Protecting Gullah Land and Community: A Locative Media Website for Tourism, Community Planning and Education

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Executive Summary

In it's simplest form, locative media is a portal through which location can be connected to content. By delivering content directly to a hand-held GPS-enabled device, the interpretive material has the potential to create a visitor experience that is simultaneously self-directed, has low infrastructure costs, and has minimal negative impact to the local community and their cultural landscapes. However, the use and impacts of this technology on heritage tourism, particularly with respect to diffuse heritage resources such as heritage corridors and cultural landscapes, has yet to be fully explored.

This project looks at the application of locative media on the heritage landscape of the Gullah community of St. Helena Island, South Carolina. The goal for this project was to convey the cultural resources of an important historic landscape while adding to the current visitor resources of the Penn Center complex, and providing a multi-layered visitor experience. The project focused around the development of a website with two goals: one, to inform virtual visitors about the history and culture of the community on St. Helena, particularly as it related to the island's cultural landscape; and two, to create an interpretive delivery system for tourists that did not place the communities and their residents "on display."

The Gullah are a distinct cultural group of African Americans descended from slave populations brought to the United States from Africa and the Caribbean. Today they live in communities located along the southeastern coast of the United States, primarily in the states of South Carolina and Georgia. While very attractive as a destination for many tourists, the region does not have many sites that are well interpreted for African American heritage. St. Helena Island is one of the most intact cultural communities in the region.

Locative media has the potential to solve these visitor issues in a cost-effective format. Locative media is a method in which content in the form of narrative, video, images, etc., can be connected with a specific GPS point location on a map or on an actual site. Thus, the information can be accessed from two different perspectives: in front of a computer screen virtually touring the region, or on the ground with the aid of a GPS enabled smart phone. By either downloading a geo-referenced file or accessing a server through a cell phone Browser in real time, a visitor to a region or site can access information about a particular place on their smart phone or mobile device such as an IPad or tablet PC. Using this technology allows the locative media project to describe and publicize the significant features of the Gullah community on St. Helena Island and highlight sites of African American heritage.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction ……...4

2. Context: The Gullah of St. Helena Island ….....5
   2.1 Issues to be Explored in the Website ..7

3. Methods and Materials: Applying Locative Media to the Cultural Landscape ….……..……...9

4. Results and Discussion …….….10

5. Conclusions ……...…11

6. Acknowledgments …….…12

7. References ……..…....13

1 Introduction

New media in its various forms, including social networking, virtual reality, augmented or mixed reality, wikis, dynamic data, online communities and geo-tagging, have now been in use a little more than a decade. Several key books, reports and journal articles have reviewed the use of multi-media projects in heritage (Marinou 2006), including interactive projects (Affleck et al. 2008), games (Champion 2008) and digital visualization (Jessop 2008), and reviewed the opportunities and constraints of new media's applications to heritage resources (Brizard et al.; Kalay et al. 2008). However, locative media, where content is connected to a specific geographic location, has had comparatively little study to date, particularly in its applications to cultural tourism and the heritage resources of cultural landscapes.

The development of locative media has been extremely rapid, beginning in the late 90's with the coining of the term, and developing primarily in the arts community in the later part of this decade. Locative media developed out of visual arts projects (Nova 2004; Townsend 2006) in the context of understanding the landscape of the city and communities. In these projects, the connection between content and location was paramount. Although the technology has been available for some time, the potential of locative media is just beginning to be recognized in humanities disciplines, particularly its application to heritage resources and their interpretation.

In it's simplest form, locative media is a portal through which location can be connected to content. By delivering content directly to a hand-held GPS-enabled device, the interpretive material has the potential to create a visitor experience that is simultaneously self-directed, has low infrastructure costs, and has minimal negative impact to the local community and their cultural landscapes. However, the use and impacts of this technology on heritage tourism, particularly with respect to diffuse heritage resources such as heritage corridors and cultural landscapes, has yet to be fully explored.

