

D. Paul Sommerville
May 28, 2016
The Original Gullah Festival of South Carolina

Good afternoon, I am Paul Sommerville, Chairman of Beaufort County Council. It is my great pleasure to welcome you to the 30th Original Gullah Festival of South Carolina. Thirty years, I believe that deserves a huge round of applause!

I would also like to take this opportunity to especially welcome our guests from outside the County who have joined us in our endeavor to promote and preserve Gullah history and culture. On behalf of Beaufort County Council, I extend my sincere gratitude to all of you for joining us in celebrating this wonderful, annual festival.

The story and living legacy of the Gullah people is not just significant in the history of Beaufort County, the state of South Carolina, and the United States, but also in world history. Since the settling of this area, Beaufort County has been a place where cultures collide. Our shores have been walked by the Native Americans, the British, the French, the Spanish, and the Africans.

Historically, the Gullah region extended from the Cape Fear area on North Carolina's coast south to the vicinity of Jacksonville on Florida's coast. Today, this historic stretch of land is recognized as the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, designated by an act of the U.S. Congress in October 2006. Beaufort County sits almost in the center of these areas—we are really the heart of Gullah, a true living legacy.

This festival gives us an opportunity to recognize, sustain, and celebrate the vital role that those Africans played in the past and present development of our vibrant and unique culture here.

These remarks and this weekend celebration do not allow enough time to cover so many historical events, accomplishments, and life stories of the Gullah people. Rather, such occasions as these are really a reminder that this important part of our heritage belongs in the forefront of our consciousness today, tomorrow, and all the days thereafter.

I take great pride in being here today. Like many of you, my roots here are deep. My family history in Beaufort County dates from 1862, when my great-grandparents, who were staunch abolitionists from Boston, arrived in Hilton Head Island to become educators in the yet-to-be constructed schools that would comprise the Port Royal experiment which led to notable achievements such as the founding of the Mather School and Penn School.

The enslaved individuals who were brought from African shores to the Lowcountry were able to not only persevere and preserve their distinct heritage, but also forge positive and constructive relationships with people of various tribes. They developed a bond and unified language to communicate and collaborate for survival. In the process, a unique cultural heritage and lifestyle evolved that is uniquely its own and has endured for centuries. A unique spirit has also endured, as evident today.

The significance of the Gullah people and their experience in Beaufort County is still apparent in fannah baskets, folklore songs, language, food, fishing nets, and much more. This festival yields an opportunity for everyone to enjoy arts, crafts, music, and cuisine reflective of the beauty of Gullah culture.

My special thanks to all of those who envisioned this event and brought it to fruition. On behalf of Beaufort County Council, I hope that you enjoy all the activities throughout the weekend and will continue to enjoy the rest of today.