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Testimony
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Committee on Resources
United States House of Representatives

Hearing on H.R. 4887: Cumberland Island Wilderness Boundary Adjustment Act of 2003
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Chairman Radanovich, Ranking Member Christensen, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to testify today. I am Gregory B. Paxton, President and CEO of The Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation. With 8,000 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.

That is why I am here today to speak to you about Representative Kingston's legislation, H. R. 4887, the Cumberland Island National Wilderness Boundary Adjustment Act of 2003. I have been actively involved in the preservation of the outstanding historic resources on Cumberland Island through my role at the Trust, through numerous visits including two four-day retreats with environmental organizations since 1982, review and comment on National Park Service management plans and ongoing activities, and through serving on the Cumberland Island Historic Foundation since its founding in 1982.

Cumberland Island is a large and complex island with a rich natural and human history. The multitude of significant historic and cultural resources within the island's natural setting represents a unique opportunity to preserve and interpret the island's cultural heritage while conserving the ecosystems and animal species that comprise the island's natural environment. The National Trust for Historic Preservation's Save America's Treasures program has designated Cumberland Island's diverse historic resources as nationally significant.

The Island was designated a National Seashore in 1972 because it offered such a wonderful mix of both natural and cultural resources. It was clearly intended that historic structures like Plum Orchard would be preserved and used. Many of the private owners of Cumberland Island have been instrumental in the preservation and protection of the island. They fought development proposals, lobbied for Seashore and Wilderness designations and donated, bargain sold or voluntarily sold their property to the National Park Service in order to preserve the Island's historic and natural resources, as they were. These owners and former owners who retain rights on the Island are not interlopers in the wilderness. They are its creators. Private owners have also preserved and continue to preserve many of the island's historic resources and their agreements with the Park Service provided for it to preserve the historic properties under its care.

When the Park Service proposed to increase the number of daily visitors to 10,000, Island residents led the lobbying to further protect the island by designating portions of it as wilderness, without fully understanding the implication for historic resources. However, the original legislation establishing Cumberland's wilderness set up a conflict between protecting the island's historic resources and its natural resources. In fact, President Reagan and his soon-to-be Secretary of Interior Donald Hodell noted conflicting mandates between wilderness and historic preservation laws when signing the act into law in 1982. The Wilderness Act prohibits any use of buildings within a designated wilderness area, but the National Historic Preservation Act calls for preservation of historic resources. These conflicts remain unresolved.

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 with S.2569 should be resolved before the bill is enacted into law.*”
[Emphasis added]

While Cumberland today is a barrier island with much of its land area returning to a natural state, the island also represents a rich 5,000-year history of human habitation, revealed in the island’s landscape, archaeological remains and extant historic resources. The island has been occupied by Native Americans, Spanish and French explorers, English and American generals, enslaved and free African Americans, and more recently the Carnegie and Candler families’ descendants. The island was the site of two 16th century Spanish missions, among the oldest European structures built in North America. Two colonial English forts laid out by Lord Proprietor of the Georgia Colony, General James Oglethorpe, established and protected the boundary of Georgia thus setting the southern boundary of the 13 original colonies. The evidence of this human habitation is everywhere – from the Native American burial grounds and shell middens to the crumbling chimney pots and tabby ruins; from the 1890 freed slave settlement to the large estates with numerous outbuildings. Throughout most of the last 150 years the vast majority of the island has been cleared and cultivated. Horses and pigs remain the dominant animal species on the island.

This level of human activity and its tangible remains, including the historically cleared landscape, throughout the island clearly prevent the areas currently designated wilderness and potential wilderness from meeting the criteria for designation as wilderness. Yet the key areas representing human activity on the island do currently meet the criteria for historic significance. Managing portions of the island with the goal of coming closer to meeting wilderness criteria in the future is a worthy one. However, the designation or management of portions of the island to meet this future goal should not be carried out in a manner that prevents or undermines preservation, access to or use of current significant cultural and historic resources; and that is currently the case. So, why, under the National Park Service’s management are we permitting the

destruction of historic resources that clearly meet established national criteria for historic significance in order to over protect natural resources that do not meet established national criteria for wilderness?

We believe that this unique combination of historic and natural resources provides a unique opportunity to develop a balanced management approach to Cumberland Island that preserves, utilizes and interprets the extant historic and archaeological resources within the overall natural context of the island. Since the ambiguous wilderness designation in 1982, some extreme wilderness advocates have paralyzed any attempts to preserve the island's historic resources by filing frivolous lawsuits against private property owners and the National Park Service. The fact is that the island's historic resources are highly significant and these tangible traces of America's and Georgia's history warrant protection along with the areas that are re-growing wild around them. That is why the National Park Service, at all levels, supports this bill.

