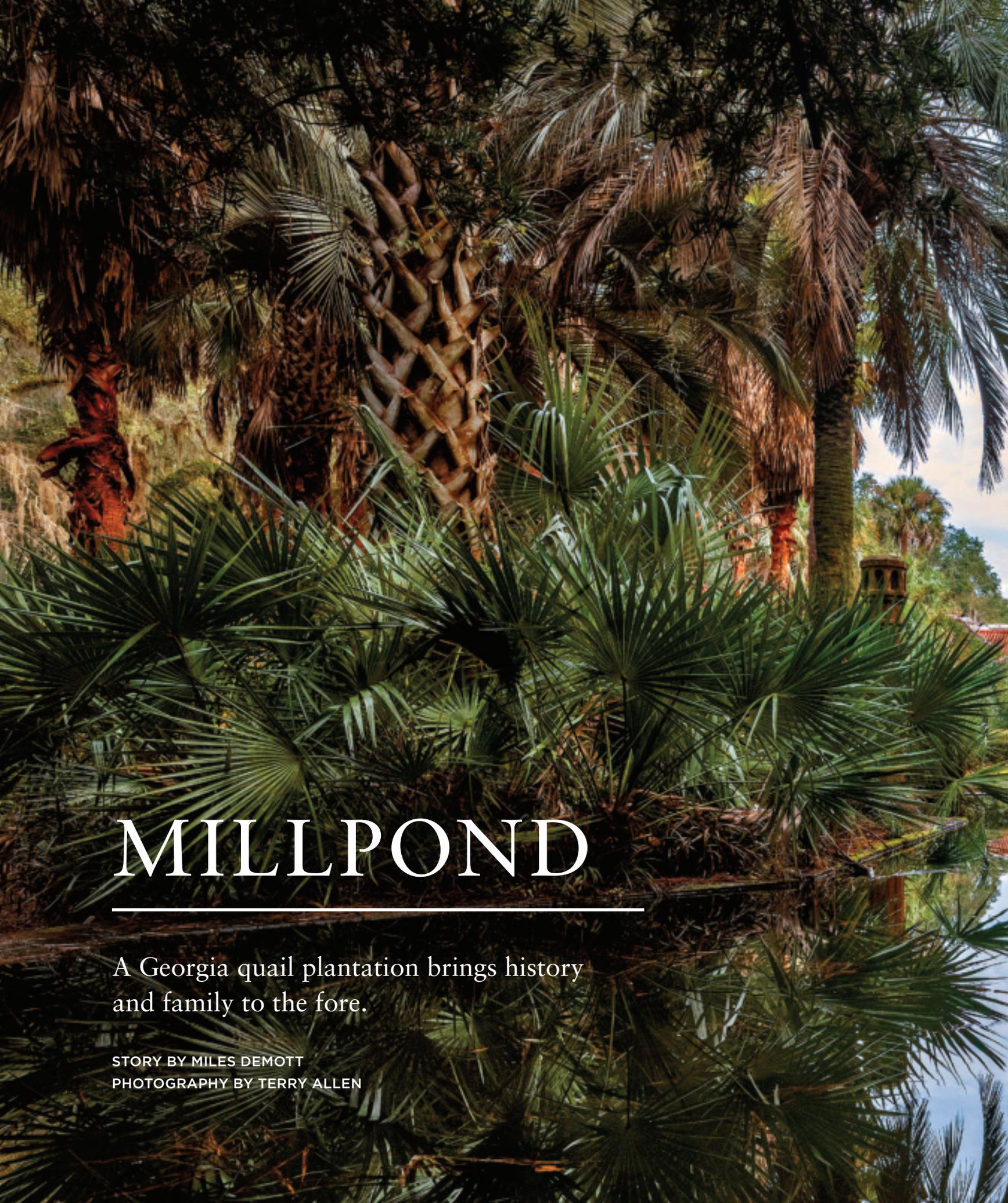


COVEY RISE.®



A lush tropical garden scene featuring several large palm trees with thick, textured trunks and dense foliage. In the foreground, numerous fan palms with large, radiating fronds are prominent. The scene is reflected in a body of water at the bottom of the frame. The overall atmosphere is serene and natural.

MILLPOND

A Georgia quail plantation brings history
and family to the fore.

STORY BY MILES DEMOTT
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TERRY ALLEN





For many in the upland world, Thomasville, Georgia, evokes very specific images. As the epicenter of plantation bobwhite quail hunting, the Red Hills of South Georgia that stretch into the Florida Panhandle have been legendary for over a hundred years, drawing the patriarchs of modern, unfettered capitalism from their fervent grip on the tiller of global commerce to the more temperate climes of the piney woods. If one were prone to reminiscences of uncivil wars or of reconstructions that followed, the insertion here of an inappropriate carpetbagger reference might play, especially since the windows of opportunity bear a striking resemblance. The analogy would fall woefully short, though, in describing the handful of families who have left such an indelible mark on the region.

