



Cumberland Island's colorful history told in illustrated coffee-table book

THINGS TO DO | Aug 5, 2020

By Suzanne Van Atten, For the AJC

Advertisement

Draped in Spanish moss, inhabited by wild horses and home to descendants of both the Carnegies and the Candler, Cumberland Island holds an almost mythological place in the minds of many Georgians. The author of a new history of the island from University of Georgia Press, Stephen Doster, included.

Advertisement

“When I was growing on St. Simons, it was this thing on the horizon, this thing in the mist

that was nebulous and mystical,” said Doster, speaking from his home in Nashville.    

Spending a year researching and writing “Cumberland Island: Footsteps in Time” has done little to diminish Doster’s perspective.

Accessible only by boat, the 56-square-mile barrier island in the southernmost part of Georgia is home to 17 miles of pristine beach and 9,800 acres of protected wilderness. The only signs of civilization are a couple structures and ruins from the plantation era and a smattering of homes that belong mostly to the descendants of tycoons and slaves.

The coffee table book is one of several illustrated history books from UGA Press that feature a wealth of large, color photographs, as well as historical images, maps and illustrations. Doster worked closely with photographer Benjamin Galland, a native of St. Simons, to illustrate the book. The result is an informative, visually luscious ode to a beguiling part of the state.



Credit: Benjamin Galland

In the prologue, Doster, 61, acknowledges that the late [Mary R. Bullard](#) wrote a definitive history of the island for UGA Press in 2005, and there are other books, too. But they mostly focus on a post-Revolutionary War timeline, encompassing the plantation era and the late 1800s when the island was a popular vacation destination, an era that coincided with the construction of Thomas Carnegie's palatial Queen Anne mansion, Dungeness, which burned in 1959.

Working on the book, Doster discovered the island's history was more complex than he initially imagined.

"I thought it was about wild horses and the Carnegies, but if you look at this book, that's the last chapter," said Doster. "There's a lot in this book that happened before that era.

These other books about Cumberland don't really dive that deeply into the native era, the Spanish era, the Colonial era and even the Civil War."



Doster was surprised to discover how well the Spanish and French had documented the island's occupations by native populations and the Spanish.

"I sort of felt like working on the book I was a time traveler being washed up on Cumberland's shore in different eras," he said.

Another element that distinguishes his book, said Doster, is the inclusion of an illustration of the first Dungeness mansion built in the early 1800s. Other than an illustration of its ruins, there are no known images of the structure in existence.



Credit: Benjamin Galland

“Based on photographs of the ruins and written descriptions, I hired an artist to recreate the first Dungeness, which was a monstrous mansion,” he said. “It was so large it was used as a navigational device by pilots. It was built by Caty Greene, widow of (Revolutionary War general) Nathanael Greene.”

The book contains plenty of photographs of the second Dungeness mansion, built by Thomas and Lucy Carnegie in the late 1800s. In addition to historical images of the vast

structure when it was still intact, Galland provides several photos of the ruins, which have become an iconic symbol for the island.



This is the fourth book Galland has photographed for UGA Press.

“What I found on this book without a doubt was that accessing the island was my biggest challenge,” he said. “We had a hurricane, it was Hurricane Matthew I believe, that wreaked havoc on the mainland in St. Marys, and it ruined a lot of the docks over there. They were the docks for the ferry to Cumberland, so it was not accessible to the public for quite a while.”

Galland was also forced to rough it on his dozen or so visits to photograph the island. The only accommodations for guests is the exclusive Greyfield Inn, originally home to Thomas Carnegie’s daughter built in 1900. Not willing to pay upwards of \$600 a night to stay there, Galland had no choice but to camp.

If there is anything Galland would like people to know about Cumberland, it’s that it is a place that remains untamed.





Credit: Benjamin Galland

“You have the horses, and that’s a huge draw to the island,” he said. “There are a lot of different schools of thought on the horses — if they should be there, if they’re healthy. I think it is important to note that the horses definitely are an invasive species and they are wild.”

But that’s not all.

“There is some development on Cumberland towards the north end, there are houses and residents, beach homes and summer homes, but most of it is pretty wild,” he said. “If you’re not careful, you can get in trouble over there.”

For Doster, it all comes down to the history.

“A lot of blood, sweat and tears went into the history of that island,” he said. “It’s the same history as the Caribbean. You go there and see nice swaying palms and nice sandy beaches and think, this is lovely. But a lot of people died for it to be a lovely place to visit.”

NONFICTION

[‘Cumberland Island: Footsteps in Time’](#)

by Stephen Doster

Photos by Benjamin Galland

University of Georgia Press

392 pages, \$34.95

[More books on Georgia](#)