

Sea Change in the Sea Islands

"Nowhere to Lay Down Weary Head"

By CHARLES L. BLOCKSON

Photographs by KAREN KASMAUSKI

NOWADAYS Verneda ("Rikki") Lights, M.D., a graduate of Bryn Mawr College and of the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, practices in Philadelphia. But in the 1950s, when she was a small girl in Charleston, South Carolina, she was passed over the coffin of her great-grandmother so that she would be free of fear in accepting the mystical powers the old woman had specifically bequeathed to her. Rikki's ancestress, like many other black mainlanders on the Southeast coast, had embraced the traditions and customs deeply embedded in the Sea Islands, just offshore. Rikki's family moved there—to the island of Port Royal—three years after the old woman died.

"My great-grandmother came from a community of Christian mystics," Dr. Lights explains. "In the islands we all took it for granted that there were spirits, and we had to get rid of the hostile ones."

Dr. Lights, who is descended from West Africans transported to America as slaves, has never doubted that the powers that she inherited are real. Her great-grandmother, a practical nurse and midwife who was expert in the use of medicinal herbs, was famous for her *clairvoyance*. Dr. Lights herself has a gift for medical diagnosis in internal medicine—a gift, she says, that came from God.

The physician feels that her inheritance has strengthened her natural talent for music and poetry and that the spirit of her island and ancestors is a strong presence in her personal and professional life. "For me there is no separation between medicine and poetry," she told me in the cool tones of a modern scholar as we discussed the treatment of cancer patients with the latest drugs. The miracles of modern medicine, Dr. Lights



CLOSED OUT of her birthplace on South Carolina's Kiawah Island, Dolly Green stands outside Vanderhorst Plantation, where her grandparents were slaves. Gates also limit access to a black cemetery on Sea Pines (above), an exclusive enclave on Hilton Head Island. Those visiting buried kin may enter, but the need to ask for a pass affronts black islanders who see their land and life-style lose ground to development. Says one: "I been swallowin' bitter pills and chewin' dry bones."

clairvoyance: Seeing into the Future

believes, are every bit as wondrous as the feats of her long-ago neighbor on Port Royal, who would give Rikki's mother "flowers hexed, which would never die."

The latter phrase was spoken in Gullah, the headlong Sea Islands Creole that mixes English words and syntax with those from the Caribbean and especially West Africa to create a speech that is all but incomprehensible to outsiders, including blacks who may live only a few miles away on the mainland.

Charles L. Blockson wrote about the Underground Railroad in the July 1984 *GEOGRAPHIC*. Photographer Karen Kasmauski is a frequent contributor to the magazine.



This tongue, sometimes called Geechee, is an important reason why Sea Islanders have preserved a way of life that remains African in some of its essentials.

Like many another Sea Islander, Dr. Lights fears that the world of her ancestors, which survived more or less intact into her own childhood, is fading away. Booming development is changing life in the Sea Islands, displacing people who have in many cases lived on family land for generations.

"The situation is horrendous!" says Dr. Lights. "The islands have become a playground for white people. But this will not conquer the spirits of those whom the Lord has spoken to! The land knows who it belongs to."

I HEARD this emotional, evangelical tone in many voices this past year as I traveled up and down the Sea Islands, those low-lying, marshy barrier islands that hug the coast of South Carolina and Georgia (map, page 745). In *When Roots Die*, her remarkable book about the life and language of the Sea Islands, the late Dr. Patricia Jones-Jackson explained some of the reasons: "The extended family is the norm in the Sea Islands. Most islands are sectioned off into family communities, where all members of one family, their close relatives, and people remotely related live or have a right to live. . . . Land is not normally sold to family members but is passed on through an unwritten contract called 'heir's land.'"

Island tradition also places great importance on burial in home ground, and islanders will pay all their lives on insurance policies designed to provide for funerals that may cost many thousands of dollars. Many still living in the islands believe that a person is composed of three parts—body, soul, and spirit. When the body dies, the

IN A FINAL AMEN an infant is passed over her grandfather's coffin, a West African custom to prevent his spirit from bothering her. In a hallelujah to life the Reverend Ben Williams, with staff (top), leads some of his flock to a river baptism on Hilton Head Island. "Man, you must go under the water to receive the Holy Ghost . . . none of that sprinkling stuff," a Charleston deacon told the author.

soul departs, but the spirit remains behind and is capable of doing good or mischief to the living. As in West Africa, graves in the Sea Islands traditionally have been adorned with belongings of the departed, and with charms designed to contain or placate the spirit of the person buried there. Real or imagined threats to graveyards are, therefore, a cause of disquiet.

The island people long lived in isolation, and many of their customs and beliefs closely resemble those of the Ibo, Yoruba, Kongo, Mandinka, and other West African tribes from whom they probably descend.

SIGNS OF DEVELOPMENT, and reactions to it, are particularly vivid on Daufuskie. Three-quarters of Daufuskie, a particularly lovely island lying off Savannah, has been earmarked for

development over the next 20 years, and two large tracts totaling 1,798 acres, or 29 percent of the island's surface, are already being developed to include more than 900 new homes, two inns, two golf courses, two tennis clubs, and two beach clubs, along with buildings for community services.

Local government officials estimate that "buildout," or the completed development of Daufuskie, will result in a population of 10,000 permanent residents in addition to a seasonal and part-time population of 10,000. Daufuskie's population in the 1980 census was 59, of whom 45 were black.

Property values were inflated dramatically by the development plan. A lot that may have been worth almost nothing rose in value to as much as \$50,000 depending on its location.

