



## A Georgia Political Dynasty Is Selling Its \$26 Million Hunting Preserve

*Chokee Farm has hosted a baker's dozen of national grandees.*

by James Tarmy

Mark Taylor, a former two-term lieutenant governor of Georgia, was born into an entrepreneurial family.

His late father Fred founded the Fred Taylor Co. in the 1960s “with \$95 and a \$2,300 loan from my grandfather,” Taylor says. Today, the company has a truck leasing company with 17 locations in two states and owns or manages 1.2 million square feet of warehousing space. “He built something up from nothing,” says Taylor of his father, who died in 2011. “He was just a tremendously successful businessman.”

It was somewhat out of character for the elder Taylor when, in 1994, he purchased a 3,200-acre tract of land called Chokee Farm, with a few partners and no intention of making money.



*The 2,700-square-foot lodge was built in 2014.*

“I think the genesis of it was that he loved farms and wanted to acquire one for himself,” Taylor says. That love snowballed into a passion. Four years after the initial purchase, Taylor bought out his partners and began to expand the holding by buying adjacent tracts until the property measured more than 5,100 acres. “He threw a tremendous amount of personal time into creating it—or rather, recreating it, in his vision,” Taylor says.

Today, Chokee is a vast gentleman’s quail-hunting estate that has hosted a string of local and national political figures, including governors and U.S. attorneys general.

Taylor says his father made improvements to the land until his death; Taylor and his sister have since continued to update the property by building an elegant new lodge for guests, renovating other buildings, and continuously upgrading the land.

Now the family has decided to sell the property, listing it with Jon Kohler & Associates for \$26 million.

“My father was a planner,” Taylor says, “and he left specific instructions about how he wanted his business to be operated and what he saw as the future of Chokee farm.” Should the land ever be appraised at \$26 million, Taylor says, his father felt that his children should “seriously consider selling the farm and purchasing a smaller one,” so that’s what they’ve decided to do.



*The dining room*

“We’re blessed that we’re not forced to sell Chokee,” Taylor says. “In my sisters’ and my mind, we’re following our father’s instructions.”

### The Land



*The property has seven and a half miles of frontage on the Flint River.*

Chokee sits on land that was once part of the Senah Plantation, a huge tract assembled by James Hanes of the Hanes textile fortune. “He used it as a working farm,” Taylor explains. “He had cattle operations, an extensive hog operation, and of course, row crops.”

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By the time Taylor's father purchased the land, though, "There was no infrastructure to speak of," he says. "A couple of silos and a dog kennel. So he just took it from there."



*There are nearly 1,000 acres of irrigated cropland.*

The property abuts 7 1/2 miles of the Flint River. In addition to four large ponds that the Hanes family had built, Taylor says his father dug six, bringing the total to 10. The ponds are stocked with fish; the third generation of Taylor children used to catch them with cane poles.

Next, the elder Taylor built miles of roads and pathways, including a road that follows the river. There are vast forest reserves, 986 acres of irrigated cropland, and 280 acres of dry cropland. (Currently, farmers lease the land to grow crops.) Taylor's father lavished the most time on the 3,487 acres of woodland and bird habitats. "There's so much fieldwork that has to be done to create a proper habitat for the birds to thrive," Taylor says.



*The property has big barns for horses and cows.*

It paid off. Taylor hired consultants to come to the ranch to do something called a "whistle count," whereby people "go out in the morning and travel around the farm and listen to the Bobwhite quail as the sun comes up," he says. "They can give a strong estimate based on that." The most recent count was from 2,000 to 3,000 birds on the property. Even so, Taylor says, the family limits the annual hunting harvest to fewer than 200 birds.

There was once a cattle operation that Taylor says his father shut down before his death. "Still," Taylor recalls, "he said I'll have three farms to sell one day: a row crop farm, a cattle ranch that at one point had 700 head of Angus cows, and then a hunting preserve."

There's also a horse barn with a sitting area designed by Taylor's sister. "When he got the bill for that decorating," Taylor jokes, "it was my sister's last project on the land in my father's lifetime."

## **Life On The Ranch**

Notwithstanding the extensive work put into the land by Taylor's father, who lived 20 minutes away in Albany, Ga., he never built a significant home there. Apart from a cottage that the family fixed up, says Taylor, "He always said: 'One day, the family will sell Chokee, and I don't want the husband to fall in love with the land, but the prospective buyer's wife to hate the house I built.'"



*A fire pit at one of the property's 10 ponds.*

"Of course," Taylor adds, "the buyer could be female."

After his father died, Taylor and his siblings decided to build a 2,700-square-foot lodge, completed in 2014.

"My sister designed and built it," Taylor says. "The lodge is unique. You don't enter and find anything dead on the walls, or a big leather recliner. It's all elegantly designed in a French country motif." Sometimes, Taylor says, "we get more compliments on our lodge than our bird hunting." The lodge has three beds and four baths, with a wraparound porch and a fire pit that overlooks a pond.



*The house is decorated in a French country style.*

The list of non-family members who visited the ranch is a long, and contains the names of governors, lieutenant governors, and attorneys general. Taylor's father was chief of staff for George Busbee, who governed Georgia from 1975 through 1982 and was a frequent visitor. So was Griffin Bell, U.S. attorney general under Jimmy Carter's presidency. Thurbert Baker, Georgia's first Black attorney general, visited the ranch, as did Henry McMaster, the present governor of South Carolina, and Tate Reeves, now governing Mississippi.



*A guest cottage sits near the lodge.*

Over the years, Taylor says his father turned down offers "significantly more" than the present asking price. Most of the people were interested in maintaining Chokee as "the best wild hunting ground it can be," he says. "No one has development ideas."

*Photos by Jon Kohler & Associates*