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## **The Gullah Geechee Heritage Corridor: Cultural Preservation and the Politics of Visibility**

### **Introduction**

The preservation of cultural heritage has become a central concern in contemporary social justice discourse, particularly within communities shaped by the trans-Atlantic slave trade and their subsequent cultural erasure. In the case of the Gullah Geechee people, efforts to preserve cultural heritage have increased with the establishment of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor; a rare, yet valuable federal acknowledgment of the community's cultural and historical legacy. However, preservation within this framework has proven to be anything but a straightforward process, tainted by the intersection of economic development, tourism, and the ethical considerations of commercializing sites that represent the enduring legacies of racial violence. As a result, beliefs on the "correct" way to go about cultural heritage preservation have proven to be multi-dimensional and complex, challenging traditional views on historical preservation methodologies.

This paper will examine these complexities, paying particular attention to historical sites such as the Old Slave Mart Museum (OSMM) and Behavior Cemetery. It argues that while these sites serve as powerful tools for affirming Gullah Geechee cultural sovereignty, they also operate within systems that risk inappropriately commodifying sensitive cultural sites for the sake of accessibility and profit. As

such, these sites function as spaces of cultural affirmation, while simultaneously being shaped by dark tourism and market-driven preservation strategies. The analysis that follows is structured around a few key themes, including the role of cultural preservation as a form of resistance and reparation, how historical sites within the Corridor function as vessels for cultural assertion, the ethical dilemmas posed by dark tourism, and the economic conditions under which preservation efforts are allowed. Together, these themes assess how dependency on tourism and external funding both constrain and alter the narratives of the Gullah Geechee people in order to ensure their palatability for proper commodification.

Engaging with these themes highlights the tensions inherent in institutional preservation projects that claim to protect marginalized cultures while simultaneously subjecting them to economic and constraints. In doing so, it positions the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor as a complex case study under the politics of visibility, revealing the limitations of public recognition at the expense of cultural sovereignty. Ultimately, this paper argues that sustainable cultural preservation must be rooted in frameworks that prioritize community autonomy and ethical stewardship.

## **Historical context**

The Gullah Geechee people are descendants of enslaved Africans brought to the coastal Lowcountry and Sea Islands of the Southeastern United States, primarily from the West African "Rice Coast" which includes modern-day Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, and Senegal. Beginning in the late 17th century, African farmers were forcibly transported en masse to plantations in South Carolina and Georgia, where their specialized knowledge of rice, indigo, and Sea Island cotton cultivation was exploited for profit (BeaufortSC 2025). Due to the region's swampy climate and high risk of malaria, many white slave owners relocated during the hot seasons, leaving the enslaved population to fend for themselves and act as overseers of the land. Over time, this created a uniquely autonomous community; one that not only developed its own cultural identity through language, foodways, and religious

traditions, but also maintained a strong degree of cultural retention directly rooted in African heritage. This sustained cultural continuity made the Gullah Geechee an anomaly, as elements of African culture were “preserved to a high(er) degree” (BeaufortSC 2025) compared to most other enslaved communities.

The Civil War further strengthened the Gullah Geechee’s goals for historical and cultural preservation, as white slave owners began to permanently flee the islands to avoid Union confrontation. The Union’s occupation in 1861 gave freedmen on the islands the opportunity to serve in Black regiments and successfully defend their freedom, making Beaufort’s Sea Island, the first place in the South where enslaved people were freed (BeaufortSC 2025). Freed Gullah were now able to establish churches and schools, including the Penn Center on St. Helena Island, which began as a Freedmen’s school in 1862. They were also able to form mutual aid societies and, in some cases, managed to purchase and own land.

By the late 20th century, Gullah Geechee cultural strength and resilience continued to be reflected in many aspects of their tradition. The Gullah language itself, still commonly spoken by elders, incorporates numerous West and Central African words and grammatical structures. Furthermore, modern Gullah Geechee arts and craft traditions remain deeply influenced by the practical creations of their ancestors, including cast nets, woven baskets, and various textiles. The Gullah Geechee story has not only led to the facilitation of annual festivals, but has also drawn the attention of scholars and artists who have documented Gullah cuisine (as seen in the book *High on the Hog*), crafts, music, and folklore in their research.

In an effort to honor and preserve the distinct heritage of the Gullah Geechee people, the United States Congress passed the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Act in October 2006, which established the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor as a federally designated National Heritage Area

(National Park Service [NPS] 2024). Receiving \$10 million in federal funding over ten years to support the preservation of historic sites (BeaufortSC 2025), the Corridor stretches through North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, encompassing the coastal regions historically inhabited by Gullah Geechee communities. The Act also established the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission, which facilitates collaboration between the National Park Service and Gullah Geechee community leaders. The Commission's ultimate goal is to preserve oral histories and traditional crafts, protect key heritage sites such as churches, villages, and cemeteries, and support public interpretation of Gullah history in authentic, community-centered ways (NPS 2024).

