Travels from Charleston to Southeast and Northeast Georgia
In March 1773, William Bartram set out from Philadelphia on a sailing ship bound for Charleston, South Carolina. Dr. John Fothergill of London and others had recognized his skills and knowledge in botanical research and drawing. Fothergill had provided him funds for his exploration of the little-known American Southeast and for the collection of plants.

After about two weeks in Charleston, Bartram sailed to Savannah. During the latter half of April, he explored the islands and coastline of Georgia, as far west as the Okefenokee Swamp. At some point over the following three years he returned to this area, ascending the Altamaha River. However, his chronology is unclear (see Harper’s *The Travels of William Bartram: Naturalist’s Edition* 346).

He rode north to Augusta in early May to join the officials and surveyors who were setting the boundaries of the New Purchase, land ceded by the Creeks and Cherokees. He spent more than two months exploring the northeastern Georgia hills that lie southwest of the Savannah River from Augusta to Athens.

During this time, the British government imposed the Tea Act on the colonies, and Virginia formed its Committee of Correspondence, a group that included Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, Richard Henry Lee, Francis Lightfoot Lee, and others who would be instrumental in the American Revolution.
Figure 1. Map of Bartram’s Travels from Charleston to Southeast and Northeast Georgia (1773)
March winds lost their bite after the *Charleston Packet* rounded Hatteras. As the brigantine sailed past Sullivan’s Island, William Bartram stood on the quarterdeck, shed his wool jacket, and let the South Carolina morning sun warm his shoulders. This Philadelphian, son of the Royal Botanist, looked across the sparkling waters of Charleston’s harbor to the warehouses, homes, and churches of the South’s greatest city. Beyond the wharves and spires, the eye of his anticipation may have seen alligators in Florida, rhododendrons in the Cherokee Mountains, and the great “sire of waters” far to the west.

Captain Wright guided the ship to a berth among the flotilla of other craft along the busy wharf. With his duffel bag and trunk, the lean thirty-four-year-old made his way through streets busy with longshoremen, merchants, and slaves to the home of Thomas Lamboll.

It was 1773. Seven years before, Carolinians had joined with other colonists in opposing the Stamp Act. Back in Virginia and Boston, Patrick Henry and Samuel Adams were writing inflammatory treatises opposing British tyranny. The Boston Massacre was three years past and the Tea Party nine months ahead—a good time for a pacifist Quaker naturalist to set out on a journey to observe and collect specimens across the American Southeast.

Behind Billy Bartram were more than cold winds and wars. Years of uncertainty and failure, including a bankrupt mercantile business and a nonproductive plantation, marred his past. While his father despaired Billy’s fortune, the son now had a plan and financial backing for botanical exploration. His sponsor, Dr. John Fothergill of London, had interests in furnishing his gardens and in finding plants that would be useful in medicine. Bartram’s chests
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were filled with drawing instruments and containers for the specimens he would send to Philadelphia and England.

From Charleston he could ride west into the mountains, explore the coastal plain of Georgia, and press into the wetlands and savannas of Florida. Government officials and experienced soldiers here could advise him and provide contacts among the Indians and the far-flung network of traders as far west as Louisiana. He had come to know men and women with botanical interests and political savvy during his travels with his father eight years earlier and through correspondence. They welcomed him to the city and readied him to step off into territory scarcely known to his fellow countrymen. Charleston would also be his place of respite during the winter of 1774–75.

Bartram’s “Charlestown” was robust, the third largest port in the nation, surpassed only by Boston and Philadelphia. P. C. Coker III says it offered 109 direct sailings to London in 1770, more than any other American port. The brick Royal Exchange and Customs House, two-story residences with lush gardens, and the Charleston Museum had recently joined the churches, courthouse, beef and fish markets, and 115 taverns, says historian Edward Cashin.

The seaport continues to dominate the first impressions of the millions who arrive every year in this city to tour, conduct business, or enjoy arts at the Spoleto Festival. A driver topping the overpass on Interstate 26, west of the city, looks down on four port facilities scattered along the banks of the Wando and Cooper rivers. Industrial cranes rise along the docks like oversized steel blue herons. Stacks of shipping containers stand in wide parking lots. Up the Cooper River, at the edge of the port, a massive paper mill belches smoke and steam.

More than twenty-three million tons of freight passed through in 2001. On the East Coast, only New York/New Jersey, Philadelphia, and Baltimore led Charleston in freight volume. The South Carolina State Ports Authority reports that more than 281,000 jobs and $23 billion in annual economic impact depend on trade through its terminals.

The city races to stay ahead of its nearest competitor harbors, Savannah and Brunswick, Georgia. By the year 2010, almost half of containerized cargo will be carried on ships capable of drawing more than forty feet of water. To accommodate them, the port must expand its capacity. When the Corps of Engineers completes its current project of deepening and widening the channels, the inner harbor will be forty-five feet deep and the entrance channel forty-seven feet, three times the depth of the channel that Bartram’s packet sailed. Loading facilities are also being upgraded to accommodate the larger craft. The ports have recently added the latest models of cranes, some rising more than 250 feet above the quays, to unload container ships.
From the Charleston Museum I walk down Calhoun Street toward the river and Liberty Square Park. Families lead children from a parking garage to the Imax theater and the South Carolina Aquarium. I skirt the crowd of tourists waiting outside the Fort Sumter Visitor Education Center for a ferry ride out to the historic fort. From the sea wall I look into the black water, knowing that somewhere beneath the surface lie pilings of the largest Revolutionary period wharf, if the dredging of recent years has not torn them away.

The park stands on the site of Gadsden's Wharf. Under construction when Bartram arrived and in operation by the time he ended his journeys, it was, for its time, an engineering marvel. Its unique feature, a stone lock, could hold a ship at the same level for loading and unloading, ignoring the rising and falling of the tides. A wooden derrick mounted on the wharf could extend its arm over the hold of a ship and, with ropes attached to a massive wheel, haul barrels from vessels.

Standing by the chain-link fence of the Columbus Street Terminal two hundred yards north of the park, I watch mammoth arms of mechanical leviathans, heirs of Gadsden’s crane, extend across a ship, cables lowered to a clutch of giant metal boxes. An engine roars and the cables go taut. The containers bearing the names Yang Ming and Hanjin and COSCO—companies based in Korea, Taiwan, and China—rise and swing gently as the crane pivots to deposit them on the wharf. A diesel-belching lift hoists the boxes and carries them to join the rows of containers, stacked four layers high, in a seventy-eight-acre lot.

The port receives finished products from Asia and Europe: automobiles, fabrics, wine. From its wharves, wood, frozen chicken, and fish leave for foreign markets. The tonnage and diversity of the imports have increased over the centuries since Bartram arrived, but the patterns remain remarkably the same. In the 1770s, agricultural products (rice and indigo) dominated the exports, followed by deerskins, timber, and naval stores. Incoming ships unloaded dinnerware, cloth, and wine.

Freight and itinerant botanists were but a part of the cargo that arrived on Charleston's wharves in 1773. The most enduring—and infamous—shipments were human. Edward Cashin says that, in that year and the previous one, sixty-five vessels brought 10,000 slaves. These people came from Africa and the Caribbean, destined to strain under the whips of rice growers in the Carolinas. Rice planters put a premium on slaves from West Africa—Congo-Angola, Ghana, Sierra Leone—where the cultivation of rice was already established. While the growers had land and other capital, they were relatively inexperienced in the production of the grain. Peter H. Wood says that West African and Caribbean slaves brought with them not only the energy required to plant, cultivate, and harvest the crop but also their knowledge and skills.
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The first U.S. census in 1790 found more than 100,000 slaves in South Carolina. Almost half were in Charleston County. By 1860, South Carolina's slave population had swelled to more than 400,000. Charleston, which was becoming urbanized, had fewer than 40,000. When slavery was abolished, however, many black people left the plantations and moved to the city. In 2000, more than 100,000 residents of Charleston County, a third of its people, were black.

The most visible of today's African Americans are the basket makers who sit at the entrances to the two-block-long market and others who maintain locations along Meeting Street, south of Broad. These women carry on a three-hundred-year-old tradition, weaving baskets from the grasses of the marshes and longleaf pine needles. On the plantations, the baskets were used for storage and for carrying crops and shellfish. In recent years, collectors have recognized "sweetgrass baskets" as an art form. Well-crafted specimens sell for more than fifty dollars. Fine pieces may bring hundreds. If I want to score points with my wife Maria, a sure gift is a basket from Charleston.

The center of sweetgrass basket making is U.S. Highway 17, across the Cooper River, north of the suburb of Mount Pleasant. Along a ten-mile stretch of the busy highway, basket makers display the fruits of their labor in small, wooden huts, beckoning passing motorists to stop, look, and buy.

Mildred Harrell joins more than a score of women who set up their displays in Charleston. She comes from Mount Pleasant to sit along the sidewalk beside the U.S. Courthouse at Meeting and Broad, her products surrounding her on the pavement and hung from the black wrought iron fence behind her. Huddled behind a shield of cardboard on a blustery December day, she works sweetgrass, pine needles, and sprigs of white chinaberry balls into Christmas decorations.

"Where do you get the grass and longleaf needles?" I ask.

"They hard to find now," she says. "We get some from around Mount Pleasant. But they built so many houses along the marshes; we can't get to the bulrushes. And they's not as many pines as they used to be. We go down to Georgia and Florida to get the bulrushes."

I wonder if environmental impact studies on prospective marsh-front subdivisions explain that some of the nation's rare artisans will have to drive their pickups four hundred miles to gather resources they once took home over the handlebars of their bicycles.

Basket making is only one of the plantation-born skills that survive among African Americans of Charleston. Philip Simmons is master of another. When Maria saw one of his posters and learned that he had a showing on a day we were in Charleston, she put the event at the top of our itinerary. A gerontologist with an affinity for old people, she has decorated her office
with drawings and photos of them. “I want to meet Philip Simmons and get a signed poster,” she said.

We find him in the parish house of the St. John’s Reformed Episcopal Church. Jewelry, inspired by his ornamental wrought iron designs, lies on tables, for sale.

“Mr. Simmons went out for some soup,” a sturdy matron of the church tells us when we enter. “But he’ll be right back.”

We browse among the displays for a half-hour, talking with the lady, before a wiry man crosses the room to greet us, his shoulders barely stooped, his walk slow, but steady. The grip of his right hand reveals the power of seven decades of gripping iron, hammers, and tongs. A gentle smile never leaves his lined, mahogany face.

We sit with him in a corner of the room and he tells us he was born on Daniel Island on June 9, 1912, but moved to Charleston as a boy. He attended school, but his most important education came from his uncle, a blacksmith in a shop near the wharf at the foot of Calhoun Street, he says. In 1938, he began working ornamental iron. More than five hundred decorative pieces of his work grace balconies, gates, and window grills across the city.

Maria and he chat about grandchildren, old people, and his faith before he asks, “Would you like to see my double heart gates?”

We had admired them when we parked our car, but Maria says, “We’d love to see them with you.”

Over flagstone pavers Simmons leads us through the garden behind the church to the wall separating the churchyard from Menotti Street. His smile broadens as he points out the double gate, six feet tall, that he designed and whose construction he supervised. On each gate, vertical bars of black iron frame a heart composed of bands that curve toward the center like the petals of a black tulip. He poses for a picture with Maria, and we walk back to the church hall.

Skilled African Americans are fewer in Charleston than in earlier years, I learn from Dr. Bernard Powers, a historian at Charleston College: “Until the twentieth century, African Americans dominated the skilled crafts of Charleston. They learned the trades on the plantation, then, as free people, used their skills to build the city. Over the last decades, large numbers of educated African Americans have moved away. They enter professions in other cities, then move back to Charleston in their retirement years. We have a small black middle class. White artisans have taken the place of the post-plantation black craftsmen.”

As I scan the streets of the business district, I recall Powers’s observation. Most professionals are white. And among the crews that restore and maintain the old houses in the South-of-Broad district I find only a handful of African Americans. They are the men carrying bricks and scraping paint for white carpenters, painters, and masons.
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Puzzled over how, after fifty years of integration and civil rights activity, the lot of black Southerners could have declined, I seek out one of Charleston’s experienced African American leaders. Bill Saunders meets me in his paneled office on the second floor of a frame building on Rivers Street in North Charleston, the headquarters of the Committee on Better Racial Assurance (COBRA). He founded the organization and continues to lead it. Around us are African art and memorabilia of his half-century of activism. In one frame hangs a black-and-white photograph of Saunders and two women. I recognize Rosa Parks, the woman who, by refusing to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, launched protests across the South in the 1960s. But the other woman in the picture is not familiar to me. I ask Bill about her.

“That’s Septima Clark,” he says. “She was fired from the school system for being a member of the NAACP. In 1956, South Carolina had a law that a public employee couldn’t belong to the NAACP.”

“Just belonging to the NAACP! I didn’t know that,” I say, then recall that 1956 was a year of fear and rebellion in the white communities of the South. “Brown” had won a victory over “Board of Education” in the Supreme Court two years before and, only eight years earlier, South Carolinian Strom Thurmond had been the Dixiecrats’ candidate for president.

“We’ve come a long way since then,” I mused.

“Not so far as you think,” he says quickly, the voice of experience correcting my naive liberalism as we enter a conversation that reveals the frustrations of the man’s struggle.

Bill Saunders returned from the Korean War with an injury and memories of discrimination in a bus station. “We went into a bus station,” he says, “My platoon and me. And I drank from the ‘Whites Only’ fountain. It was 1952. A police officer got on me and hassled me. But my buddies didn’t do a thing. Wouldn’t stand up for me.”

Once he resettled in Charleston, he got involved in voter registration and other activities.

“White people labeled me a ‘communist,’” he recalls.

Then, five aides at the hospital of the Medical University of South Carolina were fired for protesting low wages. It was in 1968, the year Martin Luther King Jr. was gunned down in the midst of his activities supporting low-paid sanitation workers in Memphis. Saunders and Otis Robinson, a Black Muslim, organized the workers at the hospital of the Medical University of South Carolina. Salaries were the issue. So was dignity. The State did not pay the minimum wage. Nurse aides, orderlies, and others worked hard but lived in poverty. Saunders and Robinson gathered 500 employees, white and black.
After a strike that lasted 113 days, the hospital rehired the five, agreed to pay the blue- and pink-collar staff ten percent more than minimum wage, and established a human affairs commission.

From this grassroots beginning, Bill became respected in the struggle for the rights of African Americans in South Carolina. His district elected him to the South Carolina Public Service Commission in 1994, and he became its chairman six years later.

Community development and positive treatment of blacks remain high on his agenda. COBRA’s mission statement is “We Shall Not Always Plant While Others Reap.”

