

## Interview with Cornelia Bailey

**Narrator:** Cornelia Bailey

**Interviewer:** Dr. Dionne Hoskins

**Date of Interview:** August, 27, 2009

**Location:** Sapelo Island, Georgia

**Project Name:** Georgia Black Fishermen

**Project Description:** African American participation in marine-related careers began as early as 1796, when the federal government issued Seamen's Protection Certificates to merchant mariners defining them as "citizens" of the United States effectively making maritime employment one way for Blacks to shape their identities. This project documents the fishery-related occupations of African Americans in coastal Georgia 1865 to present and gather information for future work that may ascertain the relationship between their decreased participation and changes in regional fish populations and the fishing industry.

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Dionne Hoskins

**Transcription Team:** Michelle Duncan, PhD.

### **Abstract:**

On August 27, 2009, Dr. Dionne Hoskins interviewed Cornelia Walker Bailey as part of the Georgia Black Fishermen oral history project. Cornelia, a prominent historian on Sapelo Island—Georgia's fourth largest barrier island only accessible by ferry, boat, or plane—was born on June 12, 1945. Her family tree and presence on the island is well documented and can be traced back to her ancestors who purchased the island after the end of slavery. Cornelia witnessed first-hand the changes that occurred in her Gullah-Geechee community and dedicated her life to preserving traditions, oral histories, and the land of the Gullah-Geechee people. Cornelia recalls how and when fishing occurred and the significance for the men, whom each owned a cast net, to provide for their family. She recalls that while her father was at work, her mother fished during the day, catching yellowtail and red drum, and when he returned he would night fish for mullet. The catch was sold or shared and was the foundation of their social structure on and off the island. She recognized, through her travels, that customs, fishing practices, and foods on Sapelo Island were similar to West Africa. Additionally, she recognized that the tradition of African American fishing had declined because of more educational opportunities. The struggle between education and honoring cultural practices continues to present problems for the Gullah-Geechee community.

Dionne Hoskins: I'm Dionne Hoskins and we are with Cornelia Walker Bailey and what's your name?

Child 1: Marcus.

DH: Marcus. Okay, what's your name?

Child 2: Jonathan.

DH: Jonathan. Okay. Thank you for talking with us.

Cornelia Bailey: You're welcome.

DH: And I know that you've given a number of interviews and, and talked a lot about the history and culture of Sapelo Island, and the historical interests of the people that live here. Also, some of their the modern challenges that face this community. We're really interested in in an, in a perspective that we hope you can offer on the role of fishing in terms of commercial fishing, recreational fishing, subsistence fishing, and other types of participation in the fishing industry or related crafts. As you've seen it among your family, and among the generations that you've interacted with on Sapelo. So, my first question is, is that you know, what, what was the role of fishing in your family?

CB: Mom fishing in the daytime and papa fishing at night (laughter), which which was a tradition. Most of the men most of men fishing at um—they fish in the night fishing and the ladies they day fishing. Because the men was at work. So, while the men's were at the work, the ladies will go fishing with a cane rod, a drop line. They would go fishing for what they call like yellow tailed and spot and that kind of stuff. So, they went fishing in the daytime. The men did a night fishing. So, they most efficient for mullet and stuff at night. Yeah.

DH: I was about to ask. Well, I know they had to be catching different species. So yeah, and all of this was to eat or this was to eat and sell?

CB: To eat and if they caught a lot the men's mostly caught most of it at night because you can do more at night. So, they would sell it you know, to somebody who don't who wasn't fortunate enough to catch any or couldn't catch any and so they will sell fish. Yeah, so fish was sold in the community. We would go to, excuse me, we would go to uncle Dick house or Mr. Richard Ben's house. His kids—sometimes we would go early in the morning before we went to school. We would go and get a quarter worth of fish. Mama would give us a quarter and said go to Uncle Dick or go to Mr. Richard Ben's and see which one of them went fishing last night and get a quarter worth of a mullet. And so, you get a quarter worth of mullet and they put it on a sawtooth palmetto, we have a lot of palmetto around here. So, they're cutting cut it off and turn it upside down. Trim all the leaf off and just leave enough, then the string the fish by the gill on it, you know, you know. And and you're going home and you're carrying this thing and little kids you like six and seven years old. And like seven o'clock in the morning school is at 8:30. So you got to go back home, take the

fish. Your mom would clean fish and you had fresh fish and grits before you went to school, but it was 25 cent and you had about 10 or 12 fish on that on that on that on that string that you had yeah.

