

Cumberland Island National Seashore: A History of Human and Geographical Interaction

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Cumberland Island National Seashore is the southern most barrier island on the Atlantic seaboard located off the Georgia and Florida coasts. Eighteen miles long and three miles wide, it is composed of five natural ecosystems: (1) fresh water sloughs, (2) salt water marsh, (3) maritime forest, (4) dune system, and (5) the beach. Since 2000 B. C. Cumberland Island has supported human inhabitation. A list of its inhabitants reads like a history's Who's Who. The Timucuans, DeSoto, the Spanish explorer, Ribault, the French explorer, James Oglethorpe, founder of the English settlement of Savannah, General Nathaniel Greene of Revolutionary War fame and his wife "Caty," Eli Whitney, inventor of the cotton gin, Robert Stafford, Planter, and Thomas Carnegie, co owner of U. S. Steel. All of these individuals lived and worked on Cumberland Island throughout history. Thus, Cumberland Island represents not only a microcosm of our country's history, but also provides a model for students to investigate human interactions with the environment. Using the lens of geography the history of Cumberland Island is magnified so students can see the relationship between the two.

"Geography is a rich and complex discipline with two key perspectives: (1) the spatial perspective, which centers on location and on understanding of what may be called whereness, and (2) the ecological perspective, which considers how humans interact with the environment."¹

Complementing the geographical perspective is the historical perspective. "A historical perspective enriches the geographic perspective by adding the essential questions of when? Why then? and Why is the event significant?"² The purpose of this article is twofold: (1) to examine how human interaction with the environment on Cumberland Island reflected national development and (2) to pose thoughtful questions regarding management issues which challenge Cumberland Island National Seashore today.

In order to accomplish this task, Geography Standard 14: How Human Activity Modifies the Physical Environment, will be used to provide the framework for student understanding. "Human adaptation to and modification of physical systems are influenced by the geographical context in which people live, their understanding of that context, and their technological ability and inclinations to modify their physical environment. To survive people depend on their physical environment. They adapt to it and modify it to suit their changing needs for things such as food, clothing, water, shelter, energy, and recreational facilities. In meeting their needs, they bring

knowledge and technology to bear on physical systems.”³

Cumberland Island's Many Eras

The next section will describe how Cumberland Island's physical landscape was modified to meet the needs of the different groups and individuals who settled it. Organized into different settlement eras, students will be able to understand how the physical environment of Cumberland Island was used over time to accommodate groups reflecting different needs and technologies.

- Prehistory to European Contact
- European Occupation
- Plantation Era
- Carnegie Era
- Cumberland Island National Seashore

Pre-history to European Contact

Archeological evidence supports the fact that Cumberland Island was populated as early as 2,000 B.C. Its location in the southern Atlantic Ocean was ideally suited to fishing/hunting/gathering cultures. The Atlantic on the east and estuaries and marshes on the west provided a rich source of food. Artifacts from middens (oyster refuse heaps) include bones of raccoons, opossums, mink, rice rat, white tail deer, black bear, gray squirrels, and mostly rabbit. In addition to the wide variety of fish and animal sources of food, gathering of native plants was important. Oak and hickory nuts, persimmon, grapes, and black cherry thrived in the forests.

The group inhabiting Cumberland Island for which a good deal of specific information is available is the Timucua, part of the Muskhogean linguistic group who occupied not only Cumberland but areas north of the St. John's River in Florida to the southern coast of Georgia. The Timucua were the group which had the earliest contact with Europeans soon after Columbus arrived in 1492.

For the two hundred year period from 1562 to 1763, three European nations vied for control of Cumberland Island; France, Spain, and England. In 1562 Cumberland was colonized by the French. Explorers Jean Ribault and Rene GouLaine de Laudoriere were followed soon after by the Spanish. "After we tarried, we entered and viewed the country there about, which is the fairest, fruitfulliest and pleasant in all the world" (Ribault).

Early French explorers and Spanish missionaries provide accounts of initial contacts. Though the information is at times conflicting and viewed from a European perspective, these early

observations do provide insights into how the Timucua lived. As France and Spain competed for Cumberland Island and build both forts and missions, the French created an alliance with the Timucuans. In 1566, the Timucua on Cumberland Island killed Father Pedro Martinez, a Jesuit missionary, and eleven Spanish soldiers. In response to early depredations, the Spanish sought to build forts. "As early as 1569, a Captain Antones de Prado made recommendations to the crown with regard to strengthening four forts, one of which had already been erected on Cumberland Island: In the Fort of San Pedro, which is on the Island of Tacatacoru...there must be one hundred soldiers; and there cannot be less, although now there are more, because this island is six leagues long and is where the French...planned to return to build a fort...the Indians are great enemies of ours and friends to the French" (p. 6). In this context the descriptions we have today of the Timucuans were written; French accounts were more favorable than the Spanish.

