



# From Shiloh to Sapelo: Our Past Remains Unchanged

By Mike Brown | August 3, 2023 | Blog

Every day, our modern culture erases more and more reminders from our Nation's past, however the past remains unaltered. History can be rewritten, monuments and markers removed, and names on buildings, roads, bridges, schools, and even military bases and vessels replaced with different names, BUT the past remains unchanged. Only our interpretation of the past changes.

Whether our Nation's past offends or encourages us today, it took place in the time and circumstances of those who lived it and shaped it. The good or harm we perceive from the events in our Nation's history is a healthy discussion we should be free to engage in, but first we should acknowledge that our current society is a product of our past. We should take care when picking what portions of history to erase or alter.

This is the discussion I dove into after I first wrote my historical novel. Author-friends questioned my decision to publish a story that involves enslaved workers on Southern plantations at the breakout of the Civil War. But, sometimes a story comes to light from a controversial period in our Nation's history that outweighs any risk in writing it. For that reason, I am pleased Koehler Books saw the value of the story and published the story I wrote.

What follows is how I went from writing my contemporary Shiloh YouTube or downloading our mobile app to investing three years to write and publish, *The Last Laird of Sapelo*.

I quote a portion of A Land Without Ruins by Abram Ryan, a noted 19th-Century American poet (1838-1886), in the story's opening.

"A land without ruins is a land without memories – a land without memories is a land without history. A land that bears a laurel crown may be fair to see; but twine a few sad purple leaves around the brow of any land, and be that land barren, beautiful and bleak, it becomes lovely in its consecrated coronet of sorrow, and it wins the sympathy of the heart and of history. Crowns of roses fade – crowns of thorns endure. Calvaries and crucifixions take deepest hold of humanity – the triumphs of might are transient – they pass and are forgotten – the sufferings of right are graven deepest on the chronicle of nations."

The rest of Ryan's famous poem did not make it into the novel, but is worth sharing to remind us today of the value of never letting loose of the past.

"Yes, give me the land where the ruins are spread,

And the living tread light on the hearts of the dead;

Yes, give me a land that is blest by the dust,

And bright with the deeds of the down-trodden just.

Yes, give me the land where the battle's red blast

Has flashed to the future the fame of the past;

Yes, give me the land that hath legends and lays

That tell of the memories of long vanished days;

Yes, give me a land that hath story and song!

Enshrine the strife of the right with the wrong!

Yes, give me a land with a grave in each spot,

And names in the graves that shall not be forgot;

Yes, give me the land of the wreck and the tomb;

There is grandeur in graves – there is glory in gloom;

For out of the gloom future brightness is born,

As after the night comes the sunrise of morn;

And the graves of the dead with the grass overgrown

May yet form the footstool of liberty's throne,

And each single wreck in the war-path of might

Shall yet be a rock in the temple of right.

Ryan's powerful poem reminded me how we should not just cling to the memories of the victorious but likewise the vanquished. Both fought and spilled blood for a cause they felt worth fighting to preserve. We should always remember that the victors are the ones who write history. This means we must dig beyond the written history to uncover the facts where truth lies.

After attending a writer's conference on Saint Simon's Island, June 2019, my wife and I traveled to Darien, Georgia, to consider it as a setting for my next contemporary Southern novel. We fell in love with the history of Darien, the second oldest town in Georgia, bowing only to Savannah. After Oglethorpe founded what they had originally named New Inverness, the early Scottish settlers chartered the settlement as Darien in 1736.

We drove through the quaint live oak lined neighborhoods and visited Sapelo Island. We stayed at *Open Gates Bed & Breakfast* in historic Darien. Our excursion to Sapelo Island changed everything. Our tour guide and host, JR Grownor, a Geechee descendant, shared how Thomas Spalding had brought his ancestors to Sapelo at the beginning of the 19th-Century. He then told us how following the Civil War the freed Geechee population returned to the island and bought land. But after Howard Coffin of Hudson Motor Company fame bought the island in 1912, and subsequently sold it to R. J. Reynolds, Jr., the changes they instigated affected the Geechee communities. Of the four hundred Geechee residents on Sapelo at the beginning of the 20th-Century today there are only about three dozen descendants still living on the island. The children no longer attend school on the island but take the ferry to school on the mainland. After the State of Georgia gained the island from R. J. Reynolds' widow in the 1970s, only parcels of land in the Hoggs Hammock community remain privately owned. Between a lack of jobs and rising taxes, most of the Geechee families at Hoggs Hammock have sold their land to outsiders and moved away.

