



File • The Island Packet

Charlie Simmons Sr. sits on the porch of his son's house on Hilton Head Island in 2003.

# 'The island's lifeline'

'Mr. Transportation' was native islanders' link to the rest of the world

## WANT TO GO?

The Town of Hilton Head Island will unveil its memorial to Charlie Simmons Sr. at 10:30 a.m. Saturday at the Discovery House at Honey Horn.

By TOM BARTON  
tbarton@islandpacket.com  
843-706-8169

Sea Pines founder Charles Fraser established the vision that made Hilton Head Island what it is today, but it was an African-American man born into poverty who set the foundation, say native islanders and town leaders set to remember "Mr. Transportation."

"Charlie Simmons Sr. was like the Moses and Charlie Fraser was like the Joshua," said Charles

Houston Jr., a native islander and friend of Simmons'.

Now, after five years of debate and discussions, Simmons will be memorialized.

The Town of Hilton Head Island will place a commemorative marker along Spanish Wells Road near Jarvis Creek in honor of Simmons' contributions to the community. A ceremony will be at 10:30 a.m. Saturday at the Discovery House at Honey Horn.

Please see LIFELINE on 9A

## LIFELINE

Continued from 1A

For decades, "Mr. Transportation" carried the lifeblood of the native islander community in the back of his trucks and on his ferries, in the form of fresh fruits, vegetables, clothes, school equipment and people.

Though not the only ferry captain, family and friends say Simmons was a good role model and represented a segment of the island's heritage that needs to be remembered.

Before the days of telephones, bridges and highways, Simmons and his boats provided the primary link between the native islanders and the rest of the world.

"He was the island's lifeline," Houston said.

And it was Simmons who transported developers Fraser and Fred Hack to the island, along with oyster merchants the Hudson family, and transported people and materials needed during Hilton Head's early development. He also ran a couple of stores and a dock on Broad Creek. He raised livestock.

Since his death in 2005 from a lung condition — two months short of his 100th birthday — family and native islanders have sought a way to recognize Simmons. One proposal was to rename Spanish Wells Road after him; an idea dismissed by town officials because of the difficulties of changing residents' addresses.

The town built Compass Rose Park in 2008 as an homage to Fraser and others instrumental in making Hilton Head a premier resort. But some believe not enough has been done to highlight the history of native islanders, many of whom are the direct descendants of freed slaves.

"This is significant not only for me and my family, but the whole



Photo courtesy of Coastal Discovery Museum

This image shows the freight boat the Alligator, owned by Charlie Simmons Sr. In the early days of Hilton Head Island's development, before the bridges to the island were built, Simmons would make daily trips to Hilton Head, carrying supplies for native islanders and the owners of hunting properties.

**"I think he would certainly appreciate this. He deserved a whole lot I don't think he'll get credit for."**

Charles Simmons Jr., 81, who said the memorial for his late father is an honor to the native island community

island, particularly the native islanders," said Simmons' son, 81-year-old Spanish Wells resident Charles Simmons Jr. "I think he would certainly appreciate this. He deserved a whole lot I don't think he'll get credit for."

An energetic and devout man, Charlie Simmons Sr. worked tirelessly to bridge the gap for native islanders, taking the fruits of their toils to market and bringing back supplies, his son said. He was a link to medical help and education. He served as a bank, making loans to those in need, long before the Bank of Beaufort came to the island after the first bridge was built in 1956.

A deacon at First African Baptist Church, Simmons was remembered by many for his ability to make friends across racial boundaries and overcome hardship.

Simmons was born into poverty and his parents died when he was about 2 years old. His first wife died, and he was nearly beaten to death during a robbery at his grocery store when he was in his 70s, said grandniece Gloria Pace, 61, of Savannah.

"He harbored no hard feelings against the people who did it to him, and he continued to work until his health prevented him from doing so," Pace said. "He was one of the strongest men I have ever encountered. ... There is no one else to compare him to."

Simmons began his career in the ferry business by working on a sailboat. In 1927, he purchased the 30-foot Lola, in which he ferried cans of oysters and produce to Savannah. He eventually replaced it with the larger Edgar Hurst. His last freight boat, the Alligator, made daily trips carry-

ing supplies for islanders and the owners of the hunting properties in the 1930s and 1940s, according to information from the Coastal Discovery Museum.

After a hurricane in 1940, Simmons brought the materials needed to repair buildings damaged by the storm. He eventually purchased a barge and contracted with the Coast Guard, Beaufort County and the state to transport public-works equipment to Hilton Head and Daufuskie islands.

In the early 1950s, Simmons began assisting the timber operators by bringing their workers and many necessary materials for their equipment.

Though small in stature, Simmons was a "giant" through his actions, Pace said.

"First God and then family and the rest was the community on the island," Pace said. "He did everything strictly from the heart. He pitched in and gave without a second thought. He was the patriarch of the island. He wore that hat and he wore it proudly. He was always calm, peaceful and a very humble person."

# Before the bridges

## Hilton Head considers ways to honor two men who kept the island well-supplied

ISLAND PACKET  
9-8-09

By DANIEL BROWNSTEIN  
dbrownstein@islandpacket.com  
843-706-8125

**W**ell before the first bridge to Hilton Head Island was built in 1956, two native islanders helped connect the remote barrier island with the rest of the world.

