

**The Gullahs of Squire Pope Road:
A Case Study in Social Impact Assessment**

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Abstract

Gullahs are descendants of enslaved Africans living in the Sea Islands and coastal areas of South Carolina. Hilton Head Island was inhabited entirely by Gullahs until 1956, when entrepreneur Charles E. Frazier developed Sea Pines Plantation and changed the history of the island. In less than fifty years, the island has become an internationally known resort destination with gated communities, seashore condominiums, expensive hotel properties, and elaborate country clubs. Gullah land ownership has dwindled to less than ten percent of the island. The Incorporated Town of Hilton Head has published a design to improve the roads, water, sewer, and utility services for populations living in Ward One of the island. The plan recommends expanding traffic capacity on Highway 278 from the entrance of the island through Squire Pope Road, a two-lane road running through one of the few remaining communities on the island with significant Gullah populations. Planned changes may result in the displacement of Gullah families, businesses, and the historic Mt. Calvary Missionary Baptist Church. Profile data were collected to determine the perceptions of Gullah residents toward published plans for structural changes in Ward One. Study findings represent the profiling stage of a social impact assessment.

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Introduction

Jackson, Slaughter, and Blake (1974) recommend researchers be *accountable* to indigenous communities by upholding a philosophy of service through their research. Kenneth Clark (1965) describes the researcher as an *involved observer*, a person who actively interacts with the people of a native community. This study represents part of a long-term research initiative by an involved observer with a sense of accountability to indigenous populations. Great care has been taken to ensure local knowledge and the expertise of native people remains an integral part of the investigation.

This manuscript describes a case study conducted in 2003 on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. The five-week case study satisfies the required profiling stage of a social impact assessment scheduled for completion in 2004. The study began with an ethnographic history of the people residing on Ward One of the island, a district heavily populated by descendants of enslaved Africans (Gullahs) indigenous to the region.

The Gullahs are a traditional, rural population that has not experienced the economic rewards enjoyed by property owners on other parts of the island. An independent report indicated the economic under-development of Ward One may be attributed to a combination of factors including multiple land ownership with clouded legal title, inadequate financial resources, rapidly increasing land taxes, substandard utility services, and multiple failures by the Incorporated Town of Hilton Head to meet its municipal obligations to the people living in that particular district (R/UDAT 1995).

Gullahs of Hilton Head Island

Gullahs are descendants of enslaved African Americans living primarily in the Sea Islands and coastal regions of the southeastern United States. Pollitzer (1999) suggests the Gullahs were able to maintain a unique and distinctive African American heritage due to their isolation on islands off the coast. Glanton (2001) and Walcott (2002) agree Gullah culture evolved in relative obscurity until the 1950's, when the construction of bridges connecting the mainland with the Sea Islands triggered economic growth along coastal South Carolina. Siegal (2000) and Rowland (1996) argue a coastal economy founded on resort tourism has led to expensive hotels, country clubs, gated communities, and similar land development directed toward Gullah owned properties.

Gullahs are rural, traditional people who use their natural environment for subsistence, recreation, esthetic pursuits, and social activities. Campbell (6-4-02) suggests gated communities have limited the freedom of Gullahs to roam traditional hunting grounds, fish in salt-water rivulets, and visit sacred burial grounds. Walcott (2002) and Siegal (2000) report coastal development has adversely affected local waters that no longer produce ample supplies of shrimp, crab, and fish. Gullah artisans struggle to locate the required materials for a thousand-year-old art form--the making of sweet grass baskets. Campbell (7-2-01), Goodwine (6-12-01), and Mitchell (6-26-03) argue the esthetic and cultural character of traditional Gullah communities has been altered by economic development in the Sea Islands.

Gullahs living on Hilton Head Island have been particularly affected by the socio-economic changes associated with land development. Inhabited exclusively by Gullahs after the Civil War, the island was accessible only by ferry until the first two-lane swing bridge was constructed in 1956. After the four-lane J. Wilton Graves Bridge was built in 1982, dirt roads

and pristine timberlands were replaced by resort hotels and world-class golf courses. Greer (2000) reports Hilton Head has grown from a population of 2,500 Gullahs in 1960 to 36,000 mostly non-Gullah inhabitants today. During the same period of time, Gullah land ownership has dwindled to less than ten percent of the island.

