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Collier Neeley, President and CEO Historic Savannah Foundation, stands on the stairs inside the Davenport House Museum. RICHARD BURKHART/SAVANNAH MORNING NEWS

New historic Savannah president is named

Brings deep preservation experience to leadership role

Evan Lasseter
Savannah Morning News
USA TODAY NETWORK

On the bookshelf in Collier Neeley’s office at Historic Savannah Foundation sits a worn-covered copy of what’s known as a preservation bible of sorts, *Revolving Funds for Historic Preservation: A Manual of Practice*.

The text details Savannah’s Revolving Fund, the primary tool HSF uses to save buildings, and was coauthored by Savannah preservation legend Lee Adler. The legacy of that fund put HSF on Neeley’s radar, and his admiration came full circle in late August when Neeley was named the organization’s latest president and CEO.

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The Historic Savannah Foundation headquarters on York Street, across Columbia Square from the Davenport House Museum.

‘It takes all the flavor out of them’

Georgia’s growers and researchers think peaches are ripe for upgrade

Jillian Magtoto
Savannah Morning News
USA TODAY NETWORK

Peaches—one thing you won’t find in a true Georgian’s refrigerator.

“It takes all the flavor out of them,” says Lawton Pearson, co-owner and fifth-generation farmer of Pearson

Farm in Fort Valley, the heart of the state’s most peach-productive region.

But for wholesale growers like Pearson who ship peaches up to thousands of miles away, chilling peaches immediately after harvest prevents peaches from softening, overripening, then bruising during their rocky rides in trucks and planes. So that the fruit stays intact, “the industry has been storing the peaches right above freezing,” said Angelos Deltisidis, post-harvest specialist at the University of Georgia (UGA) Cooperative Extension.

Still, it’s no secret that store-bought peaches just don’t taste as good as the ones freshly plucked at a U-Pick orchard or just turned tender at a farmers market. And Deltisidis and Pearson suspect that it’s because that post-harvest refrigeration still reduces the peaches’ Georgia-famous juiciness.

Customers “get fruit that might look good, but they don’t taste good,” said Deltisidis. “Because many times they’ve been stored in the improper

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SPD’S FAMILY VIOLENCE UNIT

Victims are empowered with tools and support

Helps document evidence and connect with vital resources

Ansley Franco
Savannah Morning News
USA TODAY NETWORK

This year, the Savannah Police Department has recorded more domestic violence fatalities than in any year since 2019. Detective Constance Hogan with the Family Violence Unit investigates and oversees these cases.

The unit began in January 2019 to ensure the sensitive and complex cases are handled appropriately. According to information from the National Domestic Violence Hotline, it often takes a victim seven times to leave before staying away for good.

So far this year, data SPD shared with the *Savannah Morning News* shows six people have been killed in domestic violence disputes compared to four in 2024.

While the SPD has recorded fewer domestic violence cases so far this

“It is our sole goal in that unit to make sure that our victims get the most resources and help that they can so that they don’t have to return back to that situation.”

Constance Hogan
Detective

year compared to the last seven years, intimate partner abuse poses a real challenge for the state. In 2024, there were 42,184 incidents of family violence reported — a 12% increase from the previous year, according to the Georgia Commission on Family Violence.

U.S. Senator Jon Ossoff has recently allocated \$6.2 million to the State of Georgia’s Criminal Justice Coordinating Council to combat violent crimes against women while strengthening services for victims of domestic and dating violence, sexual assault and stalking.

“We have a domestic violence crisis in the State of Georgia with insufficient resources to address this crisis and to help victims and survivors of domestic violence,” Sen. Ossoff said.

Locally, SPD works closely with SAFE Shelter Center for Domestic Violence Services to share information on resources available for victims within the community.

“Domestic violence is still very taboo so people don’t like to talk about it, but it is becoming more out there where people are aware of it happening,” Det. Hogan said. She started working at the SPD in 2016 and joined the Family Violence Unit once it opened, feeling compelled to do so based on her personal experience growing up in a home where violence was present.

From 2023 to 2024, there was a 14% decrease in domestic violence cases

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Neeley

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“Having the opportunity to work with the community and the organization that revolutionized the preservation movement, that really took it from a heritage hobby to a real economic driver, ... that was really exciting to me,” Neeley said in an interview.

Neeley joins HSF with a strong preservation background at organizations throughout the Southeast—the Landmarks Foundation of Montgomery, Ala.; the Alabama Historical Commission, and Atlanta’s Historic Oakland Cemetery. He also holds a master’s degree in Heritage Preservation from Georgia State University.

Collier’s selection as HSF’s top leader signals the organization is bringing preservation advocacy into sharper focus. The move comes at a time Savannah feels pressure from growth in tourism and development, a persistent housing shortage, and concern over balancing new development with the need to preserve its historic character.

“We have a passionate preservationist who is excellent with money and raising funds, engaging the community, and isn’t afraid to take a stand,” said HSF Board Chairman Austin Hill. “I think that’s exactly what we need.”

Family legacy

Neeley grew up dragging his sister and cousins along on history-related field trips, visiting historic house museums, battlefields, and landmarks such as Colonial Williamsburg. His grandmother, Mary Ann Neeley, served as executive director of the Landmarks Foundation of Montgomery for more than two decades.