Many in the native island community would like the Town of Hilton Head Island to memorialize Charlie Simmons Sr. and Arthur Frazier, two men who worked around the clock to ensure islanders had the supplies they needed to survive on an island far from the nearest department store or hospital.

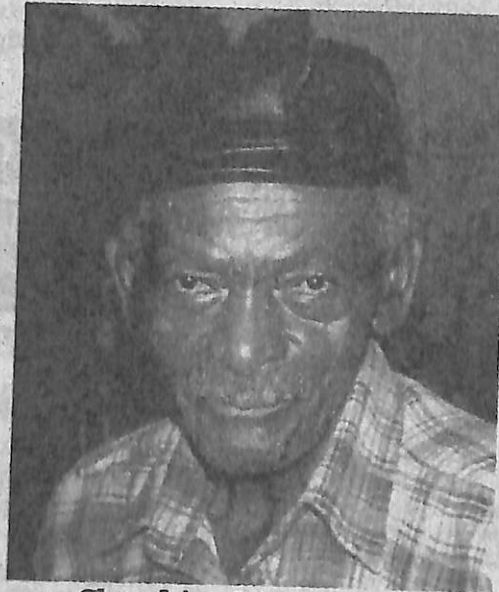
Both ran ferries and filled countless other roles, such as merchant, banker, public works department and ambulance service before development brought those modern institutions to the island.

Bill Ferguson, who represents the native island communities on Hilton Head Town Council, wants to build a monument honoring the contributions of native islanders — beginning with Simmons and Frazier — at Mitchelville Beach Park.

Ferguson said the entire community owes a debt of gratitude to the two men, not just the dozens of native island families and affluent visitors who used their services.

“Without them, Sea Pines and Port Royal wouldn’t be here as it is today,” he said, “because (the developers) used these fellows as an instrument of transportation before the bridge was built.”

Ferguson’s idea involves renaming the park to something like “Mitchelville Memorial Park for Native Islanders.” Last week, Mayor Tom Peeples asked for



Charlie Simmons Sr.



Arthur Frazier

Before the bridges to Hilton Head Island were built, native islanders Arthur Frazier and Charles Simmons Sr. operated ferries. The town is now exploring a way to memorialize the contribution of Frazier, Simmons and other native islanders.

Please see BRIDGES on 7A

File photos • The Island Packet

# BRIDGES

Continued from 1A

Ferguson's help to build consensus among the island's black community for a potential name.

"It's a sublime piece of property with a generic name on it," Ferguson said of the park.

The town built Compass Rose Park in 2008 as an homage to Sea Pines founder Charles Fraser and others instrumental in making Hilton Head a premier resort.

But some believe not enough is being done to highlight the history of native islanders, many of whom are the direct descendants of freed slaves, said Emory Campbell, former director of the Penn Center and owner of Gullah Tours.

"Despite what National Geographic says, this island does have a soul," Campbell said referring to the magazine's 2007 ranking of beach communities that slammed the island. "It goes back a long way to even the Indians. History is so important. Folks who are coming in now are looking for history and unfortunately don't know how important this island is to United States history."

Hilton Head was home to the South's first freed slaves, and Mitchelville, a fully functioning village for those released from bondage, was the nation's early experiment at Reconstruction.

After the Civil War, the island was a close-knit agrarian community. Families were rich with land that produced crops and estuaries that provided a bounty of shellfish, but were cash poor and largely disconnected from the mainland.

Simmons, who worked on fer-

ries as a young boy, began his own service in the 1920s using a sailboat to get between Hilton Head and Savannah. In 1927, he upgraded to the Lola, a 33-foot boat with a 15 horsepower engine.

He transported wealthy northerners to Honey Horn, then a hunting preserve, and helped islanders haul their produce, seafood and livestock to Savannah, where he sold the cargo at City Market and used the proceeds to fulfill families' shopping lists.

Simmons died in 2005 at the age of 99.

Frazier came along a bit after Simmons. In 1944, he began operating a boat service between Jenkins Island — near where the J. Wilton Graves Bridge today connects to Hilton Head Island — to Buckingham Landing, where the Sea Trawler restaurant recently opened. He

also owned several trucks and a barge that could carry cars.

When he was drafted for World War II, residents successfully lobbied the government to give him a waiver because his services were so vital to their way of life.

In 1968, Frazier lost a leg in an automobile accident, and in 1985, he was shot in the face during the robbery of his convenience store along William

Hilton Parkway. The cream and rust-colored commercial buildings he owned still stand and are home to a produce market and a massage parlor. A wooden, homemade sign still marks Frazier's Holiness Temple.

He died in 2003 at the age of 89.

"I knew them both," Campbell said. "They were outstanding men."

# On this side of the river, few live like Charlie Simmons

It's not every day you go to a six-preacher funeral.

I am mortified to report that there were few white people in attendance at the funeral for a patriarch of our community, 99-year-old native islander Charles Simmons Sr.

He operated sailboats, then motor boats, to get mail to the island and produce and seafood to the city market in Savannah.

