

Benfante breathed new life into Hilton Head Island's history



Lou Benfante, left, dressed as Gen. Ormsby Mitchel, for whom Fort Mitchel was named, leads a tour group in 2016 at the fort along with other re-enactors. Benfante, 71, died Saturday of cancer at his Hilton Head home.

File photos



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Lou Benfante went to great pains to look like Ormsby Mitchel, the Civil War general.

And William Hilton, the explorer.

This way, he literally stepped into history, dressed as two pillars of Hilton Head Island's past as best as a Lehigh University history major (magna cum laude) and retired supply-chain management executive could do it.

And in the process, Benfante helped create a wave of new attention to old Hilton Head. He

pitched as a lucrative tourism opportunity, but also the right thing to do.

Benfante - who died Saturday of cancer at his Hilton Head home alongside his wife, Laurette, at age 71 - was a quiet leader in the growing movement to recognize and teach the national significance of Beaufort County history.

Besides teaching what he knew, Benfante also did heavy lifting, like spearheading an ambitious \$450,000 plan to create a Revolutionary War History Park around the St. Luke's Parish Zion Chapel of Ease cemetery.

He did this as board president of the Heritage Library History & Ancestry Research Center on Hilton Head, which is responsible for the Zion Chapel of Ease Cemetery and the Civil War Fort Mitchel by the Old Fort Pub in Hilton Head Plantation.

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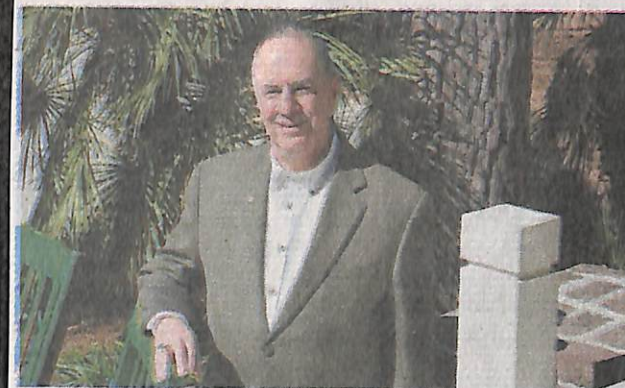
Barbara Catenaci, executive director of the Heritage Library

And he did it in a new way. Benfante did not divide history

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Benfante was a leader in the effort to teach the significance of Beaufort County history.



Submitted

Lou Benfante was board president of the Heritage Library History & Ancestry Research Center on Hilton Head Island.

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by race, instead insisting that the stories of the whites and blacks are equally important and interconnected, and must be told together.

“We need more people like that,” said Jim Robinson, who worked alongside Benfante on the Heritage Library Foundation board. “People who build bridges instead of standing on a pedestal.”

He also served on the board of the Mitchelville Preservation Project.

That Civil War-era village for freedmen was on the island's north end, named for Gen. Ormsby Mitchel, who captured Benfante's imagination. He dressed just as Mitchel did and led tours through

Fort Mitchel in Mitchel's character.

“He was a great researcher,” said Barbara Catenaci, executive director of the Heritage Library.

“And he loved turning those facts into fun things. He could keep an audience of elementary students, or teenagers, or adults listening intently to him talking about the history of Hilton Head Island.”

Benfante did a number of other things, with his community involvement including the VanLandingham Rotary Club and the Italian American Club on Hilton Head.

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