DH: I was about to ask you because a quarter was a fish to me it's half of a fillet now. So, when you said a quarter's worth of fish I was wondering how much fish that was?

CB: That was a lot back then, yeah. So, that was in the 50s and so you got you know you got quite a bit of fish, yeah.

DH: That's incredible! That's hard to imagine.

CB: Quarter! Twenty-five cents worth of fish!

DH: So, it really sounds like fishing was what you needed and what people around you needed and not what you it wasn't really a business thought of as a business firsthand?

CB: No, it wasn't thought of as a business and people give away more than it actually sold you know because it give it to the senior citizen or the widow and that sort of stuff like that. So, they give away a lot. So, fish was a, it was a social thing a lot too, you know. People will give just giveaway fish carrying kids you know if your parents got fish to give you a fish and say, "Take this to aunt so and so and take this one to cousin so and so." So, we little kids be going all over the place delivering fish in the neighborhood different families and so forth. So, fish yeah, fish it was.

DH: Okay. So, so you said something when we weren't recording that I thought was interesting. And you said something that to the effect of that if you weren't you almost might not be considered a man if you didn't have a boat and a cast net. So that you could provide...

CB: ...provide for your family.

DH: Tell me about that.

CB: Every man had to have a boat and a cast net. And they had a boat and the cast and a gun naturally. So, you went hunting and fishing. So, you can provide for your family. So, that was one of the one of the things that all men had in the house, was a cast net always. And even if they didn't have a row boat, they might borrow somebody else's row boat, but they had they had their own cast net. You didn't borrow, you didn't borrow another man's net, but you had you had your own net. You can borrow another man's boat, but not his net. No, not his net. (laughing) You're responsible your own net, but they went fishing and fish was distributed or sold in whichever manner it was and it was—we didn't have refrigeration growing up. So, most of it was what, that's why they one another reason why it was given away quickly. So, you know, especially in the summertime, and the wintertime was a little better. Because you could keep it a little longer because the weather was cold. But in the summertime, you caught fish in the summer you got rid of it real quick; what you didn't smoke. And so, we had this combination, smoking, drying thing that we would smoke fish and and that would preserve it a lot longer also, you know. Because that would keep it when you

didn't have  
refrigeration to keep fish.

DH: I see. So did your—do your children have at this... Well, first how many children do you have?

CB: I have a bunch of 'em (laughing). Biologically we have five and the rest of them is either through adoption or foster care. So, folks, we got a bunch of kids, which means I got a bunch of grands and great grands. Yes.

DH: Wonderful, which means you need a lot of fish.

CB: I wish we had a lot of fish.

DH: So, did any of your children pick up this this culture of, you know, collecting and fishing and sharing the way you described in your childhood?

CB: Oh yeah. My son Maurice, my son Stanley, my my other sons, they, they don't get to fish as much, but those two especially Stanley get to fish often. And so yeah. They share fish, they do the same, basically do the same thing. This is a community that shares, yeah.

DH: Now as a community leader, you have the advantage of seeing of perceiving answers to my questions on the basis of your own experience. But also, by really looking at—I know you spent time looking at and analyzing the needs and the desires of your community and trying to communicate that to people who are not familiar with Sapelo. So, if you if you were going to describe kind of Sapelo and fishing, even as it was done in areas around Sapelo, Darien, Brunswick, Midway, Ulonia, Vilona. What would you have us understand about the people of Sapelo and how they, how they viewed fishing? Is it the same as your family or is there is there something broader?