He kept people on the move. He took them to schools on the mainland. He brought back supplies they needed to survive.

After the first bridge to Hilton Head Island was built in 1956, he drove people and produce around in 15-passenger vans that sometimes had wire holding the back doors closed. Provisions always were stacked up in clear view. Always provisions.

Mr. Simmons would haul cows, wood stoves, you name it.

In fact, his own cows used to roam the far reaches of Spanish Wells Road. Spanish Wells Plantation never had a gate, but it had a cattle grate. Now they've

got speed bumps. That sort of tells the whole story.

Mr. Simmons was a deacon at First African Baptist Church for 75 years. (This church on Beach City Road was founded in 1863 as part of Mitchelville, the island's first planned community. It was established for the freed slaves who flocked to the island for precious freedom when the Yankees set up the lazy Department of the South here.)

Can you imagine being a deacon for 75 years? Deacons in those days acted as constables and social workers and counselors in addition to church pillars.

At his funeral May 14, one of the pastors fondly called Mr. Simmons a "churchman." The service was moved a few hundred yards up Beach City Road to the larger St. Francis By the Sea Catholic Church because First African Baptist probably would've been filled by the family alone.



David Lauderdale

A highlight of the service was jazz and blues trombonist Solomon Jenkins, a distant relative. He, appropriately, came across the water from Savannah. He performed right by the blue coffin with sea gulls painted on all the corners. Solomon's black face twisted tight as he squeezed "Going the Last Mile of the Way" out of that big horn with its slide sometimes dipping right at the coffin. He worked the audience of some 500 into a clapping mood. You'd never guess he had just come off a 14-hour shift as a longshoreman in Savannah.

Some excerpts from the two-hour service:

• "In the morning, we'll see Jesus, Mary's baby boy." I don't know how many times the Catholics will hear it said that way in their beautiful sanctuary, but it is important to note that they: A. opened their building to a brother in need; and B. Sent a resolution praising Mr. Simmons from the bishop of the Charleston Diocese.

• "On Tuesday morning he stepped on board the Ship of Zion. I heard the Captain call his name."

• "He wrote his own eulogy through the life he lived."

• "We're going to stroll down Blessed Boulevard."

• "Take it to the Lord in prayer."

• Grandson-in-law Deacon Edward Aiken sang a solo, "May My Life Speak for Me." That same thought was scripted into the baby blue lining inside Mr. Simmons' coffin.

• "The world can't give it, and the world can't take it away."

• "Oh, to be kept by Jesus."

• "Don't let nobody turn you around."

• "We have a home over yonder."

• "When we get there, we will lay down our burdens."

• Attorney Roberts Vaux of Bluffton represented white folks well in his tearful remarks about the day "Mr. Charlie" quit calling him "boy." It was when he got home from law school and Mr. Simmons was among his first clients. Mr. Simmons made it strikingly clear that he was counting on Roberts. And when he left, he called him "lawyer."

His passing was the passing of

an era. A very rare era. He knew what the people of a remote island needed, and he made sure they had it, whether it was fuel for lamps before there was electricity here, or a midnight ride for midwives to reach the bed of birthing mothers.

Mr. Simmons worked hard. His idea of recreation was work. If he ever fished, his son said, it was well after dark.

He had little formal education, but was astute and wise. He was a tough entrepreneur who won every deal, but also helped everybody who crossed his path. They all laughed when a preacher said, "I bet there are a lot of people here today who still owe him money."

He was a man of prayer. The younger generation said he kept them in line and set high standards for conduct. The younger deacons said they'd start a Scripture and Mr. Simmons would finish it by heart. They said he always wanted to hear "the old songs they used to sing." Scriptures read at his funeral included: Psalm 51:1-12, John 5:28-29, Psalm 37:25-35, Matthew 16:24 and Hebrews 11:10.

Mr. Simmons — the man they called "Cap'n Charlie," "Mr. Charlie," "Mr. Transportation," "Mr. Hilton Head," "Bubba," "Pop," "Deac" — called most men "Brother."

He had little to say. Back in the '70s I tried to interview him and met those piercing eyes beneath his cocked cap. That's about all I got out of it. He said four words. He wasn't mean, but he had no use for a Packet reporter. He didn't need publicity to establish his value. That alone sets him apart. Many push for the limelight.

Just as I used to zip past his van filled with supplies on a congested U.S. 278, the era Mr. Simmons represents is too often left in the dust.

But as it was said at Mr. Simmons' funeral, on "this side of the river," few will live a life that deserves to be remembered like his does.

That life, and that era, need to be prominently honored in this community. Our generation needs to make sure it happens.

And that's that.  
David Lauderdale is editorial page editor of *The Island Packet*.

ISLAND PACKET 5/29/05

Charles Simmons Sr.: "The major lifeline"

# Native islander dead at 99



File/The Island Packet

Charles Simmons Sr. stands on a dock overlooking Broad Creek in October 1999. For more than 30 years, Simmons ran a ferry from Hilton Head to Savannah,

providing a 'major lifeline' for island residents. He also worked to improve educational opportunities for native island children. Simmons, 99, died Tuesday.