This project looks at the application of a locative media project on the heritage landscape of the Gullah community in the southeastern United States. The goal for this project was to convey the cultural resources of an important historic landscape while providing a multi-layered visitor experience that created value-added to the existing facilities at the Penn Center. The project focused around the development of a website with two goals: one, to inform virtual visitors about the history, landscape and community form of the Gullah community, and two, to create an interpretive delivery system for on-island visitors that does not place communities and their residents "on display."

2 Context: The Gullah of St. Helena Island

The Gullah are a distinct cultural group of African Americans descended from slave populations brought to the United States from African and the Caribbean.

Figure 1: *Map of the southeast United States showing the location of the case study community of St. Helena Island, South Carolina. Adapted from (National Park Service 2009)*

Present-day Gullah (also termed Geechee) communities are located along the southeastern coast of the United States from southern North Carolina to northern Florida, with the vast majority of communities in South Carolina and Georgia (figure 1). This region, termed the "sea islands", is a culturally and ecologically unique landscape, spanning an area approximately 250 miles long and 40 miles inland along the coast. The manner in which these lands were settled, juxtaposing the cultures of land owner and slave on large agricultural plantations, reinforced by the physical (and resulting social) isolation, provided the environment for the development of this distinct cultural group.

Descended from the extensive slave populations that were brought to South Carolina from Africa and the Caribbean, the Gullah communities have dominated the Sea Island region for more than three centuries from the pre-Revolutionary War era to the present. Charleston was the Ellis Island of the African American community: most slaves were brought to the United States through this port. Due to the strength of the cultural base and the communities that have endured, the Gullah are one of the most studied populations in the United States.

The Gullah people have developed a distinctive culture in all its aspects—language, traditional foods, religion, music, folktales, and social structure. An additional key cultural expression can be found in the landscape forms and settlement patterns that are different from-- and at odds with--the dominant culture of the mainland. In recognition of the national importance of the region to African American history and culture, in 2006 the federal government designated the region the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor (2006).

While the designation of the region as a Cultural Heritage Corridor has provided a level of acknowledgement of the importance of the cultural landscape of the region, making that landscape visible and interpreting it has yet to be achieved. Although there are significant heritage resources remaining, the Gullah communities of coastal South Carolina and Georgia are feeling an increasing pressure from development, particularly that associated with tourism and retirement communities. Within the last 20 to 30 years various researchers have noted that increasing development is threatening Gullah communities and their distinct cultural landscape. New development patterns associated with large gated communities impinge on the pattern of Gullah communities, forcing people to move differently through the landscape, and in many cases leave their ancestral lands. New, gated communities have all but forced Gullah landowners and extended families to relocate off of Hilton Head Island, to abandon many traditional Gullah areas around Charleston, and to feel the mounting pressure in other areas of the region.

Local governments and land use planners are ill-equipped to mitigate these land use changes: since the physical form and landscape pattern of Gullah communities are poorly understood they are also undervalued. In order to sustain Gullah communities and their distinctive culture, it is critical that outsiders understand the patterns the Gullah have formed on the land, as well as the complex spatial and social patterns of their communities. At the same time, interest in African American heritage is mounting, and travel and tourism in traditional communities is on the increase. The difficulty in interpreting Gullah communities is that many of the sites and historical locations are hidden. This is not surprising in a community that developed under slavery and its aftermath, where to be hidden was safe, and where most meetings and assembly were done in secret. But it does present an interpretive paradox for heritage tourism in these regions: outsiders must understand the culture to comprehend its value, while at the same time local communities are wary of outsiders and of "Disneyfication," in the process of celebrating Gullah heritage.

2.1 Issues to be explored in the website: Place, Land, and Community

Three aspects of landscape are critical to understanding the physical forms and pattern characteristic of the Gullah cultural landscape: land ownership patterns, concept of community, and cultural arts and other practices related to the land. While these have been studied they have not been widely interpreted for either visitors or students of Gullah culture. So, while there is a feeling that the community is different, it is unclear how it is different, or why those differences are important to the culture. It is this lack of visibility and legibility that a locative media project holds the potential to rectify.

