

# **SWEETGRASS BASKET CORRIDOR**

**Rural  
Sweetgrass  
Basket  
Commerce  
along Hwy 17**

**Changes and  
Challenges**

**Staci Richey**

## Phase I Cultural Resource Survey of US Highway 17 Between SC-517 and Darrell Creek Trail



## PROJECT OVERVIEW

Road widening  
along 5 miles of  
US 17 from 4  
lanes to 6

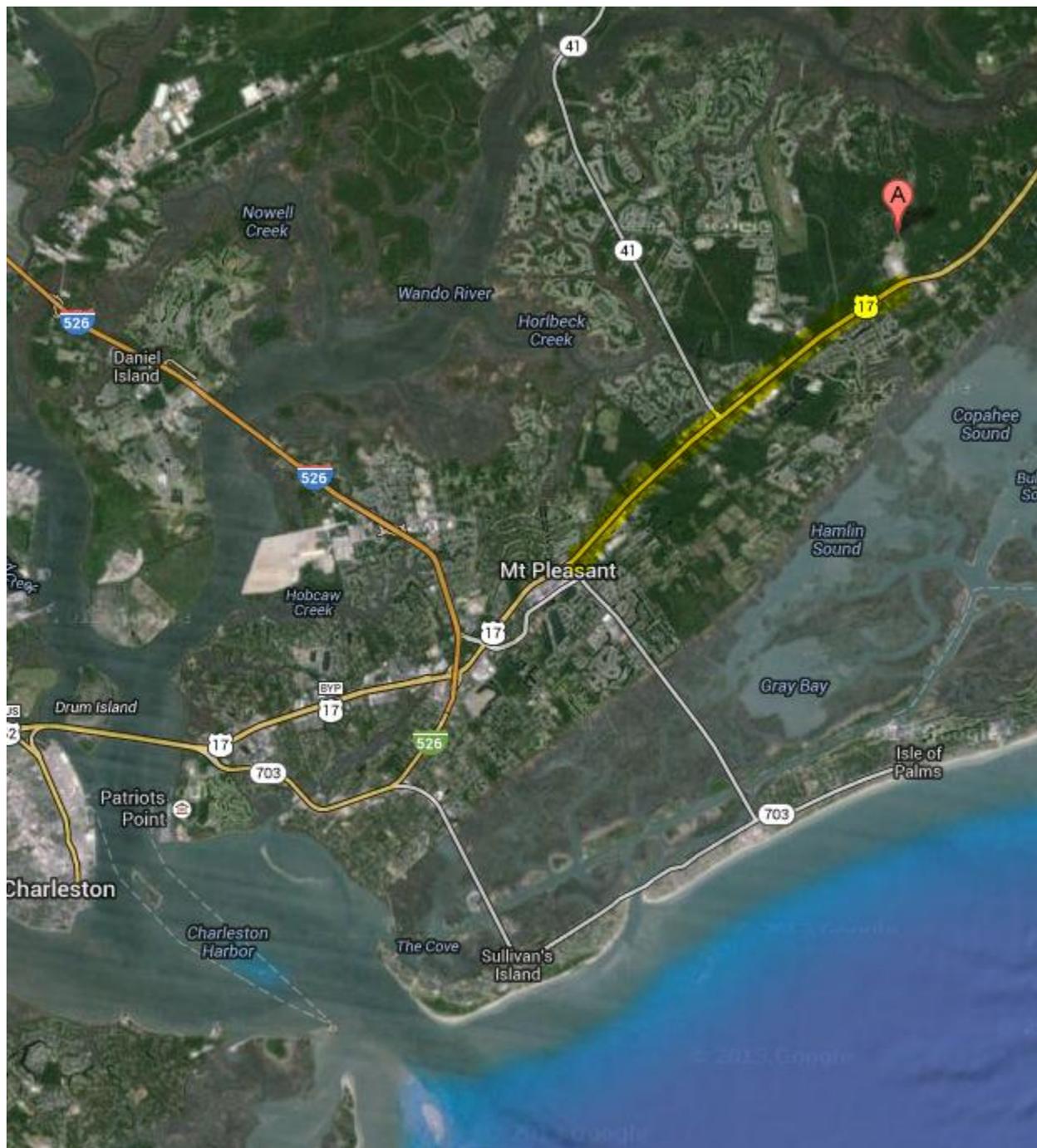
Installation of  
concrete  
sidewalk, gutters  
and curbs

