

Introduction

Cumberland Island is an eighteen-mile-long stretch of sand and marsh lying some three miles off the southernmost Georgia coast. It is part of a system of barrier islands stretching from central Florida to Virginia. Individually, the resources of the island do not seem spectacular. Nowhere does it achieve an altitude greater than sixty feet. Its vegetative communities, while delicate, are not especially rare. Its mansions are imposing, even in ruins, but larger and more significant homes are found in many other places. Horses roam free on the island as they also do at Assateague and Cape Lookout National Seashores and many places in the American West. The beach is striking but tainted by a huge jetty and views of an ugly paper mill from the south end. Archaeological sites abound, yet most consist primarily of ancient shells of still common shellfish. Even those have been adulterated by bulldozing for road use and by natural erosion. It seems an odd location for one of the most contentious and bitter resource conflicts in the national park system.

When one looks at the entire assemblage, however, a different picture emerges. The wide, empty beach imparts solitude and wonder to anyone walking it. At night one may witness the millennia-old process of a loggerhead turtle laying her eggs above high-tide line. The maritime oak forest and even the former pine plantations, made impenetrable by a palmetto understory, blanket the island interior and enfold trails and creeks. Freshwater lakes hold rare discoveries including some fairly large alligators. Acres of marsh stretch along the sound side of the island. Raccoons eat crabs along the edges while myriad sea birds come and go. A long, bumpy sand and shell road runs the length of the island, an alternative to the beach for those seeking an easy path. It connects several historic complexes made as fascinating by their years of seclusion and limited use as by their architecture.

More than anything else, the diversity of Cumberland Island, the almost overwhelming sense of natural beauty mingled with mystery, and its enveloping calm make rabid loyalists of nearly all who live on, visit, or manage it (fig. 1.1). During 1998 a meeting was held for adversaries representing



Fig. 1.1. One of the most important features of Cumberland Island is its extensive maritime oak forest. (National Park Service photograph by Richard Frear)

historic preservation, wilderness advocacy, and recreation development organizations. Near the meeting's conclusion, the combatants gathered to sit in an old African-American church at the north end of the island. The participants had come several miles by either the main road under the towering forest or by boat through twisting lanes in the marsh, according to their conservation beliefs. All sat in the few pews of the tiny church as a silence descended. Finally, someone acknowledged that he understood the passionate beliefs of the other side even though he could not agree. The opposition offered a similar view. The talk turned to the values that they shared. Every person in that abandoned church loved Cumberland Island and sought the absolute best for it. Their understandings of best would continue to clash, but for a moment they saw themselves as a united group, united by passion for a special place. That passion for this paradise makes Cumberland Island National Seashore an unfortunate arena for conflict. It is also what makes it one of the most rewarding of the nearly 390 national park units.

