

Black History Month | Tometta Pounce

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Checkout our second Black History Month feature on MGC Columbia paralegal systems analyst Tometta Pounce.

"You're probably going to think I'm joking when you read this, but seriously when I was young I really did think all (ok most) of my white friends could trace their family trees back to Europe and had a coat of arms to prove it and their grandmas had tea parties with fine china. I'm pretty sure I have my overactive imagination to thank for those conclusions. Unfortunately, I didn't see MY grandmother or my family history and traditions through those same rose-colored glasses.

I grew up in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, part of the Hamlin Beach Gullah Geechee community that's long called the Lowcountry home. My maternal grandmother (who also grew up in Hamlin) was the grandparent I spent the most time with and learned the most from. Ethel Wigfall was our matriarch – our rock. You already know I didn't see her like other grandmothers. She was a granny – a housecoat wearing, wood chopping, granny. Besides keeping things running smoothly everyday she was also a sweetgrass basket maker. Her baskets were just as solid as she was. When she made me spread out sweetgrass to dry, I huffed. When she gathered up palmetto strips to bundle I wasn't impressed. This wasn't art. This was chores. I loved my granny and I loved those baskets too; but I didn't see that either could be appreciated outside of our family or our community.

Sweetgrass baskets have been part of American history since the 17th century, the technique brought to America by enslaved West Africans, the materials adapted to available marsh grasses, stripped palmetto leaves and pine needles. Fanner baskets were used to separate rice from chaff. They continued to be used alongside newer technologies before and after slavery ended in 1865. Jumping forward to 1916, baskets became a wholesale enterprise. Charleston merchant, Clarence Legerton, would come to the home of Sam Coakley in Hamlin Beach to buy baskets in mass from basket makers. His company, Sea Grass Basket Company, would resell them to buyers near and far. Also noteworthy in the sweetgrass basket history was the construction of the Cooper River Bridge and paving of Highway 17. Basket makers could then more easily go direct to consumer. My family has had several basket-stands, even one that stands today.

Sweetgrass baskets and the Gullah-Geechee community have attracted various levels of interest over the years. The Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor has been designated a National Heritage Area by Congress. My family and its art have been featured in articles, books, documentaries and exhibits. That includes my grandmother and her work. It was a proud moment the first time I saw her work-product featured as art and her the talented artist. I'm happy to know that my family and its traditions ARE appreciated outside of our family and our community. At the same time, I wish that wasn't something I was even concerned with. We all have family arts, skills and/or traditions that add to our collective history. Whether they make it to a book, an exhibit or an article, they can be appreciated, adopted and valued by us."