off property to developers, new subdivisions have sprung up around the Gullah Geechee communities, causing such problems as property tax increases and challenging access to many antebellum burial grounds. In 2019, the Georgia Historical Society dedicated a marker to the descendants of the Butler Island Plantation in Darien, GA. Markers about the plantation owners had long existed near the roadside with no acknowledgment of those enslaved at the site or their immense contributions.

The Strategic Planning Process



OVERVIEW OF THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

Our strategic planning process began in November 2019 with the formation of an internal planning committee that partnered with our outside consultants to plan an information-gathering process that included interviews with key internal and external stakeholders.

External interviews were conducted with Gullah Geechee landowners, community organizations, attorneys, nonprofits, and government officials in all four states of the Corridor that work on issues relating to Gullah Geechee land use, preservation, and conservation. Between November 2019 and February 2020, in-depth telephone interviews were also conducted with stakeholders. Fourteen interviews were conducted with six Commissioners, three external stakeholders involved in preserving land in the Corridor, four landowners, and one staff person. Interviews were one to two hours in length and included seven questions. See the appendix Interview Guidance Document for more details about the questions in the interviews.

In December 2019, the Commission also conducted an online survey to gather information from stakeholders across the country about land ownership in the Corridor. A total of 104 landowners responded to the online survey. See the appendix Survey Outcomes and Data for the results of the survey.

In February 2020, the full Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission was convened at the South Carolina Aquarium in Charleston, South Carolina, to begin work on drafting the strategic plan. This work included:

- Defining the core values and a vision concerning heirs' property and the socio-cultural elements of land management and economics in the Corridor; and
- Crafting implementation goals, measurable objectives, and strategies to support land preservation and ownership in the Corridor.

In April 2020, a draft strategic plan was shared with the staff and the Commissioners for review. Review comments were incorporated, and a final strategic plan was prepared for publication.



Gullah Geechee heritage festivals share history and culture with community members, anchor descendants who have moved away, and curious visitors.

WHAT WE LEARNED: STAKEHOLDER THEMES

The survey and interview data were shared with the Commissioners prior to the strategic planning meeting. The primary themes were presented at the start of the meeting, and all findings were discussed to inform the strategic planning process. The following major themes and representative quotes were drawn from the survey responses and telephone interviews.

- 1 Land is history, culture, and foundation for Gullah Geechee people. Most people saw the land as the foundation of their history, culture, homes, communities, families, and futures.

 - **“Without the land, the culture dies.”**
 - **“Land ownership is extremely important to cultural preservation.”**
 - **“If we lose our land, we lose our ancestral home.”**
 - 2 Stakeholders reported the need for more community-based groups to do the advocacy work of encouraging land ownership preservation. Many were concerned that younger descendants of landowners did not understand the centrality of land ownership for cultural preservation because they did not know or appreciate the history of the land. There was also a concern that younger descendants do not understand the range of economic and other benefits that come with land ownership.

 - **“Owners move away. Once they die, it is difficult to find next of kin, or kin is unaware of ownership of land. Property is usually lost at a tax sale.”**
 - 3 More education is needed about how land is lost. Historically, Gullah Geechee land has been lost by more than a dozen different legal and illegal mechanisms. Education on how to stop those mechanisms is necessary. Our stakeholders identified a stunning list of potential educational topics that shed light on how complex these challenges are and the range of informational and educational resources that will be needed to address them.

 - **“The history of our ancestors should be preserved. It is important for future generations to know where they lived and to learn about their ancestors.”**
 - **“Younger people don’t understand the long-term benefits that land ownership affords them.”**
-

4 Affordable and trusted legal assistance is needed and can be extremely hard to find in many parts of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor. People reported needing assistance in using legal mechanisms such as wills to protect and pass on land to heirs. The traditional way of passing on land naturally through heirs' property now leads to land losses.

- “Many of my neighbors have lost land due to lack of having a will and/or heirs’ property.”
- “Heirs’ property laws need to be taught in a simple format so that everyone knows and understands the procedures.”

5 Help is needed to make land ownership economically viable. We heard that the land needs to pay for its taxes and maintenance. Education on how to earn income from the land is necessary.

- “Without land and business, we will lose the culture. It’s sad that we can’t live on the land anymore. We have to make money on the land.”
- “Economic growth is key, particularly new business development, with more technical advice to ease the process.”