On the day I meet him, Saunders is angry. A few weeks before, the police had conducted a drug search at Stratford High School. Early in the morning, just after the black students got off their buses but before most local white kids arrived, officers came with drawn guns and dogs. They forced students to kneel or lie on their stomachs and handcuffed those who did not immediately comply. Police didn’t find any drugs or nab any offenders.

“My granddaughter is a student there,” he says. “She’s on the student council. It’s the kind of police activity that black people have a lot of experience with. Singling us out. Without respect. It happens in our neighborhoods all the time.”

“We don’t need civil rights until we have human rights,” he continues, his thoughts and words racing. “Black people need to be treated like human beings.”

“Integration of the schools took a lot away from us. I don’t agree with integration. America needed integration of the schools. Black people didn’t. They needed equal schools. With black teachers. Black teachers in black schools had discipline. They’d discipline the hell out of you.”

“And the black economic system was destroyed by integration. We have few black businessmen. Black people work for white corporations.”

“From the 1950s until the middle ’70s, good, vital changes took place in the U.S.—especially in the South. But from the time of the election of Reagan, we’ve gone backward, except that white women have made great gains. Charleston is no different from before. Nothing good is happening. The highways split the black community. We are allowed to own property until the white powers want it back.”

As Saunders speaks, I recall stories I had heard of Gullah communities being taken over for subdivisions and resorts. Neighborhoods of these descendants of slaves are frequent targets for developers along the South Carolina and Georgia coast.

While Philip Simmons’s medium is iron, Bill Saunders’s is society. His skills have been refined in a crucible of human interactions over half a century and pounded on the anvil of confrontations and negotiations. And while the youthful energy of his early days of protest may have softened to a refined, philosophical
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discourse, the man remains angry. I leave without illusions: a white guy can see only the vaguest outlines of what Bill’s experience has crafted.

The eight mile drive from the COBRA office in North Charleston to downtown Charleston defines segregation. North Charleston is a community of industrial complexes, small, frame houses, and seedy strip malls where boys wearing do-rags and other prison fashions hang out. Lots left vacant by defunct factories spread over acres. Crime rates are high (in 2002, 166 crimes per thousand residents).

Drive south, toward the tip of the peninsula, cross under the viaducts that carry Interstate 26 and U.S. 17, and enter the Charleston that tourists and vacationers love. Orderliness. Not sterile, NASA-like hygiene, but a welcoming, comfortable regularity. The modern traveler finds an atmosphere, not of shipping and industry, but of a Southern cosmopolitan city. No one seems to hurry in this town, working hard to maintain a balance between commerce and beauty, industry and tourism.

A large, brick railroad depot has become a brightly lit tourist welcome center. Across the street, the Charleston Museum boasts of being the oldest museum in the nation. On its lawn is a replica of the Hunley, the Confederate submarine that sank in Charleston’s harbor in 1864 after bringing down the USS Housatonic. Across the street, the Joseph Manigault House portrays in brick and white-painted columns the splendor of the early 1800s, when rice was king and planters had mansions in the city near the sea.

Downtown has escaped the fate of many cities. Department stores and boutiques alongside antique dealers, art galleries, and locally owned cafes occupy old, brick buildings. Doormen in uniforms wait at curbs under hotel awnings. It is a real downtown, the old-fashioned kind where locals and tourists stroll, shop, and eat, having little fear of being accosted by muggers or panhandlers.

South of downtown, on the tip of the peninsula, houses built in the Colonial and Antebellum periods draw tourists and wealthy home buyers to the area known as “South-of-Broad.” Broad Street is the border between commercial downtown and the city’s oldest historic district, and the intersection of Broad and Meeting Streets is its gateway.

On his walk to the Lambolls’ house, Bartram passed through the city square which lay at this intersection. St. Michael’s Anglican Church stood on the southeast corner. Across Meeting Street, on the southwest corner, was the treasury building. Diagonally across the square was the Statehouse. The beef market filled the northeast corner.

Charlestonians know this place as the “Four Corners of Law.” St. Michael’s changed little over the centuries, still occupies its site, but the U.S. Courthouse has
replaced the treasury building and the Charleston County Judicial Center occupies
the old Statehouse property. City Hall stands on the site of the meat market.

South of Broad, by city regulation, owners maintain their buildings in
eighteenth- and nineteenth-century styles. Two- and three-story houses,
brick and cypress, rise beside shaded, narrow sidewalks. Five million tourists
a year walk or ride through, gazing at plaques fixed to the outer walls of the
buildings that tell them when the houses were built, by whom, and who lived
there: John C. Calhoun’s massive brick mansion; the Heyward-Washington
House, now a museum, where President George Washington lived a week
in May 1791, entertaining the area’s patriots and business champions and
welding together the Southern Hemisphere of the new nation; the Lamboll
House, now a bed-and-breakfast inn.

Horses and mules pull carriages filled with tourists through the streets.
Drivers, some dressed in Confederate uniforms, grey with a red sash, tell
stories of the city. You are lucky if you get to tour South-of-Broad in one of
these carts. In fact, you are a lottery winner.

Maria and I park in one of the city’s parking decks and walk to a street north
of the old market. Horses, harnessed to large wagons equipped with benches,
hang their heads and wait in a queue to roll us through the city for an hour. We
tell the ticket seller we want a ride through the historic district to the Battery
(White Point Park at the tip of the peninsula).

“We’re sorry, but the routes of the tours are determined by a lottery,” she
says, using a well-rehearsed monologue to explain that, to keep areas from being
congested by carriages, the city has established a system for allotting routes. “We
use three routes; two go south, one goes north. When the carriage leaves, it will
pass by that corner,” she says. “The worker there will give the driver a token. That
will tell him where he can go. But they are all good tours.”

Feeling lucky, we buy two seats on a black wagon with red wheels and climb
aboard, sitting behind a driver who wears a floppy-brimmed felt hat. For ten
minutes we wait in the late morning sun, entertained by the passing crowds
and shrouded by aromas wafting from the horse, until the driver flicks the reins
across the steed’s flanks and we roll forward to the corner where a round-faced,
black lady hands the teamster a small token. The wagon rolls again and turns.
Northward, away from the Battery.

Maria looks at me with a frown and shakes her head, muttering something
about my luck and advising me not to waste our money on lottery tickets when
we return to Georgia.

Our ride takes us past the College of Charleston, a shaded, serious-looking
campus, and down streets lined with nineteenth-century, gentry-restored houses.
And we learn that Charlestonians of earlier generations built their houses with their short sides facing the streets. Something to do with taxes. Many structures are held together by iron rods bolted to large steel plates. Something to do with earthquakes. And then the tour is over. The carriage rolls to a stop at the end of the queue to await another load and the next lottery token.

Having missed our ride through old city, and not willing to risk another randomly selected ride through Neverland, we take to our feet. We walk to Broad, then stroll up and down the narrow streets, pausing under shade trees for relief from the heat. We find the houses of John Stuart, the colonial Indian superintendent and friend of Bartram, and Thomas Lamboll. Well preserved and maintained, they hint at the wealth of Colonial Charleston.

South-of-Broad is pleasant and historic, but totally devoid of watering holes. All 115 of the Colonial-period taverns have disappeared from the Colonial district. So we trudge down to the Battery and along the sea wall. We find, north of Broad, a tourist-oriented bar along a street cobbled with rocks taken from the ballast chambers of sailing ships.

Ghost tours open another eye on old Charleston. On a windy evening before Christmas, my son John and his wife Terry accompany Maria, Tyler, and me on one of these ventures. We meet the guide and fellow travelers at an art gallery just south of the old market and follow him to cemeteries, houses, and churches. But not in the old Colonial district. The city fathers and residents of the oldest historic homes don’t allow such shenanigans around their neighborhoods.

During our walk, we hear the story of an image, not visible to the naked eye, appearing on a photograph taken in a cemetery several decades ago. The guide leads us to believe the figure was the ghost of a woman kneeling over the grave of her dear departed. We learn that Death Heads on tombstones mark graves of ancient citizens who died of the plague, malaria, or yellow fever, and that such stones abound in the city. And we hear of the ghost of a former resident of a house that is now Poogan’s Porch Restaurant (famous for its breakfasts). Outside Mills House, a historic hotel now owned by the InterContinental Hotels Group Holiday Inns, we hear that Robert E. Lee bunked here in 1862. Ronald Reagan and Garth Brooks also took lodging there, but not with the general.

On another day, I return alone to the Lamboll House, passing the Jacob Motte House, built by a prominent Huguenot merchant around 1731. A short, sturdy carpenter carries lumber from the house to his truck. He’s one of the dozens of craftsmen at work restoring and maintaining the old houses. By day, they park pickups in spots where Mercedes, BMWs, and Jags sit at night. I notice that the house is for sale and ask him: “How much do they want for this place?”
“I dunno,” he answers with a smile and a nasal, upstate, Cracker accent, “but it’s prob’ly way up there.”

On the corner of King and Lamboll Streets, I find the Lamboll House, where Bartram lodged with the family of Judge Thomas Lamboll. I doubt Bartram would recognize it. An owner added piazzas in about 1845, but the white-painted, three-story Georgian remains impressive.

Emerson Read, a realtor, bought the place in 1965. He and his wife live there, but use the third floor as a bed-and-breakfast inn. Heart pine floors in the living room remain from the original building, as do fireplaces and mantels, but the kitchen has been added (kitchens normally were outbuildings in the Colonial period).

Worn, wooden stairs creak as I climb to the second floor where an Audubon folio, open to the American anhinga and Frigate pelican, lies on a mahogany table. From a window on the third floor I look south, toward the Battery and the bay. Lamboll once owned acreage out on the point. It was an island then; the Lambolls reached their garden by boat. The city long ago filled in the marsh and connected the island with the peninsula so that tourists could hold hands and walk amongst the Civil War cannons and feed the sea gulls.

A Victorian/Italianate mansion, built in the 1850s, blocks the view to the north. Read tells me it is taller than his house because the ceilings are higher. It has 10,000 to 12,000 square feet of living area and is on the market for $6 million. Sensing my gasp, he says that small houses (2,200 square feet) in the area now sell for more than $1.5 million.

“I see the Jacob Motte house is for sale. What are they asking?”

“About 1.4 million,” he tells me. It’s a three-story, with five bedrooms and three-and-a-half baths.” As the carpenter had said, “it’s . . . way up there.”

“And the John C. Calhoun Mansion?”


“Who buys these places?” I ask.

“Yankees,” he replies without hesitation. “They’re buying up property for two-and-a-half million that sold for $750,000 a few years ago. They like to come down here for long vacations, or just weekends. Even in the summer, Charleston is cooler than the big cities along the coast of New York. And in the winter, the weather is very pleasant. Plus, we have a slower pace and a lot of art and music here in Charleston. They come here for a good life.”

Prosperous folks have owned second homes in Charleston for centuries. Eighteenth century planters built here, as near the sea breeze as they could, to
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escape the heat, mosquitoes, and malaria that engulfed their rice plantations inland and along the tidal marshes. “One does not boast in Charleston of having the most beautiful house,” it was said in the 1790s, “but the coolest.”

I dawdle on the second floor, looking beyond, as best I can, the clutter of the Read’s daily living. Did Polly Lamboll play Handel and Bach on a harpsichord? Did she wear a silk brocaded gown with fringe and hip panniers, those bulges below the waist that look like great, silk parentheses? Were the tables graced by wares such as I’d seen in the museum: porcelains from China, glass from England, and dinnerware carrying the now-familiar Chinese “blue plate” design? And did a servant pour Bartram a cup of claret from a giant glass bottle from France?

To get a feel for the wealth and opulence South-of-Broad in 1773, we visit the Heyward-Washington House. Its paint was still fresh when Bartram walked past this home in his week of preparation, before he set off for Georgia.

Rice planter Daniel Heyward built the brick house in 1772 as a town house for his son, Thomas. The Charleston Museum bought it in 1929 and has preserved and restored it to open a window on the life of the well-heeled South Carolinian of the period. Delft tiles frame the fireplaces and bright paints, customary in Colonial homes, decorate the walls. Heart pine floors, worn by thousands of shoes over the course of America’s life, groan gently beneath my soles. Imported china and goblets sit amid candles on a dark table. Large, graceful cabinets line the walls.

The kitchen house and gardens lie behind the house. Current material culture intrudes but little into this place. Granted, the hams and sausages hanging on the wall of the kitchen are plastic, a red rubber hose lies coiled on the ground beside an iron standpipe, and a yellow nylon cord stretches between stakes to align the bricks workers are replacing in a walkway. Across the garden wall, a satellite dish on a neighbor’s garage gathers signals from orbiting high-tech hardware. Otherwise, the authenticity of the eighteenth century prevails. Bartram would have known every plant along its brick pathways. Nothing of recent origin grows here. The ladies of the city’s garden club assure that. Sculptured hedges of boxwood frame beds of dianthus. Lavender grows between a China rose and a green rose. Basil, parsley, sage, and rosemary fill another bed.

The Heyward-Washington House and its garden are the right place to begin following Bartram across the modern Southland. Eighteenth-century herbs and artifacts of the colonizers rest amidst the trappings of the age of technological communication. They sit in a city whose current cultures range from the opulent and leisured to the racially and economically disadvantaged,
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strata of a nation more than 225 years old, still struggling to find justice and to balance industry and a healthy environment. From here, Billy and I set forth, heading farther south to the coast of Georgia along a trail of hope, discovery, disappointment, and wonder.
SAVANNAH AND SUNBURY

Savannah, Georgia. Since before “Hard Hearted Hannah” or the steamy television soap opera or Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil, Savannah has been a synonym for “Southern.” The city oozes the hospitality, slow pace, and exquisite beauty that Americans associate with “The South.” It has refused to purge the city squares from its eighteenth-century layout and maintains large neighborhoods of antebellum homes. Upon this foundation, a society not too different from the plantation culture sustains itself with balls, concerts, and fine arts. Nowhere else along Bartram’s route can one see so well preserved an old Southern American urban landscape.

Bartram hadn’t lingered in Charleston. Knowing that the flora of western Carolina were not yet in bloom, he bade his supporters well and headed south. One day on a boat brought him to Savannah, the little, forty-year-old capital of the colony of Georgia. General James Oglethorpe, its founder, had laid out a grid of streets and squares in the approved fashion of the day. An English city on a bluff twenty feet above the marshes.

Ships carrying goods to and from Savannah ply thirty-six miles of currents, passing Tybee Island and salty wetlands to reach the city. Stout wooden wharves and cobblestone walkways have replaced the crude docks and muddy paths of the Colonial city. Hotels hug the riverbank. Bars, restaurants, and souvenir shops line the waterfront, drawing business largely from the more than five million tourists who pass through the city each year. Across the river, connected by a water taxi, a resort hotel towers over a golf course on low-lying Hutchinson Island.

