



A Richness of Resources: Cumberland Island to 1880

Congress and President Richard Nixon established Cumberland Island National Seashore on October 23, 1972, after an unexpectedly controversial campaign.¹ Most of the landowners favored the seashore and willingly sold their property at reduced prices in order to save the land. However, they exacted a price in the form of retained estates and driving rights for up to three generations. Others elected to keep their land private. Once the seashore was established, environmental organizations sought wilderness status to transform the island into a nature preserve while historic preservation groups insisted that the entire island merited nomination to the National Register of Historic Places. Another group, dominated by local residents on the mainland, demanded that the island be developed as a national recreation resort. One of the most compelling characteristics of this largest of Georgia's "golden isles" is that it contains the resources to satisfy all these competing visions.

This chapter explains the genesis and formation of those resources up to 1880. The first section describes the natural resources and the environmental processes responsible for them. Thereafter, a chronological survey of the human history on the island illustrates the modifications effected by Native Americans, Spanish missionaries, English adventurers, and antebellum plantation owners and slaves. Together with the Carnegies and Candles, whose era is the subject of chapter 2, these groups of people altered the island's landforms and ecosystems while adding their relics to create a landscape markedly different from the prehuman one. The National Park Service must protect and preserve that accumulation of human designs, as well as the dynamic natural system upon which they repose, "unimpaired for future generations."²

Cumberland Island's Genesis and Formation

Cumberland Island is part of a system of barrier islands stretching along the Atlantic coast from southern Virginia to central Florida (fig. 1.1). It lies immediately north of the Florida border and is the largest of the Sea Islands of Georgia. Including Little Cumberland Island, which is separated from the larger isle by salt marsh and a narrow creek, it is approximately 18.5 miles long and from half a mile to more than 3 miles wide. The upland terrain totals roughly 16,400 acres (including Little Cumberland). In addition, some 9,400 acres of salt marsh stretch from much of the western coastline out into Cumberland Sound. The highest elevations occur in the dunes east of the Plum Orchard mansion, reaching over fifty-five feet at several points. More than 1,600 acres were classified as freshwater lakes in the early 1970s, but the depletion of groundwater flowing from the mainland has diminished their size. The remaining freshwater habitats lie behind the dunes from Lake Whitney southward along the center of Cumberland Island.³

The geologic story of the barrier islands of Georgia begins with the Appalachians. The ancient range reaches its highest elevations along the most southeastern ridge known as the Blue Ridge. To its east lies a hilly plateau of similar resistant rock called the piedmont. These geologic features supply eroded material that is carried by scores of rivers toward the southeast and the ocean. At the edge of the piedmont, the slopes briefly steepen, signaling the beginning of the Atlantic coastal plain, which consists of the eroded materials of the past 25 million years. There the rivers quicken into a series of small waterfalls and rapids. This piedmont–coastal plain boundary is known as the fall line.⁴

The coastal plain is a shallow, sloping depositional surface that continues under the sea to the edge of the continental shelf eighty miles east of the present Georgia shoreline and 160 feet below the present sea level. Over the millennia sea level has periodically changed, causing the shoreline to reach as high as the fall line during the Miocene (from 25 million to 7 million years ago) and as low as the edge of the continental shelf 20,000 years ago. During all this period the rivers continued to carry eroded material to the sea and deposit it on ancient beaches.

When rivers reach the ocean, they drop their sediment load within a few miles of the shore. The accumulated silt and sand then is washed along the coast by wave action and coastal currents. Along the Georgia coast the sea generally moves material southward. Geologists have offered several



Fig. 1.1. An aerial view of part of the eighteen-mile-long ocean beach with maritime oak forest and the Dungeness estate in the background

scenarios for the formation of barrier islands off the Georgia coast. Some propose that sediment deposited at each river mouth is washed against the adjacent headlands, forming spits that reach across the bays. A slight rise in sea level cuts off the spits, forming barrier islands. Subsequently, the sound between the islands and the mainland continues to collect sediment, and salt marsh vegetation colonizes the margins of the land. If sea level remains relatively constant, the marshy sound may eventually fill. Whether or not this occurs, a drop in sea level will expose the area as dry land with discernible eastern ridges composed of the former barrier islands.⁵

Another scenario holds that a sandbar in the shallow, near-shore sea serves as a collection point for sediment that builds to near the water surface. A drop in sea level exposes the bar as a barrier island. Thereafter the sound is colonized by salt marshes, and the entire landward margin is exposed once sea level drops far enough. In either of these scenarios, the barrier islands themselves manifest irregularities in their surfaces that become the starting points for sand dunes. In this way the elevations of the barrier islands increase.⁶

The Georgia coast experienced many sea-level changes over the period from 25 million to 18,000 years ago. The latter date corresponds with the maximum point of the most recent glacial advance and the lowest sea level. Periodic stabilization has created seven identifiable lines of former barrier islands on the coastal plain. These descend from the fall line in a series of terraces or steps composed of former marshlands and islands. In the last 2 million years, two of these barrier island formations have created the present Georgia Sea Islands. During the Pleistocene (1.8 million to 10,000 years ago), a barrier island chain known as the Silver Bluff formation appeared. The most recent period, the Holocene (10,000 years ago to present), has witnessed an accelerated recession of the world's glaciers and concomitant sea-level rise that developed another barrier formation. The Holocene barriers then migrated shoreward and became welded onto the Silver Bluff islands. Cumberland Island is composed primarily of Silver Bluff material, but the eastern edge, especially in the north (including virtually all of Little Cumberland Island) and the extreme south, are Holocene additions.⁷

One side effect of this constant deposition of eroded material at a fluctuating coastline is the layering effect of the sediments. During the millions of years, the rivers carried different types of material to the sea, depending on their source. These were deposited along the sea floor. Subsequent periods saw ancestral rivers deposit different types of material on top of the previous layers. Under Cumberland Island a number of distinct strata reflect different geologic periods and different source materials. All these layers, like the surface of the coastal plain, slope downward toward the edge of the continental shelf. Two of these strata primarily contain porous material that allows groundwater to flow easily through them. Others are composed of more impermeable material like clay that does not contain groundwater and blocks penetration by water upward or downward from the more porous layers. The principal groundwater layer on Cumberland Island and around the coastal region is composed of Miocene era limestone. The earliest deep well to tap this eastward-flowing source on Cumberland Island reached the water table more than 500 feet below the surface in 1887. The water, freed from the confined permeable layers, gushed out of the well at 800,000 gallons per day. A second aquifer flows through Pleistocene sands some 90 feet below the surface. The National Park Service accesses this water source for the campgrounds. Recently, fears have arisen that extensive water removal on the mainland will deplete the eastward-flowing groundwater before it can reach the wells on Cumberland Island.⁸

The topography of Cumberland Island is affected by the dual barrier island systems of the past 20,000 years. More than 90 percent of the island is composed of fine-grained sands. As one approaches the ocean beach from the sea, the slope gently rises at a rate of four feet per mile. Once ashore, a traveler crosses the wide beach and encounters the foredune, a low sand ridge that forms the first line of defense against the sea. Beyond the foredune lies an interdune meadow followed by the much higher rear dune. The highest elevations on the island can be found on the latter. Typically these dunes are anchored by vegetation and remain relatively stable except when a severe storm strikes. However, on Cumberland Island destruction of dune vegetation has allowed the rear dune to move westward and encroach upon the next zone, an area of flat ridges and depressions that contains freshwater lakes and marshes. The foredunes and some of the rear dunes consist of Holocene sediment.⁹