6 People want more local, community-based educators and advocates available to assist landowners. It was clear that any help that is offered should come from trusted, local resources and reflect community needs in the areas of information, education, and advocacy.

- “We need a land ownership clearinghouse to disseminate information about buying and keeping land.”
 - “Create a 12-person Land Preservation Commission to include local activists and lawyers.”
-

DRAFTING THE STRATEGIC PLAN

Essential to the work of drafting a plan to respond to these concerns was identifying the wide range of stakeholders that are critical to the work and reaching consensus on the core values that would inform our strategies. We started with the proposition that our Mission, as stated in our designating law and management plan, would still guide our work.

Mission Statement: To nurture pride and facilitate an understanding and awareness of the significance of Gullah Geechee history and culture within Gullah Geechee communities. To sustain and preserve the land, language, and cultural assets within the coastal communities of South Carolina, Georgia, North Carolina, and Florida. To promote economic development among Gullah Geechee people. To educate the public on the value and importance of Gullah Geechee culture.

Upon deliberation, we agreed that it would be important to articulate the desired long-term future that is shared by all the Commissioners. As part of the strategic planning process, the Commission crafted a vision statement to reflect the global history and culture of Gullah Geechee people.

A globally oriented, cultural landscape that protects, preserves, and celebrates the legacy and continuing contributions of Gullah Geechee people to the American heritage.

Our work was also framed by a discussion and identification of who we believed would be the key stakeholders in this work going forward. In determining stakeholders, it was important for us to ensure that Gullah Geechee property owners in urban, suburban, and rural areas were reflected in the strategic plan. We also appreciate that a wide range of professionals, local leaders, and community institutions will be needed. See the appendix Stakeholders for a list of the groups that were identified as key stakeholders.

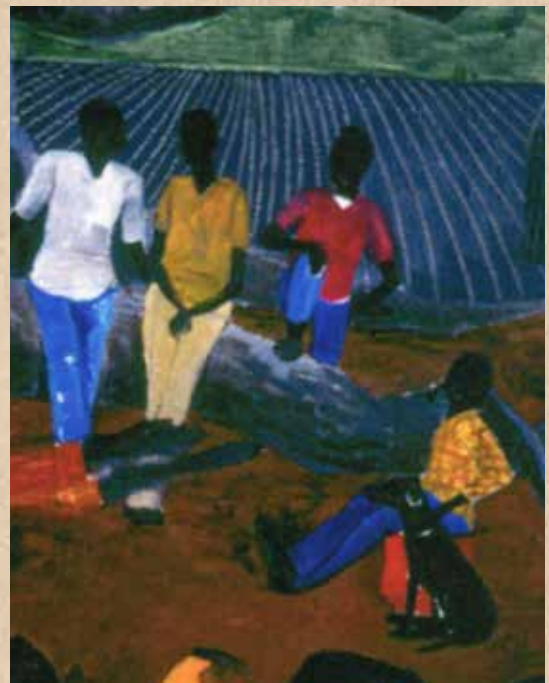
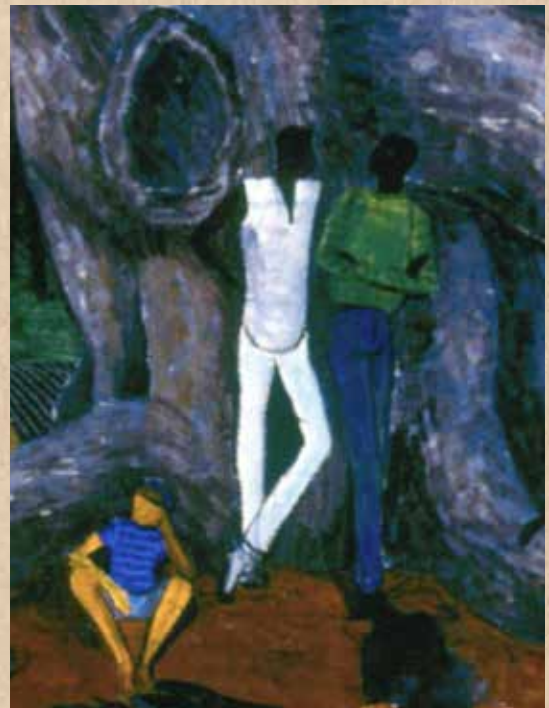
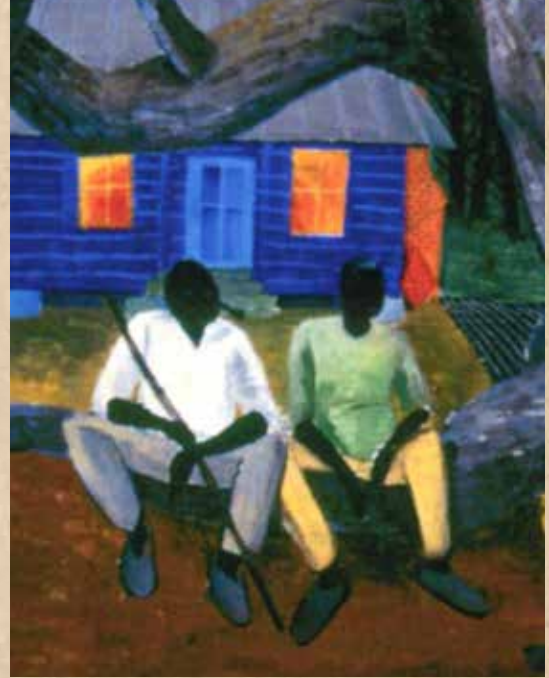
Finally, we wanted to know the beliefs and core values that were shared among the Commissioners. Core values drive the culture and priorities of the Commission and provide guidance for making decisions. The core values articulated reflect the Commission's dedication to the Corridor and the welfare of Gullah Geechee people.

