

# LOWER ALTAMAHA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## *Reflections Upon Its Past, and Some Observations on Its Present & Future*

An Address by Buddy Sullivan, October 25, 2009

Upon addressing the Georgia Historical Society at its annual meeting in 1881, Charles C. Jones, Jr. noted, "As children of the past and parents of the future, we should pause to consider our heritage and what our legacies may be." Those words articulated so many years ago are equally appropriate today, and to them we might also add: "Where do we go from here?" Perhaps we may realize some answers to that challenge before the conclusion of these proceedings today.

The Lower Altamaha Historical Society was formed in 1979. It may properly be said to have begun with a river, and an idea.

The river, of course, is the Altamaha, a vast drainage system, one of the largest in the eastern United States that has, fortuitously, remained one of America's most pristine.

By way of extension then, how might we define the "Lower" Altamaha?

For starters, a good argument could be made that it may be the most perfectly complete amalgamation of the history of coastal Georgia of any single location. Tideflow rice planting, timber rafting, steamboats to the interior, lumber mills, the commerce of an international shipping trade, the culture of the commercial shrimp fisherman and crabber—all these things properly reflect the Lower Altamaha and all are encapsulated within the rich tapestry of the history of the Georgia tidewater.

The significance of the river has certainly not been lost on our forebears. Richard Grubb, editor of the *Darien Timber Gazette*, observed in 1874: "The Nile is said to be everything to Egypt; in fact, without the Nile, there would be no Egypt. To a certain extent the same may be truly said of the Altamaha River and Darien. Without the Altamaha there would be no timber trade and no rice planting, and without these, there would be no Darien..."

And yet, the deep allure of this river and particularly for our purposes, the rich, alluvial bottomlands of the river, also lies in its mystique as a place of sheer, untamed natural beauty. The natural element of the Altamaha is almost magisterial in its wildness, the river dynamic that far more often than not, in far more places on the river than not, may accurately be said to reflect the past ten thousand years. Indeed the Altamaha transcends our concept of *time*—rather, it transcends time over far more millennia than humans have lived along its shores.

The idea for the Society evolved from a concerted initiative by local citizens to protect the integrity of the Altamaha. A local historical society might go far in preserving the river's historical, cultural and natural legacy. It would serve as a platform for disseminating that legacy, not only of the river but also that of its region, centered upon Darien and McIntosh and Glynn counties. Darien is in the heart of the Altamaha basin, and it is within the lower reaches of the river from which much of the history and culture of the section has evolved.

In the 1970s there was a concern that the river was under-appreciated and that not nearly enough was being done to protect it from the encumbrances of human progress, be it industrial development, or abuse of the river from other factors.

The late William G. Haynes, perhaps the most passionate of all the river's advocates, articulated it best when, with poetic depth, feeling and urgency, he wrote: "There are rivers which capture the imagination, that are as familiar to us as household words far beyond the limits of the lands through which they flow."



The very origins of their names are shrouded in mystery. Legends built around them have developed an aura of magic that is palpable, and irresistible to man. The Altamaha is one of these."

Bill Haynes tirelessly labored for the protection of the Altamaha in the 1970s and 80s. His unpublished paper, "The Altamaha: Two Decades in the Life of a River", establishes with unique insight his argument for the River's preservation. Appertaining to this remarkable document, was Haynes' recollection of the creation of the Lower Altamaha Historical Society and his elucidation of the rationale for the Altamaha River basin as its focal point. In establishing this perspective, Haynes wrote: "The Altamaha has been the patron of man from time beyond knowledge, and is a good reason for Darien being where it is. It has the distinction of being a name known to the world through literature, history, and the botanical brethren, because of a single book—the work of William Bartram, artist and botanist, and of a rare and lovely flowering shrub or small tree, the *Franklinia Alatomaha*, made known to the world by Bartram and named in honor of Benjamin Franklin."

