

A Detroit Banker's Winter Retreat

The January 21, 1927 issue of the *Brunswick Pilot* announced that Detroit banker Eugene Lewis had purchased Hamilton Plantation on the Frederica River as his winter home. Lewis' interest in Coastal Georgia can be traced to Detroit's automobile industry. Prior to becoming a banker, Lewis had been an organizer of the Timken-Detroit Axle Company. Through this connection to early automobile manufacturing, he and Howard Coffin of Hudson Motor Company had become friends. Coffin, founder of Sea Island Company and The Cloister, also bought most of Sapelo Island in 1912, and Lewis was a frequent guest there. When Coffin began acquiring property on St. Simons and Sea Island, Lewis served as his financial advisor. According to Harold Martin's history of Sea Island, *This Happy Isle*, it was Lewis, an avid golfer, who urged Coffin to create a golf club at Retreat Plantation on St. Simons Island. Not a golfer himself, Coffin asked Lewis to supervise construction of the course for Sea Island Company, beginning in 1926.

The *Brunswick Pilot* article also included an abbreviated history of Hamilton Plantation. Scotsman James Hamilton, business partner of John Couper of Cannon's Point, owned the property in the first part of the 19th century and cultivated sea island cotton. After the Civil War, the plantation became the site of a prosperous lumber mill, owned by the Dodge family of New York, which later merged with the Hilton Lumber Company of Darien, Georgia. After the mill closed early in the 20th century, a syndicate of railroad men bought the property, and then sold it to E.C. McLean of Florida and C.G. Justice of Pennsylvania, who established a successful commercial farm. When Lewis acquired the 400-acre property in 1927, 150 acres were cultivated in lettuce and peppers. The article concluded with a prediction that Lewis' winter home would be "made into one of the most magnificent estates in the South."

Lewis and his wife Margaret spent the next decade restoring, improving, and



beautifying their property. They continued commercial farming until 1937, when the Depression brought an end to the enterprise. During the years just before World War II, Lewis operated a dairy, which closed when the labor force went to war. In the late 1940s, Lewis sold the property to Sea Island Company, which then sold 43.5 acres at a much reduced price to the

Methodist Church for a conference center. Epworth-by-the-Sea opened in 1950. Sea Island Company later donated an additional 100 acres to the center.

This month's images show Eugene Lewis in his office at Hamilton Plantation and the gardens he and his wife Margaret created next to their home.



Our monthly images on this page are from the vast archives of the Coastal Georgia Historical Society. The Society's mission includes the "administration, restoration and maintenance of historic facilities and resources ... preserved as a living part of the historical and cultural foundations of our coastal community." Society facilities include the St. Simons Lighthouse and Museum, the A.W. Jones Heritage Center, and the Maritime Center (formerly the U.S. Coast Guard Station). To learn more about the Society, its diverse programs, and the benefits of Society membership, please call (912) 638.4666, or visit www.saintsimonslighthouse.org.