CB: It could be broader, you know. They said, you know, "Give a man a fish and you feed himself for a day and teach them how to fish you can do it for a lifetime." You know, he can feed himself and his family. So, and I think on the mainland, they have the same idea too, because I can go on the mainland and get fish from people. If the fish is not biting here and somebody have a shrimp boat on the mainland, I can call them and said, "Did y'all go out today and did y'all get any whiting?" And they said, "Yes, we got whiting." And so, so we go get fish from either way, you know. People from the mainland come over here and vice versa. So, it's it's the fishing thing. When I went back to Africa, so it's a fishing thing. So, I think even went further than just being on the coast, because the similarity between the coast there and the coast here was great. And they did a lot of fishing there and they fishing with cast net and boat similar to the boat that I grew up with, when a men's went out and fished. And they also smoke it; went to this big market called King Jimmy market. And there was smoked fish all over the place and you go, (smelling sound) "yeah, they smoked fish all over the place." And so, we had a lot of smoked fish and that sort of stuff. And so, it's a historic thing as well, yeah.

DH: Where did you go in Africa?

CB: Sierra Leone.

DH: Sierra Leone, ok.

CB: On the west coast, and they and they had some. They do combination of fishing and okra like we do as well. Fish and okra is good. Yeah it is a great dish and they do the same thing. They take the smoked fish and you cook it with okra and it's absolutely delicious, yeah so yeah.

DH: I read a book called "Praying for Sheetrock." Are you familiar with that?

CB: Melissa Faye Greene.

DH: Green, yes and in that book, it would lead you to think that most Blacks in this area were working at the shrimp processing plants. I had a vision—so, tell me tell me what you think of that?

CB: No. They used to have some shrimp processing plant in Darien and then maybe did maybe one or two on a small-scale basis. So, a lot of them did because they grew up inside of it. You know, they had various profession and industry. The shrimp industry was pretty, you know, highly regarded in this area for a long time. So, when Melissa wrote that, there was still quite a bit of it going on, you know, people were working. They were shucking oysters in some places, and picking crab. Mostly was picking crabs and peeling shrimp was the main things that they were doing. They did a lot of that, but then it depends on the industry. Some like a few years ago, we hardly had a crab that people couldn't catch crab. Now they back and, you know, quite plentiful. So, it depends on the industry. Some people like doing that kind of stuff and some people don't like doing that kind of stuff. You know, they got the sea, the packing plant in Brunswick, like Sea Pak, and others in Brunswick, and also doing this. A lot of Black people that works in those plants as well. So, I think sometimes it depends on on what's been passed down traditionally, and what you knew how to do. Some of those folks that work in some of those plants, you would think that well these are uneducated people who didn't finish high school and so forth. Some of them that I know, they finished high school. I even know a couple of them that went to college, but the packing plant is what was hiring. So, once they get to like it, they never left yeah.

DH: I understand.

CB: It was providing a decent living and you're good at it, then that's what you do, yeah. (child enters)

Guest 2: I got a popsicle!

CB: You found a popsicle?

DH: You found the popsicles? Oh, you have a red and a green popsicle. And you know what?

Your popsicle matches your shirt and your popsicle matches your shirt.

CB: See, she did a good job of matching you up.

DH: Well, I think I only have...

CB: She know how to please kids. (laughing) Good, alright.

DH: I think I only have maybe, maybe one other question. And that is, I think what we're definitely trying to get through in this study is to figure out what were the trends in Black participation in fishing, you know, after slavery, you know. Who was doing what and where was it occurring? And we're trying to do that through historical data and through talking to people, but also we're trying to figure out now, in contemporary times. What affects the decision for Blacks to participate in any part of the fishing industry? Like you said, whether it's at Sea Pak, or whether it's being, you know, having your own boat, or, or something of that nature. What do you think, is the reason that Blacks do or do not participate in in the fishing industry now, today?