Black water of the Savannah River, darkened by rich vegetation along its route from the Appalachians, eddies around the bulkheads a few feet from the
bench where I sit with my souvlaki and bottled water, bought from a Greek
restaurant in a hundred-year-old brick building along the waterfront. A cleat
under my foot holds a sturdy line of the Georgia Queen. Gleaming white, with
red trim, designed to carry six hundred tourists on harbor cruises, she’s a replica
of the sternwheelers that once carried cargo along the rivers of the South. It is a
surreal scene: a historic waterfront, preserved for tourists to get the feel of early
America, looks out on technological, industrial, multinational commerce.

Down river, a massive freighter steams against the current. Ballast water pours
from her belly and stacks of containers rise above her deck. She looks top-heavy; I
wonder how she can negotiate a stormy ocean. Two tugs guide her to a slip beyond
the Talmadge Memorial Bridge that hangs from suspension cables far above the
river. The cranes that await her cargo rise almost four hundred feet above the
wharves and stretch steel arms and cables across twenty-two stacks of containers.

Furniture, toys, steel, rubber, clothing, plastic goods, and cars arrive in
Savannah. Georgia kaolin, wood pulp, chicken, cotton, agricultural machinery,
and granite leave, bound for ports around the world. It’s a lucrative business for
the state. Georgia Trend magazine says Savannah’s “marine machine creates more
than $1.8 billion in personal income” and $585 million in state and local tax
receipts each year (Costello 95).

The ships and the river are at the heart of an environmental controversy.
To compete with Charleston, the Georgia Port Authority wants to deepen
the channel to accommodate future generations of mega-freighters.
Environmentalists remind the state and federal agencies that the natural depth
of the channel is eighteen feet and that each time the channel has been dredged
deeper salt water has crept closer to the city. They point out that when salt water
intrudes freshwater, fish and other animals lose valuable habitat and disappear
or dwindle in numbers. Striped bass can’t conduct their usual mating routines
because earlier dredging has deprived them of their spawning grounds, so the
state has for several years stocked them into the river. The Coastal Environmental
Organization of Georgia says that harbor activities also threaten the shortnosed
sturgeon, an endangered species.

In the spring of 2004, under a partnership with The Nature Conservancy,
the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers raised the gates of dams along the river to
mimic the natural spring flow patterns of the river. The Conservancy thinks
that such dam water management may restore habitat for fish, birds, and other
aquatic life along this river. If the project is successful, it will be a model for other
waterways across the nation.

Environmentalists are also concerned that deepening the harbor may
imperil drinking water. If the channel is deeper, they say, salt water may seep
into the Floridan aquifer, the underground water supply for many of the towns and cities in southern Georgia.

Away from the river, the Southern graciousness of the historic district sniffs out the mix of industry and tourism. While none of the buildings of Bartram’s Savannah remain, Christ Church (Episcopal), the oldest church in the state, occupies its old site a few blocks from the waterfront. Its original building, first occupied in 1750, burned in the Great Fire of 1796. Fewer than forty years before Bartram arrived, John Wesley was its rector. Here he established the first Sunday School in America and then returned to England where, after his conversion experience, he founded Methodism. Great live oaks and azaleas decorate the square’s grass lawns and walkways; it remains, as most of the squares of Savannah, a calm, shady sanctuary.

Farther south, the Colonial Park Cemetery covers almost an acre of land that lay on the outskirts of the Colonial city. Its occupants are a Who’s Who of Georgia. Lachlan McIntosh, Revolutionary general and friend and host of Bartram, rests here, as do others that Bartram may have known: Button Gwinnett, Nathaniel Greene, Joseph Habersham. Counties across the state bear their names.

Up and down the streets of the old city stand two- and three-story houses, built after the fire of 1819. They rise directly from the sidewalks. No front lawns to mow here, just steps that lead to second story entrances. Among the largest of the homes is a grand, brick Italianate mansion once owned by songwriter Johnny Mercer. (It has a lawn.) Tourists line up to peek inside. They come not humming bars of “Moon River” or “Blues in the Night” but with curiosity about the sordid mystery of the famous murder that took place within its walls. Some time after the Mercers, it became the house of Jim Williams, the antique dealer and central character in John Berendt’s 1994 book, Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil. Tourism in the city skyrocketed after the book and movie.

Not far south and west, however, the city turns dingy. Boarded windows on old, three-story houses, tall weeds in what is left of lawns, shabby grocery stores and laundromats near housing projects. Beyond this ring of squalor lie fifty-year-old suburbs of well-kept houses on shady lots. Then, near the malls and franchise stores out on Abercorn Street, newer subdivisions with few trees. Within minutes, a driver can pass from the shaded, leisurely old city into a stereotypical, modern American suburbia. Historic, calming pedestrian squares and narrow, tree-lined streets give way to four- and six-lane boulevards and steaming parking lots.
Footprints across the South

"After resting and a little recreation for a few days in Savanna," Bartram writes, "and having in the meantime purchased a good horse, and equipping myself for a journey southward, I set off early in the morning for Sunbury, a sea-port town" (Travels 5). He was on his way into sparsely settled islands and coastal plains where plants flowered, the land where he and his father had discovered previously unknown species.

As I head south on U.S. 17, I reach deep into the bag of my imagination to find some tool that will let me feel a bit of the excitement that a naturalist from Philadelphia must have felt. But for miles I see nothing he would recognize. Concrete, brick, and billboards outweigh the grass, trees, and flowers. Overhead, blades of large helicopters thud against the air, transporting men and equipment to and from Fort Stewart, home of the 3rd Infantry Division (Mechanized), a heavily armed, swift-moving fighting force that led much of the assault on Iraq. Camouflaged military vehicles run the road.

Traffic lights slow me—twenty-nine of them in the thirty miles from Savannah to Midway. And almost as many gasoline stations. Mobile home dealers (three), McDonald’s (two), and Wal-Mart (one). Three railroads pass under the highway.

Eventually, about fifteen miles out of Savannah, forests appear. For a half-mile along each side of the Ogeechee River, tupelo and cypress trees root in wetlands. Then, within the next mile, suburbia returns in the form of Richmond Hill.

Nice name, Richmond Hill, evoking rolling English land owned by dukes and earls. Nothing resembling a hill shows up here, however, and the closest to a duke or earl was Henry Ford. In the 1930s, Ford began to buy up land in Bryan County, establishing here a planned community on land where slaves had tilled the land and planted rice and cotton.

Bryan County has become a bedroom community for those seeking suburban refuge from Savanna. Since 1960, its population has quadrupled. More than 23,000 persons now live in its 400 square miles. Growth has prompted a water war. In 2002, Richmond Hill applied to the state’s Environmental Protection Division (EPD), seeking permission to drill a new well. The city wanted to tap the salty lower Floridan aquifer, a giant underground reservoir layered with both fresh and salty water, and draw out and desalinate more than a million gallons a day.

Environmentalists responded that too little is known about the aquifer. The state agency denied the request. It had capped withdrawals from the upper Floridan since 1997, when it recognized that industrial pumping over decades had caused salt contamination of coastal wells in Georgia and South Carolina. Richmond Hill looked for other options but continued to press the state. In the fall of 2002, EPD struck a deal with the city. Richmond Hill could drill the lower aquifer but had to manage its water supply and safeguard the aquifer.
A Tale of Two Cities: Savannah and Sunbury

Water has become an issue across Georgia. Urban development in the Atlanta area and along the coast sucks enormous quantities of water from streams and pools deep under the surface. Over recent years, the state has tussled with Alabama and Florida over the use of water from the Flint and Chattahoochee. Greenskeepers want it for their bentgrass. Suburbanites take it for their zoysia and fescue. Farmers in South Georgia need to irrigate. Oystermen in Apalachicola Bay say their oysters need a proper mix of fresh and salt water and that the upstream use of water hurts their harvests. Commercial fishermen in the Altamaha basin find their catches reduced because reservoirs that supply Atlanta’s suburbs reduce and regulate the flow of freshwater.

Bartram would have puzzled over the idea that water would become scarce in Georgia. Even twenty-five years ago, most Georgians scoffed at the notion. But the quickening shift of people into cities and burbs has made this seemingly abundant fluid into a commodity.

Bartram rode through Midway and turned toward Sunbury on the coast. When he passed south of the Ogeechee he was entering a land ripe for botanizing.

Sunbury was, in his eye, a “rising city” (Travels 9), well set to become a major port in the emerging colony. “Beautifully situated on the main” and protected by islands, “... the harbor is capacious and safe, and has water enough for ships of great burthen” (Travels 5-7).

The town was less than fifteen years old when Bartram visited in 1773. About a thousand people lived in raised cottage homes set along an orderly grid of streets. An additional thousand—most of them slaves—lived on island rice plantations. Warehouses lined the busy wharf. The company of Spalding and Kelsall, whose Florida trading posts served as Bartram’s bases when he traveled into the heart of Florida, owned one of the stores along the waterfront.

And it was a rich town. Reconstruction-era historian Charles C. Jones writes, “at the outbreak of the Revolutionary war the parish of St. John possessed nearly one-third the wealth of the entire province” (172).

Bartram writes of visiting with “a circle of genteel and polite ladies and gentlemen.” While he doesn’t tell us their names, they could have included Lyman Hall and Button Gwinnett, signers of the Declaration of Independence. In its ninety year history, three signers of the Declaration, four Georgia governors, three U.S. Senators, and the first U.S. ambassador to China and Japan lived in Sunbury. Paul McIlvaine surmised that Sunbury “probably produced more famous people per square foot of real estate than any other town in America” (5). If the town’s social prominence awed Bartram, he doesn’t mention it. Instead,
he describes in detail the flora and fauna of the area, giving special attention to
an island he mistakenly calls “South Catharine” (Travels Introduction). Because
he says that he “forded a narrow shoal,” his biographers think that the island
was Bermuda Island, later known as Colonels Island. “South Catharine” (St.
Catherines) could not have been reached except by boat, but a mere tidal creek
separates Colonels Island from the mainland.

On the island, he found plantations set among longleaf and other
varieties of pines, oaks, magnolias, dogwoods and a wealth of other plants.
He excavated from a shell mound a partly complete clay pot of Indian origin
and describes its basketweave design. His list of mammals consumes half a
page, and his description of the osprey and bald eagle is a mini-essay on the
political affairs of the world of birds. The eagle, he writes, is “an execrable
tyrant” that “supports his assumed dignity and grandeur by rapine and
violence, extorting unreasonable tribute and subsidy from all the feathered
nations.” On the other hand, the osprey (Bartram uses the names “falco
piscatorius, or fishing-hawk”) is a “princely bird” that “subsists entirely on
fish which he takes himself, scorning to live and grow fat on the dear earned
labours of another; he also contributes liberally to the support of the bald
eagle.” Was Bartram reflecting the conversation of the previous evening,
when he sat with champions of liberty in a home in Sunbury? Was the osprey
a metaphor for a hard-working colonist, the eagle for King George III? If so,
Bartram may have shared Benjamin Franklin’s consternation over the choice
of the eagle as a symbol of America.)

Sunbury didn’t rise to the heights Bartram expected, however. His predictions
for Sunbury are as off base as several other of his forecasts of urban growth.
While I would follow this man into mosquito-infested swamps to find a plant or
animal, I would not want him picking my stocks. The town’s “rise” peaked about
two decades after Bartram’s visit. Its lifespan was less than a century. Simply
having a “capacious and safe” harbor was not enough to guarantee success.
Although Savannah, only twenty eight miles away, was twice the distance from
the open sea, it was a political hub. And Savannah was closer to the cotton
and tobacco plantations, which overtook rice as export products early in the
1800s. Mosquitoes also had a role in Sunbury’s demise; malaria and yellow fever
epidemics frequently swept the lowland. Then, in 1804, a hurricane tore down
houses and docks and left townspeople dead.

A Swedish ship carried a load of cotton out of Sunbury in 1814 and made
history as the last major export vessel to visit the port. The government left a
customs collector in an office in the town, but, according to Jones, “for many
years prior to his death the office was a mere sinecure. Subsequently a Surveyor
was appointed by the General government whose principal duty was to sign blank reports and draw his quarterly salary” (220).

Another hurricane struck in 1824. The government closed the post office in 1841. After that, Sunbury’s only moment in history was a hostile visit by the federal armies of General William Sherman, which overran a Confederate picket post, burned the church as a fire signal to troops offshore, and landed troops for the invasion of Savannah.

In 1878, Jones wrote,

Without trade, destitute of communications, and visited more and more each season with fevers, Sunbury, for nearly thirty years, has ceased to exist save in name. Its squares, lots, streets, and lanes have been converted into a cornfield. Even the bricks of the ancient chimneys have been carted away. No sails whiten the blue waters of Midway river save those of a miserable little craft employed by its owner in conveying terrapins to Savannah. The old cemetery is so overgrown with trees and brambles that the graves of the dead can scarcely be located after the most diligent search. . . . Only the bold Bermuda [grass] covered bluff and the beautiful river with the green island slumbering in its embrace . . . remind us of this lost town. . . . Strange that a town of such repute, and with the confines of a young and prosperous commonwealth, should have so utterly faded from the face of the earth! (221f)

By the end of the twentieth century, the historic cemetery, shaded by moss-hung oaks and surrounded by a handful of modern ranch houses, was the sole above-ground trace of “the rising port.” A lone shrimp boat rests at the wharf, a few feet from a seafood restaurant in the shadows of a condominium complex—thirty-six units, complete with two elevators, a swimming pool, and spa. When its residents look out to St. Cathrines Sound and the ocean beyond, they see spectacular sunrises. But, to know they are living in a once-proud port city, they will have to read a history book or the brochure from nearby Fort Morris State Historic Site.

Southeast of Sunbury, a banner hangs across the road near the spot where Bartram waded the marsh to Colonels Island. It welcomes fishermen to the annual King Mackerel Festival. Beyond it, at a fork in the road, a historical marker lists Revolutionary War officers who once owned plantations on this land.

From the Yellow Bluff Fish Camp, I follow an air conditioning service truck over sandy washboard roads that wind through forests of young pines, oaks, and black gums. A horse farm, surrounded by a white plastic fence, has
Footprints across the South

replaced the colonels’ plantations. Along the seaward margin of the island, plush modern houses fill the remnants of the forest where Bartram found “deer . . . tyger, wolf and bear,” along with a “large ground-rat, more than twice the size of the common Norway rat.” Each house has picture window views across the sound to St. Catherines and the Atlantic and a dock that stretches the length of a football field into water deep enough to carry its owner’s sport fishing and pleasure boat berthed at its far end. Near a quiet community of comfortable weekend homes, a middle-aged woman dressed in a white T-shirt and olive shorts walks briskly down the center of the paved road that leads to a cluster of luxurious homes on the southern shore.

