

LOCAL

Islander: Remember your roots

Hilton Head native shares her story to help preserve the Gullah heritage.

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Ninety-eight-year-old Hilton Head native Helen Frazier Pittman Sumpter loved to fly down the island's tree-lined dirt roads on her father's horse. Disapproving men be damned.

"I was the tomboy, handling my father's horses and cows," Sumpter said.

"A fella used to wait for me to come by. He'd see me coming, and he'd hold my horse and said I couldn't go. He says a girl shouldn't be riding a horse.

"I'd cry and cry, and some of the elders would come by and see me crying. They said, 'If you don't leave that girl alone (her father) is going to put you in jail.' Then everybody leave me alone...."

"After that, anybody get in my way they get run over. They weren't going to stop me from riding my horse."

Sumpter, who turns 99 on Oct. 28, is the oldest among a vanishing breed of Gullah elders on the island who remember simpler times — before ferry service began bringing cars and people to Hilton Head in 1953. Before a bridge was built in 1956 connecting the island to the mainland. Before Charles E. Fraser began charting a new destiny for the island.

For nearly a century, she has watched as her birthplace evolved from a rural, isolated coastal community of farmers, fishermen and artisans to a budding resort town.

She comes from an era when islanders relied on the creek to provide for their family, catching fish and crabs, picking oysters and digging for clams. Sumpter worries that spirit of self-reliance, perseverance and hard work that defines Gullah culture is being lost in today's fast-paced society of overindulgence and selfishness.

She worries the old ways will be forgotten and the history and heritage of the island's Gullah descendants lost.



SARAH WELLIVER • Staff photo

Hilton Head native islander Helen Sumpter, right, is shown with, from left, sister Eliza Frazier, niece Shirley Williams and Williams' husband, Sandy, on Friday at NHC Health Care in Bluffton.

"The ones who were here years ago should be able to help the ones here now, but they're gone," Sumpter said Friday. "We really don't have a foundation to say how we grew up."

SAVING THE PAST

The Gullah culture arose from slaves brought to South Carolina and Georgia from West and Central Africa to work the rice, cotton and indigo plantations.

Until the 1950s or so, the Gullah way of life was virtually hidden among the Sea Islands of South Carolina. Slowly, Gullah natives became less isolated as developers moved in and the Gullah moved out, said Carrie Hirsch, a board member of the Hilton Head Gullah Museum.

The culture's mix of African, Caribbean and European influences slowly began to fade and was threatened, according to national experts.

Hirsch plans to interview Sumpter today for a museum documentary Hirsch intends to share with local schools and civic groups to keep the island's past and Gullah traditions alive.

"There were no doctors or

"It was a pioneer life where you made do with what you had. But what I've learned from the Gullah elders was they had happy lives."

Carrie Hirsch, Hilton Head Gullah Museum board member

hospitals. It was a farming and bartering community," Hirsch said. "It was a pioneer life where you made do with what you had. But what I've learned from the Gullah elders was they had happy lives. ... We want to dispel this myth of rampant poverty, because of the amount of natural resources that were available to them."

Sumpter agrees. "We had boats. We had horses. We had cows. We had our farms. We had the creek. We were happy," she said. "And everybody got along like one big family. Everything was there. If you wanted it, you go get it. And whatever one person family got, they divided it. Everyone lived together."

Sumpter's father worked as a stableman, farm hand and hunting guide at Otterburn Plantation, also known as Otter Hall or Otter Hole, on the northwest side of Broad Creek. Sumpter's

mother was "a farmer's aide."

Sumpter graduated from the Mather School, where she boarded, in 1935. The school, on what is now a part of the Technical College of the Lowcountry campus in Beaufort, was established in 1868 to educate the daughters of freed slaves.

She attended the school from fifth through 12th grades. Afterward, she enjoyed a long career working for telephone companies in Brooklyn, N.Y., Savannah and on Hilton Head until she retired in 1975.

Her advice for today's generation: Don't underestimate the value of education and remember your roots.

"Know the people who came before. See the advantage of doing things our way," she said. "Get together and work together to make improvements."

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