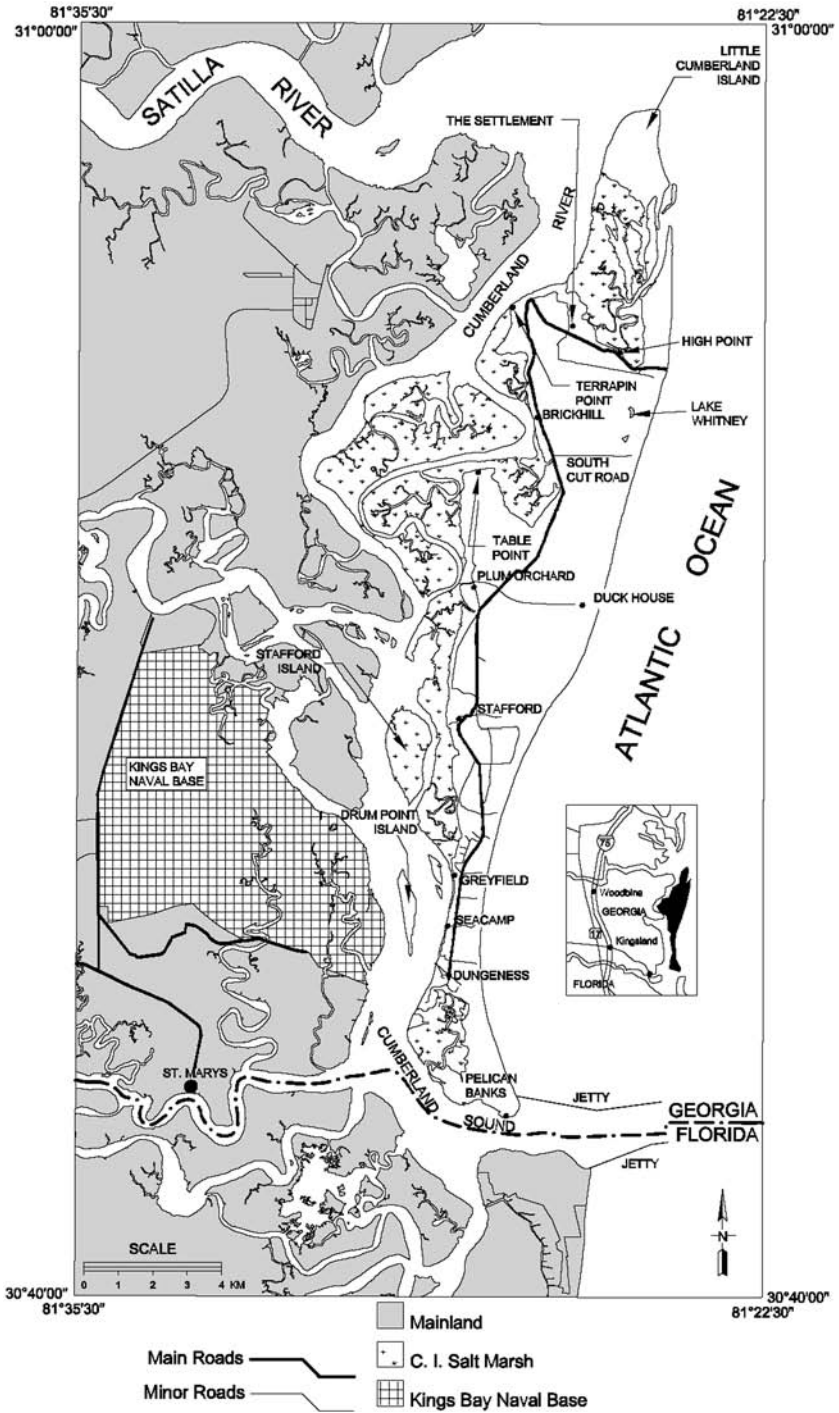
This book is a historical geography, which is to say it is the biography of a place.¹ Cumberland Island is one segment of the complex, interrelated

earth, subject to a unique combination of environmental forces and processes. For at least 6,000 years the island has absorbed the modifying effects of human habitation as well. Until 1972 these societies manipulated the land for utilitarian purposes. Beginning in 1972, however, the pattern changed. The arrival of an organization with a mandate to preserve natural processes signaled the most significant change in human activity since the arrival of Paleo-Indians.

This book is also a history. Specifically, it is a history of the National Park Service and its practice of conservation. The federal bureau came to Cumberland armed with a complex set of policies and a philosophy based on voluminous legislation, procedural tradition, and an agency culture formed from evolving management. The 1916 act that established the Park Service charged the agency to preserve resources, both natural and historical, but also to encourage and support public visitation. If either of these mandates is carried to its ultimate extreme, it becomes contradictory. Pure preservation of natural ecological processes precludes nearly all nonresearch visitors. Development to meet all public recreation demands unquestionably would destroy the ecological resources. Throughout its history the National Park Service has struggled to achieve a balance between these extremes.²

On Cumberland Island the issues are especially complicated. The island's rich ecology and long, colorful history have left a spatial pattern of intermingled resources that resembles two decks of cards shuffled together (map 1.1). Management for historic preservation inevitably hampers the purity of natural resource protection. Alternatively, management only for the natural environment and unchecked natural processes demands that man-made artifacts be ignored or even eliminated. Establishment of wilderness status on the north end seriously complicates any proactive procedures aimed at protecting either the human or the natural resources. Added to these conflicting management directives is the continuing presence of private landowners as well as long-term leased estates on lands sold to the Park Service. Having rights to modify historic structures on their estates, drive over much of the island, and otherwise use its many resources, these residents cannot help but impact all of Cumberland's many assets.

Cumberland Island, then, presents a remarkable collision of historic preservation, environmental protection, and numerous legal restrictions and caveats. All other units in the national park system face these issues to some degree. However, this idyllic, semitropical island presents one of the most complex and controversial collisions of value, law, and emotion in the



Map 1.1. Cumberland Island location map

system—in fact, among all the preserved lands of the United States. Thus, the histories of this fascinating place and of these different philosophies come together to shape, but also to embroil in conflict, one magical place.

