

PHOTOS BY DAVID LAUDERDALE [dlauderdale@islandpacket.com](mailto:dlauderdale@islandpacket.com)

Joseph "Crip" Legree Jr., one of the last Gullah cast net makers on St. Helena Island who died Friday at age 92, would sit barefooted on his screened porch to create the cotton nets.

## Widely respected Gullah cast net maker dies at 92



BY DAVID LAUDERDALE  
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**B**eaufort County — and, in fact, America — lost a piece of its fabric Friday when one of the last Gullah cast net makers died on St. Helena Island.

Joseph Legree Jr., 92, died March 17 at his daughter's house next to his blue cinder block home on Seaside Road, where he would

sit barefooted on a screened porch, his long fingers "building" cotton nets that would last a lifetime.

The tall, thin man was known as "Crip" because he broke a leg as a child on remote St. Helena and walked with a slight limp. He was known as "Cap'n Crip" because he was a waterman most of his days — fishing, crabbing, shrimping and picking oysters. Some called him "Mr. Crip" out of respect.

In 2009, he received the Jean Laney Harris Folk Heritage Award from the S.C. Arts Commission, the McKissick Museum at the University of South Carolina, and the General

Assembly — recognizing lifetime achievement in the folk arts.

He was feted at the museum on the USC Horseshoe and was recognized on the floor of the House of Representatives for preserving the cultural values and traditions of his Gullah ancestors.

"My heart was full," he said.

He is to be inducted into the Penn Center's 1862 Circle in April, along with Andrew Young.

Legree learned to make nets in a bateau at high tide, while waiting for another crack at the oyster beds. He learned from



Joseph "Crip" Legree Jr. makes a cast net on his front porch on St. Helena Island in 2009.

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another St. Helena resident, Harry Owens, in a bateau made by Eddie Holmes. And so it went, generation after generation, all the way back to Western Africa.

Even as fewer people went into the river, and those who did were armed with filament cast nets made in China, Legree labored the old way to produce practical works of art that could sell for \$150 at the Penn Center gift shop on St. Helena. He also contributed to oral histories by demonstrating his craft and explaining it in his fast, Gullah tongue.

Legree hung his handiwork from a nail on the porch, and with two small pieces of equipment in his long fingers — one like a large plastic needle and the other like an oversized emery board — he turned a spool of cotton string into a net 4- to 6-foot tall, with diameters of 8 to 12 feet.

The nets were seen as a delicate link to an era when Sea Island craftsmen made their own tools, clothes, cuisine, bateaux, music, baskets, stories,

songs, churches, homes, medicine and, sometimes, whiskey. It was a day of steady midwives, powerful deacons, roaming live-stock, marsh tacky horses, rocking praise houses, sultry juke joints and bateaux pulled across entire sounds by oars.

In Legree's era, the Gullah were in the river for subsistence — for their families and elderly neighbors. It also could turn a little profit. He sold the crabs, clams and oysters. The fish and shrimp were for the families that still live in compounds across the rural St. Helena Island.

Legree was born April 4, 1924, the second of Joseph Legree Sr. and Geneva Brown Legree's 14 children. He left the Frogmore School after third grade to work in the fields to help his family survive. By age 17, he was a waterman, but he also planted crops and worked on the construction of Beaufort Memorial Hospital.

His daughter, former Beaufort County tax assessor Bernice Wright, said Legree and his siblings were known for singing.

He sang as he built his nets.

She said that, after being treated for the broken leg at age 9, her father never had to see a doctor again until he was in his 70s. He outlived two wives and was then known for taking in people who had nowhere else to live and driving the elderly to Beaufort to run errands in his 1987 Cadillac Brougham.

He had a sharp memory and helped the family with reunions and recording family history. He was known as a quiet, gentle, no-nonsense man.

Ervena Faulkner of Port Royal nominated Legree for the statewide award. She said at the time he was "a graduate of the school of common sense, hard work and high standards."

She said he was true Gullah: "Very wise, very observant."

The funeral service is to be held at noon Wednesday at Bethesda Christian Fellowship on St. Helena Island. Visitation is 6 to 7 p.m. Tuesday at Allen Funeral Home Chapel, 1508 Duke St. in Beaufort.

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**Joseph Legree**

Joseph "Capt. Crip"  
Legree, 92, of St. Helena  
Island, died Friday, March  
17, 2017, at his residence.  
Visitation is from 6 to 7  
p.m. Tuesday at Allen  
Funeral Home in Beau-  
fort.

Funeral services are at  
noon Wednesday at Be-  
thesda Christian Fellow-  
ship on St. Helena Island.