Beyond the zone of depressions, one encounters ridges and intervening swales of the Pleistocene Silver Bluff era. The highest of the old dune ridges are found in the center of the island. A portion of the ancient dune formation reaches the sea at the north end of the bigger island, accounting for the bluffs that face Little Cumberland. Continuing to move westward, the island slopes downward, occasionally interrupted by minor ridges until it meets the tidal mudflats and marshes of Cumberland Sound. Both the Pleistocene and Holocene dune ridges are lowest in height at the narrow southern end of the island.¹⁰

The two most important mainland rivers for Cumberland Island are the Satilla on the north, which separates the Cumberland group from Jekyll Island, and the St. Marys on the south. The St. Marys inlet separates Cumberland from Florida's Amelia Island. The Satilla historically brought sediment to the beaches of Cumberland, but the amount has been vastly reduced by dam construction and water diversion upriver. On Cumberland Island itself, several creeks cross from the rear dunes to the sound. The three most significant geographically are Christmas Creek, which separates Little Cumberland from the larger island; Old House Creek, which empties into the sound near Stafford Island; and Beach Creek, which flows just south of Dungeness and through the marshes on the southwestern part of the island.¹¹

Cumberland's Ecology

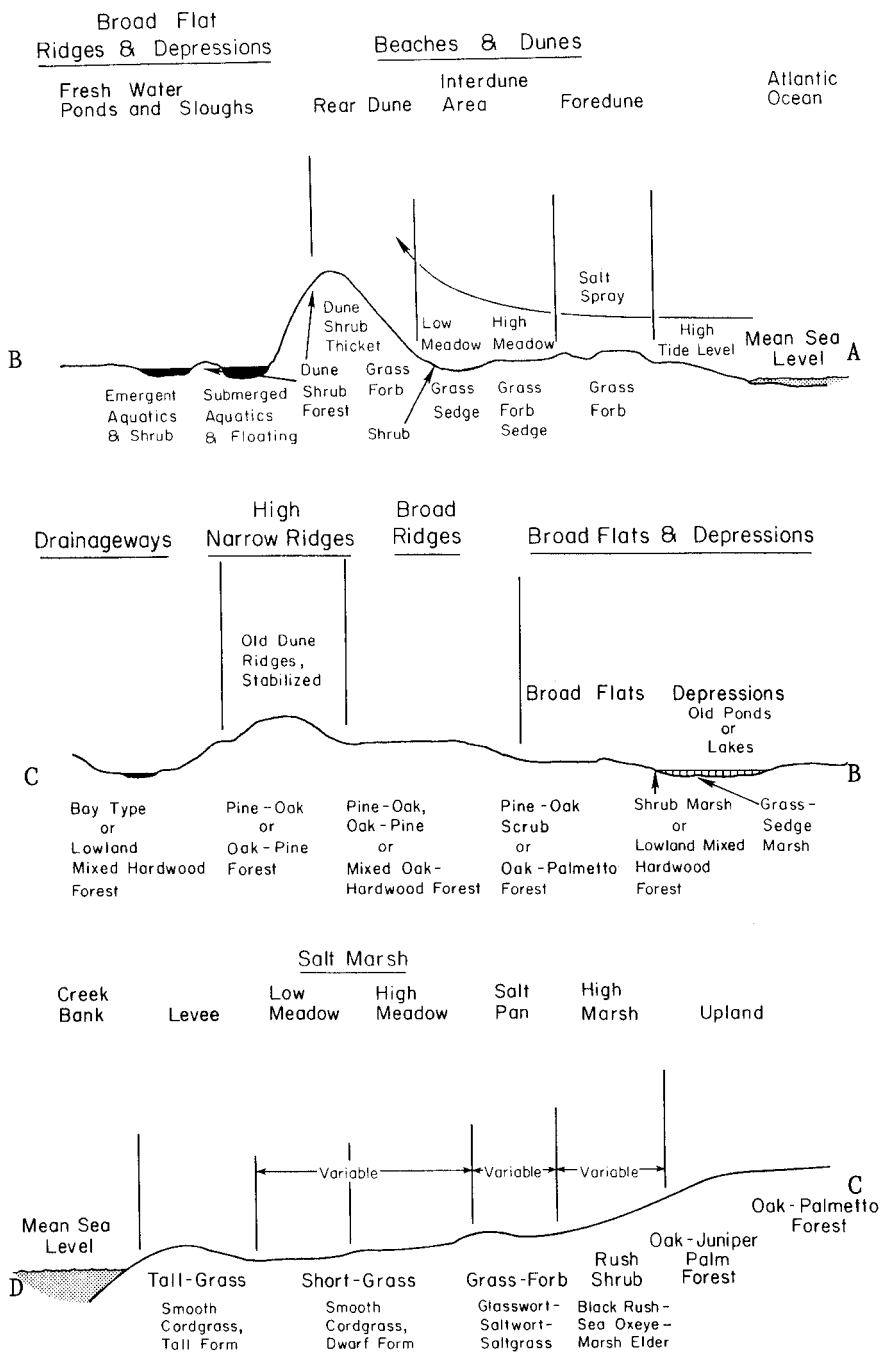
The biota of Cumberland Island is rich and diverse despite the inherent stresses of island life. At the height of the last ice age, the Pleistocene Cum-

berland Island was a low ridge many miles inland from the coast. A cooler and much drier climate supported species of plants that today inhabit areas in the Appalachians or several hundred miles to the north. During the centuries of warming, but before the island was cut off from the mainland, numerous terrestrial species of plants and animals colonized the future island. By 5,500 years ago, a rising sea level returned the Silver Bluff ridge to island status. Subsequently, additional plant species with adequate seed dispersal techniques, as well as animals that could fly or swim, also reached the island. Finally, throughout the period of the island's emergence, Native Americans lived in the region and visited Georgia's primary golden isle. They likely brought valuable plants and animals with them to increase the range of these species in order to ease their subsistence hunting and gathering. By 3,000 years ago these favorites included agricultural crops.¹²

At the time of European contact, Cumberland Island boasted an assortment of biotic communities adapted to the climate and various microhabitats of the island. Southeastern Georgia, including Cumberland Island, has a classic humid subtropical climate with hot, muggy summers, marked by frequent convection thunderstorms, and mild winters with periodic frontal storms. It is a climate conducive to the growth of species from both the semitropical and temperate latitudes. Five major groups of vegetation communities that occur along the island's geomorphic profile were identified by Hillestad et al. (map 1.1). On the eastern side the dunes contain three grass and scrub communities dominated respectively by sea oats and other grasses; shrubs including saw palmetto, Spanish bayonet, and bayberry; and a gnarled buckthorn–live oak–pine assemblage. The interdune flats contain grass-sedge, shrub, and pine-mixed hardwood communities, depending on the degree of protection from salt spray and the time since the last disturbance. The third group of communities clusters in and around the freshwater lakes in the zone of depressions. Among these communities are various aquatic plants, emergent sedges and grasses, and a riparian forest dominated by water-loving species such as willow, sweet bay, and bayberry.¹³

The category of vegetation communities most prized by early explorers and modern campers includes several upland forest assemblages. Hillestad et al. described five different communities that reflect soil type, drainage, successional stage, fire history, and various human activities. The three predominant ones are oak-palmetto, oak-pine, and oak–mixed hardwood (fig. 1.2). The human manipulation of these forest ecosystems has caused the most significant changes in the visual landscape throughout the last 5,000

H A B I T A T T Y P E S



Map 1.1. Generalized profile of land and vegetation on Cumberland Island. (Original map in National Park Service, 1975, *Draft Environmental Statement, General Management Plan, Cumberland Island National Seashore*, CINS Library)



Fig. 1.2. A dense understory of palmetto makes large portions of the forest virtually impenetrable.

years. A final group of communities occurs on the western edge of Cumberland Island. These include several types of salt marsh as well as shrub- or tree-dominated transition zones between the marshes and the upland forest. Important salt-marsh species include salt grass, cordgrass, and various bulrushes and reeds. Saw palmetto, bayberry, and live oaks occur in the transition zone. Recently, National Park Service resource management specialists identified more than 500 species of plants on the island, some 95 percent of which are native to the region.¹⁴

Elements of these vegetation communities have existed on Cumberland since it regained island status. However, their spatial distribution and the percentages of the island that they cover have changed repeatedly. Two significant natural phenomena, lightning fires and severe storms, have destroyed vegetation from time to time, initiating succession on the disturbed areas. Early colonizers like grasses are replaced by other communities until a stable one, known as a climax community, comes into equilibrium with external environmental factors. Nevertheless, natural fires are so prevalent during the summer season that some of the most extensive and seemingly

permanent communities on the island are successional stages. The oak-palmetto and some of the pine forest communities are cases in point.

