

Anna Robertson

## The Scars Left Behind on Ossabaw Island, Georgia

This Hidden History was created by SCAD student Anna Robertson as part of her SCAD art history department coursework with guidance from art history professor Holly Goldstein, Ph.D., 2021. Ossabaw Island historical markers were erected in 2003.

### **Introduction**

Ossabaw Island rests on the coast of Georgia, a one-hour boat ride from the edge of Savannah through Moon River—renamed after Johnny Mercer’s famous song—and into the Ossabaw Sound past Racoon Key (Fig. 1, 2). It is comprised of two islands: a sandbar, and flat, solid lands of high ground behind it, creating the barrier island.<sup>i</sup> The north end of the island, referred to as the Holocene Side, has stood since the end of the last Ice Age and was the land that every plantation on Ossabaw resided.<sup>ii</sup> The tallest trees on the island visible from the water are pine, the fastest growing and fastest recovering tree that grows in this climate. While Ossabaw is covered with both natural and unnatural protected growth, these are not wilds, they are fading scars of previous existences. To call Ossabaw Island “untamed” or “wilderness” would reject the thousands of years of human interaction with the land, from the clearing of the land by the indigenous Guale people who lived along the Georgia Coast, to the establishment of the Ossabaw Island Foundation by Eleanor Torrey-West. The island has been shaped by humans for the last 5,000 years.

### **Indigenous Americans on Ossabaw**

In 1974, the Pleistocene Side of Ossabaw Island, the western two-thirds of the island—which was not farmed during the antebellum era—underwent a large archeological dig. The results were remnants of thirty large shell middens, large “trash heaps” from the Late Mississippi Period consisting of oyster shells, bone fragments, pottery, and whorled shells that showed evidence of the creation of beads chipped from the base of the shells.<sup>iii</sup> Oyster shells salvaged from these middens were later used to build the tabby cabins used by enslaved people on the Holocene Side of Ossabaw in 1820.<sup>iv</sup>

Further archeological digs on Ossabaw, as well as St. Catherines Island suggest that these Indigenous Americans were not nomadic, rather settling on Ossabaw permanently. According to evidence in excavation, there were approximately 2500-3000 people living on the island in established villages.<sup>v</sup> This group of people, called the Guale (WALL-eh) both hunted and established low-level agriculture.<sup>vi</sup> The Guale, like other Indigenous Americans along coastal Georgia, regularly burned the island, which cleared trees for agriculture, promoted the growth of edible fruits, and created clearings to aid in hunting.<sup>vii</sup> They also built a pathway stretching along the length of Ossabaw, which is now used as the main road. The name “Ossabaw” translates to “Land of Holly” after the Yaupon Holly, which is not only the only native source of caffeine in the American South, but also used in traditional medicine and spiritual practices. “Ossabaw” derives from the Indigenous Americans’ local languages which have been recorded as calling the land “Osbo,” “Hoospa,” and “Osspo.”<sup>viii</sup>

When Spanish colonizers came to Ossabaw, they believed they had to convert the Guale to Christianity. This mission, Mission Santa Catalina de Guale, lived off of the food resources of the Guale. The Spanish also released hogs onto the island, which are not a protected species on Ossabaw.<sup>ix</sup> While no permanent structures were found of Spanish origin, pottery from Spain has

been found, as well as bones of humans buried beneath the location of the mission.<sup>x,xi</sup> When the Spanish left Ossabaw, they burned the Guale villages to the ground, leaving little behind. By the time General Oglethorpe established the colony of Georgia, there were little to no people living on Ossabaw. The cause of this abandonment of the island is debated; the Guale were either killed or enslaved by the Spanish or died due to infighting among other Native American tribes.<sup>xii</sup> The island was dedicated as a hunting and fishing reserve for the Creek Indian Tribe in 1733, where the regular controlled burnings of the island continued to preserve the hunting clearings.<sup>xiii</sup> This continued through the short ownership of Mary Musgrove.

