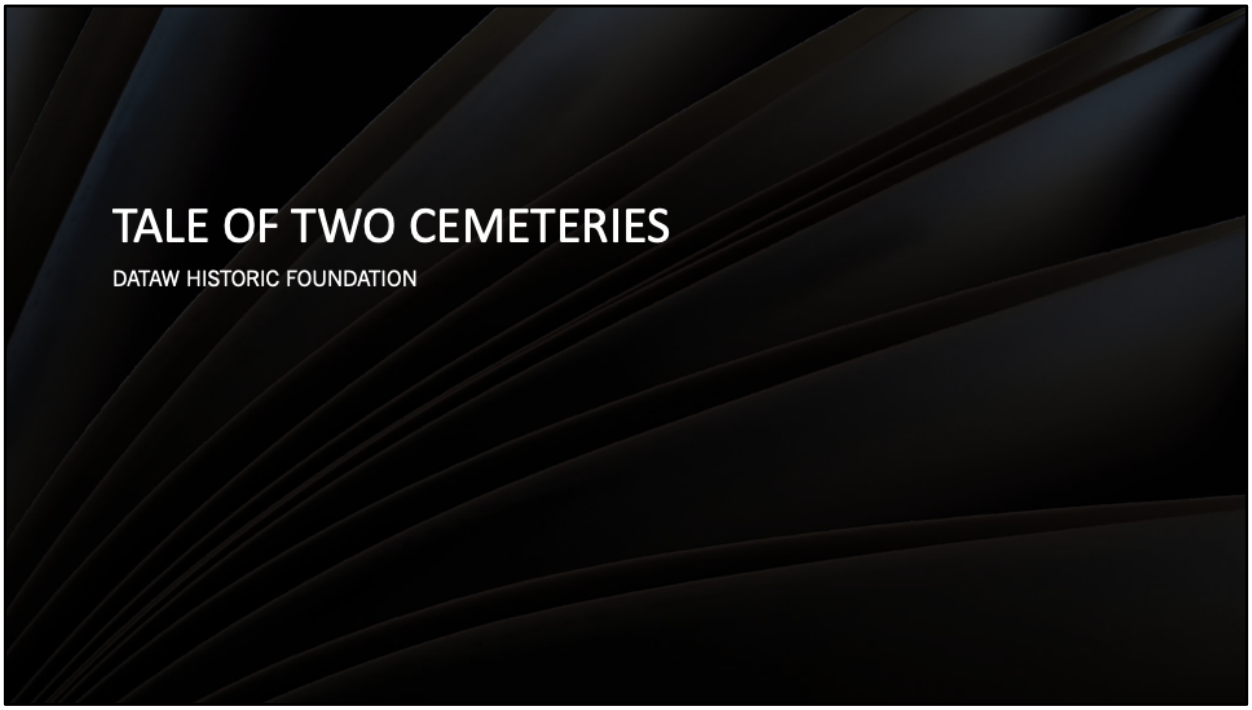
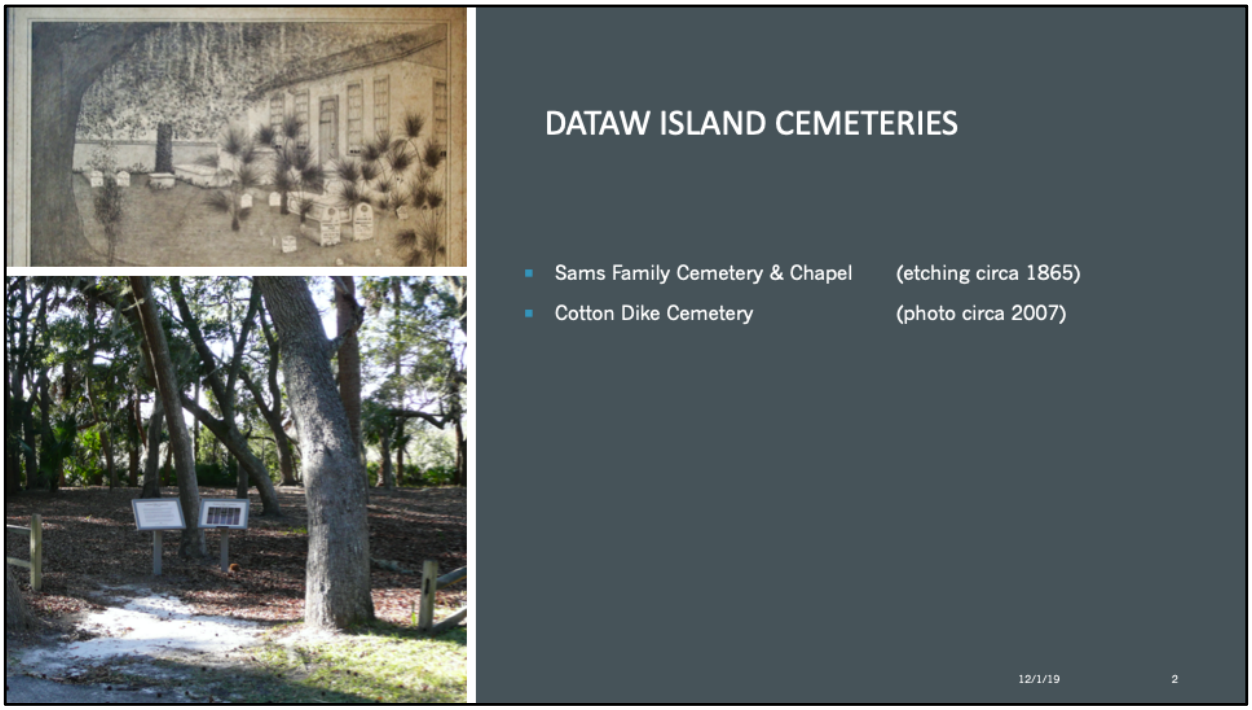


