

## The Cabbage Palms of Billy's Island

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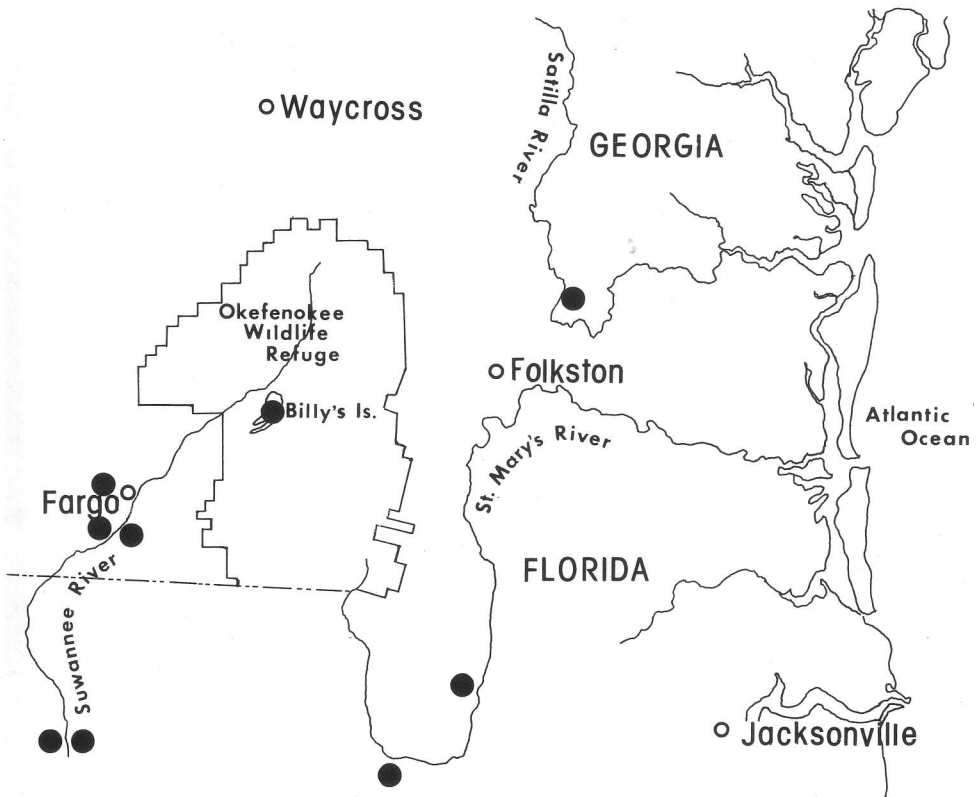
It never ceases to amaze me how much one can find out by following a lead, even if the lead is tenuous. It is also amazing how quickly time slips by and such leads are left on the back burner or even forgotten altogether. One such instance relates to a story that I first heard almost twenty years ago when I became a serious student of the cabbage palm, *Sabal palmetto*. In searching all possible sources of information for records of cabbage palm locations, I heard reports from fishing guides that cabbage palms were growing deep within the Okefenokee Swamp, Georgia. I was unable to find any documented evidence to verify these reports. During trips to the swamp fishing and botanizing in my earlier undergraduate days, I had never encountered any cabbage palms. As a result these reports were relegated to the category of interesting but improbable and promptly put out of mind.

However, in the fall of 1987 my assumptions proved to be false. An October trip to Stephen Foster State Park on the west side of the swamp near Fargo, Georgia, culminated in a boat ride to Billy's Island (Fig. 1). The island is approximately two miles by boat from the boat landing at the state park. It was named for the last Seminole chief in the swamp, Billy-Bow-Legs. The island's 3,140 acres make it one of the largest in the swamp. This size, along with its elevation of several feet above the swamp, has allowed development of a mixed pine-oak forest over most of its area.