- Pride
- Trust
- Mental and Physical Health
- Cultural Sustainability
- Historic Preservation
- Community values
- Education
- Empowerment
- Connection and Networks
- Geographic Equity
- Generational Inclusion
- Environmental Protection
- Transitional Adaptation
- Reduced Classism



February Strategic planning meeting.

The Strategic Plan



THE 2020-2025 STRATEGIC PLAN

The following table shows the three major goals for preserving and promoting Gullah Geechee land ownership for the next five-year period (2020-2025). Each major goal is accompanied by objectives and strategies for achieving them.

1 GOAL: ENCOURAGE THE PRESERVATION OF GULLAH GEECHEE LANDS AND BUILT HERITAGE TO FOSTER CULTURAL PRESERVATION

OBJECTIVE 1

Increase the volume of written information and online materials that provide educational modules or educational techniques.

STRATEGIES

- The Commission will develop a list of commonly asked legal information questions and a common template for sharing the information. We will seek to partner with organizations like the Center for Heirs Property already engaged in similar legal education efforts and with lawyers and law schools in each state to have them conduct legal research, answer the questions, and commit to keeping the information updated. This information will be available online and in multiple other formats (e.g., print distribution, sound recordings).
- The Commission will produce short, informational videos using trusted community figures to deliver “evergreen” information. An example would be the basic definition of “heirs’ property” or “intestate estate succession.”
- The Commission will post a curated list (created with internally contracted or volunteer assistance) of links to partner sites that contain additional information about land ownership and built heritage preservation.

OBJECTIVE 2

Increase the number of pathways, partnerships, and networks through which information (concerning vulnerable properties) reaches the Commission.

STRATEGY

- The Commission will collaborate with trusted local partners who can provide direct services to distressed landowners to assist them in finding ways to reliably identify vulnerable properties while balancing the need for privacy concerns.

OBJECTIVE 3

Decrease the rates of annual land loss and the annual loss of built structures, as reported by stakeholders.

STRATEGIES

- The Commission will meet with government agencies and economists to try to adapt or develop quantitative models for calculating Gullah Geechee land ownership using existing or newly collected data while balancing against privacy concerns.
- The Commission will catalog first-person, public, and anecdotal information from landowners regarding land and structure loss.

1

GOAL: ENCOURAGE THE PRESERVATION OF GULLAH GEECHEE LANDS AND BUILT HERITAGE TO FOSTER CULTURAL PRESERVATION

OBJECTIVE 4

Facilitate or deliver at least one educational program annually in each county in the Corridor.

STRATEGIES

- The Commission will initiate budgeting and development activities to raise money to fund legal information and land preservation workshops in each county.
- The Commission will identify government agencies that already offer free training and partner with them on active outreach and program delivery, leveraging our existing outreach infrastructure and staff.

OBJECTIVE 5

Identify and complete at least one advocacy activity in each of the four states in the Corridor.

STRATEGIES

- The Commission will internally prepare a list of long-standing advocacy objectives. The proposed priorities will then be shared at the regular, scheduled quarterly Commission meetings to engage the community in setting a local advocacy agenda.
- The Commission will host a town hall meeting on the anniversary of the adoption of the Management Plan to share progress to date and to discuss where management priorities need to be changed or realigned.

