

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks & Public Lands

Testimony

Testimony before the Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands
by Gregory B. Paxton, President & CEO, Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation
July 28, 1998

Chairman Hansen, Ranking Member Faleomavaega and Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify today. I am Gregory B. Paxton, President & CEO of the Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation. With nearly 10,000 members, the Georgia Trust is one of the two largest statewide, non-profit preservation organizations in the country. Our mission is to promote an appreciation of Georgia's diverse historic resources and provide for their protection and use, and that is why I am here today to speak to you about Congressman Kingston's legislation. I have been actively involved in the preservation of the outstanding historic resources on Cumberland Island, primarily through serving on the Cumberland Island Historic Foundation from its founding in 1982 by the Regional Director of the National Park Service Robert Baker.

Known as one of Georgia's "golden isles," Cumberland Island contains an indelible 5,000-year history of human habitation written on the Island's landscape, and the evidence is everywhere -- from the Native American burial grounds and shell middens to the crumbling chimney pots and tabby ruins, from the 1870 freed slave settlement to the large estates with numerous out-buildings. These tangible traces of America's and Georgia's history warrant protection along with the areas that have re-grown wild around them. Historic and natural resources are both important elements of Cumberland Island's past, present and future.

The original legislation establishing Cumberland's wilderness set up a conflict between protecting the Island's cultural resources and its natural resources. The Wilderness Act prohibits any use of buildings within a designated wilderness area, but the National Historic Preservation Act calls for preservation of historic structures. Before Congress passed the original legislation, the then Under Secretary of Interior Donald Hodel urged that this situation be rectified. In a letter dated July 12, 1982 to the Hon. James A. McClure, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, Secretary Hodel wrote:

"We have serious reservations as to whether the (Cumberland Island) lands to be designated as wilderness under S. 2569 meet the criteria set forth in the Wilderness Act. However, because wilderness designation will help maintain the area in its natural state to a greater degree than other environmental laws alone, and because of strong public support for the wilderness designation, we support enactment of this bill, if it is amended to reflect the concerns noted below....However, the requirements of section 106 (of the National Historic Preservation Act) may well conflict with the designation of these lands as wilderness, since the Wilderness Act defines wilderness as 'natural' and 'undeveloped' in character and devoid of 'permanent improvements or human habitation.' Maintaining the structures in perpetuity would seem to frustrate the intention of Congress that these lands eventually be designated as wilderness. At the same time, designating this acreage as wilderness would seem to frustrate Congress' intent that historic structures be preserved. *We believe this apparent internal conflict within S. 2569 should be resolved before the bill is enacted into law.*"(Emphasis added.)

The fact that most of Cumberland Island has been heavily farmed throughout the last two centuries, and the fact that the Island contains hundreds of significant historic and prehistoric sites were not adequately addressed in its wilderness designation. Since the conflict was not resolved, three important historic

structures listed on the National Register of Historic Places have fallen to the ground from neglect. These include the formerly elegant Recreation/Guest House beside Dungeness and the large carriage house at Plum Orchard (photos in attachments 1 & 2.). Many of the Island's other significant cultural resources, including the stately 35-room, Neoclassical Plum Orchard main house (attachment 3), also are in a serious state of disrepair.

These conflicts between laws that guide the management of Cumberland's varied resources have served only to worsen the state of cultural resources on Cumberland Island, since there are strict limitations on driving on the historic road through the wilderness area to the historic sites. This makes it nearly impossible to maintain the historic buildings that need substantial and consistent upkeep on a subtropical sea island.

The Cumberland Island Preservation Act helps provide solutions to these management conflicts, helps rectify the critical condition of the cultural resources on Cumberland Island, expands wilderness areas and allows greater public access to the Island's historic districts. This bill provides the blueprint for a management plan that *balances* the need to protect historic and cultural resources as well as the Island's wilderness areas. Specific important points in the bill include:

- **preservation of Plum Orchard**, a 22,000-square-foot house (designed in 1898) that requires stabilization and restoration. In the National Register inventory Plum Orchard is described as the architectural jewel of the island.
- **preparation of a plan to preserve other archeological and historic sites on the Island** which has still not been prepared after 25 years of Park Service ownership.
- **limited use of the nearly 200-year-old main road**, which is also listed on the National Register. This north-south road linked early 19th century plantations, the 20th century farms and continues to link the entire island together, serving as the primary transportation and communications link on the Island today. This bill proposes removing the historic road itself from the wilderness in order to allow *limited* public access to the north end of the Island where Plum Orchard and other important historic sites -- including the Island's cemetery and the small, historically significant African-American settlement at Half-Moon Bluff -- are located. It would also allow the historic road itself to be preserved. Running along the western and northern edge of the Island, the road would enable park visitors to see more of the Island's history, while leaving eight miles of shoreline and nearly all of the width of the wilderness undisturbed.
- **addition of about 200 acres south of Dungeness to the protected wilderness area** where there has been limited human intervention, except for the site of Fort Prince William, built in 1739 by Col. James Oglethorpe, which was the southernmost occupied site in what would become the 13 original colonies.
- **an exchange of land between the National Park Service and the Candler family** that includes the 1875 High Point Hotel and numerous other buildings on the National Register currently maintained by the family under a 70-year life estate. This provision would allow the Candlers to buy up to *1,000 acres* of land owned by the Fergusons (a branch of the Carnegie family) on the south end of the potential wilderness area and swap it for ownership of less than *150 acres* of the Candler's historic land at the north end of the Island. The National Park Service will put in place measures to limit this area to family use only. This small parcel would then be removed from the wilderness, allowing for the buildings to be preserved after the current 70-year life estate expires. If the swap does not occur, after the life estate ends, the buildings could not be used by anyone and would inevitably be demolished by neglect.

