



Cannon's Point: Where 'Georgia's Little Amazon' meets the sea

Step into Cannon's Point Preserve and you step into a different time. A time before St. Simons Island was "discovered" by beach lovers and travelers. A time even before the cotton fields and the olive and citrus groves of 19th century owner John Couper. Back to the time of the Native Americans who harvested oysters from the creeks and rivers and piled their shells into middens – still present near the top of the peninsula.

The preserve is a unique part of the island – historic, wild, filled with rare plants and trees. And to most visitors to the island, it's an undiscovered wilderness.

"Most people who visit the island go to the Village and to the beach. That's their visit," and that's all they know, says Scott Coleman, ecological manager at Little St. Simons Island and member of the St. Simons Land Trust's Board of Directors.

"I think because St. Simons Island is such a public tourist destination, people will [eventually] stumble on these places," he says. Once they have the experience, they will have a "whole different feeling of the Georgia coast."

Unique and impressive as it is, the 608-acre property is not a stand-alone conservation site. It's part of a much larger land- and sea-scape and provides a connection to the community's history and culture.

Back in the 1990s, The Nature Conservancy conducted an ecological inventory of the Altamaha River system, assessing the lands along the Altamaha River all the way to St. Simons Island and Little St. Simons Island. Even then, the organization identified Cannon's Point as a priority in its mission to "conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends." Today, The Nature Conservancy holds the conservation easement for Cannon's Point. According to Christi Lambert, Georgia

Marine and Freshwater Conservation Director, “Cannon’s Point Preserve continues to be a conservation priority for the Conservancy and our partners in our work to conserve lands along the coast and throughout the Altamaha River system.”

Lambert notes that the Altamaha is the second largest watershed on the Eastern Seaboard of the United States. “It supports a wide array of diverse ecosystems,” she says, adding: “The lower end of that watershed meets the St. Simons Island and Cannon’s Point area. Standing at the northern tip of Cannon’s Point, one can gaze across the expansive Altamaha delta.” The diversity of plants and animals gives the river system its nickname, she says, of “Georgia’s Little Amazon.”



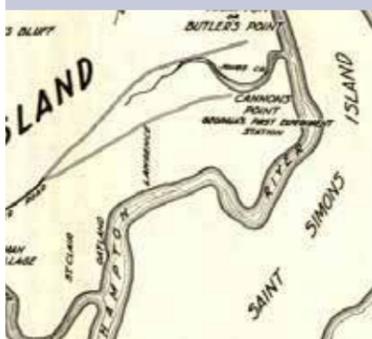
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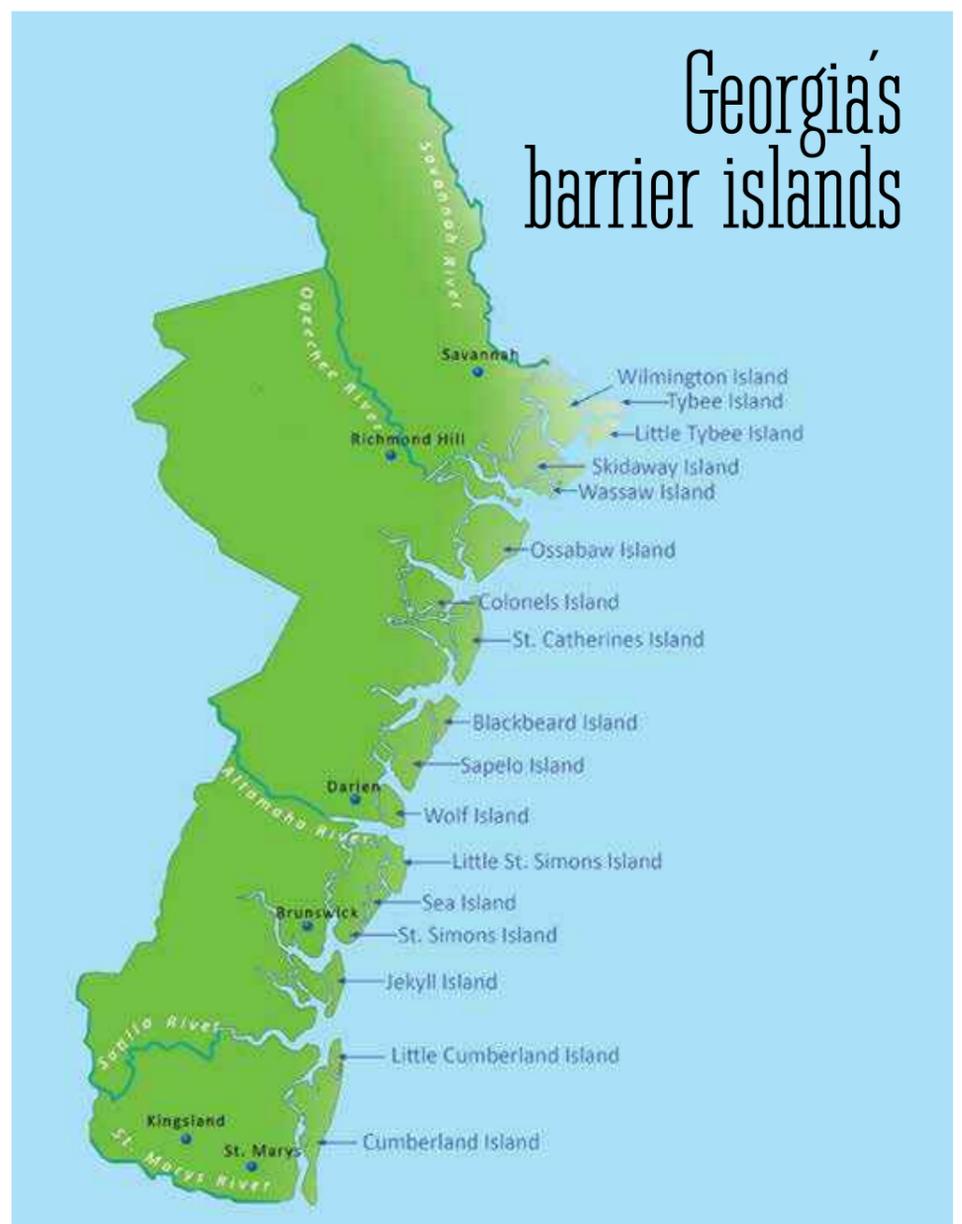
- The American Holly (*Illex opaca*) is a small native tree that grows 15-30 feet tall. Its beautiful red berries are a great food source for our native wildlife. Male and female trees – both present at Cannon’s Point – are needed to produce the berries. For more information on native plants: <https://plants.usda.gov/>