OBJECTIVE 6

Increase the number of experts available in each of the four states who could work with property owners.

STRATEGIES

- The Commission will budget to hire contracted, temporary help to begin building and then updating a database of professionals across categories to facilitate local referrals.
- The commissioners and staff will find opportunities to address relevant professional organizations (e.g., National Association of Black Lawyers) to educate them about these issues and how they can help.

2

GOAL: INSPIRE FAMILY-CENTERED LAND MANAGEMENT IN THE CORRIDOR

OBJECTIVE 1

Increase media coverage about land ownership challenges and family-centered land management.

STRATEGIES

- Develop a list of media and other stakeholder contacts to share information.
- Add a “Media” resource page to the main website to provide press releases, stories, photographs, and other information to media and public.
- Develop terms and themes relating to this project to enhance web search engine optimization and public awareness.

OBJECTIVE 2

Increase the use of community stories and genealogy as tools for family-centered land management of heirs’ property.

STRATEGY

- The Commission will produce a short documentary that will use first-person stories to discuss cultural challenges and benefits of family-centered land management, such as reaching consensus, using mediation to resolve intra-family disputes involving younger generations of heirs, and explaining different types of land ownership models.

OBJECTIVE 3

Increase young adult participation in educational opportunities for asset management and cultural programming.

STRATEGY

- The Commission will partner with local centers for entrepreneurship to develop K-12 curriculum content that will cover the cultural value of the land to families and the history of collective Gullah Geechee land ownership. Content will identify site standard approved rural, suburban, and urban Gullah Geechee landowners and properties to facilitate field trips.

3

GOAL: PROMOTE ENTREPRENEURIAL LAND OWNERSHIP AS A FORM OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

OBJECTIVE 1

Increase Gullah Geechee purchase of historically important lands and built heritage.

STRATEGY

- The Commission will budget to host a convening (likely in conjunction with an existing Black landowner conference) to identify the work currently being done to encourage land ownership to (a) identify the gaps that we can work to fill for Gullah Geechee landowners and (b) to determine how we can use our budget and staff to amplify their messaging and programs.

OBJECTIVE 2

Increase mentorship opportunities for landowners around finding economically sustainable uses for the land.

STRATEGY

- The Commission will budget to conduct a pilot mentoring program based in Savannah, Georgia, that will include matching and wrap-around program delivery to support engagement between mentors and mentees.

OBJECTIVE 3

Increase the number of people who participate in land ownership and economic development training programs.

STRATEGIES

- The Commission will actively partner with groups in all four states offering training programs to offer (a) outreach support and (b) cultural competency training.
- The Commission will also work to identify ways to subsidize Gullah Geechee landowner participation in training programs through negotiated sponsorships and leveraging our federal status to collaborate with federal and state government agencies that can offer free programs and grants.