A TALE OF TWO CEMETERIES by JOHN COLGAN, November 2019



The tabby ruins at the Sams Plantation Complex stand as mute evidence of a bygone era. There were two distinct ways of life which coexisted in the antebellum South.

The Plantation Owner and his family were White, European-American, educated, affluent and engaged, politically, socially and culturally, in the wider community. The plantation owners all spoke English, all were able to trace their family's genealogy, history, customs and culture back hundreds of years. They relied upon family custom and tradition to make socially appropriate decisions regarding education, marriage, dress, work, religion. etc.

The Slaves, on the other hand, were captured by European slavers who forcibly removed them to North and South America from all over West Africa.

They were taken from many tribes. Captives spoke a variety of languages; had differing religious beliefs, tribal customs and culture. They had different skill sets and came from various stations in life.

Once captured, they were transported, sometimes hundreds of miles, to coastal shipping ports where they were graded as animals would be by gender, age, physical

fitness, etc. and sold into the Atlantic slave trade. If they survived the “Middle Passage” (1.5 million did not) they were again auctioned off to plantation owners without regard to their past lives.

Thus, slaves found themselves thrown together with total strangers, often unable to communicate with one another and with differing customs and beliefs.

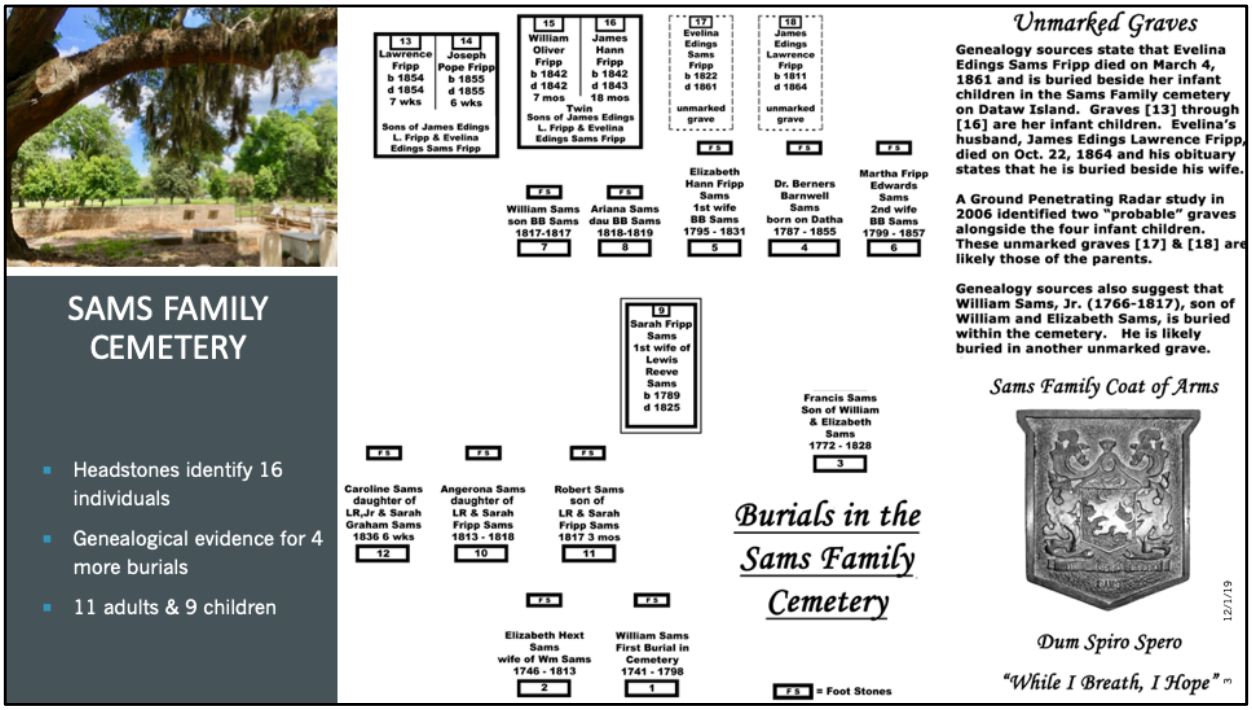
As if this dehumanization wasn't complete, immediately, they were put to hard, unfamiliar, often back-breaking work from sunup to sundown. Slaves had very little leisure time. Privacy was a rare commodity. They were functionally illiterate and destitute.