The wild, pristine wilderness that Bartram explored disappeared from the island two centuries ago. Plantations drove out most of the snakes and large game. Sightings of ospreys and eagles are subjects of conversation around the kitchen tables of the houses in the fishing camps.

Bartram accompanied several of Sunbury’s “polite inhabitants” to “a very large and well constructed place of worship” in Midway. He “heard a very excellent sermon delivered by [the church’s] pious and venerable pastor, the Reverend --- - Osgood.” Bartram doesn’t detail the minister’s sermon or discuss his theology. However, it is probably safe to guess that what he heard was unlike the preaching in more recent houses of worship in the area.

Osgood’s sermon, if it was like other Puritan preaching of the day, was eloquent, systematically laid out, comforting, but challenging, emphasizing duty and gentility. Samuel S. Hill, historian of Southern American religion, says, “The building of a holy community was central in the Puritan program. Christian responsibility was thought to comprehend the creation of a Christian civilization. Accordingly these ardent Christians worked for the rule of God over the civil realm no less than the ecclesiastical” (58).

Twenty years later, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists began to dominate the religious landscape of the South. Their numbers grew, especially among the middle and poorer classes, leaving the gentry in the Episcopal churches and draining the Puritan Congregationalists of membership. Over the past fifty years, Pentecostals and other groups of conservative Christians have drawn throngs of believers. Most Baptists, Methodists, and Pentecostals shun the formality of the Episcopalians and Puritans. Participating in rituals is not what their religion is about.

Within the doors of “Free For All” and “Jesus World Ministries,” small, storefront congregations along the highway between Midway and Fort Stewart, worshipers raise their hands and energetically clap to guitar music blaring over amplifiers. Preachers—some are women, an unusual quality in the South—exhort
their audiences to turn away from sin and turn to Jesus to avoid the fires of hell. Darwin is anathema here. So are abortion and homosexuality.

Following the tradition of The Great Awakening that was sweeping the South at the time of Bartram’s travels and has marked popular culture there for the past two centuries, religion is a highly personal matter. Members are “born again,” usually in an emotional upsweeping. The Holy Spirit moves and each worshiper responds uniquely. Worship is individual, active, sweaty. Individuality does not shut out love, however. The worshipers hug and talk long after the final prayer. On their ways to heaven, these brothers and sisters march together.

Except for the ancient church building and the historic cemetery, Midway does not stand out from other rural Georgia crossroads. U.S. Highway 17, following the old trail that Bartram rode, splits the village from north to south. The road once bore the weight of much of the traffic that hugged the east coast from Virginia to Florida. Through travelers and trucks now roar down Interstate 95, leaving local traffic to roll at a more leisurely pace past the town’s health care center, gift shop, and convenience stores.

Though interstate travelers make it to Florida more rapidly than those on U.S. 17, they miss Ida Mae and Joe’s Truck Stop, which is their loss. For four decades, Ida Mae and Joe’s has been filling the bellies of truckers and travelers in a white building with a pink, steep-pitched roof. While the big rigs now go to massive truck plazas along the interstate, the restaurant draws a crowd of locals and blue-highway drivers who enjoy the corn bread, chicken, meatloaf, and other Southern fare.

From my plastic-covered chair in the little, white-walled cafe, I searched the black print on the whiteboard beside the front door for a bit less cholesterol and more fiber than I had eaten during my previous two days of gorging on Savannah’s fried seafood. I picked beans, stewed apples, and a double order of the broccoli and cheese. My nutritionist would be proud, I figured. When the waitress set the plate on my table I looked for a broccoli and cheese casserole, a popular dish across Georgia. Instead, I found nuggets of broccoli and cheese, rolled in a corn batter. Golden brown. Fried. Not the meal I dutifully planned, but Southern cuisine at its best.

I pulled out of Ida Mae and Joe’s crushed-shell parking lot and drove a few hundred feet to the old church. Originally built in the 1750s, the current structure is the fourth used by the congregation. Its present site is a few feet from the spot where Bartram went to hear the “very excellent sermon.” (When the highway was widened, the church was moved about fifty feet in order to spare its venerable, historic cemetery.)

In 1778, the British burned the church Bartram visited. It was an understandable target for the Redcoats: members of the congregation led the
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movement for independence in Georgia. Its walls echoed the debates and heard the decisions to resist the Crown. On its ruins, the Puritans built the current, New England-style house of worship in 1792.

Massive oaks shade the front yard, and black shutters offset the brilliant white paint on its clapboard siding. A large, double door gives access to the ground floor, while a single door to its left leads to the balcony where slaves sat to worship.

The pulpit is central on the raised podium. Hard, white pews, each with a door, provide the seating. Overhead, the rail of the slave balcony curves from the sides of the church to the back. The building has never been modernized by the addition of heating or artificial lights.

Standing in its doorway, I look across the old Sunbury road and see White’s Auto Care, built in the style of roadside service stations of the 1950s. An old Gulf Oil sign hangs over the pump island; cars in various stages of disrepair grace its driveway. According to the faded blue letters painted on its walls, it sells belts, hoses, brakes, tuneups, and window tinting.

Four lanes of U.S. 17 divide the church from its ancient cemetery. Turbulence from cars ruffles my hair as I stand on the road shoulder and wait to cross. An iron gate in the plastered brick wall groans in rusty resistance to my push. Then I stand amidst grey stone markers, raised brick tombs, and marble monuments in one of the oldest graveyards in the state. Near an ancient oak lies James Screven, a hero of the American Revolution. A county not far away is named for him. General Daniel Stewart is also buried here. As a boy, Stewart served in the Revolution under Francis Marion (“The Swamp Fox”) and Thomas Sumter. He distinguished himself during the Indian Wars that followed the Revolution. The nearby army base bears his name. The body of the Reverend Mister John Osgood also rests here, near the wall closest to the church. A marker tells me that he preached his last sermon on May 5, 1773. I figure that was about three weeks after Bartram heard him.

This is a serene place, holy in its own way. Cedars, magnolias, and oaks set a quiet tone that overcomes the sight of the ramshackle car shop and the sounds of the highway. It’s the South. Traditional. Historical. Proud.

But outside the creaking, rusty graveyard gate, stereotypes of the South—slow, unchanging, backward—don’t work. Over the full expanse of its history, the South has adapted. Within the first fifty years of Georgia’s existence, towns thrived, then died, and were replaced by cities with different economies. Planters switched crops in response to new demands. Then, for almost a century after the Civil War, change came slowly. Over the past half-century, however, the South has developed new economies and cultures. While agriculture remained a base for more than two hundred years, industry, commerce, and tourism are rapidly replacing it. Democrat
politicians become Republicans. Schools are integrated. Black men and women are professionals (albeit not as frequently as their white counterparts). Children born in rural communities move to cities, building a structure of new values on the foundation of their small-town principles and customs.

Perhaps no period of Georgia’s history saw more change than the time of Bartram’s travels. Migrants from Europe and slaves from the Caribbean and Africa filled the new colony, clearing land, establishing homesteads and plantations. When the explorer left Sunbury and Midway to botanize areas in the southeast corner of Georgia, he rode through a land on the cusp of a social, technological, and political revolution.
I’ve taken a table beside a picture window at Mud Cat Charlie’s, a couple of miles south of Darien, Georgia. From here I can watch dark green water swirl toward the Atlantic, eight miles away, and see the wind ripple the heads of the marsh grass on Broughton Island. Charlestonian Henry Laurens, friend of the Bartrams, owned the piece of marsh across the South Altamaha River in the middle and late 1700s. It’s a key spot for someone following Bartram. He spent a lot of time here, botanizing, resting, and visiting with the Scottish Highlanders who had settled here a generation before.

The scene inside Mud Cat’s is lively. I turn away from the river and marsh to watch the Friday lunchtime scene. Construction men, officers from the wildlife refuge, and sport fishermen come and go. Six men and women, whose windbreakers bear the logo of the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Brunswick some nine miles south, joke as they wait for their order. At the bar, a middle-aged blond flirts with a lean, muscular man with a face lined like the older Clint Eastwood. A white-haired couple, wearing pastel cotton sweaters and slacks, greets a young woman and little girl at the door. They take a table on the glass-enclosed deck overlooking the marsh.

People of means and leisure, owners of boats and houses on the wooded hammocks, are gathering for the weekend. Many of them know someone at a nearby table. Tomorrow most of the men will take their boats into the bays to fish for speckled trout and redfish or offshore for king mackerel and tuna.

These people are part of the migration to the country that Kathleen Russell described when I talked with her earlier in the day. “I know it’s a strange thing to say in a town that is almost as old as the state, but McIntosh County really is
the 'last frontier.' She sat behind a desk in her corner office of the Darien News. Outside her door were the pressroom and tables where her small staff assembles the fourteen pages and packs them for weekly delivery. Not the stereotypical gruff, harried editor, Kathleen is relaxed, has time, and shares it with a smile. “I mean,” she explains, “the county is not built up, but very quickly developers are buying property and putting in subdivisions and condos.”

Darien sits on a natural terrace at the Atlantic end of the Altamaha River. The river, which drains about one-fourth of the state, splits into a half-dozen channels a few miles above the town, leaving a patchwork of islands that look, from the air, like a cubist painting in shades of gold, green, and blue. U.S. Highway 17 crosses the Darien River, one of the Altamaha’s branches, on the south edge of town. Small shops, banks, and restaurants line the thoroughfare that once carried the trucks and tourists from the cities of the Northeast to Florida and back. Interstate 95, a bit more than a mile west of the town, has drained this traffic, leaving a quaint fishing village and the restored Colonial Fort King George.

Bartram spent time here during the spring and fall of 1773 and again toward the close of his travels in 1776. Lachlan McIntosh, later a Revolutionary war general, hosted him. McIntosh owned and managed important properties. He and the Macgillivarys, Mohrs, and Mackays sheltered, equipped, and regaled Bartram with the rhetoric of Highlanders ready to do battle with King George. Bartram called them “the generous and true sons of liberty” (Travels 48).

James Oglethorpe, founder of the colony of Georgia, brought the fierce warriors to his new colony in the 1730s and ’40s to bolster its southern border against the Spanish. Three decades before Bartram arrived, they routed the Spaniards and established a tartan of rice and indigo plantations, largely on islands in the Altamaha delta. Remnants of their irrigation canals, filled with cattails and rice, still cross the marshes. Sawmills, powered by the waters of rising and falling tides, cut pines and cypresses into boards for houses and ships.

Descendants of these Highlanders remain in McIntosh County, but Russell says that people from Atlanta are moving here at an increasing pace. She runs through a litany of new subdivisions, most of them called “plantations.” Developers are gobbling up the northern half of the county near South Newport, where Donald McIntosh, a “venerable greyheaded Caledonian” gave Bartram refuge from a “tremendous thunder storm” on his first journey southward from Savannah (Travels 13).

After she orients me to the life, economy, and dreams of her county, Kathleen walks me to my car and I drive around the town. The grid of streets that
"O Alatamaha!"

Oglethorpe laid out for Darien in 1736 remains. A handful of two-story houses and churches, built in the town’s heyday as a lumber city, surrounds Columbus and Vernon squares.

Gray beards of Spanish moss hang from live oaks that spread green big-tops above neatly mowed grass in Vernon Square. The square was the commercial hub of Darien from 1870 to 1910, when the town was a leading exporter of pine timber. The banks and other commercial establishments are gone, but St. Andrews Episcopal Church, chartered in 1843, remains. Federal troops burned it in 1863, but the faithful rebuilt it. Its white, board-and-batten siding and steeply pitched roof identify it as Episcopal from five blocks away.

On the riverfront, a well-kept park with a boardwalk separates the river from the stubs of walls built of tabby, a mixture of fired oyster shells, lime, and sand. These ruins of nineteenth-century shops and warehouses recall the decades of Darien’s prominence as a seaport, when steam-powered mills sliced pine and cypress cut from the forests along the Altamaha and floated to the harbor. Local historian Buddy Sullivan says that in the early half of the nineteenth century the mills churned out 40,000 board feet per day.

A few yards up river, entrepreneurs, backed by government grants, have transformed an old shrimp house and dock into a restaurant with floating piers for pleasure craft. It’s part of the town’s plan to attract tourists.

Manufactured and mobile homes, with an occasional faux-tabby house, stud dusty lots in the northern outskirts of Darien, out on U.S. 17 and State Road 99. The narrow highway winds between massive live oaks and passes old Victorian cottages and two-story frame houses in Ridgeville (“The Ridge”), listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Across Doboy Sound, Hog Hammock, a community of Gullah/Geechee people who have lived there for three centuries, shares Sapelo Island’s 16,000 acres with the Sapelo Island Reserve, the R. J. Reynolds Plantation (since 1950 the home of the University of Georgia’s Marine Institute), and the Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve. Bartram went there in the island’s wilder days, accompanying a party of locals for “fishing and fowling.” There he encountered a rattlesnake so remarkable that he gives more than a page to the serpent and his advocacy to spare its life (Travels 268–70).

By 8:30 in the morning, cars, trucks and SUVs pack the narrow parking lots and road to the Sapelo ferry landing. Their drivers have gone to work on the island. The ferry makes two trips a day, each way, and space is limited. Try and get to the island on a whim, at the last minute, without a reservation, and you are likely to stand on the wharf, watching the wake of the departing Sapelo Queen as she heads across the sound.
Footprints across the South

Arrows by the highway point to the Tolomato subdivision. Narrow, paved streets curve through forests of oak and pine, occasionally dividing into two lanes to allow the roots of live oak trees to stretch beneath the asphalt. These are young trees compared with the massive oaks that the residents of Ridgeville protect. Behind a low, serpentine, faux-tabby wall that edges the right-of-way, lie golf courses, swimming pools, and tennis courts.

Tolomato is built around the ruins of a sugar refinery and rum distillery that ran here in the early 1800s. Two- and three-story houses under construction join large homes where landscapers manicure lawns and plant palms and shrubs. Marsh frontage is the first to go. Premium locations have decks and screened porches that give their owners a place to watch the sun rise over the gold-tinted marshes that separate Sapelo and St. Catherines Islands from the mainland.

Southerland Bluff Plantation sprawls across a woodland where, at the beginning of the Revolution, a shipyard shaped live oak timbers into gunboats and frigates for the Continental Navy. A British blockade in 1778 halted the work, but the bluff remained a stop for ships sailing the inland waterway in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

A half-acre lot overlooking the twelfth fairway had recently sold for $54,500. Another lot “with beautiful oaks overlooking the sixteenth fairway” was still available for $65,000. But I find no visible trace of the old shipping facilities or shipyard.