CONCLUSION

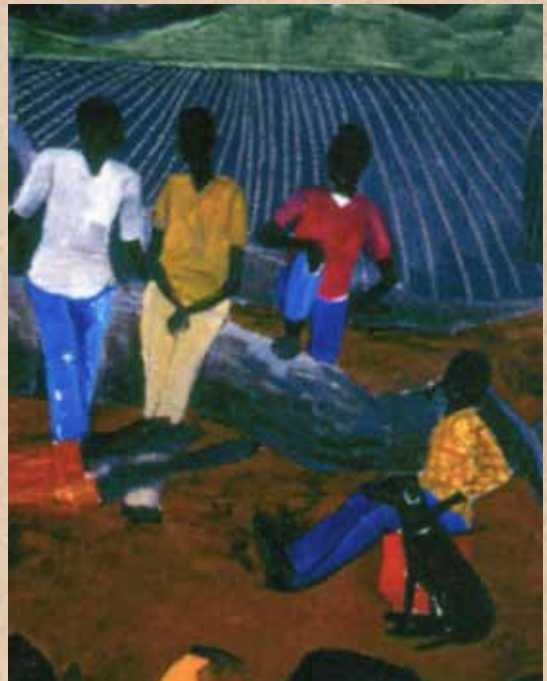
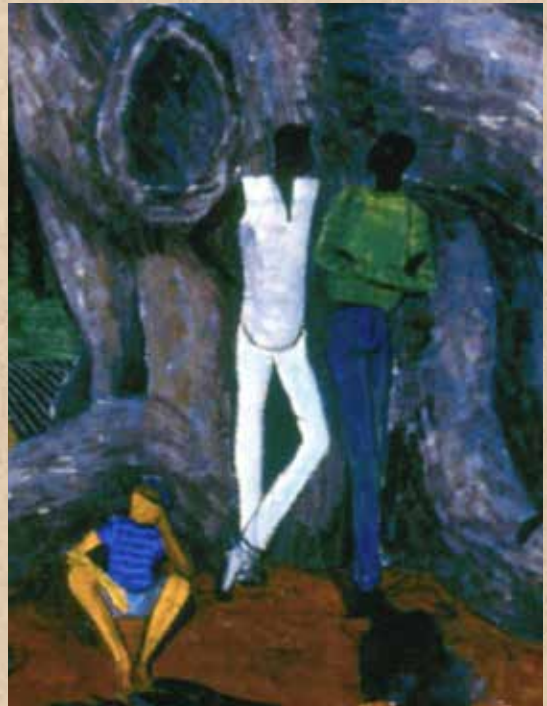
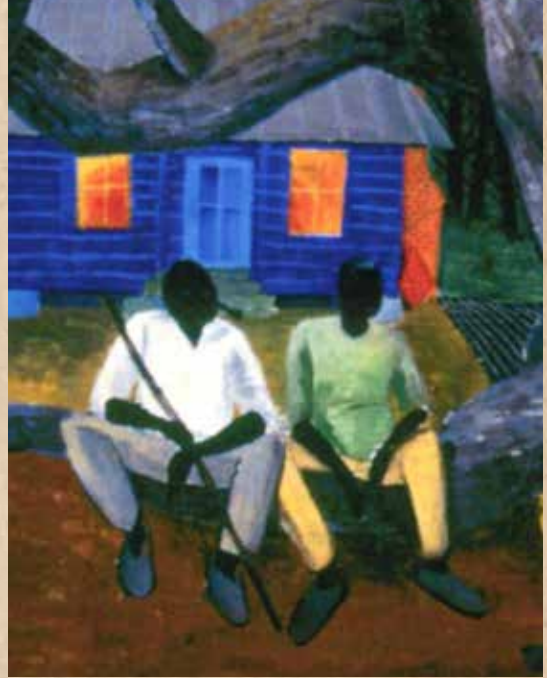
The Corridor is still experiencing the post-WWII economic development pressures that began 70 years ago when the geographic isolation of the Sea and Barrier Islands was broken by the connecting bridges to the mainland and the development of the Interstate 95 highway inland. Land and property are still being lost for many reasons. One of the primary reasons for land loss is the intricate and difficult legal process for establishing ownership of heirs' property and transferring it to succeeding generations.

The need to ensure that historical land and property are preserved is urgent for both the Corridor and Gullah Geechee people. If nothing is done, land and property ownership will continue to decline, and elders can already see their history and culture declining as a result. Both the Management Plan and this five-year strategic plan can help Gullah Geechee people to address current economic and legal issues. Both plans can provide guidance on the next steps to take to help Gullah Geechee people survive another challenge to their existence.

Elders Amy Lotson Roberts and Margie Washington sharing stories with the community in Darien, Georgia.



Appendices



APPENDICES

APPENDIX: RESOURCES

Here are some useful resources for more information.

LEGAL SERVICES

Center for Heirs Property. The Center for Heirs' Property Preservation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that protects heirs' property and promotes its sustainable use to provide increased economic benefit to historically under-served families.

<https://www.heirsproperty.org>

Charleston Pro Bono. Access to justice and legal services builds strong, vibrant communities. Charleston Pro Bono serves the vital legal needs of Charleston's economically disadvantaged. We empower people by providing aid, representation and an array of legal services that grant access to the protections and benefits of our legal system.

<https://charlestonprobono.org>

Georgia Heirs Property Law Center. The Center is a not-for-profit law firm dedicated to increasing generational wealth, economic value, and community stability by securing and preserving property rights of low- and moderate-income Georgians. The Center has served Georgia's heirs property owners, nonprofits, and municipalities since 2015.