"Yayman!" says Thomas Stafford, who makes his living on Daufuskie as a crab fisherman. "Money talks and you know what walks—some people can't wait to leave!" Thickets of For Sale signs sprang up over the island and are still to be seen.

But the sale of the heir's land is not always entirely voluntary. Under South Carolina law, heir's property (land whose title is often clouded because the original owner died without having made a will) usually cannot be sold until the title is cleared, but heirs living on it must pay taxes in order to continue their residency. As development causes land to become more valuable, taxes

rise. Consequently, the occupants of heir's land are sometimes obliged to sell it in order to pay taxes. Because all known heirs must relinquish their interest in the land before title can be cleared, and because there may be hundreds of heirs to any given piece of land, the process is long, arduous, and fraught with emotion.

Most of the land on Daufuskie has been owned by whites since before the Civil War. In the days of slavery Daufuskie was divided into several large plantations growing



SPECIAL DELIVERY: During the 1940s and '50s, Agnes Brown, now 89, delivered most residents of Wadmalaw Island, including Kerry Linen (facing page). "Sometimes they'd keep the car running, and she'd rush off to the next one," granddaughter Ruth Peterson recalls. Folk medicine came to these islands from Africa, as did a taste for plants like the elephant ear (above). Chefs Edna Lewis and Sylvester Holmes prepare the tubers as a side dish for the Restaurant at Middleton Place near Charleston.

long-staple sea island cotton. Profits for the white owners were enormous—the supple, silky sea island cotton sold in European markets for more than twice the price of ordinary cotton. Union forces occupied Daufuskie early in the war. White owners abandoned their plantations, and blacks who had been their chattels were dispersed.

As the Confederacy collapsed, freed slaves moved into the Sea Islands in large numbers. On January 16, 1865, after meeting at Savannah with a delegation of black clergymen who pleaded for land for former slaves, Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman issued Special Field Order 15, ceding most of the Sea Islands in Georgia and South Carolina to them and declaring that no whites apart from military officers and others in helpful capacities were permitted to reside in the islands. After the war, however, President Andrew Johnson allowed plantation owners to return. Many former slaves nevertheless retained small holdings.





During Reconstruction two of the plantations on Daufuskie were subdivided into small tracts and sold to blacks who had moved onto the island, but the others remained under white ownership. A period of prosperity followed, based on sea island cotton, lumbering, and the rich oyster beds that surround Daufuskie. By the early years of the 20th century, a thousand blacks were residing there.

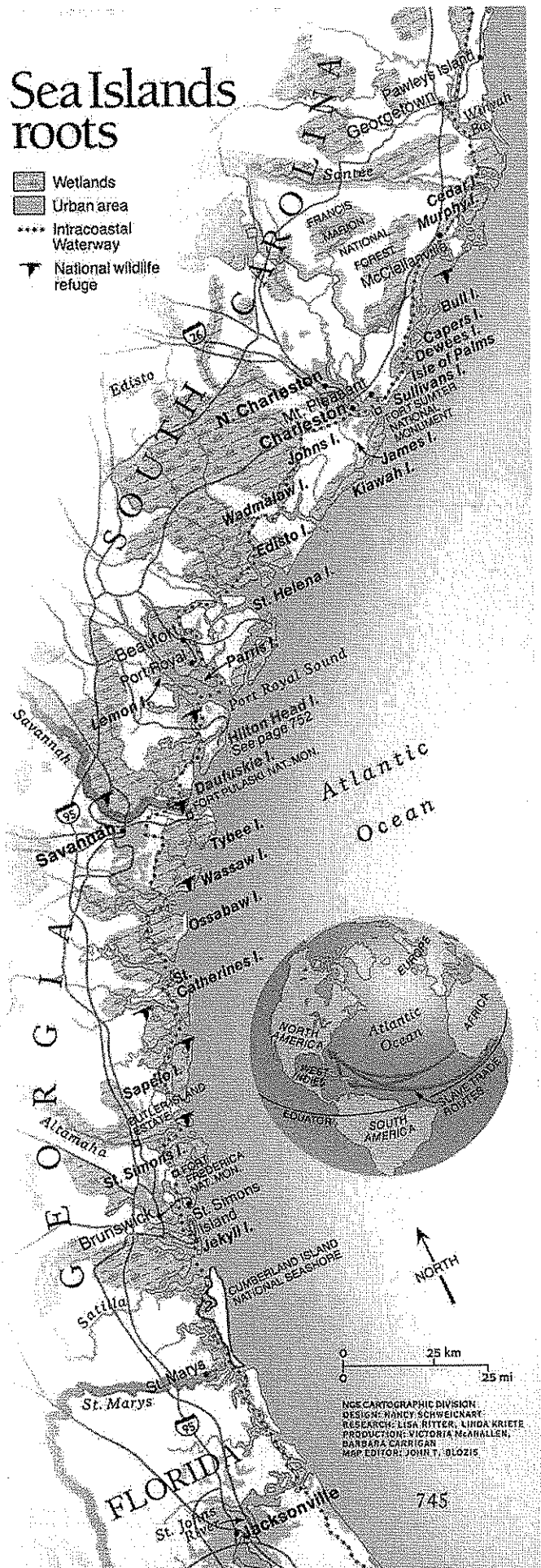
Then disaster struck. By the 1920s the boll weevil had destroyed the cotton industry. In the ensuing economic collapse, many black families sold their land to mainland investors and moved away, and by 1936 fewer than 300 blacks remained on Daufuskie.