A catalyst toward the creation of the Lower Altamaha Historical Society was the organization in 1976 by Bill Haynes of the "Man in the Landscape" conference as the local participatory event in the United States Bicentennial observance. The purpose of the symposium was the fulfillment of a collaborative inquiry "into man's relationship to his natural environment through the history and culture of the lower Altamaha River region." Concurrently, Haynes was instrumental in efforts to establish nearby Fort King George as a state historic site, an initiative that began in 1965 and has steadily progressed with museum development and fort restoration on the site up to the present day. The Historical Society began as an idea that evolved into a concept and finally, as a formalized entity. Three individuals—Bill Haynes, Hans Neuhauser of the Georgia Conservancy and Norman Edwards, site superintendent of Fort King George—met one day in the summer of 1979 in Darien to discuss ways to protect the Altamaha River. "The battle over protecting the river had been waged by scientists and dedicated environmentalists," Haynes later wrote. "Their concern was for those natural wonders of the river. The state's bureaucracy won't listen to the individual who would disrupt their ease, but they are heedful of determined organized groups," said Hans Neuhauser. "Why not", he continued, "an historical society? The county ought to have one. The Altamaha too is loaded with history." Thus, in November, twenty-one persons responded to an invitation in *The Darien News* to all who were interested in forming the historical society to gather in the community room of the old City Hall. Wrote Haynes, "Those present were invited to consider well the debt to the River for Darien's past periods of prosperity, a condition that was likely to be renewed in the future, as an attraction to visitors. Also, not forgetting our seafood industry to which the free-flowing Altamaha contributed its share. A name was proposed: the Lower Altamaha Historical Society, and this was adopted without dissent. By so honoring the River, the Society would acknowledge the County's debt to the Altamaha, indicating that its outlook was regional, and not limited to Darien and the County alone..."

The founding members of the LAHS were: Miss Bessie Lewis, Miss Frances Haynes, Miss Anne Lee Haynes, Mrs. Elizabeth Wyly Aug, Mrs. Will Dean, Mrs. Evella Brown, Mrs. Freida Stebbins, Mrs. Annie Gill, Mrs. Doris Rabb, Mrs. Gertrude Mallard, Mrs. Amanda Young, Mrs. Lillian Schaitberger, William G. Haynes, Jr., William B. Dean, Robert Young, Paul H. Ploeger, Jr., Daniel H. White, Talbot Harding, Ralph Gill, John McEvoy and Norman Edwards. The Society, as may be surmised from the preceding comments, began with the stewardship of the river as its primary objective. However that mission expanded to include the advocacy of the development and improvement of Fort King George, and the Fort's logo is part of the official seal of LAHS.

There have been outstanding achievements in the field of community service by the Society and its members over the last thirty years. In addition to its ongoing advocacy on behalf of the Altamaha River, the Society helped coordinate the 1982 Project Raft event in which members worked with communities along the river to build a pine timber raft and reenact a trip to Darien, replicating the timber days of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early twentieth centuries.



In 1986, LAHS and the City of Darien had a cooperative effort to appropriately recognize the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Darien by the Scottish Highlanders.

The most visible and enduring legacy of LAHS is the Society's work, in partnership with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, to successfully raise funds and facilitate the construction of a replica of the cypress blockhouse at Fort King George, based on plans of the original structure built in 1721. The Society hosted the blockhouse dedication in October 1988. Since then, as any visitor to the site can well observe, many additional replica structures have been added to enhance the interpretation of the Fort.

Lower Altamaha, with a grant from the Georgia Humanities Council and the Mills Bee Lane Foundation, coordinated coastal Georgia's observance of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the landing of Christopher Columbus in the New World. The highlight was the Society's "Columbus and the Land of Ayllon" symposium in which over 400 persons attended three days of scholarly lectures, tours and other activities in Darien in September 1992.

Mattie Gladstone of the Society, with persistent and unflagging energy, coordinated the initiative to catalog and document all of McIntosh County's cemeteries, black and white. The project culminated in 2000 with the publication of a book sponsored by the Society listing all the burial sites and grave inscriptions of the county's cemeteries.

The Society has had other publishing initiatives, including the reissue of Bessie Lewis's 1975 book *They Called Their Town Darien*, and booklets on the history of the Darien waterfront, McIntosh County's tabby ruins, and an account of the 1898 hurricane that struck the county, issued on the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary observance of that event. The most recent publishing effort will be made available for the first time this afternoon, a short history of Ashantilly sponsored jointly by the LAHS and the Ashantilly Center.

The Society in recent years has provided for public research a highly useful archives of all its collections of records, documents and books, including an important bequest of the complete genealogical collection of the late Annie Fisher Gill, a charter member of the Society. This rich archival resource is in LAHS's new facility at Fort King George.

Finally, LAHS, with the assistance of grant funds from the City of Darien and the Georgia Historical Society, has coordinated the installation of five state historical markers to commemorate important aspects of local history—the Columbus Square Railroad Depot, the Darien Cotton and Timber Port, the Burning of Darien in 1863, Sapelo Island and Ashantilly, the unveiling of which is a part of the events of today's observance.

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I began this discussion with my own observations on the Altamaha River. And now we come, full circle and perhaps appropriately, back to the River, to close these remarks

Over the years, almost up to the moment of his death in 2001, the steadfast advocacy by William G. Haynes for the Historical Society, the Altamaha River and Fort King George have played an integral role in the preservation of the cultural legacy of our region.

