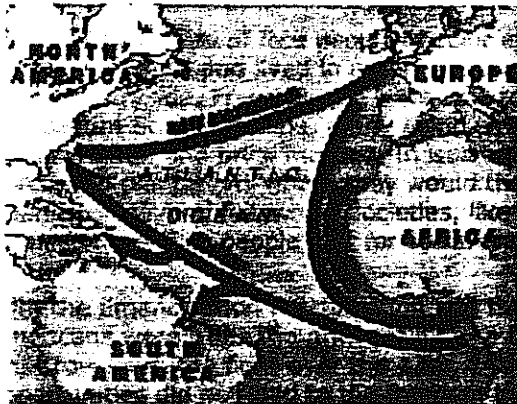




Explore Lowcountry Region

Lowcountry Region

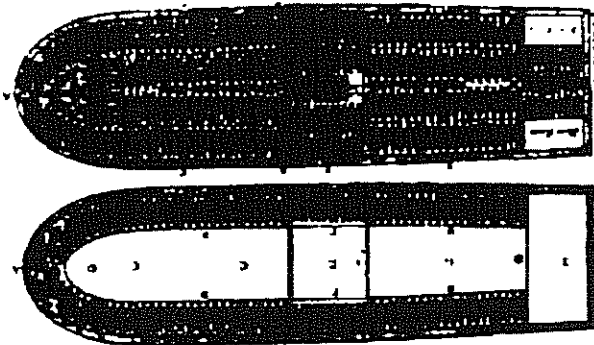
Discovering the African American Trail of Charleston, Colleton, and Dorchester Counties



The purpose of this guide is to familiarize the visitor with the wealth of African and African American sites in three counties of the Lowcountry. Two trails traverse the area and offer fascinating sites, towns, and communities that highlight the folkways, lifeways, culture, and achievements of enslaved Africans and African Americans in Charleston, Dorchester, and Colleton Counties. These two trails also follow the Discovery and Nature Routes of the South Carolina National Heritage Corridor.

In 1670, English settlers, black and white indentured servants, and enslaved Africans established the first permanent settlement between Spanish Florida and Virginia. This area would bear the name Carolina for King Charles II of England. Within 10 years, the European settlers had implemented the plantation system that had been created in Barbados. The labor force to sustain the European-owned plantations would come from Africa, particularly the West Coast, in what are today Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Benin. These Africans were known for their strength and abilities in husbandry, particularly in growing rice. Rice, the "seed" from Madagascar, would become the Lowcountry's most important cash crop from the colonial period until the early part of the 20th century.

European and American traders captured and sold Africans and typically imprisoned them until they were boarded on slave ships. In most cases, the African was allowed four square feet of space while in the hold of the ship. Departing Africa, the ships would sail to the West Indies. Some of the human cargo was sold into slavery in the West Indies while the balance was brought to the Carolina coast. However, of all Africans enslaved, less than 10% were brought to America. Arriving at Sullivan's Island's pest houses, the unwilling passengers would remain for at least forty days, where they would be checked for disease and infection and groomed for sale. Many were also quarantined on board ship. The South Carolina port of Charleston would be known as one of the most active ports to ship and sell enslaved Africans in 18th- and 19th-century America. Between the years of 1803 and 1808, an



estimated 40,000 Africans were imported. Slave imports to America were banned after 1808, but the trade continued illegally, as evidenced by the case of the Echo, a slave ship captured by the U.S. Navy and brought to Charleston in 1858.

Once sold, many slaves would toil in the fields, initially planting and harvesting indigo and rice, and later long-staple cotton.

Contributions

The Africans brought with them other talents that benefited the plantation, including carpentry, ironworking, basketry, and more. African labor would be responsible for the great economic gain that was made from rice in colonial and antebellum society. It was the African labor force that cleared the swamps and fields, built the dikes, canals and water control devices, and planted, tended, and harvested the crop.