They boarded trains in New York and Cleveland with pockets full of cash, and they rode the rail to the end of the line, quietly collecting parcels of contiguous property and changing the landscape almost imperceptibly. Small row crop farms were reforested and first-growth timber stands, though few and far between, felt a newfound protection as the native ecosystem was renewed and hundreds of thousands of acres between Thomasville and Tallahassee rose to a very specific purpose: protecting the habitat and pursuit of bobwhite quail.

The wave of gentrification wasn't limited to the land, and this is where those images begin evolving into upland lore. In the early years of the last century, once the plantation scene had reached critical mass, the monied migration became a

seasonal affair, stretching from November into April, bringing new life, new faces, and new activity to what was a sleepy little county seat. It began as a pilgrimage of private train cars bearing families and friends and aides-de-camp, along with cooks and nannies and other staff who enabled families to balance life seamlessly among multiple homes.

Though the journeys have tracked alongside the leading edge of travel technology, its current state of private jets and Range Rovers seems to be where the evolution screeches to a full stop, reeling in the years with a deliberate and conspicuous return to 19th-Century traditions, like mule-drawn wagons, white-vested guides, and dog handlers out front, with hunters on foot and in the saddle as pointers stretch their noses to the wiregrass and their tails to sky, and coveys flush chaotically into the sun. In the dream version of the private plantation, the hunt is followed by an evening of cocktails and conversations between well-dressed magnates, their beautifully coiffed wives, and a table full of famous guests who, in turn, hold forth on issues of the day before retiring to the drawing room for cigars

STEWARDSHIP OVER TIME

Fifth-generation Millpond, Wade and Jep Sedgwick, saddle up for the hunt (above) as their parents, Walter and Jeannie, tour in the old Jeepster, and their Uncle Ellery reflects on his favorite gun and dog in the atrium.



FINAL CHECKS

Handlers ready their dogs in anticipation of a traditional hunt aboard a mule-drawn wagon rolling through the pines and sage.





and brandy. Just like an F. Scott Fitzgerald novel, only different.

These are the images that spring to the minds of many who view the plantation set with some mix of envy and contempt, and the socioeconomic barriers to entry go a long way to perpetuate those mixed emotions. My purpose here is not to discredit the stories or shatter the images in favor of some magical democratization of plantation quail hunting. Instead, I hope to offer a rare look inside the gates, inside the walls, and inside the story of just one of those plantations.

The Sedgwick family of Millpond Plantation has what might be described as a linear relationship with our great country, historically represented by miles and miles of telegraph lines that crisscross the American landscape. Jephtha Homer Wade, their great-great-great-grandfather, was shoeless to the age of eight. He set about selling nuts on the street to demonstrate his financial independence and purchase his first pair of shoes. Shortly after that, he set out on his own odyssey, stringing telegraph wire across the Midwest and coast to coast, a grid that would prove useful, as he helped to start Western Union in 1861, serving as president of the company in 1866 before selling his interests to focus on other ventures, most of which generated uncommon wealth.

Our rags-to-riches story establishes roots in the piney woods, though, with the Sedgwicks' great-grandfather, J.H. Wade II, who had the skills to avert the curse of the third generation—where generational wealth historically begins to decline—and the foresight to invest in a little patch of dirt in South Georgia.

Though he'd set his sights initially on Santa Barbara, California, unseasonal rains soured his West Coast plans, and his return trip to Cleveland included a stop in Thomasville to visit friends. His affection for the place was immediate and actionable. Beginning with the turn into the 20th Century, Wade spent 20 years piecing together 10,000 acres, mostly farmed by sharecroppers who migrated elsewhere between the world wars.

To complement his growing acreage and house his growing family, Wade turned to the Cleveland firm of Hubbell & Benes to design a unique residence, reflecting the Mission style and Spanish Revival influences of both Southern California and northern Florida. Beneath the characteristic clay tile roof is a series of bedrooms and common spaces set off from a landscaped courtyard. Crowning the atrium above the courtyard is a glass roof that is mechanically opened in the warmer months to enable the tropical gardens to breathe. The house is unlike any of the large plantation seats in the Red Hills region, most of which are Georgian or Greek Revival in style. And the thought of large steel trusses being delivered and hoisted by teams of a dozen mules—remember, this was the early 20th Century in rural south Georgia—to form an engineered atrium boggles the imagination, as it must have challenged the design team accustomed to cranes and early skyscrapers.

Of course, no plantation house would be complete without a garden and a grand landscape design. For this, Wade hired Warren Manning, a protégé of Frederick Law Olmsted—designer of the Biltmore estate and Central Park, among others—to



set the house in context and surround it with seasonal color. Manning's style has been described as informal or naturalistic, preferring an assemblage of wild, native plants to a more formal insertion of foreign plants. That original design is now framed by over a century of new timber growth ribboned by sandy farm roads and a complement of cottages and outbuildings.

