

December 12, 2025

Gullah-Geechee Culture

Today's Daufuskie Island History Museum advent calendar post departs a bit from others, focusing on a people rather than a person, place or thing: the Gullah-Geechee history of Daufuskie. It would be impossible to do justice to the Gullah-Geechee culture and people in a short post, but we hope a brief exposure will encourage you to visit the museum and learn more. The Gullah culture is an inseparable part of Daufuskie identity and more than just history. We live among the descendants of 300 years of African-American life on Daufuskie.

Daufuskie Island Gullah are descendants of slaves brought from the "Rice Coast" of West Africa. The term Gullah may be derived from Angola, where many of the Gullah people originated. While Daufuskie turned out to be a poor host for commercial rice cultivation, plantations thrived on indigo and cotton crops, relying on the enslaved labor for their success.

The hostile environment along the coast for much of the year, due to heat and disease exposure, drove wealthy plantation owners away from local properties for six months or more each year. The isolation of the African community fostered the retention of African customs and heritage, and led to the evolution of the people we know as Gullah or Geechees of the Lowcountry. This mix of Africans from different regions, speaking different languages and the interaction with English speakers dictated the development of a common language and contributed to the development of the Gullah language which incorporates English and African influences. The language is not, as some mistakenly believe, broken or pidgin English, but a complete language with its own systematic grammatical system.

At the start of the Civil War, plantation owners fled Daufuskie, and Union troops occupied the island throughout the period. In 1861, they found the Gullah people eager for their freedom, and eager to defend it. Many Gullah served with distinction in the Union Army's 1st South Carolina Colored Infantry Regiment, and the Sea Islands were the first place in the South where slaves were freed. After the war, ex-slaves returned to Daufuskie as land owners and farmers or as workers for the new owners of some of the old plantation properties, and in some respects, their isolation from the outside world increased. Left alone in remote rural areas of the Lowcountry, the Gullah continued to practice their traditional culture with little influence from the outside world well into the 20th century.

The former Jane Hamilton School building at the Daufuskie Island History Museum is the Gullah Learning Center, with exhibits about life from the post Civil

War period to today. Panels present Gullah day-to-day life, religion and spirituality and education over the years. An English-Gullah bible is on display as well as Gullah animal tales showing examples of the Gullah language.