### **Introduction of Indigo and Sea Island Cotton**

John Morell was the first person to bring enslaved human beings onto Ossabaw Island after the legalization of slavery in Georgia. Morell forced enslaved people to timber and clear lands for farming—at great risk to their life, as clearing land on marshes was incredibly dangerous—as well as manufacturing boats from the Live Oaks, Red Oak Cedar, and Long-Leaf Pine cut from the island (Fig. 3). Ossabaw Island became a large indigo plantation. Over 11,000 acres of land was farmable, and 2200 acres was used to farm indigo. Enslaved people cultivated about four to six pounds of indigo per acre, fermenting the leaves in water, agitating it to incorporate oxygen into the liquid, turning it from a rust brown to blue, and drying it (Fig. 4, 5).<sup>xiv,xv</sup> The dried dye would be cut into cakes and shipped. England was the largest importer of Ossabaw Indigo, as it was cheaper than indigo sourced from India.<sup>xvi</sup> At the end of the Revolutionary War, England did turn their trade to India. Indigo plantations were abandoned, but the plant continues to grow wild on the island. It is now a perennial, growing in random patches along the island, including out of decaying wood. When Morell died, his three sons received a

section of the farmable land. North End, Middle Place, and South End Plantation all farmed Sea Island Cotton even as ownership changed (Fig. 6, 7). Sea Island Cotton was incredibly prized, due to its long, silky fibers. The plant grew successfully in the salty, sandy pine barrens of the Sea Islands, and enslaved people were forced to work an unimaginably laborious job of restricting, timbering, and controlling the land to produce as much cotton as possible, exhausting the soil.<sup>xvii</sup>

After the end of the Civil War, the majority of Black Americans who had been enslaved on the plantations stayed on the island. Sharecropping became common on Ossabaw—sharecroppers worked for the agriculture firm Fly, Middleton, and Magill, these Black sharecroppers did not own the land they farmed on—and the cultivation of Sea Island Cotton continued.<sup>xviii</sup> The Freedmen's Bureau was established on Ossabaw, as well as the Hinder Me Not Baptist Church. In 1881, a hurricane ripped through Ossabaw Island, completely decimating farmland and homes, including the Morell House at the North End (Fig. 8). 700 people, mostly Black sharecroppers descended from enslaved people, were killed.<sup>xix</sup> By the mid 1890s, the majority of Black people had moved off Ossabaw Island, establishing communities on Burnside Island and, most notably, Pin Point, where a crabbing and oyster cannery was established (Fig 9). However, these farmers continued to return to the island, living and farming part time on the island. In 1970, the of the Gullah-Geechee people left Ossabaw, moving to Pin Point, located at the edge of Savannah on the mainland by what is now Diamond Causeway. Ossabaw quickly became a vacation destination for rich, white tourists from the Northern and Western part of the United States. These families built enormous mansions on the island to live the romanticized lifestyle of the antebellum South, without truly understanding that that lifestyle was built on the backs of unfathomable violence and pain. The island was used as hunting land for these wealthy

families, and many former plantation sites and Native American-made meadows were kept free of tree growth for hunting, but a few were allowed to return to young maritime forest (Fig. 10).

### **Timbering and Trees on Ossabaw**

At the end of the Civil War, agriculture was no longer a viable source of income for white, landowning families. Instead, lumber became a large export from the Sea Islands of Georgia, including Ossabaw. The Northeast was still thriving from the Industrial Revolution, and the demand for wood to build bridges, buildings, and factories was high, and the hardwood forests in the North and West were almost gone. The long-leaf pine growing on the barrier islands of Georgia was highly prized for its fire-proof and mold proof qualities. The port of Darien, Georgia was the main center of lumber export to the Northeast, where cities like Chicago, Pittsburg, and New York City—the Brooklyn Bridge sits on top of a core of long-leaf pine from St. Simons Island—used lumber from Ossabaw Island and its neighboring islands.<sup>xx</sup>

Much of Ossabaw's Red Oak Cedar and Live Oaks had been cut down during Morell's timbering to make ships in the mid 1700s and had not recovered by the time the pine began to be lost as well. The hard wood of live oaks was prized for "strength, hardness, durability, and resistance to rot. The wood of the live oak tree—particularly its massive, curved branches—were perfect for 'compass pieces'...that make up the frame of the ship."<sup>xxi</sup> Live oaks are also home to other plants that grow from the branches and the base, such as resurrection ferns. The loss of these large, old growth forests would stand to reason that these plants were also severely impacted. These slow-growing trees like the live oaks and red cedar did not recover as quickly as the long-leaf pine cut in swaths in the early 1900s but have been replaced by secondary growth.