However, the creation of the Corridor was not merely a federal imposition or the result of gracious funding, but rather the result of decades of local and regional advocacy. The Gullah Consortium, formed in the late 1990s by grassroots cultural leaders in South Carolina's Lowcountry, played a key role in organizing public discussions and scoping meetings. Their advocacy led to the creation of the Corridor's 272-page management plan, which was approved in 2013 by the Secretary of the Interior. The plan is centered around the goal to "enlighten and empower Gullah Geechee people to sustain the culture" (Daise 2015) through education, documentation and preservation, and economic development. Through partnerships with local governments, community organizations, educational institutions, and artists, the Corridor supports initiatives that include oral history projects, youth mentorship programs, traditional arts training, and community-based museum exhibits. All participating partner sites are encouraged to align with six interpretive themes: Origins and Early Development; The Quest for Freedom, Equality, Education, and Recognition; Global Connections; Cultural and Spiritual Expression; Gullah Geechee Language; and Connection with the Land (Daise 2015).

However, while the creation of the Corridor marks a critical milestone in federal recognition and resource allocation, it is necessary to assess the extent to which this framework meaningfully supports

the deeper goals of cultural sovereignty for Gullah Geechee communities. Recognition alone does not guarantee that preservation efforts are free from external pressures, nor does it ensure that heritage sites maintain community-driven narratives in the face of commercial and institutional demands. As preservation initiatives increasingly intersect with tourism and economic development, the question becomes not just whether culture is being preserved, but how, by whom, and for what purpose. It is within this context that a closer examination of specific heritage sites becomes essential to understanding the real implications of preservation work.

### **Old Slave Mart Museum**



**Figure 1**

Source: Old Slave Mart Museum - "Old Slave Mart Museum." *Old Slave Mart Museum*, 23 Sept. 2024, [old.slavemartmuseum.com](http://old.slavemartmuseum.com).

As the Corridor attempts to balance cultural integrity with public visibility, individual sites become emblematic of both the potential and the limitations of institutionalized preservation. The

OSMM in Charleston, South Carolina, stands as one of the most symbolically charged heritage landmarks in the Corridor. Constructed in 1859 as part of Ryan's Mart, a private slave market complete with a barracoon, kitchen, and dead house, the building functioned as a center for domestic slave trade until the Civil War (Yuhl 2013). Its status as the only surviving slave auction site in South Carolina lends it an undeniable historical weight, making it one of the more emotionally intensive sites within the Corridor. The building's transformation into a museum began in 1938, when white preservationist Miriam B. Wilson first opened it to the public with little critical framing of its historical context (Drago and Melnick 1981). Its 2007 reopening under municipal ownership marked its transition into a state-sponsored heritage preservation site, aligning it with the broader goals of the Corridor. This transition reframed the museum as a historical exhibit, allowing the newly imposed goals of accessibility and profitability to begin its encroachment on the site's interpretive integrity.

Within this context, the museum performs a double function. On one hand, it stands as a form of cultural resistance by reclaiming a site of racial commodification and reorienting it toward historical accountability. In this way, the site exemplifies how preservation can assert cultural autonomy through narrative control, as its very presence contradicts popularized Southern ideologies that belittle the true inhumaneness of slavery (Yuhl 2013). On the other hand, the museum's location within Charleston's heritage economy complicates this effort, as Charleston markets itself as a city steeped in Southern history and often plays into romanticized visions of the antebellum past (Drago and Melnick 1981).

As such, the OSMM is caught in the net of dark tourism, turning racialized trauma into an immersive historical experience that is meant to educate outsiders. While the museum's minimalistic design may be a conscious attempt to resist spectacle within the larger landscape of the city, it also runs the risk of under-communicating the brutality of slavery to visitors unfamiliar with the depth of its effects. The watering down of narratives in order to make them more digestible for visitors allows the

violence that took place to be rendered as an abstract thing of the past, and absolves tourists (often white and affluent) of the emotional investment it takes to truly encapsulate what occurred at the site. In this way, visitors are allowed to engage with racial trauma at a safe emotional distance, serving not descendant communities, but the comfort of those consuming their history.

These tensions are inseparable from the museum's larger economic context. Like many state-sponsored preservation projects, the OSMM relies on public funding and tourist revenue to remain operational. This financial dependence incentivizes institutional caution, where more confrontational or community-specific content is often softened or excluded altogether (Yuhl 2013). At the same time, the absence of Gullah Geechee curatorial leadership reveals the limits of symbolic inclusion. While the museum presents itself as a site of cultural empowerment, it ultimately reproduces the very structures that marginalize descendant voices in the act of representing them. In doing so, memory becomes something managed by institutions rather than shaped by the communities to whom it belongs.

