

Voices of Southern Hospitality: An Oral History Project

Interviewee: Halifax, Shawn

Place of Interview: McLeod Plantation, James Island, South Carolina

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Abstract: The interview begins with Halifax's background, and how he became an interpreter in Charleston. He talks about the way he has seen different developments in Charleston in industry and tourism, and that they aren't necessarily bad changes. He mentions the way Charleston has often entertained a romantic notion of the Antebellum South. He thinks there are changes in the ways narratives are being told and interpreted in plantations and house museums, namely that the darker parts of Southern history like slavery are becoming integrated into the regular history for the better. He mentions the way the dynamic between himself, and locals and tourists can sometimes be different due to their knowledge of the area. He discusses his idea of stereotypical southern hospitality, which includes over-the-top fake enthusiasm. Hospitality to him is saying yes ma'm, yes sir, and smiling and acknowledging those you pass on the street. He references a saying he learned growing up about how "southern whites love the individual and hate the group, and northern whites the opposite." He wants to see intolerant attitudes change in the future, and for Charlestonians to embrace and welcome differences in demographics, ideas, and culture.

Biographical Note: Shawn Halifax is originally from Virginia and has been living in Charleston for the past couple of years. He is currently the Cultural History Interpretation Coordinator for the Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission, at McLeod Plantation on James Island. He has over 24 years experience working in historical museums, plantations, and houses.

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Project Details:

In the summer of 2018, student researchers from the College of Charleston conducted oral histories for the research project, *Voices of Southern Hospitality*. The project documents diverse opinions and stories about southern hospitality in Charleston, South Carolina, but also offers a deeper and more intimate history of a changing community. Over the past thirty years (early-1990s to 2018), the Charleston peninsula and its surrounding islands have experienced rapid economic growth and rapid cultural and ecological changes. The *Voices of Southern*

Hospitality project chronicles this profound transformation with the personal histories of Charleston residents.

The project was launched in June 2018 with funding from The Committee for Innovative Teaching and Learning in the Liberal Arts and Sciences at the College of Charleston. In addition to documenting important stories, the project was designed to train College of Charleston students in oral history research methods.

Interview Begin

[Interviewer Initials]: LR

Interviewee Initials]: SH

LR: Its July 3rd, 2018 and this is Laura Robbins sitting down at McLeod Plantation with Shawn Halifax, Cultural History Interpretation Coordinator on James Island, South Carolina. So Shawn, can you tell me how long you've lived in Charleston?

SH: I moved to Charleston in 1998, and lived here until 2010, before moving back to Virginia, and then moved back to Charleston in 2013.

LR: So where were you from originally?

SH: The Hampton Roads area, Virginia. Newport News, Virginia.

LR: Ok, and can you tell me a bit about your work in the area of Charleston?

SH: When I moved here to Charleston, I worked at Middleton Place Foundation...for Middleton Place Foundation at Middleton Place. Then I took a position with Charleston County Parks in 1999, and throughout the entire time that I've been in Charleston except for that first year, I've been with Charleston County Parks. And that's who owns and operates McLeod Plantation Historic Site.

LR: Okay, and what sparked your interest in this area of work?

SH: Well my background is in history and education, and when I graduated from college in Virginia, I started working in museum education and doing interpretation of history at Jamestown, in Virginia. And when I moved here to Charleston, I wanted to continue in that work, so I took the first job I could find, which was at Middleton Place, and then Charleston County Parks started a history program, a public history program as far as doing programs for the public related to history. And I was the first person in that position when they initiated that program. I've just pretty much been with Charleston County Parks, growing that program area ever since.

LR: Through your time living in Charleston can you think of a time or a range of years when you first began to notice a change in the city--whether it's in tourism or development or industry?

SH: Well, for development, yeah I've seen a lot of changes in development from when I first moved here. It was interesting to see how the development in this area was kind of going at a pretty steady pace until about 2000--whenever the recession hit--2009 or so, and then 2008 or whatever it was--but I just remember it came to a dead stop. Since I've been back since 2013, I just within the last two years have seen it just really expand. It's amazing to drive across town to the Ravenel Bridge from West Ashley, and just see all the development that's going on. Industry, yeah I've seen changes in industry, and I mean I've been here since I think the BMW plant was brought into South Carolina, and the port--the impact that that's had on the port. The process of the--I mean I know that...I don't remember exactly when the naval base for all intents and purposes shut down, but I've seen the impact of that since I've been here. So, I've seen different things try to make it happen out there. And then as far as tourism goes, I guess I've seen it grow, but I don't know that I've seen it necessarily change all that much, until maybe right now. There's some...perhaps some changes that are occurring since maybe 2015, but for the most part, tourism has been the same. Maybe increased numbers, but as far as just the experience for people engaged, who are coming here as tourists are kind of the same.