Younger live oaks and cedars, as well as holly, magnolia, and various pine and palm species mix throughout the maritime forest.

### **Preservation of an Altered Space**

In 1924, Harry Norton Torrey, a brain surgeon, and Eleanor “Nell” Ford Torrey, heiress of the Pittsburg Plate Glass Company, purchased Ossabaw Island from the Strachan Shipping Company partners. The family built a 20,000 square foot Spanish Colonial-style winter residence on the island, referred by their daughter, Eleanor “Sandy” Torrey-West, as their “little cabin in the woods.”<sup>xxii</sup> Sandy West introduced eight Sicilian donkeys (Fig 11) to Ossabaw as a present for her ten-year-old son. After the donkeys began to overpopulate the island, 93 were successfully relocated to safe homes, leaving seven on the island—some were pregnant—and their offspring to live out their days on the island. Torrey-West and her nephews inherited the entirety of Ossabaw in 1959 when her mother died. In 1961, Torrey-West established the Ossabaw Foundation and the Ossabaw Island Project. Her goal for the Project included an interdisciplinary approach to educational and creative study on the island, as well as to allow the island and the history to connect with others. Artists, ecologists, historians, writers, all collectively took care of the island, sustainably living in a community lifestyle while they worked on their own projects.<sup>xxiii</sup> The Genesis Project, which Torrey-West also established in 1970 was similar to the Ossabaw Island Project, involving a “cooperative, semi-sustainable community” run by college students at the site of the Middle Place plantation.<sup>xxiv</sup>

In 1978, the State of Georgia purchased Ossabaw Island from the Torrey family, but gave Eleanor Torrey-West a life estate of the Torrey mansion, where she lived from the late 1980s until she relocated to Savannah when she was 103. Ossabaw was designated Georgia’s first

Heritage Preserve “set aside for natural, scientific, and cultural research and education.”<sup>xxv</sup> For about twenty years, management of Ossabaw was under the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, until 1994, when the Ossabaw Island Foundation was established to restore historic structures.<sup>xxvi</sup> This included the tabby cabins built by enslaved people with the oyster shells from the prehistoric shell middens on the south side of Ossabaw. Eleanor Torrey-West passed away January 17, 2021, in Savannah at the age of 108, but the Ossabaw Island Foundation did not stop preserving the island. There was never a ferry established to Ossabaw as doing so would risk the protected sites and ecology of the island. The Foundation also regularly maintains the changed environmental sites, such as the meadows created by the Guale as well as the former plantation sites, regularly mowing and conducting controlled burns. The meadows have now become resting sites for neo-migratory birds.

### **Breath Studies 12–15, Ossabaw Island and Pin Point Heritage Center**

I became close to the barrier islands of Coastal Georgia and South Carolina early in my undergraduate degree at The Savannah College of Art and Design. For the majority of my time here in Savannah, I traveled up and down the coast of the two states, returning to the islands and photographing them repeatedly. I have stayed long enough to notice the changes to the landscape, some immediate, like beach conservation that occurred along Georgia in 2019 to early 2020, and some gradual, like the steady alteration of the tide on the dunes and beach, and the gradual burial and unearthing of the skeleton trees along the coast. In this class with Dr. Goldstein, I had the opportunity to photograph on Ossabaw Island, a barrier island I had yet to visit, and walk some of the same pathways of the people I have been studying. To immerse

myself in the multifaceted history of the island was a privilege, and to give back to the island in some small way was all I could have asked for.

I began my photo series, *Breath Studies*, in January 2020 during the last year of my bachelor's degree in photography at SCAD. I began photographing the landscape with an 8x10 and a 4x5 pinhole camera, focusing on the movement of the Earth with the long exposures required of a pinhole camera. In a successful Breath Study, a portion of the photograph will appear blurred from whatever movement occurs, while the solid structures will be in relative focus, to make sure that the composition of the image does not fall apart. This is an incredibly meditative practice; being mindful of the camera and the open shutter, the wind or water that is moving around me, and my own breath. I chose to continue these studies on Ossabaw to spiritually connect myself to the environment I was researching, to sit alone with the land and listen to what it would say.