Another environmental factor is the influence of salt spray on dune communities, which works to limit the shoreward extent of sensitive species. Thus, when a hurricane causes coastal erosion or deposition along the island's shoreline, it sends a ripple of change through the dune communities. These natural processes have manipulated the vegetation geography of the island for centuries. However, when humans arrived, they brought exponentially greater changes.¹⁵

The animals of Cumberland Island have faced the limits of a barrier island ecosystem for thousands of years. One result is less diversity than the mainland. Another is the smaller size of island species like white-tailed deer compared to their mainland counterparts. Nevertheless, the Park Service lists approximately 450 species of animals that can be seen on the island, more than two-thirds of which are birds. As the largest of the Georgia's Sea Islands and a protected environment, Cumberland serves as a major stopping point along the Atlantic flyway. Native terrestrial mammals present today include white-tailed deer, raccoon, Virginia opossum, and various bats, squirrels, gophers, and mice, a few of them endemic to the island. Marine mammals include manatees and dolphins. The largest reptile on the island is the alligator, but various species of snakes, lizards, frogs, and turtles also occur. Hillestad et al. identified 52 species of reptiles and amphibians on the island, half the number found on the adjacent mainland. Loggerhead and, occasionally, other species of sea turtles lay their eggs on the beach as well. Resident bird species number more than 100, with wild turkeys being the visitors' favorite. In addition, Hillestad et al. identified more than 220 species that seasonally or occasionally visit, including bald eagles and peregrine falcons.¹⁶

During the centuries of human occupation, species appeared and disappeared. Some, such as black bear, Florida panther, and bobcat, vanished within the last two centuries. The principal introduction by Paleo-Indians was the dog. Since Europeans arrived, however, the entire Cumberland ecosystem has been drastically altered. Europeans and Americans have turned loose horses, pigs, and many species of birds. They have also facilitated the arrival of armadillos and other species. Floral exotics arrived in the forms of crops, unusual garden plants, and a variety of pernicious weeds that accompanied livestock and grain seed.

The Cumberland Island of 13,000 years ago was a heavily forested up-

land. The forest composition and distribution on the island was likely different than that found by the earliest European visitors. When the Europeans arrived, they still found a more impressive forest than today's. All reports by the Spanish, English, and early American settlers describe towering, thick pine trees, especially on the north end of the island, and magnificent oaks with huge limbs, perfect for ship timbers. Palmetto and other understory species were less prevalent than at present due to shading and other types of competition from the extensive forest canopy.¹⁷

130 Centuries of Native Americans

The arrival of hunting and gathering peoples in North America is a topic that excites considerable scholarly debate. Recent archaeological finds as far south as Chile have overturned a cherished theory that humans arrived within the confines of the present United States only 12,000 years ago. A date of 20,000 B.P. (years before present), coinciding with the onset of glacial retreat, is now widely accepted.¹⁸ Although no data prove that Paleo-Indians arrived that early on the Georgia coast, evidence from Florida suggests that 13,000 years ago is not unreasonable. Between 18,000 and 12,000 B.P., the shoreline remained close to the edge of the continental shelf, some seventy miles east of its present location. Nomadic hunters and gatherers were few in number and possessed a simple technology. Their most dependable sources of food would have been the estuaries and shallow waters of the sea. A rapid rise in sea level between 12,000 and 3,500 B.P. repeatedly inundated their littoral sites as it pushed the shoreline upward and westward. Recently, archaeological remains from southwest Florida have been dated at 12,030 B.P. plus or minus 200 years. A considerably earlier date is suggested by the nearby discovery, at a depth of more than eighty-five feet below current sea level, of the remains of a long extinct giant tortoise that appears to have been killed by a wooden stake driven through its shell.¹⁹

After Cumberland Island reappeared and sea level stabilized, use of the island by Native Americans was probably sporadic and seasonal. National Park Service archaeologist John Ehrenhard and others propose that intensive use of the current coastal region began around 4,000 years ago during what is known as the Bilbo archaeological phase. This culture eventually gave way to other groups about which little is known. One persistent cultural trait, however, was a focus on the sea and marshes for subsistence.

The next stage began about 1,450 years ago and is known as the Deptford

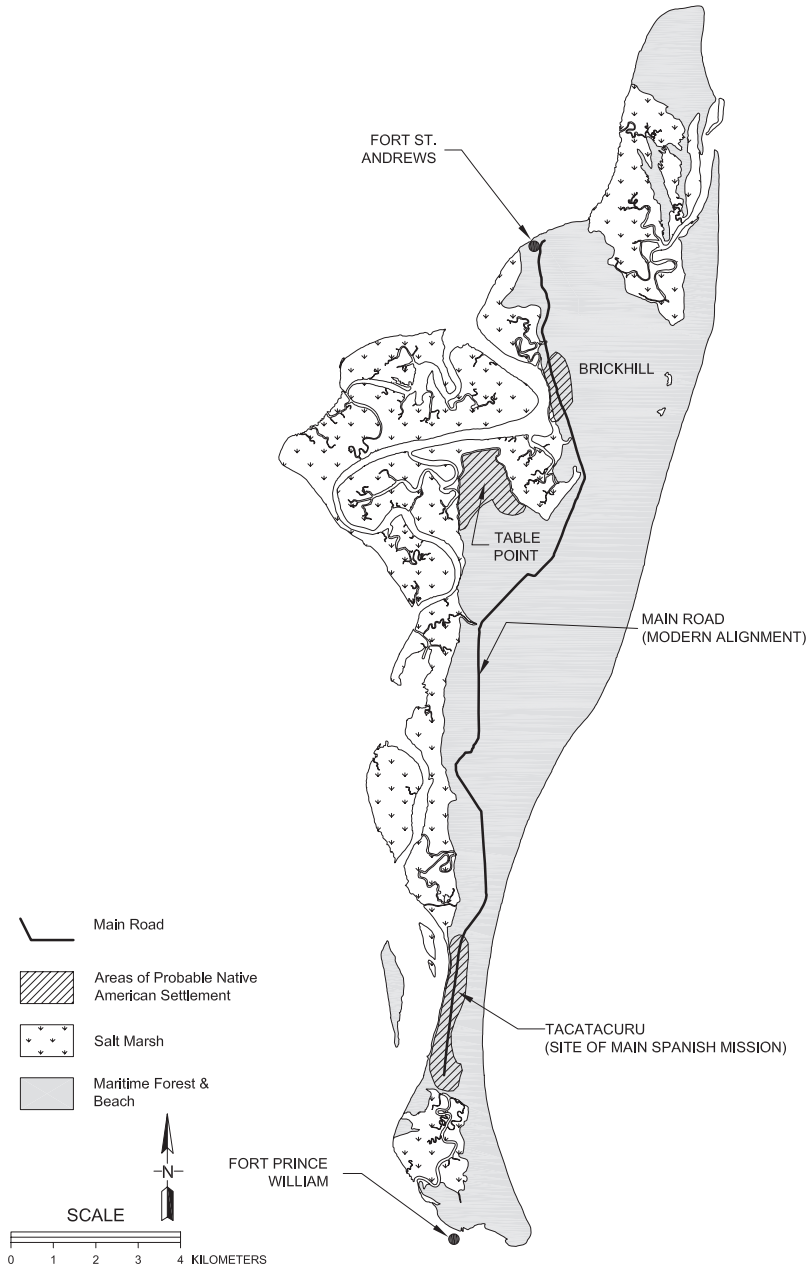
phase. These people showed distinct advances in ceramics manufacture that may indicate a diffusion of ideas from elsewhere. This diffusion might also have brought maize horticulture to the region, allowing people more leisure to experiment with their handicrafts. A further sign of the diffusion of ideas is provided by the appearance in Georgia of burial mound construction, a cultural practice that came to dominate much of the central and southeastern United States. The Deptford people, like those who preceded them, show cultural affinity with peoples north and northwest of Cumberland Island.²⁰

