



# HISTORICAL TIMES



# AMERICAN HISTORY

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# **SAPELO ISLAND'S SPALDING LEGACY**

**T. M. BROWN**

Many folks are familiar with Georgia's Saint Simon's and Jekyll Islands and even spent a vacation on the golf courses and beaches on Tybee or Hilton Head, but what about Sapelo Island? Likewise, most have enjoyed Savannah, the oldest and grandest vacation city on Georgia's storied coast, but what about Darien, the second oldest city in Georgia? Don't feel bad. Prior to my visit four years ago, neither did I. But since then I have fallen head over heels with both Darien and Sapelo Island—smack dab in the middle of Georgia's storied tidewater coastline.

Though Sapelo's history stretches back centuries, if not millennia, it is the Spalding legacy on Sapelo during the 19th-Century that makes this antediluvian barrier island worth being better understood.

Long before R. J. Reynolds, Jr. purchased the island in 1934 from Howard Coffin, an automobile magnate, had bought Sapelo in 1912, and the remote island became a getaway for the rich and famous, the Spalding family built an empire of plantation holdings on the island until the War Between the States broke out. But before we judge the Spalding family growing their wealth on the backs of enslaved workers, we should

Sapelo Island, Georgia, USA - Images provided by T. M. Brown





## SPALDING LEGACY

dig deeper and learn what separated the Spalding plantations from others along the Georgia tidewater. While researching the historical facts about antebellum and post-bellum Sapelo after my first guided tour on the island in 2020, I discovered an unheralded story about the Spalding legacy and the Geechee descendants on the island today. One that begged to be told and defies the black and white facts (metaphorically and literally) about our nation's history involving the decades leading up to and following the brutal bloody battles of the Civil War—in particular, on Sapelo Island and in nearby Darien, Georgia.

Thomas Spalding (1774-1851) purchased the southern end of Sapelo Island in 1802, completing a transaction his father-in-law, Richard Leake, had begun. In the years that followed, Spalding's family grew, as did his agricultural holdings on Sapelo and along the tidewater mainland in McIntosh County, Georgia. His most notable architectural legacy left to his heirs, beside his land holdings, was South End's Big House—an elaborate tabby-built mansion built by enslaved labor between 1807 and 1810. Big House became an esteemed monument to Spalding's sense of permanence and place that marked all his plantation management and relationships. It featured a grand symmetrical layout of gardens, walkways, live oak groves, and pools at the front and rear of the majestic house. Upon its completion, Big House became one of the finest estates along the Georgia tidewater. Its two-foot thick tabby walls withstood the harshest hurricanes, but could not survive the ruin of war and abandonment years later.

Thomas Spalding proved himself to be a skilled planter and his fame as a scientific farmer brought acclaim up and down the entire Southern coast. His humane treatment of his enslaved workers and their families made him one of the most revered planters from the Carolinas to Florida. He grew abundantly wealthy with sugar cane, but his cultivation of Sea Island cotton earned him the most recognition as an agriculturist.

In 1843, Thomas Spalding completed his ownership of Sapelo Island when he bought Chocolate on the north end of the island from Charles Rogers. He gifted those fields and the estate to his youngest son, Randolph Spalding (1822-1862) as a wedding present after he married Mary Dorothea Bass that year. Thomas Spalding had done likewise a decade earlier when he gifted 1500 acres to his daughter, Katherine Anna (1807-1881) and her husband Michael Kenan from Milledgeville. In the prior decades, Thomas Spalding had likewise generously gifted his landholdings on the mainland to his other two daughters, Jane Martin (1796-1861) and Elizabeth Sarah (1806-1876), and oldest son, Charles Harris Spalding (1808-1887), when they married. In 1821 Spalding built Ashantilly for his wife, Sarah Leake Spalding (1778-1843) and family on the mainland just above Darien. Further up the coast, he also bought The Thicket from Willam Carnochan, who mastered the distilling of sugar cane into the finest Georgia rum until the hurricane of 1824 destroyed the sugar mill.

Thomas Spalding's generosity reached beyond his family's benefit. In 1820, he donated the southernmost point of land on Sapelo to the federal government for the building of the brick lighthouse to guide shipping to the burgeoning port of Darien at the mouth of the Altamaha River.

After his marriage to Sarah in 1795, fifteen children were born between 1796 and 1822, but only five of their children grew up, married, and outlived Thomas and Sarah.

Despite his misgivings about the institution of slavery, the Spalding family maintained nearly 400 enslaved workers and family members on Sapelo Island by the time of Thomas Spalding's death in 1851. He espoused and implemented the task system of labor, and assigned black drivers who were under the watchful eye of Bu Allah (Bilali) a Muslim, Thomas Spalding's entrusted black overseer and second in command on Sapelo.

# SPALDING LEGACY

Just before Thomas Spalding passed away at 76, he fought and debated in Georgia's assembly for Georgia to vote against secession in 1850. A position his two sons, Charles and Randolph pursued but ultimately failed in preventing a decade later. Upon his death, Thomas Spalding bequeathed South End on Sapelo Island with its grand mansion to Thomas II, Randolph's oldest son, only four-years-old in 1851. Charles and his wife bore no children, thus Thomas II became the next heir in the Spalding paternal line. Because of his son's age, Randolph became the trustee of the estate until Thomas II reached legal age. As a result, Randolph became the de facto laird of Sapelo Island with only his brother-in-law and sister owning Kenan Fields on the 15,000 acre barrier island.

In the months following General Sherman's march on Savannah, history records virtually every displaced, enslaved worker and their families returned to Sapelo Island, risking their lives in doing so. They came back to the only homes they knew, remembering the Spalding family's promise—they would always have a home on Sapelo. In 1868, after a turbulent few years and legal challenges, Mary Spalding and her family returned and lived on Sapelo. They became the only permanent white residents on the island until the turn of the century.