## List of Illustrations

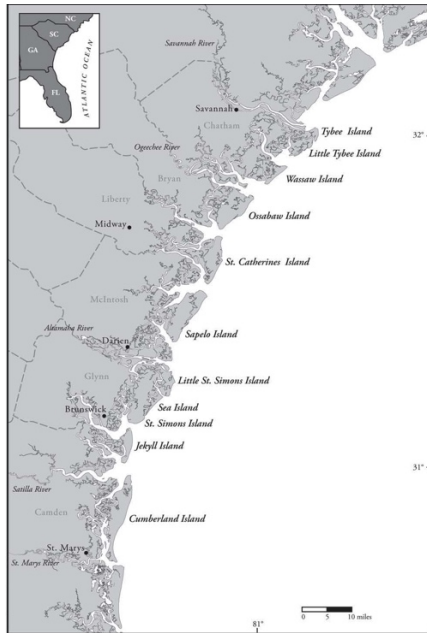


Figure 1: Map of the Sea Islands of Coastal Georgia, 2009, courtesy of the Ossabaw Island Foundation and the Skidaway Institute of Oceanography. <https://ossabawisland.org/island/maps/>



Figure 2: Map of Ossabaw Island's Heritage Preserve with emphasis on the ecological diversity of the island's landscape. Courtesy of the Ossabaw Island Foundation. [https://ossabawisland.org/wp-content/uploads/1\\_Ossabaw-Island-Heritage-Preserve-Map.pdf](https://ossabawisland.org/wp-content/uploads/1_Ossabaw-Island-Heritage-Preserve-Map.pdf)



Figure 3: 1790 Map of Ossabaw Island, courtesy of the Ossabaw Island Foundation. <https://ossabawisland.org/island/history-timeline2/>

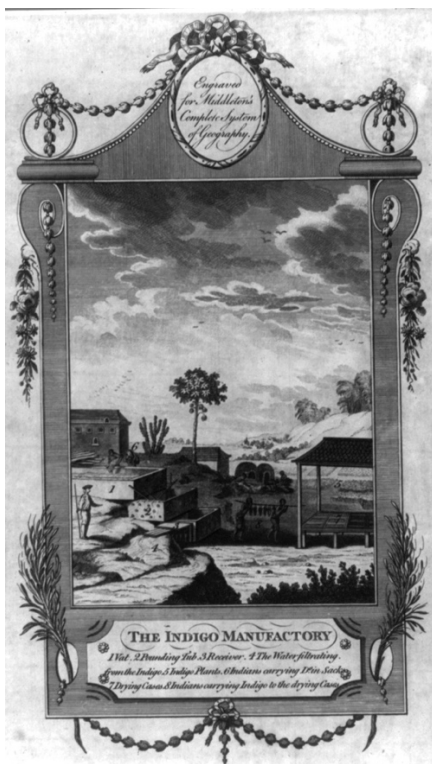


Figure 4: Indigo cultivation on Ossabaw Island by enslaved people forced into labor by John Morell, courtesy of the Georgia Historical Society, <http://neh.ghslearn.com/interactive-case-study/primary-sources/primary-source-2/>