THE MOSSY FRINGE of the Sea Islands edges a 250-mile stretch of southern coast. The islands, marshy lowland veined by tidal streams, number in the hundreds, perhaps thousands. Because the deep waterways offered good harbor, slaves were landed here from West Africa, or via the Caribbean, in a trade that continued as late as 1858. The slave population, by 1860 more than 400,000 in South Carolina alone, provided the muscle for plantations of rice, indigo, and cotton. During the Civil War, General Sherman issued Special Field Order 15, reserving land for former slaves. The order was widely ignored within a year, but many held on to their lands, bequeathing them to heirs.

Sea Change in the Sea Islands

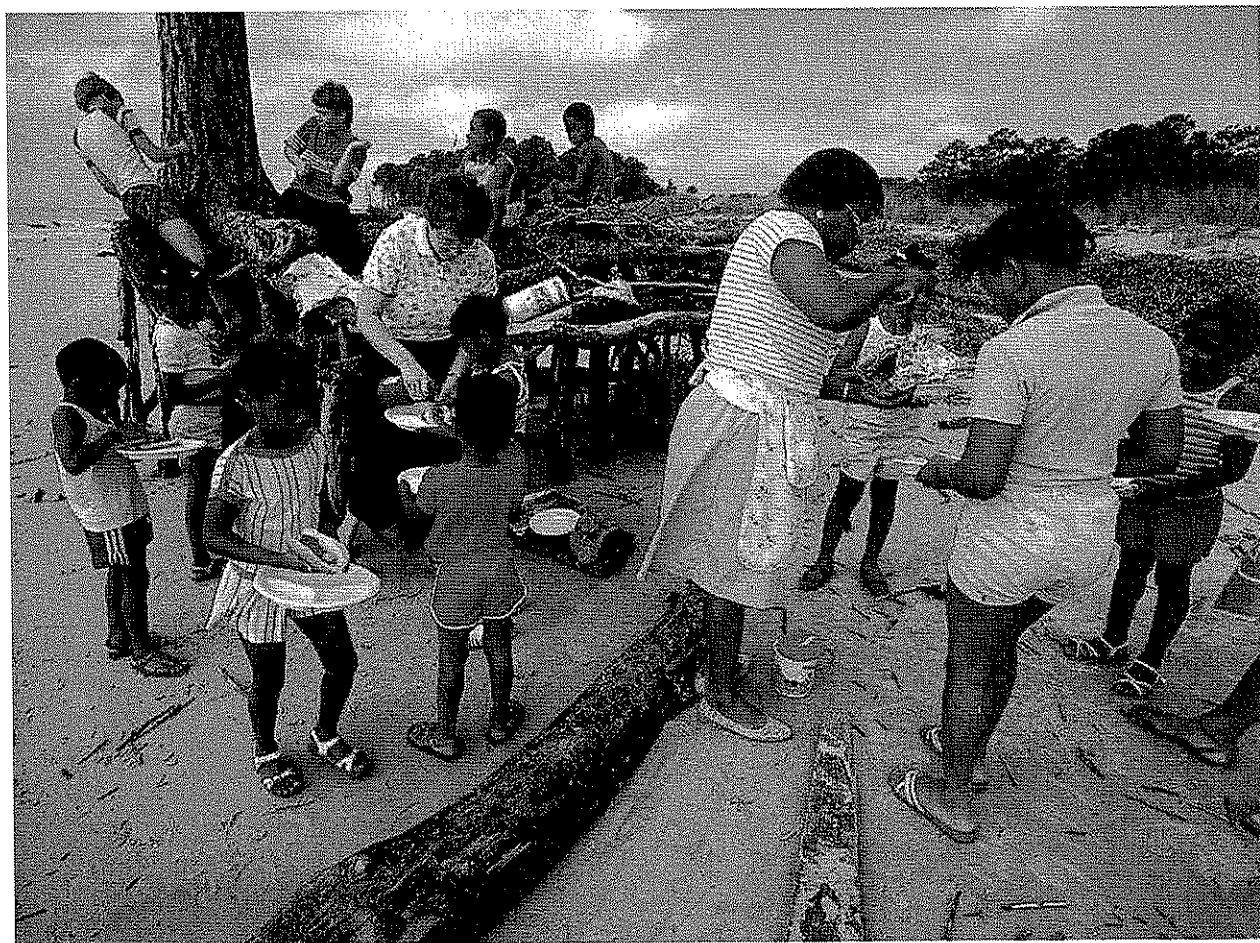
Sea Islands roots

-  Wetlands
-  Urban area
-  Intracoastal Waterway
-  National wildlife refuge



o Chattels: Slaves

o Clergymen: Church leaders



WITH ALL OF SUMMER stretching ahead, the Daufuskie Island children and their friends from the mainland picnic on the beach to celebrate the last day of school. A pine tree's exposed roots testify to the forces of erosion.

Many worked at an oyster cannery, but it was closed down in the 1950s after industrial pollution from the Savannah River poisoned Daufuskie's oysters. The population fell steadily as residents departed in search of work and education.

