



Courtesy Georgia Department of Natural Resources

James Banks

Photos by Eliot VanOtteren

When Sapelo Island's James Banks passed away in December, a link to the storied barrier island's rich past was lost.

Banks, 70, succumbed to cancer. His life was celebrated at the First African Missionary Baptist Church on Dec. 13, 2008, and he was laid to rest in the island's Behavior Cemetery in the shade of the iconic Spanish moss-shrouded live oaks for which coastal Georgia is famous. A descendant of Thomas Spalding's slaves, he accepted the life the island offered him just as other residents of the Hog Hammock community do.

It's easy to wile away the time in such a serene and tranquil setting, separated from mainland havoc by miles of salt marsh and the tricky waters of Sapelo and Doboy sounds. The days, weeks, months and years go by with barely a ripple. Each moment is savored to its fullest. Life, after all, is not a meal to be rushed, Sapelo residents instinctively understand. These islanders, their lives are synchronized with the tides, swayed

by the moon's phases, and subject to the capriciousness of the weather. The tether, therefore, that connects them to the hectic bustling modern electronic world is tenuous at best, the cacophony across the water dulled by the soft green rushes of the marsh and buffered by a persistent, soothing offshore breeze.

Banks was a stocky and jovial man who loved his neighbors as if they were members of his own large family, which included five daughters and a son.

"He was always laughing, always willing to share," daughter Shannon Anthony says. "His home was always open to his neighbors and he'd invite them over for barbecues. He was an outdoors person. He loved to hunt and fish and garden. And he was always a hard worker."

Early in his adult life, his work ethic was tested by the eccentric and flamboyant owner of Sapelo, R.J. "Dick" Reynolds Jr., heir to the North Carolina tobacco magnate. Banks worked as a butler in the Reynolds Mansion, which was constructed by plantation owner

Spalding on the island's south end early in the 19th century and modeled after Thomas Jefferson's Monticello.

Industrialist Howard Coffin acquired the island in 1912 and updated the mansion. Heavily invested in the development of the Sea Island resort to the south, Coffin sold the island and his 124-foot yacht, the Zapala, to Reynolds in 1936. Despite owning homes in North Carolina and Palm Beach, Fla., Reynolds considered Sapelo his main residence and became the island's largest employer.

Reynolds' presence on the island changed its tranquil nature to a degree as, by all accounts, he was not a tranquil person, nor was he prone to serenity.

"Reynolds was a very outgoing and flamboyant sort of person," says Buddy Sullivan, director of the Sapelo Estuarine Research Reserve and a noted historian of Coastal Georgia. "He was very big into entertaining and he'd have friends on Sapelo all the time and a lot of parties going on that he'd host. There was something going on all the time."