Approximately 2.3 million tourists visit Hilton Head annually and 60,000 people inhabit the island during a typical week in the tourist season. Highway 278 encircles the island providing motorists access to residential areas and businesses. Highway 278 was widened in the early 1990's to provide better traffic flow and more convenient access for island residents and tourists. Traffic levels on the island continued to escalate, so the Beaufort County Department of Transportation engineered the Cross Island Parkway in 1998 to provide a direct route across the island. Native Islanders report road improvements on Hilton Head have displaced Gullahs from their land (Interviews 2003).

The Incorporated Town of Hilton Head, responding to problems described by their local chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), requested a Regional/Urban Design Assistance Team (R/UDAT) to investigate socio-economic development on the island. R/UDAT teams are comprised of professionals not compensated for their services nor provided commissions for work resulting from their recommendations. R/UDAT teams study a community and its people, engage in an analysis of community development strategies from an unbiased perspective, and offer recommendations for planning and governmental policy (R/UDAT 1995).

The 1995 R/UDAT Report of Hilton Head Island specifically targeted the economic development strategies applied in Ward One, describing this district as an area whose inhabitants have not experienced the economic rewards enjoyed by property owners living on other parts of

the island. Ward One is a district heavily populated by Gullahs who have witnessed little, if any, public or private resources allocated to the long-term economic viability of their communities. R/UDAT (1995:3) stated, “The 1983 Incorporation of the Town of Hilton Head led to the establishment of a ‘limited services’ government that strictly regulated growth and economic development in Ward One.”

R/UDAT recommended the town immediately adopt a governmental policy of inclusiveness to meet its municipal obligations to the Native Islanders living in Ward One. R/UDAT further recommended improvement of the roads, water, sewer, utilities, communication services, and the procurement of tax relief provisions for property owners to improve the quality of life in that district (R/UDAT 1995:12-24). The NAACP offered public support of the R/UDAT recommendations calling for a more inclusive government able to meet its municipal obligations to the Native Islanders of Ward One.

The Incorporated Town of Hilton Head published Ward One Master Land Use Plan as a partial response to the public recommendations for developing a more inclusive governmental policy toward the people living in that district. The publication announces structural changes in roadways, sewer and water facilities, communications services, and tax relief provisions as methods of stimulating economic growth. The plan involves expanding traffic capacities on Highway 278 from the entrance of the island through Squire Pope Road, an area with significant Gullah populations. Whether expanded capacity takes the form of additional travel lanes, frontage roads, or reconfigured intersections, planned changes may affect and/or displace Gullah families, businesses and possibly the historic Mt. Calvary Missionary Baptist Church (R/UDAT 1995).

Significance of the Study

This study has significance for people concerned with the impact of technical, social, and economic changes on indigenous populations. The Gullahs are a traditional population with extensive economic and emotional ties to their land. The loss of land ownership places a burden on Gullah leadership to implement effective strategies for preserving Gullah culture and language. Emory Campbell (7-2-01), Executive Emeritus of Penn Center, Inc., an internationally recognized institution of African American Studies on St. Helena Island argues, “Gullahs are a people tied to their land, and we’re losing our land at an alarming rate. To sustain our culture, we’ve got to protect the land!”

The term *Gullah* literally refers to a *language* spoken by the ancestors of enslaved Africans, a language that merges African dialects with English ‘pidgin’ borrowed from the speech of Carolina colonists (Jarrett 2003; Pollitzer 1999). Marquette L. Goodwine (6-12-01), historian and preservationist, argues, “Gullah language is a living, breathing oral tradition used to preserve the culture of our enslaved ancestors. Gullah culture is in the midst of transition. Land development in the Sea Islands has triggered social and economic changes that affect the *Diaspora* of Gullah culture and language.”

This research introduces an important database for an island community targeted for planned change initiatives. The Native Islanders of Ward One represent the last viable contiguous Gullah community on Hilton Head Island. Published plans for structural changes in Ward One (i.e., expanding traffic capacities, sewer and water utilities, communication services, etc.) could be completed in harmony with standards designed to protect the historical legacy of Native Islanders. Local knowledge and expertise should play an important role in the implementation of planned changes.

