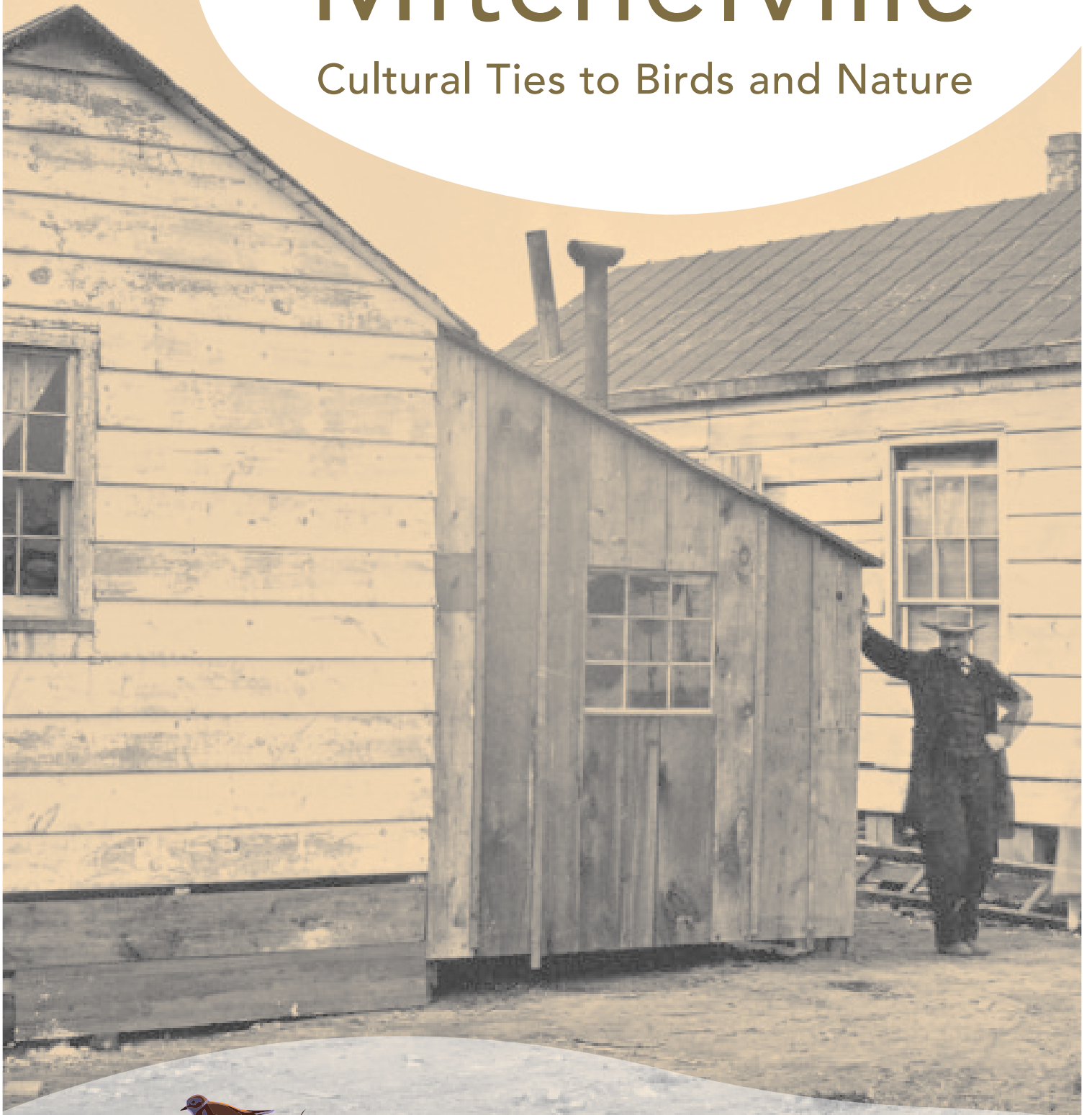


# *GULLAH GEECHEE OF* **Mitchelville**

Cultural Ties to Birds and Nature



*Hilton Head Audubon*

This project is made possible by a National Audubon in Action grant awarded to Hilton Head Audubon in 2023. Hilton Head Audubon is an all-volunteer, non-profit organization whose mission is to be a leading voice for birds and conservation in the Lowcountry, where people and nature thrive together.

Hilton Head Audubon partnered with the University of South Carolina-Beaufort's Students Connected program to provide students with real-world experience to the benefit of the Lowcountry community. Students in a Professor Sarah Swofford's Professional Writing Class for Non-Profits assisted in this research.

This is an excerpted version of our report, which continues to be expanded. It is published on the occasion of Juneteenth 2023 in honor of Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park on Hilton Head, South Carolina.