Saltwater Timucuans, those inhabiting Cumberland Island, relied heavily on fishing, hunting, and gathering of shellfish, nuts, acorns, and starchy roots (Hahn). The French listed maize, beans, pumpkins, gourds, cucumbers, citrons, peas, and many other fruits and tubers as crops the Saltwater Timucua grew around their houses. The continued food supply from both the island and the sea provided the protein to sustain a healthy population. "Laudonniere observed that the women were as agile as the men and big, of the same color, painted just like the men, and strong swimmers, capable of crossing a large river while holding an infant out of the water with one hand, and equally adapted at climbing the highest trees" (Hahn, p. 23).

The Timucua culture, in spite of European incursions, survived until 1650. Adapting to an environment that provided for their physical needs insured their survival until two events destroyed them; (1) coastal Indians sickened and died by the thousands from the "pestilence," and (2) Yamasse Indians, displaced by English settlers to the north, pushed the less aggressive and weakened Timucua to the south.

Spanish domination of east Florida and Cumberland Island lasted until 1736 when James Oglethorpe built Fort Frederica on St. Simons Island just to the north. From here he launched campaigns against the Spanish. He constructed Fort St. Andrew at the north end of Cumberland. Battles see-sawed back and forth until 1742 when he finally drove the Spanish from Cumberland at Fort William, built at the southern end. The culminating peace treaty in 1748 stated that all areas south of the Altamaha River would be neutral territory. Without the force of either Spanish or English law this area soon became a refuge for criminals and dissidents. Finally in 1763 Spain

ceded East Florida to England. Between 1562 and 1763 Cumberland Island, because of its proximity to Florida and the expansionist policies of France, Spain, and England, was used for missions and forts. After 1763 a new era begins on Cumberland Island: The Plantation Era.

Plantation Era

The plantation era can be divided into two distinct periods; (1) "live oaking" and (2) sea island cotton. Both periods reflect not only human adaptation to the environment, but how humans took advantage of geographical elements to modify the environment to suit their particular needs as well. By 1768 tracts of land on Cumberland Island were awarded to many wealthy individuals and land companies. Initially, these units represented legal, not agricultural principles.

In 1783, Nathaniel Greene, hero of the American Revolution, secured 11,000 acres on Cumberland Island in return for a bad debt. This land included tracts on Cumberland, Little Cumberland, and the adjacent south Georgia mainland. Greene expected to sell off valuable stands of live oak and pine to the French navy. A report from William Maxwell stated that "...Amelia and Cumberland islands both abound with 'live oak and hickory of the largest growth ever measured,' and several people were cutting ships timber on Cumberland destined for Philadelphia (p. 18)."

Why was live oak valuable for ship building? Live oak is found from southeastern Virginia to the Texas border. Forty to seventy foot trees, the 150' crown can shade more than half an acre. Because of its tolerance to salt spray, annual rainfall of 25-66 inches, and a temperature range of freezing to 110°F (43°C), the narrow strip of land in the south is ideally suited to growth. Additionally, live oaks can thrive in a wide range of soil conditions from rich moist hummocks to dry sand hills.

MAP

The density of live oak is greater than any other wood in North America. As a result it can last for a full fifty years, compared to ten to twelve years for ships built of other materials. A report written by John Berry, Thomas Trexton, and Richard Dale, all sea captains with considerable experience states, "of the most durable wood in the world (Live Oak of Georgia) would be a great

savings to the United States, we seem well satisfied (accidents excepted) that their frames will be perfectly sound a half century later" (p. 24). Live oak was perfectly suited to furlocks, knight heads, hawsepices, bow timbers, stanchions, knees, transoms, and brest hooks. "It was essential that 'great timbers,' those pieces used in the hulls be large as well as strong. 'Compass pieces,' the curved members used in the frames, could be hewn of trees of irregular shape, and Live Oak met this requirement" (p. 25).

