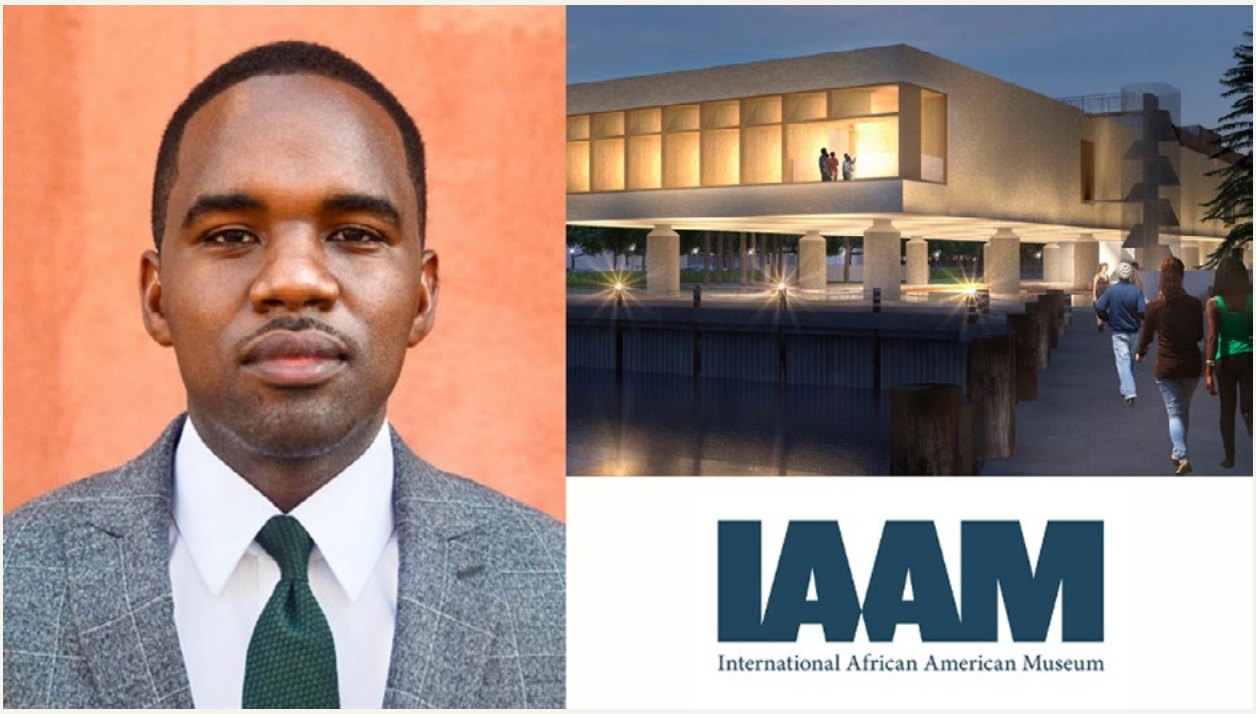
ELIJAH HEYWARD III, CULTURAL CURATOR



The International African American Museum (IAAM) is a museum of African-American history being built in Charleston, S.C., on the site where Gadsden's Wharf, the disembarkation point of up to 40 percent of all American slaves, once stood. Construction of the IAAM began in January of 2020 after 20 years of planning. In 2018, Elijah Heyward III joined IAAM as its chief operating officer. We spoke with Heyward about our experience filming segments of our porridge episode in Charleston and on Edisto Island, South Carolina's role in memorializing the transatlantic slave trade, and his take on soul food.

Can you tell us a little bit about who you are and how you ended up as Chief Operating Officer of International African American Museum (IAAM)?

