

Nancy Basket
Artist Nancy Basket has been working with Kudzu since 1989. She makes everything from baskets to paper at h
Walhalla.

Discovering the Upstate's Native American heritage

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If trees could talk, they'd have a million stories to tell -- stories of war and peace, life and death, s
changing. In South Carolina's Upstate, one type of tree in particular, with a very curious bend, ha
human ingenuity.

Hundreds of years ago, before the advent of street signs, paved roads and personal navigation dev
Americans used trees to help guide their way. The guideposts, called trail trees, can be found acro
United States including parts of the Upstate.

Nancy Basket, a Native American storyteller and folk artist, and Dave LaVere, an educator and hi
recently took me to a trail tree located a couple hundred yards off Highway 28 just outside Ocone
According to Basket and LaVere, the trail tree, and others like it, are the result of Native America
saplings, usually oak or elm, fastening them to the ground and allowing the trunks to extend and g
horizontally in a direction that pointed to specific points along a trail. The markers led those who
to neighboring villages, safe havens, fresh water and other important locations. With a horizontal
about five feet from the ground then rising to a 90 degree angle toward the sky, the 200-year-old t
off Highway 28 is quite a sight to see.

The trail tree visit was one of several along Basket's and LaVere's newly formed His and Herstor
Mystery Tour. The Cherokee Lower Villages, which made up most of what is now present-day O
once served as the center of Cherokee country in South Carolina.

Basket, an artist-in education in basket making who also has been recognized by the McKissick M
master basket-maker, knows a lot about the Cherokee culture. She sought out Cherokee tradition a
from her Cherokee grandmother and other elders. Today she excitedly shares her knowledge with
visitors to her art studio and gallery in Walhalla. Make no mistake about it, Kudzu Kabin Designs
ordinary art spot. If you're looking for proof of that, look no further than the gallery's kudzu cove
or the century-old barn made of kudzu bales in the backyard or even the gigantic Thunderbird, ma
vine, flying from the ceiling inside the studio. Basket's place, the first stop along our tour, was de
showcase of all things kudzu. What is kudzu you ask? If you don't know, chances are you're prob
the South. The fast-growing vine, native to Japan, carpets powerlines, trees … just about anything
way.

While most folk consider Kudzu to be a pesky weed, Basket holds true to her Native American he
respects the unruly plant. "Every plant has a purpose, just like people," she says. How did she figu
purpose? She says she went straight to the source. "After talking to the kudzu vines when baskets
them fell apart, I knew the proper respect was needed … I went back to the kudzu and said I was

long time, but finally heard the kudzu say, leave the trees alone, use us for paper instead." After ta kudzu's advice to heart, she began making paper products from the plant's leaves. Most of Basket' kudzu paper is on display in her gallery in the form of nature-themed folk art greeting cards and o Basket also has put the kudzu vine to artistic use. She makes beautiful kudzu vine baskets, lamps foot long snake with wings and antlers called the Great Uktena, a serpent of Cherokee legend.

After checking out the gallery and Basket's artwork and Native American artifacts, we headed out Kudzu Bale Barn. As the name implies, the 100-year-old barn has been refitted with kudzu bales. works her kudzu paper making magic by blending kudzu leaves, water and paper scraps then allo which looks a lot like green grits, to dry on felt taken from a plastic screen.

After Basket's kudzu paper making demonstration, we loaded up and headed out to explore Nativ sites in the area. The Oconee County Heritage Center was our next stop. There, we saw two ancie wooden canoes -- one was pulled from the Chatooga River in 2002, the other from the Keowee Ri summer of 2008. I was amazed that they were in such good shape, especially since one of them is 250 years old. While archeologists aren't sure whether Cherokees or European settlers built the ca pretty certain their design is Cherokee-inspired. After our visit to the Oconee County Heritage Ce down the street to check out the site of the new Museum of the Cherokee of South Carolina, whic to open in 2012. The Museum will pay homage to the area's rich and colorful Cherokee history.

Oconee County, which takes its name from a Cherokee word which means land beside the water, Native Americans dating back to as early as 300 A.D. The Cherokees were the last tribe of Native inhabit the county. Their villages, collectively known as the Lower Towns, were usually situated streams or rivers to ensure a steady supply of drinking water, food and transportation. In the late 1 there were more than two dozen Lower Town settlements located in the northwest portion of the s most of those areas are currently overgrown with vegetation or are underwater, we had to use our visualize what the sites might have looked like.

Tamassee was our first Lower Town visit. The site, which is just a grassy tree-lined area today, w thriving settlement of skilled Cherokees who were master farmers, artisans, hunters and warriors. Tamassee, we traveled east to the Keowee Lower Town site. Keowee Town, currently submerged waters of Lake Keowee, was once the main village and center of all the Cherokee Lower Towns. Path, a Native American travel and trade route that extended from Charleston to the Greenville ar neighboring states of Georgia, North Carolina and Tennessee, ran directly through Keowee. Look beautiful lake and at the boaters and anglers who were enjoying it, I wondered if they had any ide stunning, peaceful, pristine area was once a flourishing village of native people who governed the democratically, who were in harmony with nature, relied on mother nature for sustenance and hea balanced lives between work and play, developed sophisticated agricultural systems, honored thei were the first people of Oconee County.

After Keowee, we visited Isaqueena Falls -- a 200-foot cascade supposedly named after a Native Our visit there was pretty interesting, not just because the place is gorgeous but also because Bask debunked the myth of Isaqueena. The two say the myth of a Native American girl jumping from t death is just that -- a myth. While they say the story of Isaqueena isn't true, they do believe that N. used the waterfalls and saw them as a sacred place, one to be respected.

As we left Isaqueena, finishing up the last leg of our tour, I thought back on all we'd heard and se

day. The pristine water falls, century-old trail trees, ancient canoes, entire towns submerged under unique art work and colorful stories handed down through the ages are all a part of Native Americ history that is intricately and beautifully woven into the fabric of Oconee County just waiting be c

Interested in the His and Herstory Cherokee Mystery Tour or visiting Kudzu Kabin Designs? Clic Basket at (864) 718-8864.

Click here for more information on Native American trail trees and to learn more about a nationw identify and map their locations.

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Native American trail tree
This odd-shaped tree is a Native American trail tree. Native Americans made trail trees by bending saplings. As they pointed to specific and important locations along specified routes. This tree, believed to be more than 200 y off Highway 28 just outside Oconee State Park.

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Isaqueena Falls
Isaqueena Falls is a 200-foot cascade located at Stumphouse Tunnel Park in Oconee County. Native Americans to be sacred ground.

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Keowee Town
Keowee Town, currently submerged under Lake Keowee, was once the main town of the lower Cherokee settlen 18th century, there were more than two dozen Cherokee Lower Towns in present-day Oconee, Greenville, Ande counties. The Lower Town settlements served as the center of Cherokee country in South Carolina.

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Kudzu Kabin Designs
Nancy Basket, an artist and educator whose work has been featured in major motion pictures such as Last of the and displays her kudzu folk art at Kudzu Kabin Designs in Walhalla. The front porch of her gallery is covered in material -- kudzu

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The Thunderbird
Folk Artist Nancy Basket uses kudzu vine to make interesting pieces of artwork like this Thunderbird. According American oral tradition, the Thunderbird is a gigantic bird with a wing span up to 20 feet long.

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Native American artifacts
Nancy Basket, whose grandmother was a Cherokee woman, has a room full of Native American artifacts at her Walhalla