This disconnect is further reflected in the museum's failure to connect the atrocities of slavery to the ongoing systems of disenfranchisement faced by Gullah Geechee communities today, which includes issues like land dispossession and economic marginalization. While the site draws attention to the brutality of slavery, its lack of contemporary cultural engagement undermines its potential as a living site of advocacy. This highlights the risks of absent community-driven leadership, where preservation becomes less about collective survival and more about institutional control over what is remembered and what is allowed to be forgotten.

## Behavior Cemetery



**Figure 2**

Source: Brown, Brian. "Behavior Cemetery, Circa 1805, Sapelo Island." *Vanishing Georgia: Photographs by Brian Brown*, 24 Feb. 2022, [vanishinggeorgia.com/2012/09/17/behavior-cemetery-circa-1805-sapelo-island](http://vanishinggeorgia.com/2012/09/17/behavior-cemetery-circa-1805-sapelo-island).

Behavior Cemetery, located on Sapelo Island, Georgia, offers a critical counterpoint to the more institutionalized heritage sites within the Corridor. Established in the late 1800s, it remains the primary burial ground for the island's Geechee communities, drawing its name from the nearby Behavior settlement that was originally formed by enslaved Africans on Thomas Spalding's plantation (Cochran et al. 2011). The cemetery itself maintains traditional Gullah Geechee burial practices, including west-to-east grave orientations, the placement of personal belongings on graves as spirit offerings, and informal spatial arrangements rather than orderly rows (Honerkamp & Crook 2012). These practices embody African cultural continuities alongside Christian influences, forming a distinctive mortuary tradition. Still in active use today, the cemetery contains over 375 documented headstones dating from



1889 to 2010, in addition to an estimated 180 unmarked graves identified through archaeological survey (Honerkamp & Crook 2012).

Behavior Cemetery highlights the core tension between cultural sovereignty and commodification within Gullah Geechee heritage preservation. Unlike more tourism-oriented sites within the Corridor, the cemetery remains primarily under community stewardship. This community-based approach is particularly significant because it underscores how preservation frameworks tend to privilege sites that are easily marketable to tourists, while marginalizing those that resist commodification. Despite its listing on the National Register of Historic Places, Behavior Cemetery receives limited funding and infrastructure support compared to more commercially viable heritage destinations. This lack of protection also makes the site vulnerable to break-ins and grave-robbings, highlighting the harmful consequences of these discrepancies (Cochran et al. 2011). In this way, the cemetery illustrates how market-driven preservation strategies create hierarchies of value that disadvantage spaces prioritized by descendant communities rather than by external audiences.

Moreover, Behavior Cemetery challenges conventional preservation models through its ongoing role as a living cultural site. While spaces like the OSMM are presented as relics of the past, Behavior Cemetery remains an active space where the community continues to engage in traditional burial practices. The placement of personal items on graves and the persistence of community-centered funeral traditions represent forms of cultural resistance that have survived despite centuries of systemic oppression (Cochran et al. 2011). However, the site's vulnerability is intensified by broader issues affecting the modern-day Gullah Geechee community, including land loss and displacement caused by development. Rising property taxes have dramatically reduced the number of residents able to maintain these sacred spaces, making it clear how economic forces directly threaten cultural sovereignty. When communities lose access to land, they also lose the ability to protect and sustain sites of ancestral

significance. Although its designation as a heritage site brings a degree of recognition, it does not address the fundamental structural conditions currently jeopardizing the site's survival. This paradox reveals how the politics of visibility can overshadow the need for material support, creating situations where sites are simultaneously recognized and neglected.

As a result, the community's push for community-based archaeological investigations at the site represents a strong assertion of cultural sovereignty, ensuring they retain agency over their ancestral remains rather than giving full control to outside institutions or researchers (Cochran et al. 2011). It is clear that the local community is intentionally protecting the cemetery from the commercial exploitation that affects similar sites, yet this same lack of federal intervention contributes to its material degradation. The contradiction highlights a fundamental problem in current preservation frameworks, where communities are often forced to choose between visibility with commodification or autonomy with authenticity.

