Sweetgrass Cultural Arts Pavilion at Memorial Waterfront Park

In July 2009, Mount Pleasant celebrated the opening of the Sweetgrass Cultural Arts Pavilion at Memorial Waterfront Park. This open-air pavilion is a tribute to the generations of men and women who have carried on the Lowcountry basket tradition for more than three centuries. The facility provides a venue for local sweetgrass basketmakers to sell their wares. Kiosks and panels tell the history of the craft. As a stop along the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, the pavilion gives the public an in-depth look at one of America's oldest and most important African-inspired arts.

The Sweetgrass Cultural Arts Association promotes Gullah culture, heritage and traditions by celebrating the creativity of sweetgrass basketmakers and other Gullah artists. The Sweetgrass Cultural Arts Festival, an annual, family-friendly event, showcases performances of Gullah Geechee skits, gospel music, folklore and dance, along with sweetgrass basket making demonstrations and videos on the history of this cherished Lowcountry art. A vibrant array of sweetgrass baskets, quilts, paintings and other handmade goods are displayed alongside delicious Lowcountry cuisine for all to enjoy.

For More Information:
843-856-9732
www.sweetgrass.org

FIRST SATURDAY IN JUNE
Memorial Waterfront Park, Mount Pleasant, SC

Thank you! Your basket has been crafted by:

NAME: .................................. CONTACT: ....................

CARING FOR YOUR SWEETGRASS BASKET

Because the grasses used in these baskets come from swamps and marsh areas, water will not hurt them. To clean, gently spray the basket with cold water. Then, thoroughly air dry. This is the only care required.

DIRECTIONS

The coiled sweetgrass basket is a historically significant example of African cultural heritage that was transported across the Atlantic by enslaved African people. Africans from the Windward or Rice Coast of West Africa had knowledge and experience with rice cultivation and were, thus, particularly sought after in the Atlantic Slave Trade to the Lowcountry. Fearing that they might never return to their homeland, these enslaved people brought their culture with them in their minds, spirits and in treasured objects hidden away on their bodies.

Coiled basketry, one of the oldest African crafts in America, appeared in South Carolina during the late 17th century. The first known baskets in the Lowcountry were farmer baskets used for winnowing rice. Originally designed as a tool of rice production and processing, baskets had a very real and significant cultural connection for the displaced Africans. They were used in the planting and harvesting of the coastal money crops – rice, cotton, and others. Agricultural baskets were made of bulrush, sweetgrass and split oak.

Bulrush and palm, mainstays of coiled basketry, are ancient plants that are mentioned in the Bible. They are also prevalent in Africa. Their availability in the Lowcountry proved to be a welcome cultural connection to the homeland. Incorporating these plants in their basketry kept the Africans close to their beloved homeland and continuously reinforced their faith in the God of their salvation.

Sweetgrass basket sewing is viewed as a gift from God. The craft, handed down from generation to generation is usually learned from childhood. Baskets require a great deal of patience and creativity, as there are no set patterns. Each piece is unique, and each artist develops his or her own style. Basketmakers pledge to continue their traditional craft as long as there are raw materials available, but development of rural areas is threatening the supply.

After the 1890s, sweetgrass baskets began to evolve from agricultural implements to household items. Sweetgrass, a softer, finer straw, replaced bulrush as the primary material, long leaf pine needles were added for contrast, and palmetto replaced split oak as binders. On plantations, such as Boone Hall in Mount Pleasant, basket making continued even after slavery ended.

Sweetgrass basket sales surged with the opening of the Grace Memorial Bridge in 1929 and the paving of Highway 17 in 1931. Mount Pleasant area basketmakers began a longstanding tradition when one lady of vision, Lottie “Winee” Moultrie Swinton, soon followed by Lydia Spann Graddick, placed her chair along the highway to display baskets for sale. Thus, roadside basket stands were born. Sweetgrass baskets are very durable. Their uses range from practical daily use to show pieces. Basketmakers and their baskets are major tourist attractions in the Lowcountry.

Today, sweetgrass baskets are displayed for sale on roadside stands along Highway 17, just north of Mount Pleasant, at the Sweetgrass Pavilion at Mount Pleasant Memorial Waterfront Park, and in Charleston at the “Four Corners of Law” at Broad and Meeting Streets as well as the City Market. Show pieces may be found at the Charleston Visitor Center, Charleston International Airport, Gibbes Art Gallery, the Smithsonian Institute, and homes and museums around the world.

In 1997, a historical marker was erected to commemorate the legacy and history of sweetgrass baskets and their makers. The marker was placed at the intersection of Hamlin Road and Highway 17 in the Seven Mile section of Mount Pleasant, on the site of the first basket stand, by the Original Sweetgrass Basket Makers Coalition and the Christ Church Parish Preservation Society. The State of South Carolina named Sweetgrass Baskets the official state handcraft in 2006. That same year, a portion of Highway 17 North was designated as the Sweetgrass Basket Makers Highway.

Portions of HWY 17 North designated Sweetgrass Basket Makers Highway

More information at Sweetgrass.org

Text for this brochure provided by M. Jeannette Gaillard Lee, Sweetgrass Basketmaker