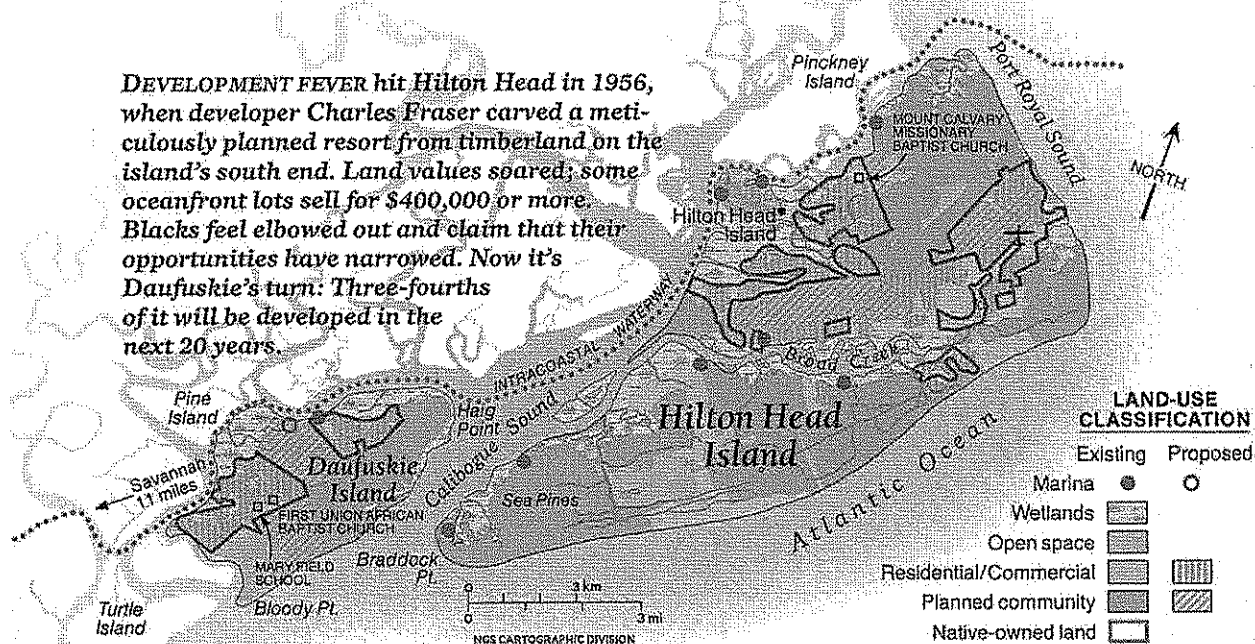
OTHER ISLANDS have experienced similar declines. The exodus has been so marked that some community leaders, such as Bill Jenkins, the heir of a family long established on Johns Island, believe that black ownership of the land will likely be a thing of the past by the turn of the century. Those who do remain will be living under conditions that are quite different from the life described in the Gullah folktales, in which the simple adventures of the islanders almost always involve the soil and the animals—Brer Rabbit, Brer Gator, Brer Deer, the friendly porpoise who leads mullet into the net, the wise buzzard

(a favorite creature among black islanders). “Most people feel, what can we do?” says Tom Stafford. “Sure, I raised some hell at first, but now I don’t feel a cuss about the damn pollution and the building that are changing everything.”

An elaborate plan of development, approved by the local authorities, seeks to provide adequate protection against overbuilding and the pollution and other problems that can result from it. But golf courses and hotels and villas, pleasing though they may be to the investor and to the city dweller, are not as enchanting to those who grew up on the islands as the salt marsh, the piney woods full of birdsong, the lagoon teeming with ducks.

To the outsider’s eye, the Sea Islands remain enchanting. Separated from the mainland and from one another by a system of tidal creeks and salty inlets, wide bays and marshes, they form magnificent beaches

DEVELOPMENT FEVER hit Hilton Head in 1956, when developer Charles Fraser carved a meticulously planned resort from timberland on the island's south end. Land values soared; some oceanfront lots sell for \$400,000 or more. Blacks feel elbowed out and claim that their opportunities have narrowed. Now it's Daufuskie's turn: Three-fourths of it will be developed in the next 20 years.



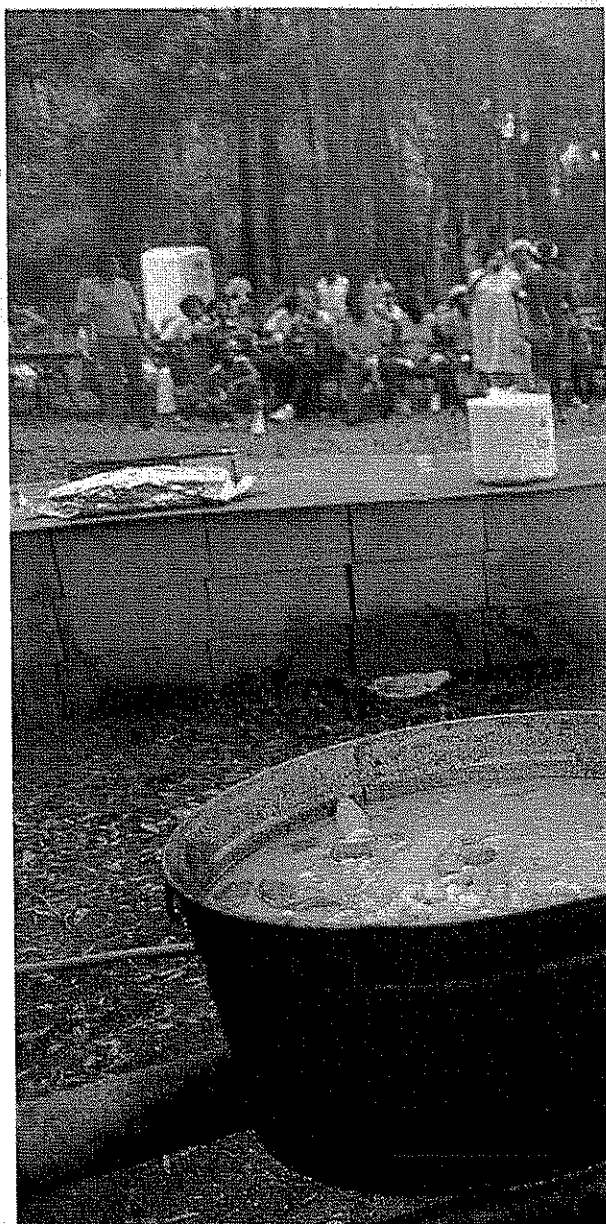
with the hope that they can move ahead into college level classes," says Mrs. Bush. But the 5,000 men and women who arrive daily on Hilton Head at 7 a.m. from five surrounding counties work in construction, service, landscape, cleaning, or maintenance.