I have been enamored with history for most of my life. I grew up in Beaufort, S.C. and spent many of my summers in Charleston. My parents were very active in our community, namely as volunteers at Penn Center, the site of the former Penn School. The Penn School was one of the country's first schools for the formerly enslaved. The grounds captivated me as a child and served as a place where

we gathered for events like “Community Sing” and the annual Heritage Days programming. Penn Center was one of the first museums that I visited and later volunteered. It was there that I drew a deep sense of pride in my community and African American heritage. My journey to becoming COO of the International African American Museum experience is one of providence fueled by my early exposure to the power of history to inspire. I was a history major at Hampton University. My senior thesis explored the connection between Hampton Institute and the Penn School. I attended Divinity School at Yale where I focused on the idea of “public social witness,” that so influenced much of my volunteerism as a youth. To that end, I started a nationwide college access program at Yale and moved to Wash. D.C. to get it off the ground after graduating. I graduated from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s American Studies Program in 2018. The program provided a great foundation for my work given the opportunity to do fieldwork in the South Carolina Lowcountry and beyond, interrogate the international dimensions of African American identity and creative expression, and the invaluable training I received as a fellow at the Ackland Art Museum in Chapel Hill, N.C..

What is your personal relationship with the African American food and cultural history that thrives in Charleston?

Professor Marcie Cohen Ferris introduced me to the notion of food as text, and the idea of “tasting your way through history.” My own investigation of shrimp and grits — likely the most consistent breakfast dish in my life — revealed generations of traditions that continue to inform my life. My relationship with African American food and cultural history in Charleston is deeply personal. It is the significance of the table as a place to convene, gain nourishment, and traverse the inter-generational art of storytelling. It is the negotiation of legacy found in every recipe, cooking ritual, and meal. It is love. The love I felt from meals prepared by my late grandmother who dressed her table with linens and served food using her best china (if only for the two of us). Foodways reveal important details about the cultural nuances and practices that inform our American heritage.

What is the International African American Museum and why did it make its home in Charleston?

Charleston is the only place that the International African American Museum could be built because of the centrality of the city to African American history and culture. Nearly half of all enslaved Africans who entered America entered through Charleston. The future site of the museum honors this important history that we hope will become a sacred place of pilgrimage for all Americans. We argue that every African American can trace at least one relative to Charleston. It is because of this that Professor Henry Louis Gates refers to our site as “ground zero” for African American history.

What are some of the exhibits guests can anticipate seeing at the museum?

Our project is quite dynamic. It consists of our museum, memorial gardens, and a Center for Family History. The permanent exhibits will explore the African American journey through the lens of Charleston. It is a journey that begins in West Africa, intersects with Charleston as the single greatest point of entry for captive Africans in America, and beyond Charleston to impact the world. It is this impact that cannot be underscored. As with the story of Omar Ibn Said, that will soon be immortalized in an opera by Rhiannon Giddens, captive Africans were fully realized people forced into an inhumane system that did little to honor the complexity of their experiences. We will change that by not only honoring the many who died during the journey of the middle passage and on our

future site, but by sharing untold stories of tragedy and triumph. There will be galleries exploring Gullah Geechee culture, the ingenuity required to cultivate rice and the resultant impact on the Charleston economy, the international dimensions of the African American journey, and the overall centrality of Charleston to American history. There will also be a changing exhibition gallery for the museum to create its own exhibits and host traveling exhibits.

How is the construction of the museum being funded? What's the projected opening date?
The museum is funded by the support of our local and state governments as well as private philanthropy. We are projected to open in early 2022.

Will the museum include any memorials to Gullah Geechee culture?
Our museum will feature a gallery exploring Gullah Geechee culture. As a native, I am very excited about the space that we are dedicating to offering a comprehensive exploration of a culture that is deeply personal to me. Beyond the exhibition space, the memorial gardens designed by landscape architect Walter Hood will honor the many who arrived, the countless others who died at our site, and those who we lost during the Middle Passage.

When we were filming in Charleston, Vivian went on a carriage ride tour that talked about the rice trade and how the knowledge that enslaved Africans brought to America was pivotal to the emergence of Charleston as an economic powerhouse in the South at that time. Has that history somehow contributed to the construction of IAAM?
It is a central history. Consider that Charleston, South Carolina was once the wealthiest city in the colonies all as a result of rice. Rice is a staple of Gullah/Geechee cuisine and offers an important case study in the contributions of captive Africans to American society. It took a high level of expertise to engineer rice cultivation in the Lowcountry. I do not think we honor the skill and intellectualism of the individuals who literally built our city.