While in Darien, Zachariah and Carrie Rath, innkeepers of *Open Gates Bed & Breakfast*, handed me a copy of Buddy Sullivan's book, *Early Days on the Georgia Tidewater, The Story of McIntosh County & Sapelo*. Scouring through Buddy Sullivan's book, I learned more about Thomas Spalding and his family's legacy on Sapelo, in Darien and throughout Georgia. I then discovered the overshadowed and mostly overlooked story of Randolph, Thomas Spalding's youngest son. Newspaper accounts recorded Randolph as a revered politician, a successful planter, and a heralded patriot who proudest his inherited fame and fortune on Sapelo Island in the decade following his father's death in 1851. Further, as a testament to Randolph and his father, following the Civil War, virtually all the displaced Geechee enslaved workers and their families returned to the only home they knew: Sapelo. The question of "why?" led me to writing *The Last Laird of Sapelo*. Though a work of historical fiction, I anchored the novel around actual people and places in history.

In August 2021, my wife and I returned to Darien and ventured to Brunswick and Savannah as well. At Ashantilly, now a restored history and visitor center in Darien, we met with Buddy Sullivan and Harriet Langford, Director of the Ashantilly Center, before we drove to Randolph Spalding's house, built in 1857 near the historic homes on *The Ridge*. Subsequent trips led me to Milledgeville, Columbus, and Russell County, Alabama, where we found the plantation home where Mary Bass Spalding grew up a scant twelve miles from Columbus. When not on the road, I researched the internet and read books about Randolph Spalding and the other characters and events and places in the story.

The lone notable exception in this fictionalized–I chose not to depict actual Black slaves. Bu Allah (Bilali Mohammed) was the only real Geechee person mentioned–Thomas Spalding's famous black overseer. I contend he had an influence upon young Randolph Spalding as an adolescent growing up on Sapelo Island. All the other slaves depicted in the story are fictional, but representative of those who lived on the island and served the family at Randolph Spalding's mainland farmstead in 1860.

Spalding Wyllly's discovery occurred when I met Miriam Lukken and her husband, Peter. She is a direct descendant of Elizabeth Spalding Wyllly, daughter of Thomas Spalding. Her family's collection of journals, paintings, books, artifacts, and photos belonging to the Spalding/Wyllly family took my breath away. She and Peter have since built a home on Sapelo Island and support the historical connection of the Geechee community there, as well as preserving the legacy of the Spalding family.

I hope *The Last Laird of Sapelo* offers a thought-provoking story that reveals the hard choices and hardships everyone faced in the early months of the Civil War. Likewise, neither did I intend this historical novel to defend any of the wrongs of yesteryear, but to help us navigate the present.

## Mike Brown

Retired since 2014 from the 9-to-5 life, T. M. Brown, simply Mike to friends and family, embraces his Georgia heritage. He recalls his childhood when on many warm Sunday afternoons his father drove the family beyond Stone Mountain to his Great-Uncle's farm on the then dust-filled, red clay back roads of Snellville, GA. Mike fondly recalls the bite of barb-wire pasture fences, sipping cool well-water from a ladle, and getting scrubbed in a washtub near the front stoop of Uncle Kerry's and Aunt Monk's old farmhouse. Today, Mike and his wife Connie live below Atlanta near Newnan, Georgia. He has published the three-book Shiloh Mystery Series: *Sanctuary, A Legacy of Memories* (Jan 2018); *Testament, An Unexpected Return* (March 2018); *Purgatory, A Progeny's Quest* (February 2022). His fourth book is a historical novel, *The Last Laird of Sapelo*, August 15, 2023 by Koehler Books. A common theme throughout all his stories stems from the truth his pop and poppa exemplified and taught him while growing up in Georgia and Florida. "The testament of a man lies not in the magnitude of possessions and property left to his heirs, but the reach of his legacy long after his death." President, Hometown Novel Writers Association, Inc, Newnan, GA B. A. Theology/Church History, Baptist College of Florida

[View all posts >](#)

[Mike Brown](#) [Southern History](#) [Southern Literature](#) [Southern Tradition](#) [War For Southern Independence](#)

## Related Posts

- [Blog](#)  
**Jefferson and the Indians**  
M. Andrew Holowchak  
March 13, 2024
- [Blog](#)  
**A New Classic Southern Novel**  
Chlyde Wilson  
March 12, 2024
- [Blog](#)  
**What If Secession Happens Now?**  
Kevin Orlin Johnson  
March 11, 2024

## 6 Comments

William Quinton Platt III  
August 3, 2023 at 9:10 am

There were no "wrongs" of yesteryear. Slavery existed then and it exists today. Blacks owned slaves by the millions in Africa. Blacks owned slaves by the tens of thousands in the New World. "Native"(whatever that means) Americans owned slaves by the millions. The Five Civilized Tribes owned slaves by the tens of thousands. When a society that is stone age meets a society that is in its industrial age, the stone age "loses" by being dragged into the future. The only reason African slavery was imported into the New World is because disease destroyed the "native" populations AND the royal families of Europe wanted to trade with Africa. Africa had nothing but labor and raw materials to offer to an industrial customer.