That organization, which Neeley himself helmed for about five years, drew “spiritual inspiration” from HSF, Neeley said. “I was just immersed in (historic preservation) from the very beginning.”

One of Landmarks Foundation’s signatures is Old Alabama Town, an outdoor museum comprised of over 50 historic structures preserved by the organization.

Structures tell stories of how people worked in central Alabama in the 19th and 20th centuries, preserve examples of Montgomery’s urban slavery, and show elements of the social fabric of “19th century everyday life,” according to Landmarks Foundation’s website.

Mary Ann Neeley ran the organization from 1979 to 2003. Collier Neeley became executive director in 2019, one year after his grandmother’s passing.

“Long story short, Old Alabama Town’s got a huge story to tell, right? And that’s part of what my grandmother was doing. So, I got to take on that legacy, and it was really, really fun,” Neeley said.

But following his grandmother’s footsteps made it harder to forge a legacy of his own. At Landmarks Foundation, he would always be looked at as “Mary Ann’s grandson,” Neeley said, being sure to note he meant it as no disparagement to his grandmother.

Then, the role at HSF opened. “I’ve always kind of had an eye on Historic Savannah Foundation, so when the CEO position came open it was like, ‘oh God, we have to at least ask,’ right,” Neeley recalled.

The hiring committee, consisting of Hill, another board member, preservation experts and past presidents, fielded more than 50 applications. The group interviewed fewer than 10 candidates from that pool, Hill explained.

The search was launched when former President and CEO Sue Alder

stepped down in March. Hill credited Adler with stabilizing the organization, which was needed when she took the position in 2019.

But going into the new search, Hill knew the organization needed a staunch preservation at the helm again. Neeley’s resume showed a “pursuit of preservation” from his graduate degree to the diversity of organizations he worked for, Hill said. “We were excited about his resume and his application from the second we received it.”

HSF’s future

In recent years, HSF’s Davenport House Museum has expanded the stories it tells about its history.

It opened an Urban Enslaved exhibit in 2023 to tell of the 13 enslaved persons who lived at the house during the Davenport era, and the museum recently launched a temporary photo exhibit about Robert Chan, one of Savannah’s first Chinese immigrants who lived in the house when it was a tenement.

Neeley recalled learning of that storytelling vision during a visit in July, where he met Davenport House Museum Executive Director Danielle Hodes. Neeley then had the realization that such storytelling can be done throughout Savannah.

“Preservation is not done. We can’t just see all the work that has been done as being it,” Neeley said. “There is an immense amount of opportunity in Savannah, because there are just so many stories here, and there are so many stories that haven’t been told.”

Neeley also showed awareness of major planning and preservation projects on Savannah’s horizon, namely the opportunity to restore portions of the Oglethorpe Plan at the Savannah Civic Center site and eventual removal of the Interstate 16 Flyover for community rede-

velopment.

A major lesson Neeley learned in Montgomery, and through work with nonprofit Your Town Alabama, was about coalition building, he said. Your Town Alabama convenes annual workshops around collaboratively and strategically planning community development projects.

Neeley’s eye towards community collaboration is part of the culture he is seeking to build within HSF, he said. And major projects, such as the Civic Center site redevelopment or I-16 Flyover removal, are bound to consist of community engagement.

“Let’s go be friends with people, let’s build relationships, build coalitions and recognize everybody’s on the same team,” Neeley said. “The only way that we enhance, improve and protect the unique character of Savannah is by working together.”

Neeley also acknowledged some potential challenges facing preservation, rattling off items such as overtourism, potential loss of local identity, and those major planning projects on the horizon.

But he called on HSF’s “Seven Ladies” and how their launch of Savannah’s preservation movement helped build the product millions flock to visit each year. Yet the fight they faced in saving the Davenport House may not be totally dissimilar to the challenges the city faces now, he said.

“Everybody cares about the historic fabric of the city because they recognize that’s the thing driving people here,” Neeley said.

“Now, how do we enhance it and preserve it so that it continues to drive people here, but we also feel like Savannah’s still home?”

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Victims

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reported by SPD. And of the 362 incidents last year, 132 involved a gun.

“We more so focus on the felony side of things. When we focus on those felonies, we’re able to do a deeper dive, see that prior history, and focus on getting

those cases through the court system and testifying, so there’s a possibility of a greater outcome, not a dismissal,” Det. Hogan said.

The four detectives and sergeant in the SPD’s Family Violence Unit go through extensive training in recognizing signs of and building cases around instances of strangulation, stalking and general abuse.

“It is our sole goal in that unit to make

sure that our victims get the most resources and help that they can so that they don’t have to return back to that situation,” Det. Hogan said. “We would like to see none of our victims to ever have to be victims again.”

She urged people to speak up, tell law enforcement and reach out to the Family Violence Unit.

“I’m not going to promise that somebody is going to jail or that it’s going to

get better the first time, but at least we can start documenting those things and offering those resources to give the victims the option to walk away from that situation.”

Ansley Franco is an intern with the Savannah Morning News, covering public safety and general assignments. You can reach her at afranco@gannett.com.



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