At some time between the appearance of the Deptford phase and the arrival of Europeans (1,450 to 450 years ago), an infusion of people and their culture traits from southern Florida took place. European explorers found that people on the island spoke a Timucuan dialect similar to those found along the Atlantic coast of northern Florida. On the mainland north of Cumberland Island lived a people known as the Guale, bitter enemies of the Timucuan.

The people on Cumberland referred to their particular group as the Tacatacuru. Like their predecessors who inhabited Cumberland Island for centuries before, the Tacatacuru lived in villages on the sound side of the island and exploited shellfish, sea animals, and various terrestrial plants and animals. Their primary settlement was located at the area now known as Dungeness, but they had other significant sites at Table Point and Brickhill (map 1.2).²¹

The Dungeness site is a large one with shell deposits stretching from the dunes on the east along the edge of the marsh to the shore of the Cumberland Sound and then north beyond Sea Camp. Furthermore, coastal erosion has removed the bulk of the village site, leaving only a fraction of the aboriginal relics. Early groups amassed huge communal shell mounds. Ehrenhard has suggested that much of the Dungeness area might have been five or six feet higher than at present. Interestingly, the later Tacatacuru shifted to a rectangular village form of dispersed houses, each accompanied by a small, individual mound. This sprawling village spanned an area from the modern Dungeness Dock to north of Sea Camp. General Nathanael Greene, his heirs, and the Carnegies mined the mounds for shells to build tabby structures and roads. Greene himself leveled one of the largest mounds to build his huge tabby mansion called Dungeness. The ruins of the late nineteenth-century Carnegie mansion still occupy the site.²²

The impact of the Native Americans on the natural ecology of Cumber-



Map 1.2. Native American and colonial sites on Cumberland Island

land Island is difficult to determine definitively. Many centuries of island use and habitation have destroyed or corrupted much of the archaeological record. Nevertheless, some Native American environmental impacts can be confidently proposed. First, Paleo-Indians caused, or at least contributed to, the extinction of the Pleistocene megafauna. Animals such as mammoths, giant sloths, saber-toothed cats, and giant tortoises disappeared in a few thousand years due to the skills of the hunters as well as the animals' inexperience with human predators. The actions of animals partly determine the structure and species content of ecosystems. Elimination of these megafauna sent a ripple effect through the natural world that resulted in new geographies of both plant and surviving animal species.²³

Native Americans also deliberately manipulated the ecology of Cumberland Island by introducing desirable animals and plants and by frequent burning. Timucuan peoples, like other cultures, burned to clear or maintain open fields for agriculture, improve browse for desirable animals like the white-tailed deer, drive animals during a communal hunt, and create an open area around a village for defense. In addition, Native Americans established a latticework of trails and village sites readily adopted by later European and American settlers. Hence when French explorer Jean Ribault visited Cumberland Island in 1562, he found an island already deeply humanized.²⁴

A Colonial Prize

The arrival of the Spanish in North America initiated two processes that forever changed the region. First, the Native American population underwent extensive decline and redistribution. European diseases decimated the tribes of coastal Georgia as they did Native Americans throughout the continent. This catastrophic population decline radically altered their interaction with and impact on the natural environment.

Second, direct conflict between the Spanish and the English over the Georgia coast, an area some historians call "the debatable land," incited raids that led to construction of forts and, ultimately, permanent settlement in the region. These processes took place on Cumberland Island as well as on the other Sea Islands and the adjacent mainland. Although no historic structures survive on the island from this era of imperial design, these European actions began the large-scale modification of Cumberland's landscape.²⁵

The first Spanish incursion in the southeastern portion of North America came in 1513 with a visit to the Florida coast by Juan Ponce de Leon. The Spanish followed with more probes of the Atlantic coast by Francisco Gordillo and Lucas Vasquez de Ayllon. The latter established a short-lived settlement near present Savannah, Georgia. All of these forays quickly turned hostile. Hence, Spanish-Indian contact was brief.

It is uncertain whether European diseases took hold in the region at those times. It is certain that the arrival of Hernando de Soto in 1539 brought deadly pathogens to the native peoples. Although his massive 600-man expedition came no closer to the Georgia coast than the western side of Okefenokee Swamp, the four-year sustained contact with Native Americans across the South unquestionably introduced European diseases. The Indians themselves then diffused these maladies through trade and other contacts. By 1565 the population of Native Americans in the Southeast had dropped by at least half. The effects of this holocaust included elimination of some tribes and villages as independent entities and the drastic reduction of such environmental modifiers as hunting, farming, and burning the timberlands.²⁶

Ironically, the first attempt to settle the Atlantic coast of Florida came not from Spain but from France. French Huguenots established a colony on St. Johns River, presently called Fort Caroline. The Spanish answered by massacring the Protestant French and establishing their own fortified settlement at St. Augustine in 1565. From there they attempted to build missions, presidios, and towns up the coast to modern South Carolina. Among the sites chosen was Cumberland Island, which the Spanish named San Pedro. The missionary effort started badly. When the first three Jesuit missionaries from Europe inadvertently landed on San Pedro, they were slaughtered by the Timucuan, who favored the French.²⁷

Ultimately, Franciscan missionaries succeeded where the Jesuits did not. Beginning in 1587, they established six missions along the Georgia coast, including two on San Pedro. The main mission, called San Pedro de Mocama, stood somewhere between Dungeness and Sea Camp on the western side of the island. Park Service archaeologists posit that it lay close to the modern Dungeness Dock. Nearby, the Spanish had a small fort. One historian, citing the records of a missionary priest, claims that the mission included seven pueblos (towns) with 384 converts. In addition, mainland Timucuan also attended services on the island. The Franciscans established a second and subsidiary mission on the northern portion of the island called San Pedro y San Pablo de Puritiba. In 1602 Father Baltasar Lopez reported 792

Christian Indians on the island. They depended more heavily on agriculture than their mainland counterparts and hence were more sedentary. The missions on the Georgia coast continued to succeed until pressure from the English and their Creek allies caused the Spanish to abandon the indefensible coast in 1686. Subsequently, St. Marys River became the unofficial border between Spanish and English territory. The missions on San Pedro at that time quickly fell into disrepair.²⁸

