

2023 Toolkit

**JONKONNU  
AT STAGVILLE**

Historic Stagville  
State Historic Site

"Two athletic men, in calico wrappers, have a net thrown over them, covered with all manner of bright-colored stripes. Cows' tails are fastened to their backs, and their heads are decorated with horns. A box, covered with sheepskin, is called the gumbo box. A dozen beat on this, while others strike triangles and jawbones, to which bands of dancers keep time. For a month previous they are composing songs, which are sung on this occasion."

**HARRIET ANN JACOBS  
INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL.**

# WHAT IS JONKONNU?

Jonkonnu is a historic Afro-Caribbean masquerade and procession tradition. It was first recorded among enslaved people in the Caribbean. During slavery, Jonkonnu was a defiant celebration of culture, community, and masquerade. Jonkonnu has been celebrated and preserved by people of African descent across the Atlantic world.

Today, scholars, artists, and descendants are re-connecting with Jonkonnu in North Carolina. North Carolina's historical Jonkonnu tradition connects our state to West Africa, Jamaica, the Bahamas, Belize, and beyond.

Jonkonnu traditions have many different names, but they share common roots.

**JONKONNU**

**JOHN CANOE**

**JOHN KUNER**

**JANKUNÚ**

**JUNKANOO**

**JOHNKANNAU**



# JONKONNU IN NORTH CAROLINA

North Carolina is one of the rare places in North America with records of Jonkonnu. Here, enslaved people and their descendants actively celebrated Jonkonnu through the 1800s.

During Jonkonnu, enslaved people gathered to drum, dance, and parade. Some made masquerade costumes or masks. The Rag Man, dressed in colorful fringe with animal furs and horns, led the way. The procession moved from house to house, requesting gifts at each stop.

Jonkonnu happened on plantations, like **Somerset** and **Stagville**, and in cities like **Wilmington**, **New Bern**, and **Edenton**. Jonkonnu changed and adapted in each place.

Often, Jonkonnu mixed with Christmas traditions. Enslaved people at Stagville celebrated Jonkonnu on Christmas Day in 1848. West African traditions carried on in the drums, dances, and masquerade.

Jonkonnu continued after emancipation, but it faced new restrictions. White men and boys mocked or co-opted Jonkonnu processions. By the early 1900s, Jonkonnu faded away as Jim Crow rose to power.

# RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE

## JONKONNU IN NORTH CAROLINA

- Visit [Tryon Palace](#) for their annual Jonkonnu summer workshops, or for their annual Jonkonnu performance during their December holiday program.
- Harriet Ann Jacobs, “[Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.](#)” 1861.
- Elizabeth Fenn, “‘A Perfect Equality Seemed to Reign:’ Slave Society and Jonkonnu.” 1988.
- M.E. Lassiter. “[Jonkonnu, Jankunu, Junkanoo, John Canoe: Reorienting North Carolina’s Practice in the American Mediterranean.](#)” 2014.
- Elijah Gaddis, “[Processional Culture and Black Mobility in Maggie Washington’s Wilmington.](#)” 2021.

## INTERNATIONAL CONNECTIONS

- “[The History of Junkanoo](#)” - A short video on Junkanoo in Nassau, Bahamas.
- “[Play Jankunú, Play](#)” (2006) - Documentary on Jankunú in Belize.
- Kenneth Bilby, “Surviving Secularization: Masking the Spirit in the Jankanu (John Canoe) Festivals of the Caribbean.” 2010.
- Kenneth Bilby, “[Masking the Spirit in the South Atlantic World: Jankunu’s Partially-Hidden History.](#)” 2007.