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A RIVER THROUGH HISTORY

By Michael Jordan ✦ Photos by Cobblestone Photography and contributed by The Richmond Hill Historical Society and Richmond Hill Convention & Visitor's Bureau

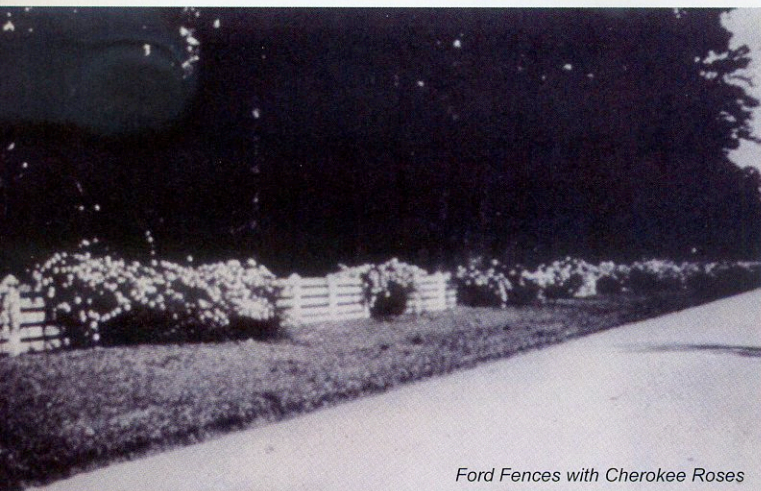
Michael Jordan is an award-winning journalist, filmmaker, and historian.

His Savannah-based video production company, Cosmos Mariner Productions, has been engaged by the Richmond Hill Historical Society to produce a short documentary about the “hidden history” of Richmond Hill. In this article, Michael takes us along on his journey of discovery, revealing facts from lower Bryan County’s past that are often overshadowed by more well-known people and events.

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Civil War Reenactment at Fort McAllister State Historic Park



Ford Fences with Cherokee Roses

The Bottom



For years, I've made trips to Richmond Hill, GA, from my home in Savannah for various work projects such as videos for the Matthew Freeman Project or for the Richmond Hill/Bryan County Chamber of Commerce and the Convention and Visitors Bureau (projects initiated under the auspices of my friend, Jim Bunn). I also shot footage several times at Fort McAllister State Historic Park for my film, "Savannah in the Civil War." I found the people of Richmond Hill to be extraordinary folks doing extraordinary things.

The first thing I remember thinking about Richmond Hill the place, however, is just how far away it seemed. Even though the distance on a map between Savannah and Richmond Hill is relatively short, the drive seemed long – especially the section from the intersection of Highways 17 and 144 to Kilkenny Marina. As a city-dweller who doesn't really enjoy driving anywhere south of the Oglethorpe Mall, I remember being almost "road-hypnotized" by the seemingly endless succession of pine trees, white fences, and subdivisions. The only things breaking the monotony were the occasional views of the marsh and the Ogeechee River.

The next thing I noticed was that there seemed to be no city center – not just a lack of a downtown, but the complete absence of anything to anchor this sprawling bedroom community. Not even a factory or large industry of any kind – just gas stations, a strip mall or two, grocery stores, and homes. Suffice to say, I just didn't "get" Richmond Hill.

A bright spot in my experience with this small city was my involvement with the Richmond Hill Historical Society. Screening my local historical documentaries for several of the society's monthly meetings over the years, I found the group to be uniformly engaged, excited, and receptive to learning about local history. What, I thought, could motivate these folks to care so much about the story of a little town hidden in the shadow of the historical 800-pound gorilla, Savannah, looming just up the road?

It was only when the Historical Society contracted with me to produce a documentary about the hidden history of Richmond Hill that I finally began to penetrate the veil and see the rich historical tapestry that binds this coastal Georgia town together.

