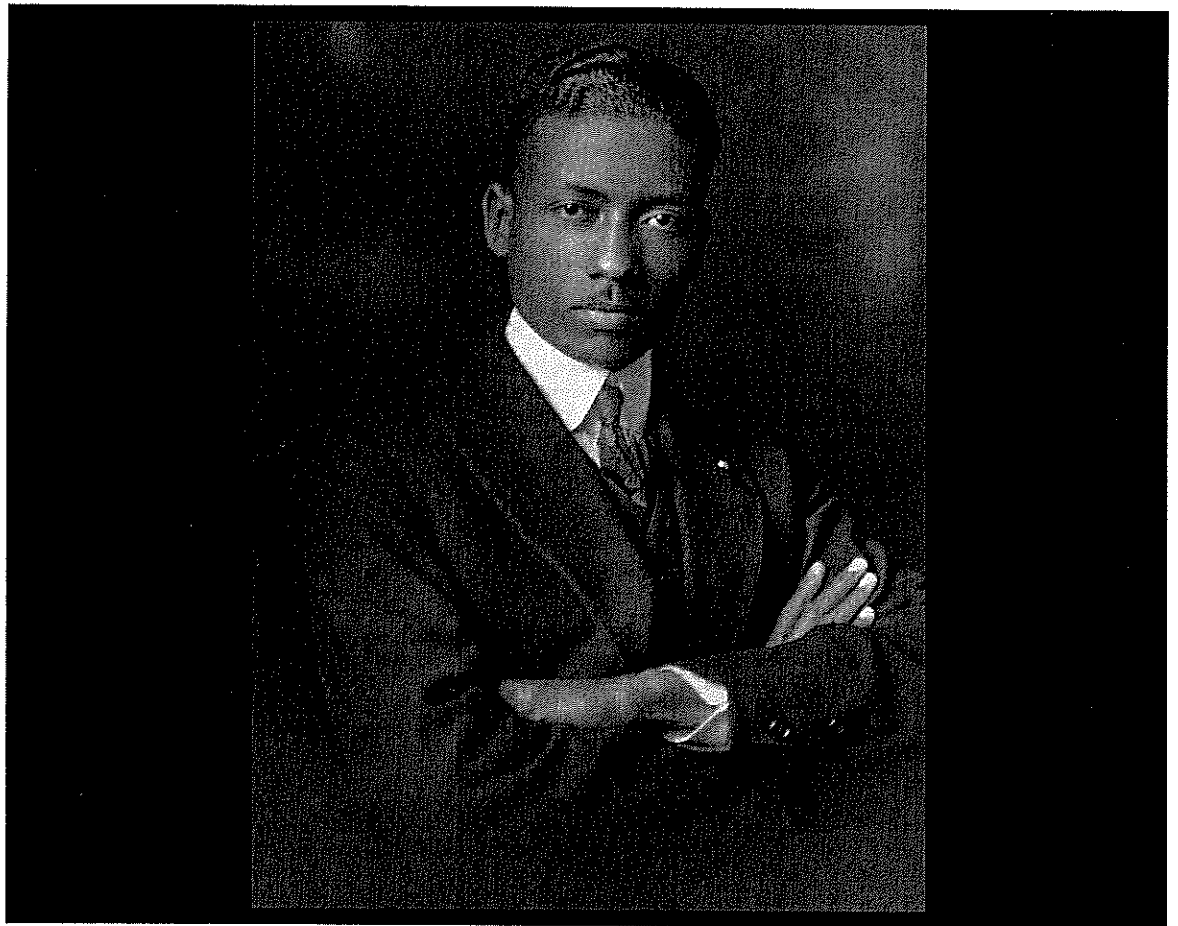


THE **BLACK** SCHOLAR[®]

Journal of Black Studies and Research

THE LIVING LEGACY OF LORENZO DOW TURNER THE FIRST AFRICAN-AMERICAN LINGUIST



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IN DR. TURNER'S FOOTPRINTS

by Herb Frazier

WHAT I KNEW of Lorenzo Dow Turner's research suggested that he spent much of his time traveling the Sea Islands along the South Carolina-Georgia coast where he found linguist gems that linked Gullah speech with West African languages.