Chart

Although Green had excellent timber, he was unable to find a market. Hoping to convince his old friend, the Marquis de LaFayette, to secure contracts with the French navy, he found the French were unwilling to purchase oak from him. In 1784 a second problem arose. It was reported that two or three hundred British loyalists were illegally cutting and shipping live oak from Cumberland to the West Indies on British transports. He was unable to seek relief from either Georgia's governor, John Houston, or Vincente Valasco, the governor of St. Augustine. During the winter of 1785 - 1786, both the British and French government began contract bidding and negotiations for Cumberland's prize live oak. Greene's untimely death in June, 1786, at the age of forty-five, terminated any possibility of financial gain for him or his family. Fifteen years later Phineas Miller, who married Nathaniel Greene's widow Caty, would try to sell live oak again.

However, in the intervening years, events would change the fortune of Caty Greene. Phineas Miller, tutor to the Greene children, became Caty's business advisor after her husband's death. Needing a tutor for the children, Phineas hired Eli Whitney from Yale, to come to the Mulberry Grove Plantation. While in their employ, Whitney showed Miller a drawing of his contemplated cotton gin. Miller, himself a mechanical expert, recognized its value and convinced Caty to finance the new enterprise. By 1794, Whitney and Miller were business partners financed by Caty. Financially "trapped" and not wanting to draw from the Greene's estate for further capital to insure the success of the cotton gin enterprise, Miller and Caty looked elsewhere for money. Desperately needing capital, they became involved in an investment scheme against the advice of

Eli Whitney. A group of New England land developers calling themselves the Yazoo Company proposed to buy cheap land in Georgia and sell later at a great profit, to prospective cotton planters rushing to the state. The scheme turned out to be a fraud. "The Yazoo collapse cost Caty and Miller their ready cash, tied up estate property pledged collateral, and severely compromised the credit of the cotton gin firm (Stegerman, p. 169)."

Near financial ruin, Caty advertised the sale of Mulberry Grove Plantation. Due to the economic depression of 1800 no offer was made on the property. To satisfy unpaid taxes Mulberry Grove was placed on the auction block. Caty and Phineas were forced to return to Cumberland Island where they built their new house, "Dungeness."

Fortunately for Miller, Congress passed an act in 1799 authorizing President Washington to form a navy under the war department with a nucleus of six frigates. Six port cities received contracts for the construction of America's first navy: Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Portsmouth (NH), and Gosport (now Portsmouth, VA). A provision of the act also authorized "...payment not to exceed \$200,000 for the purchase of growing or other timber, or of land of which timber is growing suitable for the Navy." (Wood, p. 35). Contracts were signed with Phineas Miller of Cumberland Island, Georgia, to supply live oak frames for the six 74 gun ships of the line, and with Colonel Thomas Shubrick of Bulls Island, South Carolina. Miller delivered 12,076 cubic feet to different yards. The live oak cut on Cumberland Island was used in the construction of the frigate U.S.S. Constitution ("Old Ironsides").

This fledgling navy with superbly built ships of live-oak defeated the British during the War of 1812. Ironically, the British had developed a prejudice against buying Live-Oak from America. Due to some infestation of Live-Oak delivered to British ports earlier, they decided not to purchase live-oak. Had the British admiralty used live-oak for its ships, the outcome of the war might have been different.

While Miller was cutting timber, Caty developed extensive orchards of olive, date, plum, coffee, guava, lime, and pomegranate. She was an amateur botanist in her own right. Phineas Miller died in 1806 from lockjaw resulting from the prick of a thorn while he was moving orange trees from Florida to Cumberland. The oranges thrived until the Great Frost of 1835 when the groves of orange trees were destroyed. In 1814, Catherine Littlefield Greene died, leaving Dungeness for her youngest daughter, Louise Shaw.

At the conclusion of the War of 1812, the British realized the necessity of using live-oak.

Virginia Steele Wood, in her excellent book Live-Oaking, tells us that "...In August, 1814, British troops under Rear Admiral Sir George Cockburn marched into Washington, where they deliberately burned the Whitehouse and other public buildings. Moving along the southern seaboard, Cockburn's detachment created panic as they plundered and occupied coastal plantations. Occupying Cumberland Island in Georgia during December 1814, they "cut 'a quantity of live oak timber' and loaded it aboard the Bermuda bound British ship Rolla, which embarked in 1815, nearly a month after ratification of the Treaty of Grant ending the war (p. 43)."

Sea-Island Cotton

Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin coupled with the cutting of live oak in Cumberland coincides perfectly to insure that Sea Island cotton would be the principle agricultural enterprise for the next half century. The most successful planter on Cumberland Island was Robert Stafford (1790-1877), an early nineteenth century Horatio Alger. Not only a planter but a shrewd businessman, during his lifetime he modified Cumberland Island to produce Sea Island cotton.