They were isolated with no legal rights or standing in the larger community except as chattel. Into this place they carried their memories and languages, their drums and musical styles; their habits and cuisine; their gods; their immune systems and their DNA. They carried their culture and creativity; their potential for heroism and roguery; their loves and hatreds - and their desire to be recognized, not rendered nameless and self-less; they carried skills and knowledge to help cultivate New World soils and crops.

They were colonists too, however reluctant – essential contributors to the burgeoning Colonial economies of the New World. They helped found and change American republics, including the one that became the United States. Immigrants, changing as they survived. They made the landscapes in the Americas their own.

The world they had known had been profoundly unmade, through their suffering. In the New World they remade themselves. Here, in the Lowcountry, they managed to forge a new civilization they called Gullah.

But, on Dataw from 1783 until 1861 perhaps the only shared experience in the lives of both the slave owners and the slaves was DEATH.



That brings us to the subject of our talk today. Let's start with the Slave owners.

The Sams Family Cemetery came into being when William Sams, the father of Lewis Reeve and B.B. Sams, passed away on January 16, 1798.

William as you may know, moved to Beaufort with his wife Elizabeth and family, in 1783, shortly after the end of the Revolutionary War hostilities. William's position as the King's Magistrate made him unwelcome in post-war Charleston. They had to flee and start over again as subsistence farmers in Beaufort.

Fifteen years later, upon his death, he was laid to rest at the foot of a 200 year old Live Oak tree located just northwest of the main house.

Modern embalming methods were unknown at the time, so bodies were buried in the earth as quickly as practicable. If a minister could be found who was willing to travel out from Beaufort by boat and carriage to perform the graveside funeral service, the deceased would receive a proper burial. This was not usual, however, as such a round-trip would consume at least two days and take the minister away from his other duties. Grave markers (Head stones and foot stones) would have been

ordered from Charles town at that time since Beaufort had no businesses engaged in that line of work. Hand carving, packing and transporting the grave markers from Charles town to Datha Island took several months or longer to accomplish. A memorial service was then planned to coincide with the installation of the head and foot stones.

SAMS FAMILY CEMETERY WITH CHAPEL

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The Sams Family Cemetery is separated from the rest of the plantation complex by a tabby wall constructed, in the late 1820's or early 1830's. At that time, a chapel was integrated into the design and a section of the wall served as part of the chapel wall as well.

There are grave markers for 16 people in the Sams cemetery - 7 adults and 9 children. The oldest child was just 5 years old when she died. Malaria and other mosquito-borne diseases coupled with occasionally tainted water and food sources made life a struggle to maintain - even for the privileged.

In 2006, DHF brought in GPR experts who reported that they detected at least 19-26 graves in the cemetery. From genealogical research, we have identified two of these unmarked graves as being Evelina Edings Sams Fripp who died March 4, 1861 and "was laid to rest beside her four infant children" Her husband, James Edings Lawrence Fripp died October 22, 1864. According to his obituary, "he was buried beside his wife."

Their graves remained unmarked, probably due to the Civil War, because from November 22,1861 until the end of hostilities in 1865, the Beaufort area was in Union

hands while Charleston remained in Confederate hands. Needless to say, headstones were never ordered or delivered!

In 1861, the Sams family had departed their Datha plantation and scattered across the country, for the most part, never to return. In 1863, Datha was sold at auction by the U.S. Government for failure to pay property taxes.

Before we leave the Sams Family Cemetery, here is one final, curious fact about both cemeteries. GPR determined that all the bodies were placed in shallow graves fewer that two feet underground! Any guesses why that was the case?

Answer - Probably because of the high water table.

GROUND PENETRATING RADAR SURVEY OF SAMS CEMETERY

"Based on the results of the GPR survey, we estimate that the cemetery contains at least 19-26 graves, including the ones with markers or crypts."

Brockington and Associates, Inc.