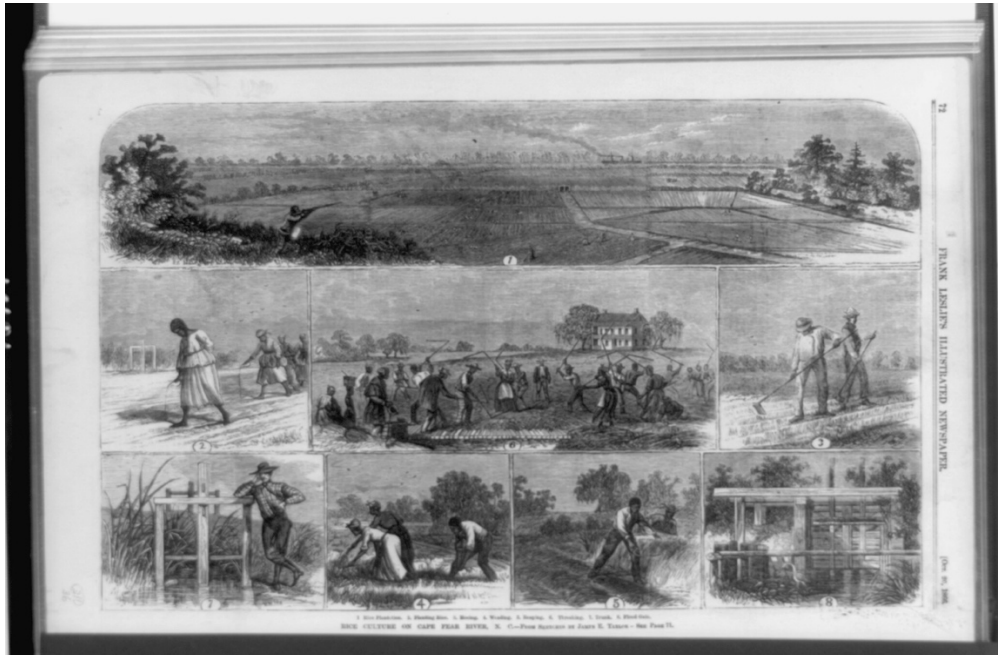


Figure 5: Indigo cultivation on Ossabaw Island by enslaved people forced into labor by John Morell, courtesy of the Georgia Historical Society, <http://neh.ghslearn.com/interactive-case-study/primary-sources/primary-source-2/>



Figure 6: 1855 Map of Middle Place Plantation on Ossabaw Island by William Hughes, courtesy of the Ossabaw Island Foundation. <https://ossabawisland.org/island/history-timeline2/>



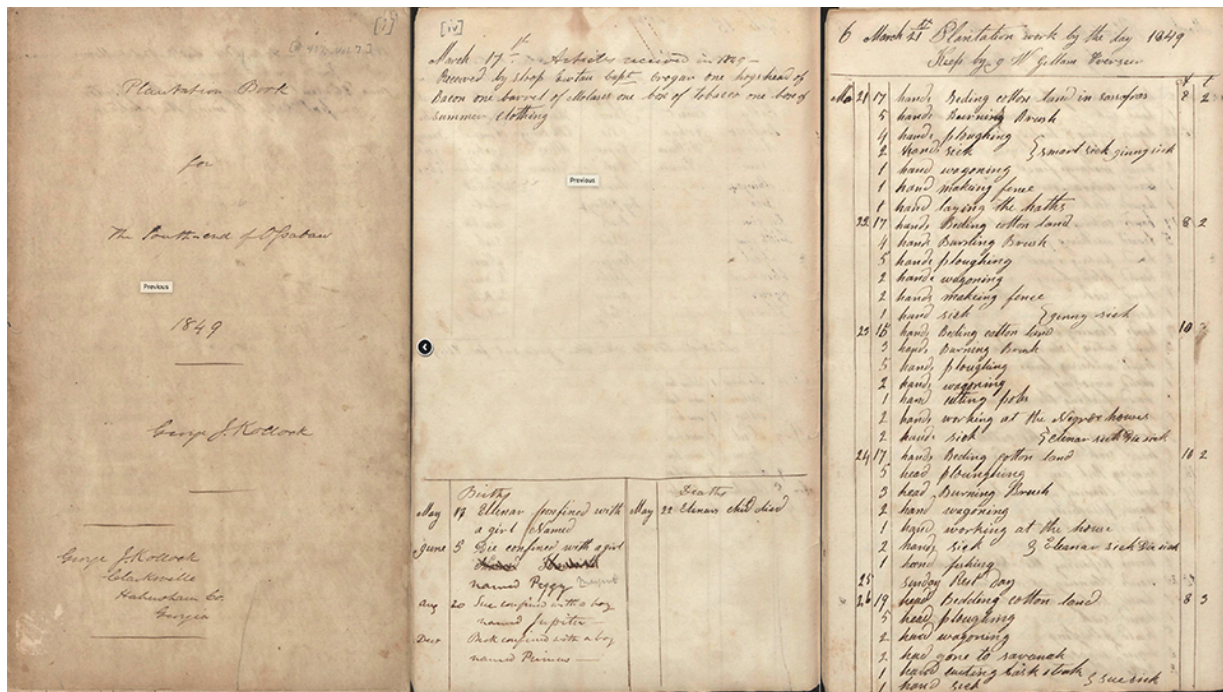


Figure 7: Plantation records kept by George Jones Kollock, who purchased South End Plantation in 1847. Kollock enslaved 71 human beings on the plantation. Courtesy of the Ossabaw Island Foundation <https://ossabawisland.org/island/history-timeline2>