Millpond was, from the beginning, a family retreat, and happy memories were created every step of the way. Wanting to preserve the bliss, and recognizing the possible burden such a large operation might pose on future generations, Wade stipulated that when his last grandchild died, Millpond must be sold. This forward-thinking mandate has allowed subsequent generations the flexibility to manage the ownership structure within the family. That's how the Wade family now blooms as the Sedgwick family, the fourth, fifth, and sixth generations to steward Millpond's rich history into its next chapters. Their stories of childhood adventures are legion, all beginning with a train ride from Cleveland and culminating along the bumpy dirt

PLANTATION VIEWS

Spanish moss drips from the live oaks (above) as dappled sunshine highlights the glass atrium roof and formal gardens (top right). Irene Sedgwick Briedis pauses against a hunt wagon and prepares for the hunt in the atrium with her brother, Ellery.

road from Thomasville, passage under the small Millpond sign, and onto the big sense of freedom and endless days outdoors that awaited them. There are the daily adventures with Totty, the nanny tasked with keeping the children occupied and outside from dawn to dusk. These activities included cane pole fishing in the millpond, rescuing newborn piglets escaping their pen, and exploring the endless paths surrounding the house and grounds, all while keeping an eye out for "monster pears in the ogeefogee." This last was Totty's way of keeping an eye out for snakes in the local grasses that bordered the paths. There was also the Rose Walk, a path that led to an octagon-shaped pool and the elevated bridge above where the grandmothers sat in the shade and sipped tea while watching the children swim.

Along with the childhood memories, there were poignant coming-of-age stories involving Jeeps and horses and endless days of discovery on a piece of land that stretched forever. There were the early hunting lessons and the realization that a day spent walk shooting with a single dog would bag a limit of quail when a wagon-led entourage of older, wiser hunters could barely bag a pair. It was, in essence, happy family time with people doing what they enjoyed doing, feeling their way into adulthood and the expectations that awaited them.

As adults, the Sedgwicks have embraced both the expectations and the stewardship, mixing a sense of *noblesse oblige* with the Midwestern practicality they inherited from their







great-grandfather. Sure, the life has offered some Gatsby-esque moments, dinner parties of the like-minded engaged in compelling conversation, and mule-drawn wagons of the rich and famous swapping black tie for brier britches. These are characteristic of the images that spring to mind when one thinks of a quail plantation. The Sedgwicks, after all, have mixed business success with public service, in both the conservation space and the diplomatic arena. But they've also been teachers and environmental activists, parents and siblings, husbands and wives. And they have also been active stewards of what has been, for over 100 years, a bastion of upland tradition and family fellowship. None of these roles is easy, no matter what the balance sheet says, especially when tough decisions have to be made. As it turns out, they face such a decision today.

Just as J.H. Wade II anticipated changes in family needs and ownership structures, his great-grandchildren now face the bittersweet task of selling their portion of the original Millpond Plantation. As one of the siblings put it, "We have all enjoyed coming here, but there comes a time when it doesn't seem to work." As they have found, families spread out across generations, and their interests follow. What began as a seasonal pilgrimage generations ago—Santa always came to Thomasville, not to Cleveland—is a more difficult challenge as families grow and dedicate resources separately.

The house itself serves as a metaphor for this transition. At the close of each season, the house is put to sleep. The art and the rugs along the courtyard—where kids would skate on rainy

days—are put away. The pantries are cleared, the linens are stored, and the furniture is covered, where only minutes before a host of hunting stories were told with varied shades of truth, and the events of the day in the real world were absorbed and debated. The atrium ceiling is opened to allow the summer heat and moisture to rise through the glass and dissipate into the blues and greens of the sky and the surrounding pine canopy. The Jeeps and the wagons are cleaned and stored, while the horses and mules are put out to pasture. So it has been for over 100 years on their watch, and someday soon they'll put the house to sleep for the last time, as the memories linger and the conversations fade, to be made and had anew in different settings.

There is hope in the sadness, though, because the following fall the house will awaken to find a new family at table, crafting a new chapter for great old bones and coming of age in the woods that surround her. It seems likely that the new family will also be one of means, and there's a good chance that many of the old images will be perpetuated by new names, new faces, and new parties. At some level, Millpond will remain a private playground for the rich and famous, a part of the plantation set that defines the upper reaches of the socioeconomic boundaries of the upland lifestyle. If the walls could talk, though, they would revel in the stories of real kids growing up together, real people growing up to be stalwart advocates for conservation, and real siblings leaning on a lifetime of days afiel together to grapple with big questions and family challenges. Somewhere in the universe, Jephtha Homer Wade II is smiling. 🌿

A hunter in a red cap and green vest is aiming a blue shotgun at a bird in flight over a canyon. The background is a vast, rugged landscape with a winding river and a large, circular crater in the distance. The scene is framed by a white border.

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