February 2006

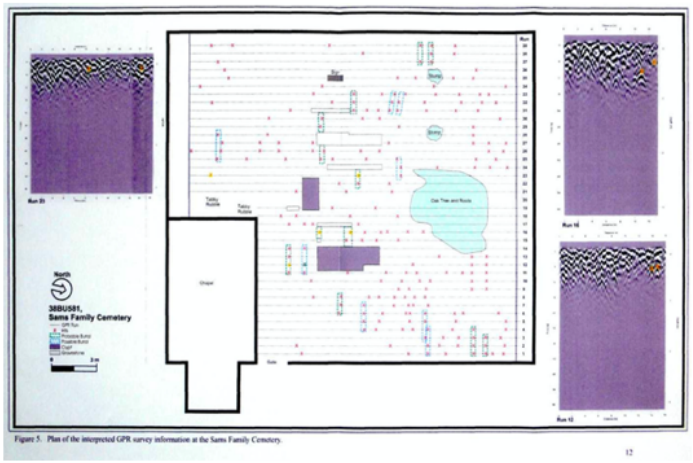

Figure 5. Plan of the interpreted GPR survey information at the Sams Family Cemetery.

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The Cotton Dike Road Cemetery served as the final resting place for generations of field slaves from circa 1785 until 1861. Thereafter, the cemetery served the free African-American farming community on Dataw until 1967 when, it is believed, the cemetery ceased to be used. Early slave cemeteries on the Sea Islands were generally placed by the planter on the least productive piece of property he owned – in the case of Datha, on the edge of the marsh. We'll see later that that served the slaves very well.

The Cotton Dike Cemetery was considerably larger than what we see today. Tidal action and tropical storms, notably the Great Sea Island Hurricane of 1893, have eroded most of it away.

Burials were almost always done at night because work in the fields took precedence. Slaves suffered extremely high mortality rates. Half of all slave infants died during their first year of life, twice the rate of white babies. While the death rate declined for those who survived their first year, it remained twice the white rate through the age of 14. As a result of this high infant and childhood death rate, the average life expectancy of a slave at birth was just 21 or 22 years, compared to 40 to 43 years for antebellum whites. Compared to whites, relatively few slaves lived into old age. Plus,

there were not many opportunities for house slaves and field slaves to meet and exchange news and information from the “main house”.

The Cotton Dike cemetery escaped the fate of many unmarked slave cemeteries. Instead of being plowed over or built upon in the ensuing years, this cemetery survived and was set aside as such by Alcoa when they created the plat maps for Dataw Island.

The institution of slavery severely restricted the ability of African-American slaves to maintain their cultural identities. Slaves differed from other human beings because they were not allowed, freely, to integrate the experience of their ancestors with their drastically changed lives; to anchor their present experiences to any conscious community of memory. There can be no doubt that they reached back for the past as they reached out to connect it to their current living experience.

Slaves tried to resist this desocialization in countless ways. The lack of ability to import material culture from their homeland and prohibitions on many remembered cultural practices, created great difficulties in undertaking such resistance. Despite these difficulties, historians of the African-American diaspora have now clearly shown that African culture, and particularly religion, made important contributions to the African-American experience. The mortuary context was a place in slave culture where some “freedoms” were allowed by the slave owners.

As an aside, the lack of a well-researched ethnohistorical approach to African-American material culture has been a serious limitation on many studies of African-American material culture. There needs to be more interaction between historians and archaeologists in West Africa and the Americas. Also, there is limited archaeological work on West African sites contemporary with the period of slaving for the Americas. In part, this is due to the lack of focus on the colonial period by governments of independent African countries and African archaeologists. Most African archaeologists are concerned with concentrating on the prehistoric cultural heritage of Africa. The archaeology of the colonial period in Africa is a very new, and still very limited field of study.

Up until the late 18th century in English-speaking North America and the Caribbean a general feeling prevailed among slave owners that teaching Christian doctrine to slaves would undermine the authority of the slave masters, thus Christian practice was not at first forced upon slaves in the New World.

In North America from the 16th to the 19th centuries slave owners were always concerned about the "conspiratorial" or "heathenish" aspects of slaves holding funerals for fellow slaves, but they did not forbid the practice. In some cases they felt it callous to do so; in other cases they felt that such a prohibition could cause embitterment leading to slave rebellions.

On some plantations, special groups of slaves appear to have prepared the corpse, with taboos against others touching it, a practice similar to many African cases. In Cameroon, for example, excavations in the Mandara Highlands reveal data which show that in some societies male "transformers" are responsible for carrying out the funeral but in others the funeral is carried out by the family of the deceased.

Among the Yoruba tribe, the blacksmiths are called upon the put the body in the coffin and seal it.

The age and gender of slaves brought from Africa thus may have been of critical importance in the transmission of burial practices between the cultures of the two continents. As an example, the 18th century British trade into Jamaica was predominantly in adult males "in the prime of life" with around 58% males, 35% females and 7% children as fairly standard.