The Spanish missionary period on Cumberland Island lasted ninety-nine years but left virtually no lasting imprint. The churches and other buildings were of simple and temporary construction. According to historian Michael Gannon, “Pine tree trunks held up the roof and walls, and between these rough-hewn pillars, small posts were interwoven with horizontal wattles, tied with leather thongs. Clay was then daubed on the lattice-work and, when dry, it was whitewashed on the interior. Palmetto thatching served as roofing.”²⁹

This type of structure would have rapidly disintegrated, particularly if the Christian Indians left with the missionaries. Archaeological investigations so far have not found any evidence of the structures. Small sherds of Spanish pottery are the primary artifacts of their presence. Nevertheless, change in the natural ecosystem unquestionably spread through the island. After the initial population collapse from new diseases, the Spanish caused an increase in native settlement, heightened exploitation of timber and other resources, and expanded agriculture to support its growing missionary base. In addition, various old-world plants and animals including cattle, horses, and hogs, accompanied these settlements. Some of those animals have never left the island, and they have negatively affected Cumberland’s natural vegetation, native fauna, and even dune morphology.³⁰

The Spanish retreat left a vacuum that the English filled from their base in Charleston, South Carolina. The two nations and their Native American allies continued to skirmish over Georgia’s coast until 1763, although Spain never reoccupied the region. Instead, the conflict centered on raiding across St. Marys River in search of loot, slaves, livestock, and political hegemony. Major attacks into each other’s territory consistently failed.

The initial English thrust into Georgia came in 1733 with the arrival of James Oglethorpe and his utopian colonists. He established Fort Frederica on St. Simons Island by 1736 and then elected to build forts on San Pedro, which he renamed Cumberland Island after William Augustus, the duke of Cumberland. Scottish Highlanders under the command of Hugh Mackay

built the first fort on a bluff at the north end of the island. After six months of labor in summer and fall of 1737, Oglethorpe named it after St. Andrew, the patron saint of Scotland.³¹

Various reports describe the fort as a star-shaped structure with an underground powder magazine and nearby buildings capable of housing 200 men. Later, a small settlement called Barrimacke was constructed for married soldiers and their families. The proximity of this town to the fort is uncertain. Park Service historian Louis Torres cites two sources, one of which places it very near to the fort and another that claims it was seven or eight miles away. There is some archival evidence that the village survived Spain's destruction of the fort in 1742 by at least fourteen years. Detailed Spanish reports of the abandoned fort's destruction omit any mention of the settlement, which seems to lend credence to the theory of its location miles to the south.³²

Oglethorpe constructed a second fort at the south end of Cumberland Island, which he named Fort Prince William. Ultimately this became the more important of the two forts as Oglethorpe ordered the Fort St. Andrews detachment to abandon it and take up station in its southern counterpart. In addition, Oglethorpe apparently built a hunting lodge of unknown size north of Beach Creek, which he called Dungeness. Traditional lore suggests it was in the area of the old Timucuan village of Tacatacuru, specifically on the site of the two subsequent Dungeness mansions.³³

In 1742 the Spanish, responding to a raid by Oglethorpe on St. Augustine, arrived at Cumberland Island to attack its two forts. They found Fort St. Andrew abandoned but Fort Prince William stoutly defended. The Spanish lost two ships unsuccessfully trying to take the fort and retreated to St. Augustine when a fleet of English ships appeared. Despite their victory, the English considered the southern coast of Georgia to be indefensible. They chose not to rebuild Fort St. Andrew, while the detachment at the southern fort dwindled to little more than an advance reconnaissance team. Some of the English soldiers had started small plantations on the island, but these quickly deteriorated because of constant danger from Spanish, French, and Indian raids. By 1748 the island became part of a "no man's land" between the Altamaha and St. Marys Rivers. For a time, a settlement of bandits, pirates, and other lawbreakers existed on the island. These ne'er-do-wells came from both the English and Spanish colonies. They occupied Cumberland through the 1750s, and a few may have stayed well beyond that time.³⁴

In 1763 the Treaty of Paris delivered Florida to the English and ended

colonial conflict in Georgia. Almost immediately, Georgians poured southward into the former “no man’s land” seeking claims for plantations and other economic pursuits. On Cumberland Island the British government granted nearly 11,500 acres of property but withheld the sites of the two dilapidated forts. At least twelve individuals received plots ranging from 50 to 3,270 acres. One landholder, Jonathan Bryan, subsequently bought the lands of most of the other owners. Eventually he was able to offer 10,870 acres for sale at once. His advertisement noted the tremendous opportunities for growing “corn, rice, indigo, and cotton.” He also noted that the island contained “extraordinary range for cattle, hogs, and horse.”³⁵

Despite Bryan’s optimistic claim, the only truly successful enterprise on the island was “live-oaking.” Cumberland’s enormous oaks provided some of the best ship’s timber in the American colonies as well as lumber, shingles, and other products for both the navy and the burgeoning mainland settlements. Even live-oaking was in its early stages, however, while other economic activities remained insignificant. As a result, two men, Thomas Lynch and Alexander Rose, managed to acquire undivided ownership of nearly the entire island by 1770.³⁶

The English legacy in the landscape is even fainter than those of their predecessors. No evidence exists for the sites of either English fort, the settlement of Barrimacke, or the camps of the lawless gangs of the 1750s. Archival and geological research and fruitless archaeological searches have led some scholars to conclude the sites may no longer be part of the island. Fort Prince William on the southern end of Cumberland was almost certainly several dozen yards south of the present beach. Modification of the coastline by an extensive jetty on the island’s southeast corner as well as erosion by the St. Marys River outwash has erased all traces. The hunt for Fort St. Andrews is more intriguing and frustrating because both English and Spanish records place it on a prominent upland. Most archaeologists assume that it lay near the site of the Cumberland Wharf, but no visible signs or significant relics pinpoint it. Furthermore, while the English did accelerate the cutting of timber on the island, their agricultural activities did not approach the level attained by Native Americans or the Spanish mission system.³⁷

The Plantation Period

The centuries of human activity on Cumberland Island before the American Revolution dramatically impacted its ecology and biogeography. Yet

few physical relics remain to show the island's rich history up to that time (see map 1.2). That situation changed as newly American settlers transformed Cumberland into a base for plantations producing sea island cotton, citrus fruit, and other horticultural products. The eighty years between the end of the Revolution and the beginning of the Civil War saw more than half the island's land converted to agricultural fields. Fence lines, dikes, and ditches remain. Homesteads, some quite rich and elaborate, have left buildings, foundations, roadways, cemeteries, walls, and chimneys across the landscape. The plantation period was the apogee of human modification of the island. At no time in the succeeding decades has Cumberland Island been so distant from its natural character.