Twenty-first-century colonizers are not lured to McIntosh County by free land for farming, as had been the original European colonists. Nor do beaches bring them, as the sand and surf located on the barrier islands is government owned. Rather, they come here for sea breezes in shady woodlands. The retirees with NASDAQ portfolios who migrate here, and the affluent businessmen and lawyers whose weekend dwellings fill the oak and palmetto hammocks, have bought golfing, boating, and solitude.

For them, McIntosh County may be the “frontier” that Katherine Russell thinks it is. But when Bartram rode its tracks, it had passed its day as a Colonial frontier and was already well-peopled and politically influential. Bands of wandering Native Americans caught fish and shellfish here 110 centuries before. Some of them settled to raise crops. They left middens of shells and bones around the outskirts of their villages. Someone—the guesses range from tenth-century Norsemen to seventeenth-century Spanish—built a fortified village on Creighton Island, south of Shellman Bluff.
"O Alatamaha!"

Footprints across the South

In the 1720s, the British built (then abandoned) Fort King George to guard the entrance to the Altamaha River at a site overlooking the marsh and the Darien River, now at the easternmost point of Darien. Later, they established Fort Barrington, a dozen miles up river from the marshes, to guard Darien's western flank. Near the fort, on a sandy plain, Bartram and his father found a species of *Gordonia*, a camellia-like shrub which he named *Franklinia altamaha*. William planted a specimen in his garden in Philadelphia, where it thrives and is the ancestor to all known examples of the plant. Two hundred years have passed since the last *Franklinia* was seen in the wild.

The Altamaha River made Darien. Its sediments fertilized the marsh islands; its flow cut a harbor deep enough to allow the passage of ships. And this stream enthralled Bartram:

How gently flow thy peaceful floods, O Alatamaha! How sublimely rise to view, on thy elevated shores, yon Magnolian groves, from whose tops the surrounding expanse is perfumed, by clouds of incense, blended with the exhaling alm of the Liquid-amber, and odours continually arising from circumambient aromatic groves of Illicium, Myrica, Laurus, and Bignonia.

*(Travels 48)*

He thought the headwaters of the river lay in "the Cherokee mountains, near the head of Tugilo" *(Travels 52)*. That is a stretch. The maps of his day may have misled him. A better point of reference is Stone Mountain, the landmark bulge of granite on the eastern edge of metropolitan Atlanta, now a theme park and monument to the Confederacy. Rain falling on Stone Mountain and on the east side of Atlanta’s Hartsfield-Jackson Airport makes its way through Georgia red clay and runs more than 400 miles to the Atlantic. The Yellow, South, and Ocmulgee rivers pick up sediments and wastes from subdivisions, Macon, and the Robins Air Force Base. Fertilizers from fields along the Oconee River ride the currents to join these waters near Lumber City, a hundred miles by river upstream of Darien.

More than thirty percent of Georgia’s $80 million commercial and $350 million recreational fisheries are based on the Altamaha. Less visible, but no less important, are the rare, threatened, and endangered animals and plants, including mussels and small fish, that call the Altamaha watershed home. Seven such species are not found anywhere else in the world. For this reason, the Nature Conservancy has established the Altamaha River Biosphere Reserve as one of its “Last Great Places on Earth.”
"O Altamaha!"

In 2002, American Rivers, a national organization that advocates "for healthy rivers, abundant fish and wildlife, and thriving river communities," listed the Altamaha as the seventh most endangered river in the nation. Due to the building of dams and power plants on Atlanta-area streams that feed the Altamaha, the organization predicts the river will experience "loss of important habitat areas, reduced populations of aquatic species, increased pollutant concentrations, and reduced recreational opportunities. This loss of freshwater flow has particularly profound consequences for the ecology at the mouth of the river."

James Holland has taken on the job of keeping watch over this chunk of the earth. He is the Altamaha Riverkeeper. From the window of his office in a small, frame house in Darien he can keep an eye on the marshes that surround the lowest end of the Altamaha River and see shrimp nets, fixed to the booms of white boats, rock gently as a stiff north wind rocks the waters of the harbor. Maps hanging from his walls show the extent of his interests: fourteen thousand square miles of territory surrounding seeps, swamps, and streams that feed the river.

A tall, robust man of the sea, Holland is an ex-Marine who gave up the corporate life three decades ago to trap crabs in the bays that caress the islands along Georgia's southern coastline. His face is lined by tough days fighting tides under the hot southern sun. On his feet are high, brown leather boots. His thick fingers rifle through papers on his desk and bring out charts that show water flow and salinity records over the past ten years. Though he attended school only through the ninth grade, he quotes scientific studies like a professor of marine biology. On a given day, he may be flying over Gum Swamp, two hundred river-miles upstream in Dodge County, directing a photography crew looking for evidence of logging that promotes erosion or diverts streams. Or, with the help of the Southern Environmental Law Center and the Turner Environmental Law Clinic, he may be in a courtroom, pleading his case against a dam near Atlanta that will rob the river of water and natural nutrients.

James has been the Riverkeeper since 1999. He earned the job after years of environmental activism. As a crab fisherman, he watched his profits shrink as his catches, and those of his fellow watermen, dwindled. Some years were better than others, but overall, the numbers and weight of the hard-shelled, blue delicacies kept declining.

Some blamed overfishing. Holland listened to the scientists and heard them say that water quality and quantity were the culprits.

"The counties and cities upstream have dammed the river in so many places," he tells me. "That puts less fresh water in the marshes where the fish and crabs lay their eggs and the larvae and fry grow. The female lays her eggs on the bottom and the male fertilizes them. The tide comes in and they rise into the water and
Footprints across the South

float upstream. Then, when the tide goes out, they lie on the bottom until the next high tide, when they rise again and float farther upstream. But the activities upstream make this process near impossible.

"The cities build dams and the timber people cut the forests and drain the wetlands. They plant pines in place of the hardwoods along the banks of the streams. All this together means that, when rains come, a heavy flow of water comes down from the cut-over forests. It’s like flushing a toilet. Whoosh. The fresh water pushes out into the bays. The young sea animals get out into the saltwater. When the fresh water recedes, they can’t find their way back into the marsh and they die or get eaten."

He speaks of numerous threats to the quality of the river and its life, of runoff from timber plantations and farm fields, and of more than a hundred permits allowing treated sewage, discharge from paper and pulp operations, and other pollutants dumped into the river. Fish kills happen each summer. A parasite, triggered by pollution, turns the blood of adult blue crabs into a milky soup.

The Altamaha Riverkeeper and allies have successfully defended the river in courts, blocking or stalling the building of dams near Atlanta, king-sized marinas along the coast, and sprawling subdivisions in the hammocks that crown the islands of the Georgia marshland.

In the autumn of 1773, Bartram borrowed “a neat light cypress canoe” from the Laurens plantation on Broughton Island, stocked it, and paddled up the Altamaha “fifty miles above the white settlements” before he wearied of pressing against the current and turned to float back to Darien. But Bartram had no GPS. Not even a chronometer. His distance estimates are notoriously flawed. Perhaps in the fall, when its flow subsides from spring floods, a strong man, if he left Darien on an incoming tide, could paddle fifty miles up the Altamaha.

However far he went, today one must go farther and look hard to find remnants of the environment he saw. He describes “mostly a forest of the great long-leaved pine, the earth covered with grass, interspersed with an infinite variety of herbaceous plants, and embellished with extensive savannas, always green, sparkling with ponds of water, and ornamented with clumps of evergreen, and other trees and shrubs” (Travels 30). To see forests of longleaf along this river requires a trip of a bit more than one hundred miles upstream to the Moody Forest, near Baxley.

I’m too old to paddle that stretch against the current. Or maybe just too soft. I take the highway. Seventy-five miles of two-lane, fast becoming four-lane. Artifacts of the wood industry surround me as I approach Baxley. Stacks of lumber. Piles of pulp wood. Steaming, smoking kilns. Trucks haul farm-grown pine logs and, occasionally, hardwoods along the highway. Baxley
became a timber city around the turn of the twentieth century. Its population swelled 132 percent between 1890 and 1910, when the big logging companies rolled in. Once known as the “Turpentine Capital of the World,” it continues to host an annual “Tree Fest.”

Moody Forest covers about 3,500 acres fifteen miles north of the town. The Nature Conservancy, along with the state, owns it. They and local author Janisse Ray struggled to add the tract to the list of preserves that the Conservancy holds throughout the world. In the millennium year, they outbid seven timber companies, paying $8.25 million, part of it raised from the State of Georgia’s wildlife car tag funds.

Why would rational and sane people, along with a financially conservative state government, want this land so badly? For some, the answer is in biology. A longleaf forest is not just a collection of a species of trees. It is a complex ecosystem. And that complexity motivates scientists.

Others cherish these forests for their beauty. Greens, browns, and golds spread through rolling plains, open and inviting. Tall, slender trunks hold gnarled branches that, in turn, grasp long needles and cast a calm shade over the low, bending blades of grass.

Some push to conserve the longleaf flats because they have taken as their life’s work the ethics of Father Thomas Berry:

Trees have tree rights, insects have insect rights, rivers have river rights, mountains have mountain rights. So too with the entire range of beings throughout the universe. All rights are limited and relative. So too with humans. We have human rights. We have rights to the nourishment and shelter we need. We have rights to habitat. But we have no rights to deprive other species of their proper habitat. (5)

For environmentally sensitive children of the South, the reason is primal: longleaf forests are heritage, far older and more universal than ante-bellum mansions or a flag with a star-filled St. Andrew’s cross. In pine flats, “you can see how south Georgia used to be, before all the old longleaf pine forests that were our sublimity and our majesty were cut,” writes Ray in Ecology of a Cracker Childhood (13).

The longleaf pine community once stretched from southeastern Virginia to eastern Texas. It decorated as many as ninety million acres. Fewer than fourteen percent of this acreage remains, and a tiny fragment of that is old-growth forest. The Nature Conservancy reports that “less than 3 percent of the forest remains and what is left is disappearing at a rate of 100,000 acres per year.”

Wholesale, widespread destruction swept the southern forests over the last 120 years. Humans had dabbled with the trees earlier, of course. Red men girdled
trees, burnt them, and planted small fields. White and black men came, two-by-two, one man on each end of a crosscut blade. They felled great trees and floated them down the Altamaha to Darien to build houses and ships. But these were mere skirmishes. The blitzkrieg on the forests came after the Civil War when corporations brought crews and mules and oxen to drag out the prized pines by the millions of board feet. And when they moved on, they left the land bare, save for an occasional sapling or a tangle of briars.

Pines grow still in the Coastal Plain and Piedmont. Slash and loblolly stand in sterile, simplistic rows on tree farms. When, after twenty or thirty years, they have reached a size large enough for pulpwood or two-by-fours, monster machines belching diesel exhaust grasp them just above their roots and, with a calamitous whack, shear them. Roaring steel “draggers” pull them to a central pile, where another machine wraps its arms around five or six dead trees, stripes their remaining limbs, and lifts them onto the bed of a long truck that carries them to stacks in lumberyards beside the railroads. Acres of trees can be clearcut between sunrise and sunset by three men and their diesel-steel-hydraulic assistants.

The operation leaves shallow stumps, a few scrawny blackjack oaks, and small mountains of brush. “Ugly” is an adjective inadequate to describe a clearcut. Hear Janisse Ray:

If you clear a forest, you’d better pray continuously. While you're pushing a road through and rigging the cables and moving between trees on the dozer, you’d better be talking to God. While you’re cruising timber and marking trees with a blue slash, be praying; and pray while you’re peddling the chips and logs and writing Friday’s checks and paying the diesel bill—even if it’s under your breath, a rustling at the lips. If you’re manning the saw head or the scissors, snipping the trees off at the ground, going from one to another, approaching them brusquely and laying them down, I’d say, pray extra hard; and pray hard when you’re hauling them away. God doesn’t like a clearcut. It makes his heart turn cold, makes him wince and wonder what went wrong with his creation, and sets him to thinking about what spoils the child.

(Ecology of a Cracker Childhood 123)

So the Nature Conservancy bought the Moody forest to spare it from the hungry machines and to preserve and nurture it. Sounds easy. Keep out the cutters and the strewers of trash and, in time, the Earth will do its thing and the forest will be something that Bartram would recognize. Fences and gates. And a watchman.
"O Alatamaha!"

As with most areas long corrupted by neglect or abuse, the task is not that simple or easy. To understand the difficulty faced by those who would restore such a place, it is necessary to recognize that a longleaf forest is more than a collection of trees. It is a delicately balanced home for more than a score of plant, bird, and reptile species that depend on each other for their lives—an ecosystem. Tortoises, snakes, spiders, and salamanders contribute to each others’ lives under a carpet of wiregrass beneath the longleaf canopy.

The Earth’s atmosphere plays the protagonist in the drama of the forest. To reach its best health, the floor of the forest must burn every few years. Nature sends bolts of lightning to lick the pines and wiregrass with flames. Bartram witnessed a pivotal event in a longleaf forest’s life cycle when he saw lightning turn a tree into a torch near Darien (Travels 13-14).

The Moody family had maintained the forest, protected it from wide scale timber operations, for over a hundred years. Although a wide right-of-way for high-tension power lines cuts through the tract, longleaf and slash pines cover as many as 350 of its acres. Some of these trees are over 300 years old. Canopies of the oldest of them shaded the wiregrass carpet when Bartram paddled his boat up the Altamaha.

Maybe the family loved this land too much, protected it too well. As they resisted cutting, they also shielded the forest from fire. Not that fire protection was entirely the choice of the Moodys. Forest fire is denied by law, custom, and Smokey the Bear. The longleafs, and the accompanying blackjack oaks, grew, but they not as large as they would be if fire had occasionally scorched the earth, burning away the litter of pine needles that cover its floor and encouraging the birth of new stands of wiregrass.

On an autumn day, Alison McGee, Southeast Georgia Conservation Manager for the Conservancy, guides me around Moody and explains the difficulty of restoring the natural order. As her SUV rolls along a shaded lane behind the Moody Cemetery, a buck deer herds two does into the cover of a stand of slash pines, planted a decade before on a parcel cut when a member of the family found it necessary to sell some timber in order to pay taxes on the property.