## Simmons provided transportation to and from Hilton Head

### FROM STAFF REPORTS

Native islander Charles Simmons Sr., who in the days when Hilton Head truly was an island provided a vital transportation link to the mainland, died Tuesday at age 99.

Hailed by those who knew him well as "the major lifeline" for native islanders in years past and an important entrepreneur in the island's history, Simmons provided transportation on and off Hilton Head Island before bridges were built to it. He also operated two stores and worked to

improve educational opportunities for native island children in the days before South Carolina provided public education for blacks.

Charles Simmons Jr. said his father recently became sick because of a lung condition. In addition to his family members, he leaves behind a community grateful for the contributions he made during his lifetime.

Tom Barnwell, native island business leader and developer, said Simmons was the last of the "original pillars" of the native islander community. He said

Simmons was the first person to operate a regular boat service from Hilton Head to Savannah, and his vessels carried everything from fruit and vegetables grown to provide needed income for island families to children who would make their way to Penn School on St. Helena Island and other schools to receive an education.

"The native community of Hilton Head Island is at loss to find appropriate words that describe the meaning and the contributions that

Please see **SIMMONS** Page 11-A

"For most of us, he was a role model. We admired him for his entrepreneurship."

— Emory Campbell



CAMPBELL



BARNWELL

"He had a sense of the need (of the community) and he fulfilled those needs."

— Tom Barnwell

Continued from Page 1-A

Mr. Simmons made to those of us that were born here on this island," Barnwell said. "... As I saw this man for many, many years, he was the major lifeline (for islanders)."

For Perry White, Simmons was always the transportation man.

"He was the one person who could get you from your door on Hilton Head ... and take you to Savannah and bring you back to your house," the 71-year-old Hilton Head Island native said about his childhood.

White said Simmons wasn't simply the person who provided the boat to get to Savannah.

"He was the captain. He was the mechanic," White said. "He'd go down to the engine room and fix something and a few minutes later he'd be cooking dinner for the passengers."

Simmons also took White to the Penn School, now called Penn Center, on St. Helena Island. They would take a boat to Buckingham Landing, where Simmons would pick up students as he went through Bluffton, Hardeeville and all the other towns along the way to the school in a trip that took hours.

## HARD WORK

Family members remembered Simmons on Tuesday for his community spirit and work ethic.

Charles Simmons Jr. said his father was a public servant who served the communities of Hilton Head and Daufuskie Island since 1929, and he described his father's chief passion succinctly.

"Work, work, work," he said. "That's all he did. He never drank, never smoked — he was very religious."

Simmons Jr. remembers attending church and meetings with his father as a child.

"There wasn't too much fun because he didn't believe in too much recreation," Simmons Jr. said. "He would go fishing at night occasionally. His recreation was work."

Simmons' friend and relative Emory Campbell was impressed by his work ethic.

"For most of us, he was a role model," he said. "We admired him for his entrepreneurship."

Rosa Simmons described her father-in-law as a fine person.

"He was always helpful and was

the backbone of Hilton Head," she said. "Anything you needed, he would get it for you."

In the days when Simmons ran a ferry service to Savannah, island residents gathered at the dock with crates of chickens or baskets of fresh vegetables, clutching holiday wish lists and looking forward to a day on the town. Simmons would usher them onto the Edgar Hurst, a

1998 interview, "But you could feed a family for 50 cents. We did not need to buy much because we raised most of what we needed."

Asked about his social life on the barrier island, Simmons answered that he was a man who "never drank wine, whisky or beer; never sought after entertainment, did not eat much meat — too expensive — and never over-ate."

**"Work, work, work. That's all he did. He never drank, never smoked — he was very religious."**

— Charles Simmons Jr.

56-foot converted rum-runner with a kitchen that served beef stew and a cabin that invited neighbors to talk.

It was a three-hour trip from the wooden dock on Broad Creek to Savannah's riverfront. But for merchants, farmers, sightseers and the mail, the Edgar Hurst was one of the only ways on or off Hilton Head.

And when the big builders arrived at the opposite shore and dreamed of hotels and housing communities on his native island, Simmons took them across, too.

"My way," Simmons said in a previous interview, "was the only way."

Following his mother's death when he was 4, Simmons was taken from his home in Lawton Plantation, now Sea Pines, to live with his maternal Aunt Nellie and her husband, Jacob Brown. They later moved to the Spanish Wells section of the island in 1908, where he attended the Honey Horn School, which operated only three or four months a year and was taught by the Rev. Solomon Campbell. After finishing the sixth grade, he had to go to work.

Work was hard. His days started at 4 a.m. In season they farmed, raising corn, peas, potatoes and watermelons. They would go to Bluffton in winter to pick oysters, selling them for 10 to 12 cents a bushel. In the summer, they fished in Calibogue Sound. Fish were taken to Savannah and sold for 25 cents per bunch — usually 8 to 10 fish. Crabbing brought 25 cents a dozen.

Simmons, eager to keep things in proportion, quickly added in

But he was dutiful in his church attendance. Prayer meetings were held three nights a week, but regular Sunday church service took place only once a month. The church was the center of the community and provided the social life for most, "although there were a few who chose to walk the roads getting into minor trouble."