- The Hermit Thrush (*Catharus guttatus*) is a migratory bird that feeds on insects in the warmer months in the North and West. In the winter months they can be seen on St. Simons, where their diet changes to fruit. Look for them enjoying the berries of the American Holly. For more information: www.allaboutbirds.org



- Early owner of Cannon’s Point John Couper experimented with several crops, including Sea Island cotton, grapes, olives, citrus, palms and dates. But never rice. Why? Because rice requires fresh water tidelands, and St. Simons Island offers only salt water.



Little Amazon, continued

While most of the river sediments flow south to St. Simons and Little St. Simons, some flow north to Sapelo Island.

And all three islands – as well as Georgia’s other barrier islands along the coast – provide a rich diversity of habitats, from salt marshes and tidal creeks to maritime forests and woodlands with their rare or threatened plants.

All of the undeveloped islands along the Georgia coast support important natural processes, such as nesting of sea turtles and painted buntings and migration of peregrine falcons and several species of shorebirds.

“That fits the St. Simons Land Trust into a much larger effort of conservation on the Georgia coast,” Coleman says. “Protecting the upland acreage of the Cannon’s Point peninsula goes a long way in protecting many hundreds of additional acres of important salt marsh habitat surrounding the property, including much of the marsh between the northern end of St. Simons Island and Little St. Simons Island.”

Suggested Reading List

A few delightful reads for the conservationist at heart, suggested by Wendy Paulson, member of the St. Simons Land Trust’s Advisory Council:

- *Forgotten Grasslands of the South: Natural History and Conservation* by Reed Noss
- *The World of the Salt Marsh: Appreciating and Protecting the Tidal Marshes of the Southeastern Atlantic Coast* by Charles Seabrook
- *Memoirs of a Naturalist* by Herbert Stoddard

The Altamaha River system



Over the past 25 years, a massive, collaborative effort to save the Lower Altamaha has resulted in protection of some 140,000 acres, in a continuous swath from Jesup to the Altamaha estuary, some 42 miles. The combination of land purchases and easements by The Nature Conservancy, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the U.S. Marine Corps at Ft. Stewart, federal agencies, and private foundations “is one of the greatest unsung conservation stories in recent time,” according to Jason Lee, program manager for the Non-Game Conservation Section of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources.