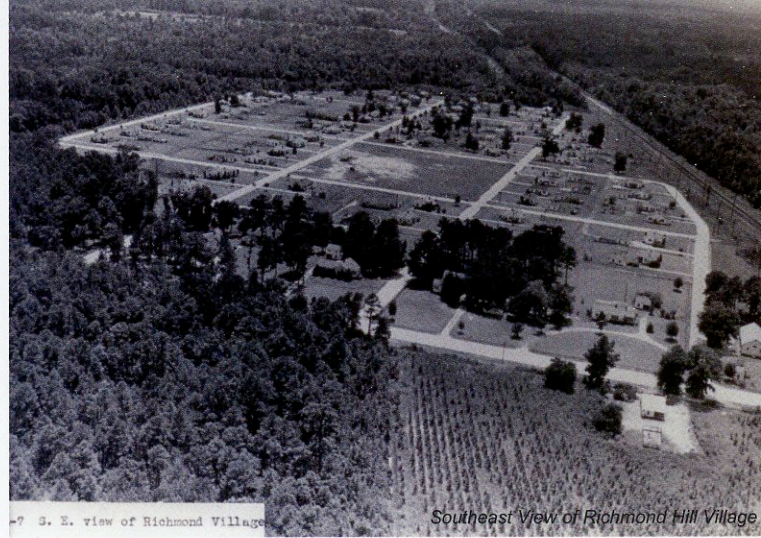
At first, like most folks, I assumed the only noteworthy thing in Richmond Hill's history was the remarkable change brought to the community by Henry Ford. Indeed, the signs welcoming drivers into Richmond Hill proudly proclaim that this is a "Henry Ford City." Truly, Henry Ford laid the foundation to make Richmond Hill the city it is today, but the fascinating history of lower Bryan County began centuries before.

That history begins, not surprisingly, with Native Americans. To be honest, my eyes used to glaze over whenever anyone brought

up Native American history. I'd never been very interested in arrowheads, pottery, or "Indian mounds," but when I began digging (metaphorically speaking) into the evidence of vanished cultures in lower Bryan County, my interest was piqued. I learned that the Guale (pronounced "WAH-lay") Indians who lived on the Georgia coast had at least two villages in the Richmond Hill area, including one near Fort McAllister. These early residents created their own unique type of pottery, stamped with beautiful designs. A display case in the museum at Fort McAllister is full of stunning examples of these treasures, along with other Guale artifacts. But what really got me hooked was an afternoon I spent walking in the woods with Georgia Southern University archaeology post-graduate Ryan Sipe, who ran a complex, multi-faceted archaeological dig on another Guale site as part of his master's thesis work. With Ryan as a guide, small, barely-perceptible rises in the sandy, plant-covered soil were revealed to be Guale shell middens – basically garbage piles full of artifacts and evidence about the daily life of the Indians. Even more surprising was another find the dig unearthed: remains of one of Bryan County's earliest colonial homesteads.

Though I have always been captivated by coastal Georgia's beautiful salt marshes, I never fully understood how these natural features were altered by Europeans – more specifically by their enslaved servants. During my research for the film, I learned from noted regional historian Buddy Sullivan about the massive rice plantations of lower Bryan County, which were worked by hundreds of slaves from West Africa. Historian Christopher Wilson of the Smithsonian Institution informed me that Bryan County's plantations were among the largest and most productive of the entire region, rivaling even those of rice-rich Charleston and the South Carolina low country. At this point, I realized that the geometric cuts through the marsh were the result of the slaves' back-breaking labor. In fact, Wilson asserted that the total amount of mud moved by slaves on rice plantations throughout the South represented a construction project equal to the building of the Great Wall of China. The best way to see Bryan County's rice dikes is from the air, with the view from a boat coming in a close second. Yet these noteworthy creations can be seen at no charge by anyone who can walk, bike, or run on the trails in Richmond Hill's J.F. Gregory Park.