When I began collecting the oral histories of long time Gullah residents in southern Berkeley County, South Carolina, some thirty miles inland from the sea, I found the unexpected—Turner's footprints.

In the early 1930s, Turner came inland to the rural community of Cordesville where he met two men—Hope Lloyd and Frank Roper—who were later listed as informants in Turner's 1949 book, *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*.

Following a few phone calls I got more surprises. Descendants of Turner's informants had remained in the community. They were not familiar with Turner, nor were they aware their relatives were part of the professor's groundbreaking research.

Meeting the Ropers was a unique experience. Few if any writers have interviewed a descendant of one of Turner's informants. When I told research librarian Leslie Anderson of Alexandria, Virginia, what I had discovered, she referred me to the Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum. The museum was mounting an exhibit on Turner's work. My research in Cordesville later became a small part of Anacostia's August 9, 2010-March 27, 2011 symposium, "Word, Shout, Song: Lorenzo Dow Turner, Connecting Communities through Language."

Discovering Turner's presence in Cordesville is one of many opportunities that

have allowed me to explore new chapters in the unfolding Gullah story. It also has been part of a personal journey that began with my first newspaper reporting job in my hometown of Charleston, South Carolina.

WHEN I WAS GROWING UP in Charleston's black community in the 1950s and 1960s, we did not know about our strong connection with the Mother Continent. Schools and the media did not promote black history in those days. Moreover, outsiders had ridiculed our speech, our diet, and our traditional ways of life for generations. For self-protection, we had acquired the habit of hiding our Gullah heritage, trying always to give the outside world an impression that we, too, were part of the black mainstream.

As a college freshman in the late 1960s, I was ridiculed even by fellow black South Carolina students who were not from Gullah communities. They called me and other Gullahs funny-talking "Geechees" who eat rice with fish heads. The cultural heckling came at a sensitive time for me and other Gullah youth. Embarking on those first tentative steps out of segregated neighborhoods, we were creating a more integrated America; yet our culture made us targets of criticism by our black classmates and at a time when the color of our skin also made us targets for white Southerners.

My Gullah education began when I was hired as a reporter at the *Charleston News and Courier*. Times were changing—black Americans were entering professions that had been closed to them and, as I came to

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learn, a new wave of scholars were researching Gullah culture and re-examining the earlier racist assumptions. After years of ignoring the Gullahs, it seemed the American mainstream was fascinated with my roots. As a result of this renewed interest, I wrote a story in 1972 about the links between the coiled sweetgrass baskets made by Gullah people and similar baskets made in West Africa.

I HAD BEEN previously uneasy with the negative attention outsiders focused on things Gullah. Later, in a fast-changing world, I was often bothered by and suspicious of the positive attention. I recall as a reporter at *The State*, a daily newspaper in Columbia, South Carolina, only a one-and-a-half hour's drive from the coast, my colleagues there were intrigued to meet a Gullah man from Charleston. They often asked me to say something in Gullah. At the time, I was one of a very few black reporters in a predominantly white newsroom, and I usually resisted such requests, as if I were being asked to perform a modern-day buck dance to entertain white overseers. Moreover, my teachers had emphasized "acceptable English" as the key to success, and I had always avoided Gullah speech in the workplace, though, like other Gullah people, I fell into it easily with family and friends.

Nonetheless, I occasionally amused my well-meaning colleagues with a phrase or two. "Put dat boat in de watuh fuh catch dem fish," I would say. Or I might offer: "Bettuh watch'um fore e goin' juke you." Little did I know at the time that one of the founders of the newspaper that gave me my second job as a reporter was considered an expert on Gullah speech.

As time went on and Americans throughout the country gave more and more respect to Gullah culture, I became more comfortable with my heritage, more consciously proud of it and more determined to explore its richness. I continued to write news and feature stories on Gullah culture. I wrote about "she crab soup," a favorite coastal Carolina dish, the origin of which was much in dispute; I researched the history of rice cultivation in South Carolina, as well, and the

role Africans played in building up that lucrative industry.

