

Float in inaugural parade to highlight unique Gullah Geechee culture

By Harriet McLeod

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Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission Chairman Ronald Daise, a Gullah Geechee storyteller and historian, poses for a picture in Pawleys Island, South Carolina. Daise said racial prejudice from outsiders, as well as a desire by Gullah parents for their children to speak standard English in order to succeed, drastically reduced the number of Gullah speakers. But over the last few decades, shame has been replaced by a building pride as Gullah culture has become more widely known and appreciated, he said. Picture taken January 16, 2013.

REUTERS/Randall Hill

(Reuters) - A unique culture maintained by African slave descendants along the U.S. southeastern Atlantic coast will be featured with a float in the presidential inaugural parade on Monday, a proud moment for a group once reticent to promote its heritage.

To nab a spot in the festivities for President Barack Obama along Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, those working to preserve the Gullah Geechee culture highlighted its ties to First Lady Michelle Obama's family roots.

Her great-great-grandfather Jim Robinson, who was born around 1850 - and likely into slavery - lived and worked at a rice plantation near Georgetown, South Carolina, said Michael Allen, a community partnership specialist with the National Park Service in South Carolina.

That area falls within the park service's Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, a federally-funded project looking to protect the culture and its people along more than 12,000 square miles of barrier islands and coastal areas that span North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida.

Allen, coordinator for the project, said the National Park Service has identified about 1,000 sites connected to Gullah history and way of life that could be included in the corridor and spotlighted for tourists with signs, maps and brochures.

It is the only one of the country's 49 National Heritage Areas dedicated to the living culture of an African-American population, said Ron Daise, chairman of the commission that completed the corridor management plan last fall.

The Gullah Geechee heritage, which includes a distinctive language, has not always been acknowledged or embraced by some of the surviving slave descendants.

"As I was growing up and even until very recently, 'Gullah' and 'Geechee' were fighting words," said Daise, who was raised in a Gullah community on St. Helena Island, South Carolina.

"Among those who were white, or even people within our own community, those words were used to identify ignorance or a close association with anything that was African or tribal," he said. "These were people who ate a lot of rice and who spoke funny. We just said we were 'sea islanders.'"

ISOLATION KEPT CULTURE ALIVE

The terms "Gullah" and "Geechee," which are interchangeable, derive from West African tribal names, according to scholars.

Slaves from the rice-producing West African coast are credited with bringing the rice engineering and growing skills that made South Carolina a rich exporter of the crop in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Their African culture survived because of isolation, Daise said. Many of the rice plantations were located on islands with no bridges connecting those communities to the continental United States until the mid-1900s.

"The African culture continued and it was sustained for generations - in the language, food ways, religious beliefs and practices," he said.

Lorenzo Dow Turner, a scholar and professor at Howard and Fisk universities, first recorded Gullah speakers in the 1930s and identified their unique language that mixes African and English words.

Racial prejudice from outsiders, as well as a desire by Gullah parents for their children to speak standard English in order to succeed, drastically reduced the number of Gullah speakers over time, Daise said.

But during the past few decades, he said that shame has been replaced by a growing pride as Gullah culture has become more widely known and appreciated.

Corridor planners had applied for a spot in President Obama's first inaugural parade in 2009, but were not accepted, Allen said.

"This time, we did a better job of connecting the First Lady to the corridor," said Allen, who will ride on the float on Monday with corridor commissioners and their families.

"I could never have imagined that I would find myself in the inauguration parade of the president of the United States and that his wife would be of the (Gullah) culture," he added.

Michelle Obama's great-grandfather and grandfather also had ties to South Carolina, according to her family history.

The float will display sweetgrass baskets, which have been woven in the South Carolina Lowcountry for generations and are almost identical to baskets made in Sierra Leone, as well as story quilts and a bottle tree made by Gullah people to ward off evil spirits, Daise said.

Being on the national stage for its first inaugural parade allows the commission to share its effort to increase awareness of the Gullah Geechee culture, promote land preservation and support heritage-related economic development to sustain the people.

According to Daise, Gullah families have been displaced and remain threatened by development of prized coastal property, higher property taxes and lack of access to the waterways for traditional fishing, shrimping, oystering and crabbing.

Some of the Gullah burial sites have also been lost or paved over and traditional roadside basket stands have been moved as streets are widened.

"When the country comes to us, the onus is on Gullah people within the communities to tell our story, or as we say, 'tellin' we story,'" Daise said.

(Editing by Colleen Jenkins, desking by Gary Crosse)





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Fourth-generation cane maker Thomas Williams of McClellanville, South Carolina, sells Gullah inspired walking sticks in Pawleys Island, South Carolina January 16, 2013. "My older brother told me it's in the family when he taught me to carve. You just got to tap into the history," says Williams. A unique culture maintained by West African slave descendants along the U.S. southeastern Atlantic coast will be featured on Monday with a float in the presidential inaugural parade, a proud moment for a group once reticent to promote its heritage. Picture taken January 16, 2013.



Walking sticks and canes are displayed for sale along U.S. Highway 17 S. by fourth-generation Gullah craftsman Thomas Williams in Pawleys Island, South Carolina January 16, 2013. A unique culture maintained by West African slave descendants along the U.S. southeastern Atlantic coast will be featured on Monday with a float in the presidential inaugural parade, a proud moment for a group once reticent to promote its heritage. Picture taken January 16, 2013. REUTERS/Randall Hill



A sign in support of First Lady Michelle Obama's roots to Gullah Geechee heritage is displayed at the Gullah O'man Shop in Pawleys Island, South Carolina January 16, 2013. A unique culture maintained by West African slave descendants along the U.S. southeastern Atlantic coast will be featured on Monday with a float in the presidential inaugural parade, a proud moment for a group once reticent to promote its heritage. Picture taken January 16, 2013. REUTERS/Randall Hill



An image of the first family is represented in a quilt made by Gullah Geechee quilters at The Gullah O'man Shop in Pawleys Island, South Carolina January 16, 2013. A unique culture maintained by West African slave descendants along the U.S. southeastern Atlantic coast will be featured on Monday with a float in the presidential inaugural parade, a proud moment for a group once reticent to promote its heritage. Picture taken January 16, 2013. REUTERS/Randall Hill