

Wiregrass Land & Living | Julie S. Bettinger

What keeps the Red Hills Region sustainable



As you drive north on U.S. 319 toward Thomasville, Georgia, you'll notice initially what's missing. Billboards, power lines and cell towers suddenly give way to clean piney woods, clear ponds and sloping pastureland. As the drive continues, a sense of peace is the reward for looking at the scenery and not your latest app. You'll soon note more absences: occasional dirt roads instead of pavement and a rural community church every few miles, not shopping malls. This is your proper introduction to the Red Hills Region.

What you experience in that roughly 20-minute trip is a unique American landscape. "The average person driving by (those forests) might not have any idea of what lies beneath or an awareness of the economic impact and history behind what they're seeing," says Thomasville native Ben McCollum, Broker and owner of [The Wright Group](#), a brokerage and advisory firm headquartered in Thomasville, Georgia. Those huge tracts of land are just a preview of the

436,000 acres of privately-owned plantations bounded by the Ochlockonee River on the west and the Aucilla River on the east. Families that own these properties have links to the region going as far back as the 1890s.

Considering the intensity of effort it takes to manage these lands and the fact that ownership has passed through as many as five generations, it's almost unfathomable that this concentration of land has remained. "It's our Yellowstone of Georgia," McCollum says. "A Great Natural Wonder."

And it's all here because of a six ounce bird.



Roots and wings

The foundation for what we see today was laid shortly after the Civil War ended, when a physician touted the healing effects of pine vapors to cure diseases of the lungs. That led to the area being discovered by healthy folks looking to escape harsh northern winters. But it was only after the sportsmen among them discovered the bobwhite quail proliferating in the pines that large tracts started getting assembled from the former antebellum and sharecropper lands. Numerous descendants from those early buyers still hold title to many of these hunting plantations today.

The Red Hills used to be the end of the railroad in the 1880s. "It was about as far south as you could go," says McCollum. "It was known as the genteel region with the pine infused air." Those plantation purchases were a lifesaver. They helped this part of the re-structured south get back on its feet quicker than a lot of other areas, he says.

Many of today's Red Hills Region plantations can trace their roots to an inter-relationship between the Hanna family and those who made large fortunes with the Standard Oil Company. The Hannas of Cleveland, Ohio, became one of the nation's wealthiest families during America's Industrial Revolution. Historians credit Colonel Oliver Hazard Payne as the trendsetter for northerners acquiring properties for private hunting preserves. Payne, who purchased

Greenwood plantation in 1899, was also from Cleveland and treasurer of the Standard Oil Company. Those with connections to that city, company or both—including Hanna family members—launched the legacy of the Red Hills plantations we see today.

Thomasville Townie

Another legacy from those early property owners is the historically preserved downtown Thomasville with its brick paved streets, elm-shaded sidewalk benches and Victorian-era architecture.

"I find it fascinating that over generations of time, people coming from different parts of the country have made their way to Thomasville and the Red Hills area," says Erica Hanway, who recently built a home in the region with her husband, Harper. Hanway has worked closely with the plantation community for more than 16 years, most recently through her boutique firm, Black Tupelo Marketing.

Even newcomers demonstrate a willingness to preserve the flavor of the Red Hills Region, Hanway says. "There's an underlying commitment of the residents to carry on that foresight (of the early plantation families) and to really make Thomasville a destination. There's a back porch sophistication to it. It's really a little southern gem."

The heart of the city, with its unique restaurants and shops, is proof that the plantation economy is sustainable, says Ben McCollum, who is intricately connected to early generation owners. His father and grandfather were attorneys who managed properties for absentee owners and his wife Haile is the fourth generation of plantation ownership (the Flowers family, owners of Merrily Plantation).

"The plantations are the anchor that have always attracted a certain amount of sophistication," McCollum says. "It's the wealth that whispers. It's not ostentatious, just very, very subtle."