My curiosity about Gullah culture spiked in 1991 when South Carolina Educational Television, the state's PBS affiliate, produced *Family Across the Sea*, a highly acclaimed documentary on the links between the Gullahs and the small West African nation of Sierra Leone. The documentary chronicled the 1988 visit of Sierra Leone's president to a Gullah community in South Carolina, as well as an historic "Gullah Homecoming" of black South Carolinians, Georgians and others to Sierra Leone the following year. Broadcast on PBS stations throughout the US in 1991, *Family Across the Sea* galvanized interest in Gullah culture among black people nationwide, but particularly in South Carolina and Georgia. Like many others, I was fascinated by the film, and drawn to the idea of visiting a place in Africa where my ancestors might have originated. Like the Gullahs in the film who went "home," I wanted my own African "homecoming."

CONSEQUENTLY, I applied for a fellowship from the National Association of Black Journalists for an assignment to Sierra Leone to report on the Gullah connection. The fellowship was awarded to me, and in 1995 I departed for Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital. Though I had been to Africa the year before to cover the aftermath of Rwanda's genocide, my first trip to the Mother Continent, though fascinating and even horrific at times, was not the homecoming I had envisioned. By contrast, after only a few days in Sierra Leone, I felt totally at ease. The people, their food, their speech, and their way of life reminded me in myriad ways of my home in Charleston. Furthermore, many Sierra Leoneans, well aware of their family ties to Gullah people through the well-publicized homecoming in 1989, welcomed me with open arms, calling me their "Goo-lah cousin."

Because the documentary served as my guide, I wanted to meet the scholars who had linked the Gullahs to Sierra Leone and those who had organized the epic homecoming. I wanted, most especially, to meet Joseph Opala, the white American anthropologist who had lived in Sierra Leone for many

years studying what he called the "Gullah Connection." A lecturer at Sierra Leone's Fourah Bay College and a former advisor on cultural policy to Sierra Leone's president, Opala was instrumental in bringing about the homecoming and the PBS documentary that followed. He was excited to meet a "Gullah journalist" and, in his typically animated style, he told me of his efforts to follow up on *Family Across the Sea*. To my surprise, he shared an even bigger and more exciting story than the one I had come to write.

Opala said that until recently his and other scholars' research had connected the Gullahs to Sierra Leone in only a very general way. During two decades of research, Opala had shown that many of the Gullahs' ancestors had left Sierra Leone via Bunce Island, a notorious British slave castle located near Freetown. But as he grew more excited, he revealed how the scholarship, good luck and perseverance on the part of himself and two of his colleagues had linked a Gullah family in Georgia with a family in Sierra Leone.

THIS NEWS was both fascinating and astounding, as it was one of those rare examples of a black family in America, descended from enslaved Africans, being connected to a family and a community in Africa. This link revolved around a song, an amazing piece of culture that originated in Sierra Leone, which was brought to Georgia, and still exists today in both places.

In 1932, Turner recorded Amelia Dawley in Harris Neck, Georgia, singing a song in an unknown language. Turner was able, with the help of Solomon Caulker, a Sierra Leonean studying in Chicago, to identify the song as coming from the Mende language of his homeland. Turner published an English translation of the song in *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*.

Opala and his research colleagues—Sierra Leonean linguist Taziff Koroma and American ethnomusicologist Cynthia Schmidt—took up where Turner's research ended. They found a woman in Sierra Leone who knew the song and also were able to find Dawley's daughter in Georgia. Not only did she remember the day Turner came to interview her mother, she also knew the song.

THE RESEARCH team's discovery led to the Sierra Leonean government extending an invitation to Mary Moran of coastal Georgia to travel with her family to Sierra Leone to meet Baindu Jabati, the Sierra Leonean woman who knows a version of the Mende funeral song. Mrs. Moran and her family traveled to Sierra Leone in 1997. I went along to cover the story for the *Post and Courier* in Charleston. Their meeting has been documented in the documentary *The Language You Cry In*.¹

After my newspaper story appeared, I continued researching the song, the research team's new discoveries concerning the lyrics and Mary Moran's connection to it. I want to tell the miraculous story of how the song survived in spite of wars and changing cultures on both sides of the Atlantic.