In my upcoming historical novel, *The Last Laird of Sapelo* (August 15, 2023, Koehler Books), the tragic story of Randolph Spalding is told. After his father's death in 1851, he parlayed his father's fame and gifted landholdings on Sapelo Island, hobnobbing from Charleston to Savannah to Milledgeville and ultimately failed to thwart Georgia's decision to follow South Carolina into secession by early 1861. Within weeks after the assault on Fort Sumter, Lincoln's naval blockade threatens the entire southern coast. Colonel Randolph Spalding, a reluctant commander of militia, faces a storm of life-altering events in the months that follow, imperiling his family's legacy, livelihood, and lands. He ultimately must decide between supposed justice and saving the life of a slave who exacted revenge for the murder and rape of two children on Sapelo Island.

This historical novel is a work of fiction, but it is based on actual people, places, and key historical events. A reader should walk away after reading the story eager to learn more about the Spalding legacy on Sapelo Island and then visit Darien, Georgia and ferry to Sapelo Island to walk the pristine beaches, wander around the manicured gardens that surround Reynolds mansion, see the Geechee community at Hoggs Hammock and Behavior Cemetery, and possibly arrange a tour of Chocolate's tabby ruins on the northern end of the island. During your visit, listen to the stories and read about the history. You just might return home with more questions than answers, like I did four years ago.

Though the past remains unaltered, history is subject to change, especially in America.

T. M. Brown



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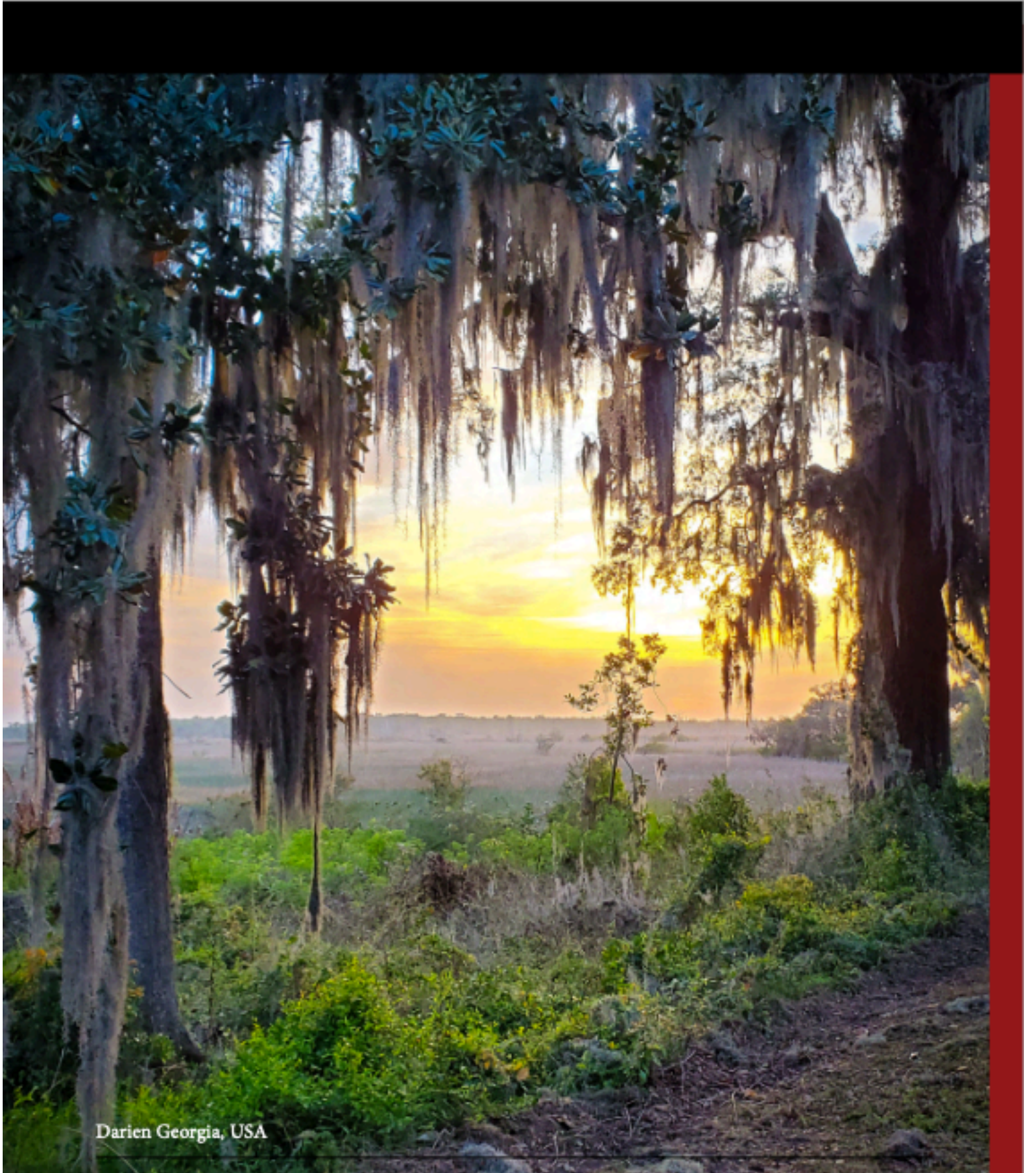
Tabby ruins of Spalding's 1809 sugar mill (Top)

Reynold's mansion (middle)

Gullah-Geechee woman making the famous Lowcountry sweetgrass baskets (right)

Images from Wikipedia





Darien Georgia, USA