## CROSSING THE WATER

Simmons learned to navigate and pilot a sail boat under the tutelage of his uncle, Jacob Brown. Lola was his first boat, which he purchased in 1930 when he was in his early 20s.

Practically everything he transported went to Savannah; seldom did they ship anything to Bluffton. He would take fishermen, farmers and others with their goods — from fish to turkeys, lima beans, peas and watermelons — to Savannah.

Once, en route to Savannah during low tide, the boat was so overloaded with watermelons that it would drop in the water and touch bottom. Every time this happened, Simmons said, he "would get troubled in mind" because he did not want to face the inevitable decision to sacrifice the melons or to endanger the boat.

He later bought the Edgar Hurst. In 1940, a storm came to the island with winds so severe that the boat broke from its moorings and was carried from Broad Creek over water and land and deposited far up into the woods on Bull Island.

This was a time before the bridge, when people had strong roots in the community. Neighbors responded to his calamity by organizing into work crews. Using cut logs, one crew rolled the boat

over land all the way to the dock known as Simmons Landing. The task was so daunting, it took almost a week. Others joined the cooking crew to feed all who helped.

He also owned trucks, and as "Mr. Transportation," Simmons said he "was available day or in the middle of the night to take midwives to the homes of expectant women to deliver their babies or take the sick and injured to Savannah for medical care." He said he "knew the Savannah River like the back of my hand and never hesitated to take my boat out night or day."

He was proud that his boats for 30 years passed Coast Guard inspection, and during World War II he applied for and received a priority card that enabled him to purchase scarce and rationed goods such as meat, sugar and gasoline for resale to his customers.

He also was proud of the general stores he operated for about five decades. People would come from all across the island to buy from his stores.

Barnwell said Simmons carried everything from produce to shoes to farm supplies, including kerosene and gasoline for lamps that were needed in the days before the island had electricity. And if he didn't have an item, Barnwell said, Simmons would put it on a list and get it on his next trip to Savannah.

"He was ahead of his time to have the foresight in planning and developing those lifelines for so many needy persons," Barnwell said. "He had a sense of the needs (of the community) and he fulfilled those needs."

Simmons also provided credit for islanders who couldn't pay for goods right away.

"He would give you a handshake," Barnwell said. "He would say, 'Brother, is that what you want? I'll get it for you.' Those were his words. He referred to you as his brother."

Larry Toomer, who grew up on Hilton Head in the 1960s and 1970s, said he recalls going to Simmons' store and being given candy and ice cream for free.

Toomer said he never heard anyone say anything bad about "Cap'n Charlie," the name most people called Simmons.

"He was such a small man with a big heart," Toomer said.

**BRIDGES CHANGE LIFE**  
Although the bridges brought

jobs, newcomers, some progress and conveniences to the island, it also brought unaccustomed violence. Simmons had to give up his last store after being surprised late one evening, hit in the head with a pipe, robbed, and dragged in the back where he was left for dead. He was hospitalized for two weeks. The robbers were never caught.

Years later, the Edgar Hurst slammed into submerged debris in the Savannah River. Simmons piloted it to the shore, salvaged its engine and supplies and left it.

He replaced it with the Alligator, a smaller boat that ran only from Jenkins Island to Buckingham Landing on the opposite shore. A truck continued the trip to Savannah from there.

It was the squat Alligator that carried the island's first major developers across, Simmons said.

The state soon took over. The Gay Times, a state-run barge that could carry four cars, made its inaugural run across Skull Creek in 1953. The Pocahontas, able to haul nine cars, later replaced it.

And on May 20, 1956, the James Byrnes Bridge opened to traffic from Hilton Head to the mainland. The age of the ferry was over.

The Alligator, his last boat, "went to pieces on Spanish Wells' shore," Simmons said. By then, he was running his passengers by truck.

Simmons is survived by his wife, Mary Lee Hall Simmons; his son, Charles Simmons Jr. and his wife Rosa of Hilton Head; two grandsons he raised, Wesley Young Jr. of Bluffton and Richard Williams Jr. of Hilton Head; three grandchildren, Charlesetta Simmons and her husband Edward B. Aiken, Palmer Simmons and Greg Marcus Simmons; seven great-grandchildren, Fahara and Ahmad Aiken, Rory and Regis Rice, and Adrian, Julian and Keith Simmons; and great-grandchild Germaine Robinson.

He was preceded in death by a grandson, Charles Edward Simmons III.

Services will be at 1 p.m. Saturday at First African Baptist Church, 70 Beach City Road. A wake service will be held at the church from 7 to 8 p.m. Friday.

Chisholm Galloway Home for Funerals of Beaufort is in charge of arrangements.