As part of that research, I obtained a list of Turner's recorded interviews that he conducted in South Carolina and Georgia. My understanding of the scope of Turner's work went to another level when I happened to see Cordesville among the place names on the list of Turner's recordings that are housed in the Archives of Traditional Music at Indiana University.

At that time, I also was collecting oral histories from Gullah people who live in communities in the southern end of Berkeley County. Many of them had lived in a remote part of the county until the opening in 1992 of an expressway made access to the area easier from downtown Charleston. The opening of the highway triggered development in the area that has changed not only the landscape but also the area's culture, a process that has happened before in other Gullah communities.

I was asked by the Coastal Community Foundation of South Carolina in Charleston to collect stories from people in the communities of Cainhoy, Wando, Huger and St. Thomas Island before development altered the area as it had done on nearby Daniel Island, which was once open farmland but now is an upscale community annexed to the city of Charleston.

CAINHOY, Wando and Huger are on the Cainhoy peninsula. St. Thomas and Daniel islands are adjacent to the area. When freedom came to enslaved Africans

who toiled (Berkeley County and raised near the plantation. African-Americans are the descendants of enslaved people just north of the experience. Cordesville an American slave and the sun

Twice in Cordesville, viewed Frank's recordings of the haunting culture to understand because of the South Carolina sixteen where I met Turner. Riverside, Carolina to her native met Roper, or Hope Llo cle. Along with Reid Roper, the Berkeley County in 2009 ed interview.

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who toiled on rice plantations in lower Berkeley County, many remained to farm the land and raise their families in settlements near the plantation gates. Many of the African-American residents in the area today are the descendants of those formerly enslaved people. Cordesville is a community just north of where I was doing my research. The experiences of Gullah people in Cordesville are likely to be similar to African-American residents on the Cainhoy peninsula and the surrounding communities.

Twice in 1932, Turner went inland to Cordesville, near Huger, where he interviewed Frank Roper and Hope Lloyd. The recordings of Turner's interviews include the haunting voices of each man. It was difficult to understand all of what they said because of their dialects. Moncks Corner, South Carolina, resident Richard Roper was sixteen when Frank Roper, his grandfather, met Turner. Bertha Roper Davis, a retired Riverside, California, teacher who returned to her native Moncks Corner in 1997, never met Roper, her paternal great-grandfather, or Hope Lloyd, her maternal great-granduncle. Along with Richard Roper's wife, Cleola Reid Roper, they sat in a meeting room at the Berkeley County Library in Moncks Corner in 2009 and listened to Turner's recorded interviews with Lloyd and Roper.

"Cordesville, South Carolina. Life as a Slave.' Oh, my word," Davis said as she read from a list of Turner's recordings in South Carolina and Georgia. (The originals are in the Indiana University Archives of Traditional Music in Bloomington, Indiana.) "I think Hope Lloyd was older than my great-grandfather. That's probably why he can remember slavery," she said.

"Great to see his (Lloyd's) name in print," Richard Roper said. "I remember him because he had a beard. He was the only man in the Cordesville area who wore a beard. It was white."

DAVIS invited her uncle and aunt to listen to the recordings with her. They sat erect and attentive as Lloyd described his experiences as an enslaved man. Because of his thick Gullah accent, each of the listeners strained to recognize words and phrases. "I'll

tell you what I used to know in the olden time. I had a boss who was very good news in a sense, and he was bad in a sense," Lloyd explained. He also mentioned the feared patrol groups of whites who regularly rode the trails between plantations looking for runaway slaves and checking the identities of others who traveled from one to the next. Lloyd said he often walked the roads without the fear of being detained. "Many of the servants were saved by that boss man of mine. But, Lord, after he dead and gone, I catch the dickens."

Lloyd said he once was stopped, tied up and lifted off the ground with a rope:

"I thought I was going to die. Dat same party dat done dat, I had to get 'em bread. I am glad to find out dat somebody take an interest in what we came through in dem days. I remember when we had to go into the woods at night to have (church) class meetings. I could go in the woods at night and make fire."