LR: What change are you referring to--is there something specific?

SH: Well, for a long time Charleston, you know it focused its history in the antebellum period, and the Civil War period. For tourism, as far as people that are coming here for cultural tourism, that's what the focus was, really focused on this kind of romantic notion of what Charleston's past was during the colonial, I guess, and the antebellum period. Really not a lot about Charleston's history post-Civil War, and then of course the beaches are always attractive to people. But I think probably people come as much to Charleston for **(5:00)** its historic preservation, its kind of history as they do for beaches.

LR: Would you say that people's interests in plantations in the area has remained relatively the same, their level of interest, or has it increased?

SH: In plantations?

LR: Yes.

SH: I don't know. I'm not familiar enough with the numbers. I mean, I'm assuming that it's grown. To be honest with you, I don't really know the numbers for all the different plantations, but I'm assuming it's grown. The changes that have occurred at plantations have been ongoing--the history that was presented at plantations historically was a pretty romantic notion of history here in the South as it dealt with or didn't deal with slavery and its legacy. That started to change in just around, just before the time I started...I got here in the mid-1990s. Really started to see sights at least acknowledging it. But then there was virtually no advancement beyond really acknowledgement and what was being done in the 1990s was the same thing

being done in the 2001s. Really haven't noticed where a lot of historic sites, both house museums and plantation museums have started to recognize the need for a more inclusive history, until the last, really the last three years, I'd say. I'm no expert on this, but if I had to guess I would say that the impetus for that was Mother Emanuel.

LR: Okay. And what were the changes that you initially saw on plantations where they began to, acknowledge true history.

SH: Well yeah, acknowledging the story and telling the story are kind of two different things, and for most plantation sites in Charleston if you want to get a sense of what life was like for the majority of the people that lived in these places you have to almost seek that out. It's not an integrated history. It's a segregated history, and it's been that way really since the 1990s. You still have tour guides that work, docents that work at plantations and at house museums that have a hard time using the term slave, much less the term enslaved. They have...you know there's a reluctance to talk about some of the darker side of the...at all talk about the darker side, and that still exists today, but there's just been a change in institutional...institutional change that I've seen over the last three years that I think is, like I said, reflective of you know some of the things that have gone on locally and nationally. When I say locally I mean the state level you know, starting with Mother Emanuel and then everything that came after that with the removal of the flag from the state grounds. I mean that had been something that had been talked about for a long time, and I mean just getting it off the capital was, you know, a challenge back. I think a lot of that, a lot of institutions that are in this kind of work here in Charleston took that into account and recognize that people are interested in more than just the stories of the elite in places like this, and so have begun making an effort to be more inclusive. And like I said, that's really within the last three years that you've seen a big shift. And I'm not suggesting that plantations and other sites weren't doing anything, they were, but it was largely, as I said before, a segregated history. If you wanted to find out about what life was like for the majority of the people at places like this, you had to take a special tour that was an African American focus tour or something like that and it may only be offered one day a week, I mean one day, one hour a day. One time during the day.

LR: Mhmm.

SH: So, I think. I mean I know at our site here at McLeod, that we have worked very hard to integrate the story, and I think at other sites you are seeing more of an effort to do that, at least on maybe more of a focus on that from the kind of administrative level, that maybe I think a lot of the...you know some of the people that work at the places like this have been wanting this integration to occur, and some are not comfortable with it. It's kind of a mixed bag. But like I said **(10:00)** a lot of the change is the last three to four years.

LR: So here at McLeod, is there a certain age group or demographic of the tourists that come through here, or is it just a mix of everyone?

SH: Well, like most places that are like this--plantations and house museums that are talking about antebellum history, visitation is largely middle-class, white. At sights like this across the South, African-American visitorship numbers are, I've been told, are one percent or less. Ours here at McLeod is, the last time we did a survey was at eleven percent. So, it's a majority white audience, and you know, financially a little better off, perhaps. I think that's probably the case across the board.