Sea Island Cotton came from the Bahama Islands where it had been introduced by the Board of Trade from Angulla, an island in the Caribbean Sea. The plant is tall; the seed black, and the fiber, long, strong, and silky. The plant would only prosper in light, sandy soil, known as the salt water lands. The Sea Island Cotton area in the antebellum region was a belt of coastal land from twenty to thirty miles wide, extending from the Santee River, including St. John's Parrish, Berkeley to the Everglades of Florida. Cumberland Island has four soil types, two; cainhoy (CAB) and pottsburt (Po) of which are favorable for growing Sea Island cotton, provided the fields are ditched and properly drained.

Camden's Challenge presents a report published in 1849 by George While which describes Cumberland as an island on "which soil of a light sandy character adapted to the culture of cotton, corn, and potatoes. Lemons, figs, pomegranates, olives, oranges and melons grow finely. Three thousand oranges have been gathered from one tree on Mrs. Shaw's plantation, formerly General Greene's. Cotton averages two hundred pounds per acre, corn twelve bushels per acre, sweet potatoes seventy bushels per acre... Population, 24 October, 1846, thirteen white men, eight white boys, seven girls, eight women, Negroes, four hundred (p. 217)." It is obvious that both the cutting of Live-oak and clearing and cultivating acreage for Sea-Island cotton was done by slaves. Ironically, the cotton gin, a labor saving device, actually increased the need for more slaves in the deep south. In his book, A Social History of the Sea Islands, Johnson wrote the

following, "White Marsh B. Seabrook, of Edisto Island, estimated in 1844 that fifty four laborers were required to prepare seed cotton for market: one dryer, one turner and one feeder of the whipper; thirty assorters, grading fifty pounds per day; twelve ginnerers, preparing twenty five pounds per day; seven motors at forty three pounds each; a packer and a reinspector. Seabrook concluded it cost a planter \$27.00 to gin a bale of Sea Island cotton. On the average plantation it required fifty to sixty days of labor to cultivate and gin a bale of fine cotton (pp. 29-30)."

Stafford would lease his slaves for construction and lumbering during the off season. This practice insured that his slaves were profitable. In 1850 he reported 175 bales of cotton, each bale at 400 pounds. Robert Stafford reported twelve times as many bales of cotton as his neighbors.

The cotton baled on Cumberland was shipped north to textile mills in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. Negro cloth, a mixture of cotton and wool spun exclusively for slaves, comprised nearly a third of the production of these mills between 1814-1875.

By 1860 Stafford reported owning 110 slaves and twenty four slave quarters. When the Civil War broke out in the Sea Islands most of the planters left the plantations. Stafford remained on Cumberland Island throughout the war and supported the Union cause. Although there is no evidence that he sold cotton to the north during the war it is probable that he did, as he was known to have sold livestock, lumber, and small boats to federal occupation forces.

After the war most of Sea Island plantations lay in ruins. When Robert E. Lee came to Cumberland Island in 1870 to visit his father's [General "Lighthouse" Harry Lee] grave he...found Dungeness in ruins and the old cotton fields a sad picture to behold (Torres, pp. 154-55)."

Robert Stafford died in 1877 a very wealthy man. In 1910, a New York attorney gave an interview in a Jacksonville newspaper. "He declared Stafford had sold most of his slaves before they were made free, and, by profits in his cotton business, his estate ran into the millions" (Bullard, p. 282). In a few short years the plantation era which thrived on Cumberland Island would be replaced by a new era: The Carnegies.

The Carnegie Era

In 1881, Thomas Morrison Carnegie, younger brother of Andrew Carnegie, purchased 4,000 acres of land, which included Dungeness, for his wife Lucy Coleman Carnegie. The following year (1882) he purchased an additional 8,240 acres from the heirs of Robert Stafford. By 1900, through a series of land transactions, Mrs. Carnegie acquired 90% of Cumberland Island. As money was no object, the Carnegies developed the island to suit their recreational

needs. They built a new Dungeness on the site of the former Greene mansion. Lawns, gardens, and walks were restored. "In the spirit of former owners he planted rare bulbs, plants, and trees, some obtained in remote parts of the world (Torres, p. 167).