***Mr. Charlie Simmons, Sr.  
Commemorative Marker  
Unveiling***

*Discovery House at Honey Horn  
Saturday, December 4, 2010  
10:30 AM*

*Master of Ceremony  
Mr. Emory Campbell*

*Invocation:  
Dr. Alvin L. Petty*

*Speakers  
Mr. Kenneth Heitzke, Mayor Pro-Tem  
Mr. Bill Ferguson, Town Council Ward One  
Mr. Roberts Vaux  
Mr. Benjamin Stewart*

*Sign Unveiling  
Mr. Kenneth Heitzke, Mayor Pro-Tem  
Mr. Bill Ferguson, Town Council Ward One*

*Closing Remarks  
Mr. Charlie Simmons, Jr.*

*Benediction  
Dr. Alvin L. Petty*



**Mr. Charlie Simmons, Sr.  
“Mr. Transportation”  
1906-2005  
Commemorative Marker Unveiling**

## Editorials

Hilton Head Island loses  
a steady hand on the rudder*Preserve legacy of Charles Simmons Sr. for the future*

With the burial today of Charles Simmons Sr., Hilton Head Island will say goodbye to a giant.

And as his friends and relations stand by his gravesite on the shores of Broad Creek, the Lowcountry will close the book on an incredible era.

Charlie Simmons, who died Tuesday at the age of 99, represents the finest of the plucky native islanders who were here before the first bridge brought a flood of change to a poor community in 1956.

Simmons had a firm hand on the wheel, helping islanders survive and adapt. It was in "Cap'n Charlie's" boats that butter beans, watermelons, shrimp, oysters and crab made it to market in Savannah. It was in his general stores that islanders got fuel for lamps before electricity, and where they got credit when it was needed to survive. And it was in his trucks that midwives got to the bedsides of mothers giving birth, no matter the hour.

They called him "Mr. Transportation" because it was Simmons who got people, supplies and news to and from what was a sparsely populated, remote island. It was in his last boat, the Alligator, that Simmons first brought another entrepreneur named Charlie to the island. It was the energetic young Charles Fraser who would pioneer modern development and forever change the island. With the change, Simmons drove right on, though it was no longer on the waters that had been the Lowcountry's freeways since the Indians built oyster shell rings here. His transportation network had long included land vehicles, and that's where Simmons turned his attention after the bridge was built, slipping behind the wheel of 15-passenger vans, still crawling the Lowcountry loaded with supplies, people and the news.

Charlie Simmons was a slight man of few words, but great strength. He said it cost too much to eat meat. But he actually stayed too busy to eat a whole lot, much less chew the fat.

But from those piercing brown eyes beneath his ever-present cap, came a towering presence.

He was universally respected. It showed day in and day out, generation after generation. But it came to the fore with the outpouring of rewards and concern when some coward beat and robbed an aged Charlie Simmons in his little brick store across from where the Welcome Center is today.

That respect was based on many traits that it would behoove future generations to take to heart. Those who now have free access to sparkling public schools and jobs in air-conditioned comfort should not be allowed to forget Charlie Simmons, who never had those opportunities but never considered himself a victim.

Future generations should remember this description of his father from Charles Simmons Jr.: "Work, work, work. That's all he did. His recreation was work."

They should remember the investments that his entrepreneurship led to, bringing greater opportunity and personal holdings.

They should remember his devotion to his church, where he would attend prayer meetings up to three nights a week.

They should remember his big heart, always looking for ways to help his fellow man, more than ways to skin a nickel off him.

They should remember his attention to detail, with his boats always passing U.S. Coast Guard inspections and his land transportation licensed like a Greyhound bus.

They should remember his community involvement, with his sharp eyes always on what the people needed. He shared his business acumen as readily as he shared his kerosene.

We were lucky to have Charlie Simmons Sr. in our community, especially for 99 years and especially for this particular time of massive change. We must now as a community find concrete ways that Charlie Simmons' legacy can be honored so that he can continue to serve as a role model for generations to come.

**Charles Simmons Sr.**

Charles Simmons Sr., 99, of Hilton Head Island died Tuesday, May 10, 2005, at his home.

Mr. Simmons was born July 15, 1905, on Lawton Plantation, now Sea Pines, a son of Susan LaVant and Cato Simmons. His mother died when he was young, and he was reared by his aunt, Mrs. Nellie Brown, and her husband, Luke.

Though self-educated, Mr. Simmons attended Honey Horn Plantation School in 1915. He was a member of the First African Baptist Church, where he served in the deacon ministry more than 70 years.

He became an entrepreneur at an early age and began transporting islanders and their possessions from Hilton Head to Savannah. The state of South Carolina hired him to bring equipment to the local schools and take road machines from Hilton Head and Daufuskie islands. He also used his barge to transport heavy equipment for the Coast Guard.

For a time, Mr. Simmons hauled the U.S. mail for Hilton Head and Daufuskie, using his boat and truck. In 1927, he and his wife, Estella, started a grocery store in Spanish Wells and named it "Big Star." They later opened another shop in the Stoney area.

He was preceded in death by his first wife, Estella; grandson Charles Simmons III; great-grandson Charles Simmons IV; two brothers, George Simmons and Richard Chisholm; and two sisters, Queen Smith and Blossom Ward.

Survivors include his wife of more than 30 years, Mary Lee Hall Simmons of Hilton Head; four sons, Charles "Charlie" Simmons Jr. of Hilton Head, Wesley Young of Bluffton, and Richard Williams and Julius Chisholm, both of Hilton Head; a daughter, Mabel Bryant of Savannah; four grandchildren; 13 great-grandchildren; and 14 great-great-grandchildren.

Funeral services will be at 1 p.m. today at St. Francis By the Sea Catholic Church at 45 Beach City Road. Burial will be in Simmons Memorial Garden.

