TEACH A MAN TO FISH

CAPTAIN FRED AND THE POWER OF WATER

by KAYLA STEWART

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Captain Frederick Douglas McBride IV is probably the only Black commercial fisherman who works along the Texas Gulf Coast. If you know about another one, please tell me. I'd love to meet him, too. ¶ Captain Fred is one of more than half a million Black people in Houston, the nation's fourth-largest city. If you know my hometown, and Captain Fred's, you know about the imprint of Black people on our city. You'll see that imprint in the jazz shows that fill up clubs downtown, in the Creole and Cajun seafood joints that line the city's strip malls, and in the soul food restaurants that bring you close to the feeling of eating in your aunt's kitchen. What you may not know is that Black folks govern our city, from school boards to our mayor. This legacy stretches back through Houston's history—the city simply wouldn't be what it is without generations of Black residents leaving their mark.

Today, Captain Fred is one of a community of Black Houstonians shaping what the city eats. And in the years to come, his vision is to cultivate the next generation of men and women who catch our fish.

Captain Fred remembers learning to fish at age four, alongside his brother, Jesse. Their grandfather would take the boys out to the 61st Street Fishing Pier on Galveston Bay, about an hour's drive from their home. Young Fred's first catch was a piggy perch.

From the beginning, fishing with his grandfather shifted something in Fred's soul. The water felt like a natural home, and as he cast he imagined the world that existed beneath the surface. As he grew up and spent more time on the Bay, he learned about discipline, about the environment, and about the man he wanted to become. Years would pass before he would dream of calling this love his profession.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, approximately 35,000 Americans work as commercial fishermen and -women. Of those, we don't know how many are Black. But we do know they are few. In 2017, commercial fishermen harvested almost 10 billion pounds of seafood from U.S. waters, realizing some five billion dollars in profit. Today, the commercial fishing industry is overwhelmingly white. But this was not always a white vocation.

I asked Captain Fred why he believed he was the only Black fisherman in the region. Thoughtfully he paused, rummaged through his mind, and then looked directly at me. He told me, "I believe I'm the only Black one because of the access, and because of the fact that people don't know that this opportunity exists." For him, learning how to fish as a child, and later learning to navigate the complicated (and expensive) roads to boat ownership and business ownership, allowed him to become who he is today. Like all of us, his path was shaped by environments both built and natural, and by the people who moved through those environments with him. But Fred acknowledges that his story is not common for many people who look like him.

Captain Fred's maternal grandfather, Jesse Lundy, worked as a sharecropper in Bailey's Prairie, south of Houston. He told his grandsons harrowing stories about long, hot days, his hands pricked from cotton bolls. Lundy was able to leave the fields and went to college at Houston College for Negroes (now Texas Southern University). He earned both a bachelor's and a master's degree and eventually became a school principal. His career as an educator helped him achieve the financial stability that allowed for activities outside of work. He could afford to fish recreationally, and it became his great love.

BLACK FISHERMEN HELPED SHAPE AND DEFINE FISHING CULTURE IN THE SOUTH, YET THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS ARE RARELY ACKNOWLEDGED. STILL, THEIR WORK IS EVIDENT IN OUR REGIONAL CUISINE.

Fred's mother, Jessica McBride, didn't fish, but she became an educator like her father, and she shared her family's other great passion—music. Mrs. McBride directed the band at B.C. Elmore Middle School in Houston for twenty-seven years. For the McBride family, music and fishing have long intersected. For at least the last three generations, both have provided joy, a sense of freedom,