Previous studies have established a precedent regarding Gullah attitudes and perceptions about land development in the Sea Islands. Goodwine (1998), Jarrett (2003), Jarrett and Lucas (2002), and Porcher (2001) report Gullah leadership has expressed definite preferences regarding highway and road improvements as follows:

- design of walking paths through a community to encourage social interaction
- ample room for roadside businesses, farm markets, and vegetable stands
- the elimination of continuous turn lanes extending from main highways/roads
- road expansion that does not remove historic oak trees and/or landmarks
- improving traffic safety without affecting the rural character of communities
- direct dialogue and face-to-face discussion with agencies responsible for planned change initiatives

Gullah preferences regarding planned changes stress the need to protect traditional cultural values, the rural character of surrounding landscapes, and traditional venues for community based social interaction. Governmental agencies should respect the preferences of native populations and attempt to mitigate the adverse effects of development prior to the implementation of planned change initiatives.

Research Theory and Methodological Applications

Studies of human behavior have emerged from two intellectual traditions, each with a different perspective on the nature and style of social research. Positivism, the first intellectual tradition, contends sense perceptions are the only admissible basis of human knowledge and precise thought (Berg 1998; Giddens 1974; Patton 2002). Positivism assumes social phenomena exist not only in the minds of individuals, but also as an objective reality. The fact that a social phenomenon may be viewed differently by subjects does not negate its existence, or the application of scientific principles as a valid means of investigation (Berg 1998; Coser 1977; Giddens 1974; Patton 2002). Patton (2002:69) clarifies the *objective* nature of positivism saying,

“A positivist seeks the facts or causes of social phenomena apart from the subjective states of individuals, using quantitative and measure-oriented methods to test deductive generalizations.”

Phenomenology, a second intellectual tradition, questions the premise that social reality can be determined using empirical data alone. The phenomenological perspective views social phenomena as constituting not one, but a set of multiple realities that require subjective methods of inquiry (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Berg 1998; Patton 2002). The phenomenologist is committed to understanding social phenomena from the actor’s *subjective* perspective. Thomas and Swaine (1928:572) clarify the subjective nature of phenomenology with their classic statement, “It is not important whether an interpretation is correct--if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.”

Phenomenological sociology assumes the position that reality is a matter of human perspectives, that people actively construct social reality from a subjective point of view. Max Weber (1964:29) stated, “We can only understand human action by using methods of investigation requiring ‘*Verstehen*’, or empathetic understanding.” Lewis Coser (1977:220) notes, “Weber’s method of sociological inquiry aimed for an interpretative understanding of social behavior by penetration into the subjective meanings that actors attach to their own behavior, as well as to the behavior of others.”

Ethnographic methods of investigation have traditionally been used to understand another way of life from the native point of view. Sociological methods of investigation that feature *Verstehen* have traditionally been used to obtain a more empathetic understanding of human behavior (Weber 1964). The ethnographic and sociological methods of inquiry applied in this study were chosen to yield a more interpretative and empathetic understanding of the attitudes and perceptions of a native community toward planned structural changes in their district.

Participant observation, personal interview, and focus group interviews were selected as appropriate methods of data collection, methods designed to encourage interactive group communication and empathetic exchanges among community members and the principal investigator.

A five-week field study provided opportunities for participant observation in the community under investigation. A systematic random sampling technique was used to select adult occupants from every other fifth dwelling for one-on-one interviews using a detailed map of the area. A series of focus group interviews were conducted to provide residents a forum for direct dialogue on issues pertaining to planned changes in the community. The University of South Carolina Beaufort at Hilton Head provided access to archival records and historical data. The Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition, a local agency dedicated to the preservation of Gullah culture, served as official liaison between the principal investigator and the Gullah community during each stage of data collection.

Study Findings

Study findings reflect the impact of economic development on traditional island lifestyles and provide readers an interesting dialogue of the functional and dysfunctional aspects of rapid social changes. An overwhelming number of respondents commented that a study of the planned structural changes in their neighborhood was a good idea. People commented a study of resident attitudes would greatly serve the community, for things develop quickly once money is available. Participants argued the community should participate in future studies of resident attitudes toward planned change.