What new information will IAAM share about African American history?
It is easy to take for granted that there is an awareness of the true impact of the period of slavery on America and the African American community. There is still so much to learn. We will uncover these truths, offer a space to mourn the horrific conditions that have a lasting impact, and consider how we can effect change as a society. There is this idea that was introduced to me when I joined the team of "building bridges of understanding." I see this as a key component of our work. I also think that an important aim of our work is representation. It is important to share the beauty and dynamism of the African identity that shapes so much of the African American cultural experience. It is also important to lean into the triumph bred through tenacity, innovation, and the creative spirit. How do we offer a community that has not been given a viable platform on the historic stage a platform to see themselves as agents in the American narrative? I am excited for both my grandmother and my future children to visit the museum and feel inspired by representations of their shared experience: the harsh truths but also the perseverance that affirms the legacy that we all are living into.

In our episode about porridge, we talk about soul food and ask a roundtable of African American food luminaries, chefs, and scholars: "What does soul food mean to you?" I'd like to pose that question to you as well. What does soul food mean to you?

It's funny. I often joke that I only eat soul food at my grandmother's table. What is fascinating is that what we have come to know as "soul food" is not monolithic. There is an approach to cuisine that is informed by my Gullah Geechee roots, and grandmothers even approached this very differently. I would hate to reduce "soul food" to any commercial representation of African American cultural identity. Vivian's series does such a good job of complicating this idea. For me, soul food is about love. I do not cook, but my job growing up and even to this day is setting the table and cleaning up. My time in the kitchen is usually spent taking directions from my grandmother, mother, or aunts. Looking back, there are so many lessons to be gleaned from those experiences. The women in my family prepared most of the meals (my father only cooked breakfast) and they approached the meals and presentation with so much care. To me, the table is so key. My fondest memories are of my entire extended family: grandparents, parents, siblings, aunts. Cousins gathered around tables, together, engaging in a shared culinary experience. I think one of the greatest expressions of love is a cooked meal and I am fortunate to have had several throughout my lifetime. Some might say the cuisine was soul food, but I prefer to honor the gesture as being one from the soul.

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

Somewhere South has been made possible in part by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities: Exploring the human endeavor.

SOUTH CAROLINA etv PRESENTS
UNC TV

MARKAY MEDIA

SOMEWHERE SOUTH
with CHEF VIVIAN HOWARD

PORRIDGE ENCYCLOPEDIA

In "Porridge for the Soul," Vivian samples a variety of porridges, some for the first time, while others, like grits, she's enjoyed since childhood. From the familiar thickness of grits to the milky creaminess of congee, the types of porridges are plentiful. Here's a rundown of a few of the porridges you'll encounter in the episode.

GRITS

Pronounced: grɪts

What is it: corn kernels, ground and boiled

One place where it's popular: American South

Grain: Corn

A vehicle for: shrimp, gravy, butter, maple syrup

OATMEAL

Pronounced: oht meel

What is it: ground oats often served as cereal

One place where its popular: Scotland

Grain: oats

A vehicle for: brown sugar, nuts, fruit

CONGEE

Pronounced: kaan jee

One place where it's popular: China

Grain: rice

A vehicle for: ginger, dried shrimp, tea eggs

MAMALIGA

Pronounced: mah mah LEE gah

What it is: ground yellow maize flour

One place where it's popular: Romania

Grain: corn

A vehicle for: herbs, sour cream, eggs

RICE MIDDLINS

Pronounced: raɪs MID lunz

What it is: broken flecks of rice, boiled with water or milk

One place where it's popular: The Carolinas

Grain: rice

A vehicle for: savory toppings like tomatoes, seafood

MALT-O-MEAL

Pronounced: mawlt OH meel

What it is: hot breakfast cereal made from farina wheat

One place where it's popular: Midwest

Grain: wheat

A vehicle for: fruit

UPMA

Pronounced: OOOP mah

What it is: boiled dry-roasted semolina or coarse rice flour

One place where it's popular: India

Grain: varies

A vehicle for: herbs, spices, mixed veggies, ghee

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

Somewhere South has been made possible in part by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities: Exploring the human endeavor.

