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Coming Through: Voices of a South Carolina Gullah Community from WPA Oral Histories

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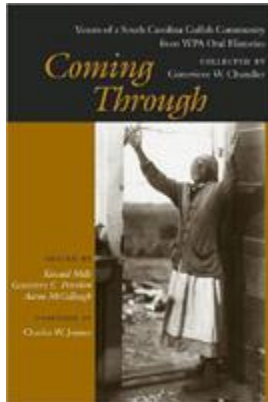
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Book Review



Genevieve W. Chandler, collector; Kincaid Mills, Genevieve C. Peterkin, and Aaron McCullough, editors. *Coming Through: Voices of a South Carolina Gullah Community from WPA Oral Histories*. Foreword by Charles W. Joyner. University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, 2008. xli + 391 pp., 14 photographs, 3 maps, references, 4 appendices, index. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-721-4.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archeology Newsletter by Christopher T. Espenshade, New South Associates

One of my earliest, large-scale, archaeological surveys on the South Carolina coast was the Arcadia tract, on the southern edge of the Waccamaw Neck. There were remnants of Gullah culture everywhere -- the rice fields and rice mill, slave quarters and post-bellum cabins, and a surprisingly high frequency of tar and charcoal kilns.

The Gullah themselves were still to be found. The distinctive dialect could be heard while waiting in line at Yum Young's Barbeque ("best barbeque in the Free World"). The local residents could be seen sweeping their yards, and you could still find doors and shutters painted purple to keep evil spirits out the house.

Unfortunately, there were significant gaps in the available literature. Charles Joyner's *Home Upriver* made some use of the WPA narratives from the area, and Jones-Jackson's *When Roots Die* touched on certain aspects of Gullah culture. Other areas boasted excellent volumes based on slave narratives (e.g., *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*, and *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*), but there was no such book for the Waccamaw Neck.

Twenty-two years later, students of culture, history, linguistics, folklore, and archaeology can now rejoice. *Coming Through: Voices of a South Carolina Gullah Community from WPA Oral Histories* provides a detailed and intimate look at Gullah culture on the Waccamaw Neck from slavery times through the Great Depression. It is a welcome addition to the regional literature, and it is

recommended reading for members of the African Diaspora Archaeology Network.

Coming Through presents an edited collection of excerpts from oral history interviews sponsored by the Federal Writers Project on the Waccamaw Neck of South Carolina. Genevieve W. Chandler conducted the interviews among the ex-slaves and their descendents of this area. The editors -- Kincaid Mills, Genevieve C. Peterkin, and Aaron McCullough -- provide context for each interview. More importantly, the editors have selected material to provide a broad understanding of Gullah culture in these communities. Charles Joyner offers a brief Foreword, and the introduction details the Federal Writers Program and Chandler's activities in the program. The four appendices give a sense of the challenges experienced by white researchers seeking information from black informants, many of whom grew up enslaved. Fourteen, beautiful, black-and-white photographs taken by Bayard Wootten at the time of the interviews complement the 48 sets of verbatim interviews.

I had a few minor issues with this volume. Perhaps I was spoiled by *Drums and Shadows*, but I found this volume to be lacking in natural context. There is no introduction to the unique geography of the Waccamaw Neck. There was neither discussion nor photographs of the distinct environmental zones and resources of the Neck, nor was there any discussion of the unique cultural landscapes (e.g., the rice fields). Personally, I am well familiar with the area, but I wonder how well other readers can relate without an environmental introduction. The landscape of the Neck is integrally linked to why certain enslaved Africans and African Americans were brought to the area, and to why it is one of the enclaves of surviving Gullah culture. For those unfamiliar with the area, I recommend that they read *Home Upriver* before reading *Coming Through*.

This volume is not an easy read. Any oral history from a tightly knit community is bound to have some degree of repetitiveness, and I think that there are minor organizational shortcomings that exacerbate the repetitiveness. It often seems that we are told what is going to be said, and then we are provided two or more verbatim transcriptions of the actual conversation. My recommendation is to read this book over month or more, reading only a few informants at each sitting.

The verbatim transcriptions can also be a challenge. To those not speaking or hearing Gullah on a regular basis, some passages take a while to interpret. The Gullah practice of often using "he" as the universal pronoun certainly requires care from the reader. However, I think that Chandler was correct in

recording these verbatim and the editors were correct in presenting the conversations as recorded. Oral history is not meant to be an easy read, and the language is such an important part of Gullah culture that the verbatim transcriptions are completely appropriate.

I fully appreciate the difficult choices made by the editors. They had to decide which accounts to include, and which to leave out. They had to predict and cater to the various audiences for this volume. At times I wondered if there was, perhaps, too much conversation about the details of day-to-day life, and not enough narrative addressing the past. As well, an archaeologist would certainly have culled different data from the narratives (I was particularly disappointed when the narrative of Reverend Albert Carolina was stopped, with a footnote stating that he continued to give a full account of his grandparents making and firing a load of hand-made pottery).

That said, there are nuggets of information that will be of specific value to the archaeologist (beyond developing a general feel for Gullah culture). For example, Lillie Knox tells us that the Gullah buried drowning victims north-south, rather than the typical east-west. She also provides excellent detail on many of the medicinal plants used by Gullah root doctors.

No single volume can reasonably be expected to present a comprehensive collection of the slave narratives from a given area. I judge *Coming Through* a great success in providing sufficient interviews to provide a real flavor of Gullah culture before and after Emancipation. The volume gives a valuable portrait of this distinctive culture, and the interviews stress individuals rather than cultural trait lists. The volume succeeds in bringing to life the Gullah of the Waccamaw Neck. *Coming Through* and other volumes of this genre also reminds us of the significant research potential residing in the yet to be published slave narratives. It is an interesting and educational volume, and it will be a valuable addition to the bookshelf of all readers of the newsletter. Beyond providing particulars of Gullah culture, the volume reminds us of the individuals behind the archaeology.