2.1.1 Concepts of Land and Land Ownership

Originating in both African traditions and the system of land distribution after the Civil War, the Gullah concept of land ownership is both complex and radically different from the dominant white community. As was traditional in Africa (Twining and Baird 1991), land is understood within the Gullah community to be held in common ownership by the family. All members of the family, including the extended family, have a partial interest in the property. Traditionally, families held land in common, and passed it down from generation to generation through inheritance equally to all members of the family.

Today, when any member of the extended family needs a plot of land to build a house, it can be had for "A dollar a deed, love and affection," a process whereby the older generation embraces new families into their family community or compound.

The Gullah community has faced a number of threats to continued land ownership due to the problem of "heirs' property." Heirs property resulted from land passing down through successive generations without recording title changes, particularly when family members died intestate. Since the land was typically held in common throughout the generational transfers, no individual or small group of individuals holds clear title (Jones-Jackson 1987).

In the Gullah community, the family is strengthened by the close functioning of family groups shared by relatives and functioning as one unit, an extended family that predominates in cultural importance. It is not uncommon to find as many as 8-10 buildings centrally located on a piece of land, in an organic arrangement, with little obvious distinctions of property boundaries. This pattern contrasts with the predominant American suburban pattern of a linear arrangement of rectangular lots along a street corridor, a similar pattern to the plantation villages that preceded the development of the compound.

Without understanding the cultural context, outsiders view these settlements as peopled by individuals with little care for their environment and living too closely together. However, there are entirely different cultural constructs at play, requiring an understanding of the importance of landscape dimensions and features necessary for healthy social interaction and support of the community.

2.2.2 Cemeteries and Access to the Waterfront

There are two other aspects of the organization of the landscape that are critical to the Gullah community today: traditional burying grounds and common community access to the water, no matter who owns the land, to harvest fish and shellfish. Various pre-Civil War plantation plats of the Lowcountry and written sources indicate that slave cemeteries were covered in trees, and the graves were not marked, increasing the confusion of outsiders today in recognizing sacred lands.

The South Carolina Lowcountry, particularly in Beaufort and Charleston Counties, is currently one of the fastest growing coastal areas in the country. The growth pattern is characterized by large-scale landscape conversions to single-family resort and retirement communities, and developments are typically marketed as exclusive and gated to enhance

a perception of safety. In addition, the most valued amenity offered is waterfront property.

Although compounds are not traditionally built with water frontage, water access is a traditional right for all members of the Gullah community. Access to the water is key to subsistence living that relies on fish and shrimp as a major protein source. The valuation of land for building sites is a classic example of the differences in values between two cultural groups: Gullah family compounds are rarely built on the water, although water frontage is highly valued by the Euro-American community. Thus, land that possesses an invisible web of traditional use may be perceived as vacant by outsiders.

Cemeteries are also often an invisible resource. Each pre-Civil War plantation had at least one cemetery, and there are over 40 known cemeteries on the island today. Cemeteries are traditionally minimally tended, with natural tree and shrub growth, and historically had unmarked plots. The traditional practice of leaving gifts for the departed, such as fabric flowers, a stuffed toy, a piece of cutlery or coins is still practiced, with the offerings becoming part of the forest floor over time. While practices are changing towards more understory clearing and ground-level headstones or upright headstones are also becoming more common, to western eyes, the lack of tending indicates an absence of value, and so most traditional cemeteries have been ignored even though they remain sacred ground in the community.

3 Methods and Materials: Applying Locative Media to the Cultural Landscape

The goal of this project was to develop a locative media prototype for the island that could serve as a pilot and be added to in the future. The project included developing a storyline and structure for the site, and collecting and preparing content to tell the different parts of the story from history of the Gullah community on the island, through the form, structure and landscape of their communities today.

The site builds on the structure of a traditional website, with the additional of available software to create an interface for hand-held devices. Content that is delivered to the hand-held devices is primarily in the form of videos or images. It is possible to skim the surface and gain an understanding of the community and its way of life, or to delve deeply into one or more of the topic areas, providing casual visitors with an overview of the historic landscape patterns of the Gullah, while at the same time allowing professional researchers and/or interested individuals to access a wealth of archival information specific to St. Helena Island.

