

Lecture 3: “Sweetgrass Baskets: Preserving African American Traditions in the Low Country”

Teacher Script

Use the following information as a guide for teaching the “Sweetgrass Baskets: Preserving African American Traditions in the Low Country” MS PowerPoint presentation.

Slide 1: Sweetgrass Baskets: Preserving African American Traditions in the Low Country

- A. The purpose of this lesson is to show students the importance of preserving cultural heritage. This lesson will focus on the sweetgrass basket traditions of African Americans living in the Low Country from Charleston’s early settlement to the present day.

Slide 2: What is a sweetgrass basket?

- A. The art of sweetgrass basket making was brought to the Low Country in the late 1600s by West African slaves.
- B. The baskets are made of sweetgrass, palmetto, pine needles, and bulrush.
 - a. These grasses and leaves are similar to what can be found in Africa.
- C. Even though sweetgrass baskets are seen all over the world today as artistic collector’s items, their original use was much more practical.
 - a. The baskets were first used to winnow rice and store dry goods such as vegetables, corn, herbs, dried grain, and fish.¹
 - b. Winnowing is the process taken to separate the rice grains from the husks. Slaves would toss rice grains on the sweetgrass baskets. The heavy grains fall back into the tray and the husks blow away.

Slide 3: Where can I find sweetgrass baskets?

- A. After slavery ended after the Civil War, newly freed African Americans had to search for ways to make a living and support their families.
- B. By the 1900s, job opportunities were scarce for African Americans.

¹ Joyce V. Coakley, *Sweetgrass, Baskets and the Gullah Tradition* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2005), 9.

- C. Those African American families living in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina began to establish a sweetgrass basket-making industry to provide income.
- D. Today, one can find local African Americans making and selling sweetgrass baskets in the market downtown as well as in roadside stands along Highway 17 in Mount Pleasant.

Slide 4: How are sweetgrass baskets used to preserve African American heritage in the Low Country?

- A. Later in the twentieth-century, sweetgrass baskets quickly became a hot tourist commodity for their beautiful design and labor-intensive handiwork. They represented a unique aspect of the Low Country's history and many people wanted to be able to take a piece of that home with them as a souvenir.
- B. The making of these baskets helped to preserve the African American history and traditions of the Low Country region.
- C. "Not only was a traditional craft passed on, but the making of baskets afforded the opportunity for older relatives to share lore, family traditions, and historical events as recorded by their enslaved relatives." (Coakley, 9)

Slide 5: The Sweetgrass Basket Cultural Landscape

- A. In recent years, more research has been conducted to help identify and preserve the influence sweetgrass basket-making has had on the Low Country region.
- B. The passage of the National Heritage Areas Act of 2006 through the National Park Service established the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor which stretches along the coasts of northern Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and southern North Carolina. The term "Gullah/Geechee" refers to generations of descendants of enslaved Africans who were brought to the southern United States from West Africa. This corridor helps formalize and bring awareness to the cultural heritage of thousands of people living along the southeastern coast of the U.S.²

² "Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor: North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida," National Park Service, <http://www.nps.gov/guge/index.htm> (accessed March 5, 2010).

- C. Many times people assume historic preservation is always in reference to a building or site, but the sweetgrass basket tradition can be seen as a “cultural landscape” that is difficult to define but is nonetheless there.
 - a. The World Heritage Committee defines “cultural landscapes” in three different categories.
 - b. The one that applies best to the Low Country sweetgrass basket cultural landscape is the “associative cultural landscape.”
 - i. The sweetgrass basket cultural landscape is significant not because of a specific building or location, but because of its artistic and cultural associations between African American heritage and the Low Country region.³

Slide 6: What are the best methods to interpret and preserve cultural landscapes?

- A. Refer back to the lesson plan for further directions about the sweetgrass basket cultural landscape brochure assignment.
- B. You can leave this slide on the screen for students to see the different ways cultural sites can be interpreted and exhibited.

³ “Cultural Landscape,” United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, World Heritage, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/culturallandscape#1>.