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*“Without the land, we don't have the culture,” Queen Quet says. “Land is family to the Gullah Geechee and the waterways are our bloodlines.”<sup>1</sup>*



# NAYCHA (NATURE)



*One of the most important relationships,  
within a Gullah worldview,  
is that which exists between human beings  
and the natural environment.<sup>2</sup>*



Photos (cover, pg 2, pg 3) courtesy  
<https://beaufortcountysc.gov/mitchelville/photos/>



# WE ARE ALL CONNECTED TO THE CYCLES OF NATURE

## A shared membership

“Sea Islanders view their natural surroundings with respect and a sense of interconnectedness. Their relationship with the environment has always emphasized harmony and social exchange that is non-exploitive.”<sup>3</sup>

“De moon be a powerful ting. It control de tides and bring a sense of peace to de night. It be a reminder dat we are all connected to de cycles of nature.”<sup>4</sup>

## NATURAL ENVIRONMENT OF MITCHELVILLE-FISH HAUL

Four natural habitats provided food and materials to sustain life in the village:

1

Salt marsh and creeks



2

Beach dunes and scrub



4

Maritime forest



3

Tidal mud flats



Photos (from top, clockwise):  
Salt marsh: Patricia Kappmeyer;  
Savannah Sparrow: Cathy Bennington/  
Audubon Photography Awards;  
Tidal mud flats: Patricia Kappmeyer;  
Northern Parula: Arni Stinnissen/  
Audubon Photography Awards

# TAKE ONLY WHAT YOU NEED

## Valuing self-sufficiency in food supply

Depend on their natural surrounding as a reliable source of food—hunting, fishing, foraging and gardening.

Communal style of cooking and eating, cooked in iron pots (pileaus, okra soup, stewed hominy).

“Mitchelville... somewhat more reliant on wild foods. This is, of course, documented by the historic records that talk of near starvation by Hilton Head blacks.”<sup>6</sup>



The isolated Sea Island Gullah made the most of their surroundings. Note animal skins tacked to the barn.

Photo courtesy of [HiltonHeadIsland.org/](http://HiltonHeadIsland.org/) Gullah

## EMBRACING NATURE FOR SELF-CARE



Rabbit Tobacco "Life Everlasting"  
Photo: Becky Laboy; Wikimedia Commons

### Hoodoo Medicine

Traditional healers with knowledge of the beneficial properties of locally available plants and organic materials.

"More important than the same species in linking Africa to the sea islands is the similar way in which these plants are regarded in the art of healing and the beliefs surrounding them." <sup>7</sup>

"Some call this hardy, fragrant wildflower 'rabbit tobacco,' but I like the Gullah Geechee way. We call it 'life everlasting.' The name refers to the herb's indefinite shelf life once it dries out. But the elders say it prolongs life." <sup>8</sup>

## COILED BASKETS, A WEST AFRICAN WEAVING STYLE

Fanner baskets used for winnowing rice are linked to a tradition derived from the West African rice area

"Like the grasslands and marshes of western and central Africa, the coastal wetlands of Georgia and South Carolina provide grasses and plant fiber appropriate for making coiled baskets. On lowcountry plantations, enslaved Africans used bulrush most often as the foundation material. To wrap and stitch the rows of the baskets together, people who lived on the Sea Islands fashioned strips from the stems of saw palmettos, while sewers on the mainland used white oak splints." <sup>9</sup>



Gullah basket

Photo: Jud McCranie / Creative Commons

# “HIDDEN IN PLAIN VIEW”

**African “retentions” are expressions of African cultural beliefs and customs that occur in non-African environments**

An intentional deposit hidden from sight beneath cabin floors, chimney/hearth/fire areas, cabin corners, or backyard constructions and garden areas, suggestive of a nonrandom, patterned interval placement situated along walls, beneath doorways or windows, in proximity of foundation posts, or at other entrance and exit areas.

Buried altars beneath praise houses followed a crossroads pattern based on the four cardinal directions. The praise house is viewed an outward symbol of assimilation to Christianity, while the ritual ‘deposits’ buried beneath represent retention to cultural tradition.

## “WATER SPIRITS”



American Oystercatcher, Beaufort county, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina

Photo: Patricia Kappmeyer/Audubon Photography Awards

### Organic objects found in ritual deposits:

- oyster shells
- nut shells
- whelk
- botanical items
- bird skulls
- ash
- rounded pebbles
- remains of small animals or chickens
- egg shells

**Shells and rounded pebbles are culturally associated with ancestors and water spirits.**

“Many artifacts shared specific color palettes, such as white, blue, black, yellow and red, typically expressed with shells, pieces of painted ceramic, beads, and brick. Colors are consistent with color symbolism found in West African cosmological folklore. White shells and the color blue are the representatives of water and water spirits that offer protection; house charms and dedicatory deposits at the foundation level of a new house was a common practice among the Yoruba of West Africa who were among the enslaved population of South Carolina.”<sup>10</sup>



