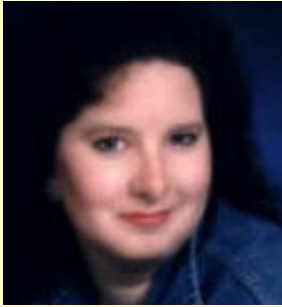


St. Simons Island – Going Coastal

By Graceann Maciolek



In the 18th Century, Fort Frederica was established on St. Simons Island, Georgia, in order to protect the newly-established colony, and the city of Savannah to the North, from Spanish aggression. In the 19th Century, up through the Civil War, fourteen plantations operated on the Island, their owners drawn by family history and temperate climate in order to grow Sea Island Cotton and, on the mainland, rice. But for most of the 20th century and now in the 21st, St. Simons offers a respite from bleak winters for Yankees like me, and a chance to see wildlife and history that is different

from any other part of the country.

Like many St. Simons devotees (at least those who have been visiting since the early 1960s), I first discovered this gem of an island through the novels and memoirs of Eugenia Price. She wrote about the people who lived, loved and died on St. Simons, and I often feel as if I am walking among my own ancestors when I visit the Christ Church Frederica Cemetery. Price's gift as a writer has been both a blessing and a curse for the Islanders, given how many tourists just like me show up clutching copies of her books in our arms and shedding tears at various locations during our pilgrimage. St. Simons was always popular as a tourist destination, especially since the Torras Causeway opened in 1924, but visits truly



skyrocketed since Ms. Price's novels started appearing, and there is no sign that the deluge will ease up anytime soon. What once was sleepy village and mom and pop beach motels is now large resorts and ridiculously expensive McMansions. It is a disappointment to those of us who have been visiting for many years and remember the old days, but at the same time, we smile and are happy that others are discovering the joy that we have found on this, the



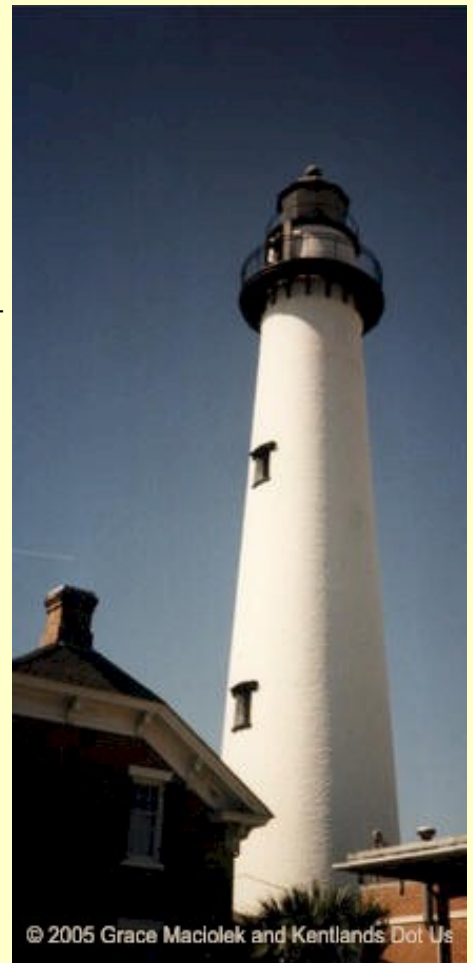
most glittering of the Golden Isles of Georgia. Those small, sleepy places still exist on St. Simons; you just have to know where to look for them now (and I do).

There are still homey hotels where someone in search of atmosphere can have a nice stay at a reasonable price. I always stay at the same simple, "nice but not fancy" hotel when I visit. And when

I sit on the big wooden swing at my hotel and watch the tide come in, see the pelicans soaring over the surf, see the sandpipers picking up tasty tidbits on the beach and, as I did this year, see dolphins cavorting at high tide, the 21st Century disappears and takes my stress with it. There is only me, the water and the sunshine glinting off of it.

Here are some facts about St. Simons Island that are known only by Islanders (and by St. Simons-obsessed travelers).

- After the famous 1804 duel between Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr, Mr. Burr stayed with his friend Pierce Butler on St. Simons until things quieted down up North.
- The British actress, Fanny Kemble, married Pierce Butler and lived on St. Simons for a brief period. She was not prepared for what she would see in a slaveholding state, and in particular for what she would see on her husband's plantation, which was known for its harsh treatment of its slaves. Her book, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation*, was released at the height of the Civil War, and is credited with discouraging European countries from entering the War on the side of the Confederacy.
- The oak used to build the U.S.S. Constitution (or "Old Ironsides" as it is affectionately known), came from the great oak trees on the Island. The main mast was taken from an enormous Live Oak that shaded the front of the homestead at Cannon's Point, the plantation owned by John Couper.
- John Couper and his son, James Hamilton Couper, were world-renowned for their agricultural knowledge, were widely published and maintained correspondence with Thomas Jefferson on plantation matters. John Couper was beloved by all who knew him, and Cannon's Point was a very popular place to visit by many travelers to the southeastern colonies. One couple came to celebrate their honeymoon, and didn't depart until after the birth of their second child!
- Eugenia Price and her best friend, author Joyce Blackburn (of the famous Suki stories for children), discovered St. Simons in the early 1960s on a long weekend during a book tour for one of Price's religious non-fiction titles. They immediately fell in love with the story of Anson Dodge, who took up the ministry after losing his wife, Ellen, on their honeymoon. Despite having just finished building a home in Illinois, Price and Blackburn immediately began looking for a place to live on the Island, and St. Simons was home to "Genie" and Joyce until Ms. Price passed away in 1996. Ms. Blackburn continues to live and write on St. Simons, and her privacy is scrupulously protected by her fellow Islanders. Price was laid to rest in the cemetery at Christ Church Frederica, among the people about whom she wrote so lovingly, and visitors to the Island often visit her resting place, usually leaving a bouquet or memento.



Those are just the highlights - there is so much more. But this is meant to be a brief essay, and there

are many books on the Coastal Empire that cover the topics much better than I ever could. What I can tell you is that the sunshine warms my face and the peaceful pace of life soothes my soul. I recently



took one of my dearest friends with me to St. Simons, and she turned to me the morning of the second day and said "I get it." After all these years of hearing me turn to mush when I discuss "My" island, she now understands why I love it so. It was the best gift I could have ever received.

Recommended Reading:

Major Butler's Legacy: Five Generations of a Slaveholding Family, by Malcolm Bell, Jr., (1987) The University of Georgia Press

The John Couper Family of Cannon's Point, by T. Reed Ferguson, (1994) Mercer University Press

Anna: The Letters of a St. Simons Island Plantation Mistress 1817-1859, by Anna Matilda Page King (Edited by Melanie Pavich-Lindsay), (2002) University of Georgia Press

Georgia's Land of the Golden Isles, by Burnette Vanstory, (1980, Revised Edition) University of Georgia Press

The Lure & Lore of the Golden Isles: The Magical Heritage of Georgia's Outerbanks, by Don W. Farrant (1993) Rutledge Hill Press

The Novels of Eugenia Price (numerous, but especially the Lighthouse Trilogy - *Lighthouse*, *New Moon Rising*, and *Beloved Invader*), available through various sources