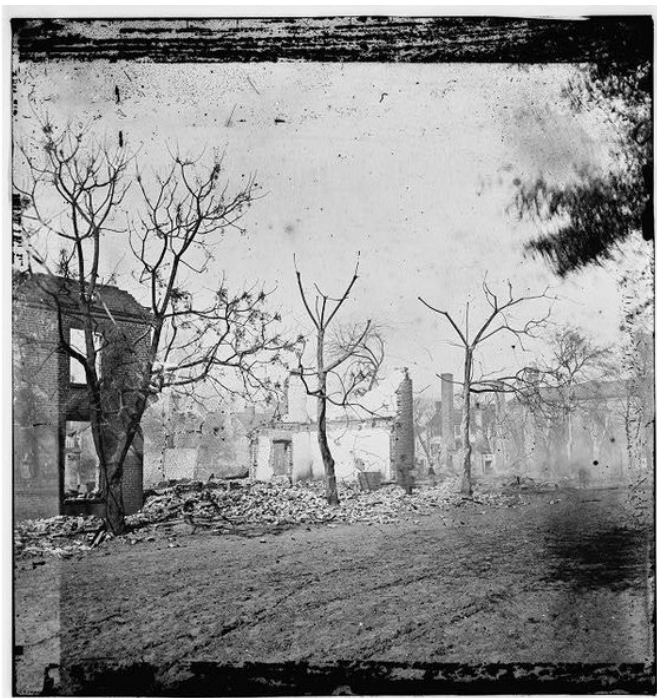


Figure 8: Photograph of the devastation of the 1881 hurricane on Ossabaw Island. Courtesy of the Ossabaw Island Foundation <https://ossabawisland.org/island/history-timeline2/>



Figure 9: Anna Robertson, “Breath Study 15, Pin Point Heritage Center, Savannah, GA”, May 2, 2021. Camera faces Burnside and Skidaway Island from the deck of the oyster cannery building.



Figure 10: Hunter posing with game, ducks on, possibly, Ossabaw Island, undated. MS 1360 Foltz Photography Studio photographs. Courtesy of the Georgia Historical Society.





Figure 11: Anna Robertson, “Breath Study 14, Ossabaw Island, GA”, May 2, 2021.



Figure 12: Historical Marker on the north end of Ossabaw Island. Short, young hardwood trees can be seen behind tall trunks of pine. May 2, 2021, photo by Anna Robertson.



Figure 13: Anna Robertson, “Breath Study 12, Ossabaw Island, GA”, May 2, 2021. All images were taken near the North Place Planation location on the Holocene Side of Ossabaw Island.



Figure 14: Anna Robertson, “Breath Study 13, Ossabaw Island, GA”, May 2, 2021.

## Further Reading

Alexander, Clark. "Preserving Georgia's Coastline for Fifty Years," *Conversations on Georgia's Environmental Histories: Six Part Lecture Series by the Ossabaw Island Foundation*. Accessed April 11, 2021. <https://vimeo.com/showcase/8121179>

"Animals: Ossabaw Island Pigs" *Ossabaw Island Foundation*. Accessed May 15<sup>th</sup> 2021. <https://ossabawisland.org/island/ossabaw-pigs/>

"Ecosystems of Ossabaw Island," *Ossabaw Island Foundation*. Accessed April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2021. <https://ossabawisland.org/island/ecosystem/>

"Island History: Timeline" *Ossabaw Island Foundation*. Accessed April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2021. <https://ossabawisland.org/island/history-timeline2/>

"OIP and Genesis Projects" Ossabaw Island Foundation, accessed May 16, 2021. <https://ossabawisland.org/island/projects/>

Leigh, Jack, James Kilgo, Alan Campbell. *Ossabaw: Evocations of an Island*. University of Georgia Press, Georgia and London, 2004.

"Ossabaw Island, Interactive Case Study: Primary Sources" *Georgia Historical Society*. Accessed April 20, 2021. <http://neh.ghslearn.com/interactive-case-study/primary-sources/>

Pearson, Charles, Fred Cook, "The Bead Maker's Midden: Evidence of Late Prehistoric Shell Bead Production on Ossabaw Island, Georgia." *Southeastern Archaeology*, vol. 31, no. 1, Summer 2012, pp. 87-102. [https://0-www-jstor-org.library.scad.edu/stable/41620313?pq-origsite=summon&seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://0-www-jstor-org.library.scad.edu/stable/41620313?pq-origsite=summon&seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)

Pressly, Paul. *On the Rim of the Caribbean: Colonial Georgia and the British Atlantic World*. University of Georgia Press, Georgia and London, 2013.

