

*Botany Bay Avenue portrays the idyllic appeal of the barrier island. Opposite page: loggerhead turtle tracks; stalwart Edisto fishers Bobby Fontaine (left) and Jimmy Skinner.*

# Edisto's Historic Present

*Article by Rachel Haynie  
Photos by Susan Roberts*

**E**distoans—whether for a lifetime or only a week of vacation—are drawn into the barrier island's harmonic cycle where Mother Nature constantly freshens the cliché: Less is more. The chance to renew familial ties is a perpetual pull, and humans are not the only ones who keep coming back.

Telling time by tides and moon, female sea turtles lumber out of the froth, often onto the same beach where they were hatchlings, to nestle their clutch of eggs into the warm sands of Edisto Beach. They know not whether it's 1000 B.C. or 2009 A.D.

Beach lovers living or vacationing on the row facing the Atlantic Ocean willingly leave the turtles' perspective of the shoreline unchanged, the way it's been for several millennia. During nesting season—early May to late October—that means forgoing illumination, because these loggerheads' "GPS" is the night sky reflection, guiding them to and from the beach. Any other ray of light emanating from porches, auto headlights—even flashlights—could disorient and send them back into the surf without laying eggs.

For generations, the turtles' period of gestation closely matched the island's natural vacation season—until the latter expanded to all 12 months when another ping pong-shaped orb, dimpled and much harder than turtle eggs, plopped onto a smooth fairway at the Plantation Course at Edisto.

Golf, Art Guild craft shows, the Edisto Day Bazaar, the Edisto Fall Festival, the annual fall plantation tour organized by the Edisto Island Historic



Preservation Society, and the Christmas Parade have conspired with Indian Summer weather and mild winter temperatures to blur the seasons.

Hunting and fishing, mainstays of recreation and commerce since the Edistow Indians thrived on the island's bounty, also perpetuate that recreational conspiracy. Canoes once conveyed natives through and around the open waters, inlets and marshes. Later steamboats, sailboats and commercial shrimp boats plied the salt and brackish waters through which kayakers now pull their paddles.

The Fontaine family perpetuates the island's maritime legacy. "We're the only fishing operation left," said Bobby Fontaine, speaking from the family-owned Dockside Restaurant where the catch of the day becomes a meal to remember. Family regard for local history decks the walls at the popular spot overlooking Big Bay Creek. One mural pictures a rotating bridge that, for many years, afforded the only access to the mainland. Today, the modern bridge spanning



the Dawhoo River and bringing travelers off S.C. 174 onto the island is named for McKinley Washington Jr. who, as a representative in the state legislature, led appropriation efforts to replace the old bridge.

**T**he island—at once teacher and classroom—perpetually imparts history in its seasons, its food ways and other cultural traditions, its maritime legacy and lore. Its past is its present, and as islanders ardently convince visitors, it’s also Edisto’s future.

The sea has been the magnet since before recorded history. Spanish explorers sailed in and were impressed. Then Spanish priests established a mission on St. Pierre’s Creek. After that, it was Spanish pirates looking for treasure—but by then permanent English settlements had taken hold on land the Earl of Shaftesbury, one of the Lords Proprietors, bought from natives for trinkets and goods.

Unforgettable as Edisto is, everybody who nears it seems to want a piece of it to take away, to remem-

ber it by, even if it’s only a seashell. When military vessels encroached nearly 150 years ago, New Hampshire photographer Henry Moore snapped Union troops in their stand against secession. The pictures went home as memorabilia. The island museum displays evidence of their determination, and adventurers on Addam Coe’s artifact and relic hunts still discover proof on private Edisto property—from Union uniform buttons to fine china shards.

Shops and galleries such as With These Hands offer handcrafted treasures as souvenirs. Artists capture the island’s essence so those who must leave may have visual touchstones to bring them back. The Rev. Henry Cheves, a self-taught watercolorist and priest at Trinity Episcopal Church, passes on to adult classes techniques of the popular medium.

“Ability within the group varies widely; they just really enjoy painting together,” said Cheves, whose work is represented at Sage Gallery. He admits he’s learning along with the students, and encourages



*The Rev. Henry Cheves, associate rector at Trinity Episcopal Church on Edisto Island, demonstrates watercolor techniques to (from center-left) Gil Girdauskas, Mary Sue Martin and Terry Girdauskas. Below: Francine Morrison, president of Community Pride, and her brother, the Rev. Chick Morrison of the New First Baptist Church. Opposite: The recipe for Edisto's famous tomato pie is etched around a vessel by island potter Nancy Fishback.*

them to paint as loosely as possible, leaving for the beholder's eye more of the island's innate beauty. The priest's images of some of the island's most evocative dwellings have graced covers of the Edisto Island Historic Preservation Society's tour books.

The tour, *Beyond Edisto: Historic Plantations, Churches and Graveyards*, draws visitors from as far as Michigan and Connecticut the second Saturday each October. "Demand to take the tour is so keen patrons often become society members just to be on the 'preferred' ticket list," said Gretchen Smith, the society's director. "Last year, the handful of tour tickets remaining after members bought theirs were sold out before lunch the first day they were available."

Even if they can experience it only fleetingly, people are drawn to the island's way of life, its living traditions, as intrinsic in the present as steeped in the past. The Rev. Chick Morrison, pastor of the New First Baptist Church, said respect and love—Edisto's enduring elements—aren't mutually exclusive. "You can't have one without the other," said the native, who leads one of 17 island churches that joined spiritual forces for a winter revival. "We have great diversity here and when something happens out of the ordinary, we get together and work it out."

