

BY ANDREA GABLE

Rock of Ages

BALANCE ROCK GETS CONSERVATION EASEMENT PROTECTION

Ask anyone in Apalachee about Balance Rock and you'll get a smile.

Not a mischievous one, but one that turns up slowly in the corners at the recollection of fond memories.

The huge mass of granite outcropping on the edge of Morgan County that seems to teeter precariously has been the source of many memorable afternoons – weekends filled with church picnics, family outings, and adventurous expeditions.

"I went there a bunch when I was a kid," says John Shockley, "just frolicking around, climbing all over it. Everybody did." Anyone growing up in the small Apalachee community knew about the rock, and knew that it made for a good meeting place.

"Back in the old days, there were no movies to go to, not everybody had a car, so it was something to do. It was just an outing," says Shockley. "You'd go get your buddies and go down to Balance Rock."

Nothing untoward ever went on around the rock, he says. Sneaking kisses or a pull from the bottle was usually reserved for Tremble Bridge, just down the road.

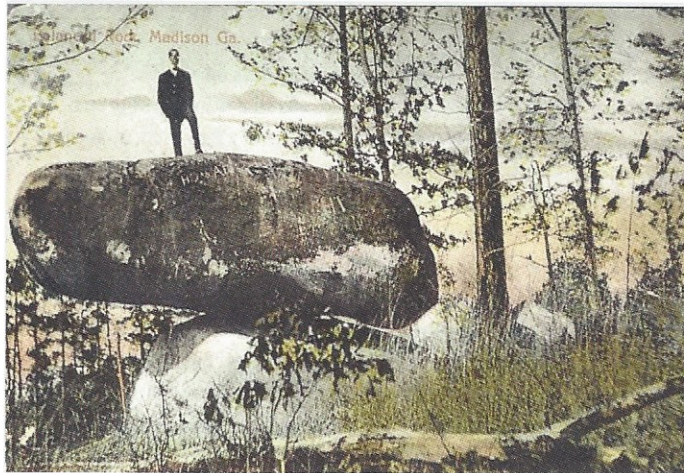
Rumor has it that when the railroad was coming through, the workers tried to move Balance Rock, afraid it would crash down from its base on the bluff above the track. One hundred convicts tried to pull down the mighty stone – or a team of 20 mules, depending on who you talk to. "The railroad bounced by it for years and never shook it loose," Shockley says.

A generation later, Jamie Hamilton also grew up in the shadow of Balance Rock. It was part of the property his father, Jack, purchased in 1978 and dubbed "Rattlesnake Ranch." Hamilton well understood the cultural significance of the rock and knew he wanted it to still be around for his own children to enjoy.

He decided to give up his development rights to permanently preserve a 264 - acre tract of his family's property that includes Balance Rock and parts of Hard Labor Creek. With the help of local land consultants and the Athens Land Trust, Hamilton placed the tract into a permanent conservation easement which will protect the land from future development into perpetuity.

These sorts of conservation easements are essential to maintaining greenspace and protecting wildlife habitats in a fast-developing world, even in rural Morgan County. Christine McCauley, director of the Madison-Morgan Conservancy, says Morgan County is on the forefront of these efforts – a pocket of Georgia with dense easement work.

As a result of Hamilton's and other recent easements, like William Pharr's 227-acre tract on Sugar Creek, Morgan County now has nearly 1,800 acres in permanent conservation. These easements can protect wildlife, water resources, timber, soil, or cultural landmarks like Balance Rock.



Contributed photos

Balance Rock has always been a popular gathering place. This postcard from the turn of the century reads, We were so sorry you couldn't come last Saturday. Start off the new year by writing us a letter, it will improve your handwriting. It was postmarked on Jan. 6, 1910.



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The unusual granite formation, estimated to be between 300 and 500 million years old, will now be around for many more generations to come – a true rock of ages.