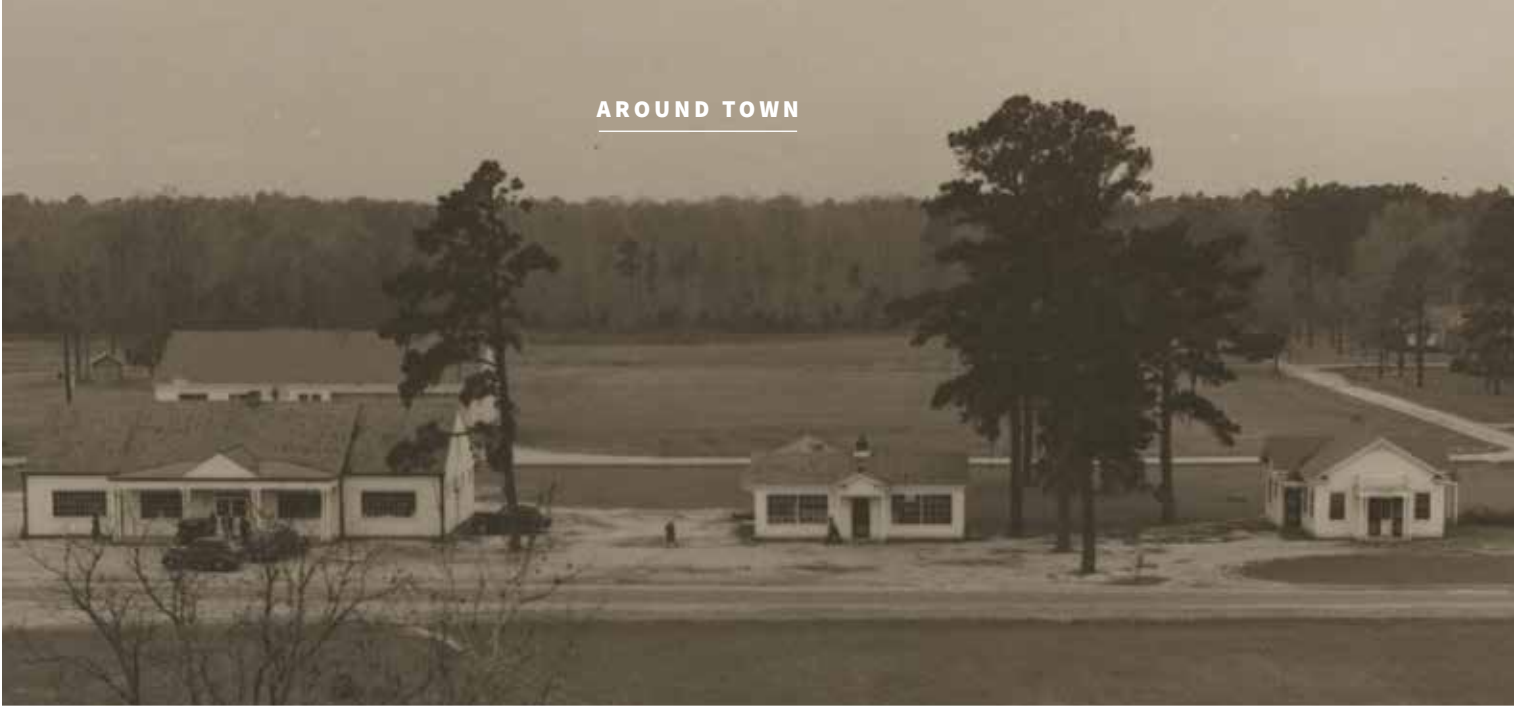


AROUND TOWN



HIDDEN HISTORIES

How The
Richmond Hill Visitors Bureau
Sheds Light On Our Past

CO-WRITTEN BY **REBECCA FROST** AND **CHRISTY SHERMAN**
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MICHELLE LYNN MORRIS**



Opposite page clockwise: Ford's Commissary, Bakery, Post Office and ice house. Replica sink made with period feel. Christy Sherman opening the front door to the new Visitor's Center. Original Ford Commissary, circa 1940s.

Above clockwise: Original mixer Ford donated in the 1940s. Ira Womble Sr. and Jr. at the Georgia Fruitcake Company using the table formerly used at the Richmond Hill Bakery. Ira Womble Sr. at the Richmond Hill Bakery. Original bakery table returned to Richmond Hill and restored.

IF YOU'RE FAMILIAR WITH OUR LINEAGE, YOU'LL KNOW WE WEREN'T ALWAYS RICHMOND HILL. UNTIL MAY OF 1941, WE WERE WAYS STATION, NAMED AFTER WILLIAM J. WAY, THE TOWN'S FIRST STATION MASTER. AND WHILE "WAYS STATION" GAVE WAY TO HENRY FORD'S RICHMOND HILL, THIS PRETTY LITTLE STRETCH OF COASTAL GEORGIA WILL ALWAYS BE A WAYSTATION—A STOPPING PLACE ON ONE'S JOURNEY.