<https://www.gaheirsproperty.org>

North Carolina Association of Black Lawyers: Land Loss Project. The Land Loss Prevention Project was founded in 1982 by the North Carolina Association of Black Lawyers to curtail epidemic losses of Black-owned land in North Carolina. The organization broadened its mission in 1993 to provide legal support and assistance to all financially distressed and limited resource farmers and landowners in North Carolina. <https://www.landloss.org>

South Carolina Legal Services. South Carolina Legal Services (SCLS) provides free legal assistance in a wide variety of civil (non-criminal) legal matters to eligible low-income residents of South Carolina. SCLS is a non-profit corporation, funded by grants from the federally funded Legal Services Corporation, the South Carolina Bar Foundation, local United Ways, state court filing fees, and other federal, state, and local funding. <https://sclegal.org>

LAND MANAGEMENT SERVICES

Black Family Land Trust. In February 2004, the Black Family Land Trust incorporated, emerging as one of the country's leading land trusts, dedicated to the preservation and protection of African American and other historically underserved populations' land assets utilizing the core principles of community-based economic development. <http://www.bflt.org>

Center for Heirs Property. The Center for Heirs' Property Preservation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that protects heirs' property and promotes its sustainable use to provide increased economic benefit to historically under-served families.

<https://www.heirsproperty.org>

Clemson Cooperative Extension/Clemson College of Agriculture, Forestry and Life Sciences. The CAFLS embodies founder Thomas Green Clemson’s vision of a “high seminary of learning” focused on improving the lives of South Carolinians through education and outreach in the agricultural and natural sciences. CAFLS remains grounded in the fundamental principle that Clemson University is committed by its land-grant legacy to ensure that higher education remains a public good, and that land-grant colleges link their expertise to the needs of the people. <https://www.clemson.edu/extension>

Georgia Center for Heirs Property. The Center is a not-for-profit law firm dedicated to increasing generational wealth, social justice, and community stability by securing and preserving property rights of low- and moderate-income Georgians. The Center’s services include title clearing, will creation, estate planning, and connecting clients with programs to increase the value of their land and homes. <https://www.gaheirsproperty.org>

LEAP (Legislation, Education, Advocacy, and Production Systems). John Deere, the National Black Growers Council, and the Thurgood Marshall College Fund announced in 2020 that they are establishing a coalition focused on the work needed to improve the livelihoods of Black farmers with a particular emphasis on the preservation of heirs’ property in rural communities throughout the United States. <https://www.tmc.org>

Longleaf Alliance. The Longleaf Alliance was established in 1995 to coordinate a partnership between private landowners, forest industries, state and federal agencies, conservation groups, researchers, and other enthusiasts interested in managing and restoring longleaf pine forests for their ecological and economic benefits. <https://www.longleafalliance.org>

McIntosh S.E.E.D. (Sustainable Environment and Economic Development). The McIntosh S.E.E.D. has worked for more than 20 years across the artificially constructed lines of race and class to empower and build confidence among oppressed populations. Decision making starts at the community level with a reliance on principles of inclusion and equality. <https://mcintoshseed.org>

National Family Farm Coalition. National Family Farm Coalition was founded in 1986, at the height of the 1980s farm crisis, to be a voice for farmers in Washington, DC. Our members fight for farmer rights, fair prices, clean air and water, strong local economies, the right to sell and buy locally-grown and -processed food, the right to be free from corporate domination, and the right to live in vibrant and healthy rural communities. <https://nffc.net>

Pan African Empowerment Network. The Pan-African Family Empowerment & Land Preservation Network, Inc.’s mission is both simple and complex in its scope. Our main goal is to simply empower people of African descent with the educational and organizational tools, and the financial resources necessary to protect their ancestral homes and family-owned land from being lost through delinquent tax sales; dishonest land surveys; encroachment by developers and neighboring landowners; forced sales of heirs property; forged deeds; and the unfair use of tax collection laws. <https://panafricanfamilyempowermentnetwork.org>

APPENDIX: STAKEHOLDERS

Stakeholders are the people and organizations that have an interest or concern in Gullah Geechee people, the Corridor, or the Commission. The following groups were identified as stakeholders in the work of the Commission.

- Gullah Geechee property owners
- Gullah Geechee business owners
- Commission members
- Community organizations
- Federal, state, and local government agencies
- Leaders in the community
- Future generations of Gullah Geechee
- Those who left and will return to the community
- Gullah Geechee youth and students
- Black churches
- Law school clinics
- Heritage sites and archives
- African American cultural centers, multi-cultural centers, diversity
- Museums and institutions
- Those who commit their entire lives to the Gullah Geechee
- Advocates of Gullah Geechee heritage
- Tourists and visitors
- Fraternities and sororities
- Renters and residents
- American population
- Culture keepers (storytellers, actors, musicians) who transmit culture to the next generation
- University departments of African American Studies, History, Marine Conservation

Descendants of Gullah Geechee communities on St. Simons Island returning home for the Georgia Sea Island Day Festival in May 2019.



