



COASTAL GEORGIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Our mission is to connect people to Coastal Georgia's dynamic history through the stories we share and the collections we preserve.

The Coastal Georgia Historical Society is dedicated to the original vision of our founders to serve Glynn County and the Coastal Georgia region. In the spirit of our refreshed mission statement, shown above, we have been exploring the dynamic history of our region in a series of articles. This article is the third of four installments appearing the second Saturday of each month through December.

Margaret Davis Cate: A Pioneer in Preserving Coastal History



Margaret Davis Cate in front of the ruins of the Magazine at Fort Frederica.

Born in 1888 in Brunswick, Georgia, Margaret Davis Cate spent her life in service to Glynn County's people and history. After graduating with honors from Glynn Academy and attending summer school at the University of Tennessee, she served as a teacher and principal in the Glynn County Public Schools. From 1929-1946, she held positions on County and City Commissions of Public Welfare and as head of the Glynn County Planning Board. She also served as president of the Brunswick Women's Club.

With her husband, Dr. Gustavus Vassa Cate, she became a pioneer in poultry farming. The "Cate Strain of Barred Plymouth Rock Hens" won state-level awards across the south in the 1920s and 30s and earned Margaret honors as one of the twenty-five most outstanding women farmers in America in 1928. A resident of Brunswick from her birth, she moved to St. Simons Island when she was appointed postmistress of Sea Island in 1943.

Cate's passion throughout her life was history: researching and preserving her community's past and sharing it through her lectures and writings. A major focus became protection of Fort Frederica, one of Georgia's most important 18th century sites. She not only raised interest in the site but also helped with securing the funds to purchase

the property, which was gifted to the National Park Service. Perhaps her crowning achievement was the dedication of Fort Frederica as a National Monument in 1947.

Her research spanned the centuries – from Native American and Spanish settlement in the 17th century through the colonial and plantation periods to African American studies in the 20th century. She amassed a collection of maps, letters, and other documents, as well as oral histories recorded from the formerly enslaved and their descendants. She researched local stories through English colonial records, courthouse documents, and archives across the southeast.

Her findings led her to publish *Our Todays and Yesterdays: A Story of Brunswick and the Coastal Islands* in 1926. She went on to publish *Early Days of Coastal Georgia* in 1955, a collaboration with amateur photographer and physician Dr. Orrin Wightman. Through text and photographs, the pair sought to document the stories of local

African Americans, as well as historic structures that were in danger of being lost. At her death in 1961, her personal collection of over 10,000 items was donated to Fort Frederica National Monument.



Basket maker Charles Wilson of St. Simons Island showing Cate his work.

Since its founding four years after Cate's death, the Coastal Georgia Historical Society has embraced Margaret Davis Cate's mission to preserve and share the history of our region. Today, the Society will launch an online collections database featuring a selection of the images, documents, and objects received from generous donors over the past fifty-five years. We will continue to add to the database throughout the coming year. One of the collections available for view contains glass lantern slides Cate used to illustrate her history lectures at The Cloister and other venues. We hope that wider access to items such as these slides will perpetuate the legacy of Margaret Davis Cate and spark a passion for local history in new audiences.



Mahony-McGarvey House, circa 1950. While a number of structures photographed by Cate and Wightman have been lost, this house still stands on Reynolds St. in Brunswick.

Going Live Today – Online Collections Database

Coastal Georgia Historical Society has one of the region's largest collections of archival photographs, documents, and historical objects. We are excited to make these significant collections available 24 hours a day.

To access the Society's online collection, please visit coastalgeorgiahistory.org.

The Coastal Georgia Historical Society is headquartered in the A.W. Jones Heritage Center, located on the campus of the St. Simons Lighthouse Museum. The Society is the owner of the St. Simons Lighthouse and custodian of the Lighthouse Keeper's Dwelling and Historic Coast Guard Station at East Beach, which houses the World War II Home Front Museum. We welcome the public to the museums 360 days a year.

