

An Exceptional Endeavor

Some people might question the importance of learning the history of African Americans and their contributions to South Carolina. If they desire to learn anything about South Carolina, they will discover that the African people brought here on slave ships, and their descendants, played a vital role in defining this beautiful state's history. Communities built by Africans are still thriving today and have become one of the great cornerstones of South Carolina's history.

Walking around Charleston, Beaufort, and many other places in this beautiful southern state, you can feel the deep history of the land. This history weaves a path all the way back to the beginning of America. South Carolina is home to an enduring community founded by Africans and their descendants, the Gullah people. The Gullah people live throughout the Lowcountry and coastal regions of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. Generations ago, Africans from various tribal communities situated in the rice-growing central and western parts of Africa, were stolen and sold into slavery. They were brought into the ports of Charleston and Savannah and put to work on the southern rice plantations. Because of these knowledgeable and skilled people, the North American rice industry thrived. Among the Gullah people, the fascinating creole language of Gullah Geechee developed. This remarkable language has extensively influenced the vocabulary and speech patterns of southerners and is the only distinctly used African American creole language in the United States. The Gullah people have a strong connection to the heritage of their ancestors from Africa and have maintained a rich tradition in art, music, and food. As an integral piece of South Carolina history, the Gullah people and their traditions should be protected and preserved so future generations will understand their significant contribution to our beautiful state.

Even though the majority of Africans who lived in early America arrived as slaves, their contribution to the growth and development of our nation is exceptional. They arrived with skills in farming and animal husbandry and provided the backbone of the labor force on southern tobacco, rice, and cotton plantations. It is important to acknowledge that not all history is glorious. Capturing and enslaving the African people to serve as unpaid and undervalued workers was indeed the ugly underbelly of American society. Taking the time today to recognize and rectify these mistakes by presenting the history of the early African people, provides an opportunity for all of us to gain a clearer understanding of their contributions to not only South Carolina history but to the foundation of American history. The economy of the south grew fat on the backs of Africans and their descendants. This strengthened South Carolina's influence politically and financially. The Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights movement changed everything. Today we are able to reflect on our history, taking steps to commemorate and celebrate the foundational role that Africans and their descendants have played in building America. The International African American Museum is one such institution contributing to this exceptional endeavor.