LR: So these changes that you've seen in Charleston, you've talked about changes in industry. Do you believe that they've had a positive or negative impact on the city? And surrounding areas?

SH: It depends on your perspective.

LR: What's your perspective?

SH: I mean Charleston is a desirable place to live and visit, and of course by becoming a desirable place there's more people that are attracted to it. I'm one of those people that were attracted to it, so that contributes to lessening the value of that place once it becomes so, on one hand, I've contributed to kind of the overcrowding the number of people that have moved here and the growth that has occurred. What was the question again?

LR: Do you think that the changes in Charleston are positive or negative?

SH: Yeah that's a matter of perspective. In some ways it's a positive, but in some ways it's a real negative, you know it's had an impact on gentrification, it's had an impact on affordable housing, but I don't think that there's anything necessarily, particularly special about this place as opposed to other places that are experiencing the same challenges. I know it's not the most expensive place to live, but it's...based on what wages are and what expenses are, it's a difficult place to live.

LR: And do you think that these changes have had an impact on southern culture here? Even though you're not...a Southern native I guess.

SH: Be careful. Yes, I'm from Virginia, that is the South. Yeah, I mean a lot of the folks that move here are not from--they're from other places, not the South. But there's a lot of people moving back here that were from the South and have moved back here, so I don't know what the demographics are, but. Can I see the questions again? I'm getting myself...

LR: Do you think that the culture is misunderstood maybe, by non-locals?

SH: I don't think it's really not understood, I mean there's the stereotypes of southern culture right? Which is hospitality, and all of that. Charleston is consistently rated by whoever does these ratings as one of the most friendly towns, cities in the country. Anytime you have more people, it can have a negative impact on hospitality just because there's a greater number of

people, but I don't know that it's really had a negative impact on culture. I think maybe it's changed the culture a little bit, but I don't know that that's necessarily a negative. It just is. It's just change.

LR: Do you think with the influx of, I guess non-natives, the culture has been kind of diluted maybe?

SH: So there are unique cultures, that are unique to Charleston. There's Gullah-Geechee culture, and there's this old Charleston culture that has been here, and **(15:00)** those things have changed. I think that probably the local kind of Charleston white culture has probably shrunk. I think Gullah-Geechee culture is a little bit more difficult to perhaps measure the impacts, because at the same time you have an influx of people coming into the Lowcountry from away, you have you know, Gullah culture is something that wasn't necessarily celebrated until the 1990s/1980s, 1990s. So as you have this awakening to Gullah culture occurring at the same time that you have in this time period, an influx of people since Hurricane Hugo...the influx of people contributes to awareness and recognition of the culture perhaps in ways that an influx of people wouldn't have. Now, at the same time there's other things that are, I think probably creating some challenges for Gullah-Geechee culture. I mentioned one of them--gentrification. Both urban and rural gentrification is one, but there's other things too. There's, you know, one of the things working at plantations sites for Gullah-Geechee culture is, part of what we talk about--one of the things that tourism and growth in this area has done in some ways, it's relegated Gullah culture to these almost, as it's portrayed to people, as this, this is just from my perspective, this culture that has been somehow, has a quaintness to it that is stuck in this 1950s, 1960s era, and there's a lack of recognition amongst people that Gullah-Geechee culture is here, and it's still functioning as a culture.

LR: Today, yes.

SH: Today, yeah. So, like I said, I mean I think for Gullah-Geechee culture, it's tourism and development, both have had mixed influences. Both positive and negative, and I think really to have a really deeper understanding you'd have to speak to Gullah-Geechee people, to really understand the impact of those things. That's just me as an outsider, one of those people that moved in. Looking at it, I mean I can see positives and negatives.

LR: So, given the influx of non-natives into Charleston, have you found yourself interacting with more non-natives or tourists, not just at McLeod plantation, but in your day to day life? Just living here in Charleston?

SH: Well, the nature of my work here, and part of what we do as far as sharing the stories of the people that have been here for so long, requires that I interact with people that are from here, and have been here for generations. And then, but at the same time, because it's a tourist destination, I meet people and talk to people from all over all the time too.

LR: So it's remained relatively the same for you overtime because of your work?