Installation of  
turn lanes at  
intersections



## RURAL HISTORY

Plantations and later communities retained cultural traditions among African Americans



## RURAL CONTEXT

This location is the densest collection of sweetgrass basket stands along the highway found anywhere.

A historic marker, a town ordinance, and other recognitions name this corridor as unique and culturally significant.

# HISTORY OF THE SWEETGRASS BASKET CORRIDOR

# DURING SLAVERY

- Traditional, practical skill of coiled basketry from West Africa
- Used in America during enslavement as a winnowing tool for rice production
- Males created baskets for heavy duty work, females created them for lighter duty



# RECONSTRUCTION

- Ownership of land by freed people altered the agricultural practices
- Devastating hurricanes further altered the agriculture
- Competition from other markets helped eliminate the dominance of rice
- African Americans farmed their land for vegetables to sell in markets, sometimes in Charleston



# NEW CENTURY

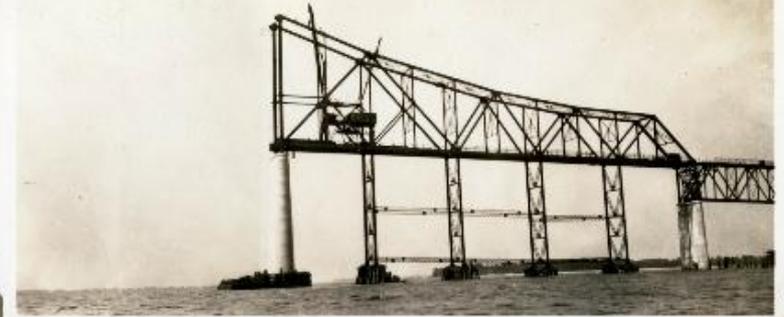
- Sweetgrass replaced bulrush as the main material for baskets
- Pine needles incorporated for show
- Evolution of utilitarian baskets to finer, more fragile baskets for show
- Students at the Penn School on St. Helena made baskets for sale as early as the 1910s
- Charleston merchant Clarence Legerton commissioned a large number of baskets to sell through his Sweetgrass Basket Company in 1916



# HEADING NORTH



377 5-29-29 West side - First truss members erected in cantilever arm.



378 5-29-29 East anchor arm complete. Transfer at L9.

## 1929 Construction of the Cooper River Bridge

(Charleston County Public Library Archives, Cooper River Bridge Collection)

This important bridge created a lasting northern route from Charleston to Mount Pleasant and beyond along Highway 17 and coincided with the growth of tourism to the area.