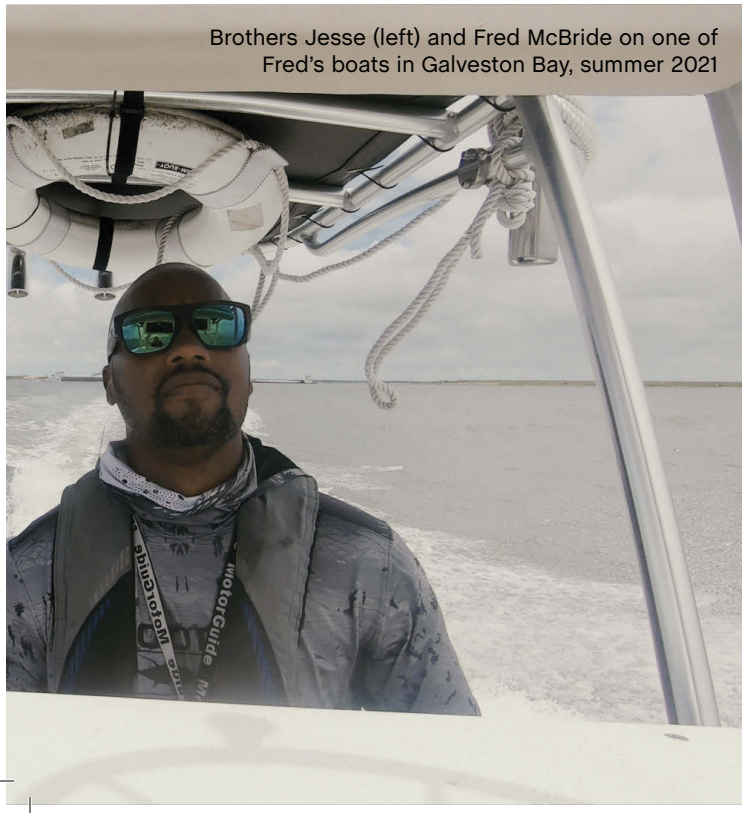
and at times a source of income.

When Jesse Lundy died, Fred was thirteen years old and his brother was eleven. His last words to his grandsons were "I love you boys," and "Now remember, we're going fishing on Saturday." Lundy didn't make it to that next fishing trip, but the McBride brothers' time on the water would continue.

Jessica McBride could've easily allowed the hobby to drift away, but she saw how integral fishing had become to the boys' lives. Early on weekend mornings, they'd leave their home in Houston to fish along Galveston Bay while their mother would wait in the car, reading or taking a nap.

Both Fred and his brother studied for careers in music education. Jesse, a jazz pianist, teaches in the Black American Music program at Tulane University. He often comes back home to fish. A classically trained musician, Fred played weddings as part of a string quartet during graduate school. The money from those gigs supported his fishing habit. Fred taught music in downtown Houston for eighteen years, primarily at MacGregor Elementary School.

Though Fred has left the school district to fish full-time, I met him one rainy afternoon in the classroom where he used to teach his young students about classical composers, jazz artists, and reading and playing music. He told me how he views fishing, too, through the lens of education. He wants other Black people, especially youth, to know that fishing can be a hobby. Or it can be a career. Black knowledge is at the root of his quest.



Brothers Jesse (left) and Fred McBride on one of Fred's boats in Galveston Bay, summer 2021

WHILE CAPTAIN FRED HAS CARVED OUT an unusual niche for himself as a Black Texan commercial fisherman, his journey points to universal truths about the Black experience in the American South. And that story, of course, goes back to the West African coast.

Centuries ago, along Ghana's Gold Coast, fishermen were revered. European voyagers recognized the skills of the Fanti and Mina of the Gold Coast and the Kru of what is now Liberia. Harvard researcher Emmanuel Akyeampong found that European ship captains regularly recruited Mina and Kru fishermen to work canoes and load and offload goods. The ingenuity of Black fishermen reportedly baffled many of the newly arrived Europeans.

Male Akro was one such fisherman. Recalled in Teshi and Labadi accounts, he introduced several new kinds of nets to the Ga people during the nineteenth century, including the *tengiraf*, a bottom net that "stretched along the coast in the sea as the telegraph wires on the land," and could catch an astounding number of fish. Other Africans, particularly the Fanti, introduced Europeans to their particular styles of nets and canoe-like boats.

Many Africans enslaved in the South originated from that coast. While the specifics have mostly been lost to history, we do know that Africans were much more likely than English colonizers to have hunting and fishing experience. During the plantation period, African Americans were virtually the only marine fishermen.

In a case study focused on coastal Georgia, researcher Ben G. Blount found that slave owners encouraged enslaved people to fish to supplement their food supplies. Using dugout canoes and later, wooden boats, enslaved people on the Georgia Sea Islands obtained half of their meat from fishing. Post-enslavement, small-scale fishing provided an economic opportunity for Blacks. Whether hauling in a cast net full of fish or pulling a waterlogged crab trap, this was physically demanding work. But it was a source of income, and of independence.

Into the twentieth century, Black Americans dominated the oyster, shrimp, and blue crab industries in South Carolina and Georgia. They

profited from fish and other seafood along the Gulf Coast of Texas and Louisiana. But as national demand for seafood increased, newly arrived European immigrants began to take an interest in the industry. They brought in larger, more expensive boats and equipment, taking advantage of costly new technology. They opened canneries to process their catch on a larger scale. Their practices tended to be less sustainable, often leading to overfishing and environmental degradation. By and large, Black commercial fisherman could no longer afford to compete, often because they lacked access to the bank loans necessary to finance a commercial boat with up-to-date equipment. Some went to work for larger operations, earning wages instead of the profits of ownership. One study found that, as of 1999, only five Black shrimpers on the Georgia coast owned and operated their own boats.