### **Tourism, Development, and Ethical Dilemmas**

As reflected in these case studies, the dual pressures of dark tourism and economic development present both opportunities and profound risks for the Gullah Geechee community, whose cultural identity is grounded in their ancestral ties and traditions of resistance. While tourism offers a platform for visibility, it often does so through a romanticized lens that reduces Gullah Geechee history into something more digestible. Representations of Gullah culture in tourism literature and performances tend to emphasize folkloric imagery (i.e. sweetgrass baskets, traditional cuisine, oral storytelling) which detaches them from their history of enslavement, land dispossession, and fights for cultural survival (Graves 2013). This mode of presentation not only erases contemporary voices that still fight for cultural sovereignty, but reorients the public's understanding of Gullah identity away from ongoing resistance. As a result, visibility becomes a tool of containment; cultural expression is allowed only within the

boundaries deemed profitable and palatable by tourism markets. Now, land that has been held by Gullah families for generations is becoming increasingly valued not for its historical significance, but for its real estate potential. An ethical dilemma emerges, as preservation becomes possible only through mechanisms that displace the communities whose histories are being preserved (Graves 2013). The tourism economy thus acts as both benefactor and aggressor, enabling the public display of heritage while undermining the conditions necessary for that heritage to survive in lived form.

Within this framework, the market not only commodifies Gullah culture but also profits from the legacies of enslavement in ways that mirror its historical exploitation. Dark tourism specifically, packages elements of black suffering and resilience into marketable experiences, often with very minimal return to the community. While festivals and cultural centers may offer opportunities for community gathering and cultural pride, these benefits are constrained by structures that prioritize economic gain over cultural control (Boley and Gaither 2015). Thus, the heritage market becomes an extension of historical exploitation, that while less visible, is equally impactful.

Yet within these contradictions, sites within the Corridor also hold great potential as platforms for social justice. When locally governed, these spaces can assert historical truth, educate the public on the realities of racial violence and resistance, and mobilize support for land rights and cultural preservation. They are not inherently compromised by tourism, but rather shaped by the conditions under which tourism occurs. Community-led management and authentic storytelling can transform these sites from instruments of consumption into vehicles of empowerment, especially when aligned with broader initiatives for reparative justice and policy change (Boley and Gaither 2015).

For such transformation to occur, however, the Corridor's relationship with tourism and development must be restructured. This involves not only equitable revenue distribution, but legal protections for Gullah land, transparency in development processes, and institutional frameworks that

prioritize Gullah decision-making in all aspects of heritage planning. Preservation efforts must shift from performance-based funding models to ones rooted in community-defined needs and historical responsibility. This includes addressing the long history of displacement and recognizing the cultural and spiritual ties that Gullah families have to the land.

## **Conclusion**

The case of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor underscores the deep tensions embedded in heritage preservation efforts, especially when culture is both a source of pride and a site of trauma. Through the OSMM and Behavior Cemetery, we see two ends of a preservation spectrum: one shaped by institutional infrastructure and the demands of public consumption, the other grounded in community autonomy and ancestral continuity. Both sites carry immense historical and cultural value, yet each is affected differently by the pressures of visibility and funding. This divergence reveals that preservation is always bound up in decisions about power, representation, and control.

As previously discussed, preservation frameworks that rely on tourism and federal recognition often come at the cost of softening narratives and sidelining community voices. The OSMM highlights the risks of this approach, where historical truth can be obscured for the sake of visitor comfort and institutional funding. The museum's design and interpretive choices, while meant to preserve a difficult history, risk depoliticizing it by silencing the contemporary relevance of racialized dispossession. Meanwhile, Behavior Cemetery reflects the consequences of resisting commodification through the prioritization of authenticity and community leadership, while struggling under material neglect and threats of displacement. The cemetery functions not only as a sacred landscape but also as a living archive of Gullah Geechee kinship systems and mortuary traditions. However, its exclusion from major preservation funding leaves it vulnerable to erasure, even as it stands as a site of profound resilience. This contradiction exposes a critical flaw in heritage models that equate visibility with protection and

shows how symbolic recognition without structural investment offers public validation at the cost of gaining tangible resources for cultural continuity.

Ultimately, the preservation of Gullah Geechee heritage must move beyond the binary of commodification versus invisibility. True cultural preservation requires frameworks that prioritize community-led stewardship and involve meaningful investment in the people and practices that sustain cultures across generations, which could look like legal protections for heirs' property or sustained funding for grassroots initiatives. Moreover, this approach insists that cultural sovereignty cannot be divorced from questions of land justice and economic redistribution. To preserve Gullah Geechee heritage meaningfully is to challenge the very systems that have historically undermined it. Preservation, then, becomes an act not just of commemoration but of resistance that asserts the right to define one's legacy on one's own terms.

The fight to preserve Gullah Geechee culture is not just about saving sites, but rather, about resisting systems that treat culture as a product rather than a living practice. Sustainable preservation must be rooted in the autonomy of the people whose heritage is at stake, and without this, even the most well-intentioned efforts risk reinforcing the very systems of erasure they claim to resist. In this sense, the Corridor should not be understood merely as a federal designation or a collection of marked sites, but as a contested space where struggles over memory, belonging, and self-determination continue to unfold. Its future depends on the extent to which preservation efforts are reoriented toward social justice, allowing heritage preservation to serve as a vehicle for community repair rather than one of preferability and exclusion.

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