Sapelo Island which lies just off the coast of Georgia, north of the mouth of the Altamaha River, is the fourth largest and most pristine of the Georgia barrier islands. It is a reserve that is made up of salt marsh, maritime forest, and beach and dune areas.

**History of Sapelo Island**

The earliest inhabitants of Sapelo Island were prehistoric Indians. Shell middens, mounds, and pottery fragments provide ample evidence of their presence from 4000 BP up through the influx of Europeans during the eighteenth century, when they were known as the Guale. Artifacts excavated from the Shell Ring, on the northwestern side of the island, have been carbon-dated to 4120 ± 200 BP. Excavations at Kenan Field, on the northeastern side of the island, have shown that a village there covered at least 60 hectares, and artifacts recovered there have been carbon-dated to AD 1155 ± 75.

During the 17th century, Spain established missions in what is now coastal Georgia as part of their effort to convert the native Indians to Christianity and to guard their sea routes to Mexico. One of the missions on the coast was named San José de Zápala, from which the name Sapelo is derived. Although archaeological surveys on Sapelo have located a number of sites where fragments of their pottery attest to the influence of the Spanish in the area, no architectural remains of a Spanish mission have yet been identified on Sapelo. Spanish presence in the area declined during the latter part of the 17th century, and by the time that Georgia was established as a British colony in 1733 the coast was occupied by the Creek Indians.

Mary Musgrove, a niece of the Creek chief who served as interpreter for James Oglethorpe, claimed ownership of three of the Georgia barrier islands, St. Catherines, Ossabaw and Sapelo. During the latter part of the eighteenth century, ownership of Sapelo passed through several hands, including a group of Frenchmen who established plantations at several locations on the island. Although some crops were cultivated, cattle seemed to be the major interest of these early plantations. The French syndicate failed, and ownership of most of the island eventually passed to Thomas Spalding, who had learned how to run a successful plantation from his father and was a leader and innovator in the cultivation and processing of sugar and in the cultivation of Sea Island long-staple cotton. He was a promoter of tabby construction, using it in his home, the South End House, a sugar cane mill and several other buildings on Sapelo. The present-day Reynolds Mansion was built on the
foundations of Spalding's South End House, incorporating some of the original exterior tabby walls. The first Sapelo Lighthouse was built on the southern end of the island during the Spalding era.

During Spalding's tenure, much of the land on Sapelo was cleared for cultivation or pasture. A network of ditches and canals, still evident today, were dug to drain the swampy interior of the island. Thus whatever natural climax forest existed on Sapelo Island largely disappeared during the 1800s, both from upland areas and from the inland swamps. Originally these ditches and canals directed water into the intertidal salt marshes around the island; today, with artesian wells no longer flowing the canals only fill during periods of heavy, extended rainfall or at times of high spring tides when salt water flows into the canals from the marsh.

Thomas Spalding died in 1851 and a long period began during which ownership of Sapelo passed through many hands, many of them descendants of Thomas Spalding. During the Civil War the island was abandoned by its owners and was occupied by only a few former slaves. Union troops blockading the southern coast frequently visited Sapelo to hunt and enjoy a change of surroundings. After the war the barrier islands were set aside as reservations for former slaves, and black communities were established at several sites on Sapelo Island. One of them, Hog Hammock, is still an active community. During the next forty years, various tracts of land changed hands and several attempts to reestablish profitable agricultural operations failed.

In 1912 Howard Coffin of Detroit, developer of the Hudson motor car, purchased much of the island and set out to restore the island's agriculture and many of its buildings, including the South End House. With his cousin Alfred W. Jones as manager of Sapelo, Coffin built the dock at Marsh Landing, several freshwater ponds, established an oyster and shrimp cannery on Barn Creek, established an oyster farming project in the waters between Sapelo and Little St. Simons, and built a saw mill to provide lumber for buildings and boats. He built a marine railway on South End Creek so that his many boats could be repaired and serviced on the island and built the greenhouse which still stands, though in disrepair, near the South End House. He also had a keen interest in hunting, and raised ring-necked pheasant and turkeys which he and his guests would hunt, aided by dogs from the Sapelo kennels. He introduced the Chachalaca (Ortalis vetula) to Sapelo as a game bird; native to Central America, the birds adapted well to the environment on the island. They were well established on the island as recently as the late 1970s, but are now seen only occasionally.

Richard J. Reynolds, Jr., heir to a tobacco fortune, purchased Sapelo from Howard Coffin in 1934. In many ways, he continued the work done by Coffin, maintaining and enlarging the dairy herd, continuing cultivation of crops in fields on the south end of the island, and trying to make the Sapelo Plantation a self-supporting enterprise. He redesigned and rebuilt most of the buildings in the quadrangle complex that now houses the University of Georgia Marine Institute, remodeled the interior of South End House (the Reynolds Mansion), refurbished buildings at Long Tabby to be used as a camp for underprivileged boys, and for several years opened the Big House and the apartments in the quadrangle complex to vacationers as an exclusive resort.

Prompted by his lifelong interest in the sea, in the early 1950s Reynolds invited Eugene Odum and Donald Scott, faculty at the University of Georgia, to prepare a proposal for the use of Sapelo and its surrounding marshes for basic research on the productivity of coastal waters and marshes, which led to the establishment of the University of Georgia Marine Institute in 1953. From a modest beginning, the Marine Institute undertook much of the early research on salt marsh ecosystems, describing the biology, hydrology and geology of the waters and marshes around Sapelo Island.

In 1969 the northern half of Sapelo Island was sold to the State of Georgia to be administered by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR) as the R. J. Reynolds Wildlife Refuge. In 1975, the state of Georgia nominated the Duplin River Estuary as a national estuarine sanctuary, and in 1976 the state matched the federal funds provided by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and completed the purchase of the south end of Sapelo Island, establishing the Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve (SINERR).
Sapelo Island Microbial Observatory

The Sapelo Island Microbial Observatory (SIMO) is investigating the diversity of prokaryotes, their physiological and genetic characteristics, and their biogeochemical activities in a salt marsh/estuarine ecosystem in the southeastern U.S. This project was funded in October, 2000 by the National Science Foundation. Like other coastal environments, the Sapelo Island salt marshes play essential roles in processing materials from both the land and sea. In the coming decade, knowledge of prokaryotic communities and their metabolic capabilities will be critical for establishing linkages between species composition and biogeochemical function in coastal ecosystems.

Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve

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Sapelo Island National Estuarine Reserve

Human activity on Sapelo Island spans over 4000 years. The earliest inhabitants were Paleo-Indians who used the island to fish and hunt. Their legacy is evident by the numerous shell middens located throughout the island, including a shell ring 15 feet high and 200 feet in diameter. In the early 1800’s, Sapelo Island underwent significant change when Thomas Spalding, the son of a Scottish trader and planter, bought the island and developed it into a plantation.