We bounce over the track, barely wide enough for two wheels, across the power right-of-way. False foxglove (Bartram’s Gerardia) reigns in full bloom. Alison is out of the car the moment we park in a grassy opening where tall pines support the tent of a bright blue sky. Before I can grab my camera and walk around the vehicle, she is fondling the frail flowers of a clump of wiregrass. “It’s sterile,” she says. “We burnt it too late. Natural burns occur in the summer or fall. If that happens, the grass germinates. We can’t burn in the summer; there’s still too much fuel on the forest floor because it’s been protected from fire. A summer fire would burn too hot and damage the forest. Look here.”
Footprints across the South

She walks to the base of a great tree and stoops. Her hand passes over a mound of earth that rises gently about eighteen inches above the surface of the forest floor, then wipes away the duff: rust-colored pine needles that dress the forest’s floor. Running her slender fingers through the loose soil beneath the duff, she says, “These are roots of the tree.” She’s touching a web of beige fibers. “If we burn when the forest is dry and the air is hot, the duff will burn the roots and damage the tree. We have to get rid of most of the duff before we can encourage a more natural fire.” She says that a graduate student is writing a thesis on the subject of how to reduce the duff. Meanwhile, the organization will continue to light controlled burns in the winter, on days after rain, when the air is humid and the wind calm.

As we stroll over the hills, we stop beside the opening of a burrow, a foot across, home of a gopher tortoise and the myriad spiders and small reptiles and amphibians who follow him. Bartram was the first to identify this tortoise when he saw one a few miles down the Altamaha.

Twenty-five feet up a large pine towering over the burrow is a hole where a red-cockaded woodpecker, an endangered species, has dug his den. The bark below the cavity is glossy, coated with resin that drains from the hole. Alison tells me that the sap makes it impossible for snakes to reach the den and raid young woodpeckers. This bird, about the size of a cardinal, once lived in the forests from Florida to New Jersey and Maryland and as far west as Texas and Oklahoma. Settlers in Missouri, Kentucky, and Tennessee knew them. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that only about 5,000 groups of red-cockaded woodpeckers, or 12,500 birds, now live from Florida to Virginia and west to southeast Oklahoma and eastern Texas. Its range is about one percent of its original territory. Unlike the Carolina parakeet or the red wolf, which early farmers considered pests, the woodpecker neared extinction for the simple reason that builders and lumbermen coveted his longleaf home and cut it in large numbers.

Brown water fills a bog on a slope below the burrow and den tree. In the center of a soggy pocket fifteen or twenty feet across grow clumps of pitcher plants, the Sarracenia that Bartram marveled over (Travels xviii). Alison tells me that these individual plants are not as healthy as those that live in a fully natural longleaf environment. Too much shade, the result of too few fires, has dwarfed them. Still, they are delightfully sensuous and mysterious, their hooded tops ready to attract unwary insects, their throaty stems waiting to receive and trap them. And under the care of Alison and her colleagues, they will regain their rightful vitality.
"O Alatamaha!"

Footprints across the South

Longleaf forests hold more than what I see. Somewhere beneath the wiregrass and the duff crawl flatwoods salamanders. The bog hides striped newts and Carolina and dusky gopher frogs. Flitting behind some branches is a Bachman’s sparrow. Alison hears it, but I don’t see it. I’d like to see an eastern indigo snake and a Florida pine snake, maybe even an eastern diamondback rattler—at a distance.

Alison loves the longleaf forest, knows every trail, tree, and woodpecker den on the site. As we walk, she notes bracken fern, smilax, and Saint-John’s-wort. We drive deeper into the tract, where she knows of a cluster of Altamaha grit sandstone. “Larger outcroppings of the sandstone are full of life,” she says. “At Broxton Rocks [another Conservancy site], we have creeping morning glory, which is endangered in Georgia. Eastern wood rats love to hang out in these rocks.”

But Moody Forest is home to more than longleaf. We drive downward on a winding track into the Altamaha bottoms. Briers and twigs scratch the side of the SUV before we park on the edge of a ten-foot bluff. “A month ago, the river was up to here,” says Alison, pointing to the edge of the bluff. Cypresses and tupelos root in the black soil. Some are over six hundred years old. We walk down, toward acres of cypress knees. The bases of some trees extend more than ten feet in diameter, narrowing in an inverted funnel, their straight trunks surmounted by canopies of feathery leaves that darken the soggy forest floor. In most cypress forests, trees of this size would be seen only as stumps, memories of earlier grandeur. Moody’s trees are intact, worth thousands of dollars if milled. They are priceless standing here in a primeval forest, dark and moist, untouched by saws and greed. Fruit of tupelos, soft and oval like small calamato olives, their skins tough, dark purple, splash in the tea-colored water. Frogs scurry for cover. A toad the size of my smallest fingernail hops over fallen leaves.

Restoring natural order to an ecosystem that has been disturbed by human intervention, even when that intervention has been to protect the land from tree cutting and fire, is a long-term, painstaking venture. Step-by-step, experiment-by-experiment, the Nature Conservancy plans to work with the forest. The goal is to help Moody regain, over decades, the health it deserves and allow it to join the ranks of the scattered other longleaf forests of which Janisse Ray writes, “Nothing is more beautiful, nothing more mysterious, nothing more breathtaking, nothing more surreal” (Ecology of a Cracker Childhood 14).
they’ll be jumping over that coop to your right and heading down the pasture over by the woods,” bellows a voice with a gravelly, fully Southern good-ol’ boy twang. “At least, that’s the plan.”

I’m seated on a bale of hay on a farm wagon, part of a train of tractors, heavy farm trucks, and flat-beds. We’ve stopped in a broad, grassy pasture. The announcement comes from a black box, a loudspeaker set in the tall, green grass near the crest of the hill.

“What’s a coop?” I ask the man with a full, sunburned face who sits beside me on a bale of hay.

“It’s one of those wooden fences the horses jump over,” he says, lifting his plastic cup to point toward the triangular structure that breaks the tree-lined barbed wire fence.

I climb down and walk through knee-high grass, dodging land mines of fire ant mounds. As I train my camera on the wooden gap in the fence row, I hear the bellowing of hounds following fox scent that had been dragged over the field to provide the festive spectacle. A red jacket atop a shining roan glides over the coop. A column of dogs follows in a cacophony of yelping, then mounted men and women in red and black jackets, reins relaxed. The horses gallop along the edge of the woodland, their hooves clipping the turf in an occasional tribute to gravity.

“Hey! These guys can ride!” says the pudgy woman who swings her video camera quickly to the left, following the spectacle down the pasture.

When a horn sends two notes into the clear, autumn air, riders rein in their mounts in a copse of trees at the far end of the field. The horses impatiently tramp the soft soil while white, brown, and black hounds circle them, whipping
Footprints across the South

the air with their rope-like tails. This “Opening Meet” of the Belle Meade Hunt runs on land that William Bartram visited in the middle of May 1773. The wagons and their loads of spectators are the “Tally Ho Ride.”

Bartram had cut short his exploration around the mouth of the Altamaha to ride to Augusta to observe a crucial conference of Creeks, Cherokees, and the Colonial government. It was an opportunity for the explorer to meet leaders of the tribes whose lands he planned to wander and study.

When he arrived in Augusta and learned that the Indian delegations had delayed, he went some thirty-five miles farther west to Wrightsborough, on the edge of European settlement. A few days after the conference, he returned to the town, this time in the company of a party of military officers, land surveyors, Indians, and entrepreneurs surveying the land the Crown had acquired from the Creeks and Cherokees.

Bartram says Wrightsborough was a “pleasant town,” “founded by Jos. Mattock, Esq of the sect called Quakers; this public spirited man having obtained, for himself and his followers, a district, comprehending upwards of forty thousand acres of land” (Travels 35-37). Governor Wright had deeded them an area of magnificent forests, rich soil, and well-drained hillsides on the edge of the “Fall Line” of Georgia. Streams “murmering in the hollow rocks ... Groves, presenting to view their prolific Boosom, beautifully decorated with the sorounding flowery hill & verdant lawns; all gay & Fragrant defuses a lovely & fruitfull Scenery all around” (Report to Dr. John Fothergill 442). The massive trees Bartram saw have long since yielded to axes and saws, leaving mere pockets of woodlands that are beginning to show the yellows and reds of a Georgia autumn. Sprawling pecan groves have replaced the cultivated fruit trees—apple, pear, and peach—that delighted Bartram. And today nearly a thousand riders and spectators have succeeded the Quaker farmers.

At noon, on the long, narrow front lawn of an old white frame house, riders in black britches and tall, polished boots had walked their slender chestnuts, sinuous palominos, and giant blacks with plaited tails and manes to line two sides of the field. They fixed their eyes on a pony leading a riderless gray horse that bounds over a coop, followed by the hounds and a group of red-jacketed riders.

In his strong, proud flanks, the gray embodies the uniqueness of this day. This had been Master James Wilson’s mount. Today, his granddaughter leads her on the first Opening Meet that Wilson missed in the thirty-six years of the hunt. Master James had died seven months before, hit by a truck as he crossed a highway in his golf cart. His family and colleagues have made today’s hunt a tribute to his vision and tireless development of fox hunting on the hills of McDuffie County.
In 1966, Wilson brought together seven other fox hunters at his home outside of Thomson. Within two years they were breeding dogs and organizing the hunt. Over the next three decades, Belle Meade grew into a nationally recognized hunt that draws riders and spectators from across the world.

Hunters circle around the pack to hear the “Blessing of the Hounds,” solemn in the presence of the riderless gray and its back-facing black boots. The dogs, wagging their tails, surround James’s son, Epp, who kneels on the grass in the middle of the circle.

“Bless, O Lord, rider and horse, and hounds that run, in their running, and shield them from danger to life and limb,” prays Father Edward Frank, a Roman Catholic priest from Augusta who has participated in the hunt almost from its beginning. Dressed in his long, red jacket, a yellow scarf around his neck and a surplice over his breast, he pleads, “Bless the foxes who partake in the chase, that they may run straight and true and may find their destiny in thee.”

But the day is more James Wilson’s than the horses’, hounds’ or foxes’.

Wilson family roots in the county go back six generations. Among James’s ancestors is Thomas Watson, one of those of whom Bartram said, “They Plant Wheat, Barley, Flax, Hemp, Oates, corn, Cotton, Indigo, Breed Cattle, Sheep, and Make Very good Butter & Cheese” (Report to Dr. John Fothergill 442).

Now the prayers are done. As riders and dogs assemble in a grove, spectators climb aboard their wagons and trucks. I’ve been told that most any wagon would accept me. “Just ask them. They’ll be glad to have you,” Epp had said. I walk down the row of trucks and wagons, looking for a crew.

“You looking for a ride?” asks Larry Lendman, a building contractor from nearby Thomson. A member of the hunt, he usually rides after the hounds, but today has chosen to drive an oversized pickup pulling a farm trailer. “You can join my group.”

My fellow travelers are related to a locally owned bank: lawyers, accountants, bankers, and their wives. They have loaded the rig with hay bales and coolers. A smiling, silver-haired lady in blue jeans offers me a red drink named for a notorious Queen of England as our trailer pulls into the queue of wagons. By mid-afternoon, the wagon is a rolling tailgate party. We are eating sandwiches of thin-sliced, spicy roast pork, dipping chips in salsa, and washing down the food with cold beer and wine.

Mindful of the comforts of their guests and the need to keep the soil free of non-fox scents, the Belle Meade Hunt folks have contracted with a Jiffy-Jon company to tow a trailer carrying portable toilets along the hunt route. Wherever the feast roves, there go the twelve blue and yellow fiberglass outhouses.
At the far end of the hunt course, on the side of a steep hill leading down to Little Creek, the wagons stop. "This is the Rock Dam," says Larry. "We rebuilt it last year after a flood washed it out."

I follow the crowd down the sloping roadway through a pine and oak forest and look down to an old dam built of rust-brown boulders. A trickle of water spills over the center of the rock structure. Curious spectators walk across the dam. Three girls from a sorority wagon walk on the beach of silt downstream. They are flirting with two slender young men who have carried bottles of beer to the creekside.

"Is this Mattock's Dam?" I ask one of the Belle Meade Hunt members.

"Who was Mattock?"

I explain the history briefly, telling her that Joseph Mattock ran a mill.

"We just call it the Rock Dam. My aunt would know. She knows all about the history of the county."

I ask others on the ride what they know of Colonial Wrightsborough but give up the quest after talking with a couple of dozen. Except for Epp and members of his family, no one knows a shred of the rich history of Wrightsborough. Riding through fields and forests of a new millennium, they are unconnected to and unsupported by the labors and conflicts of the past. They know that the Rock Dam is old. But how old? Built by what hands? What happened to the Quaker men whose industry and sweat built the dam? What principles led those men and women, six generations back, to oppose the political winds of their day to the extent that they would forsake their land, orchards, and mills?

Early in the hunt, the riders are aloof from the wagons. They rest their horses in the shade of the trees or jump leisurely over coops while waiting the next "drag" and chase. Toward the close of the day, however, they mingle with spectators, chatting around tables where champagne is served at the end of a tree-bordered pasture while the hounds mill about, begging for leftover meat scraps from the picnics.

The sun is low and the air growing cold as the wagons pull away from the festive field. But the champagne has warmed the hearts and loosened the tongues. A pair of hunters rides alongside the wagon.

"Do you have any water?" asks the man.

Someone hands him and his companion cold bottles from a cooler. His companion, wearing a tight-fitting black jacket, her blonde hair pulled into a bun under her velvet-covered helmet, kibitzes with a lawyer and an account executive.

"I have you seen a fox today?" asks the lawyer, whimsically.

The chic rider laughs, "Not a one. Someone saw one last December."
“You’re the chief fox!” says the exec. The men laugh; their wives sit on the hay bales, pale, vengeful smiles pasted on their faces, while the horsewoman blushes, grins, and rides on.

Red foxes are rare now on the hills of Wrightsborough, but, occasionally, the hounds scare up a coyote.

Barbecue, catered on the lawn of the Bowdre-Rees-Knox house, ends the day. A ticket-taker directs us to a long table laden with pork, potato salad, beans, slaw, and thick-sliced bread. Styrofoam cups hold syrupy iced tea, Georgia’s official liquid accompaniment to barbecue. In the living room of the two-hundred-year-old stone raised cottage men sit on sofas and chairs sipping bourbon beside a crackling fire and watching a video of the blessing of the hounds and the chase.

I see it wherever I go looking for Bartram’s tracks: the American absorption in the pursuit of pleasure. Bass boats, motor homes, whitewater raft outfitters. The Academy of Leisure Sciences estimates that leisure easily accounts for over one trillion dollars a year, or about a third of all consumer spending, and is America’s number one economic activity. We take for granted a level of slack time and of money for play that Wrightsborough’s hard-working Quakers could not have imagined.

There is more to Wrightsborough than a fox hunt, however. I find the historic township with Dot Jones, long a prime mover of The Wrightsboro Foundation and promoter of tourism in McDuffie County. On a warm April morning, when the Georgia countryside is coming alive, Dot drives me across the Interstate north of Thomson, past a small airport, a country club, and a sewage treatment plant on Mattcock Creek. Pale green leaf buds brighten the pecan groves.

