

WISDOM'S VOICE

ETHEL RIVERS RECALLS AN OLDER WAY OF ISLAND LIFE



SARAH WELLIVER • Staff photo

Ethel Rivers, 94, the second-oldest Hilton Head Island native, talks Wednesday at her home near Dillon Road about growing up on the island. To see a video of Rivers, click on this story at islandpacket.com.



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Ethel Rivers says her late husband could play the piano, organ, mouth organ and accordion, and he never had a music lesson.

"He was a gifted man from God," she said. "God knows everything, and he can teach you everything if you just take time to learn."

Her comment is appropriate for this moment in time on Hilton Head Island.

Last week, a historical marker was unveiled at an old one-room schoolhouse next to Rivers' home on Dillon Road.

She was the eldest of about 20 former students of the Cherry Hill School who attended the three-hour dedication ceremony.

Several speakers said that if we took the

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time, we could learn more from the former students of the school than from a building where Gullah children were taught grades one through five from 1937 to 1954.

Now this week, organizers of a celebration of the island's history want to single out for special honors at Saturday's community beach party the longest-living Hilton Head residents.

Ethel Rivers, two weeks shy of her 95th birthday, is among the oldest who were born here. She is a few months younger than Laura Campbell of Spanish Wells Road and slightly older than Rachel Ferguson Brown.

Their lives tell a story, just like the old school now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

It's like Perry White said as he closed his history of the school during the marker dedication ceremony:

"In the words of an old Negro hymn, 'It was a tejus (tedious) journey.'"

HARD WORK

Ethel Green Rivers was born Oct. 16, 1918, to native islanders Viola and Jacob Benjamin Green. They lived in an area called Drayton, near today's Barker Field. "They had 11 head of children and raised four," said Rivers.

They could both read and write, and Viola taught neighborhood children to read. Jacob Green was a carpenter with a big garden. He rode a horse to the Jenkins Island dock to get the mail and distribute it to residents of the area of the island known as Baygall.

Ethel Rivers attended the Cherry Hill School before it had a building. It met in a church parsonage until

people of the community put together money for the land and helped build the building. She went through fifth grade, then learned from her mother "everything a girl's supposed to learn: sew, wash, iron, cook, clean, everything. Old as I am, I still keep my house clean. I don't know where the dust comes from."

Her mother cooked for students of the Cherry Hill School, then turned the duty over to Ethel. She fixed "peas and rice, cornbread, chicken, deer meat and everything else."

Ethel Green married Nathan "Apple" Rivers one month before her 17th birthday. They lived with her parents from 1935 until they bought the acre where she still lives in 1942.

They had 17 children. Two died in infancy. All were born at home with a midwife, the last baby arriving when Ethel was 46.

"When the pain hit you, you'd tell your husband or whoever you've got to run get the midwife," she said.

Ethel Rivers has had to bury six of her children, and in 2005, her husband.

Apple Rivers drove trucks for the Toomers, Charlie Simmons Sr. and O.J. Malphrus as the island crept into the modern world with electricity in 1950 and a bridge in 1956. He worked in landscaping for the Hilton Head Co. from 1965 to 1986, as neighborhoods of newcomers from far away sprang up like mushrooms.

Ethel Rivers said she and her children worked for many years keeping up yards in Port Royal Plantation. She also worked alongside her husband in his spare job repairing cars. "I was a grease monkey," she says.

BUTTONS AND KNOBS

Ethel Rivers is the "mother of the church" at St. James Baptist Church, across the

street from the home she and Apple built in 1971. Apple Rivers was a deacon for more than 50 years at the church, which bought and restored the Cherry Hill School building.

Ethel Rivers still keeps a garden like her daddy did, and has lime, orange and peach trees. And she visits her children in Brooklyn. Most of her children left the island. All got the high school diploma that was unavailable to their parents, and some got college degrees.

She goes to the Bluffton Senior Center four days a week on a Palmetto Breeze bus.

The walls of her neat home are full of family pictures, one showing her husband making a sweetgrass basket. A signed print by Gullah artist Joe Pinckney depicts a young woman beside an iron hand pump in the yard, holding a sweetgrass basket filled with clothes.

Ethel Rivers says that represents her.

She's proud to come from an era when islanders "would go in the creek and catch fish and crabs and dig for clams and pick oysters and knock 'em and beat 'em and sell 'em. Everything that would make a dollar, they do."

Now "all you have to do is mash a button or turn a knob," she said. People throw too much away, and don't take care of things.

"Children now have so much and everything comes so easy to them, they don't appreciate it," she said. "They don't appreciate."

Her advice to anyone who will take time to listen: "Trust our good Lord. Do what is right. Try to treat people like you want to be treated, whether they're white, black, green or blue. Stay busy."

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Development also brought electricity to the area.

When Palmetto Electric Cooperative first lit up Hilton Head in 1950, Rivers said, running a household became a lot easier.

"My dad and my husband and a couple more men were the first ones to sign up for Palmetto Electric," she said. "It was real heat. You could get your washing machine and your other appliances. And you could use a refrigerator — that was a big thing."

Also in the late 1950s, the civil rights movement was in full swing, but Rivers said Hilton Head

remained relatively peaceful, even during those tumultuous times.

She said black people on the island had faith that proponents of civil rights would prevail.

"I don't think it bothered the people too much," she said. "All of the black people believed in God, and we just depended on God to work it out."

Faith in God also helped Rivers sort out the hard times in her personal life, including the deaths of six of her children over the years, and most recently, the death of her husband, Nathan, she said.