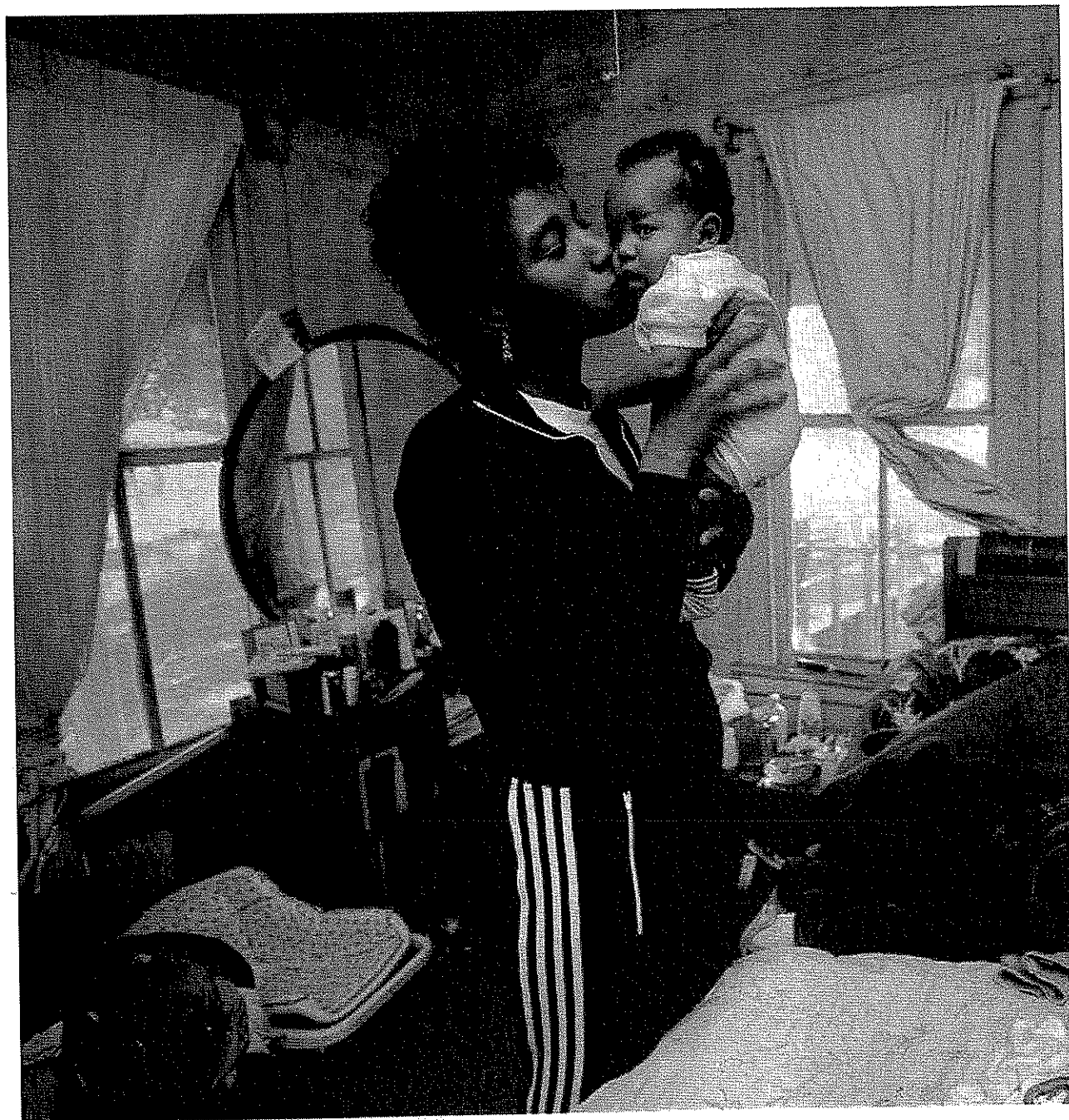
Like Mr. Chazal, Donald Martin, former vice president and now a consultant for the Haig Point Realty Corporation, which has been building on Daufuskie since February 1985, sees the resort boom as a long-term source of jobs in the Sea Islands. "Everybody who wants to work can work," Martin says. "Inevitably there will be growth and therefore more jobs."

"We can tolerate what is happening so long as there is progress with pride," says the Reverend Benjamin Williams, pastor of the Mount Calvary Missionary Baptist Church on Hilton Head and member of the board of the Paralleled Land Owners Association. "But surely residents must be given the privilege of traveling about on the islands of their ancestors without showing identification."

BENEATH this tense and puzzled surface, old things survive. One elderly woman, who asked that her name not be published, told me, "We have love and understanding here—but I tell you, when the burden becomes too heavy to carry, we go to church."

