



WARWICK BEACON

The place where time stood still

by Joe Kernan

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ART FOR ART'S SAKE: Warwick poet and schoolteacher Al Green has started a memorial scholarship fund in his older brother's name for the benefit of Sea Island kids who need help with tuition. He hopes to supplement the fund with sales of his poetry anthology.

"There are Gullah people all through American history and we have all heard about them," said Warwick poet Al Green, who celebrates the Gullah in his poetry. "We just didn't know they were Gullah."

The Gullah people are descendants of West African slaves who worked on the Sea Islands off the southern Atlantic coast who have managed to maintain the language and culture they brought to America over 300 years ago. The story of Robert Smalls is one of those Gullah people Green is talking about.

In the early morning of May 13, 1862, the white officers and sailors of the Planter, a side-wheeled commercial vessel re-fitted as a war transport, were asleep on shore when the boat quietly steamed out of the harbor loaded with Confederate artillery and the families of the eight slaves

below deck. The black men on board aroused no suspicions. The Planter normally had a black maintenance crew and Robert Smalls, a domestic slave who had trained himself to be a pilot, was a familiar sight in the harbor. The Planter was flying the Confederate flag as it moved slowly out of port and into the harbor. They blew the whistle as they passed under the forts and heavy guns in the harbor.

When the vessel was safely out of reach of the Confederate guns, Smalls brought down the Confederate flag and replaced it with a white flag. He promptly surrendered to the Union, delivering guns and ammunition that would help the blockade and, more importantly, keep the supplies out of rebel hands.

Smalls had been hired out at the age of 12 to work in the Charleston shipyard. He was the son of a Gullah woman, a native of West Africa, who worked as a house slave. When the war broke out, he was 23 and a pilot for boats in Charleston Harbor.

On the morning of their defection, only the black crew and their families knew of Smalls' audacious plan. It was a big risk they were taking and the entire party vowed not to be taken alive. They would sink the

boat first. But there was no need for that. The scheme was an unqualified success, and the Union Army and Navy got their first inkling of what freed black men were capable of, and what they were willing to do for freedom.

“Roberts Smalls was not exactly a part of my family,” said Al Green, a Providence middle school teacher who lives in Warwick, “but he was an individual we always pointed to with pride. He was an inspiration for us and for the rest of the Gullah people he came from.”

In Smalls, the nation also found out about the free spirit that lived among the Sea Islanders who were brought from West Africa to grow cotton and rice on the marshy islands that stretch from the southern Georgia coast to northern Florida.

“We were brought here because we already knew how to farm in the wet climate of West Africa and we were resistant to tropical diseases like malaria,” said Green. “They knew how to farm in areas the white planters of South Carolina would have otherwise ignored. In fact, they were often left totally on their own while their white masters stayed on the mainland, so they were used to being unsupervised and free.”

The result was that the Gullah culture that thrived offshore already had an independent turn of mind when the Civil War came. The white owners quickly fled the Sea Islands when war broke out and more or less resigned themselves to Union occupation of the islands. The Union occupiers found strong support among the slaves of the islands, who were the first to be freed, well before the formality of the Emancipation Proclamation.

“Harriet Tubman was actually recruited by the Union to be a spy and she and other freed slaves conducted a raid on a Confederate position,” said Green, “the first military action led by a woman in American history.”

But it was Robert Smalls who conquered the hearts and minds in the North. He argued successfully to have freed slaves enlist in the Union Army.

“If you saw the movie, ‘Glory’, you would know that many of the black troops were Gullah,” said Green, “and many of them were familiar with the area.”

In spite of the renown of Smalls and the “Swamp Angels,” as the Gullah troops were called, the Gullah people went back to the land they had worked on as slaves that now belonged to them. They lived in a place where time brought little change. Their culture and language were worlds away from the people of South Carolina and Florida who lived mere miles away from them. Things remained that way until the islands were rediscovered in the middle of the 20th century. By the mid-1960s, the quaintness of the islands and its crafts were a tourist draw and exposure to the modern world drew the young away from the islands.

“My family was always advocating the professions,” said Green, “but the professions were ‘Preach or Teach,’” said Green. “They were always afraid of going into other professions. They believed preachers and teachers always had a job.”

The biggest threat to their way of life today is the real estate market. People have discovered the temperate climate of the islands and Hilton Head Island is crawling with developers and retirees seeking the some of the last attainable paradise in the United States.

But the Diaspora of the Gullah people was well underway by the time the developers arrived. Green’s older brother, Melvin, was gone from the area in the 1950s. Melvin Conley Green studied art in New York but, having had his fill of racism, America and an atmosphere not very conducive to art, he moved to Guadalajara, Mexico in 1966 and never came back. More accurately, he never came back alive.

“My brother was much older than I was,” said Green, “but he was still an inspiration to me. When I went to college, I considered going into law, which my family thought was risky. I eventually studied English and Education but ended up working for the Digital Equipment Company in Massachusetts but I never stopped writing.”

He came to Warwick 25 years ago when Digital was expected to develop the former Gtech property in West Greenwich for its regional headquarters.

“Obviously, that didn’t happen but I stayed in Warwick and have never regretted it,” said Green. “My kids went through the schools here and I am still in the same house, only now I teach at the Roger Williams Middle School.”

So Green did eventually become a teacher, which would have pleased his family, even if he has forgotten how to fluently speak Gullah.

“If my grandparents were here, they could carry on a conversation in Gullah and you would have no idea what they were talking about,” he said with a smile. “Even if they were talking about you.”

Always writing, Green recently decided to do something positive with his talent. When his brother died suddenly in 2007, he wanted to create a scholarship fund in his name, specifically for South Carolina Lowcountry students in the arts.

Green has been composing a steady stream of poetry since he was a young man. He went back to his pile of manuscripts recently to select poems for an anthology. He hopes to sell enough of “The Struggle for Peace of a Gullah Mind” to start the scholarship fund.

“The poems are about my own life and reflections but I also wanted to give people an idea of what Gullah language and thought were like,” said Green. “All of the proceeds of the book will go to the fund.”