Three related questions address the story of Cumberland Island. The first concerns the level of human occupation and the repeated escapes from massive development that the island has experienced. Native Americans on the island seldom numbered more than a few hundred. Their use of fire and their disposal of garbage left only faint evidence. When the Spanish arrived, their mission efforts threatened Cumberland with a high population of acolytes imported from the mainland. However, this project collapsed because of English harassment. The latter constructed two forts on the island but never fully developed them. In the antebellum plantation period, Cumberland Island reached its population apogee, yet nearly all were slaves whose movements were proscribed. The Carnegies added a chain of estates but rejected suggestions to transform the island by strip-mining, clear-cut logging, and residential subdivision. Finally, upon acquisition of the island, the National Park Service developed a plan for massive recreation development. The public soundly rejected it. That same environmentalist-led public pushed the Park Service to seek and receive wilderness designation for the northern half of the island.

Today, Cumberland Island has less human presence and pressure on it than at any time since the American Revolution. The designation “national seashore,” in the Park Service lexicon, means a recreation area. Yet only 300 tourists per day are allowed to visit more than 16,000 acres of land. The island has no motels, no restaurants, no stores, and no true visitor center. Is this or is this not a recreation unit?

A second question addresses the legacy of human activities, the infrastructure of more than 6,000 years of use. Mansions, gardens, simple shacks, airfields, roads, trails, burial mounds, foundations, walls, and cemeteries dot the island. Most have achieved at least one criterion for addition to the National Register of Historic Places: they are more than 50 years old. From 1972, the National Park Service has faced decisions on how many of these features to preserve. Many factors influence the choices made for each of the more than 200 structures. Which era of human activity is most important historically and should be emphasized in visitor interpretation? The answer will determine which buildings and relics to save. If all of them are critical, how can the agency fund their maintenance? Should any be removed from an area zoned for reversion to a natural ecosystem?

Perhaps the most troubling concern is how far should the government go to preserve a building that has suffered decades of neglect and damage? Cumberland Island is a platform for widely dispersed and radically different types of cultural resources developed over many centuries. How much of this human legacy should be maintained and at what cost? Is this national seashore a historic unit or not?

The third question addresses the natural ecosystem that has existed at Cumberland Island for thousands of years. Vegetation and animals in complex communities carried out their life cycles together. Geological and climatic forces shaped the island's coasts and landforms. As soon as humans arrived, changes began. Native Americans increased the frequency of fire and created artificial habitats with their shell and bone deposits. Europeans caused much more change, bringing horses, cattle, pigs, old-world crops, and devastating diseases. During the plantation era some species disappeared from the island while a host of exotic plants and animals were deliberately introduced. What natural vegetation remained was spatially manipulated. Even during the relatively benign Carnegie years, the acreage of salable pine increased dramatically at the expense of oak woodland and other biotic communities.

When the National Park Service arrived, it sought to return the island to an approximation of the biotic system prevalent before Europeans arrived. This meant unfettered natural processes as well as an assemblage of plants and animals quite different from the one that met it in 1972. However, many elements of the human presence on the island directly or indirectly stunted this effort. Not only did historic structures disrupt the natural ecological processes, but their maintenance demanded transport across the island. Retention of estates further diluted ecosystem preservation. And then there are the matters of the financial and political prices of returning to nature. How much will it cost to permanently remove feral pigs? How about tamarack? Will the public ever accept the removal of horses? What efforts, if any, should be taken to halt erosion? Can natural processes ever approximate their prehuman form while historic buildings, residents, and visitors are on the island? What visitor activities can be allowed and by how many before unacceptable environmental change occurs? Is this island a natural resource unit of the park system, or is it not?

The following eight chapters reveal the actions taken and decisions made by several centuries of people on Cumberland Island. But they focus particularly on the stresses and strains of trying to preserve the island for a tri-

partite of worthy goals. The first two chapters deal with the ways the island reached its transformed stage by 1972. The first describes the earliest inhabitants up to the end of the plantation period while the second chronicles the years when the island served as a vacation retreat for the wealthy Carnegie and Candler families. Chapters 3 and 4 explain the creation of Cumberland Island National Seashore and land acquisition by the Park Service. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 relate the myriad issues and conflicts the agency encountered in its management from 1972 through the mid-1990s. Finally, the last chapter brings the reader through a tumultuous few years when the Park Service aggressively tried to solve many of the most pernicious problems. The conclusion reflects on the state of the island today and on the future of its evolving government management.