Lloyd also described the method of getting a pair of shoes that fit properly:

"If you want to buy a pair of shoes, I mean if you are going to get a pair of shoes, you got to measure your foot with a stick, you know," he said with a soft chuckle. "You take dat stick and dat your shoe."

Lloyd mentioned the end of the Civil War and the uncertainty among whites as to whether Union officers would prosecute former slaveholders for the way they treated their slaves. "When peace was declared, master come to the house and beg us not to put him in trouble, even though he was very good master."

During Christmas enslaved workers traditionally got a day off. "Oh Lord, come Christmas time if you dance, you get two days. If you don't dance, you get but one," Lloyd said.

Lloyd did not mention the name of the plantation where he lived and worked. It probably was one of the following: Winter Grove, Brick House, Pawley, Glebe, Rice Hope, or Mepkin plantations near Cordesville. He is buried in the Cordesville United Methodist Church cemetery on Dr. Evans Road, which previously was known as St. Luke Methodist Church. No one knows exactly when he passed away.

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FRANK ROPER'S interview with Turner is easier to understand. "I'm no great talker. Why? 'Cause what little I do know of God, I take from the Bible. And that is all I depend on." He said his parents would not let him leave his house without kneeling and praying. "Anybody who knew my father never heard him use a bad word or cuss. I trained that way. Wha' little I know about Christ, I take the Bible, take the Bible for my guide." Then Roper, in his rich Gullah accent, prayed:

"Oh Heavenly Father, I am asking you once more. I'm asking you for forgiveness. Oh Lord, hear me. This is my true word what I am supposed to say.

"Lord, have mercy. ... Oh Lord, thou are so merciful to be with me ...and today I have a glorious opportunity to say blessed thanks be to God.

"I am not confined in the bed, wrapped up. I can say thanks be to God I am able to walk and I am able to talk.

"Through the mercy of Christ, Jesus blessed me to see this day and, oh God, I ask you most merciful God to keep me in the middle of the road.

Don't let me go astray. Don't let Satan have the dominion over me."

He asked God to help him remember that he has a throne waiting for him in heaven after he dies and for the Lord to have mercy on him.

"Lord you know thou have been good to me, and I say thanks be to God. I am asking thee night after night, day after day, to don't let me go astray until I can get home to Jesus.

"Oh Father, you know my desire. You know what I want. I am asking you, Master, to don't let me be no stumbling block; no difficulty in nobody way. That is my desire, Master."

Frank Roper was eighty-five when he died April 4, 1936, a year after his grandson Richard Roper joined the Army and left home. Richard Roper was stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia. He could not return to Cordesville for his grandfather's funeral and burial at Emmanuel AME Church, where he serves as a trustee today. He's also a retired Army sergeant.

The epitaph on Frank Roper's headstone reads: "Though thou art gone, fond memory clings to thee." He never told his grandson that Turner had interviewed him four years prior to his death.

"People back in that time didn't tell us much about sex, who is this child or that child or what not," Richard Roper said. "They use to

say, you teach a boy, he becomes too mannish. He has been gone since seventy-two years ago. He was a positive man and independent. He owned land and often said, 'If you make a dollar, try to save part of it.'"

As Roper listened to his grandfather's voice, he flinched each time his ancestor said "Jesus." "If I hear Jesus called, it runs through me," Richard Roper said. "I pray sometimes, and I jump. I don't know why. The spirit. Even on the television, I hear 'Jesus' and I jump."

Cleola Roper said her husband's voice sounds more like his grandfather's than his father's, Richard Roper, Sr. His father and mother, Eva Gillins Roper, had four children: Dan Porcher Roper, Julia Roper Chisolm, Tony Roper, and Richard Roper, the youngest.

By today's standard of travel, Cordesville is not that far from Huger. But it was a long way to go when Richard Roper was a boy on the farm. "We had only a few modes of transportation; mule, horse, or by foot. Going to Huger was out of the way. I was born and raised in that community, and I stayed in that community until I went into the service."