The age and gender of the slaves would have influenced their cultural knowledge. Age-grade systems and secret societies in some African groups may have limited the knowledge of burial practices to within certain groups of older, often male, individuals. Thus, transmission of cultural practices to the Americas would have been

highly dependent on whether such specialists were present. It can be fairly safely assumed however, that in most situations at least some of the males would have been old enough to have been versed in the burial practices of their culture.

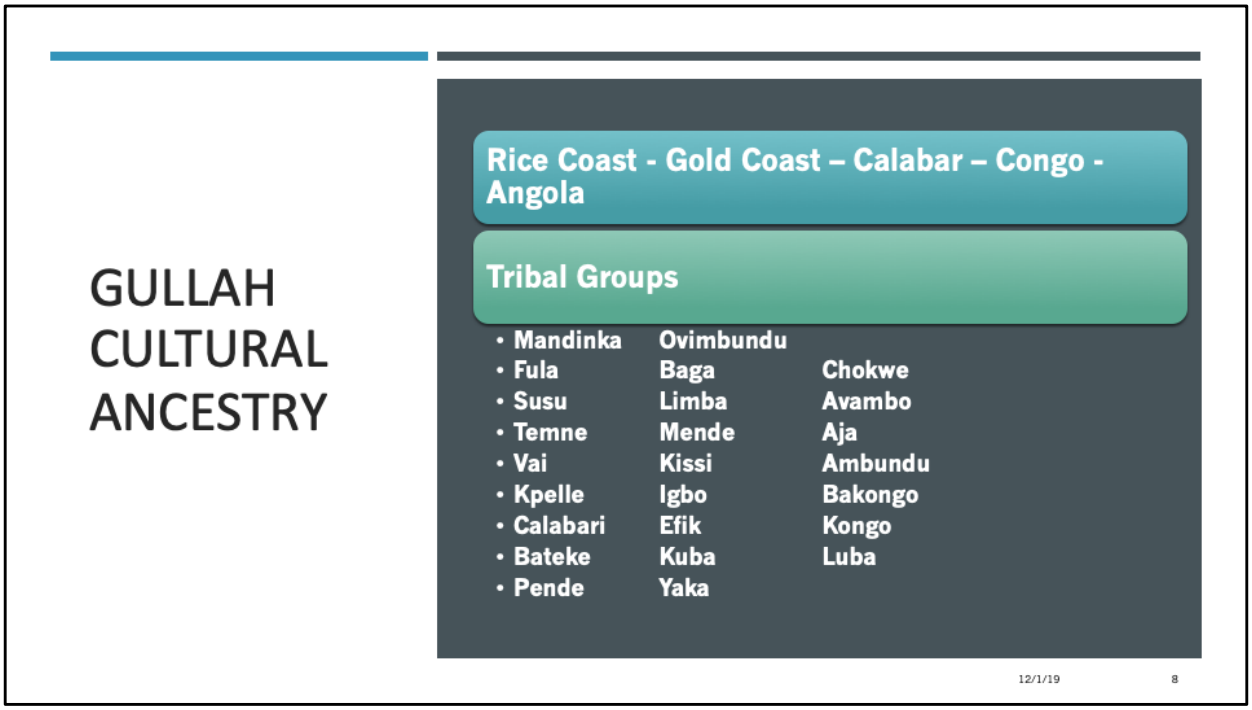
The physical location of the burials may be another clue to African practices. Separate burial practices for different social groups is a common occurrence in many African societies, with the location of burials often tied to the symbolism of a group's cosmology.

In some African societies those who died a “natural death” were distinguished from those who died in childbirth, from infectious disease, from being struck by lightning, from committing suicide, and as victims of murder or drowning.