From 1690, a class of free people of color existed in this area. Mostly, these people were multi-racial and lived in urban areas, with a marginal population dwelling in the rural countryside. Freed people were able to exist in the peculiar society of antebellum South Carolina, many being smithies, cobblers, carpenters, wheelwrights, and brick masons. In isolated cases they amassed small fortunes and purchased plantations where they would then own slaves. In the urban center of Charleston several fellowship societies, like the "Brown Fellowship Society" were formed where free people met for social and political reasons.

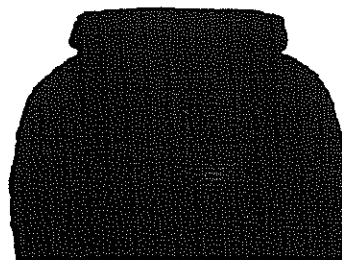
With the Emancipation Proclamation and the end of the Civil War, all African Americans were free. The grim reality of a failed reconstruction era and the rise of Jim Crow laws, the fight over the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments, and the lack of opportunities did not lead to the freedom that was expected. Many living in rural settings would flood to the urban areas where opportunity abounded in the form of trade organizations, schools, and institutions. The opportunities for education and leadership largely free of white control made the AME (African Methodist Episcopal) church, and other denominations, an extremely important institution. Many significant African Americans by the turn of the century were practicing in the fields of science, medicine, mathematics, law, and education.

For those that remained in rural settings, many families lived in a communal or village setting. Just as their ancestors had done in Africa, these descendants were self-sufficient in the village setting; all that was needed could be procured from the various people in the community. In the event that they had no materials for church buildings, they would worship in grape arbors or brush arbors. In many areas of the Lowcountry today, the visitor will travel through small communities that were founded after freedom. Those communities today house the descendants of those freed people who managed to obtain property in the decades after the Civil War; Snowden in Mt. Pleasant and Maryville, west of the Ashley are good examples.

During the Civil Rights Movement, the song "We Shall Overcome" was heard at the tobacco factory in Charleston at 701 East Bay Street. At Moving Star Hall on Johns Island and throughout the region, African Americans met to organize and peacefully attain rights guaranteed to all American people by the U.S. Constitution. Today, both structures stand as a testimony to those efforts.

The Gullah

The traditions brought from West Africa to the New World can still be found today. These traditions include music, dance, basketmaking, ironwork, culinary delights, carpentry, and more. The language spoken in the Lowcountry also is reflective of Africa. Known as Gullah, this creole language developed in the 1700s as a combination of various African



languages and English. Because many of the enslaved Africans were brought to the West Indies before they ended their journey in South Carolina, their language was also affected by the creole languages used in Barbados, Jamaica, and the other West Indian islands. For later generations of bondspersons born in the Lowcountry, Gullah was their mother tongue. Some typical Gullah words are "goobah" meaning peanut, "bubbah" meaning brother, and "tote" meaning to carry.

Carolina-Caribbean Connection

The framework of the Carolina-Caribbean connection was the plantation system implemented in Barbados by the British colonists. Barbados would become the headquarters of the British colonists who would develop a system of government known as the "Barbados Model." This system designed by the planter elite would be implemented in the other Caribbean islands and later in the Carolinas. Plantations required a large labor force, and enslaved Africans were introduced as this labor force by the early 17th century. In 1670, a contingent of the planter elite came from Barbados to the Carolinas. With them they brought the "Barbados Model" in order to implement it in the new colony. Many of the early planters owned property in the Caribbean and the Carolinas, thus there was a great deal of interaction between the regions. Consequently, people of African descent from the Caribbean have identified with people of African descent in the Carolinas from the earliest days of colonization. This is evident in common surnames. Today, the government of Barbados is working with the South Carolina National Heritage Corridor in continuing the ties through heritage tourism.

Illustrations:

Map courtesy of National Park Service.

Slaves in hold, courtesy of The Mariners' Museum, Newport News, Virginia.

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