Churchgoing on the islands is an inspiring experience, and as Dr. Jones-Jackson observed, the sound of singing and praising





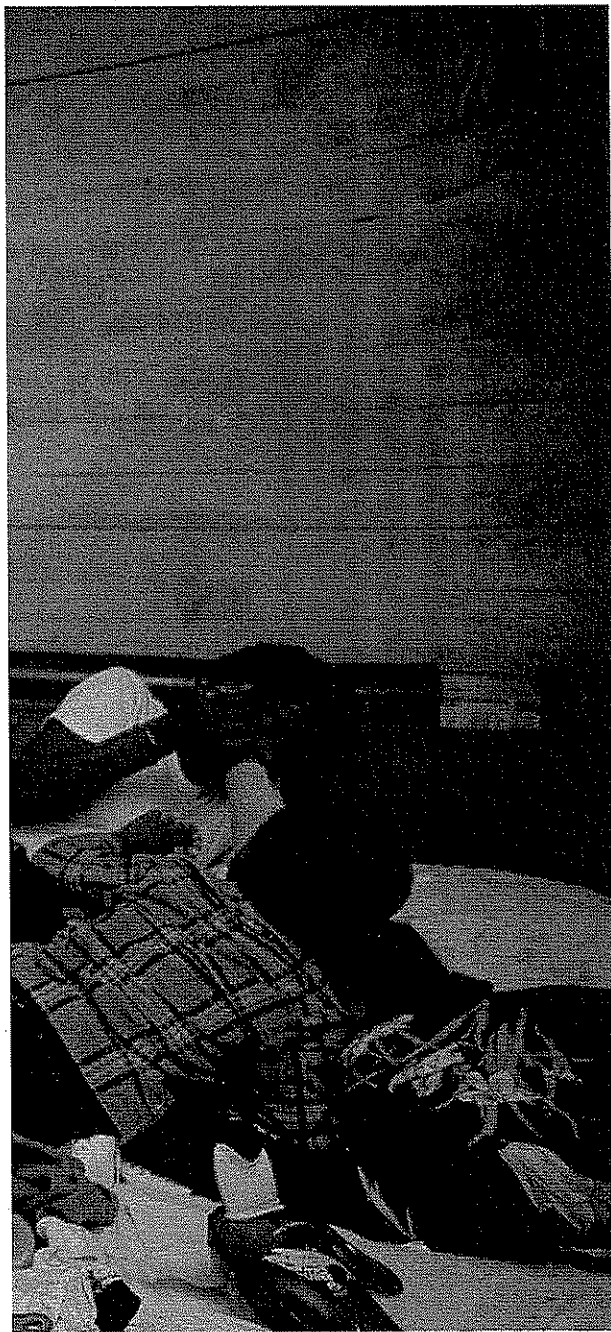
can be heard from afar on Sunday morning. In her book she quoted this passage from a prayer in an island church:

*As you say the foxes of the forest
Got hole
And then the birds of the air has nest
Master, we are poor son of man
Nowhere to lay down weary head.*

Mrs. Gillian Hinson-White spoke about other traditional activities. "I used to be the best shot on Fuskie," said Mrs. Hinson-White, who told me that she was 86 years old, five feet tall, and had always weighed

exactly 98 pounds. "I could shoot alligators between the eyes. I buried two husbands on Fuskie, and now those folks talking about removing the cemetery. If the construction companies bother my husbands' graves, that is the day I'll put *them* in one."

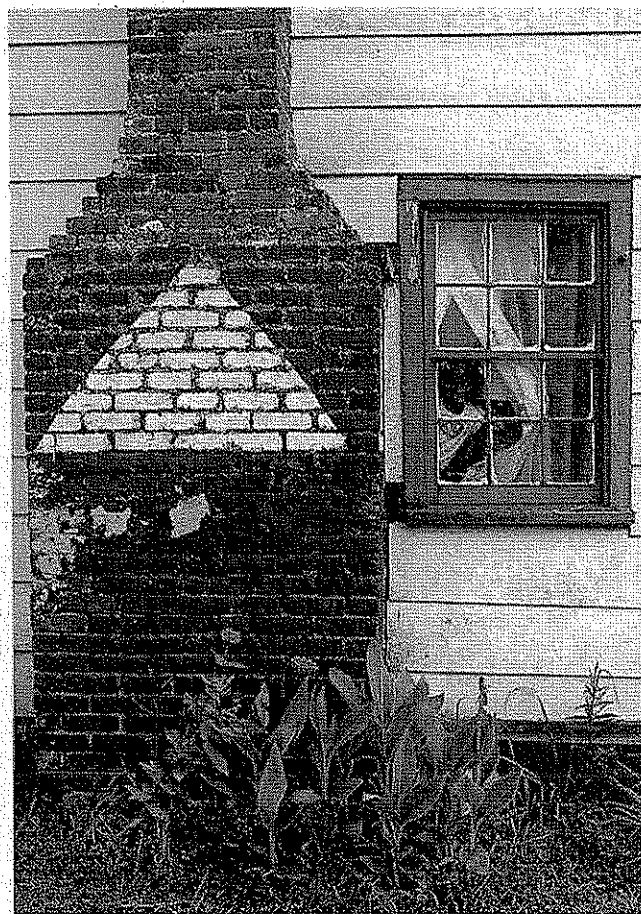
Rikki Lights had told me about a plant known to black island residents as "life everlasting," whose dark leaves and stems can be boiled into an herbal tea to treat many ailments, including asthma. Elsewhere in the islands I had heard tales of hexes and other herbal remedies—mullein tea for curing colds, tinctures of wood chips and turpentine



for purging the system, secret roots used by midwives, poke leaves for sprains, leaves from the lily bush for sweating out fever.

When I asked Mrs. Hinson-White about these matters, she gave me a searching look and responded with caution: "Yes, there were a few root doctors—years ago. Some people believed in ghosts, hexes, and roots. Sheriff McTeer and Dr. Buzzard were good witch doctors who made a lot of money."