NO ONE KNOWS why Turner chose to come thirty miles inland to conduct interviews at Cordesville. The best possible explanation could be that Dr. Walter Evans, Berkeley County's first black physician, likely suggested it. When Turner was concluding his master's degree studies at Harvard University in 1917, he may have met Evans, who was studying medicine at Boston University. Evans may have told Turner about the Gullah people in Cordesville and arranged for him to interview Lloyd and Roper.

Dr. Margaret Wade-Lewis, a linguist at the State University of New York at New Paltz, is the author of Turner's biography, *Lorenzo Dow Turner: Father of Gullah Studies*. In an interview before she died in December 2009, Wade-Lewis suggested that Turner go to Cordesville to compare inland and coastal Gullah speech.

FRANK ROPER left his family with more than the memories captured by Turner's voice-recording machine. He showed them how to feed themselves, a skill that was useful dur-

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ing the Depression. When the commercial production of rice ended in the early twentieth century, black families did not suddenly lose their rice-growing skills or their taste for it. Richard Roper was reared in the Buckhall section of Cordesville, ten miles northwest of Huger. He remembers how his family grew rice when he was twelve years-old in 1928. The rice-growing knowledge was passed down from Roper's grandfather Frank Roper. He instructed his children and grandchildren, who provided the muscle to plant, harvest and clean the rice. The Ropers farmed twenty-two acres on River Road, which is now called Dr. Evans Road. When it was time to plant, rice seeds from the previous harvests were retrieved from the barn where they had been stored during the winter. An ox-drawn plow cut trenches in a low-lying half-acre too moist for other crops. Rice seeds were sprinkled along the trenches and covered. The plants emerged about a week later.

During warm weather, rice plants grew about a foot and a half in about three months. When mature, the plants were cut while still green with a reap hook, a hand tool with a sharp, curved blade and long handle. The stalks were bundled and laid out in the sun on the high ground for two weeks. When they turned brown, the Ropers placed them between sheets of burlap sack that were sewn together and then beat the grain on the ground. They scooped up rice, which was still in the husks and poured it into a wooden mortar. Richard's job was to pound the rice in the mortar with the pestle to remove the husk.

Roper's family didn't make the heavy mortar and long pestle that was set up in a shed next to the barn. A local craftsman carved out the trunk of a pine tree to make the mortar and fashioned a tree branch into the pestle. To make the mortar's tapered bowl, the craftsman began with an auger to bore a hole in the center of the trunk, which was twelve to eighteen inches in diameter. He poured kerosene in the hole and set it on fire. Repeated burnings enlarged the hole, Roper explained. Wet clay smeared inside the hole guided the burning wood to form a deep bowl, narrow at the bottom and wide at the top.

A straight section of a branch, at least five feet in length, was selected for the pestle. With a drawknife, the craftsman shaved the limb's midsection to a circumference small enough to grasp. One end was made blunt to pound the husk; the other was pointed to polish the rice.

After Roper beat the grain, the rice and loosened husks were placed in flat fanner baskets and gently tossed in the air on a windy day. The breeze flew the husk away and the heavy rice remained. "That was our way of life at that time." The Ropers grew and processed about 100 pounds of rice this way until Richard Roper joined the Army. They, like many other black families in those days, ate rice only on Sundays. "Rice was special at that time," Roper said. "We ate more grits than we did rice."

LIKE HIS GRANDFATHER before, Richard Roper has shared stories about life growing up in Cordesville. But unlike his grandfather, his recollections were captured on video and are part of the Anacostia's exhibit on Turner.

Gullah language and culture has been altered significantly since the 1930s when Turner did his research. Other scholars like Turner will likely come along to gauge how much of the culture and language has been lost. If so, what will they discover, and would they seek out as informants future descendants of Hope Lloyd and Frank Roper?

Endnote

1. *The Language You Cry In*. Documentary. DVD only. 52 minutes, 1998, Sierra Leone/Spain. Producer/Directors: Alvaro Toepke and Angel Serrano. Narrator: Vertamae Grosvenor. English and Mende with English subtitles. Distributed by California Newsreel.

