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## A little lost tree comes home to Altamaha

By LARRY HOBBS lhobbs@goldenisles.news Feb 23, 2017



DNR botanical biologist Eamonn Leonard, left, got some help in planting a rare Franklin tree at the Altama Plantation Wildlife Management Area from The Colonial Dames' Barbara Miller, Cynthia Herrin and Julie Barber of the Waycross chapter.

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Mr. Bartram, your little lost camellia tree has come home.

Or darn close to it.

Environmental conservationists and historical preservationists gathered Wednesday in the remote heart of the state's Altama Plantation Wildlife Management Area, pitching in to plant a single sapling of *Franklinia altamaha*. The noted botanical pioneer John Bartram discovered the Franklin tree some 251 years ago, just 8 miles upriver on the Altamaha from where the planting ceremony took place.



And that is only the start of the intrigue behind the star of this happy ceremony, which took place in a 1930s era formal garden on the estate that is being restored to its original beauty. There is a whole mystery-riddle-enigma tale wrapped around the little tree, which Bartram discovered while on a hike from Fort Barrington on the Altamaha on Oct. 1, 1765.

“It’s a great, great story,” said Jason Lee, a program manager for the state Department of Natural Resources. “If Bartram had not been in that particular place and at that particular time, *Franklinia altamaha* might have been lost to history.”

Bartram managed to preserve the tree for our posterity, but it was soon uprooted from its native wilds beside the Altamaha River. Seeing to it that the Franklin tree returned were some ladies who know a thing or two about long and storied lineages. The little tree planted Wednesday was paid for by the Waycross chapter of The Colonial Dames, a national organization whose members can trace their heritage to Colonial America. The little sapling came from a nursery in Savannah.

Joining them were members of The Colonial Dames from Brunswick and Savannah. Also on hand for the planting were representatives from The Nature Conservancy, which is among the organizations helping the DNR manage the 4,000-acre Altama Plantation area. Waycross Colonial Dames Julie Barber, Cynthia Herrin and Barbara Miller took turns at the shovel to help DNR botanical biologist Eamonn Leonard plant the little Franklin tree, also known as the lost *Gordonia*. The event took place within the wildlife management area’s secured headquarters on the estate of the Alfred Jones family, the plantation’s last owners.

The Altama Plantation WMA is the latest acquisition of some 160,000 acres of Altamaha River basin that has been secured by the state for conservation, Lee said. Conserving the Franklin tree along the Altamaha, however, has been a lost cause since the turn of the 19th Century.



“It’s definitely something of an interesting curiosity,” Leonard said as he carried the little tree down a steep embankment to its new home.

The Franklin tree is a smallish member of the tea family of trees, which includes camellias and *Gordonias*. Bartram’s Franklin tree happened to be in beautiful bloom that day, its lush white flowers catching his fancy. He was fortuitous enough to take some cuttings from the tree.

Bartram famously traipsed across the Southeast in his wanderings. But he never saw the Franklin tree outside these secluded few acres along the Altamaha. By 1803, it had disappeared completely from its wild habitat.

But his clippings thrived back home in Boston, where he named his rare discovery for one of his main benefactors. Yes, that Benjamin Franklin. Today, the Franklin tree thrives in gardens in the northeast and even grows in England. Because of this, some botanical scientists suspect the small group of Georgia Franklin trees that Bartram discovered could have been a stubborn holdover from the last Ice Age, Leonard noted.

“This tree definitely deserves a special place here,” he said.



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