Following the death of Thomas in 1885, Lucy continued building on the island. "The total Carnegie estate included such building complexes as Dungeness, Greyfield, Stafford Place, and Plum Orchard. Other less pretentious structures were also built throughout the Carnegie estate on the island. Many of them were recreational facilities: a nine hole golf course was built at Stafford Place; new roads were built to facilitate duck shooting, deer hunting, and horse back riding; beach houses were erected along the ocean. Every conceivable facility that contributed to the island's self-sufficiency, convenience and recreation was constructed (Torres, p. 179)."

To support Mrs. Carnegie and her nine children on the island complex between 240-300 employees were hired. A small village of artists, carpenters, gardeners, blacksmiths, mechanics, and servants sailed to and from the mainland weekly to operate the Carnegie estate. Dungeness hosted celebrities in the world of business, politics, art, and science. In the tradition of Caty Greene Miller, Mrs. Carnegie was revered as the gracious hostess of Dungeness.

After the death of Lucy Coleman Carnegie in 1916 and subsequent international events, WWI and the Great Depression, the island was seldom used except for a brief period of occupation by Andrew Carnegie II and his family, the mansion, too costly to maintain was left vacant soon after 1925" (Torres, p. 215). Arson destroyed Dungeness in 1959.

In 1962 the last of Lucy's children died, the trust came to an end, and the estate was divided among individual owners. Through a series of land development proposals the island eventually was determined to become Cumberland Island National Seashore.

Cumberland Island National Seashore

In 1962, the National Park Service identified Cumberland Island as one of the country's most desirable seashore areas. "The natural and almost primeval wilderness beauty of Cumberland was easily recognized as it is today in such things as the simplicity of the only little church in the island, at High point, marked simply by the sign "Time to Meditate," which explains its purpose in being (Camden's Challenge, p. 225). Congressman Bill Stuckley introduced a bill in the House of Representatives in July, 1971 to assure the preservation of Cumberland. This bill, signed in 1972 by President Nixon, placed the island under the supervision of the National Park Service. The Park Service has the "...responsibility to preserve the natural resource of the island while making it

located in the wilderness area of the island, a section of the National Park set aside to be a wildlife preserve and allowed to go back to its original natural state. If the federal government, through park service funds, cannot afford the upkeep, how can funds be obtained without impacting the wilderness area and the visitor experience? Would you save Plum Orchard, and how?

Conclusion

Cumberland Island is a magnificent example of how humans have interacted with the environment. Though changed or modified to suit the needs of its many inhabitants these changes have created new challenges for the National Park Service. A historical understanding of land use on Cumberland Island and its geographical and social implications may provide insights into how best to use Cumberland Island for future generations.

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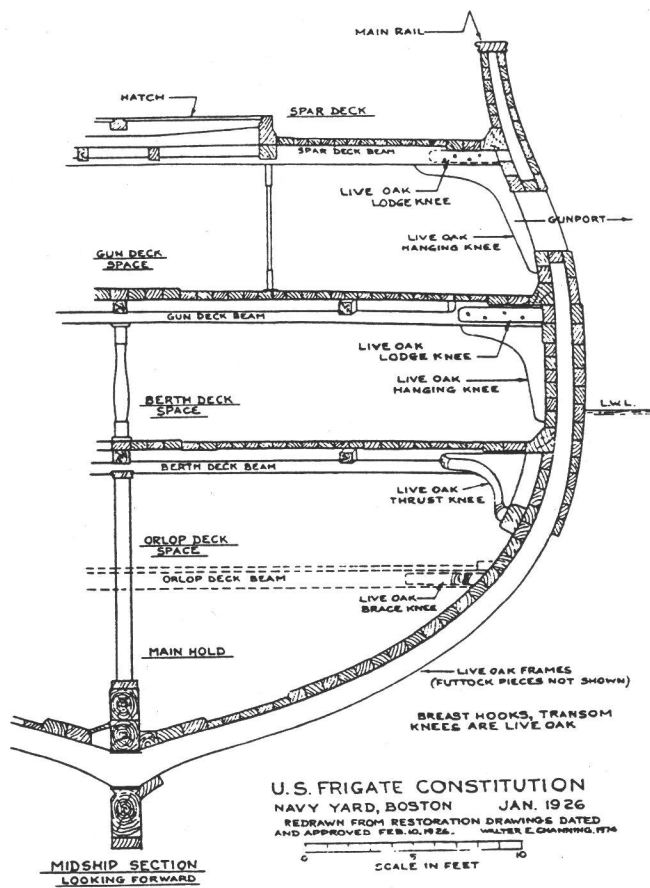
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Density and Specific Gravity of Some North American
Wood Commonly Used in Shipbuilding

<i>Type of Wood</i>	<i>Specific Gravity</i>	<i>Density in Pounds per Cubic Foot</i>
Red cedar	.44	41.1
Yellow pine (short leaf)	.47	44.0
Pitch pine	.47	43.9
Tamarack (hackmatack)	.49	45.8
White oak	.60	56.1
Live oak	.80	74.9
Water	1.00	62.4

Specific gravity values are based on oven dry weight and green volume; density values are for green timber with 50% moisture. Calculations based on data in *Wood Handbook. Wood as an Engineering Material*. USDA Agriculture Handbook No. 72, revised 1974.