APPENDIX: SURVEY OUTCOMES AND DATA

SURVEY OUTCOMES AND DATA

In December 2019, the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission issued an online survey to gather information from stakeholders across the country about land ownership in the Gullah Geechee Corridor. Between November 2019 and February 2020, selected in-depth telephone interviews were also conducted with stakeholders.

A total of 104 landowners responded to the online survey. The 14 interviews included six Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commissioners, three external stakeholders involved in preserving land in the Corridor, four landowners, and one staff person. The following themes were drawn from the survey responses and telephone interviews.

SUMMARY OF SURVEY THEMES

Education on Cultural and Historical Importance of the Land

- Education on the history, culture, and land as foundations for a sustainable culture
- Education of the younger generations about the cultural importance of the land
- Speak with elected officials about the cultural significance of the Corridor
- Education of the Corridor's connection to Africa and African culture

Access to Affordable Legal Help

- Affordable trusted legal aid help for many issues - ownership, estate planning, taxes, sales, etc.
- Help to fight rezoning that allows roads and highways to fragment the community
- Help to fight the process of contesting land parcels that result in the forced sale of the land
- Help for checking that your deed has not disappeared in the county offices
- Help for showing the chain of ownership before land sales can proceed
- Help for showing how to move land into land trusts
- Help for fighting illegal practices to steal the land
- Need local advocates such as engineers, lawyers, realtors, administrators, activists
- Need help from lawyers, writers, and historians to find and research the record

Education on How Land is Lost

- Education on how the Federal land management ownership program was put in place
- Education on the origin of heirs' property laws (no bank accounts allowed post-civil war; 1890s)
- Education on how the Jim Crow era dismantled the success of many black businesses
- Education on the specific ways that land is lost:
 - Inability to prove ownership of the property despite living on it for generations
 - Deeding out 1/32 parcels is important for documenting land ownership
 - How over-assessment of African American land works to put taxes out of reach
 - Who needs to pay; what to do if someone is unable to pay the land taxes
 - How foreclosures for unpaid taxes work; predators and developers buy the land cheaply
 - How forced partition sales work when properties cannot be divided agreeably
 - How land predators work – buying land for unpaid taxes
 - How eminent domain works – government taking land for new roads
 - How land gentrification works – incentives are offered to sell the land
 - How increased property assessments increase land taxes
 - How rezoning works – rezoning to allow commercial development
 - How passing on without a will affects land ownership and succession planning issues
 - How out-of-state family owners can affect the collection and payment of land taxes
 - How family disagreements can affect heirs' property, ownership, and land sales
 - How quitclaim deeds work and how multiple lineages and narratives could be different
 - How predators watch for quitclaim deeds and start costly legal actions to force land sales
 - How expensive attorney fees are taken out of land sale proceeds

Land Preservation

- Educate landowners on the best ways to keep their property
- Consider using land trusts, including agricultural land trusts, as opportunities to preserve the land
- Education on financial and legal literacy, including property laws, wills, taxes, realtors
- Promote the protection and preservation of natural resources in the Corridor
- Use geographic information services (GIS) and tools to document historical sites

Education About Business Opportunities for Landowners

- Hold classes and seminars on different types of property uses
- Education on ways to earn income from the land (tourism, housing/rentals, farming, fishing)
- Help landowners set up land use as proper businesses to facilitate loans, tax deductions, etc.
- Help landowners set up land as legal farms with lower taxes, deductions, etc.
- Education on starting businesses for people who may be unsure of how to overcome barriers
- Education on how to manage heavy tourism so that it does not impact residents too much

Community Advocacy

- Help community members to advocate for themselves
- Create a group of trusted lawyers, activists, legislators, landowners, etc. who are willing to advocate
- Need more advocacy because many affected people are not speaking out
- Do more brand marketing of the Gullah Geechee name, locations, and cultures for promotion
- Reach out to county personnel on Gullah Geechee history and culture
- Take the time to build on what the next generation wants
- Build community organizations that can build better plans for the land and community