Kevin Kelly, whose namesake business has catered to the plantation crowd from its earliest days, grew up in Tallahassee, Florida, hunting with friends, mostly. He remembers visiting Thomasville and Stafford's outdoor clothing store when he was a boy in the late 1960s. Kelly collected pecans and sold them along with Coke bottles to save for the trip. "That's how I became associated with that lifestyle. I couldn't get enough," he says. "I'd study those people and prayed I'd get invited to go hunting on their plantations." When he opened his original Kevin's Guns & Sporting Goods store 46 years ago, he adapted its culture to satisfy the wealthy northerners' appetites for guns and gear. Soon he was receiving those invitations he'd longed for; he was on the guest list "along with the doctor, the banker, the fertilizer guy and timber guy."

Kelly has continued to outfit and arm members of three different generations of plantation families through his second store, [Kevin's Fine Outdoor Gear & Apparel](#) on Thomasville's Broad

Street, and through catalog sales. He carries their genealogy in his head, knows their stories, and he and his wife and business partner, Kathleen Kelly, are characters in many of those stories. They're often on the guest list to shoot dove, duck and quail, as well as attend social gatherings, at Red Hills plantations.

Plantation LLC

"The economic value of what those families have done in this area—you can't measure it," Kelly says. "It's an infusion of commerce during hunting season." The plantations are surely an economic driver, but there's no such thing as a free ride.

Kelly holds a strong appreciation for what it takes to keep the plantations thriving. "These are big businesses. These are \$50, \$100 million deals," he says. They require significant resources to operate. "I mean, they are expensive. A small one is one million dollars a year. A big one could be five. You know, you start buying \$250,000 tractors and you start taking care of insurance cost and feed cost and fertilizer and farming cost and employee cost. It just goes on and on and on. It never stops."

Plantations require wise managers and professional staff to maintain them, he says. "The owners that are running these today have substantial liabilities involved. You can't just go get an old dog handler to run these things anymore. You've got to have somebody that you think can handle things while you're an absentee owner. It's like turning a big business over to somebody."

Early Red Hills landowners made a significant investment that not only saved their plantations in the early twentieth century, but continues to preserve them still today. When the U.S. Forest Service abolished fire in the southern woodlands in the 1920s, the landowners initially complied. But after quail coveys became scarce, a group of owners pooled their funds and brought in an independent researcher, Herbert L. Stoddard, to find out why. One of the key culprits was the lack of fire, which Stoddard proved was a vital component to a healthy native ecosystem. That project launched a partnership of information sharing and problem solving that is credited with keeping the plantation community connected and thriving to the present day: through the [Tall Timbers Research Station & Land Conservancy](#).

Plantation owners continue to be major supporters of the nonprofit organization. "There's still a quest for independent information they can use to make the best decisions for their property," says Bill Palmer, president and CEO. "There is no other organization that's quite built like this; we get very positive feedback. They wouldn't support us if they didn't see relevancy and value."

Easing ownership

One resource that has helped preserve the properties and protect them from commercial development is the use of conservation easements. Recent changes in federal laws have made

these more enticing financially. Tall Timbers is one of a handful of agencies that can arrange an easement, and they don't have to sell anyone on their benefits, says Kevin McGorty. "The best sales people for conservation easements is other landowners who've had their land under easement for decades. It's really peer-to-peer influence."

McGorty, who is Tall Timbers' Land Conservancy Director, says 41 percent of Red Hills properties are already under protection—180,000 acres. "Our goal now is to close the gap between protected and unprotected land."

Palmer says the easements are another thing that make the Red Hills Region unique. And the distinction is that this type of conservation is achieved without public or governmental acquisition. That's a sign of good stewardship, he says. "I've worked on private lands all over the southeast. Our (Tall Timbers) staff has worked in mid-Atlantic states and Texas. There is no other legacy of landowners who have put their land into conservation easements and kept it in the family as long as we have here. It makes for a very unique location in the South. There's not another area like this at all."

Sportsmen conservationists

It just so happens that managing a habitat for quail also helps preserve the ecosystem. Predator management, thinning pines, reducing hardwood encroachment and consistent burning practices makes for a hot spot of biological diversity, says McGorty. And there are larger ecological aspects that extend to all residents of the region. Protection of the aquifer system lies in these plantations, he says. And that affects everything from drinking water to the fisheries downstream.