SOUTH CAROLINA etv PRESENTS

UNC TV

MARKAY MEDIA

SOMEWHERE SOUTH
with CHEF VIVIAN HOWARD

PORRIDGE EPISODE READING LIST

With the help of our amazing board of advisors and scholars, we dug into the scholarship related to each of our episode themes. For each episode, we'll share a short list of some of the most helpful books and essays we found that helped shape our understanding of the evolution of Southern foodways.

"The Welcome Table: African-American Heritage Cooking," by Jessica Harris (Simon & Schuster, 1996)
Harris shares a collection of over 200 recipes from the places African Americans traditionally gather.
africooks.com/wordpress/

"Edna Lewis: At the Table with an American Original," by Sara Franklin (University of North Carolina Press, 2018)
This collection of essays features the voices of chefs and other food luminaries discussing the importance of pioneering African American chef Edna Lewis.

"Taste of Country Cooking: The 30th Anniversary Edition," by Edna Lewis (Knopf, 2012)
This seminal work by chef Edna Lewis is coveted by chefs and home cooks alike. No cookbook collection is complete without it.

"Gullah Home Cooking the Daufuskie Way: Smokin' Joe Butter Beans, Ol' 'Fuskie Fried Crab Rice, Sticky-Bush Blackberry Dumpling, and Other Sea Island Favorites," by Sallie Ann Robinson (University of North Carolina Press, 2014.)
Home cooking, Gullah style, includes rich gravies and seafood dishes that lends the Sea Islands their sense of place.

"Finding a Lost Strain of Rice and Clues to Slave Cooking," by Kim Severson, The New York Times, Feb. 13, 2018.
In this fascinating article, Severson traces an heirloom grain of rice's journey to revival.

"The Jemima Code: Two Centuries of African American Cookbooks," by Toni Tipton-Martin (University of Texas Press, 2015.)
Tipton-Martin's James Beard award-winning book celebrates 200 years of unsung African American's culinary contributions. Be sure to check out her follow-up cookbook, "Jubilee: Recipes from Two Centuries of African American Cooking: A Cookbook."

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

Somewhere South has been made possible in part by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities: Exploring the human endeavor.

SOUTH CAROLINA etv PRESENTS
UNC TV

MARKAY MEDIA

SOMEWHERE SOUTH
with CHEF VIVIAN HOWARD

CRAB AND TOMATO GRAVY OVER GRITS

Photo by Victoria Bouloubasis

This recipe is inspired by the technique shown by Emily Meggett, the matriarch of Edisto Island's Gullah community. Meggett is working on a cookbook and accepting donations to help with its completion. Check out her website for more information: motheroftheisland.com

INGREDIENTS

1 cup white stone-ground grits
4 cups whole milk
Salt and black pepper
1/2 cup heavy cream
2 cups sliced leeks, white and tender green parts only
2 garlic cloves, minced
4 tablespoons unsalted butter

more ingredients next page >

INGREDIENTS (CONTINUED)

2 cups sliced okra
4 cups peeled and diced tomatoes, about 2 large tomatoes
1 teaspoon salt
2 teaspoons sugar
½ teaspoon cayenne
8 ounces fresh lump crab meat, picked over for shells
2 tablespoons lemon juice

DIRECTIONS

Make the grits: Place grits in a bowl of water and stir. The chaff will rise to the top; these are harder parts of corn hulls that will never soften during cooking. Either skim off with a spoon or do as Mrs. Meggett does and drain water slowly, allowing chafe to leave bowl and grits to stay.

In a Dutch oven, combine the grits and milk and bring this up to a simmer around the edges. Whisk semi-frequently and cook until the grits have expanded and soaked up the milk and are thick; this could take up to 30 minutes. Season aggressively with salt and less aggressively with black pepper. Off the heat, whisk in the heavy cream.

Make the gravy: In a large skillet, melt butter and add leeks and garlic and saute over medium-low heat for about 10 minutes. Lower heat if leeks or garlic take on too much color. Add the okra and cook for another 5 minutes. Add the tomatoes, salt, sugar and cayenne and cook, covered, about 15 minutes. Just before serving, gently stir in the crab. Add lemon juice and adjust the seasoning with salt and sugar, if needed.

Yield: 6 servings

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

Somewhere South has been made possible in part by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities: Exploring the human endeavor.

SOUTH CAROLINA etv PRESENTS
UNC TV

MARKAY MEDIA