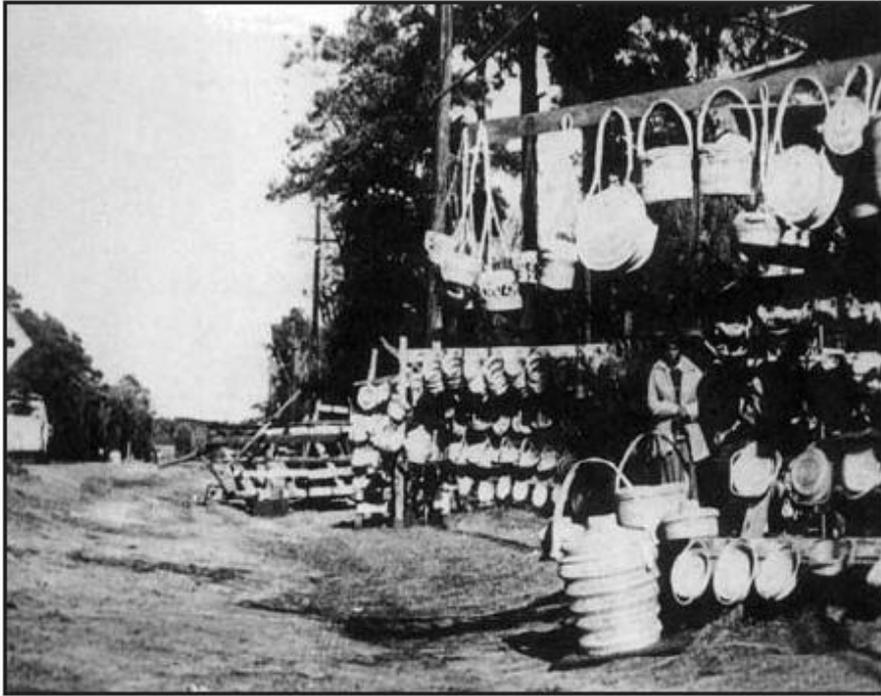


**GREAT  
DEPRESSION  
=  
NEW  
MARKETS**

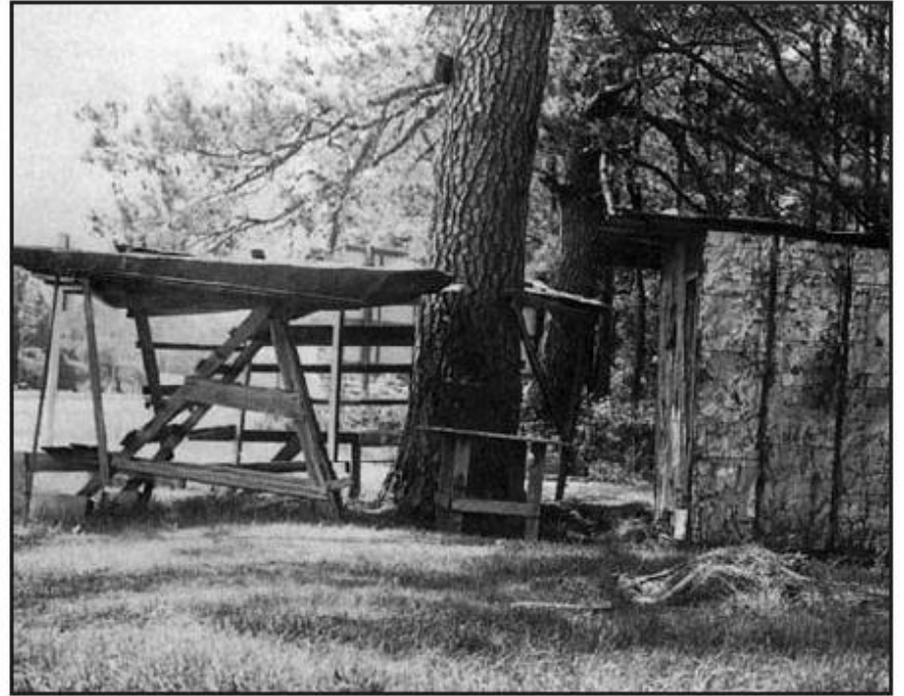
Pioneering women set up shop along Hwy 17 in the 1930s to sell their baskets.

