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Your Lowcountry Thursday October 30, 2008

CLINTON T. COOPER The Post and Courier

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legacy as military base,  
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resort, permanent village

## ISLAND HISTORY

JESSICA JOHNSON/STAFF

The historic Jones family, noted island carpenters, built this house in 1910 with lots of windows and doors to catch the breeze.

# Group emphasizes area's versatility as military base, quarantine station, summer resort, permanent village

BY JESSICA JOHNSON  
*The Post and Courier*

Some island residents say the massive live oak with spreading branches on the back side of Sullivan's Island is the gold bug tree found in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Gold Bug" about a search for hidden treasure.

Betsy Richardson, who owns the home it hides, is sure it is. "You can count the limbs," she said.

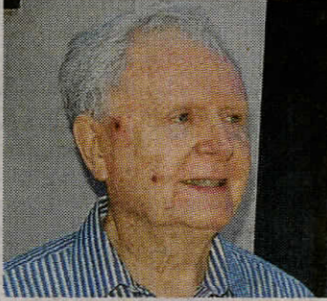
Seven limbs sprawl along the ground twisting up in all directions splayed out and upward, like fingers in a cupped hand. In the story, a poor man digs beneath a tree with the same number of limbs to restore his family's fortune. But Poe called the tree a tulip tree, and Richardson promises there is no treasure beneath hers. The only gold is the land the live oak is rooted in.

"This has become a rich man's island," Sullivan's Island resident Karen Coste said.

Coste and others formed a group called the Sullivan's Islanders to preserve the island's beaches, maritime forest, historic homes and public structures. They recently sponsored a tour of Sullivan's historic sites for the newer, richer residents, hoping to pass on the island's story.

Tour guide Roy Williams, who collaborated with Make McMurphy to write "Sullivan's Island/Gadsden Cultural Center," told residents that the island has a unique history.

"This is a very special place we live in, and unlike the other beach resorts, it's got a history that has many facets. Because when you talk about Sullivan's Island, you are talking about influence of the military, you



PHOTOS BY JESSICA JOHNSON/STAFF  
**Sullivan's Island resident Roy Williams began a historical tour of Sullivan's Island at Battery Gadsden.**

are talking about this being a summer resort, a permanent village, a quarantine station," Williams said.

No matter where people go on the island, they find signs of the former military presence. A series of batteries once lined the front beach. Some, including Battery Gadsden, now home to the Poe Library, still remain.

In 1674, Capt. Florence O'Sullivan was ordered to take charge of a single cannon on the island to watch for approaching ships. And in 1776, under Col. William Moultrie, the island's first fort was built.

The island's Breach Inlet was the site of a Revolutionary War battle and the Confederate submarine H.L. Hunley's home base.

Though Sullivan's Island began as a military outpost, the barrier island also has been host to the wealthy.

Bankers and doctors built their summer homes on the island. Dr. John Patrick, who became rich for patenting a dental instrument, built a large Greek Revival-style mansion on Middle Street in 1890. He later sold it, and it became a brothel

and tavern. The tavern was on the first floor, and ladies of the night kept to the second, where stained-glass windows show the phases of the moon.

The front beach was also home to a grand hotel built in 1884 that was 100 feet long and three stories tall. It had more than 100 rooms, a wine cellar, its own water tower, cottages and a long, wooden plank that took guests from the hotel's doorstep to the ocean so their feet wouldn't get sandy.

In 1925, a moonshiner looking for his stash lit beach myrtles on fire, sparking a blaze that spread to the wooden structure, lighting up the night sky, Williams said.

"It must have been a very spectacular site in Charleston to see a three-story building go up in flames," Williams said. "That was the end of our great luxury hotel at the time."

Most of the island's 965 homes were built after the 1940s. The eastern end of the island wasn't open to development until 1947, when Fort Moultrie was closed. Before 1968, the government allowed people to build only two-room houses on the island, but didn't give deeds to property until 1968. Until then, the state and federal governments had the right to seize the land for military purposes.

"You were always living here at the pleasure of the governor and the president," Williams said.

Since Poe set "The Gold Bug" on Sullivan's Island, it has grown wider than his description of a quarter-mile, growing a few acres wider in some places. Jetties that take sand away from Folly Beach have added sand to Sullivan's Island. The



Residents say this live oak was the tulip tree Edgar Allan Poe described in his story, "The Gold Bug," set on Sullivan's Island. Poe was a soldier stationed on the island in the 1820s. In the photograph below, Squeeze Inn is a typical Sullivan's Island summer retreat. The island has many facets, Roy Williams, says, distinguishing it from other beach resorts.

places where 73-year-old Williams once swam now are rows of Atlantic Avenue and Bayonne Street homes.

"It's hard to imagine (that) where all those houses are I used to swim right there," Williams said.

As the beach built up, front beach owners were given first right of refusal to purchase lots in front of them for about \$2,500.

In one case, a property owner didn't want the lot, so it sold to another family in the 1940s for just \$250.

Today, an empty lot would go for hundreds of thousands of dollars. It's why the island's new residents are also the wealthy, Coste said.

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