Although the published Ward One Master Land Use Plan was not widely understood by

community residents, plans to expand traffic capacities from the entrance of the island through Squire Pope Road was of great concern for people in the neighborhood. The Mt. Calvary Missionary Baptist Church, an important spiritual and social institution in the Gullah community, sits in close proximity to Squire Pope Road. People commented that efforts to provide additional traffic lanes would likely alter the physical appearance of church property and create increased traffic flow directly in front of the church. Community concerns regarding road construction included the following:

- safety of neighborhood children due to increased traffic flow
- physical changes to the Mt. Calvary Missionary Baptist Church
- re-location of the Mt. Calvary Missionary Baptist Church
- re-location of Gullah families and/or roadside businesses
- rising taxes associated with highway and roadway expansion

There are several subdivisions of Gullah residents and a gated community of non-Gullahs (Hilton Head Plantation) at the end of Squire Pope Road. People suggested if (and when) additional studies are conducted the homeowner associations for those residents should be included as part of the dialogue.

There seemed to be a comprehensive level of stress felt by community residents regarding the changes planned for Ward One. The past maltreatment of Gullah cultural heritage was cited as a major problem. Comments were made about other significant Gullah institutions on the island being negatively impacted by real estate brokers and land developers. Comments were directed toward the altering and/or loss of sacred burial grounds, waterfront properties, traditional hunting grounds, fishing areas, family land use patterns, sharing of resources, and declining patterns of communal interaction by native islanders. The need to preserve the historical legacy of Native Islanders figured prominently in conversations about plans for future development on the island.

R/UDAT (1995) suggests the history of economic development on the island has not featured a sense of equity for Native Islanders. Gullah residents have witnessed many plans being passed for outside developers, but not for Native Islanders. Hilton Head has been transformed from a rural, agricultural island into an urban center and international resort. Of the 20,000 acres concentrated in large tract ownership, land development was funded by outside interests who profited from the island's natural beauty (R/UDAT 1995). By contrast, the 3,500 acres of Ward One are small tracts (5 to 10 acres) of privately owned properties. The under-development associated with Ward One has been exacerbated by fragmented ownership, clouded legal titles, poor utility services, inadequate finances, increasing taxes, and the decision of local officials to impose a "limited services" government dedicated to the regulation of economic growth (R/UDAT 1995).

Focus group discussions provided ample evidence that members of the Gullah community have developed a "sit back - wait and see" attitude with regard to plans for economic development. There exists an attitude that the "limited services" government imposed in 1983 has not been very beneficial for economic development in Ward One. Study findings indicate community residents would participate in future studies designed to assess the potential impact (s) of development strategies in the district.

Interview and group comments suggest certain Native Islanders holding leadership positions do not provide information that might allow ALL community members to participate in economic empowerment strategies, especially strategies designed to keep Gullah families on their land. There appears to be a rift among community members that a handful of Native Islanders are viewed as leaders, and that these individuals have personally benefited by working with outside developers.

The 1995 R/UDAT Report recommended corridor planning should be expanded beyond mere traffic engineering and access management issues to include a social impact assessment of the attitudes of residents toward planned changes. Barrow (2002) reports a social impact assessment may yield valuable data for mitigating the adverse effects of governmental policy on human populations. Finsterbusch (1977) argues the primary goal of a social impact assessment is to facilitate decision making by determining the full range of costs and benefits associated with planned change initiatives.

Profile data indicates a more comprehensive social impact assessment is required, a collaborative research effort to include partnerships established during previous field experiences. Dr. Ted L. Napier, Professor of Resources Sociology and Environmental Policy at Ohio State University, has agreed to *Mentor* the research project as partial fulfillment of a cooperative plan initiated by the Ohio University Regional Campus Research Development Program. The University of South Carolina Beaufort at Hilton Head has agreed to provide access to library and archival resources. The Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition has agreed to serve as a community liaison during the study. Reverend Ben Williams has agreed to provide a central location for focus group interviews (Mt. Calvary Missionary Baptist Church). A social impact assessment would provide Native Islanders an opportunity to voice their opinions prior to the implementation of planned change initiatives. The dissemination of study findings would provide local government an opportunity to prepare appropriate strategies for mitigating the adverse effects of planned change (s) on Native Islanders.

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