Virtually all settlement and commercial activity on Cumberland Island ceased with the onset of the American Revolution. For nearly eight years the island served as a foraging ground for both American and British militias. The island's primary landowners, Thomas Lynch and Alexander Rose, both faced economic strains and viewed the island as an investment that could readily be sold. By the end of the war, Rose's half interest passed through several hands before being bought by General Nathanael Greene, a Revolutionary War hero.³⁸

The war had created severe financial problems for Greene. When the American government could not feed and supply his troops, the general used personal funds and signed promissory notes for provisions and equipment. After the war Greene moved his family from Rhode Island to a plantation north of Savannah known as Mulberry Grove given to him by the state of Georgia, and he bought the Cumberland land as a speculative investment to recoup his fortune. He planned to sell the island's rich timber as well as the land itself.³⁹

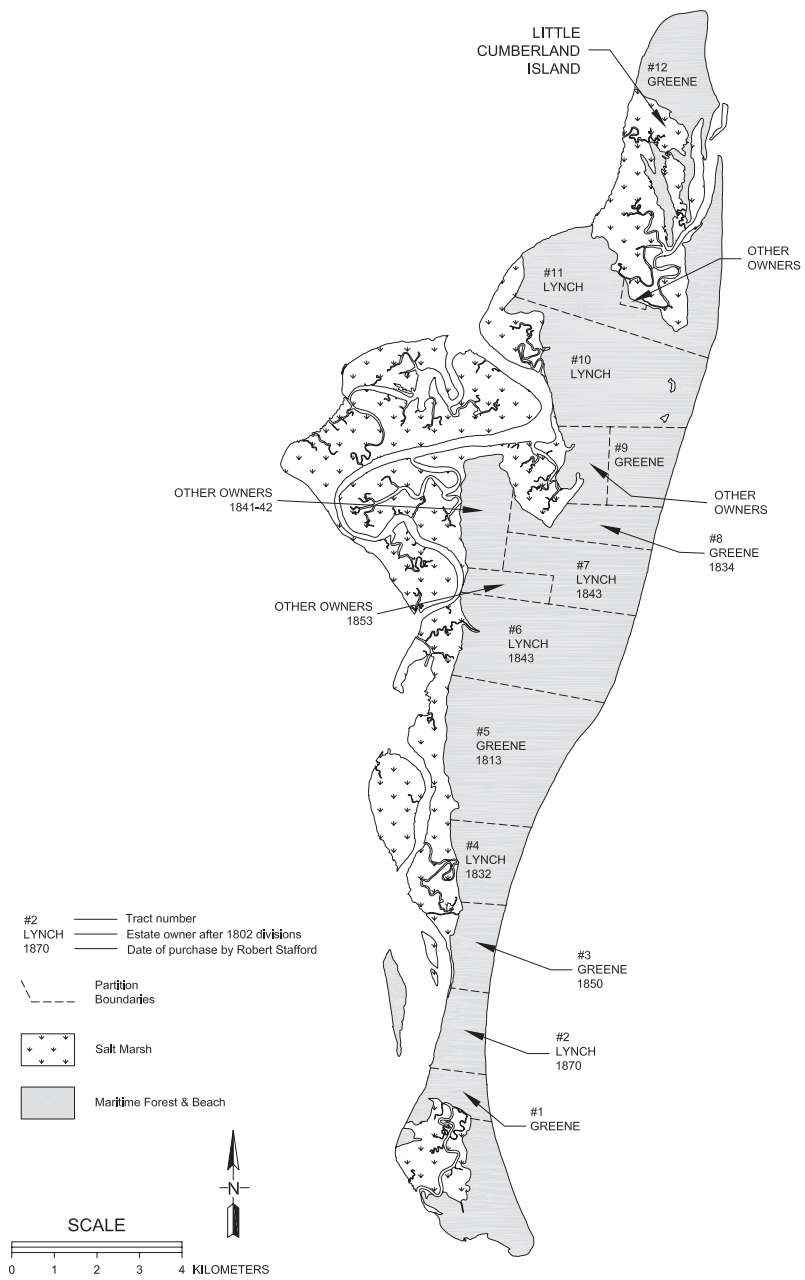
Unfortunately, neither Mulberry Grove nor Cumberland Island could provide enough income to pay off Greene's debts. Creditors hounded the general to his premature death in 1786 and then pursued his widow, Catherine. She subsequently married Phineas Miller, the general's personal secretary and tutor for their children. The Yale graduate was a promising businessman who later formed a company with Eli Whitney to sell the latter's new invention, the cotton gin. However, an economic recession in the young country and an inability to protect Whitney's patent exacerbated the Greene-Miller family's financial woes. Between 1798 and 1800 Phineas and Catherine sold their primary residence and lands at Mulberry Grove to pay creditors and moved to Cumberland Island. Four years later Phineas died,

leaving Catherine alone for a second time. This continued a process that would become characteristic of the island: the premature deaths of men leaving strong and intelligent women to shape Cumberland's future.⁴⁰

In the meantime, Thomas Lynch, co-owner of most of Cumberland's property, died in 1776, and his son and heir died only three years later. The younger Lynch left his share of the island's land to his sisters' children. They also faced economic problems, so that by the late 1790s a proper division of the lands held by the heirs of Greene and Lynch was imperative. Two surveys were conducted in 1798 and 1802. The latter survey produced a map showing land use at that time as well as acreage figures. The court and the two families used this information to divide the land equitably into twelve sound-to-ocean strips on both Great Cumberland and Little Cumberland Islands (map 1.3). This division anticipated a similar one carried out by the heirs of Thomas Carnegie 160 years later. Because of the variance in island width, soil quality, and timber resources, the two families selected parcels in a noncontiguous pattern. The Greene heirs received parcels 1, 3, 5, 8, 9, and 12. Parcel 1 included the Dungeness area, and parcel 12 was Little Cumberland Island. The Lynch group acquired parcels 2, 4, 6, 7, 10, and 11. Small landholders owned some plots along the sound, and the state government attempted unsuccessfully to hold the areas on either end of Cumberland Island. The latter were the sites of the decaying British forts, and Georgia had hoped to reserve them for possible future use.⁴¹

Over the next several decades, property continued to change hands as the descendants of Greene and Lynch parried financial blows by selling parcels of their land. Others who established plantations on the island included Robert and Thomas Stafford, Peter (Pierre) Bernardey, George McIntosh, and Henry Osborne. In 1831 Phineas Miller Nightingale, an heir of Catherine Greene Miller, was able to buy five remaining Lynch properties, ending that family's presence on the island. He promptly sold many of those parcels to small landowners anxious to participate in the island's lucrative sea island cotton production.⁴²

In addition to developing a successful plantation, Catherine Greene Miller and her heirs built a large home and estate on parcel 1. The house, called Dungeness after the earlier hunting lodge, was a four-story, symmetrical structure composed of blocks of tabby, a mixture of coquina shells, lime, and sand that hardens like concrete (fig. 1.3). Catherine and Phineas Miller began the construction shortly after their 1799 move to the island, but various monetary troubles delayed its completion for more than twelve



Map 1.3. The division of Cumberland Island property by the heirs of Nathanael Greene and Thomas Lynch in 1802 and subsequent acquisition by Robert Stafford. (Data from Mary R. Bullard, 1993, “Uneasy Legacy: The Lynch-Greene Partition on Cumberland Island, 1798–1802,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 77, 4, 757–88, used with permission of the author, who based it on the 1802 McKinnon map housed at CINS Archives, and John E. Ehrenhard and Mary R. Bullard, 1981, *Stafford Plantation, Cumberland Island National Seashore: Archaeological Investigation of a Slave Cabin*, National Park Service, Southeastern Archaeological Center, Tallahassee, Fla.)