Lee notes that the DNR is managing and restoring all four of the river’s distinct habitats (estuary, brackish area, freshwater tidal area, and uplands). Together, they make up one of the most diverse ecosystems on the planet, rivaling the tropical rainforest in plant and animal diversity. In the upland area, DNR is restoring the native long-leaf pine ecosystem that had been replaced with non-native pine forests for timber. Conversely, many of the wetland areas are practically pristine and need only management rather than restoration, he says.

Lambert notes that “the Altamaha is one of the largest undammed river systems along the Atlantic.” It supports one of the healthiest and most expansive estuarine and salt marsh systems in the world and is vital to the health of the Georgia coast. The flood plain is forested, protecting the water quality, filtering the water and protecting the hydrology. Once the water reaches the coast, it transfers sediment to the marshes and islands near its mouth – including St. Simons and Little St. Simons.

Undiscovered gem of St. Simons Island

“At Cannon’s Point, there’s a whole suite of plants you wouldn’t find in many other places, including Florida privet and climbing buckthorn, both rare shrubs,” says Coleman. He explains that it’s the oyster shell middens, or mounds, that provide a home for plants that wouldn’t exist in other places. The shells change the pH of the soil, making possible a whole different group of plants like cedars and rare shrubs.

“Cannon’s Point feels primeval,” observes Coleman. “It feels more like Sapelo or Wassaw than St. Simons.”

The difference? St. Simons is accessible by car, making it easy for people to discover and interact with Cannon’s Point and to share in the Land Trust’s legacy of conservation. And it’s just a short hop from the bustle of the Pier Village and the beach. ■



‘A Lot to Celebrate’

On Oct. 17, the St. Simons Land Trust welcomed the community to a celebration of Cannon’s Point Preserve. Keynote speaker was David Weitnauer, president of the R. Howard Dobbs Jr. Foundation in Atlanta. This is a condensed version of his celebratory remarks.

“There is a lot to celebrate today! Wendy and Hank Paulson’s original vision for Cannon’s Point is definitely something to celebrate.

I think about what it took for the St. Simons Land Trust to make the decision to accept responsibility for this project. Taking on a \$25 million capital campaign was no small feat. But saying yes to an ongoing responsibility for the property – caring for it, sharing it – was just as big.

Cannon’s Point is a microcosm of everything that makes the Georgia coast special. It is safe. It will be cared for. It will be shared. That is something to celebrate!

But what I’d most like to celebrate today is the community that has come to life around Cannon’s Point. The Land Trust established several task forces: Conservation & Stewardship, Education, History, and Recreation, staffed by people with expertise and passion in those areas, representing a host of organizational partners.

Then there are the volunteers. The Land Trust and task forces have been recruiting all manner of volunteers, people of all ages, asking them to roll up their sleeves to help with a wide range of work.

While the St. Simons Land Trust will forever get credit for launching the community that’s come to life around Cannon’s Point, it transcends the Land Trust. Just in the last couple of months, you’ve made it possible for all kinds of new people to spend time here: hikers, college students, professors, and volunteers. All of those newcomers formed their own relationship with Cannon’s Point. And in the process, your circle grew.

This growing community rooted in Cannon’s Point is critically important for the Georgia coast.

The Georgia coast is a world-class collection of nature, history, and beauty. The experts will tell you it is a national treasure. In fact... The Nature Conservancy deems it globally significant. The strange thing is most people in Georgia don’t get that. To have a region of that stature in our state ... you would expect there to be an overarching sense of regional and state pride... a determination to ensure that it’s kept safe for our children and grandchildren.

But we don’t have that. I know it exists in pockets. We have some fierce coastal advocates...some wonderful non-profits... And a good bit of very special land has been preserved. Visionary laws like the Coastal Marshlands Protection Act have been on the books since the ’70s. But...the Georgia coast needs more.

It faces very real and urgent threats. The region is growing fast. Counties and municipalities have to make decisions about how to manage that growth ... Will they do that with the region’s natural features and history in mind? ...

It’s a wonderful thing that we have visionary laws in place... But they are at risk. There are problems with the will to enforce those laws. And there is an inclination among our policy makers to weaken them.

We’ve got to build a community for the coast up and down this region and across the state... That kind of community speaks up and votes. It gets involved in the hard work of planning and policy making...The Georgia coast needs that type of community if it’s going to endure for future generations.

Cannon’s Point is just beginning its work, and you are already building a community for the coast. This...community ... is a platform for encouraging the circle of people rooted in what makes this coast special. Every single time someone new steps foot on Cannon’s Point, because of its special qualities and the careful way you’re going about sharing it, our community for the coast will continue to grow.”