Bill Haynes' support of coastal environmental issues in general is reflected in the gradual reduction of publications emanating from his Ashantilly Press. However, one work Haynes composed and intended to issue through the Press was his own statement on the need and urgency of preserving the Altamaha. This thoughtful document is *The Altamaha: Two Decades in the Life of a River*, the metal typeface for which he set at Ashantilly Press, and a work on which he was completing final editing before poor health intervened. It is an intensely personal narrative, compellingly stated, written with great depth, substance and feeling. It is possibly the nearest thing to a memoir that Bill ever wrote.

In this account, he charts the unyielding efforts by himself and others on behalf of the preservation of the River during the 1970s and 1980s. He lays out his argument based on the feelings and experiences of those who shared his passion for the river, an expression, he writes, "...of the viewpoint of Ophelia Dent whose family planted rice in the Altamaha Delta for many generations, and who regarded the rice fields and River as an inseparable resource, for the future feeding of people," and the renowned ecologist, Dr. Eugene



Odum of the University of Georgia, a strong advocate for preserving the Altamaha. "For a time," Haynes writes, "tranquility reigned. No one was making overt attacks on the River. The fishermen in their boats were up and down its length as usual. I felt frustrated, there was no visible adversary to strengthen our response—but I suspected the worst, that someone was making plans secretly against our river, for it was too quiet. But the smooth flow of the Altamaha was undisturbed...An example which best expresses the close relationship between river and coast by its thoughtful simplicity is a comment by Lillian Dean, formerly with DNR. She said, 'In many respects I feel that the Altamaha is more of a unique and important natural area than individual coastal islands. The fact that the river is intertwined with coastal life in so many different ways is part of the reason, I think.' The 1970s was a decade of intense activity on the river by all kinds: scientists, environmentally oriented persons, or those simply enjoying a day's boating. Magazine articles were drawing attention to the unique scenic beauty and resources for recreation of the Altamaha. It was rediscovery, as the great prize that all wished to possess and control, each for his own selfish use, regardless of the host of claimants...Hans Neuhauser of the Georgia Conservancy told of experiencing the reality of the Altamaha, seeing what Bartram surely must have seen in his day, a river comparatively untouched, always the same, and yet changing all the time. *The River has a way of cleansing Man's intrusion...*"<sup>27</sup>

As Haynes aged and his concerns grew about the fate and future of Ashantilly beyond his death, he seriously began studying his options. The consequence of his deliberations on this critical matter was the donation by Haynes and his sister Anne Lee in 1993 of the Ashantilly property to the newly created Ashantilly Center, Inc. Through the years, the work, mission and vision of the Ashantilly Center has gone hand in hand with that of the Lower Altamaha Historical Society which makes it particularly appropriate these proceedings today are being conducted jointly and in partnership. As Lower Altamaha and Ashantilly embark together upon the next thirty years the interpretation, preservation and dissemination of the history, culture and legacies of Darien, McIntosh County and the greater coastal Georgia community appears to be in the best and most capable of hands.

The thread that ties together the Historical Society and Ashantilly is, of course, Bill Haynes. The bond is strong, expressive to past generations the rich legacy of the two organizations that Bill loved and embraced so passionately, along with his River. This link, the enduring connectivity by which Haynes, last private owner of the restored Ashantilly, is inalterably connected to the past, is embodied in the person of Thomas Spalding, designer and builder of the original Ashantilly.

While researching, writing and revising *Early Days on the Georgia Tidewater* during the 1990s I developed an increasing appreciation for the vision, passion and achievement of Thomas Spalding, antebellum planter of McIntosh County and Sapelo Island, and surely one of the most unique, yet under-appreciated, historical personages in the history of Georgia. I found myself devoting large blocks of space in *Tidewater* to Spalding's agrarian philosophy, his far-reaching accomplishments, and, not least, the enduring imprint he left on his community, his region, and his state. Spalding was to his time what Bill Haynes later became so indelibly to his—for Haynes also embodied vision, passion and achievement. He too left a lasting imprint that will be recognized and remembered for many years. Both Spalding and Haynes have left permanent legacies and it is especially fitting that their common bond was Ashantilly. Ashantilly both transcended and linked their affinity and affection for the landscapes and legacies of McIntosh County. As a native and fourth generation McIntosh Countian whose love for the natural beauty of the county coincides perfectly with a similar appreciation for the endless tapestries of its unique history, it is easy for me to share those feelings. I am sure I speak also for so many others whose lives have been touched, and are being touched, by Ashantilly. Thank you.

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