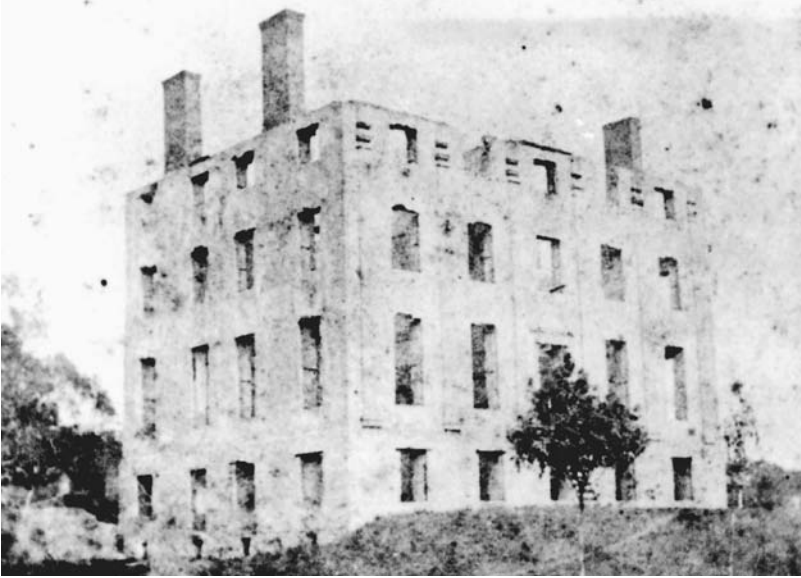


Fig. 1.3. The ruins of General Nathanael Greene's Dungeness mansion in the late 1870s

years. Not long after construction ended, the family suffered another financial setback when an 1813 hurricane blew off the roof, necessitating an expensive new one made of copper. Catherine also built many supporting structures in the Dungeness area including a small tabby house that may have served as the Millers' temporary residence while construction of the mansion was under way. This small cottage later served as an office for the Carnegie estate. It lies a few dozen yards from the ruins of the Carnegie mansion and is the oldest standing building on the island. Today it is simply called the Tabby House (fig. 1.4).⁴³

Catherine and her youngest daughter and heir to Dungeness, Louisa Greene Shaw, also developed the grounds around the new mansion. They created a formal garden devoted to both vegetables and ornamental plants between the mansion and the Beach Creek marshes. Later Thomas and Lucy Carnegie maintained the basic layout of this garden. The National Park Service is currently restoring it to the Carnegie period. Louisa Shaw was an accomplished botanist and horticulturist, widely known along the Georgia and South Carolina coasts. She introduced a variety of semitropical and temperate-latitude crops to the estate. By the time of her death in 1831, the Dungeness plantation was producing significant commercial crops of oranges and olives as well as lemons, figs, dates, and pomegranates.⁴⁴



Fig. 1.4. The Tabby House at the Dungeness Historic District was built in the early 1800s.

Both Catherine Greene Miller and Louisa Shaw maintained busy social lives in spite of their isolation. Visitors included prominent businessmen like Eli Whitney, politicians, English gentry, and many notables from southern society. Revolutionary War hero General Henry “Light-Horse Harry” Lee (the father of Robert E. Lee) landed on the island in 1818 and promptly died. Louisa buried him in the Greene-Miller cemetery near the Dungeness mansion. Nearly a century later the state of Virginia removed his body and reinterred it by his son’s grave on the campus of Washington and Lee University in Lexington. Even during the War of 1812, Catherine maintained a formal social schedule with officers of the occupying British forces.⁴⁵

Upon Louisa Shaw’s death in 1831, her favorite nephew, Phineas Miller Nightingale, inherited the Dungeness plantation as well as one called Oakland near the modern Duck House Road. He continued the mixed economy of timber harvesting and farming cotton, oranges, and olives. A planter at this time had many sources of income. For example, Nightingale also owned productive land on the mainland, leased his slaves for various projects, and invested in stocks and other financial pursuits. Despite this diversification, economic troubles continued to follow the descendants of Nathanael Greene. After his purchase of the Lynch properties, a severe frost

in 1835 badly damaged crops on the island and seriously strained his financial means. Nightingale tried to sell land to relatives in order to keep it in the family. However, as his fortunes continued to decline, both neighbors and strangers snapped up the property.⁴⁶

The primary buyer was Robert Stafford Jr., son of Thomas and nephew of Robert Stafford, who first appeared on the island in the early 1780s. The younger Stafford's productive tenure on the island began with his purchase of Catherine Greene Miller's 600-acre Littlefield tract in 1813. This became the site of his home, primary agricultural buildings, and a substantial group of slave quarters marked today by their surviving chimneys. Stafford was an extremely successful planter, and he continually added to his lands, ultimately owning 8,125 acres from the area around Sea Camp to north of Table Point (see map 1.3). During the 1850s Stafford reportedly owned up to 348 slaves. His aggregation of formerly scattered and tiny holdings enabled him to consolidate cotton production, adapt transportation, and achieve an economy of scale that matched the high quality of his product. It also erased some of the landscape features that marked the boundaries of former plantations.⁴⁷

Sea Island Cotton Production

From the end of the Revolution to the Civil War, the backbone of the island economy was sea island cotton. This type came originally from South America, where wild relatives still grow in southern Ecuador. Its use dates back to textiles found in the Chilean desert from more than 5,500 years ago. Paleobotanists propose that the plant, *Gossypium barbadense*, spread to the West Indies at least 1,000 years ago. By 1650 the British cultivated it on plantations in Barbados, hence its species name. From there planter-settlers brought it to the South Carolina coast in the 1670s. Because of its ability to flower outside the tropics, it was an immediate success in the mild climate of the Carolina and Georgia islands. Sea island cotton produces fine and silky lint much desired for luxurious fabrics. Its severe nutrient demands forced Sea Island planters to rotate the cotton production, leaving worn fields fallow or in restorative crops. On a typical plantation, therefore, only a portion of the farmland would be planted in cotton at any one time. This sometimes led to forest cutting for new fields. Another adaptation was the application of fertilizer. On the Sea Islands the most common compound consisted of marsh mud, crushed shells, and manure. Cultivation of sea island cotton

continued in the United States until the advent of the destructive boll weevil in the early twentieth century. During its peak production on Cumberland Island, it supported a population of 65 whites and 455 slaves.⁴⁸

Robert Stafford Jr.'s Cumberland Island cotton commanded extraordinary prices of up to 75 cents per pound. Island historian Mary Bullard has estimated that he had more than 260,000 pounds of unginned cotton on hand and cultivated at least 75 acres of the work-intensive staple. The proceeds allowed him to live a wealthy and comfortable life. He built a substantial planter's house that would later serve as a mansion for one of the Carnegie sons until it mysteriously burned in 1900. Stafford never married but received from a neighbor a mulatto slave by whom he fathered six children. When the Civil War and emancipation came, Stafford was an old man in his seventies. Unlike his neighbors, he refused to abandon his home. Although he repeatedly appealed to Union forces for protection from his former slaves, the Northern army gave him only sporadic attention. However, he did stay on the land, which saved him from having it declared as "abandoned" and divided among the newly freed slaves. Nevertheless, the war destroyed the plantation economy on Cumberland Island. The former slaves migrated to the mainland or the northern part of the island, which left Stafford with no workforce. Most other owners sold out for a pittance and moved on.⁴⁹

Sea island cotton production required many island developments, both technological and residential, that influence the modern Cumberland landscape. Planters and their workers installed ditches to drain fields, mark boundaries, and serve as moats to keep out livestock and feral animals. The spoils from these ditches became the bases for fences to further exclude animals and unwelcome visitors. Occasionally these spoil-walls served as dikes to prevent saltwater intrusion. Various functional structures were scattered through the island, including equipment sheds, storage buildings, and foundations for cotton gins and cotton rams. In addition, many buildings housed or provided services for the slaves, who typically outnumbered the white residents at least ten to one. Slave quarters consisted of small individual cabins, each containing a fireplace and chimney. Families or segregated groups of single men and women occupied each. A typical unit included space for a dooryard garden and a yard for pigs and chickens. Other buildings might be reserved for medical purposes or church services.⁵⁰

On Cumberland, several collections of chimneys mark the sites of former slave cabins. The most notable lies due east of the present Stafford house perpendicular to a road traversing the island from east to west. Three parallel



Fig. 1.5. The Main Road runs the length of Cumberland Island. Portions of it date from the earliest English settlement of the island.