Nature tours, oysters, and popcorn

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It's been an eventful fall for the Land Trust and friends! Highlights: the Cannon's Point Community Celebration, a showing of "City Slickers" and the new Land Trust video "Home" at the Old Stables Corner, and the 15th Annual Oyster Roast at Gascoigne Bluff.



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The Land Trust invites you to join a growing number of members choosing to make their annual membership contribution monthly, over 12 months, via credit card. Monthly giving provides a reliable stream of support for the Land Trust's mission. Here's how it works.

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Your annual membership to the Land Trust allows us to fulfill our mission. Join us today!

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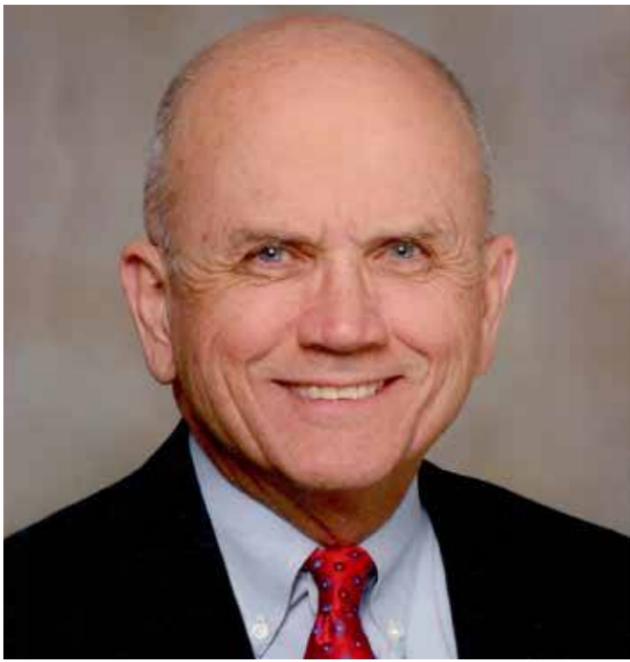
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JOIN OR RENEW TODAY AND HELP PRESERVE THE NATURAL AND SCENIC CHARACTER OF OUR ISLAND





A letter from the Executive Director

One has only to reflect on our mission statement to count off the many ways our work at the St. Simons Land Trust will “preserve the natural and scenic character of our Island and enhance the quality of life of our Island community for present and future generations.”

Over six miles of marsh and river frontage were permanently protected when your Land Trust acquired Cannon’s Point. This superb maritime forest also protects an important source of groundwater that will ensure clean drinking water for generations to come.

Other Land Trust properties provide opportunities for residents of all ages to enjoy the tranquility that can be found in unspoiled natural areas. As we seek to preserve another 1,000 acres as the focal point of our plan for St. Simons, our children and grandchildren will be the beneficiaries of this bold concept for the permanent assurance of all that makes our Island such a special place. We will achieve this vision through land acquisition, conservation easements and partnerships with other conservation organizations.

Not to be overlooked in our vision for St. Simons is the value of our work to a stable, vibrant economy. Eco-tourism is one of the fastest growing activities for individuals and families. Protecting our streams, marsh front, and wildlife will provide abundant opportunities for visitors to immerse themselves in the unique natural world that all of us enjoy. Clean beaches, tree-lined paths and accessible parks will continue to attract visitors who appreciate a community that plans for future growth and thinks about future generations.

Thanks to all of our members and many volunteers who make this work so exciting and rewarding. “2,000 acres, protected and connected” is not just a slogan, it is a vision that our members, volunteers and staff strive for every day.



Sincerely,

*Ben T. Slade, III
Executive Director*

CALLING ALL VOLUNTEERS

The Land Trust needs volunteers willing and able to act as rangers and greeters at Cannon’s Point Preserve.

These volunteers will be critical to enhancing the visitor experience. If you are interested in joining our volunteer cohort, please visit www.sslt.org/sup_volunteer.php or call 912-638-9109.

Your year-end giving: Doubled!

In the spirit of the season, three loyal St. Simons Land Trust supporters have teamed up to provide an exciting challenge grant of \$15,000, dedicated to completing the last phase of the Island-Wide Trail System along Sea Island Road from Frederica Road to Gascoigne Park.

Plan to make an extra contribution before the end of the year for the Island-Wide Trail System, and your gift will go twice as far!

And don’t forget in your year-end tax planning that all donations to the Land Trust are tax deductible. Visit sslt.org to give today.



ST. SIMONS LAND TRUST NEWS

PRESERVING THE NATURAL AND SCENIC CHARACTER OF OUR ISLAND