Scars of old road beds, cut deep by stagecoaches and wagons, lead out from the paved road. “That’s the old Savannah road,” says Dot, pointing to a well-worn dirt road on our left. “My great-grandfather drove the stagecoach on that road.”

She turns into a short, gravel driveway that ends abruptly at a weathered tombstone in the yard of the Wrightsboro Methodist Church. The Foundation maintains the church house and watches over the surrounding historic district.

Dot compiled a book that contains studies of the history of the church and records of the community written by the late, local historian Pearl Baker. She knows the facts and feels the history. To her, the church, tombstones, and meager remnants of old buildings are more than flotsam left by the tides of social change. This hillside is Georgia’s heritage.

“This was an educated community of family farmers, even after the Quakers left. Some of the leading families of Atlanta came from here,” she says as we
ramble through the cemetery behind the church to a plot beneath a massive oak. “These are Massengales and Candler’s”—names in the aristocracy of Atlanta.

“Behind those trees was the girls’ academy; the boys’ academy was over that way,” she says, pointing north through the second-growth forest that covers the rolling hills.

Walking up the steps to the porch that spans the north end of the white church house, she pulls a key from her pocket and slips it into the lock on the heavy wooden door. Late morning light through the windows reflects from the white-painted broad pine planks of the interior walls and illuminates the dark wooden pews. An old pump organ and a piano flank the podium.

“The last church on this land was the Wrightsboro Methodist Church,” she tells me. “According to Pearl, the original Quaker church was here. But it burned some time before 1773. The Indians may have burned it. So, the Quakers built a meetinghouse across Mattock’s Creek from the old mill site.”

She leads me from the church to Fish Trap Road, a twenty-five-foot-wide crease worn into the earth that marks a main street of the abandoned town. We walk the muddy corridor past the unmarked lots of the Quaker town, then double back across the blacktop road and find our way over a spring branch, dodging poison ivy vines. On a hill that overlooks Middle Creek, we walk around a sturdy stone foundation. “This may have been the fort built by Colonel Barnard in 1774 to protect the frontier,” she tells me.

Along the way, she spins stories of how the Quakers from North Carolina obtained a land grant to these fertile hills in 1768, and of Indian attacks in the early years of the settlement: “the Quakers wouldn’t take up arms against the king. The revolutionaries opposed them bitterly... after the revolution, the Quakers moved away to east Tennessee, Ohio, and beyond... in 1799 the Georgia legislature abolished the Quaker control of the township and deeded it to a new set of trustees. That’s when they changed the name to Wrightsboro.”

Only the church, cemetery, an old, unpainted general store, and the foundation of a nineteenth-century building remain. Four goats browse in the pen beside the shed that stands near one of the two modern white frame houses.

We return to Dot’s car. “Now I want to show you the second oldest house in Georgia,” she says. We drive past forests, pastures, and tree farms and turn onto a muddy country road. There, in an isolated quarter of the county, the Rock House has stood for more than two hundred years, surrounded by a lawn carved from the forest. Over the past two decades, the Foundation has used funds from small grants to restore this house built by Thomas Ansley in 1785.

He styled it after the homes of his native Delaware River Valley in Pennsylvania. Granite rocks dragged from nearby fields on the “Fall Line,”
are mortared into foot-thick walls and whitewashed on the inside. White oak beams form lintels above the doors and fireplaces. Heart pine flooring, sawn from longleaf pines on the ridges, creaks beneath our steps. Pine walls divide the house into four rooms. A wooden staircase leads to a loft.

Ansley’s frontier was harsh and wild. Creek Indians, chafing over the expansion of colonists into their lands just a dozen years earlier, threatened. Rough-hewn settlers from Virginia and the Carolinas, hard-drinking and lawless, were no less menacing. Perhaps this house, with its thick walls and deep, fireplace-warmed basement, served not only as a dwelling but also as a fortress and cache for vital, perishable supplies and deer hides traded by Creeks. I imagine the Rock House as the “rock” of the early frontier settlement. It is also heritage. The great-great grandmother of President Jimmy Carter, Ann Ansley Carter, descended from Thomas Ansley.

For those who see the Old South as Tara-style, antebellum, Greek Revival houses of plantation-land Georgia or as the town houses of Savannah and Charleston, the Rock House gives notice of the diversity of the state and its early settlers. This building is a survivor of the old Old South, worthy of more protection and visitation than the Foundation can afford.

On a pleasant, sunny Sunday morning in May, Maria and I drive across the state to McDuffie County. Bartram’s horse had carried him to Wrightsborough down a wagon road that was hardly more than the ancient Indian trading path; we speed along Interstate 20. At the Thomson exit, we pass the sprawling Dudley Nursery, a wholesale outfit that has replaced, in horticultural history, the farms and orchards of the Colonial Quakers.

Up the state highway about a mile, a small sign points to the right, beckoning us to the Blind Willie Festival. Each spring, blues aficionados gather on a grassy hillside to celebrate the heritage of the South’s original music, played in honor of Blind Willie McTell. Guitarist and singer Blind Willie, born in nearby Thomson, played the blues in Atlanta and across the state in the 1920s through the ‘50s. He left behind a legacy of commercial recordings. The Library of Congress holds a collection of his music.

But we turn left and drive to the gravel lot across from the old Methodist church. An unseasonably cool wind sweeps across the cemetery at Wrightsborough as we watch a family of six walk to the church. “We didn’t dress right,” says Maria, observing the mother’s dress and the father’s suit and tie. “Church clothes. I should’ve known better than to listen to you,” she
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jokes, looking at my denim shirt and khakis and patting her black slacks while recalling the controversies over women wearing pants in her home church in rural middle Georgia. As we stroll around the cemetery reading faded inscriptions on ancient tombstones, Maria finds solace when she sees arriving women wearing slacks and men with no ties.

We find places on an old, painted pew. Maria thumbs through the old Methodist hymnal and notes that the songs are familiar from her childhood Baptist church in Middle Georgia. I recall reading that all Southern religion is, at its heart, Baptist.

As the pews fill, a man walks down the aisle and places a bouquet of flowers, cut from his wife’s garden, on the small table behind the pulpit. Women walk down the aisles, handing out printed programs.

By eleven o’clock, more than a hundred people have taken their places. In a Quaker meeting such as Bartram attended here, the congregation sat quietly. No one passed out programs. Silence was broken only when the Spirit moved. But this is not a Quaker meeting. People eagerly greet one another across the aisles and benches as the pianist begins a prelude of hymns that have endured since the nineteenth century.

Southern Protestants sing. They sing in harmony. They sing with conviction. They enjoy the lyrics that blend a sense of place with their spiritual heritage. “The Church in the Wildwood” opens the service:

From the church in the valley By the wildwood,
When day fades away into night,
I would fain from this spot of my childhood
Wing my way to the mansions of light.

Later, after a prayer, the pianist announces “In the Garden” and the worshipers sing,

I come to the garden alone,
While the dew is still on the roses.
And the voice I hear
Falling on my ear
The Son of God discloses.

Memory sings to memory, and where memory loses the scent, nostalgia and faith take up the hunt.

A young physician from the nearby town of Thomson mounts the pulpit. Tall, slender, scholarly, dressed simply in a blue blazer over khaki slacks, he tells the congregation, “Our destiny demands that we consider our heritage.”

“The faith of Wrightsborough is what made America great,” he says, weaving the story of the Israelite king Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah into a homily that provides a subtle but clear warning: A nation that strays from its heritage of faith is doomed.
The pianist plays a Joplinesque version of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," while the congregation fills wooden plates with ten- and twenty-dollar bills.

Bartram is on the agenda. The guest speaker, Dr. Edward Cashin, a historian from nearby Augusta State University, spins the tale of the botanist’s visit to Wrightsborough. He stands easily behind the dark wooden pulpit, relaxed beneath his shock of white hair, a gentle smile on his face. His speech is informal, chatty, the lively overflow of years of piecing together the history of the American Revolution in the South and writing dozens of books and articles.

"We think of Wrightsborough as quiet, safe, and pastoral. But it was a dangerous place when Bartram rode out here. The trees along the narrow roads held many perils. Worthless ruffians had settled out beyond Wrightsborough, in land that still belonged to the Creeks. The Indians were angry."

The congregation sits quietly and listens intently.

"More than once the Creeks attacked and plundered the settlement. In 1773, the Indians were particularly upset. The Cherokees to the north had gotten themselves into debt to the British. To pay off their debts they had agreed to give up land to the settlers. The problem was that some of the land didn't belong to the Cherokees; it was Creek land. That was the reason for the conference in Augusta that Bartram was to attend. The Creeks, the Cherokees, and His Majesty's government needed to work out a land dispute."

Cashin paints a picture of the land survey that followed the conference: "Quite an impressive event. Probably the most important thing that ever happened in Wrightsborough. Ninety or so men, surveyors, soldiers, wealthy colonists, Indian chiefs and braves, came together at Wrightsborough and headed northwest, marking the boundary of the new cession of land."

Quietly, almost as an aside, he tells a story. "A couple of Cherokee braves from the survey group took Bartram fishing up where the Tugaloo River comes into the Savannah River. Then, when the survey was over, Bartram headed back to Savannah and the young men started home to the North Carolina mountains. The Indians stopped at a farm house, built out in the territory where no white settlements were authorized, and asked for some food. The housewife had brought out milk and something to eat when her husband appeared in the doorway, leveled his gun, and blasted one of the braves. He struck the other visitor with his musket butt and finished him off with an axe."

A teenaged boy in the third row stops whispering to his brother and leans toward Cashin.

"Bartram never mentioned the murders. Why not? He knew the victims. He had to have known about the killing. The incident riled the Indians so much that
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war almost broke out. But Bartram wasn’t writing about war. He was painting pictures of nature, of the goodness of man, of a land full of beauty and wonder.”

For a few moments, in the minds of the congregation, Wrightsborough is more than an idyllic, nostalgic woodland, a place to find one’s roots. It is a focal point of the American Revolution and a crossroads on the trail of a solitary wanderer from Philadelphia.

When echoes of the final hymn have fallen, the congregation resumes the joyous buzzing, deferred from the moment before the first hymn. Family and old friends are here. Children have grown taller, the belts of middle-aged men are longer, stretched tighter, than they were last May. A silver-haired matriarch, walking with the help of a cane, is alone at this homecoming for the first time in thirty years. An old man’s pallor shows the signs of illness and decline. A brown-haired young woman in a loose-fitting dress hugs an older woman. They laugh as they talk about the young woman bringing a new heir to next year’s event.

Quickly the friends spill through the wide doors and onto the porch and grounds, retrieving containers from their cars: casserole dishes, fried chicken covered with aluminum foil, salads, cakes. They set them on the plywood tables that rest on weathered sawhorses behind the meeting house where large roots bulge through the dark soil of the cemetery. The homecoming buffet is laid out between ancestors’ graves.

Lines form quickly on both sides of the table. People meet and chat as they juggle heavy-laden paper plates and find places to sit on low concrete walls surrounding the final resting places of ancient ancestors.

By 1:30, only the clean-up team and a few stragglers remain in the churchyard. We drive from the parking lot and down the road, past the shady pecan groves and pastures where cattle graze behind barbed wire fences. Every half mile or so, a coop punctuates the strands of wire.

The following April, when abundant rains have loaded Middle Creek with fresh water, Dot Jones guides Maria, Brad Sanders, and me back to the Rock Dam. Brad sets up his tripod and camera to capture the cascade of water, rustling by the runoff from upstream fields, that rushes over the granite rocks.

The original builders slid boulders into a natural shoal, fitting them into place until their structure rose twenty feet above the swirling pool at its base. Recent repairs have used smaller stones; a concrete cap seals the crest.

“This is Mattock’s Dam,” Dot tells us, filling in the information that my fox hunt guides missed.
“Joseph Mattock ran the mill here.” She points out the mill race across the creek and tells us that the mill was set on a shallow hill beside the steep, tree-covered banks fifty yards below the dam.

I imagine walls of raw pine boards, the wheel, the pond, the Quaker farmers bringing their corn to be ground to meal. And Bartram, fresh to the colony, looking for brothers and sisters in his native faith and finding them around this mill.
Light from my lantern reflects off droplets clinging to the tips of the pale green leaves of early April. Off and on all day, a gray sky had soaked the fields and forests of northeast Georgia. Draped in a poncho, I had poked around brambles and cemeteries and in the late afternoon had returned to my campsite in the A. H. Stephens State Park.

The park spreads across a hill on the northern edge of Crawfordville, Georgia, a town now retired from a brief career of historic importance. I search for a grocery store but find only a couple of defunct cafes and closed antique shops. Beyond the railroad trestle, I turn in front of Liberty Hall and pass a display of Confederate flags hanging in front of Ruffin's, manufacturer of flags.

A. H. Stephens, scholar, lawyer, vice president of the Confederacy, and governor of Georgia, lived in Liberty Hall. His pale yellow house is large and impressive but modest compared to Greek Revival antebellum homes. A broad lawn in front surrounds a tall, marble statue. Preserved and restored barns and other outbuildings in the lot behind the house display the working parts of the plantation. Farther behind, on a thousand acres of Stephens's land, tall pines spread their canopies above the campground, surrounding a white wooden fire tower that resembles a lighthouse more than a forest lookout.

Earlier in the day, when I set up my tent and stretched a blue tarp over the picnic table, I'd had my choice of any of the twenty-five campsites, each with a gray limestone gravel parking pad. The campground host was the only other occupant. By evening, three RVs are my only neighbors.

I scrounge some dead pine limbs from the floor of the forest and take out my knife to shave the wet wood into kindling. With my hand axe, I split a couple
of sticks of wood I had bought from the park office. Memories of Second Class Scout test (start a fire using no more than two matches) warm me until my fire blazes and gives me the illusion of warmth and comfort. After a supper of noodles, tuna, and canned fruit, I open my camp chair under the tarp, set a bottle of cold beer and a bowl of dry-roasted peanuts on the bench of the picnic table, and prepare to fill a yellow pad with notes from my day of exploring the area of Bartram's Great Buffalo Lick.

A woman’s voice breaks the monotony of drops splashing on the campground floor. “Barney! Barney, come here!” she is calling from the open door of the silvery motor home parked on the gravel in the next campsite.

The black and white terrier trots, nose to the ground, toward my chair. He approaches me cautiously, sniffs my hand, and wags the stump of his tail.


He licks the salt from my fingers while my neighbor continues to call, the pitch of her voice rising in frustration.

