

Marking History : Coastal Bryan Heritage Trail

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Most people who visit or move to Richmond Hill already know a bit about the Civil War heritage that South Bryan County shares with many of its neighbors. In decades past, the Georgia Historical Society made an effort to commemorate the most notable sites with the addition of several historic markers in Richmond Hill and at Ft. McAllister. However, there is one era in Richmond Hill's history that is unique to our community alone. That is the Henry Ford Era. In the 1930's, Henry Ford created what would be a lasting impression on our community. He built many of the buildings we now consider historic Richmond Hill. These sites, along with those already marked, are now called the Coastal Bryan Heritage Trail. Two years ago, representatives from the City of Richmond Hill, Richmond Hill Historical Society and Richmond Hill Convention and Visitors Bureau sat down and went to work on a plan to expand the current historic marker collection in South Bryan County to include sites that covered post Civil War and Henry Ford Era history. The ideas and much of the manpower were donated by members of the Richmond Hill Historical Society, most notably, Christy Sherman, Jim Leahy and Buddy Sullivan. As a Preserve America City, the City of Richmond Hill received funds for the project, under the Preserve America grant program. The City of

Richmond Hill matched the funds, as stipulated in the grant, and provided administrative leadership and manpower. Along with all of the financial and in-kind assistance, much of the credit for the creation of the trail goes to Richmond Hill Boy Scout Troop 527 led by Scout Masters Bruce Slack and Mike Hardy. The Scout troop provided the much needed sweat equity to install the signs over two weekends in February. The Scouts love doing community service projects and were moved by the fact that the signs they helped plant will be enjoyed by generations to come. Additional markers are being planned, as well as an educational brochure and website that can be added to as new markers are purchased. This spring, watch for information on a special “Sunday Drive” event being planned to mark the creation of the trail.

New Trail Sites



Courthouse Annex

This wood-frame structure, situated on a site known since the creation of Bryan County in 1793 as “the Crossroads,” was built in 1939 with funding provided by Henry Ford. The building came to be familiarly called “the Courthouse” by local citizens. For many years, it was used for civic meetings and as the official Richmond Hill voting site. The local Masonic Lodge and Order of the Eastern Star organizations held their meetings in this facility. Later, city and county governmental offices were housed here.

Ways Station

In 1856, the Savannah, Albany & Gulf R.R. was built across the nearby Ogeechee River into Bryan County. Near this site a train depot was built, which came to be known as “Ways No. 1 ½” for William J. Way, the first station master and a local rice planter on lands through which the railroad passed. A settlement grew up in the section between the railroad tracks and the Crossroads just to the west. It came to be called Ways Station, a designation that lasted until 1941 when the name of the community was changed to Richmond Hill.

J. F. Gregory

For nearly 20 years, J. F. (Jack) Gregory was the general manager and superintendent for all of Henry Ford’s various operations in and around Ways Station, later Richmond Hill. Serving for Ford from the 1920’s until 1946, Gregory oversaw the activities of the Richmond Hill Plantation, a large agricultural enterprise that employed many local and area residents. Known as a hardworking, no-nonsense manager, Gregory ran Ford’s operations with great efficiency and organization.

Community House

Outside of their expansive home on the Ogeechee River, this is the single most imposing structure built by Henry and Clara Ford during their sojourn in Richmond Hill from 1926 to 1951. Built by local labor in 1936, near the Ways Station School, the Community House served residents in the enhancement of their educational, social and cultural development. Cooking, home economics, sewing, dancing and other activities were taught at no cost to adults and children alike. Local social activities were held here, and many were attended by the Fords themselves.

Martha-Mary Chapel

Henry and Clara Ford had this chapel built in 1937 near the Community House and the Ways Station School. The chapel was

named for the mothers of Henry Ford (Mary) and Clara Ford (Martha). Students from the nearby school utilized the Martha-Mary Chapel to conduct devotional services under the supervision of their teachers. The pews, tables and other furnishings for the chapel were constructed in the local plantation carpentry shop. Today, the chapel is owned by St. Anne's Catholic Church.

Kindergarten Building

This structure was built in 1940, by Henry Ford, to serve as a kindergarten for the children of Ways Station-Richmond Hill during the Ford era. The building included a kitchen and two large classrooms to accommodate children age three years to six. Dr. Margaret Mustin was hired by Ford to serve as the first director of the kindergarten. The Ford Kindergarten building now serves as home to the Richmond Hill Historical Society and Museum.

Burnt Church Cemetery

Near this site, in 1830, the Bryan Neck Presbyterian Church was established. It is the oldest organized congregation in Bryan County. The church served the numerous planter families of lower Bryan which had become one of the most productive agricultural sections on the south Atlantic coast. The church burial ground was adjacent to the wood-frame sanctuary. On these grounds are interred members of some of Bryan County's most prominent early families, including those of Clay, McAllister and Maxwell. The original church accidentally burned in 1882, and a new edifice was built in 1885 several miles east, near Keller.



Bryan Neck Missionary Baptist Church
Organized in 1869, this is the oldest African-American church congregation in lower Bryan County. The first structure for the church, a Prayer House, was built in 1870, near the white Presbyterian Church (Burnt Church). London Harris, a freedman and spiritual leader of the local black community, was one of the organizers and first pastors for this church. The church was renovated and enlarged at the time the nearby Carver school was built, in 1939.

George Washington Carver School
On these grounds in 1939, Henry Ford built a school to serve the educational needs of the African-American children of lower Bryan County. Professor Herman Cooper was appointed as the Principal when the school opened later that year, originally with grades one through six. Ford named the school in honor of the prominent African-American educator and agriculturist from Tuskegee Institute, Dr. George Washington Carver. In March 1940, Dr. Carver attended the dedication ceremonies here for the new school named in his honor.

Henry Ford at Richmond Hill
In 1925, Henry Ford of Detroit, Michigan, a leading American

automobile pioneer who perfected the assembly line concept of auto manufacturing, began acquiring large tracts of land on both sides of the nearby Ogeechee River. He sponsored extensive agricultural and forestry operations, providing the impoverished area with much-needed employment opportunities. Ford also implemented numerous civic improvements for the people of the Ways Station-Richmond Hill community, including: medical, educational and cultural. Near here, on the river, Henry and Clara Ford built their winter home, Richmond, in 1936. Ford was active in the local community until his death in 1947.

<http://www.richmondhillreflections.com/2011/04/marking-history-coastal-bryan-heritage-trail>