"If you love to go to Apalachicola and swallow down some oysters and eat some shrimp, you need to know that the water quality from North Florida and South Georgia play a key role protecting that," he says. McGorty referenced the plantations' influence on the Flint River, and the Apalachicola, Ochlockonee and Aucilla rivers, too. "These are world class estuaries," he says. "The Red Hills provides a lifeline between southwest Georgia and the Gulf."

In recent years, Red Hills landowners recognized a need to have Tall Timbers monitor public policy and advocate on behalf of the plantations when needed. To carry out that plan, Tall Timbers commissioned a study in 2012 titled, "The Economic Impact of the Red Hills Region of Southwest Georgia and North Florida," which was completed by The Florida State University's Center for Economic Forecasting and Analysis.

They found that in 2012, the total economic impact generated by Red Hills working rural lands was an estimated \$147.1 million. That number included operating costs, capital improvement expense, discretionary spending and charitable giving. And nearly all were local expenditures,

which in turn led to an estimated \$32 million in indirect costs for companies doing business with Red Hills property owners.

An important discovery that ran contrary to what some suspected, is that the average annual wage for jobs related to hunting properties were higher than the average for all jobs in five out of the six Red Hills communities.

"Salaries have gotten pretty competitive," Palmer says. "They want good people. It is a demanding job and takes a lot of effort." A typical position includes a salary and benefits such as health insurance and retirement; and for management, can include housing and a truck.

Seeking to provide more than just a working wage is a tradition that started with the earliest families coming to the region in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Quail plantations provided educational resources in the community and secured medical care and other amenities that were lacking in the post-Civil War south. Those plantation families have quietly supported cultural activities, nonprofits and churches, as well.

Some of the contributions are more obvious than others, Palmer says. "You look at Phoebe and Archbold (hospitals), would those be what they are without these properties?"

Tall Timbers re-commissioned the Red Hills Region study recently and Palmer says early indications are encouraging. "The impact is significantly higher. We think it will be closer to a \$194 million." He says the employment numbers have also increased considerably from 1,413 to 1,725. "It's real exciting."

Changes, but all is not lost

There's another "plantation effect" that becomes apparent to those seeking land ownership opportunities. McCollum, who founded The Wright Group real estate firm, and deals mostly in plantations and hunting tracts, says the well managed plantation properties significantly influences the real estate market. "Land values are strong, especially for hunting tracts," he says. "The price per acre is higher, and you also get more stable prices." While values plummeted 30 to 40 percent in other regions during the Great Recession just a few years ago, there was only a slight drop of maybe 10 to 15 percent within the plantation corridor. "Plantations help support land values across the board," he says.

Still, it's important that we don't take for granted that these properties will always be here, that the wealth will remain to support them, or that the next generation will want to hold onto them. While they may have originated with the mega wealthy, their fourth or fifth generation heirs may not have the same means to support that lifestyle, Palmer says. "It's not too different from a farm family that starts with 1,000 acres in the 1950s, and now maybe you have eight heirs."

Some family members may be working as farmers, another as a teacher or other trade. "It's the same story, different angle."

In today's fast-paced society, it's easy to wonder if the plantation economy is truly sustainable and whether or not the large landownership will remain. But transactions in recent years show a commitment that assures these legacy properties will remain as working rural lands and not as supersized residential developments. Several owners have reassembled tracts that had previously been subdivided among family members. "We're now seeing an accumulation to larger tracts as they originally were," McGorty says. There's still a threat on the outskirts, especially on the southern tip: the Capital City of Florida. "Tallahassee is still building and will continue to do so," he says. "That's land in waiting for the next big step." Tall Timbers has built relationships with decision makers to assure a continued appreciation for the plantations, encourage urban infill vs. sprawl, and preserve the vital role the plantations play both environmentally and in the quality of life residents enjoy. "As they say, 'the last crop is asphalt.'"

Bill Palmer is optimistic the Red Hills is here to stay. "The demise of the quail plantations has been predicted time and time again," he says. "They say 'It's too expensive and there are not enough quail hunters in the current generation.'" But with the number of acres being re-assembled in the last 10 to 15 years, this region's long standing reputation as a rare American landscape, and the investment these families continue to make, he's reassured. "I don't see any risk of it going away."

Photos courtesy of The Sedgwick Family and Tall Timbers.

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