SH: Yeah I think so. I think so. I think it's probably a pretty good mix because of what I do. If I didn't do this work, I think I would have a different answer. But the work kind of...if I'm to do this work effectively, I have to engage with local communities that have been here, because it's their stories that we're telling.

LR: Of course.

SH: It requires that I interact, and that's a good thing.

LR: Do you find yourself interacting in different ways with these different groups, with locals versus tourists? Do you speak to them in a different way or?

SH: Well, so from a work perspective the goals are different. The interactions, the outcome of what we want--the outcome of those interactions are different. For one thing, at a historic plantation site that is **(20:00)** dedicated to telling a story that is more inclusive of the people that are here...I mean you recognize that it's a plantation site, this place carries the stigma. Places like this have not only...have a history of not just not acknowledging, but before acknowledging of really what some historians and some people in academia would refer to as annihilation of their histories and stories that have occurred at places like this. Interacting with people in those communities becomes first and foremost, before any of that can happen is trust-building has to occur. And that takes time, so those interactions with people that are local, people from Gullah-Geechee communities, and others, you know that have...whites that have been here for a long time. It takes building trust, and that is a very different approach to how interactions occur than with tourism, and tourists, and people that are coming from outside. I'd say it's fundamentally different approaches because of what the goals are for the interaction. But then overriding all of that is just the idea of human interaction period, whether it relates to work or not, just the actual human interaction with someone, is going to be different, even despite whatever goals I might have for that interaction, the interaction, just human interaction is different just because it's the difference between people that have been here and people that haven't been here. There's a difference there too, I think. Not necessarily a bad one, just different.

LR: Given your high level of interaction with locals, do you think that their attitudes have changed over the years that you've been working with them? In general? Maybe not specifically with the same people, but in general, their attitude towards tourism or the plantations?

SH: No, I don't think so. I don't think that it has changed much, and I think that that's justified. There's often times in this kind of work, there's a lot of apprehension, mistrust, you know, questioning what are the motivations between this interaction. I think that that remains the same. And then you get into the layers of this too, and you have how folks will--how folks interact with someone not from the community is different from how folks will interact with someone that is in the community, and what those interactions look like are going to probably always be different because it's kind of part of the culture but it's also part of the history.

LR: Mhmm.

SH: The history of people from inside and outside this area, coming in and exploiting others is pretty long, so you know, it's a pretty complex thing I think.

LR: You would say it has remained relatively the same over time?

SH: Yeah, I'd say it's remained the same. It's still just as complex as it was. I think the thing that, of course I can only speak from my perspective, but one of the things that has changed is me. Interacting with folks has changed me, in recognizing how being more aware of how I approach a situation impacts what that interaction looks like to a greater degree than what I probably was aware of when I first moved here. That's just through experience where I've had interactions and have learned from mistakes. But I don't know that it's really...if anything has changed it's been how I approached those things, those interactions.

LR: And do you think in your time here, you have learned--you said you've changed so, do you think you've learned how to approach southern hospitality? And how to approach...

SH: I was born with southern hospitality, so I **(25:00)** don't know that I'm...that that's changed.

LR: Do you think...can you tell me what your idea of southern hospitality is, and if it's changed since you've come to Charleston. If it's different here for you.

SH: I don't think its changed, from where I'm from, and then you have, you know you have the stereotype of what southern hospitality looks like.

LR: Can you tell me about it?

SH: Well yeah, and I don't know, I'm sure there are a lot of people--I mean I was just having this conversation this morning. I mean I was raised to say--it doesn't matter who the person is that I'm engaging with, it doesn't matter, anything. It doesn't matter age, it doesn't matter gender, it doesn't matter what. It's always yes m'am, no m'am, yes sir, no sir. Those kinds of things, and so that's one of the things that is kind of a stereotypical kind of southern hospitality. But you know, southern hospitality is, for me, is one of those things where the stereotype is, I think kind of over the top kindness that comes across as fake. That is kind of the stereotype. I think in reality, it's very different, and I think that it's, at least from my experience, it's a very genuine thing in treating people the way you want to be treated. Which when you start to really dig into that is...it's also complicated. The South, southern whites, and again speaking in generalizations, haven't always treated people the way that they would want to be treated. Usually, its other Southerners that they're not treating very well. But, for me, southern hospitality is--yeah kind of goes to that. You know, recognizing that...to me southern hospitality is this thing where Southerners tend to recognize individuals, as individuals--if that makes sense, and there's even a long history of that even with the institution of slavery.