DILEMMA #1

Caty Greene, wife of Revolutionary War General Nathaniel Greene, lived on the Dungeness Estate from 1803 until her death in 1814. During that time she and her husband, Phineas Miller, brought many tropical and exotic plants to the island. They had extensive flower and vegetable gardens to provide both food and beauty for the household. Plants such as acacia, tung trees, bamboo and woolly mullen were planted. Caty's daughter, Louisa, carried on her mother's interest in botany after her death. In 1881 the Carnegie's continued to plant exotic species on the island. Many of these non-native species remain. They provide a diversity of plant life for the island but are displacing native vegetation. When native vegetation is threatened the natural balance of the island is upset. What should be done?

DILEMMA #2

Spanish missions were established on the island to convert the Timucuan Indians in the 1500s. With the Spanish settlements came horses, necessary for transport of supplies, and domestic animals for food. Throughout the course of the island's history, other animals were brought. The Carnegies had polo ponies and a wide variety of livestock to feed both the family, guests, and the nearly 300 servants needed to run the estate. About 260 feral horses and a large number of feral hogs presently inhabit Cumberland. They displace native animals, feed on marsh and dune grasses, and destroy Loggerhead turtle nests. The animals receive no veterinary care but are maintaining their numbers. Tourists and other visitors to the islands are very fond of the feral populations; indeed, many talk of the feral horse as a symbol of Cumberland. What do you think should be done about the feral populations of hogs and horses?

DILEMMA #3

Cumberland is a wonderful setting for many types of wildlife. Located on the North Atlantic flyway, it attracts over 325 different types of migrating birds. Many endangered species, sea turtles, piping plovers, least terns, and wood storks, are present here. Private boaters come to the island to bird watch as do visitors on the Cumberland Queen. Many of the birds make shallow nests in the sand and on the dune grasses, difficult to see by walkers. These nests are often trampled by tourists, feral livestock, and the vehicles of the island residents. Loggerhead sea turtles are caught in shrimp nests, washing up on the beach dead, unable to utilize one of the rare nesting

locations on the Eastern Seaboard. Over 75 sea turtles are found every year washed up on Cumberland beaches, many immature females. Endangered species and mankind do not often survive in close contact. What would you do to preserve the species on Cumberland?

DILEMMA #4

There is a native cedar tree growing near the ruins of Dungeness. It is a very old cedar, home for generations of Great Horned Owls. The owls can be seen on the chimney stacks of the ruins at night, hooting eerily through the darkness. This cedar tree is threatening the ruins however. If not cut down, it will cause the collapse of several support walls, which may lead to a major loss of most of the ruin. Where is the line to be drawn between maintaining natural resources at the expense of cultural resources? What would you do with this cedar tree?

DILEMMA #5

The southern end of Cumberland was settled by Native Americans in ancient times and has continued to be populated: as missions, French settlements, forts, plantations, vacation homes and private residences. The north end of the island has been designated the Cumberland Island Wilderness Area. (CIWA) While there are private residences and former plantation fields within the area, the National Park Service is slowly purchasing lands to fully establish the area as a wilderness preserve. What do you think a wilderness area should be? How can it be shared by the visitors to the island, or should it be shared? Decide on a plan to manage the CIWA .

DILEMMA #6

Plum Orchard was the first of the Carnegie mansions to be donated to the National Park Service. It is a large mansion in good condition, sitting in extensive grounds, that has an indoor swimming pool and many fine architectural features. The upkeep necessary to maintain the house is considerable. Built of wood, the timber must be treated and painted frequently to protect it from the salt air of the island. Roof leaks and other climate related factors have caused some damage to the interior. Tours are currently given to the public one Sunday a month of the spring and summer seasons. Money from the visitors is used to pay for repairs and maintenance of the property, but it is not enough. The house is vacant but has had several interested purchasers, one an artist colony. It has been suggested that it be used as a bed and breakfast like Grayfield but Plum Orchard is