Surveys of island visitors have indicated they overwhelmingly want to see both natural and historic resources. According to the CUIS Visitors Study, 83 percent went to the Dungeness historic area and 64 percent visited the Ice House Museum. Sixty-two (62) percent of visitors, asked to list reasons for visiting the park, chose "visiting historical areas." Under the current status, access to many historic resources is prevented for the vast majority of visitors because of the distances between historic sites. This bill protects the island's natural areas while allowing provision of tours to the island's historic and cultural sites for visitors, including the average day-tripper and those unable to hike great distances. Thus we disagree with the Wilderness Society's characterization of the Senate version of this bill as "meant to benefit a small group of business people." Based on the visitor survey, this bill benefits the vast majority of the public that visits the site. The existing law benefits only a small group of people.

The Wilderness Society has further stated that removing the roads "will split the wilderness in two" and that the historic district to the north contains only "a few structures." In fact H.R. 4887 will permit public access to numerous historic sites along the island's western and northern edge by removing from the wilderness the 200-year-old main road, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and the Plum Orchard and North Cut Roads, which go to and through historic districts. The Intracoastal Waterway can be seen along portions of the Main and Plum Orchard Roads, where motorboats and even submarines from Kings Bay Naval Base now ply. The bill leaves intact the vast majority of the acreage now designated wilderness or potential wilderness, as a contiguous area in the middle of the island two miles wide and more than six miles long. For those desiring a wilderness experience, private landowners have donated a hiking path in the middle of the island, though it is seldom used. Thick subtropical foliage blocks sounds in well less than 100 yards.

The legislation adds a net of 772 acres to these designations, while removing 21 acres of roadbed and the northern historic district, which includes 20 buildings. These changes to the designation will help preserve the 17 contributing buildings in the Plum Orchard Historic District and the 20 structures in the High Point/Half Moon Bluff Historic District, or 37 in all. The lack of general accessibility prevents viable attempts to adequately preserve and maintain these historic buildings. Three important historic structures listed on the National Register of Historic Places

have fallen to the ground from neglect. These include the Dungeness Recreation Building and the Plum Orchard Carriage House, designed by the nationally recognized firm of Peabody & Stern. In addition, more than half of the 13 structures located in The Settlement, or Half Moon Bluff, and identified in the National Register of Historic Places nomination have been lost. H.R. 4887 will permit road access to the north end of the island, including to the historic African-American Settlement, a late 1800s community made famous as the site of John Kennedy, Jr.'s wedding; and an adjoining historic cemetery, a rare tangible link to the slaves who once occupied the island. Nearby are Native American shell mounds in an area once containing a 1595 Spanish mission and Gen. Oglethorpe's 1736 fort.

Great public and private funds, including federal appropriations successfully sought by Representative Kingston, have been expended on Plum Orchard. Despite these expenditures and the National Park Service's best attempts to maintain the property, this important historic resource has remained largely unused, and has therefore greatly deteriorated, because of the wilderness area management guidelines preventing adequate access and use of the property. While strongly supporting rehabilitation and use of the existing historic structures, the preservation community would strongly oppose development of any new buildings or upgrading of the one-lane sand roads to be removed from the wilderness.

The bill will also facilitate the preservation of 1898 Plum Orchard, Georgia's largest historic house, which part of the Carnegie family donated with 12 acres and \$50,000 in 1970 to help establish the National Seashore. The Park Service struggles to preserve it, and several attempts to establish a public/private partnership to save the house have failed for lack of reasonable road access. The current limitations to driving on these historic roads make using and maintaining historic buildings such as Plum Orchard, which require continual upkeep, nearly impossible. The World Monuments Fund has recently listed Plum Orchard as a threatened building, joining only six (6) listings in the U.S. and 100 worldwide.

The private landowners including the proprietors of Greyfield Inn already have the right to drive on these roads through long-standing practice and retained rights with the National Park Service. The general public does not have a right to bring or drive a car on the island now nor will it under this bill. The goal of this legislation is to allow reasonable access under the aegis of the Park Service for members of the general public to the island's numerous historic sites.

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. H. R. 4887, the Cumberland Island National Wilderness Boundary Adjustment Act of 2003 provides a more reasonable approach to protecting the island's resources by providing access for the purposes of maintenance, preservation and limited visitation. The Subcommittee Report should make clear that this change to the wilderness designation is not to set a national precedent of de-designating wilderness, but to rectify a legal conflict preventing preservation of the island's significant historic areas that has existed since the Cumberland Island designation was first considered.

We are pleased that this important bill has bipartisan support through the co-sponsorship of two other members of Georgia's Congressional delegation, Representatives Sanford Bishop and David Scott. The Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation joins in strongly supporting this bill and we commend Representatives Kingston, Bishop and Scott for their leadership in forging a better solution for managing Cumberland Island National Seashore.