



Photos by JAY KARR • The Island Packet

SaNIyah Aiken, 7, sits on the lap of her grandmother Jackie Aiken while her great-grandmother Elnora Aiken helps her pin a rose to her shirt during the 50th annual Aiken-Singleton family reunion held Sunday on Hilton Head Island. The roses were worn as a tribute to family founders William and Maybelle Aiken.

# keeping the LEGACY alive

## Native islanders celebrate Aiken-Singleton family's 50th reunion

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**F**rom her seat under a massive oak tree, Julia Grant Thomas watched with excitement as several hundred of her relatives gathered to march, play, pray, eat, celebrate and sing Sunday during the family's 50th reunion at its large plot off Marshland Road.

The Aiken-Singleton family's reunions, thought to be the longest running within the native island community, are always festive occasions that draw people from great distances to the land the family has inhabited for generations, family members said.

This one, however, was particularly joyous, attracting people from as far away as California and Germany, some of whom could seldom attend previous years' renditions, the family said. Many attendees wore T-shirts bearing this year's theme: "Striving to Keep the Legacy Alive."



William Aiken Jr. of Miami, left, and his brother-in-law Harold Frazier of Savannah get reacquainted Sunday during the Aiken-Singleton family reunion.

“Generations to come, we want them to know about this.”

Julia Grant Thomas, on her family's reunions

# LEGACY

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"Generations to come, we want them to know about this," said Thomas, a retired New York City teacher who returned to Hilton Head Island in 1999 and lives on a separate family plot nearby. On Sunday, she took her late mother's place at a table of children of the late William and Maybelle Aiken.

The tradition began when the family brought covered dishes for their dad on Father's Day in 1960, a year after Maybelle's death. William died more than 20 years ago, but the family continues to gather there each year, a tribute to the sense of kinship they say he and Maybelle instilled in them.

This year's reunion included a fish fry, boat ride around the island, semi-formal banquet, worship service and visits to a local cemetery and the Heri-

tage Library, whose volunteers have helped the family trace its roots.

Family members don't know when or how their forebears first arrived in America, but they track their modern history to the 1800s, when James Aiken — William's grandfather — escaped from slavery with his wife, while muffling the cries of their infant daughter.

On Sunday, some of the family's younger members read that story into a microphone. Later, the family handed out trophies called "Lamps of Knowledge" to each branch of the family.

Before the family closed the event by marching around the property and sharing a meal of Lowcountry boil, Thomas took the microphone and led the group in a song, penned several years ago by Almetha Frazier, Thomas' aunt.

"We hope to keep you in our hearts," they sang in unison, "and we'll be a family while we sit beneath the old oak tree."