I pull my poncho over my head, wrap my arms around Barney’s wet fur and carry him across the pine straw to his owner. Her tall, slender frame reaches the top of the doorway. She wears her silver hair in a long pony tail that falls over the cowl of her light blue sweater. Wire-rimmed glasses perch on her angular nose. I had seen her earlier, walking her dog along the asphalt roadway near the bathhouse.

I lift Barney to her waiting hands.

“Thank you,” she says. “He’s too friendly. Goes to anyone. I’ll lose him that way some day.”

“You’re welcome,” I say. “I needed the company.”

“We made you get out in the rain. I’m sorry.”

She rubs Barney with a towel. “Won’t you come in? I have some hot water for tea.”

“Tea would feel real good right now,” I answer.

As I hang my poncho across the support rod of her awning, she extends long fingers and says, “I’m Jane Bascom. From Michigan.”

“Jim Kautz. From Atlanta.”

She pulls a sack of scones from a cabinet above the stove, sets it beside a variety pack of tea bags on the table, and pours steaming water into a mug.

“I just have herbal tea.”

I select a bag, unroll the string, and drop it into my mug as she motions for me to sit in a chair beside the table.

Jane had spent thirty years as a speech and drama professor, teaching in colleges in the upper Midwest. When her husband died two years before, she bought her motor home and began prowling the back roads, setting up camp in state parks,
RV courts, and the Arizona desert. She is heading back to visit her daughter and grandchildren in Michigan before launching a summer trip in western Canada.

We talk of life on small campuses, of academic freedom, of testing the edges of tradition in conservative environments.

Loosening the band around her pony tail, she shakes her head, lets her hair fall down her back. She appears younger than her years.

“What are you doing here, the only tent camper in a soggy campground in Georgia?” she asks.

“Do you know of William Bartram?”

“The Bartram Trail,” she says, repeating the reply I had learned to expect from those who ask about my project.

I tell her briefly of Bartram’s travels and of my plan for a book that describes the places Bartram went.

“From what point of view?” she asks, as she squeezes drops of tea from the bag and lays it on a paper towel.

“A question from a literary professional,” I answer. “I’m still trying to find that. Right now, I am gathering information, visiting the corridor along his route.”

“I gather he came here,” she says.

“Pretty close to here.” I explain that Bartram had tagged along with a survey party from Augusta through the land to the northwest and to the Savannah River above Elberton.

“Bartram says it was about ‘the middle of the month of May.’ Actually, it was mid-June. ‘[V]egetation, in perfection, appeared with all her attractive charms, breathing fragrance every where,’ he says (Travels 34). Along the way he collected specimens and seeds and took notes on the lay of the land and the health of the plant life.”

She smiles at the description of fragrance filling this land, now covered with the monotony of pines planted in rows, and her eyes widen. “A survey?”

“It was 1773. The Cherokees had run up some nasty debts; they’d bought more goods than they could pay for with deer hides. So the colonial government called together a large conference in Augusta and they cut a deal. For the forgiveness of their debts they’d give up some land to the colony.”

“And the survey was to mark the land.”

“Right. The Indians had a pretty good idea where the boundary was. A ridge here, a stream there and, in one case, a big tree. Both sides needed a survey to make sure of the line of what was called the ‘New Purchase’.”

“And what have you found here?” she asks. “I’ve driven past pine trees and pastures and towns that may once have had one horse. This is really rural, unpopulated country. And the way they leave the forests that they’ve cut!”
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I think of the clear cuts I had seen that afternoon. Stalks of trees, denuded of branches, in bleak isolation among heaps of gray, tangled limbs and abandoned deer stands are the desolate heirs to the forests that enamored Bartram.

“Bartram described this forest as ‘the most magnificent . . . [he] had ever seen . . ., thinly planted by nature with the most stately forest trees.’ Black oaks, tulip poplars, black walnuts, sycamores, hickories, beeches, elms, and sweet gums towered above the survey party that staked a line through these hills. He was so impressed that he feared he would lose his credibility. I mean, writing of black oaks that ‘measured eight, nine, ten and eleven feet diameter five feet above the ground . . .’ He said they measured several trees with a girth of over thirty feet (Travels 37). Who would believe him?”

I crunch a scion and give her a short history of the area, mentioning the migration of the “Crackers” (the Indians called them “Virginians,” but they were from the Carolinas as well as Virginia) who flooded into Georgia after the 1773 survey and established small farms, towns, and churches.

“Alexander Stephens is a good example. His grandfather moved here from Pennsylvania in 1784 and established a homestead. Like so many others from the north, they built their farm into a plantation. The culture they established included a strong educational program for whites and hard work for slaves. Stephens was quite well educated and brilliant.

“Not all of the settlers were civil and educated, however. Many were rough. Violent. They farmed here, but only a few knew anything about conserving the land. Most of them drained the soil of its fertility with corn and cotton, then moved on.

“At first, some of the trees that captivated Bartram were cut to provide for farm land. Then, just after the Civil War, serious lumbering began. I’d guess that by 1890 the last of the big trees was gone.”

“For someone’s mantel in Boston,” she muses.

“Yes, and for furniture and ornate crown molding in Baltimore and New York. The largest tree I saw today was less than three feet in diameter. It stood in the front lawn of an antebellum house up in Philomath.”

We finish our tea while Barney curls up on the bed.

“What route are you taking when you leave here?” I ask.

“Up to Athens, then to North Carolina.”

“Good trip. I think you’ll enjoy it. You’ll be following Bartram. Tomorrow you’ll go right past the Great Buffalo Lick.”

“Buffalo? As in American bison?”

“The same.”

“And you’re telling me Bartram saw buffalo here?”
“No. Just the place where the buffalo had licked clay from the ground. By Bartram's time cattle and deer were licking it.”

I tell her she'll be passing close to the route of the 1773 survey, then driving almost on top of his trail into the Little Tennessee River Valley in North Carolina. She pulls an atlas from the driver's compartment and hands me a highlighting pen. I mark her map. Clayton, Georgia, Franklin, North Carolina. A circle around Wayah Bald. A Bartram route. Then, with my black ballpoint, I draw a line east of Georgia Highway 22 across to where the Tugaloo runs into the Savannah River.


She vows to buy a copy of Travels in Athens and asks me if I'd like another cup of tea.

“It's been a long day. I'd best go to my tent.”

She nods and looks down. I thank her for the tea, scones, and conversation. Rain has drowned my campfire when I return to my campsite. I put my pad in my old gray attaché case, pour my stale beer on the ground, and crawl into the sleeping bag in my tent.

At daybreak, a brisk north wind blows white clouds through patches of blue sky above the tops of the pines. After a cup of coffee and bowl of granola, I roll my sleeping bag, tent, and tarp, pack the truck, and head for the shower. Jane is rolling up her awning. She waves and greets me.


“Good luck.”

Barney lounges at the end of a leash tied to a tree.

When I return from the bathhouse, the gravel where Jane's motor home had sat is empty and dry. She is back on the road. I wonder what she will see as she drives Route 22 and U.S. 78 into Athens. She'll notice the miles of young pines, the scattered pastures, and the mailboxes beside the driveways that mark the presence of lonely residences hidden in woodlands. At Philomath, she'll pass the Georgia Pacific wood lot and think of the decades of lumber and pulp wood stripped from the forests.

Philomath was once the seat of Oglethorpe County. Governor Stephens gave it its name, “Love of Learning,” a tribute to the academy that once stood there. Three Greek Revival houses, one built in 1833, serve as reminders of the days when the town built its wealth on the sweat of slaves who plowed and picked the cotton in fields now planted in pine. Small houses, mobile homes, and a rundown convenience store now outnumber the mansions.

Until 1998, a spot near Philomath had been known as Bartram's “Great Buffalo Lick.” Two other places near Union Point vied for the honor, but the
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Philomath site became favored by those who marked the Bartram Trail. There was no way Jane would find the lick. I would never have seen it had Brad Sanders not led me there.

Brad meets me in Athens early one Sunday morning. A teacher of graphic arts at the Cedar Shoals High School on the outskirts of Athens, his Guide to William Bartram’s Travels is a “must have” book for those seeking Bartram sites. In the parking lot of the Home Depot, Brad steps out of his beige pick-up, rigged with a matching fiberglass cap and a kayak rack. Tall, slender, with a full head of curly, auburn hair, he greets me with a smile and a warm handshake.

We skirt the vast University of Georgia campus. Along Broad Street the sidewalks are deserted, as are the bars, restaurants, and boutiques in century-old buildings. Students “sleep in” on Sundays. Our route drops into the valley of the North Oconee River, past the restored remnants of textile mills with old brick and stone walls.

“Athens was once the heart of a major cotton industry. The river provided the energy for the mills,” Brad explains as we pull into the parking lot of one of the many parks that dot Athens and Clarke County. We walk along the paved bicycle path that stretches along the greenway beside the river. Beneath a railroad trestle, now abandoned, he says, “Bartram likely rode to this spot in 1773. He probably followed the trading path that later became the railroad.”

“But this is not the survey route, is it?”

“No. This was a side trip. We’ll drive down the Great Ridge where the surveyors and Indians marked the boundary of the New Purchase.”

In the eastern suburbs of Athens we pass old neighborhoods of small frame houses, new subdivisions scattered over rolling hills, and carloads of worshipers filling the parking lot of the St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church. Brad notes that our road follows a ridge, the route of the survey.

Pointing into a woodland near the Clarke-Oglethorpe County line, Brad tells me that “Cherokee Corner” is a short distance to the north. A bronze plaque embedded in a rock cairn beside the highway says the spot was pivotal on the boundary between the Creeks and Cherokees. A historical marker a few hundred yards west along U.S. 78 says the Bartram Trail came near here. Close by, beside the clear, trickling waters of Moss Creek, concrete picnic tables surround a crumbling fireplace in a park that appears unused.

Along the road from Crawford to Stephens, broad, green pastures surrounded by young forests cover the hills like green swells on an inland sea. A brick house presides over the shining roofs of white buildings as long as football fields.
"That's my parents' chicken farm," says Brad. "I grew up in that house."
"You lived on the Bartram Trail?"
"Right on his path. Some time along the way I learned that Bartram walked with Creeks, Cherokees, and the officers of King George in fields and forests I wandered as a boy."
"And you've made Bartram a lifelong passion."
"He's the joy of my life."
We drive across a blacktop road that becomes gravel before it reaches Highway 22 and park beside a logging road in a pine plantation. As we walk over rough gravel laid down for trucks hauling logs four years ago, seed pods of beggar lice paste themselves to our jeans, hoping we'll transport their DNA to another field.
"This is the Buffalo Lick. Dr. Louis DeVorsey brought us here," says Brad. "He is a University of Georgia geographer who painstakingly researched the location of the lick. He found through research of old maps and land deeds that the lick was somewhere within a few hundred feet of this spot."
We stand in a clearing littered with brush piles and empty oil cans left behind by the loggers. Less than a quarter mile away, a box on stilts stands fifteen feet over the logging road. It is deer season. We hope no hunter is in the deer stand or that, if he is, he can distinguish us from his prey.
We are on ground sacred to those who follow Bartram. The survey party lingered here, preparing several routes for the surveyors. Bartram observed great trees, a cane swamp, meadows on "an immense plain." Of the "three or four acres" known as the Buffalo Lick he says:
The earth . . . is an almost white or cenereous coloured tenacious fattish clay which all kinds of cattle lick into great caves, pursuing the delicious vein. It is the common opinion of the inhabitants, that this clay is impregnated with saline vapours, arising from fossil salts deep in the earth; but I could discover nothing saline in its taste, but I imagined an insipid sweetness. Horned cattle, horses, and deer, are immoderately fond of it, insomuch that their excrement, which almost totally covers the earth to some distance round this place, appears to be perfect clay; which, when dried by the sun and air, is almost as hard as brick. (Travels 39)
Gone is the clay that Bartram saw on the surface, licked bare and eroded into Buffalo Creek after centuries of farming. Perhaps the soil of the lick was kaolin, abundant in the land south of here, a mineral that is still used as a folk remedy for stomach and intestinal distress. Hidden in the kitchen cabinets of small frame houses across Georgia is a jar of "clay."
Footprints across the South

The idea of buffalo roaming the hills of northern Georgia caught me by surprise when I first read Bartram’s account. From the legends of Daniel Boone, I knew the beasts had lived in Kentucky and Ohio. But I didn’t recall learning that the great bison ranged in Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. My textbooks had not let me in on that piece of science and history. I had, unfortunately, received this part of my education from those great American educational sources, the movie theater and the television screen. When it came to bison, I imagined prairies—not forests on Georgia’s red clay hills—and Sioux and Cheyenne hunters with flowing black hair riding ponies and shooting bison with arrows and bullets.

My schools didn’t mention that James Oglethorpe, the first governor of Georgia, listed buffalo as native to the colony. As late as 1739, explorers reported seeing and eating buffalo in the Piedmont and Coastal Plain. One report claimed several herds of sixty or more. Apparently, at the time of European settlement, the animals were expanding their territory, crossing the Appalachians into Virginia and wandering down the Piedmont and Coastal Plain. They multiplied and thrived as far as northern Florida. By 1770, however, they had been killed off. Only the names of licks and a few obscure notes in the yellowed journals and letters of early colonists remain.

Georgia is a spacious, beautiful, and diverse state. Beaches, marshes, and hammocks line its coast. Piney flats and farms roll upward through the Piedmont to bulging mountains covered with dark hemlocks, pines, and hardwoods. People from every corner of the earth, showing the skin, hair, and bone structures of every race, live here. Vast rural areas encompass towns, great cities, and sprawling suburbs. Still, the natural diversity known by the earliest European settlers has dribbled away before the advance of timber barons, industry, and multinational commerce.

Ecologists ponder, with serious concern, the loss of biodiversity. In Invasive Species in a Changing World, Harold A. Mooney and Richard J. Hobbs speak of “a massive biotic homogenization of the Earth’s surfaces” (xii). We hear arguments about the value of snail darters, obscure mosses, and rare microbes, usually hidden in remote mountain streams or Brazilian rainforests. But diversity comes in larger packages too—snorting, aristocratic American bison or stealthy panthers in Georgia swamps, for example.

Georgia has lost not only the grandeur of forests whose trees measured thirty feet, but also stately, wooly beasts. Buffalo once deigned to extend their empire into the American Southland. Until we Europeans, hungry for land and equipped with technology, conquered the wilderness, the land had its own dynamic.
The Great Buffalo Lick

A great curtain dropped when our ancestors moved in. Trees planted in rows have replaced the oak and chestnut forests. Even the small towns are losing their uniqueness—their own diversity—as national chains, their buildings and striped parking lots identical to those in the next town, replace locally owned businesses. And we, who thrive on diversity, search for it by surfing satellite channels on our televisions, buying cruise ship tickets, and roaming the blue roads in our SUVs and silver motor homes.