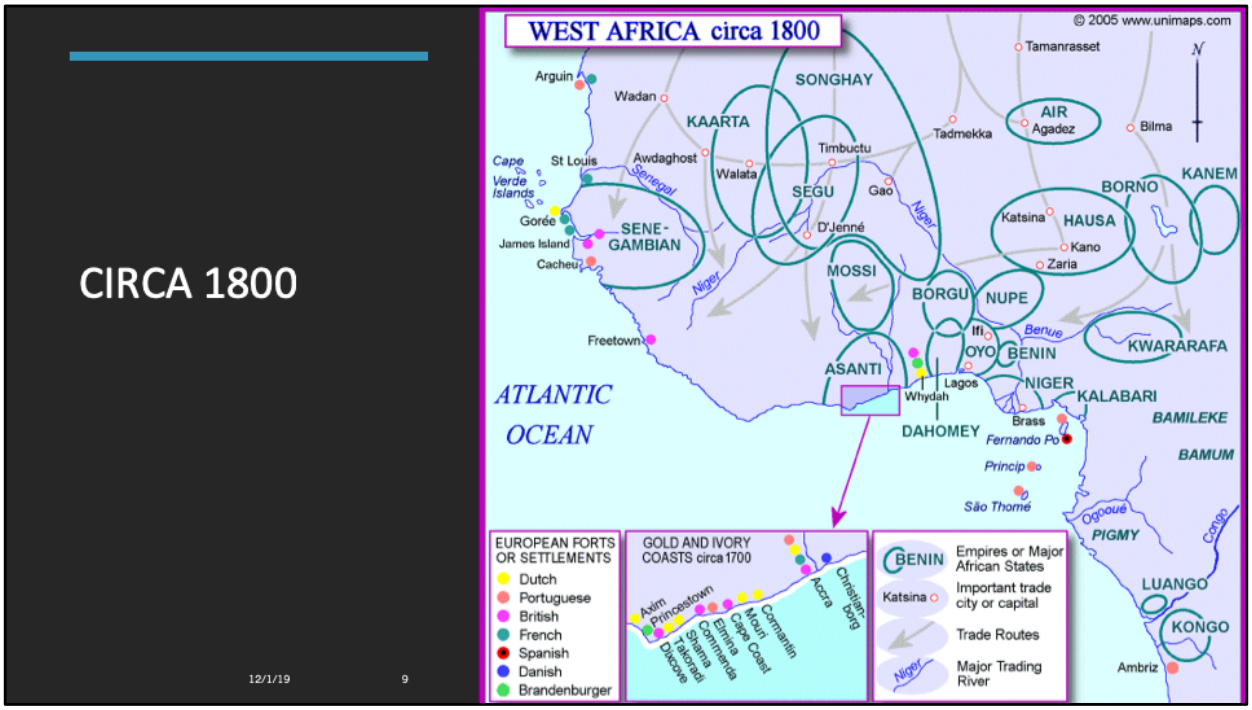
In early American slavery, funeral customs were one of the few areas of Black life into which slave owners tended not to intrude.

Plantation owners chose the least productive part of the plantation to site slave cemeteries (in the case of Datha, that was marshland).

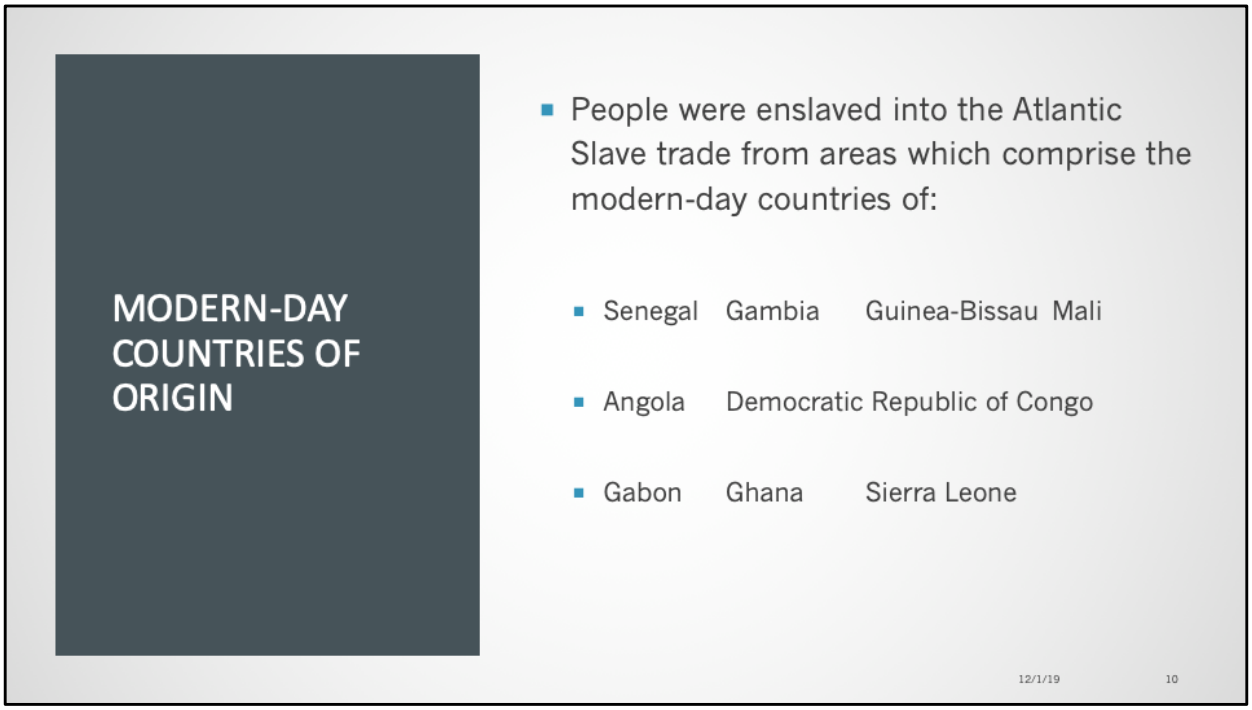
Gullah traditions are not, of course, all purely African. The Gullah slaves borrowed practices from their white masters, but they always gave these an African spirit. The Gullah became Christians, for instance, but their style of worship reflected their African heritage. In slavery days they incorporated into the Christian service, a ceremony called the “ring shout" in which participants danced in a ritual fashion in a circle amidst the rhythmical pounding of sticks then, at the culminating moment, experienced possession by the Holy Spirit while shouting expressions of praise and thanksgiving. The ring shout raises the subject of cultural change among the Gullah, as this custom, like some other Gullah practices, seems to have completely died out.