Community Education and Information Sharing

- Train local trainers to facilitate peer-to-peer education; hold workshops in the communities
- Educate people through seminars on estate planning, wills, and succession planning
- Create a museum to promote the iconic Gullah Geechee history and story
- Educational outreach on property ownership and retention; stewardship of the land
- Educational outreach to out-of-state landowners about heirs' property issues

Community Resources

- Create an umbrella community group that could redirect landowners to specialist groups
- Do a gap analysis for missing or inadequate services for all the above issues
- Create a website and call-in number to support outreach and information sharing
- Work with local organizations; amplify the signals of other groups vs. creating a new group
- Do community genealogy and tracing of history, families, and ownership
- Create a cultural resource center

SURVEY QUESTIONS AND RESPONSE DATA

The survey consisted of four short multiple-choice questions and one open-ended question. Interviews consisted of parallel questions. An overview of the data for each of the questions is presented below.

Q1

DO YOU THINK LAND OWNERSHIP IS IMPORTANT FOR GULLAH GEECHEE CULTURAL PRESERVATION?

104 RESPONSES, 4 INTERVIEWS, AND 68 ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

- 100% Yes | 0% No

Additional comments, including interview responses, were related to the following topics:

- 44 Culture – preservation of culture, identity, community, future
- 21 Land – value, asset, food, resource, survival, wealth to pass on
- 1 Legal – people have lost land because of lack of legal wills
- 2 Other – comments that did not fit the groups above

Q2

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE REASONS WHY GULLAH GEECHEE LANDOWNERS HAVE LOST THEIR LAND?

Survey respondents were asked to choose a maximum of three reasons from the list below.

103 RESPONSES, 4 INTERVIEWS, AND 32 ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

- 18% Someone took the land through unfair or illegal practices.
- 16% Not able to pay taxes
- 15% The pressure of surrounding development
- 12% Not able to find or hire legal help
- 12% Family members wanted to sell
- 11% Local tax increases
- 10% Younger generations do not want to keep the land
- 5% Government takes the land

Additional comments, including interview responses, were related to the following topics:

- 9 Financial – income, employment, lack of wealth, taxes, financial literacy
- 8 Legal – laws, legal wills, unfair practices, land boundaries, long-term pressures
- 7 Education – about land ownership, literacy, legal wills literacy, the value of legacies
- 6 Land – who owns it, value and duties of ownership, being forced off the land
- 6 Other – comments that did not fit the groups above

Q3

ARE THERE IMPORTANT ACTIONS THAT NEED TO BE TAKEN TO PROTECT THE LAND?

Survey respondents were asked to choose a maximum of three actions from the list provided below.

104 RESPONSES, 4 INTERVIEWS, AND 24 ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

- 26% Train landowners about how to keep their property
- 24% Support protection and preservation of natural resources in the corridor
- 19% Speak with elected officials about the cultural importance of the Corridor
- 17% Find new economic development opportunities for landowners
- 9% Raise awareness about the best practices for land development
- 6% Promote traditional recreational activities on land and waterways

Additional comments, including interview responses, were related to the following topics:

- 9 Legal – laws, resources, realtors, lawyers, land preservation commission, funding
- 7 Education – on finances, property law, wills, economic development, history
- 1 Culture – preserve the history of the Gullah culture
- 1 Land – need a clear definition of preservation that includes progress and development
- 5 Other – comments that did not fit into the groups above

Q4**IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE THAT IS IMPORTANT FOR THE GULLAH GEECHEE CULTURAL COMMISSION TO KNOW?****45 RESPONSES**

Additional comments, including interview responses, were related to the following topics:

- 13 Outreach – increase awareness, history, reach out to supporters
- 11 Community – joining, training and educating landowners and children
- 5 Political – Commission goals, preserve, protect, culture, land, Gullah Geechee people
- 3 Financial – taxes, leasing, income disparities
- 3 Legal – laws, conservation easement, honest appraisers, sustainable income
- 10 Other – comments that did not fit into the groups above

Q5**DO YOU OR YOUR FAMILY OWN LAND IN ANY OF THE STATES NAMED BELOW?**

Survey respondents were asked to check all states in which their families owned land.

83 RESPONSES, 4 INTERVIEWS, AND 22 ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

- 54% South Carolina
- 24% Georgia
- 15% Florida
- 7% North Carolina

Other areas in which respondents owned land included, “from Florida to Vermont,” Texas, Mississippi, and Sapelo Island, GA.



2817 Maybank Highway, Suite 1,
Johns Island, South Carolina 29455