CB: Now you do it and you be honest with yourself, it's like this. Now when, remember when we were slaves we didn't have much choice on your profession. Because you were told to do this and do that, that's what you did. Places like on the coasts, you and according to who the slave master was, you had some freedom to go fishing. So, that took the burden off them of having to feed you constantly, because then you can feed yourself. So, you learn how to gather shellfish, and you learned how to fish. I mean, even if you didn't know how already, but so you fish, so you could feed your family. So, it's traditionally and from that purposes, as well. And then, when it become a commercial business, where a lot of us got into it, because then we could get paid. You know, as well as its feeds your family fish and seafood, you can get paid for it as well. So hence, that was another reason we got into it. And just like, just like any Black in any area, once schooling was opened up to us, and, and as you realize, a lot of us went into two professions we had. A couple of 'em, you was an undertaker, or you were a hairdresser or you were a school teacher, or nurse. And when we could go further than that, and we was other schools opening up an opportunity to open up to us and, and Civil Rights open up to us. It was, we can be an engineer. I can be astronaut. I can be anything I want to be, we stopped doing that. A lot of that stuff because we had no other choice but to do that to make a living. Not that we love it that much, but what else can I do except fishing, you know, to make a living. Now I'm gonna be sure that my son don't fishing because now he can go to college and he can become something else. So, he's not going to be a fisherman like me, you know, and that sort of stuff. So, it depends— education plays a big part and Blacks. We were taught to keep going up up up not to stay on the same level. So, motivation and what your parents want you to become and said, “No son, you're not gonna go out there in all kind of weather and become a fisherman like me. I'm gonna see to it that I have money put aside for you to go to college so you can become what you want to be.” And so, education play a part in traditional stuff being lost in a lot of cases. Because that's what happened. I mean, tradition, education. So, we have not learned yet how to balance, a lot of stuff and education. Once you strive for the higher education, we tend to drop a lot of cultural stuff.

And not because we really want to, but then we stop and look back at it, you're going, you know, when I went to Harvard, I forgot, you know, what I was before I went to Harvard. And by the time

you reach 50 years old and thinking about it, then you're trying to recapture that stuff, you know, all over again. And sometimes you can and sometimes you can't. So, we have to learn how to balance the both, yeah. We have to balance education and shrimp industry. I mean, go get your education, and then decide to buy whole shrimping fleet. You know, that's, that's what you should do. You know, if it's still in your system, why not? You know, do it that way, instead of just getting out of it all together. And, you know, I have this secret desire to a secret desire to still be a fisherman. Yeah. Yeah. But that's what happens.

DH: Well, thank you. Thank you very much. I really appreciate your time.

CB: You're welcome my dear.

Guest (adult): I wanted to say something. I think that was a very good point that you just brought up about, like, Black opportunity, like opportunities for minorities, especially Blacks opening up, and us becoming a more integral part of like, mainstream institutions. How tradition and history fall behind. I think that's important, because even with my family, go to school become better than what we were my grandfather, his family from Florida was sharecroppers, they migrated and did sharecropping. My grandparent, my grandmother, her father owned the farm well, in Pinic. So, it was always you're not going to do this, don't even think about this stuff. They weren't, they didn't—those things weren't for me to do. That was for the older people to take care of you, you stay in this book, because now you have the opportunity to become whatever you want to become. I think that's, that's interesting.

CB: It is. And so, but the one thing we forgot doing that, we forgot to instill in the young folks that, okay, you're going ahead, you're gonna get this great education, you're going to end up with this great job, and you're going to make better money. So, you should come back and buy the farm, you know. (laughing)

Guest (adult): And that's important to because now it's my grandparents are afraid that I'm going to become too educated for them.

CB: Yeah. And then their fears sets in like okay, we raised them, right, we send them off and now what are we going to do? All the stuff that I worked so hard for. Who's gonna take care of it after I leave? And they they send you away and that at the secret time is secretly wants you to come back.

Guest: Yes, but not secretly. They make it known.

CB: They want you back. They send you for education, but they're hoping you use that education to better yourself, but also better their condition, and then your upbringing at the same time. So, so we have to learn, as Blacks, how to balance how to balance that. We have to balance education, tradition; respect for the all the wishes of the old people and so forth. We have to balance all of that and stop calling it old fashioned stuff and old timey stuff and that kind of stuff like that.

That's what brought us over and so we need to stop leaving it at that and I need to respect it. We need to, yeah, we need to do what the Chinese do and respect the elders and their wishes. We

respect our elders, but we need to respect their wishes, yeah. That's for sure.

DH: That's really that's really, that's really a fascinating expansion of those ideas. Um, you three gentlemen, any questions over there? No, bashful, okay. All right, thanks. So, you're going to end our recording now.

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Reviewed by Michelle Duncan 10/27/2022

Review by Nicole Zador 10/10/2024