Black fishermen helped shape and define fishing culture in the South, yet their contributions are rarely acknowledged. Today, few have access to the financial capital necessary to continue this legacy. Still, their work is evident in our regional cuisine. Shrimp and grits was born of enslaved Africans augmenting their rations with shrimp they caught themselves. Frogmore Stew, full of heavily seasoned shrimp and crabs, takes its name from the Gullah-Geechee community on St. Helena Island, South Carolina, where it likely originated.

Today, along the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia, many Gullah-Geechee people work to maintain the fishing traditions of their communities. They work in harvesting, cast-net making, and boat-building; and they continue to catch shad, crabs, oysters, shrimp, and more. Queen Quet, a conservationist and Chieftess of the Gullah-Geechee nation, has participated in oyster replanting efforts across the Sea Islands. The community does this work in spite of external challenges like gentrification and climate change.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN BLACK AMERicans and the water has been fraught since the beginning of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. A brutal, horrific journey across the Atlantic Ocean that included drownings and suicides marked a new relationship to the water.

Water became racialized in the United States. In the Jim Crow South, Black Americans were blocked from public beaches and pools. Later, the desegregation of public swimming spaces was sometimes marked by violence. Other times, venues were closed altogether.

In 1959, Gilbert R. Mason Sr. began leading a series of "wade-ins" on the beach in Biloxi, Mississippi, facing down assault and arrest. During one wade-in in 1960, a white mob attacked 125 Black men, women, and children as police officers watched.

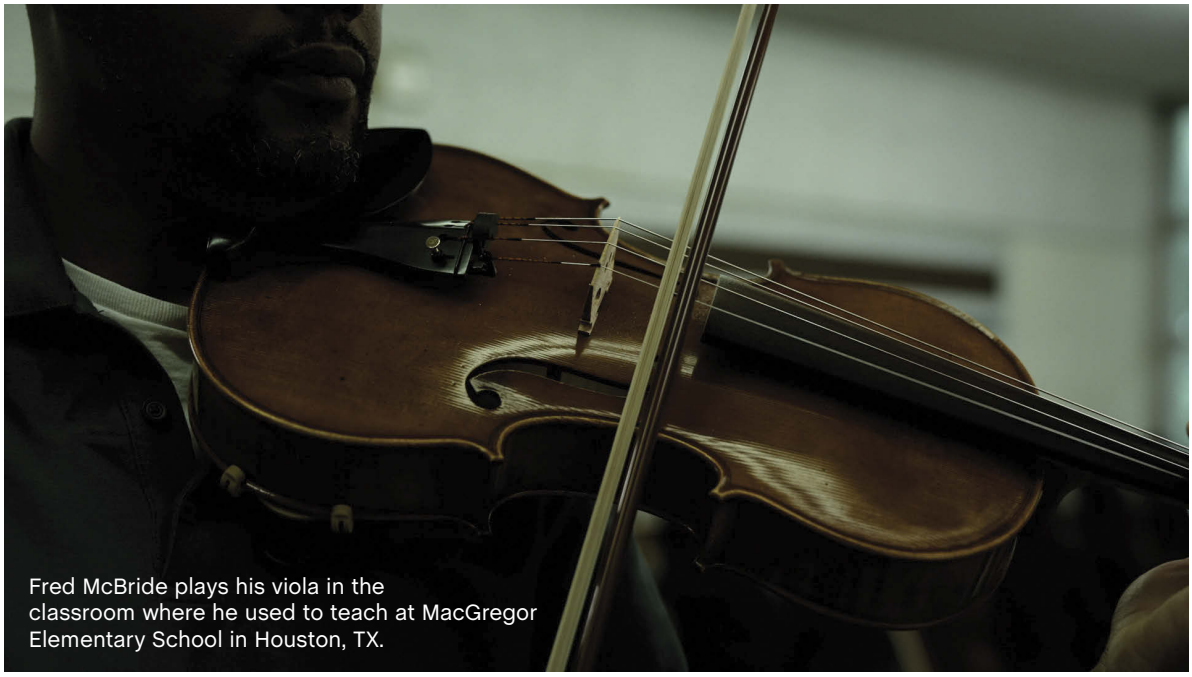
In 1964, civil rights activists orchestrated by Martin Luther King Jr. conducted a swim-in at the Monson Motor Lodge in St. Augustine, Florida. Black protestors, disgusted with ongoing segregation, jumped into the hotel's whites-only pool. The motel's owner, James Brock, retaliated by pouring acid in the water.

