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## Legal threat to Gullah Geechie historic site

By Charleston Mercury Staff

*Mercury* subscriber Kaaren Montgomery brought to our attention a legal issue facing the members of the First Union African Baptist Church, a Gullah Geechie institution on Dafuskie Island. She referred us to Don and Jean Newton, who for years have been members of the Dafuskie Community Preservation Zone Association and advocates for preserving the Gullah Geechie culture on Dafuskie.

Of the association, Don said, "We listen to the Dafuskie people and assist them when they get in trouble and have been doing this for years. We try to work for justice."

Jean gave us a brief background on the situation: "In 1999 the church was converted from a congregational church to a religious nonprofit corporation" by Clarence Edmondson, the pastor at the time — but "We've asked for minutes and no minutes have been provided. We have not seen any documented evidence (such as minutes of a church meeting) that document members voted to convert First Union Baptist Church to a non-member, non-profit religious corporation.

"Fast-forward to just a few weeks ago and the church

membership was given a new set of bylaws which would be the operational guidance for the church."

The practical result is that the members are losing their ability to have input into church management and also stand to lose ownership of the 15 acres the church and associated Mary Field School buildings stand on — land their great grandfathers bought and which is designated as a national historic site.

Don explained their goal: "We need to put this in a trust so it is protected and so that is overseen by the original Gullah owners. We are not trying to stop anybody who wants to lease it to have church, but they have to respect it for what it is, our heritage, a historic site: the school, the land and the church."

The Daufuskie Island Gullah Community, including Gullah members of the First Union African Church and Community Preservation Zone Association, is looking for legal assistance in completing this goal. To help or for more information, contact Sallie Ann Robinson, the representative on Dafuskie Island, at [mygullah@yahoo.com](mailto:mygullah@yahoo.com) or 912-604-8210, or Don Newton at [will2481@aol.com](mailto:will2481@aol.com) or 703-855-0146.