The locative media portion of the website allows for a clearer picture to be conveyed of the qualities of the Gullah historic landscape, how it was created, and how it is being impacted by development pressures. In this way it interfaces well with the resources available at the Penn Center including the York W. Bailey Museum.

The site content is broken down into three areas: Land, Community and Culture. Each content area hold three subsections:

Land: Access to Land, Growing Food and Cooking
Community: Praise House, Cemeteries, Penn Center
Culture: Music, Quilt Making, Boat Building

For its first level of information in each subsection, the website relies primarily on video to illustrate the importance of land and physical community structure. The individuals interviewed for the website were identified by staff at the Penn Center, given a prescreening interview and then scheduled for an on-camera interview. The videos are augmented with historical photographs and documents. The historical documentation used for the development of the historical content is focused as much as possible on the specific documentary evidence available for the island.

4 Results and Discussion

In summary, the project had two main goals:

1. to document cultural attitudes and values toward the interaction of land, place and community, and

2. to educate a broadly defined public about the spaces, places and values that are critical to the Gullah cultural heritage.

Success was achieved in the first goal of the project, to document cultural attitudes and values in the community on St. Helena Island. The stories of culture and heritage were told in the community's own voice, through participants selected by the Penn Center, the non-governmental organization on the island. This can be contrasted with an expert-based approach, where academicians or historians from outside the area define and tell the story. While the content of the stories may not always be based on solid documentary evidence, these are the community's own stories and reveal contemporary cultural attitudes and values.

The historical documents used on the website are primarily from the Island. In some instances, photographs and other documents form the surrounding islands were use, although these were carefully noted as not being of the island. Clarity in this regard is important to create a clear picture of the historical conditions on the island, particularly as they were different from, and at time unique in contrast with other areas in the state and the South as a whole.

Am assessment of the success of the second goal will require additional time beyond this grant period. There are three levels of audience that the locative media site will reach:

National and International: Individuals interested in learning about the cultural landscape and communities of the Gullah culture, who are either engaged in local heritage tourism, or who access the information on the website.

Regional: Gullah communities (South Carolina, Georgia, northern Florida, and southern North Carolina) as a model of heritage tourism, community planning and documentation of the importance of place, land and community to the culture as a whole.

Local: the Gullah community on St. Helena Island and Beaufort County: the form, culture and history of Gullah communities and land patterns that are significant to this community.

Future data collection and analysis of the user experience is needed. Website visitor counts, mobile download counts, and user surveys will be needed to assess how well the technology has met its potential, and to fully illuminate its strengths and weaknesses.

5 Conclusions: Strengths and Weaknesses of Locative Media

The potential of locative media lies in a number of areas, for the virtual and the on-site visitor.

In the virtual world,

1. the website provides access to information about a physical place, coordinated with map points to provide spatial understanding.

On site,

2. it creates a visitor experience that is highly interactive with the landscape: people are not separated from, but are immersed in the resource – the landscape – they are learning about;
3. the visitor experience is highly experiential: visitors move through and experience first-hand, while they are accessing interpretive information;
4. it provides a low-cost way to provide interpretive information to the visitor; and
5. it can provide a value-added format to the traditional cultural museum.

6 Acknowledgements

The website could not have been built without the many photographs made available for the project by the Penn Center from their archives located at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. We have included 20 photographs in the website from a rich archive of more than 4000 photos, many from the period between 1860 and 1930. The Civil War era photos in the Penn Center collection are invaluable in understanding slave life on the cotton plantations of the island.

The website would not have been possible without the time and commitment of the Penn Center staff led by Executive Director Walter Mack.

The website would also not have been possible without the time and expertise committed to the project by the community members interviewed. The sharing of their knowledge made this project a success: Joe McDomick, Sara Reynolds Greene, Bill Greene, Mary Rivers Legree, Ernestine Atkins, Walter Mack, Marlena Smalls, Thomas Mack and Sam Moultrie. Six other individuals gave of their time and were also interviewed - Captain

Cripp Legree, Garfield Smalls, Elise Mollison, James Holmes, York Glover and Luke Inabinett – and we are awaiting additional funds to allow for the editing of their videos into additional segments for the website.

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