Images from the Book *Row Upon Row: Seagrass Baskets in the South Carolina Low Country*, 1987, Dale Rosengarten

# CONTINUING THE TRADITION

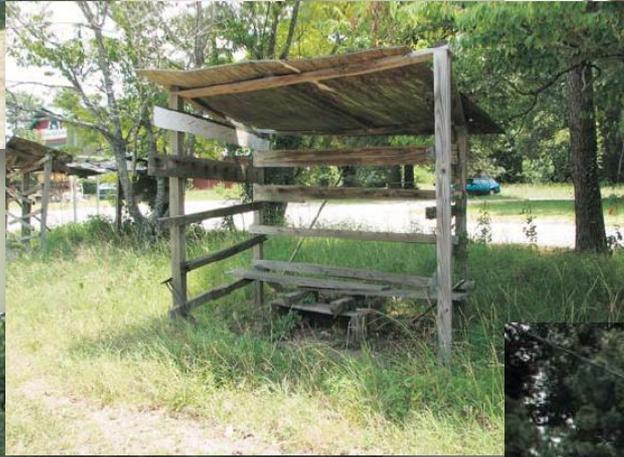


A. Sweetgrass Stands in 1977 from *Row Upon Row*



B. Sweetgrass Stands in 1986 from *Row Upon Row*





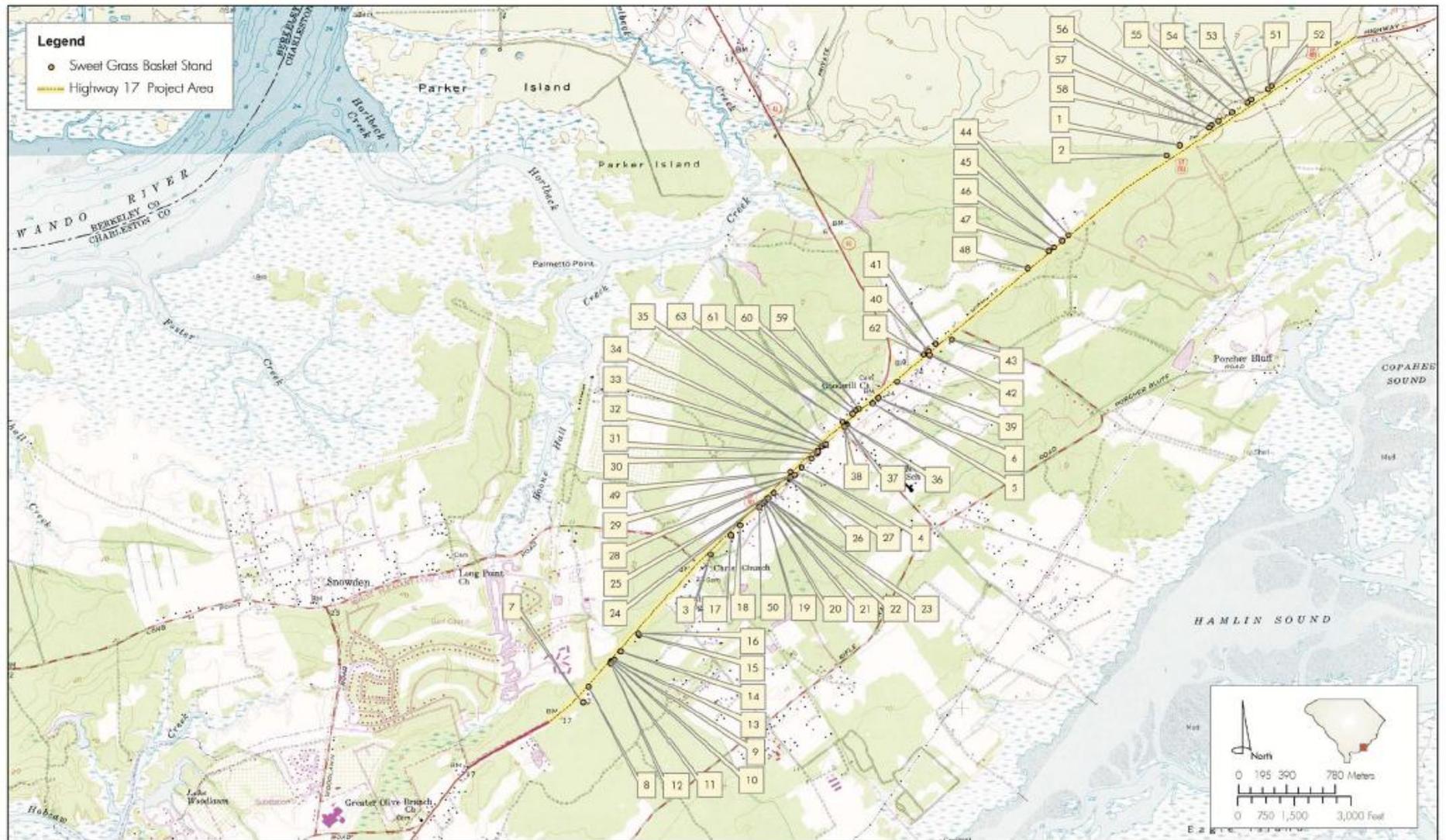


Figure 23.  
Identified Sweetgrass Basket Stands Locations in APE

Source: USGS 1997 Capes Inlet, 1997 Seawee Bay, 1997 Cainho and 1997 Fort Moutrie, South Carolina Quadrangles

# DEFINING “RURAL”

# WHAT MAKES THIS RURAL: LOCATION

- Relative isolation from urban centers
- Relatively little competition commercially
- Low density of buildings in the area
- Large areas of fields, woods, ponds, pastures
- Low volume of traffic
- Commerce is a reflection of the local clientele



2008 Image

# WHAT MAKES THIS RURAL: ROADWAY

- Wide grassy medians and/or shoulders
- Two lane roads
- Dirt roads
- Ditches vs. buried pipes
- Lack of lighting
- Lack of urban improvements



2008 Image



# TRADITIONAL CULTURAL PROPERTY

**SURVEY QUESTION: HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN MAKING BASKETS?**

**“learned when I was 6 years old”**

**“I’ve been selling baskets along the road all my life, ‘like a gypsy’”**

**“I am 86 and I have been making baskets since I was 7, I learned from my mother and if anyone came to me I would teach them”**

**“About 65 years”**

**“Over 70 years”**

**SURVEY QUESTION: HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN AT THIS LOCATION?