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Binyah and Comyah

Coming Together to Celebrate Gullah-Geechee Culture

by Laura Von Harten

photo courtesy Aislinn Kate Photography

Louise Miller Cohen stood in the foyer of the antebellum mansion and looked up at the old document yellowing in its frame. It was a list, written in spidery script, of people who had been enslaved at Rose Hill Plantation. Drawn up quickly on the eve of Union occupation, it was a last-minute legal document created by a master intent on being compensated for the human property he was about to lose. And right there under the glass were names that were familiar to Cohen: here was Cesar, her great-great-grandfather and here were the names of the rest of the family she had heard about for so many years.



Cohen started to cry. As founder of the Gullah Museum she has a special interest in history, and there was a story, passed down as oral tradition, that had often been told in Cohen's family: Cesar had obtained a boat and was escaping with his family from Rose Hill Plantation to Buckingham. They were making good progress but the crying of the youngest child threatened to give away their presence. Cesar told the others to throw the baby overboard—at this point nothing could be allowed to get in the way of their freedom—but the mother muffled her child's cries by rolling her up in a corn-shuck mattress that was lying in the bottom of the boat. The child survived and good thing she did, because she was Cohen's great-grandmother. And here, in this document on the wall of Rose Hill Mansion, was solid proof of her presence on this earth.

This touching scene was one of many heartwarming moments that occurred at a recent gala reception held for members of the National Park Service Gullah-Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission. The 12 commissioners, including Cohen, all speak Gullah-Geechee, an English creole language whose structure, like that of Haitian Creole,

is based on the languages of West Africa. The commissioners were all selected by the National Park Service to guide the formation of this new living cultural heritage corridor because of their unique knowledge of the Gullah-Geechee region and its people.

There are three commissioners representing each state in the corridor, which runs from Jacksonville, Florida, to Wilmington, North Carolina, and they gather once a quarter to tend to the business of establishing the corridor, planning its implementation and guiding its interpretation of information to the public.

For several years now commission members have been laboring intently at meetings in community centers, churches and libraries, so it was an unlikely sequence of events that brought them into the glamorous surroundings of Rose Hill Mansion, where they mingled with everyone from the mayor of Savannah and other local politicians to cultural icons such as NPR's Vertamae Grosvenor.

It all started when the Binyah Foundation joined forces with Penn Center and the Mitchelville Freedom Village project to coordinate the event. The Binyah Foundation, whose advisory board members include celebrity chef Sallie Ann Robinson, is one of those rare organizations whose mission is so broad you could paddle a thousand bateaux through it. And that's a good thing, because it means they can get done just about anything to which they set their minds.

"Binyah," of course, is a Gullah word that means "people who have been here," while "comyah" means "people who have come here." The Binyah Foundation includes both binyah and comyah, and its mission, in a nutshell, is to support historical, cultural and environmental preservation efforts on Daufuskie Island and in the rest of the Lowcountry; to honor the culture of the Lowcountry; and to promote appropriate tourism and job creation.

In this case, the members of the Binyah Foundation wanted to honor the federally appointed Corridor Commissioners with a festive affair while bringing together many of the people who represent key aspects of the Gullah-Geechee heritage in this area.

The evening's fare, of course, was the creative Gullah cuisine of Chef David's Roastfish and Cornbread. He concocted a delicious gumbo full of local shrimp provided by Sea Eagle Market, and his luscious sweet potato cornbread had everyone clamoring for more.

At first there was some uncertainty about the venue for the grand affair; after all, the juxtaposition of the reception site and the missions of the groups involved was somewhat provocative. Rose Hill Mansion embodies the antebellum opulence for which the enslaved Africans toiled. Penn Center and Mitchelville, on the other hand, both represent the justice-loving Freedmen of the post-bellum era who were striving to become productive citizens of the United States. In the end, though, each of the sites tells a different piece of the story in the complex Gullah narrative and it was decided that nothing could be more appropriate—or more magnificent—than the mansion.

The Rose Hill Mansion, owned by Robb and Robin White, is open for daily tours. Robin White sometimes dresses in period costume when interpreting the history of her home and honored the guests at the reception with her presence in a beautiful gown in the style of a planter's wife. Her love for Rose Hill is evident in her impassioned expression when she shares the story of the plantation and its residents. And in her efforts to raise money to build a replica slave cabin, White hopes to create a visible reminder of the many hardworking people who were essential to the plantation's operation.

It was a memorable evening and, needless to say, the Gullah-Geechee Corridor Commissioners felt most welcome indeed.

This article is sponsored by The Binyah Foundation.

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Resources

Rose Hill Mansion: rosehillmansion.com

Binyah Foundation: thebinyahfoundation.org

Gullah Museum: gullahmuseumhhi.org

Penn Center: penncenter.com

Roastfish and Cornbread: roastfishandcornbread.com

Sea Eagle Market: seaeaglemarket.com