"(God) gives me strength," Rivers said.

She's been active at St. James Baptist Church throughout her life, including serving as an usher, president of the church sisters and president of the deaconesses.

Staying active is how Rivers said she's lived such a long, healthy life.

"I keep myself busy," she said. "I work out in the yard and the flower bed, and I keep my house clean."

Her house usually is full of friends and family members, and Rivers said she still feels the same sense of community she did when the island was young.

"We still help other people," she said. "We help each other the best we know how — we give you advice if we can't do anything else."

And somehow, despite all the changes and all the people she's seen come and go, Rivers said she still feels at home on Hilton Head.

"I'm comfortable here," she said. "Every morning I get up, I look across (the street) at that church, and I say, 'Lord, I thank you for another day.'"

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ISLAND NATIVE



Special to The Packet



Joy Karr/The Island Packet

Ethel Rivers with her youngest son, Clarence, when he graduated from high school about 21 years ago.

Despite having lived on Hilton Head all of her life, and the changes development have brought, Rivers, 86, says there is no place she'd rather be.

Born and raised here, mother of 17 still feels at home on Hilton Head

Story by Jacquelyn Lewis • The Island Packet

When Ethel Rivers says she's a native Hilton Head Islander, she means it.

She was here before Charles Fraser, before the resorts, and even before Hilton Head had electricity. She watched the island grow from an area populated by only a few thousand people — a place you could only get to by boat — to the easy-access island that more than 30,000 people call home today.

Rivers, 86, still calls it home. And she's not planning on leaving anytime soon.

"I'm gonna stay right here," Rivers said, framed by midmorning light in her rocking chair and pale gray suit. Her stucco house on Dillon Road, built in 1971, is set on the same acre of land Rivers has inhabited since 1942.

Born on Hilton Head in 1918, Rivers grew up in the Fish Haul neighborhood, just down the street from where she lives now.

By the time Rivers was born, her family already had been on Hilton Head for generations, starting with her great grandparents, who came to the area in the 1700s.

Rivers said she thinks her family might have some Gullah ancestors, but she knows almost nothing about her great grandparents. She said her maternal grandfather fought in the Civil War.

Rivers' own father was a mail carrier and carpenter who raised a garden, hunted wildlife and fished to feed his family.

"When I was coming up, there were plenty of people on the island, but it was people that were born and raised in this area here," Rivers said.

Rivers, the youngest and the only girl of 11 siblings, went to school on Hilton Head until fifth grade.

Rivers can still tell you the names of her teachers — Ruth James and Rachael Johnson — and she said that, when she was a child, Hilton Head had a nearly all-black population.

"We didn't have no white people (at my school)," she said.

And, Rivers said, if a student wanted to progress past fifth grade, he or she had to go live with relatives or go to a boarding school. The closest secondary school was on St. Helena Island.

"At that time, my parents didn't have nobody I could go to live with or enough money to transport me," Rivers said.

So, she spent the rest of her childhood helping her mother at home. She said she enjoyed growing up on Hilton Head.

"Life was grand for me," Rivers said.

Ethel Rivers

- **Birth date:** Oct. 16, 1918.
- **Hails from:** Hilton Head Island.
- **Greatest life lesson:** "Love everybody. Treat them like you would want them to treat you. And I believe in Jesus Christ."

At the time, men who lived on the island sailed their own boats from Hilton Head to River Street in Savannah to transport goods and buy groceries. The first ferry wouldn't be operated by Charlie Simmons until 1930.

In 1935, Rivers, then Ethel Green, married Nathan Rivers — another native islander whom Rivers said she met "right in my mama's front yard."

Nathan Rivers, a local landscaper, died Jan. 24 at the age of 89.

The couple had 11 sons and six daughters together. The first child, a baby girl, was born when Rivers was 16. The baby died when she was only 10 days old.

Rivers raised the rest of her children on Hilton Head. She gave birth to her youngest child, Clarence, when she was 46.

"I always had at least 10 children in the house at the same time," Rivers said.

When asked how she managed to take care of 16 children, Rivers just shrugged. She said it wasn't unusual for couples to have as many as 20 children back when she started her family.

"It was a different time," Rivers said. "You raised your children and there was nobody there to tell you how to raise them or how not to raise them. I brought my children up how I was brought up; if you do wrong, you get a spanking."

Rivers said the older children helped take care of the younger ones. And, she said, "Everything wasn't as expensive as it is now."

She said that, like her own parents, local families cultivated huge gardens, and hunted and fished for food.

While she watched her kids grow up, Rivers also watched Hilton Head and the rest of the country go through their own growing pains.

In the 1950s, Rivers said, developers from other areas "discovered" Hilton Head.

"They came and they said they found Hilton Head," Rivers said. "How are you going to find something that was already here?"

As a result, Hilton Head grew and changed, and so did the lives of the people who had lived here for centuries, Rivers added. She said the new rules and regulations regarding property and fishing sometimes were difficult to follow for native islanders, who were used to having free run of the area and living off the land.

"Changes bring on progress," Rivers said. "But sometimes change makes it hard for the people who were here before."

Still, she said, development also brought positive things, such as better transportation. The first state-operated ferry ran to the mainland in 1953, and the first toll bridge opened the island to automobiles in 1956.

Rivers said she and her husband fixed neighbors' cars for extra cash.

"I was a grease monkey," she laughs. "I liked it when people brought their cars, and we'd get them to run again, and it would make you proud. But I didn't like the mess all over my hands."