

## LOWER ALTAMAHA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

### *Reflections Upon Its Past, and Some Observations on Its Present & Future*

An Address by Buddy Sullivan, October 25, 2009

Upon addressing the Georgia Historical Society at its annual meeting in 1881, Charles C. Jones, Jr. noted, "As children of the past and parents of the future, we should pause to consider our heritage and what our legacies may be." Those words articulated so many years ago are equally appropriate today, and to them we might also add: "Where do we go from here?" Perhaps we may realize some answers to that challenge before the conclusion of these proceedings today.

The Lower Altamaha Historical Society was formed in 1979. It may properly be said to have begun with a river, and an idea.

The river, of course, is the Altamaha, a vast drainage system, one of the largest in the eastern United States that has, fortuitously, remained one of America's most pristine.

By way of extension then, how might we define the "Lower" Altamaha?

For starters, a good argument could be made that it may be the most perfectly complete amalgamation of the history of coastal Georgia of any single location. Tideflow rice planting, timber rafting, steamboats to the interior, lumber mills, the commerce of an international shipping trade, the culture of the commercial shrimp fisherman and crabber—all these things properly reflect the Lower Altamaha and all are encapsulated within the rich tapestry of the history of the Georgia tidewater.

The significance of the river has certainly not been lost on our forebears. Richard Grubb, editor of the *Darien Timber Gazette*, observed in 1874: "The Nile is said to be everything to Egypt; in fact, without the Nile, there would be no Egypt. To a certain extent the same may be truly said of the Altamaha River and Darien. Without the Altamaha there would be no timber trade and no rice planting, and without these, there would be no Darien..."

And yet, the deep allure of this river and particularly for our purposes, the rich, alluvial bottomlands of the river, also lies in its mystique as a place of sheer, untamed natural beauty. The natural element of the Altamaha is almost magisterial in its wildness, the river dynamic that far more often than not, in far more places on the river than not, may accurately be said to reflect the past ten thousand years. Indeed the Altamaha transcends our concept of *time*—rather, it transcends time over far more millennia than humans have lived along its shores.

The idea for the Society evolved from a concerted initiative by local citizens to protect the integrity of the Altamaha. A local historical society might go far in preserving the river's historical, cultural and natural legacy. It would serve as a platform for disseminating that legacy, not only of the river but also that of its region, centered upon Darien and McIntosh and Glynn counties. Darien is in the heart of the Altamaha basin, and it is within the lower reaches of the river from which much of the history and culture of the section has evolved.

In the 1970s there was a concern that the river was under-appreciated and that not nearly enough was being done to protect it from the encumbrances of human progress, be it industrial development, or abuse of the river from other factors.

The late William G. Haynes, perhaps the most passionate of all the river's advocates, articulated it best when, with poetic depth, feeling and urgency, he wrote: "There are rivers which capture the imagination, that are as familiar to us as household words far beyond the limits of the lands through which they flow."



