

ON HILTON HEAD ISLAND

Native islander dies at 100

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Helen Frazier Pittman Sumpter liked to say the world was very large.



Sumpter

It was bigger than Hilton Head Island, where she was born on Oct. 28, 1914, and it was bigger than Brooklyn, N.Y., where she worked for telephone companies for years.

“You should look,” she would say, “and you should explore.”

Sumpter did plenty of exploring before her death Friday morning at Coastal Carolina Hospital in Hardeeville at age 100. She was recognized at a ceremony on Hilton Head in 2013 as the town’s longest-living native-island resident.

Sumpter lived the past few years at NHC HealthCare in Bluffton. But she was born on Jonesville Road on Hilton Head to Charles Frazier Sr., a stableman and farm hand at Otterburn Plantation off Broad Creek, and to Elizabeth Frazier, a farmer’s aide.

She explored through the books she read, frequent trips and cruises with girlfriends, heated debates with relatives, and by bearing witness to the drastic changes that transformed the very place she was born.

“She enjoyed her life,” her nephew Newton Greene Jr. said Friday afternoon. “There’s no question about that.”

She attended the Mather School, which stood on the campus of the Technical College of the Lowcountry on Ribaut Road in Beaufort. She worked in the kitchen and earned scholarships to pay for boarding.

After graduating in 1935, Sumpter moved to Brooklyn, where she worked for New York Telephone until a job with BellSouth brought her back to Hilton Head Island.

She retired in 1975 and spent several years in Sheldon but remained active in the Hilton Head community,

delivering food to those in need and volunteering with the Sunday school at First African Baptist Church. She was Church Mother until her health declined a few years ago.

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Sumpter experienced one of her proudest moments in 2008 when she voted on Hilton Head for the first black president, said her niece Margaret Johnson. Her other great accomplishment was a lifetime of loving and raising her siblings’ children as her own, Greene said.

Though she was not a mother herself, Sumpter did marry twice, first to Joe Pittman and then, at age 80, to the 65-year-old Joe Sumpter.

“When she referred to ‘My Joe’ you were never quite sure which she meant,” Greene’s wife, Kelly LeBlanc, said Friday. “Sister Helen was quite

“I recall her saying to me, ‘Continue on the path. Your father has established a strong path. Build on it.’ I’ve been able to realize quite a few of my dreams, so I know it was a good decision.”

Newton Greene Jr., on his aunt, Helen Frazier Pittman Sumpter

a character — strong, smart, funny, generous and hard-working.”

Throughout her life, she encouraged the younger members of her family to continue their education and read as many books as they could, Greene said. She also urged them to draw on their elders’ wisdom.

“Know the people who came before,” she said in 2013. “See the advantages of doing things our way. Get together and work together to make improvements.”

Sumpter remembered a time when farming and fishing were the lifeblood of Gullah culture on the island, and people relied

as much on the water and land as hard work and each others’ generosity. She was most serious when instilling the lessons of that time in those who came after, such as her nephew Greene.

Though he wanted to be an architect, Greene says Sumpter persuaded him to follow his father’s footsteps as an engineer.

“I recall her saying to me, ‘Continue on the path. Your father has established a strong path. Build on it,’” Greene said Friday afternoon. “I’ve been able to realize quite a few of my dreams, so I know it was a good decision.”

However influential they

were, though, serious moments were rare for Sumpter, relatives said.

She was usually full of fun and humor.

“She was very spirited,” said Margaret Johnson, Sumpter’s niece. “You had no question about what was on her mind.”

A wake will be Wednesday from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. at First African Baptist Church. The funeral will be at the church Thursday at noon.

Sumpter was preceded in death by her parents; sisters Lucinda, Annie, Doris and Charlene; and brothers Herman and Charles Frazier Jr.

She is survived by sisters Davidean Mays and Liza May Frazier, brothers Paul and David Frazier, and a host of other relatives.

“She passes into history and will be remembered by many,” LeBlanc said.

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