Our town stopped Ford in his journey to Cuba and, despite the unrelenting hold of economic upheaval, it looked a lot like home. He would eventually own upwards of 85,000 acres and, with his newfound residency, restored Ways Station. Now, more than eight decades later, Richmond Hill is paying back the favor by restoring a piece of Ford's history critical to our namesake.

On April 6th, the old Ford bakery began serving its new purpose as Richmond Hill's vis-

AROUND TOWN



Above clockwise: Canvas image of seven-mile bend on the Ogeechee River. Rebecca Fenwick holding a recovered transom window from the bakery. Aerial view of Ford Avenue, circa 1940. Original windows that caused leaks and rot over the years.

itor’s center. Christy Sherman of the Richmond Hill Convention and Visitors Bureau spearheaded the project.

“I knew that if we were going to put ourselves on the map, we needed a true visitor’s center,” she said. “Our own space where we can really showcase Richmond Hill.” When the bakery came up for sale, Christy knew it was the perfect representation of our town’s character.

Ford’s bakery, also known as the Richmond Hill Plantation Bakery, was constructed in 1941. Local baker, Ira S. Womble Sr., was hired to operate it. After Ford’s death, Womble went on to start the Georgia Fruitcake Company in Claxton, leaving the building to be used for an assortment of private businesses until, finally, landing in

the hands of the City of Richmond Hill in 2016 for the purpose of relocating the Visitors Bureau.

But the building was in poor condition; it showed its age through hidden leaks and termite damage. It would be a costly, lengthy endeavor to rebuild. Even so, Christy was assured it was worth it.

After purchasing, the next step was to recruit Greg Jacobs, co-founder of Landmark Preservation. At the head of a team of historic preservationists, Greg’s experience spans 20 years in assessing countless historic structures and monuments. As the project’s contractor, he took the cautious steps necessary to get to the root of the structure.

“The trick with this project was needing to make sure the building was structur-

ally sound again while trying to maintain as much of the original interior as possible,” Greg said. “We were really cognizant of what historic fabric was left and made every effort to maintain it.”

While Greg and project architect, Jerry Lominack of Lominack Kolman Smith Architects (LKSA), worked on the exterior, Christy took some time to research the interior. She traveled to the Benson Ford Research Center in Dearborn, Michigan, where she sourced through files in the hopes of finding something helpful. Greg says that this type of meticulous restoration relied on the physical evidence and documentative research gathered; Christy’s found photos were critical in confirming that the changes being made were the right ones.



Above clockwise: Children ordering from the original 1941 bakery. Jerry Lominack LKSA Architects, Ellie Isaacs LKSA Historic Preservation Specialist and Designer, Greg Jacobs Historic Preservationist, Landmark Preservation, and Rebecca Fenwick LKSA Historic Preservation Specialist in front of the new Visitor's Center. Old nails recovered at the start of renovation. Christy Sherman with CVB Directors.

“A lot of the little details on the outside were covered by siding or eaten by termites,” Greg said. “But [we were able to recreate] front stoop columns and the water table by looking at those old photographs. They helped us build the detail back.”

Now, over two years after purchasing, Christy and her team are proud to say the restoration was a success. Not only will the new visitor’s center take pride in its past—displaying the original mixer and work table Ford bought back in the ‘40s—it will embrace the present with touchscreen kiosks highlighting local businesses, attractions, and natural resources that visitors can find in town. All while sharing a gallery space with Art on the Coast, a local non-profit working to promote art and culture along

Coastal Georgia.

A long time in the making, Christy feels the effort was worth it; she hopes the new visitor’s center will inspire other residents and local businesses residing in historic buildings to do the same. According to Greg, that’s exactly what it will do:

“I think it was smart for the city to use one of their properties as a model [for historic preservation],” he said. “It really sets the standard for what others should and should not be doing. The project has really become a visual cue to start a dialogue about preservation along Ford Avenue.”

For more information on Richmond Hill’s Visitor’s Center, navigate to visitrichmondhill.com. ●

PROJECT CONTRIBUTORS

Convention & Visitors Bureau Directors

- Bonnie Proctor, Chair
- Kenny Patel, Vice Chair
- Sherri Broome
- Jason Carter
- Shannon GaNun
- Pam Shores
- Mark Thomas
- Michelle West (former)

Community Partners

- Gerrald’s Heating and Air
- Arts on the Coast
- Plantation Lumber & Hardware
- Shoreline Landscape Solutions
- RPI Roofing
- Richmond Hill, Georgia Historical Society
- John Womble, Georgia Fruitcake Company