Pressly, Paul. "Why Does the Georgia Coast Matter?" *Conversations on Georgia's Environmental Histories: Six Part Lecture Series by the Ossabaw Island Foundation*. Accessed April 11, 2021. <https://vimeo.com/showcase/8121179>

Robertson, Anna. "Interview on the Ecological History of Ossabaw Island," interview with Elizabeth DuBose, director of The Ossabaw Island Foundation. April 12, 2021.

Sherr, Evelyn. *Marsh Mud and Mummichogs: An Intimate Natural History of Coastal Georgia*. University of Georgia Press, Georgia, 2015. <https://0-ebookcentral-proquest-com.library.scad.edu/lib/scad-ebooks/reader.action?docID=2008638#>

Stutter, Paul, Paul Pressly ed. *Coastal Nature Coastal Culture: Environmental Histories of the Georgia Coast*. University of Georgia Press, Georgia, 2018.



*Take Me to the Water: The Story of Pin Point.* Directed by Jeff Bednarz. Savannah, 2011.

Wohlleben, Peter. *The Hidden Life of Trees, What They Feel, How They Communicate: Discoveries from a Secret World.* Ludwig Verlag, Germany, 2015.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>i</sup> Paul Pressly, “Why Does the Georgia Coast Matter?” *Conversations on Georgia’s Environmental Histories: Six Part Lecture Series by the Ossabaw Island Foundation*. Accessed April 11, 2021, (04:30).

<sup>ii</sup> Anna Robertson, “Interview on the Ecological History of Ossabaw Island,” interview with Elizabeth DuBose. April 12, 2021.

<sup>iii</sup> Charles Pearson, Fred Cook, “The Bead Maker’s Midden: Evidence of Late Prehistoric Shell Bead Production on Ossabaw Island, Georgia.” *Southeastern Archaeology*, vol. 31, no. 1, Summer 2012, pp. 88–89.

<sup>iv</sup> Pressly, “Why Does the Georgia Coast Matter?” (07:41)

<sup>v</sup> Robertson

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid

<sup>vii</sup> Paul Stutter, Paul Pressly ed. *Coastal Nature Coastal Culture: Environmental Histories of the Georgia Coast*. University of Georgia Press, Georgia, 2018, 213

<sup>viii</sup> “Ecosystems of Ossabaw Island,” *Ossabaw Island Foundation*. Accessed April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2021. <https://ossabawisland.org/island/ecosystem/>

<sup>ix</sup> “Animals: Ossabaw Island Pigs” *Ossabaw Island Foundation*. Accessed May 15<sup>th</sup> 2021. <https://ossabawisland.org/island/ossabaw-pigs/>

<sup>x</sup> “Island History: Timeline” *Ossabaw Island Foundation*. Accessed April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<sup>xi</sup> Robertson

<sup>xii</sup> Pressly, (08:30)

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiv</sup> Stutter, 112–113

<sup>xv</sup> Paul Pressly, *On the Rim of the Caribbean: Colonial Georgia and the British Atlantic World*. University of Georgia Press, Georgia and London, 2013, 167

<sup>xvi</sup> Robertson

<sup>xvii</sup> Stutter, 30,179

---

<sup>xviii</sup> “Island History: Timeline” *Ossabaw Island Foundation*

<sup>xix</sup> “Ossabaw Island, Interactive Case Study: Primary Sources” *Georgia Historical Society*. Accessed April 20, 2021. <http://neh.ghslearn.com/interactive-case-study/primary-sources/>

<sup>xx</sup> Pressly, (20:00)

<sup>xxi</sup> Stutter, 222

<sup>xxii</sup> “Island History: Timeline” *Ossabaw Island Foundation*

<sup>xxiii</sup> “OIP and Genesis Projects” Ossabaw Island Foundation, accessed May 16, 2021. <https://ossabawisland.org/island/projects/>

<sup>xxiv</sup> Ibid

<sup>xxv</sup> “Island History: Timeline” *Ossabaw Island Foundation*

<sup>xxvi</sup> Ibid