One catalyst for island harmony is Edisto Pride which, with volunteer help, keeps the island beauti-



ful. Community activist Francine Morrison, the pastor's sister, currently serves as president. "I think it's unique how hard everyone here works—as one, really—to keep our history alive." In her professional role as data specialist for attendance and volunteers at Jane Edwards Elementary School, Morrison smiles when she sees community elders come in to share reminiscences of growing up on the island. "Our parents grew up here and made sure we knew about history on the island," she said in a musical lilt evocative of the Gullah language. Among many other civic respon-

sibilities she shoulders, Morrison serves on the historic preservation society board.

“On one of our islandwide clean-ups, someone found an old plow handle that had been used to cultivate the land,” Morrison recalled. The relic reminded her of the beans her parents picked to feed the family and of the lush vegetables

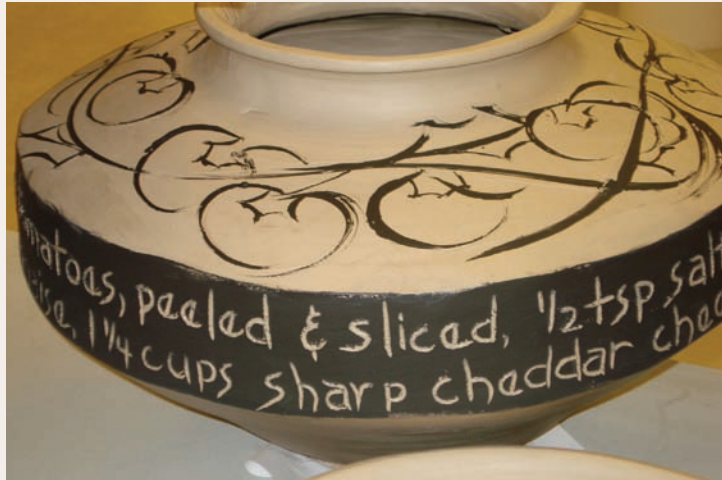
that spring up from the rich soil. Following rice, indigo and Sea Island cotton, the long-staple plant on which the island’s greatest wealth was based, tomatoes cropped up.

With canneries dotting the island, no wonder tomato pie is so often requested in area restaurants. It’s hard to devour without wanting more, so resident potter Nancy Fishback was inspired to carve the recipe into wet clay before she fired a large vessel. Now the collector who bought the pot will never have to thumb through an index box before replicating the seasonal dish.

Other island favorites have been relegated to lore. Take the diamond-back tortoise soup that once lured Charleston elite to island dinner tables. Even the Marquis de Lafayette asked for the recipe when he was a guest in 1825. These days, the only place islanders or visitors are likely to encounter this endangered species is at the Serpentarium. The center regularly rescues tortoises and holds them in a fresh water pond until they are strong enough to return to their habitat. “We are working with about 10 right now,” said Judy Johnson, the Serpentarium’s marketing manager.

**T**idal ebb and flow set the tempo for Edisto’s dance of nature. The Spaniards who explored the island five centuries ago called it Oristo, a name that morphed eventually into Edistow, so named for the Native Americans who tilled the fertile soil and fished the waters. Now those who know the island best call it by its intimate nickname, “Edislow,” for its tortoise pace.

The island’s natural history is the primary strand in a broad net of cultural, military, agricultural and architectural history that ensnares all who cross over from the mainland. Botany Bay Plantation is the latest chapter in that natural history, yet it holds some of the oldest stories.



Once two large plantations—Bleak Hall and Sea Cloud—the parcels were combined into one of the East Coast’s largest long-staple cotton plantations of the 20th Century. Timber, field crops and wildlife characterized it, and now that the public can access the 4,360-acre management area, day hikers, photographers and other nature lovers

can see contemporary flora and fauna freeze-framed with a past lifestyle.

One icon is the Ice House, an outstanding example of Gothic Revival architecture listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Nearby is a gardener’s shed constructed of tabby—once a popular building material made of shells, lime, sand and water. Overgrown now is the formal work of Japanese botanist Oqui, who came west with Adm. Perry’s expedition and later was brought south by plantation owner John F. Townsend. Only remnants of Bleak Hall’s extensive oriental garden remain visible.

The kiosk at the entrance to Botany Bay Plantation, posted by the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources which manages it, is just one public place to read how the island’s history remains relevant today. Edisto Beach State Park has an environmental education center, a “green” building where exhibits highlight the island’s natural history and that of the surrounding ACE Basin, one of the nation’s largest preserved estuaries. The Edisto Museum, open from 1 to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday during summer months, has preserved and interpreted three centuries of the area’s history; new “finds” make their way into exhibitions regularly.

Movies filmed on the island interpret bygone eras with minimal changes. Most recently, producers of *Dear John*, based on Nicholas Sparks’ novel, chose Cassina Point Plantation as a coastal shooting location. Like much of Edisto, time has stood still at the dwelling and surrounding acreage. Later this year, movie goers again can catch bits of Edisto’s past in its 2009 glory. ❖

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*Columbia freelance writer Rachel Haynie covered Beaufort’s annual tour of homes in the Winter 2007-08 issue of Sandlapper. Susan Roberts is a photographer on Edisto Island.*

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