

Interview with Charles Hall

Narrator: Charles Hall

Interviewer: Dr. Dionne Hoskins

Date: October 17, 2009

Location: Sapelo Island, GA

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 October 17, 2009, Dr. Dionne Hoskins interviewed Charles Hall as part of the Georgia Black Fisherman oral history project. Charles was born in 1934 on Sapelo Island, Georgia—a small Gullah Geechee community founded on the fourth largest barrier island in the 1700s, 60 miles south of Savannah, in McIntosh County. Charles earned his Bachelor's degree in Biology from Morehouse College in Georgia and Physical Therapy certification from the University of Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania. Along with service in the United States Air Force, he served in prominent positions within community organizations in Ohio before moving back to Georgia. Upon his return, he became a founding member of the Gullah Geechee Heritage Corridor Commission and president of the Sapelo Island Cultural and Revitalization Society. Charles grew up knowing "the water was our friend." Even after moving away, he frequently returned to Georgia with his family to expose his children to the Gullah Geechee culture, language, and food. He recalls that catching food was not the only important part of survival on the island but also preserving food—refrigeration was not available until the late 20th century. Residents relied on drying, salting, and smoking food for preservation over the winter months. With refrigeration, the urgency and frequency of harvesting fish and other animals declined. Many of the folks Charles knew, who fished the waters off of Sapelo Island, are no longer around to share their maritime contributions. To ensure no more land or history is lost, Mr. Hall's mission was "...to preserve the Gullah Geechee culture, tradition, language, food and to make sure we'll forever be what we've always been."

Dionne Hoskins: Ok, we're recording. My name is Dionne Hoskins and I'm here with Mr. Charles Hall Sr. who is chair of the board of directors for the Sapelo Island Cultural and Revitalization Society and we're here at Cultural Day and I um the goal of this interview is to talk to mr hall about um the role of water and fishing and basically anything that his family did on the water or with crabbing and shrimping or oystering um that he can remember so first I'd like to say thank you and welcome to mr hall.

Charles Hall: Thank you very much it's good being here

DH: Thanks. So the goal of this project is to come up with the history of African Americans on the water in Georgia because we don't know that history and from the work that I've done with the federal government there's just an assumption that we've never been there and when I interviewed um Mr. George Walker he told me how he'd worked on a boat for several years as a fisherman before he came back to the island um and I talked with Ms Cornelia Bailey and she said how they used to fish when she was younger, um, that that history is there it just hasn't been recorded. Can you tell me about you and your family and life on the water?

CH: Well my direct experience has been very similar to the ones you've just heard, however, uh water is the means of survival not physically but in terms of all of the things it produces for people to survive, not just the fish and the seafowl but the fact that you can get other kinds of nutrients, such as oysters and crabs. Um, so with that, uh, the water was our friend.

DH: The water was your friend? I haven't heard anyone say that. I like that. Did you, did your children have that experience- were they on the water with you, too?

CH: Not in terms of just being here on Sapelo. They grew up in Dayton Ohio.

DH: Ok.

CH: But they were here one to three times a year. So they've had splatterings of the uh, of this experience and they lived it. Reginald, who is really doing all the work over here in terms of Cultural Day and making- helping to make that happen- uh, its because of his commitment to what he's learned about Sapelo and his love for the survival of this kind of lifestyle, culture, language, food, all of the things that's so unique to the Gullah Geechee culture.

DH: I've talked with Reginald and he's very impressive, he's very well read. He was telling me about something that he'd uh, the work of Dr. Ben Jochaman and some of the other very pro-Black writers who talked about the role of our culture, um, and how we need to preserve it. And so I think he's doing an excellent job. You said that the culture and the cooking- can you tell me what did you used to catch? What did you used to eat from your friend the water?

CH: Um, everything in terms of various types of fish, crustaceans such as shrimp and other things. Uh, and...but part of that survival is your ability to preserve it. You have to remember, we did not have refrigeration so you dried stuff. If you have something in a garden you dried it. So when you think about red... uh... black eyed peass and rice, the black eyed peas is dried peas that you can eat during the winter when the garden isn't growing. Uh, so... and the cooking, it's a way of of making things taste good although, some people then didn't think very much of it. And their very nutritious. People on this island lived, lived to be, several, over a hundred years old.

DH: Really?

CH: Yes, And uh a lot, and my father died at 94 and uh some um... eating the food in the Gullah Geechee tradition is pretty good.

DH: Wow. That, that's fascinating. It explains something to me that I didn't understand before. And that was the smoked mullet. And so the smoking is for the preservation right?

CH: Absolutely. Once you smoke it you can keep it for several days. Remember, no refrigeration, and the only other way of preserving meats was to salt it.

DH: Ok.

CH: And that was and that was basically pork, or you had to eat it all while it was fresh.

DH: The salting isn't that very healthy either is it? Not as healthy as smoking?

CH: No, because it contributes to high blood pressure that those other things that we are famous to have.

DH: Um hmm. Yeah. Well thanks. Let me ask you about the changes you saw in other people. You said that, you know, fishing was something that you did just to survive. It was what you ate, you know. But what about people around you? Were there others around you that, that fished for a living? Or did they, did some people do it at one time and then move away from it? What do you remember about that on Sapelo?

CH: Oh, there were several people who did that on Sapelo but in those days you fished with a cast net. That they uh, one person'd through the net over whatever's under the water and that's what you caught. And did a good job of it, particularly this time of year when the fish are coming in like sea bass, um, sea trout, whiting, and all of those fish.

DH: Ok. That's great information 'cause that's what I was gonna ask you, what , you know, what exactly did you catch. So I guess one of my last questions would be- who should we be talking to to understand the role of fishing? Like if you and your family did it for entertainment, recreation, and just eating, you know... who on the island was doing it for a living? Um, during your working days, I know you a happy retired man, uh but back in your working days, who was working doing that here, either from the community or like in Brunswick where I know many Sapelo natives moved?

CH: Most of the people who were uh, fishing, we won't call it commercially because it wasn't big scale fishing...

DH: I understand.

CH: Most of them unfortunately are deceased at the point; the ones I knew.

DH: Ok.

CH: But the younger guys still catch a lot of fish and they sell some of it. But as you know with freezers and other ways of keeping food, um, the urgency isn't the same.

DH: OK. I understand. Are these like, I think someone told me I should be talking to Larry Johnson and Stanley Walker who makes the nets. Are those the, some of the people who would have interesting points of view?

CH: Absolutely. I would suggest talking with both of them.

DH: Ok. Well thank you. I want to thank you so much for your time. You've been very generous with me. Every time I try to speak with you you're always very kind and I appreciate it. Um, is there anything else you would like to share with us in this interview before we close out?

CH: Just that you keep Sapelo on your mind, that our mission is to preserve the Gullah Geechee culture, tradition, language, food- and to make sure we'll forever be what we've always been and that's an integral part of the American lifestyle. And that lifestyle should never die.

DH: Thank you so much.

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Reviewed by Michelle Duncan 4/18/2022

Reviewed by Molly Graham 4/25/2022