LR: Could you explain that more if you can? The idea of individuals?

SH: Well the institution of slavery, and I'm also talking about its legacy. You have the treatment of a group of people based on their skin color by whites that has been horrible. But yet, those same people will, within these set parameters have personal relationships with people that look very different from what the social norms are, so I mean think about the very personal relationships that develop between women that are raising children and those (skip in the audio) children, and those kinds of things, that we have a history of here in the South. It's this strange thing where--and of course those personal relationships, because of social norms only when it's--often times--not always--but often times only when there's a limit to that. But to me it's strange thing. I remember, I'm trying to remember how the saying goes, growing up. Talking about how southern whites interacted with blacks, and how northern whites interacted with blacks, and I think I'm screwing it up but basically what the saying--the gist of it is that southern whites...something along the lines of southern whites love the individual and hate the group, and northern whites the opposite. Something along those lines, and again those are stereotypes, but it was just something that I was raised with. The question was about southern hospitality--what I think it is. I think it's being friendly, and I think it's treating others the way you want to be treated, and that means--that doesn't mean over the top with your...just dripping with your kindness, which is often times how its portrayed. You know, I walk down the street and I **(30:00)** say hello to people. It doesn't matter who it is, I just say hello, and I don't know that you find that in other places. Just acknowledging that someone else is there.

LR: So for you, southern hospitality has remained across the board, generally the same? The principles, the basic, I guess you could say the fundamentals, the idea of southern hospitality is the same for you?

SH: Yeah, it has. I think about this, and the more I think about it, there are always exceptions to this even when we're talking about just large patterns there's exceptions to it. Yeah, that's a really hard question. The more I think about it...(long pause). Yeah I'm sitting here just thinking about it, and I don't know how to say this, what I'm thinking, and I don't know if I can express it. Sometimes I wonder if there isn't more truth to that story, or that saying that I was told. As I sit there and I think about it, I'm reflecting on kind of the gist of what that story was, like I said I don't remember the exact wording of it, it was like a saying but, the more I think about that, yeah maybe it has..I don't know. That's a hard question.

LR: (laughing) That's okay.

SH: I'll leave it where I left it. I think it's the individual in the South, is an important concept in the sense that people--the individual versus group is a dynamic here in the South.

LR: I think I understand what you're saying even when you said, passing someone on the street you acknowledge their...you are recognizing that they're an individual not just a face in the crowd--almost like that. Like it connects in that way as well.

SH: Yeah, and just not being rude too. If somebody asks me a question or something, I'm not gonna ignore them. I go out of my way to help people that are seeking help, I don't you know...and I think that's oftentimes is the case. But you know, we're talking in such broad generalizations, this idea of southern hospitality is just in and of itself is just such a huge generalization that there's...it's hard to talk about that broad.

LR: So, I have one last question. What is your vision for the future of Charleston, or what do you hope to see in the future here?

SH: That we don't fall underneath rising sea levels.

LR: Me as well (laughs).

SH: To be honest with you. I mean that's really--it doesn't matter if that isn't something that's addressed, it doesn't really matter.

LR: Southern hospitality doesn't matter if we're underwater.

SH: That's exactly right. Yeah. You know, one of the things that I would, I think, and I don't know if this will ever happen, and this is not just in the South. I think this is everywhere--I see the level of civility just in general has changed in the last few years. And that's disturbing. A lack of respect for others, a lack of respect for how others think, or for how others choose to live their lives. **(35:00)** I think a lot of it is born out of fear. You know, I think that what I would hope for in the future is that, and I think that this is pie in the sky thinking actually, but people becoming more aware of who they are, and what makes them tick, and what doesn't make them tick and just people becoming more aware because once that happens, I think how we interact with the people that surrounds us changes for the positive. That's a life philosophy, I think that a lot of people can probably recognize, but it's harder to practice. As far as, I think your question is probably not on such a personal level.

LR: It's whatever you want it to be. What are your thoughts?

SH: I mean. Yeah. I would like us to do a better job of trying to understand who each other is, and respect that, and do more than just tolerate, but embrace those differences, and see those differences as assets. That's what I would like to see.

LR: Okay.