rows of five cabins stretched south of Stafford Road while a few other buildings paralleled it. That road was part of a latticework of wagon roads and horse trails that connected the fields and plantations. Several of these roads became part of the modern Main Road that runs the length of Cumberland Island (fig. 1.5). Connected to it were numerous spur roads, a half dozen of which crossed the island from the sound to the dunes. In addition, pathways served each field, allowing access to the fences, ditches, and crops.⁵¹

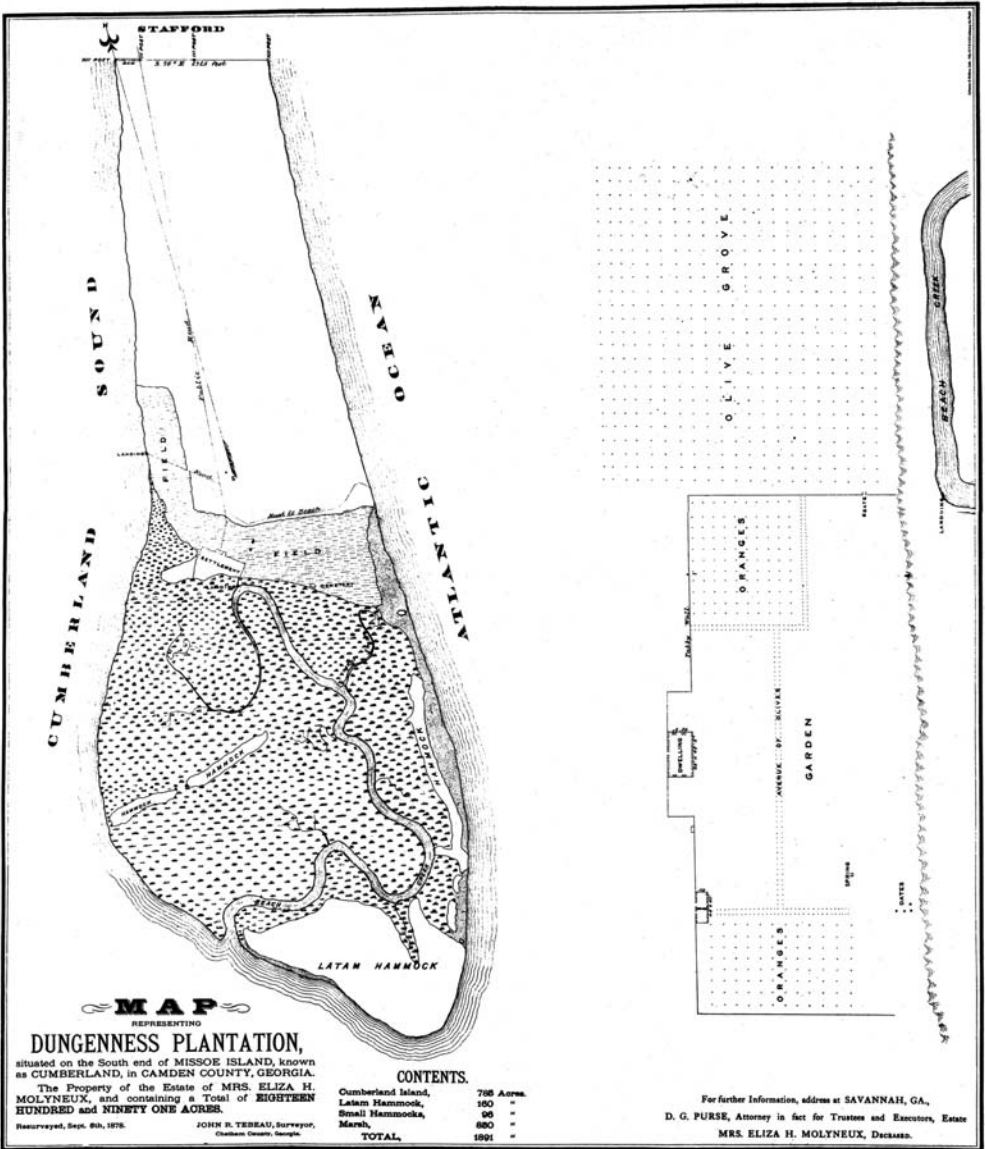
The varied uses of cleared fields have left a landscape legacy as well. Some, like Stafford Field, were never reforested. The Carnegies adapted them for various uses, including recreation and new experiments in agriculture. Landscape historian Peggy S. Froeschauer has shown that the crop history and soil types of each field influenced the type and density of natural vegetation that reclaimed it.⁵²

Even the extensive adaptation of the island for plantation agriculture, however, did not remove all of the original forest. A reconstructed map of the Stafford slave settlement by archaeologist John Ehrenhard and historian Mary Bullard shows the site nearly surrounded by woods. After the war statistics compiled by Freedmen's Bureau agent William F. Eaton showed that 36 percent of the land on seven "abandoned" plantations was woodland. These forests served as an auxiliary source of income, a reserve for fuel and building material, and a haven for feral livestock and deer.⁵³

After the Civil War

The war years laid waste to the fields, utility buildings, and homes. The emancipation of slaves created such a financial loss for the planters that most could not afford laborers or repairs to their land and property. After 1865 Cumberland Island never recovered its antebellum agricultural wealth. Some small landowners like William R. Bunkley and Rebecca Clubb on the north end easily reclaimed their land. Larger landowners had more trouble. In some cases their lands were redistributed to freedmen. However, the former owners refused to employ them, and they lacked the resources to establish their own farms. Some planters chased off the freedmen and burned the slave cabins while others waited until the former slaves left for jobs on the mainland. Robert Stafford Jr. lived on until 1877, an impoverished and bitter old man. After his death and subsequent litigation among his heirs, his land passed to two nephews, John Tomkins and Thomas D. Hawkins. Stafford's six children by his slave Elizabeth did not receive any land on Cumberland.⁵⁴

Even before the war the constant grinding financial decline of Phineas Miller Nightingale took its toll on Dungeness. The great house fell into disrepair and became uninhabitable. Nightingale sold pieces of land and finally surrendered the famous plantation to creditors in 1870. He died one year later. In 1880 W. G. M. Davis, a former Confederate general, purchased the Dungeness plantation (map 1.4). Davis toyed with several ideas to revive the estate's economy, including olive production and horse raising. How-



Map 1.4. The Dungeness plantation in 1878. The map legend explains that this is “The Property of the Estate of Mrs. Eliza H. Molyneux.” (Georgia Archives, acc. no. 69-501, box 105, folder 11-1-003)

ever, the only business that seemed to work was tourism. The decaying mansion of the famous Revolutionary War hero Nathanael Greene became a popular sight for travelers through the region. A Savannah newspaper summed up the state of Cumberland Island in 1876:

Cumberland Island, which before the war had ten or twelve large plantations devoted to the production of the valuable staple, has now not one acre in cultivation. . . . The houses have been burned, the fences have rotted, and the fields have grown up in weeds. Reconstruction and radicalism freed and made citizens of the laborers who formerly made the island fields fertile, and enriched the world with the fruits of their toil. The freemen and the citizens abandoned the cotton plantations and retired to the coast of the mainland, and the sea-island cotton has become almost a thing of the past.⁵⁵

The end of the 1870s saw the last gasps of an agricultural era on Cumberland Island. At its height the cotton business cleared two-thirds of the forest, ditched and fenced fields from one end of the island to the other, and imprinted roads and structures on the island. It also created a settlement geography that would influence later development. The year 1881 saw the beginning of a new and radically different era, one in which the forest reclaimed many fields and the island turned from productive farmland to idyllic retreat.