

# SHARE

Sparta-Hancock Alliance For Revitalization & Empowerment

## ABOUT US

The lovely pine tree melody that you hear while visiting with us kind of sticks with you, so don't be surprised if you find yourself humming a little bit of Ray Charles and "Georgia on My Mind".



["Georgia on My Mind"](#) *Click on link for tune.*



In his 1990 history of Hancock County, Forrest Shivers selected as the title of his study the phrase "The Land Between," referring to the land located between the Ogeechee and Oconee Rivers that became Hancock County. As Shivers recognized, that phrase captures the essence of the Hancock County story, for it puts the natural environment first from which the many people who have lived, loved, died, or moved on. If the narrative begins with a clear focus on the beautiful and fecund earth that provided past wealth as well as poverty, and that holds the promise of the future, then the numerous stories of the people who made Hancock County home can be interwoven into the fabric of the story of the land.

It was the abundant wildlife and rich soil that attracted the Indians to the Oconee River Valley, and although their Mound Building civilization collapsed hundreds of years ago, they left behind remnants of their existence in Hancock County. In 1540, when Hernando de Soto traveled through the valley, he met the head of the Ocute Chiefdom and saw the mounds at Shoulderbone. Within a few years disease had ravaged the population as the civilization collapsed. Those Indians who survived created a new culture based on trade with the white settlers to the east.

By the close of the eighteenth century, white settlers pushed to the borders of the Ogeechee River. They were eager to cross over and cultivate the Piedmont. Likewise, the Indians, descendants of the Mound Builders who had reorganized their civilization in response to the disease and contact with the West, were just as eager to keep the white man to the east of the river. A treaty concluded in 1884 enabled the state of Georgia to claim title to the land between the rivers but touched off the Oconee War. It also ushered in white settlement of Hancock County.

With the dawn of the nineteenth century (and the invention of the cotton gin), white settlers plowed up the red dirt of Hancock County to cultivate short staple cotton: an outcome that brought great wealth to a few but also strengthened the hold of slavery on the region and shackled the people to a dependency on the cash crop. Had the land been less fertile, as it was to the north and south, the white yeoman farmers might have remained self-sufficient. Instead the soil determined Hancock County's future as it encouraged the importation of vast numbers of African slaves from elsewhere in Georgia and the South for use as a coerced labor force under the plantation system. For the next century and a half, Hancock County remained committed to the cultivation of cotton. The black and white people living between the rivers developed a biracial culture that reflected their dependence on cotton, from the celebration of the republic as symbolized by the Greek Revival, to the ability to make do with little but individual initiative and the fruits of the natural environment. It is this legacy that is so well represented in the historic fabric and recorded in public memory through crafts and the oral tradition that is the product of the Hancock County story to be marketed

and sold by the Hancock-Sparta initiative. Yet, this legacy is shared by other southerners; indeed by people from around the world who have become committed to cash crop cultivation.

The Great Depression and World War II ushered in a change in Hancock County. The collapse of the cotton economy and the advent of federal relief forever altered the sharecropping system that had replaced slavery following emancipation. Soon pine trees grew in the cotton fields of Hancock County. New federal policies encouraged reform of old social customs. With the emergence of the southern civil rights movement, people living in the land between experienced the dramatic changes sweeping across America. Hancock County became committed to the new cash crop of timber cultivation, but ironically this agribusiness cut people loose from the land as numerous workers were now unnecessary, and it introduced foreign ownership of local property.

Brief biographies of important Hancock Countians and vignettes of significant events and locations can be written to tell the Hancock County story. Able to stand alone, together the pieces will explain how people lived in the land between, what they believed and did, and what became of them. Pieces can be added to the overall framework as the Hancock-Sparta initiative evolves.

## **PURPOSE**

Creation of a variety of new tourism, arts and crafts-related employment opportunities that lead to economic self-sufficiency for the residents of Sparta and Hancock County through efficient utilization of existing human, cultural, historic and natural resources.

## **CONCEPT**

Sparta and surrounding Hancock County are located in eastern middle Georgia in the heart of the old Cotton Belt. The population is approximately 85% African American. Unemployment is the highest in Georgia. Since the turn of the century, there has been very little in the way of new development, Consequently, what we have today is an area characterized by historic structures, a clean, appealing natural environment and a population composed overwhelmingly of the descendants of African Americans that lived and worked in the area in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It might be said that Sparta-Hancock is a place that time has forgotten. Ironically, this project seeks to capitalize on the area's existing cultural, architectural, natural and human resources in a way that will insure that Sparta-Hancock becomes the place that time remembers.

In the nation and the south, interest in African American history and culture is growing. To a large extent, this growth has paralleled the growth in African American political power and family income. Many books have been written and movies made in the last three decades that have attracted the attention of large audiences. Interest in African American arts and crafts has advanced rapidly as evidenced by press coverage and prices commanded. Museums dedicated to African American history and culture have sprung up in Atlanta and other major cities as disposable income and education levels have risen in the African American community and as historians and cultural experts have expanded their view to include important segment of Americana.

Sparta-Hancock is in a unique position to take advantage of this increasing interest in African American history and culture. Consider that most African Americans have strong ancestral ties to the rural south. This is especially true for the Cotton Belt, in Georgia, an area epitomized by Sparta-Hancock. The area is less than two hours from Atlanta, one of the nation's premier tourist destination for those interested in African American history and culture. Metro Atlanta is also home to a large, affluent African American population, what is missing in Georgia is an accessible tourist destination dedicated to presentation of the lives of 19th and 20th century African Americans in the rural context. Without such a presentation, a very significant part of the general public's understanding and appreciation of African American history is beyond reach. Wise

use of the human, architectural cultural and natural resources of Sparta-Hancock can bring this critical part of African American history and culture to life, while breathing new economic life into the community.

The primary reason for undertaking this project is to increase employment opportunity and economic self-sufficiency for the residents of Sparta-Hancock. To maximize the likelihood of success, the community must be unified in their support and approach. To achieve unity, it is important that all segments understand the project, their role in it and their stake in the outcome. Unified support will be especially critical in attracting the training, technical assistance and capital resources necessary for success. Unity and commitment over the long term will be critical to maintaining tourism appeal of the area as pressure increases for additional development. Finally, combining the three major elements of African American based historic tourism, traditional arts and crafts production and sales and access to an appealing natural environment will improve the probability of success in attaining "critical mass."