Another lasting legacy of the rice plantation days is the old Burnt Church Cemetery on Highway 144 east of town. Behind a forest of modern-day burials, weathered stone markers tell the story of the McAllisters, Clays, and other members of lower Bryan County's wealthy planter class. Nearby, on the other side of the highway, stands Bryan Neck Missionary Baptist Church. Estab-



S. E. view of Richmond Village

Southeast View of Richmond Hill Village



Christopher Wilson from the Smithsonian along with Henry Ford and Christy Sherman.



Christy Sherman and Michael Jordan with a piece of tabby from the Gabbage Homestead.



The Great Wall of China



Canals through lower Bryan County.

lished four short years after the end of the Civil War, this historic house of worship bears witness to the ability of the area's African-American people to come together as a strong, independent community after gaining their freedom. Indeed, the black church became the center of this community. Armstrong Atlantic State University history professor Michael Benjamin explained, "Within the church, communities had control over the events in their lives."

Though it is hardly hidden, Richmond Hill's Fort McAllister is one of the most important historical places in the entire region – the place where Union General William T. Sherman ended his famous "March to the Sea." The fort's badly outnumbered Confederate defenders didn't stand a chance against thousands of Sherman's battle-hardened veterans. The short but brutal battle that took place here in December 1864 opened the way for Sherman's capture of Savannah, and was a major turning point in the war. Says local historian and former Fort McAllister manager Danny Brown, "It only took fifteen minutes for the assault to be completed. The Confederates put up a good fight. Each one had to be knocked to the ground and his weapon taken away from him. They never did surrender. The fort was captured, but never surrendered."

Of course, no history of Richmond Hill would be complete without a long look at all Henry Ford accomplished in the area. There are lasting physical and cultural effects of Ford's work.

The physical evidence includes several of the more than 300 structures Ford's workers erected in the piney woods of lower Bryan County. Many structures, including the Courthouse Annex, Community House, Martha-Mary Chapel, Ford Commissary, bakery, kindergarten, and others retain essentially the same look and feel that they did when Henry and Clara Ford spent their winters here decades ago. The Ford-era kindergarten building now houses the wonderful Richmond Hill History Museum. In addition, though some have been re-painted, enlarged, and otherwise altered over the years, the houses Ford built for his workers in the

neighborhoods known as the Bottom and Blueberry still retain essentially the same character they had in Ford's day. The rows of white-painted "Ford fences" can still be seen along lower Bryan County roads. And we can't forget to mention the house where Ford himself lived when visiting the area: the stunning Ford mansion, Richmond, located on the banks of the Ogeechee River.

But I've found that more interesting, and arguably more important, than the changes Henry Ford brought to Richmond Hill's landscape are the changes he brought to the area's people. Ford did not come to Richmond Hill to make money, argues historian Christopher Wilson of the National Museum of American History – Ford came here to make people. "Throughout his working life, Ford was interested in making people – or as he said, 'making men,' in the same way that he was involved in making cars," Wilson told me. This involved educating the people of lower Bryan County in new schools, providing them work in the fields, labs, saw mill, and other businesses Ford built in the area, and housing the people in new homes. But more important to the visionary manufacturing magnate was the task of creating better Americans. In the days before the Second World War, Ford wanted to create a better educated, well-mannered, and cultured America. To a large extent, Richmond Hill, with its new, engineered lifestyle, was a Ford laboratory for making his dream a reality – just as the scientific laboratory he built here was a place to create new, industrial uses for agricultural products. Long after Ford passed away and his business enterprises were shuttered, the effects of his social engineering in Richmond Hill are still felt today.

I'm excited about bringing the new film "Hidden History of Richmond Hill" to the residents of Richmond Hill and lower Bryan County. Perhaps they'll learn some things they didn't know about their own history, or deepen their understanding of things they already knew. I hope they'll be proud of that history and come to be as fascinated with their story as I am. ✦