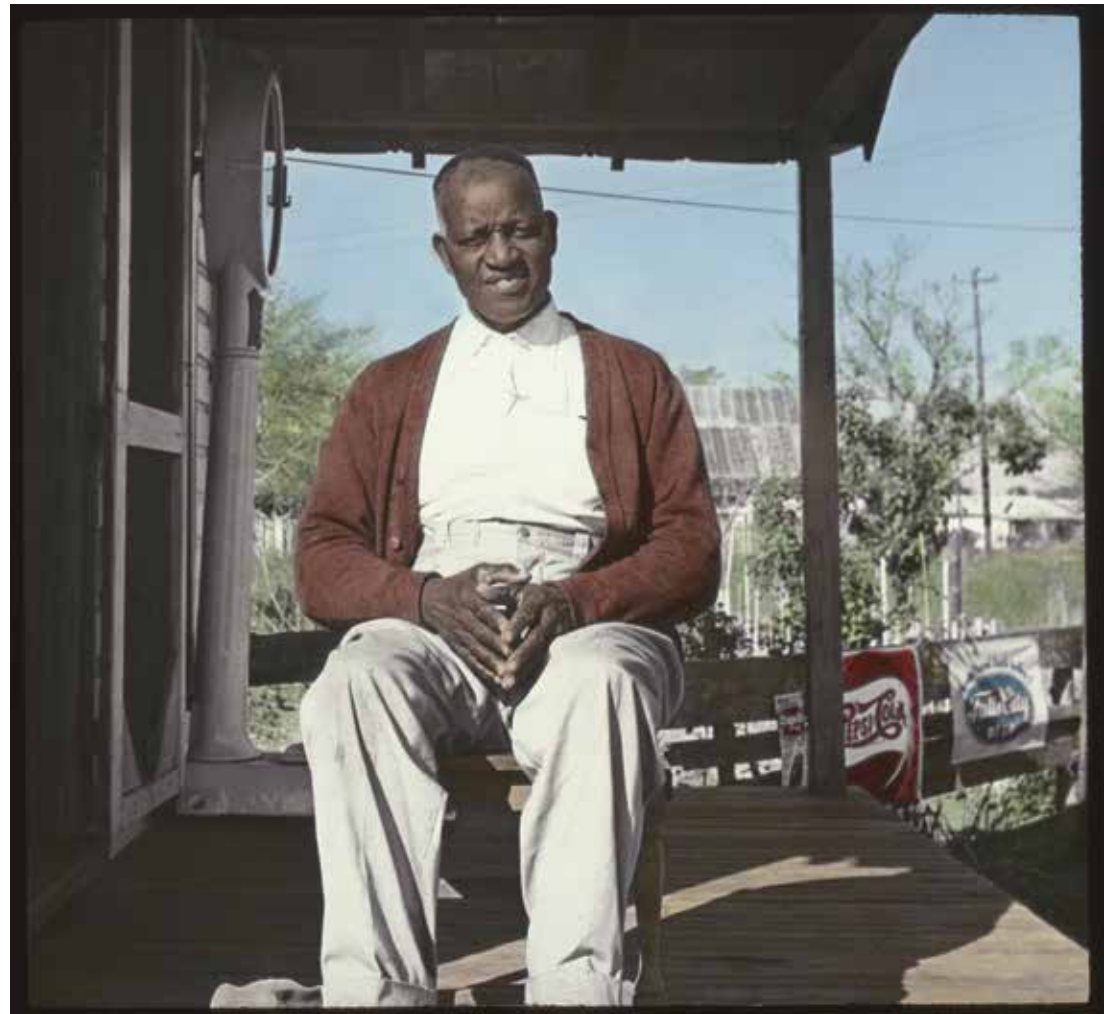


Celebrating Black History Month

Remembering Willis Proctor



Long-time residents of St. Simons Island will remember that the stretch of road linking the north end of Mallery Street with Demere Road was once known as Proctor Lane. When that lane became part of Mallery Street, we lost an important reference to one of the island's most prominent African American families. Proctor Lane was at the heart of the South End neighborhood, a community established after the Civil War by former enslaved workers from nearby cotton plantations.

Willis Proctor, in particular, was well known on St. Simons Island. For many years, he operated an emporium in South End. Previously, he had managed the dining room at the Arnold House

Hotel (once located in the vicinity of the present day King and Prince Beach & Golf Resort) and worked at the Jekyll Island Club, for a time serving as valet to club member William Rockefeller. Other Proctor family members had businesses in South End, including a fruit stand, a fish market, and a nightclub.

Perhaps one of Willis Proctor's most lasting legacies is his involvement with the preservation of the musical traditions of his Gullah Geechee ancestors. Through his sister Julia, he met folklorists Lydia Parrish, Alan Lomax, and Zora Neale Hurston (best known for her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*) during the 1930s. From the memories of the Proctors and others who became known as the Georgia Sea Island Singers, Parrish collected and transcribed their music

for her book, *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands* (1942). It included work songs that Proctor learned from his father Adam, who had been an enslaved worker at Black Banks Plantation.

By the time Alan Lomax returned with stereo equipment to record Gullah Geechee music in 1961, Willis Proctor was one of only two surviving members of the original island singers group. He was featured as lead singer on two of the recordings from that 1961 session: the praise shout "Daniel" and the dance song "Walk, Billy Abbot."

This month's image of Willis Proctor on the front porch of his store is from a hand-colored glass lantern slide in the Society's Margaret Davis Cate Collection.