Research shows that the relationship between Black Americans and the water is still fraught. In 2010, a USA Swimming survey found that 70 percent of Black children had low or no swimming ability. Yet to work on the water, it's imperative to know how to swim.

Today, groups like Brown Folks Fishing, Ebony Anglers, and the International Federation of Black Bass Anglers work as a corrective to some of the more traumatic aspects of Black history with the water. They use recreational fishing as a tool to repair the fraught relationship between Black Americans and the water.

For Captain Fred, recreational fishing tournaments were the bridge between fishing as a hobby and fishing as a business. In the mid-2000s, he placed fourth in the Gulf Coast Trout Masters and competed successfully in redfish tournaments, too. But his wife was concerned. He was spending a lot of money to enter competitions, but he wasn't bringing anything in. That's when he got the idea for Captain Fred's Seafood. Hoping to leave a legacy for his son and to make a career out of a lifelong love, Captain Fred began to invest in commercial fishing.

The investments are *big*. For fishermen like Captain Fred, one boat isn't enough. Today he owns three, including a twenty-five-foot NauticStar. It's a rod-and-reel trot line fishing boat that's good for sheepshead and black drum, Fred's main catches. A boat like this can cost as much as $80,000. And that is for a bay boat. An offshore boat—required to fish in deep waters—can cost $1,000,000 if purchased new. Add to that another $10,000 to $15,000 in equipment—and that's on the low end. And you're legally required to have



Fred McBride plays his viola in the classroom where he used to teach at MacGregor Elementary School in Houston, TX.

a commercial fishing license. A Texas Finfish Permit will run you $25,000 to $30,000. We're close to $300,000 now.

Access to money is a burden all commercial fishermen shoulder. But Black fishermen often face higher barriers, grounded in historic and contemporary restrictions of capital. They also confront racism and ignorance, on and off the water.

Captain Fred tells a story about a white fisherman who suggested to him that having such a nice boat meant that he was a drug dealer. Another time, he had a white mechanic working on his boat. A white fisherman whose boat was docked nearby spoke to the mechanic and refused to acknowledge Fred, assuming the white man must be the boat's owner. These incidents may seem slight, but when small aggressions accumulate, they feel like something big.

In the world of farming and agriculture, we've seen a huge resurgence of Black youth returning to the farmlands many of their ancestors left. From the 1950s onward, there was a dispossession of 98 percent of Black-owned land in America. Yet in recent years, many Black youth, knowledgeable to the legacy of farming pre-enslavement, have taken up farming. In doing so, they seek to heal the trauma of slavery and build ethical connections between Black communities and the land. Could it be that fishing has a place in this movement? Captain Fred hopes so. After all, as he sees it, the barriers to becoming a Black commercial fisherman are rooted in many of the same challenges—inequality, lack of access to capital, and lack of knowledge.

For Captain Fred, these challenges pale in comparison to the love he feels for the water. Over the last decade, he's built a successful business largely catching sheepshead for acclaimed Houston chefs. Chris Williams of Lucille's, Chris Shepherd of Underbelly Hospitality, and Jonny Rhodes of Broham Fine Soul Food and Groceries are all customers.

Captain Fred wants his business to provide opportunities for commercial fishermen who look like him, to help them open their own businesses and find peace along the water, just like his grandfather taught him. The effort is gaining strength.

Captain Fred has hopes to take kids out on his boat, similar to what his grandfather did with him. He plans to kick mentorship programs into gear in the coming years. Next year, Captain Fred plans to return to the school building. This time, not as a music teacher, but as a club leader, to build fishing clubs throughout the city. These clubs will teach fishing, lead field trips on the water, and offer true exposure to a new environment.

Fred McBride's life demonstrates the power of the water. And of Black people working the water. His story raises questions about who has access to the water and who profits from it. Stay tuned as he writes the answers.

Kayla Stewart is an independent food and travel writer with roots in Houston, Texas. She is the cowriter, with Emily Meggett, of Gullah Geechee Home Cooking: Recipes from the Matriarch of Edisto Island*, forthcoming from Abrams in April 2022. She first reported on Captain Fred McBride for* Life & Thyme *in spring 2021.*