Chisholm Galloway Home for Funerals of Beaufort is in charge of arrangements.

ISLAND PACKET

5/14/05



# Marker honors 'Mr. Transportation'

ISLAND PACKET

12-5-10

By ALLISON STICE

astice@islandpacket.com

843-706-8138

It's been a long time coming but Charlie Simmons Sr. — known on Hilton Head Island as “Mr. Transportation” — has finally gotten his due, a marker that remembers his work.

More than a hundred people gathered Saturday at the Discovery House of the Coastal Discovery Museum to honor

## MORE INSIDE

Read the marker's inscription. 15A

the native islander who for decades ferried food, goods and people to and from the mainland before the first bridge was built.

Speakers shared memories of Simmons, who died in 2005 just two months short of his 100th birthday. Locals have been looking for a way to commemorate

his legacy ever since.

A deacon at First African Baptist Church on Hilton Head, Simmons attended Bible study and prayer meetings until the end of his life, said his pastor, Dr. Alvin Petty.

Simmons was a friend to all and called everyone by the same nickname — “cuz,” said Bill Ferguson, a native islander and

Please see **MARKER** on 15A



SARAH WELLIVER • The Island Packet

A crowd that included family members of the late Charlie Simmons Sr. gathered Saturday morning for the unveiling of a commemorative marker honoring Simmons at the Coastal Discovery Museum.

# THE ISLAND PACKET

Southern Beaufort County's Newspaper



Erin Painter/The Island Packet

"There's never been any question in my mind that Mr. Simmons had the respect of the powers that be."

— Roberts Vaux,  
attorney and friend



File/The Island Packet  
Charles Simmons Sr.

## 'Mr. Hilton Head' laid to rest

### Simmons

Continued from Page 1-A

provided the primary link between the native islander community and the rest of the world.

"There's never been any question in my mind that Mr. Simmons had the respect of the powers that be," said Roberts Vaux of Bluffton, a lawyer who worked with and befriended Simmons. "If they needed to know something that was going on in Hilton Head or Bluffton, they contacted Mr. Charlie."

Friend Charles Huston rattled off a list of important people who first came to the island on Simmons' ferry: the Hudson family, who were early oyster merchants, and developers Charles Fraser and Fred Hack. There were other black community leaders who contributed to island life, but "in my mind and in my heart, I think Charles Simmons Sr. tops — tops — the list," Huston said.

Simmons was a deeply religious person and his funeral was

to make fast friends wherever he was, both on the island or landing in Savannah.

"It made no difference if you were black, white, rich, poor, young or old," Morris Campbell told the congregation. "Deacon Simmons was a neighbor for all he came in contact with."

Vaux told of Simmons' business prowess: "If anybody here thinks you made out ahead in a bargain with Charlie Simmons, you're

## Hundreds bid farewell to Simmons

BY TIM DONNELLY  
THE ISLAND PACKET

For decades, "Mr. Transportation," also known as Charles Simmons Sr., carried the lifeblood of the native islander community in the back of his trucks and on his ferries, in the form of fresh fruits and vegetables, school equipment, clothes and people.

On Saturday, four simple wheels carried Simmons off to rest, his casket wheeled out of St. Francis By the Sea Catholic Church toward burial at Simmons Memorial Garden.

The send-off for someone known to many as "Mr. Hilton Head," "Mr. Charlie," or just "Bubba" to his great-granddaughter, was more full of joyful celebration than tearful farewells. Hundreds of friends, relatives and community leaders gathered at the church to praise Simmons for everything from his role as the lifeline to the native islander community to his singing skills to his ability to make friends across physical and racial boundaries.

As the open casket was wheeled to the door of the church, friends grinned and patted Simmons on the cheek or took pictures. Laughs and smiling goodbyes were more common than tears.

Simmons died Tuesday at 99 after having been sick from a lung condition. Before the days of bridges, highways and super-resorts on Hilton Head Island, Simmons and his boats

Please see **SIMMONS**, Page 13-A



Erin Painter/The Island Packet

**Above:** Pallbearers bring out the casket of Charles Simmons Sr., 99, after the funeral service Saturday afternoon at St. Francis By the Sea Catholic Church on Hilton Head Island. The burial was held at Simmons Memorial Garden immediately after the service.

**Top left:** Edward Aiken sings a solo during the funeral service. Aiken is a relative of Simmons'. Hundreds of family and friends attended the service.



Hilton Head Island • Bluffton

# THE ISLAND PACKET



SUNDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2010

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# A Christmas homecoming

Students looked forward to annual trip home at Penn School



By REBECCA LURYE  
rlurye@islandpacket.com  
843-706-8155

**F**or the few Hilton Head Islanders who attended the historic Penn School, Christmas began with a boat ride from Beaufort.

Now an hour-long car ride, the journey from St. Helena Island to Hilton Head used to be so involved, and the school so strict, that students who boarded there would go home just once a year. Each Christmas, they would board a huge boat in Beaufort, dock at Jenkins Island and drive home along dirt roads to spend a week

celebrating the holiday by lamp light.