While several Indian mounds give clear evidence of very early occupation of the island by man, significant disturbance of

the forest has occurred only in the last 125 years. Billy's Island was first settled by the white man in 1853 by the James Lee family. It remained in the Lee family until just after 1900 when Billy's Island, along with approximately 290,000 additional acres of the swamp, was bought by the Hebard Cypress Company. The company set up its field operations center on Billy's Island and began lumbering the area in 1908. Billy's Island Town was a thriving community of 600 persons with a hotel, school, churches, movie theater, doctor, and large company store. In only 19 years the harvest of virgin cypress was over and the town died. Very little evidence is left today. Salvageable materials were hauled out. Forest fires and the weather have removed most of the rest.

Through all of this disturbance and activity three large cabbage palms have survived on Billy's Island (Fig. 2). How did these trees come to be on an island in such a remote area many miles from the nearest cabbage palm locality southwest of Fargo along the Suwannee River and its tributaries, Cypress Creek and Suwanoochie Creek? Several stories have persisted through the years as part of the folklore of the swamp. The most intriguing is one involving Spanish treasure. As the story goes, Hernando DeSoto, on his trek through northern Florida in the 1750's, wandered into the swamp and found Billy's Island. For some unknown reason he buried gold there and planted three palm trees in a triangulation scheme to conceal the exact location of the treasure. DeSoto and some of his officers were the only humans privy to the information. Having fallen on



1. Location of Billy's Island in the Okefenokee Swamp of Georgia. Solid black dots indicate other *Sabal palmetto* sightings in the area.

bad times farther west later on, they never returned. Of course, the "treasure" has never been found. At least the local yarn spinners "ain't lettin on to it" if it has.

A second story has the palms coming to the island as a result of the actions of a very influential woman. The wife of the owner of Hebard Cypress Company was apparently responsible for bringing culture, such as it was, to Billy's Island Town from 1918 to 1927. Among her endeavors was public landscaping including the planting of the palms. While this is a more believable tale, it too is erroneous. Photographs taken by the Wright and Wright expedition from Cornell University in 1912 show mature palms in a fence row on the old Lee family farm which became the town site in 1908.

So much for DeSoto and Mrs. Hebard. I cast my vote for the natural distribution theory espoused by Dr. Bill Cribbs, a life-long resident of the area and professor of biology at Valdosta State College. Dr. Cribbs is a descendant of the Lee family and believes cabbage palms arrived on the island after his ancestors. The photographs of 1912 support this idea by showing palms in old fence rows. Their height in the photographs is also within the range to be expected after 40 to 50 years.

I propose the following scenario to explain the presence of the three palms of Billy's Island. Sometime after the original homestead was established in 1853, fields were cleared and fences erected (probably wooden). Corn would have been a staple crop. Fish crows, which are known to feed



2. The three mature specimens of *Sabal palmetto* located on the north end of Billy's Island.

on ripe cabbage palm fruits, in their forays up the Suwannee River would have found the corn fields eventually. Some of these crows, having recently fed on cabbage palm fruits downstream in Georgia, would pass seed while perched on the fence. There is nothing tenuous about this idea as I have observed cabbage palms many times growing in fence rows all over Florida. Fish crows may not be the only birds involved in dispersing cabbage palm seeds. At any rate, the young plants on Billy's Island would have grown and thrived in the absence of any natural enemies. In fact, Dr. Cribbs indicates that there were many more than three there originally. Some twenty years ago an outbreak of palm weevils decimated the population leaving only the current three mature trees alive.

An additional mystery remains concerning the Billy's Island cabbage palms. In addition to the three mature trees, sev-

eral young trees up to eight feet in height, as well as numerous well established seedlings in the one to two foot height range, are thriving. However, there is an obvious lack of individuals in size classes between the larger juveniles and the mature trees. Dr. Cribbs attributes the lack of mid-size trees to the history of continuous agricultural activity on the island after establishment of the original trees. With the cessation of agricultural activity and the establishment of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge in 1937 opportunity for reproduction and local spread of the species began. It is occurring very slowly but steadily, which is typical of *Sabal palmetto*. Someday in the distant future I would not be surprised to see Billy's Island heavily populated throughout with cabbage palms descended from the original trees of the Lee family homestead.