I had heard that blue paint was much in demand in the Sea Islands because it is supposed to protect the home from evil spirits. "That's right," said Mrs. Hinson-White



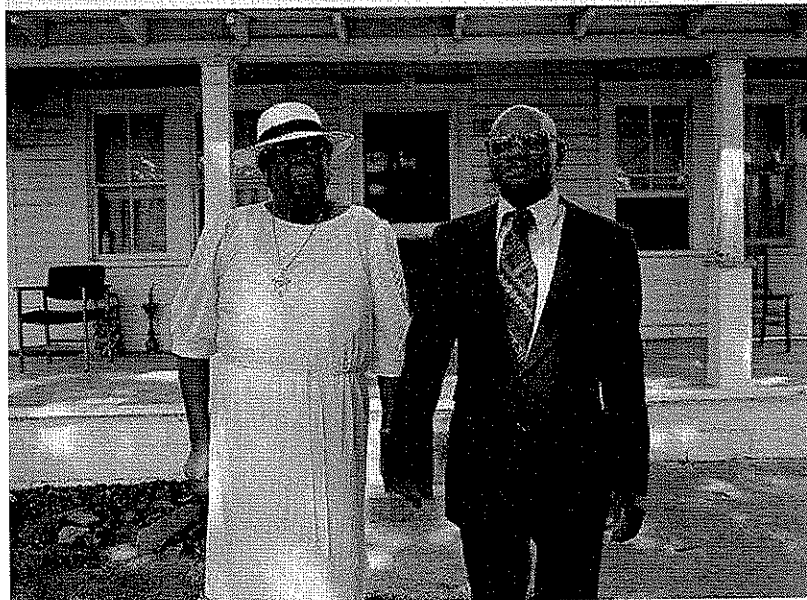
SEALED WITH A KISS, the loving compact between kin is shared by young Thomas and his mother, Sallie Ann Coleman, president of a community action group on Daufuskie Island. A mystical seal, a pyramid, graces a chimney in McClellanville. "It's the Egypt in me," says Eugenia Deas. And the blue window frame? "I just like the color," she says. But island lore says blue wards off evil hags.

tartly, "but my house isn't painted blue." Many others are.

DOUBTLESS preparation of herbal medicine and the use of incantation and witchcraft were brought to the islands from Africa. Such practices have been persistent features of Sea Island culture, and they did not always work for the good.

Many believed, and still believe, that malevolent juju men could "put de mout [mouth] on you," as bewitchment is called. In any case the picturesque terminology of

THE COURAGE of their convictions inspired Charlestonians Septima Clark (facing page, seated) and Bernice Robinson, the first teachers at the nation's first citizenship school, begun on Johns Island in 1957 to enable blacks to get voter-registration cards. The constancy of affection has kept the Reverend John Chaplin and wife Janie (below), of St. Helena Island, sweethearts for 60 years. They met in grade school and had their first date at the farmers' fair.



Sea Island superstition and folklore is still in everyday use: "When you hear the pig hollering, it's going to rain," the islanders will say. Or "hang a bottle in the tree to keep evil spirits away. . . . Pour turpentine, kerosene, or lime around your gate to keep off poisonous snakes. . . . Plant a cedar tree near the grave. . . . To put a curse on someone, mix up ashes and chicken feathers."

H. L. Mencken, among others, wrote *contemptuously* of Gullah. Other scholars thought differently, and as long ago as 1949 a linguist reported that he had identified 6,000 names and other words of African origin in the speech of the islanders. Professor William Stewart of the City University of New York has estimated that about 250,000 Gullah speakers live in the United States, including some 10,000 in New York City.

Dr. Jones-Jackson collected many Gullah words in common use that have survived

intact or have been derived from such West African languages as Kongo, Kimbundu, Vai, Twi, and Ga (page 744).

The Reverend Ervin Greene, pastor of Brick Baptist Church on St. Helena and former pastor of First Union African Baptist Church on Daufuskie, has been working with other scholars for nine years to translate the Bible into Gullah.

Mr. Greene believes that Gullah is related to the Creole spoken in the Caribbean.

Grady Lights, brother of Dr. Rikki Lights, recalled from his school days that Gullah-speaking students had little problem learning a foreign language, but sometimes had difficulty with standard English. When I asked Grady about the difference between Gullah and Geechee, he smiled. "Folks down the coast speak at a faster clip than we do," he said. "We seldom used the word 'Geechee' in their presence because it had somehow come to mean, well—hick. So if we did, we'd also say, 'Prepare yourself for battle.'"

SOMETIMES, after talking over old times and new times with the islanders, I would find myself thinking about ancient peoples who lost their history and died. Then the vitality of the islanders would wake me to reality. At the sixth annual Penn School Heritage Celebration on St. Helena Island, pride, love, and smiles reflected the reigning mood of the interracial crowd. It was a feast—fish, oysters, clams, fried chicken, corn on the cob.

There was much talk of the history of the island. Strolling around the shady park, I recalled the contributions of Penn School founders Laura Towne and Ellen Murray, and Charlotte Forten, the first black teacher. These three and others were sent by missionary societies in the North to educate 10,000 newly emancipated slaves who lived on St. Helena Island. Soon schools began springing up on neighboring islands. Abolitionist poet John Greenleaf Whittier sent

A SHOULDER TO LEAN ON is the safe harbor offered two-year-old Lindsay Barry by her sitter, Helen Bryan, netmaker and wife of a Hilton Head oysterman. But outside, a traditional way of life founders as development whittles away black land and culture. Islanders phrase it this way: "Everything change up now."