**

**“a long time”**

**“since 2001”**

**“12 years”**

**“started selling in a stand here in 1948”**

**“had to move here when the car wash came in, now I rent from the property owner”**

**“mother had a stand here for 50-60 years, had to move it back once already”**

**“28 years”**

**“35 years”**

**“always been at this spot”**

**“a geographic area, including both cultural and natural resources and the wildlife or domestic animals therein, associated with a historic event, activity, or person or exhibiting other cultural or aesthetic values.”**

**National Park  
Service**

# CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CORRIDOR

- Ease of vehicular access
  - Visibility
  - Individual ownership
  - Personalized construction
- Locations, chosen by basket makers
- Available space for customer and basket maker parking
  - Natural setting of grass and trees
- “Rural” feeling, associated with lack of urban elements such as curbs and sidewalks

# MITIGATION SOLUTIONS?



# FROM RURAL TO URBAN

Roadway  
changes  
alter the  
corridor



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Google Streetview

Report a problem





# Google Streetview





# Google Streetview

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[Report a problem](#)





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Google Streetview



3/29/2014 14:56





HAMLIN RD

BASKET SALE

3/29/2014 15:37



**3/29/2014 15:18**

Henrietta & Ida Be.

3/29/2014 15:18



3/29/2014 15:31

# LEARN MORE ABOUT SWEETGRASS BASKETS

## BOOKS:

Carney, Judith. *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*

Coakley, Joyce V. *Sweetgrass Baskets and the Gullah Tradition*

Rosengarten, Dale. *Row Upon Row: Sea Grass Baskets of the South Carolina Lowcountry*

Theodore, and Schildkrout, Enid, editors. *Grass Roots: African Origins of an American Art*

## Documentary Video/DVD

*Grass Roots: The Enduring Art of the Lowcountry Basket*. College of Charleston, Center for the Documentary, 2008.