

# Giving Research a Voice

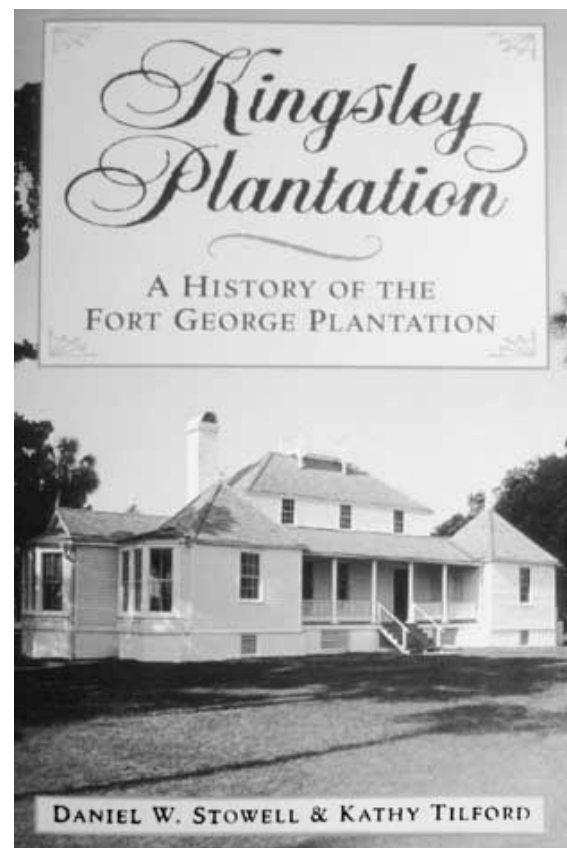
## Interpreting History in the Real World

Every year, the National Park Service produces research reports on its parks and their historic resources. Historic resource studies, National Register of Historic Places nominations, administrative histories, and other required documents investigate the history of the parks, describing the significance of historic buildings, structures, and landscapes, and providing historic contexts for their evaluation. Although these documents are printed and distributed, they reach a limited audience. Because of the technical nature of the text and a lack of funding for wider distribution, NPS staff, those with access to academic libraries, and peer historians are often the only readers of these reports. Recently, the Cultural Resources Stewardship division of the NPS Southeast Regional Office has sought to provide the research found in these internal government reports to a wider audience, specifically focusing on supplying more information to the region's park visitors through interpretive media such as site bulletins, brochures, posters, and web pages.

The interpretive tools focus on little-told interpretive stories in order to attract more diverse audiences to the parks. For example, national park units created to preserve significant natural resources may have little or no information on the historic buildings or other features that are also found in the park. At Cumberland Island National Seashore, visitors have access to site bulletins and exhibits about the wilderness area on the island and the endangered natural resources the park was created to protect, but find little information about the many extant cultural resources on the island. Recent research completed for a National Register of Historic Places nomination documented the history of African-American settlement on the island. Summarized and rewritten with a visitor's frame of reference in mind, the research has been used to create a site bulletin about African-American history on Cumberland Island. The bulletin, a free handout at the park visitor center, seeks to give visitors a sense of the broader history of the

island and its inhabitants and the issues surrounding the preservation of the island's cultural resources.

At Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve, a 200-plus page Historic Resource Study was transformed into a 24-page booklet to be sold in the park's Eastern National book store. The original study, researched and written by a contracted Ph.D. historian, provided four historic contexts and evaluated the significance of the historic structures and sites in the 46,000-acre park. Park interpretive staff condensed the history of Kingsley Plantation contained in one of the contexts into an easily readable format and included historic photographs of many of the buildings as well as copies of plantation journal entries in the booklet. The use of primary research conducted by an experienced historian with a background in Florida history in the guide



book helped ensure factual content and provided visitors with new information. Interpretive staff created text and a graphic layout that would be accessible to a range of ages and reading levels. This combination of research talent and interpretive skills has been a key factor in the success of the booklet.

A third interpretive tool undertaken by the Southeast Region and currently in the final stages of development explores the Gullah culture on the Sea Islands and coastal areas of Georgia and South Carolina. Gullah communities, created by African slaves from different tribes and maintained by their descendants, have a unique culture that developed as a result of the geographic isolation of the slaves and the combination of cultural influences from their various tribal groups and their Euramerican owners. The Gullah site bulletin and other interpretive media are created by NPS historians whose specializations may lie in other fields of history. As a result, comments are solicited from outside scholars in the field in order to produce a more accurate publication. Scholars specializing in Gullah culture, Gullah preservationists, and members of Gullah communities were all contacted and asked to review the Gullah bulletin before distributing it to the park.

The majority of the interpretive products created in the Southeast Regional Office is funded by the Park Service, either from service-wide project funds or from park budgets. However, attempts to garner financial support from outside sources have shown promise. The Golden Crescent project, which sought to create a brochure, poster, video, and web site to promote visitation to parks, museums, and other historic sites along the coasts of Georgia and Florida, received initial funding support from the National Park Service even though the interpretive media described parks, historic sites, museums, and other resources managed by state and local governments, private organizations, and non-profit agencies as well as the National Park Service. Although NPS funding for the project was discontinued, the state tourism and parks departments in Georgia and Florida committed to funding reprints of the brochure to ensure continuing distribution.

The Southeast Region utilizes new technologies in its efforts to provide historical research to a wider audience. Expanded web sites

for the region's parks are being developed that provide potential visitors with a virtual look at a park and its resources. The first park web page created by the Southeast Region's team built on an existing site for Castillo de San Marcos National Monument. Historical research completed for the park was converted to a graphic format in order to provide a virtual tour of the primary resource at the park, the 17th-century Spanish fortification on the Matanzas River in St. Augustine, Florida. The site is interactive, providing links to more in-depth information about the resources at the park, the history of the park and the surrounding area, park activities, and detailed images of the fort, museum exhibits, and the St. Augustine community. Other web pages under development include sites for Fort Matanzas National Monument and Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area. The expanded web pages project will provide a consistent design and layout for parks in the region.

Future plans for interpretive products include linking park web sites in specific geographic areas in order to provide visitors with travel information for specific parts of the southeast; writing site bulletins for parks such as Civil War battlefields to relate stories of commemoration, park development, women's history, or other areas of the site's history where information may be lacking; continuing to explore the possibilities for outside sources of funding; and teaming up on projects with park staff and independent scholars in order to provide more accurate and informative products.

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## **Correction**

In *CRM* Vol. 22, No. 2, "The Sewall-Belmont House National Historic Site Library, the Florence Bayard Hilles Library Opens to the Public," was based on a history written by Karen Whitehair, the Florence Bayard Hilles Feminist Library Restoration Project Coordinator. To make an appointment to visit the library, call Courteney Holden, Deputy Director at 202-546-1210.