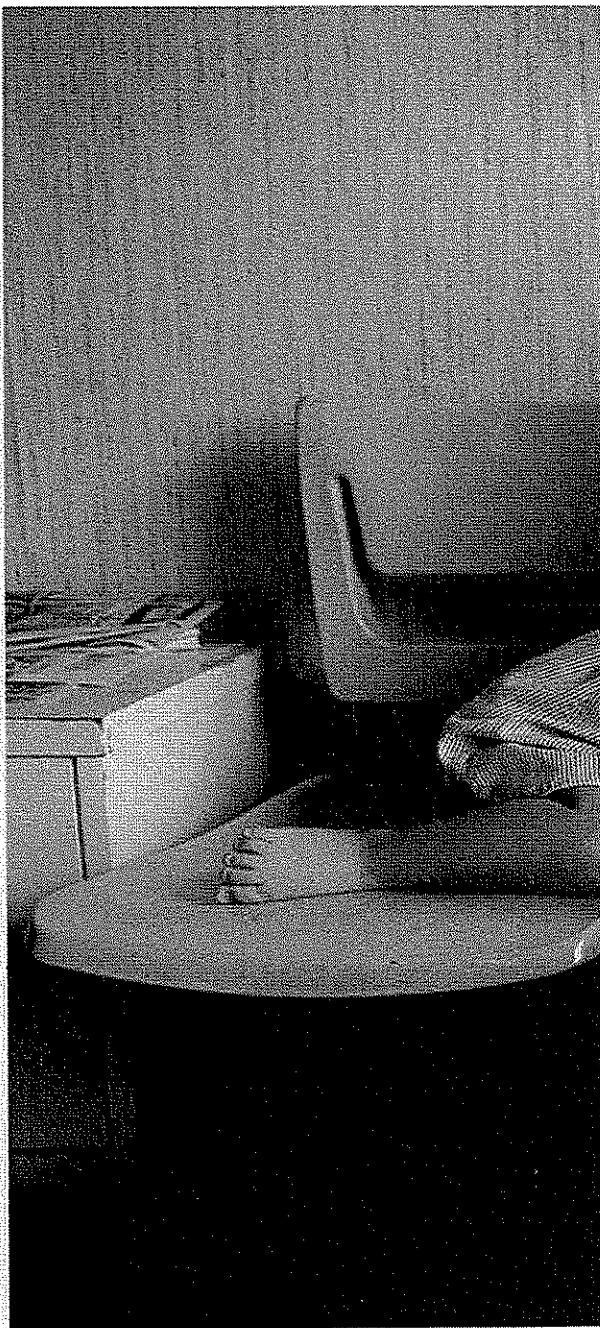
Charlotte Forten his "St. Helena Hymn" written for the scholars of St. Helena Island, occupied by Union troops. Charlotte taught her students to sing Whittier's verses for the Emancipation Proclamation exercise of January 1, 1863.

IN 1858, on Jekyll Island, the slave ship *Wanderer* debarked one of the last major cargoes of slaves ever to land in the United States. Jekyll, lying near the mouth of the Satilla River some 20 miles north of the Florida line, greeted me with a shower of warm rain and a great squawking flock of sea gulls, almost the first I had seen in the Sea Islands. At the turn of the century Jekyll was developed as the exclusive winter retreat for a group of northern industrialists. Some of the great houses that they built and filled with servants brought from Newport, Nantucket, or Southampton still look down stately avenues of live oaks.

If present-day luxury is something a person values, then he must not miss St. Simons, for here are exclusive country clubs, opulent private estates, marinas bristling with yachts. Fields where slaves toiled have been converted to emerald golf courses.

In a sense the slaves are still a presence here. It is said that a slave ship landed at high tide on a bank of Dunbar Creek. As the slaves were unloaded, they turned together and marched into the deep waters of the creek, chanting as they drowned: "The water brought us in, the water will take us away." Ghost hunters today say that the chant, and the clanking of chains, can still be heard on dark nights.

On nearby Cumberland Island I sought out more contradictions of history and human nature. There is a dewy freshness about Cumberland—waves of sand, great live oaks, vast stretches of green-brown earth. Here I walked among the ruined chimneys of slave quarters and meditated on



the tall chimneys on Butler Island in which every brick, I was told, memorializes a soul born into slavery.

But I remembered too the accomplishments of the British actress Fanny Kemble Butler, wife of the master of this famous plantation. Her *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839* strengthened antislavery sentiment in the North and, some feel, was a factor in the British decision to refrain from aiding the Confederate cause. God works in mysterious ways.

On one island, at least, God seems to have ordained contentment. On the landing at

*Opulent: Having goods, property or money in abundance



Sapelo Island I met Tracey Walker, pilot of the ferryboat *Sapelo Queen*. He painted an idyllic picture of his island. "We have 75 or 80 black families all the time," said Tracey. "During the weekend, when my business is at its best, maybe 200 people will come home to the island. Many of them work in Brunswick, St. Simons, or Savannah. People from Sapelo are living all over the world. But they always come home. We have an equal number of men and women, so there is someone for everyone. There are seldom any divorces and never an orphan because every child is welcome. If a person starves on Sapelo,

something is definitely wrong. My grandmother Mrs. Annie Walker, who is 95, was born in Sapelo and can still walk around."

"Does Sapelo have *any* problems?" I asked. Tracey gave me a jaunty smile. "We have no drugs, crime, or jail," he replied, "and if we did have a drug problem, there is only one way to go, and that is to the boat."

I had been told that they used to have hags on Sapelo—supernatural visitors who terrorize people at night while they sleep—but everyone on the island assured me that the hags have gone away because nobody believes in them any longer. □