Past and current private owners of Cumberland Island have been insensitively, inaccurately and broadly criticized by some. When all of it was privately owned, the owners hired lobbyists to defeat a proposed causeway and led the effort to have it first declared a National Seashore and then a wilderness to protect it from development. The private owners donated Plum Orchard with 12 acres and \$50,000 to the National Park Service to maintain it. Many others donated or sold land to the government at bargain prices. Those

owners and former owners who retain life estates on the Island are not interlopers in the wilderness. They are its creators. Private owners have preserved and continue to preserve the historic structures at Cumberland Island, sadly, substantially better than the National Park Service.

The Georgia Trust supports the balanced approach of the proposed legislation and believes that the legislation can be improved by also removing from the wilderness designation three other small areas on the north end of the Island that are located along the road, so that access can be permitted for the purposes of maintenance, preservation, restoration, rehabilitation, reconstruction and limited visitation. These areas are Cumberland Wharf, the cemeteries containing the remains of black and white residents of the Island and a village comprised of structures surrounding the African Baptist church at Half Moon Bluff dating from its settlement in 1870 by freed slaves.

After thousands of years of often intensive human occupancy, Cumberland Island is a rich and fragile combination of natural, prehistoric and historic resources that together make it a special place worthy of protection. The Cumberland Island Historic Preservation Act provides a more balanced approach to protecting all of the Island's resources as was recommended by the Department of the Interior prior to the passage of the wilderness designation. The Committee Report should make clear that this change to the wilderness designation is not to set a national precedent concerning de-designation of wilderness but to rectify an internal conflict that has existed since the Cumberland Island designation was first considered.

The vision for Cumberland Island that I see emerging from this Act is one that provides for the future protection of the cultural, historic and natural resources of the Island through a plan that arises from the Island's past and present. The historic resources along the western and northern edges of the Island would become more accessible for maintenance and limited visitation. The 90+ percent of the visitors, who never leave the vicinity of Dungeness, would gain access to an additional wilderness area. Limited and restricted use and visitation of historic sites would allow for the elderly, young and handicapped to experience the edge of the wilderness while allowing the current wilderness areas and additional new wilderness in the central and eastern side of the Island to further advance to a wild state. The Park Service would have a clearer path for a management plan for both the cultural and historic resources and for the wilderness.

Congressman Kingston's legislation also serves as a wake-up call for the entire country. The problems on Cumberland Island reflect more serious problems in our National Parks nationwide, and it is critical that the United States address the substantial under funding of cultural and historic resources in our Parks. Historic buildings on Cumberland Island under the care of the National Park Service are not the only ones falling apart.

While during the past two decades, the private sector has funded more than \$17 billion in preservation projects meeting the Secretary of the Interior's Standards, the Secretary's National Park Service has fallen behind on the maintenance of historic structures under its care by an amount conservatively estimated as \$1.7 billion. This means that many of the United States' most important historic resources are threatened and that historic sites throughout the country are literally collapsing from neglect. This condition undermines our national self-esteem and the esteem of our country in the eyes of the world. As our country approaches the millenium, a renewed commitment of the monetary resources to preserve our most valuable natural, cultural and historic resources is desperately needed to help the National Park Service.

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Summary of Comments

The tangible traces of 5,000 years of human habitation on Cumberland Island need to be protected along with the areas that have grown wild around them. Although the original legislation establishing Cumberland's wilderness set up a conflict that has never been resolved between protecting the Island's cultural resources and its natural resources, Rep. Kingston's proposed legislation provides the blueprint for a management plan that balances the need to protect historical and cultural resources as well as the Island's wilderness areas. Specific points in the bill that are important to preservationists include:

- preservation of Plum Orchard
- preparation of a plan to preserve other archeological and historic sites on the Island
- limited use of the nearly 200-year-old main road listed on the National Register
- additions to the protected wilderness area south of Dungeness
- an exchange of land between the National Park Service and the Candler family which would make future preservation of buildings at the north end of the Island possible

Many preservationists have called for even more measures to protect Cumberland Island's historic resources, including removing from the wilderness designation four areas within the High Point-half Moon Bluff district so that access can be permitted for the purposes of maintenance, preservation, restoration, rehabilitation, reconstruction or visitation. Although critics of the bill believe private ownership of Cumberland Island will undoubtedly lead to heavy development, the Island's history shows that private owners have fought to protect it from developers, have hired lobbyists to defeat a proposed causeway, and have led the effort to have it first declared a national Seashore and then a wilderness. Many have donated or sold land to the government at bargain prices.

Rep. Kingston's legislation serves as a wake-up call for the entire country. The problems on Cumberland Island reflect more serious problems in our National Parks nationwide, and it is critical that we address the substantial under-funding of cultural and historic resources in our National Parks. The Park Service's \$1.7 billion maintenance backlog means that some of the country's most significant buildings and historic sites are literally collapsing from neglect. As we approach the millenium, a renewed commitment of the monetary resources to preserve our most valuable natural, cultural and historic resources is desperately needed to help the National Park Service.

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