You could go to Africa to study slavery there, but there are no written materials to study prior to Europeans writing about African slavery. You could go to the New World to study slavery there, but there are no written materials to study prior to Europeans writing about New World slavery. There are a few stone carvings depicting hundreds being executed to appease their gods of whatever...per day. I suppose enslaving Europeans time traveled back to carve those stone records.

BT Washington said, "we loved our masters"...Frederick Douglass said, "we loved our masters". Thousands of slave narratives said, "we loved our masters".

If slavery was so horrible, please explain why there were no slave uprisings during the War Between the States. None. Despite thousands of lost weapons on hundred of battlefields. It would have been impossible for the South to fight the yankees without the support of their slaves.

Perhaps a topic for a next book...HOW FREDERICK DOUGLASS WON A FISTFIGHT WITH HIS MASTER AND SURVIVED, despite the "horrors" of slavery. Or, THE COMPLETE COLLECTION OF SLAVE NARRATIVES, never seen, since they were hidden in the Library of Congress because they did not fit the NARRATIVE.

Thank you for your quest for truth.

[Reply](#)

James M Persons  
August 3, 2023 at 1:26 pm

Yes, the "horrors" of slavery. A work colleague once expressed concern to me about slavery as an issue. I can't reveal more info on that without giving too much information about the colleague or my place of work. To continue, I told the colleague that it wasn't all whips and chains in the slave days. This relieved her concern. Another great source, IMO, about the "horrors" is Grady McWhiney's book on Cracker Culture. There are a number of footnoted, first person, primary source accounts about: slaves enjoying days off dressed in fine clothing; and being paid for work; and one especially fun account of a Yankee visitor in S.C. complaining that the slaves were even lazier than the White Southern slave owners and were not BEATEN. Nuggets of gold in a book about the Celtic influence on Southern culture, and most definitely NOT about slavery. Imagine, slave owners tolerating lazy slaves, and in S.C. of all places which the Yanks despise above all other Southern states. Most definitely not part of the Yankee narrative and it's no wonder info such as The Slave Narratives, and accounts like the ones McWhiney notes are not general knowledge.

[Reply](#)

James M Persons  
August 3, 2023 at 1:53 pm

Also speaking of the "horrors" of slavery I once lived in a town in northern New Jersey that I discovered decades later by accident had a 2,000 acre slave plantation in it. Of course NO ONE EVER spoke of it. I also discovered that Harriet Stowe "was inspired to write her book" by a slave that escaped this "unknown" plantation and received the kind of treatment described in Stowe's book.

In case folks are not aware an informative site on Northern slavery is Slavenorth.com. Written and thoroughly researched by a Yank and there is a ton of info on this site... and it's not flattering to the North at all. It is very objective. It's well worth visiting.

[Reply](#)

William Quinton Platt III  
August 3, 2023 at 11:01 pm

Stowe plagiarized another book written by a runaway slave. He didn't make much money, if any. She made a killing. It's just another lie...the woman had never visited a plantation. She just stole a book and made her name.

Spooking of slavery...how did the slaves get to the New World? I love to mesmerize yankees with the Anaconda Plan. They've heard of it, of course. What they don't realize is what the Anaconda Plan confirms...the yankees were able to establish a naval blockade of thousands of miles of shoreline because there was no shipbuilding in the South when compared to New England...which begs the question: who built all the US slave ships? Did they close all of the shipyards in the South when the slave trade was outlawed in 1808?

Robert E. Lee said his father-in-law's slaves were essentially worthless. They had been so spoiled there was no way to pay off debts run up in the estate which had mostly been run up taking care of slaves who wouldn't work. Lee's treatment of the slaves, their subsequent LAWSUIT AGAINST ONE OF THE MOST RECOGNIZED NAMES IN AMERICAN HISTORY is one for the history books. The Virginia Supreme Court ruled against Lee in his role as executor of his father-in-law's estate DURING THE WAR.

The book, PRINCE AMONG SLAVES is a must read for anyone who wants to know about the African slave trade. You will find it does not fit the NARRATIVE either.

[Reply](#)

James M Persons  
August 4, 2023 at 7:16 am

Thumbs up on your comment and thank you for the book reference. I was not aware of it.

Have a Dixie Day, William.

Pingback:  
From Shiloh to Sapelo: Our Past Remains Unchanged - Dixie Drudge - Southern Nation News

## Leave a Reply

Save my name, email, and website in this browser for the next time I comment.

I'm not a robot

## Recent Posts

- Jefferson and the Indians
- A New Classic Southern Novel
- What If Secession Happens Now?
- 1934: The Last Rebel Yell
- What's a Road

## Get a free gift and Abbeville Institute articles delivered to your inbox.

Timely Abbeville Institute articles and news delivered directly to your inbox. We'll also send you an eBook by 20 Abbeville Institute scholars as a free gift.

[Subscribe Here](#)