In years past, 87-year-old Charlie Simmons Jr. remembers “Santa” gave him a carpenter’s set and cowboy suit with a cap pistol. In years to come, he and his friends would ring in the new year at the Rip It Up, a Marshland Road juke joint not much bigger than his living room today.

But the first Christmas break from the Penn Normal, Industrial and Agricultural School — when it was gift enough to just be home — is still his favorite.

Please see PENN on 9A

# PENN

Continued from 1A

"Those other familiar relatives in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, wherever they were, they came home, too, so we all got together and enjoyed it," Simmons said. "That was the most enjoyable."

During the summer, Penn School students would plant potatoes, broccoli, asparagus and other crops, Simmons said. Over Thanksgiving, which students called "Potato Week," they harvested.

On break for Christmas, Simmons still took to the

land, but on his own terms.

He would go searching the woods for small pine trees to decorate with pine cones and Spanish moss in place of ornaments and twinkle lights.

While students had electricity at the Penn School, they were not similarly blessed on Hilton Head until 1950, two years after Simmons graduated from the St. Helena school in its final year.

For entertainment, people would race marsh tackies from house to house.

Mostly, he remembers, the family ate.

His mother, like the other women who lived along Spanish Wells, would cook

up macaroni, collard greens and butter beans, plates of barbecue, and a big pot of rice.

"Everybody believed in rice," he said. "I don't care for it too much now."

The men would walk from house to house, visiting for a while and eating their fill, joining the women in carols and then leaving to start the process again.

If a home had a batch of "scrap iron," or moonshine, they might have to carry a guest or two home.

Mostly, they enjoyed each other's company and reveled in the holiday.

While Charles' wife, Rosa,

was also in his class, they didn't spend the holidays together. She lived near Penn School and the pair didn't date until years after they graduated and went on to attend different colleges.

As the story goes, Charles Simmons wrote three girls the same letter, and only Rosa wrote back.

He and Rosa were married about a year later.

Nowadays, she decorates the home sparingly with an artificial tree covered in multicolor lights and a big, red bow instead of a star. She's also hung a wreath on the front door and lights on the chain-link fence that cuts

through the land where Simmons' father used to farm butter beans, squash and watermelon.

But mostly, the home is decorated as it is year-round — with photos of family and mementos honoring their Gullah roots.

He says his grandchildren wouldn't believe you could celebrate Christmas with even less fanfare.

"A lot of people don't believe Hilton Head didn't have a bridge," he said. "We didn't have any lights, running water. They didn't believe that."

It's so unlike the flashy, month-long commercial af-

fair Christmas is to many today, Simmons said.

"They just think these things were here all the time," he said of the now-traditional sight of a mountain of presents under a Christmas tree.

Some progress, though, is fine with him.

On Sunday, he sat near the blinking red, green and blue lights in the corner of his living room and recalled the first time he could hang real decorations on a cedar tree.

"Ooh, that was something."

Follow reporter Rebecca Lurye [twitter.com/IPBG\\_Rebecca](https://twitter.com/IPBG_Rebecca).

# Opinion

SARA JOHNSON  
FITZ McARTHUR  
JANET SMITH  
JEFF KIDDER

## OUR VIEW

# Honoring Charlie Simmons has a broader significance

**Too little has been done to visibly acknowledge the native islanders' place in Hilton Head Island's history.**

**T**his is an important day in the Lowcountry.

Today, the Hilton Head Island community will unveil a commemorative marker in honor of the late Charlie Simmons Sr.

The significance of the event is not so much the well-deserved salute to the thin, quiet, no-nonsense man. He attained legendary status before he died in 2005, almost 100 years after he was born on Hilton Head. Things had changed so much, it's almost as if he died in a different world, even though on the same sea island.

His place in history is assured as a waterman, businessman, churchman, family man, and protector and provider for the few who lived off the land and sea on remote Hilton Head and Daufuskie islands.

From the time he was a barefoot child, he was around sailboats, then motorboats, then ferries, then vans and trucks to link islanders to the broader world beyond. He offered some of the few ways islanders could get to and from the mainland for anything from a bantam rooster to a college education.

There were other ferrymen — Arthur Frazier and Ben Jones, for example — who also helped islanders get their goods from home

to market and their supplies from market to home.

And that's why this day is so important. The community, represented by the Town of Hilton Head Island, will honor a people and a way of life. Both were easy to overlook in a community barreling pell-mell from an enclave of a few hundred sturdy souls into a town of nearly 35,000 and more than 2 million visitors annually.

But on this day, Hilton Head will stop and formally acknowledge the intellect, ingenuity, wisdom, patience, humor, honor, work ethic, stubbornness, chutzpah, common sense, core values and grace that made this community world-class before there was golf, tennis or time shares.

Today, we recognize that newcomers with rolls of development plans under their arms were not the beginning of time on Hilton Head. Neither were they the beginning of vision, enterprise or virtue.

Charlie Simmons Sr. — “Mr. Transportation” — was well known and appreciated by the first developers.

Now it is fitting to acknowledge the native islanders' place in Hilton Head's history.

That's the real reason today's ceremony, beginning at 10:30 a.m. at the Coastal Discovery Museum at Honey Horn, is noteworthy for the Lowcountry.