*B'UHD*  
*(BIRDS)*



*“Birds and winged creatures were the epitome of liberte total for enslaved Africans, a freedom that was achieved through flight.”<sup>11</sup>*

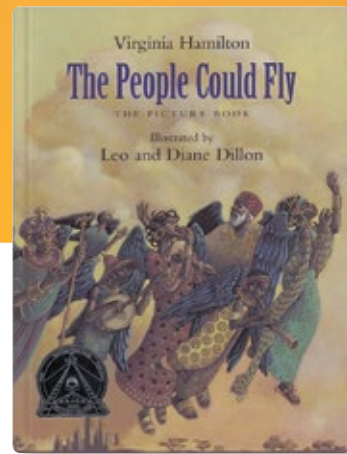






Boat-tailed Grackles, Mitchelville.

Photo: Patricia Kappmeyer



## “COME FLY AWAY”

### Legend of the “Flying Africans”

In her book *The People Could Fly*, Virginia Hamilton imagines the story of enslaved Africans who remembered and reclaimed their ability to fly, escaping their imprisoned lives. Her characters embrace their spiritual truth and return to their native form, weightless bodies ascending from the plantation field.

“They say the people could fly. Say that long ago in Africa, some of the people knew magic. And they would walk up on the air like climbin up on a gate. And they flew like blackbirds over the fields. Black, shiny wings flappin against the blue up there.”<sup>12</sup>

“Come fly away” was part of the coded language used by the enslaved in organizing runaway attempts.

# SYMBOLISM

Birds are associated with specific qualities and energies



**Anhinga:** grace, adaptability



**Screech Owl:** harbinger of death, misfortune



**Red-tailed Hawk:** strength, good luck, success



**Hummingbird:** good luck, prosperity



**Carolina Wren:** news, gossip



**Bald Eagle:** strength, freedom, protection



**Bobolink (Rice Bird):** good luck, abundance



**Swallow:** carry messages to the dead



**Turkey Buzzard:** protectors

PHOTOS (left to right, top to bottom): Anhinga: Ursula Dubrick/Audubon Photography Awards; Eastern Screech-Owl: Jen St Louis/Audubon Photography Awards; Red-tailed Hawk: Jim West/Audubon Photography Awards; Ruby-throated Hummingbird: George Benson/Audubon Photography Awards; Carolina Wren: Clyde Dexter/Audubon Photography Awards; Bald Eagle: Wink Gaines/Audubon Photography Awards; Bobolink: Diane Taylor / Audubon Photography Awards; Tree Swallow: Kathryn Keith/Audubon Photography Awards; Turkey Vulture: Ronald Schlegel/Audubon Photography Awards

Red-bud



Sparruh



Jay-bud



Thrasher



## ANCESTRAL STORIES ADAPTED TO FEATURE COMMON BIRDS

Folktales teach morality and life lessons through the natural world.

In “Buh Sparruh”, the sparrow gathers his bird friends to brag, though he does little work and is also prone to lying.<sup>13</sup>



PHOTOS (left to right, top to bottom): Northern Cardinal: Rosemary Gillian/Audubon Photography Awards; Savannah Sparrow: Nikki DeBraccio/Audubon Photography Awards; Blue Jay: Sarah Hughes/Audubon Photography Awards; Brown Thrasher: Peter Waksmundzki/Audubon Photography Awards



*“De marsh be de heart of our island. It be where de fish and de shrimp be livin’ and where de birds come to rest their wings. We gotta take care of it, so it can take care of us.”<sup>5</sup>*



- 1 This Land is Our Land: The Struggle and Beauty of Gullah/Geechee, 2019
- 2 Low Country Gullah Culture, Special Resource Study: Environmental Impact, 1997
- 3 Quet Marquette L. Goodwine, WEBE Gullah/Geechee Cultural Capital & Collaboration Anthology, 2015
- 4 Interview source unknown
- 5 Interview source unknown
- 6 Indian and Freedmen Occupation at the Fish Haul Site (38BU805), Beaufort County, South Carolina
- 7 William S. Pollitzer, The Gullah People and Their African Heritage, 1923
- 8 Gullah Museum, Hilton Head Island, April 2023
- 9 Dale Rosengarten, Lowcountry Baskets, South Carolina Encyclopedia, August 9, 2022
- 10 Enslaved African conjure and ritual deposits on the Hume Plantation, South Carolina
- 11 “Screech Owls Allus Holler ‘round the House before Death”: Birds and the Souls of Black Folk in the 1930s American South
- 12 Revisiting the Legend of Flying Africans, The New Yorker
- 13 Gullah Folk Tales from the Georgia Coast, p 23