Gullah culture seems to emphasize elements shared by Africans from different areas. The Gullahs' ancestors were, after all, coming from many different tribes, or ethnic groups in Africa. Those from the Rice Coast, the largest group, included the Wolof, Mandinka, Fula, Baga, Susu, Limba, Temne, Mende, Vai, Kissi, Kpelle, etc.—but there were also slaves brought from the Gold Coast, Calabar, Congo, and Angola. The Gullah slaves adopted beliefs and practices that were familiar to Africans from these widely separated regions. In most cases, therefore, we cannot say that a particular Gullah custom is from a particular African tribe; but we can often point more generally to West Africa, the Western Sudan, the Rice Coast, etc.



One of the most direct and unaltered visual manifestations of African influence on the culture of African-Americans in the United States is found in the social behaviors centered on funerals. In many rural graveyards across the South and many urban cemeteries in the North and far West too, Black Americans mark final resting places of loved ones in a distinctive manner. While standard markers or floral arrangements are used, the personal property of the deceased is often placed on the top of the grave. This can range from a single emblematic item like a pitcher or a vase, to an inventory of the dead person's household goods. One can find clocks, cups, saucers, toothbrushes, marbles, piggy banks and more. Such material collections of honor contrast with the usual contemporary European-American ideal of burial landscape. Such a collection establishes a connection to customs and practices known not only on Southern plantations but also in West and Central Africa.



Despite the massive conversion of Africans to Christian faiths, they retained many of their former rituals associated with the respect of the dead.
Placing personal items on graves is more than an emotional gesture. One resident of the Georgia Sea Islands testified, “Spirits need these [things] same as the man. Then the spirit rest and don’t wander.” In addition to personal objects, some African-American graves in the South are decorated with white seashells and pebbles, suggesting the watery environment at the bottom of either the ocean or a lake or river. Such material items are not associated with the Christian belief of salvation; they are more likely signs of the remembrance of African custom.

Earlier I mentioned that marshland, deemed useless by the planter, actually served the slave quite nicely. In South Carolina, nearly 40 percent of all slaves imported between 1733 and 1807 were from the Kongo-speaking region; their world of the dead is known to be not underground but under water. This place is the realm of the bakulu, creatures whose white color marks them as deceased. Shells and stones signal the boundary of this realm, which can only be reached by penetrating beneath the two physical barriers. Their whiteness remembers that in Central Africa white, not black, is the color of death.
Bodies were laid to rest in an East-West orientation confirming the belief that as the

spirit rose from the grave, it would be facing back toward Africa where it would return home Also found in Black cemeteries are pipes driven into burial mounds to serve as speaking tubes that may allow communication with the deceased and mirrors that are said to catch the flashing light of the spirit and hold it there. When given the opportunity, any people will carry a heartfelt custom and tradition from place to place as essential cultural property. These same customs for instance, are found in burial sites in the S.F. Bay Area of California.

WEST AFRICA - TODAY

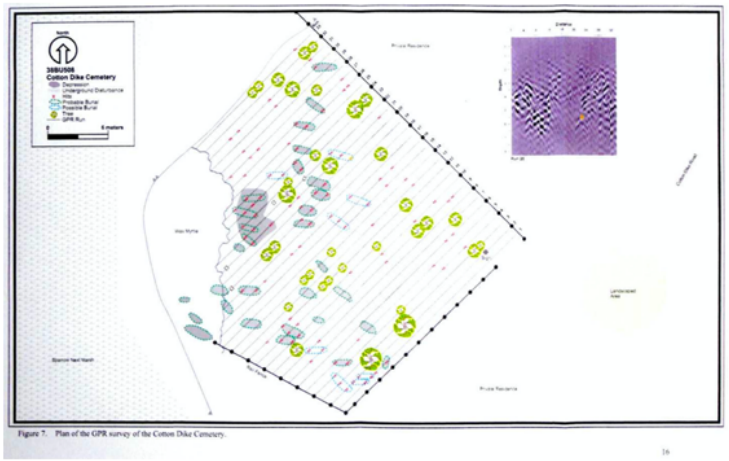
COTTON DIKE CEMETERY

GROUND PENETRATING RADAR SURVEY OF COTTON DIKE CEMETERY

"Based on the inspection of the ground surface and the GPR information, we estimate that there are at least 38 possible or probable graves in the Cotton Dike Cemetery."

Brockington and Associates, Inc.

February 2006



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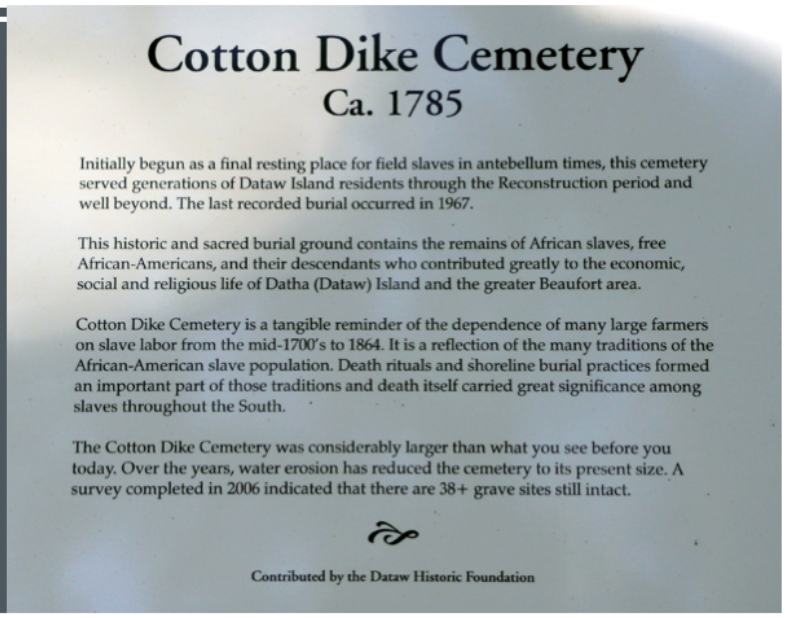
As for the Slave cemetery at the end of Cotton Dike Road, we have identified 38 graves to date, thanks largely to Andrew Robinson, a former resident of Datha, and his nephew Nathaniel but there surely were many more graves at one time.

Storms over the past 230 years, especially the Great Sea Island Storm of 1893, have swept away large parts of this cemetery.

In 2007, DHF led a rededication of the Cotton Dike Cemetery. Over 60 members of the Robinson family attended.

It was a very satisfying moment to see mothers and fathers pointing out to their children the names of long lost family members and connecting them at last to their heritage.

REDEDICATION OF COTTON DIKE CEMETERY DEC 2007

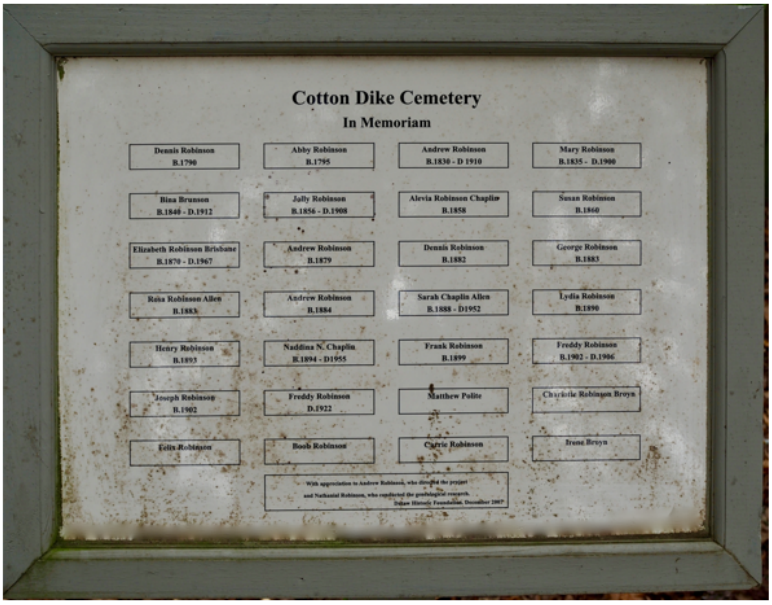


REDEDICATION OF COTTON DIKE CEMETERY

DEC 2007

WILLIAM, ANDREW, ARTHUR ROBINSON

ALLEN
BRAYN
BRISBANE
CHAPLIN
POLITE
ROBINSON



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Dennis Robinson b. 1790 is the first person buried here. Also members of the Chaplin, Allen, Brisbane, Brayn, and Polite families.

REDEDICATION OF COTTON DIKE CEMETERY
DEC 2007

Sources:

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