

**On Island Time: A place-based identity in Dauphin Island, Alabama**

by

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## Abstract

Dauphin Island, Alabama is a small barrier island to the south of Mobile and Mobile Bay. All along the Gulf Coast are popular tourist attractions at places like Gulf Shores and New Orleans. My thesis research will look at what makes Dauphin Island different from these booming tourist destinations. I trace the community's history and culture to illustrate how it displays a present day shared identity of what the island should look and feel like in opposition to traditional tourism development approaches. With the obvious benefits of an industry such as tourism, how does anyone justify withholding such a potential opportunity? In this project, I describe how and why Dauphin Island is not likely to become the traditional Gulf Coast vacation spot anytime soon.

My results in this thesis come from efforts in qualitative research. I conducted interviews with town officials, local residents, and tourists to draw my conclusions of Dauphin Island. I also accessed archived and recently published materials to illustrate the changes on Dauphin Island over time.

This thesis analyzes the way Dauphin Island has developed. Although the island does offer beaches, sun, and sea life, what it does not offer are several tourists' amenities that many modern day Americans deem necessary for a vacation destination. Through a shared social memory, locals strive to promote ecotourism and a more family oriented atmosphere. I have found that locals maintain Dauphin Island's identity as stuck in the golden era of the 1950s. As potential for development abounds, the island remains the same only changing when Mother Nature demands it.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to Thesis

### 1.1 Introduction

*“Who wouldn’t thrill to an island with a romantic and colorful history dating back to early days of Colonial America, the sparkling blue surf of the Gulf of Mexico where you can swim or boat to your heart’s content...an island whose white sand beaches were made for romping and swimming...whose swaying pines beckon you to forget the cares of the day. A semi-tropical, leisurely paradise...primitive enough to stir the urge for adventure, yet with all modern conveniences, including luxury motels, apartments and clubs. A paradise made for a vacation or a place to live...that’s Dauphin Island.”*

-1958 Fort Gaines brochure

If you are travelling south on Alabama State Route 193, you will inevitably find yourself in the town of Dauphin Island. After leaving Tillman’s Corner bypassing Theodore, Bailey’s Corner (renowned for their West Indies Salad), and Heron Bay, the scenic route turns into a panoramic view of Mobile Bay and the Mississippi Sound. The greenery changes from pines to marshes and wetlands where Great Blue Herons stand like statues. Now comes the fun part. Roll the windows down, crank up your iPod and cruise over the 3-mile long Dauphin Island Bridge. As you cross the bridge over the water it is as if you are leaving the world and any problems behind (Figures 1 and 2). Often it seems like the pelicans and seagulls are matching your 50 mph speed right outside your window. On a clear day, as you reach the 400-foot summit your view becomes limitless as you can even see over the two-mile wide island southward to the

Gulf of Mexico. To the east is the mouth of Mobile Bay. To the west are shrimp boats, oil rigs, and nearly ten miles of sandy beach. And down below as your car moves from the elevated concrete to the flat asphalt surrounded by palms, you will find a town nestled between pine trees and sand dunes where businesses are referred to by the owner's name and the sunsets rival those of Hawaii. Get rid of your wrist watch and take a deep relaxing breath, you are now officially on island time.



Figures 1 and 2 – Gordon Persons Bridge onto Dauphin Island (Photos courtesy of Rian Castillo, via Flickr Commons 2009)

Dauphin Island, Alabama is a barrier island to the south of Mobile and west of Mobile Bay with a population of about 1,300 permanent residents. With a variety of diverse ecosystems, the island offers rest and relaxation away from the hustle and bustle

of many modern cities. As a teenager, I found myself enjoying family vacations at Dauphin Island, but still longing for the faster paced trips to places like Waterville in Gulf Shores or shopping in Orange Beach. Now, not only am I much more appreciative of the opportunity to take family vacations in general, but I find myself being drawn back to the slow pace and “homey” nature of Dauphin Island. These are the experiences that led me to choose this as my study area.

The island has evolved over centuries from the natural flow of the tides, natural disasters, and mankind. Perhaps the most last lasting impacts from mankind are the many historic sites left behind. With all the natural beauty and history that the island offers, there are many things it does not offer. There are no traffic lights, McDonald’s, Wal-Marts, amusement parks, and many other tourists’ amenities that most modern day Americans deem necessary. Dauphin Island strives to promote ecotourism and a family-oriented atmosphere.

There are positives and negatives to foregoing such a flashy consumer culture tourism so commonly found around the Gulf Coast. Such a destination can be more expensive for the tourist, which in turn benefits the local economy and jobs. In addition, some people may seek a vacation filled with daily shopping or beach activities and a lot of nightlife while others try to avoid the crowds and a busy schedule. Arguing about the preferred vacation type is not the object of my research. This thesis is about the bigger picture.

All along the Gulf Coast beaches are popular tourist destinations. Dauphin Island is unique among them. By tracing the community’s history and culture, I will show the development and promotion of a particular shared identity and social memory

distinguishes it from its peers. This shared identity, of a sleepy fishing village, is inherently different from the traditional tourism development approaches that we see in places like Orange Beach and Gulf Shores, Alabama. With the obvious economic benefits of the tourism industry, how can the residents and policy makers of Dauphin Island justify avoiding such an opportunity? Are the hazards of living on a barrier island too risky for development? Is the community clinging to their historic past in order to preserve their present identity? Or do these residents simply not want to welcome change? This thesis seeks to understand why Dauphin Island is not likely to become the traditional vacation spot anytime soon.

## **1.2 Format of Thesis**

This thesis will attempt to flow chronologically. Because the island has an extensive history, this is an important piece to the puzzle. However the beginning chapters will first provide a framework for the theoretical approach to my research. After establishing the qualitative methods and theories I used to gather my research in the latter part of this chapter, I will address the many other pieces of literature pertaining to my topic. The literature in Chapter 2 focuses on a broad framework for cultural and humanistic geography I used in researching, analyzing, and finally writing this thesis. Chapter 3 presents the historical background of Dauphin Island. While it may not detail every piece of the island's past, it will provide a comprehensive overview of how Dauphin Island became the place it is today.

Chapter 4 is significant because it summarizes the most recent attempt the island has made for economic development. The results from the 2007 Strategic Plan offer a

first-hand account of how islanders are trying to sustain their economic future while balancing the hazards of living on a barrier island. In addition to the Strategic Plan, this chapter also gives an overview of more development literature on sites from all over the world. This literature allows the reader to see examples of development practices in other places for comparison. Chapter 5 will detail my case study of the present day site. This chapter will account for the many different organizations presently competing with each other for governance of the island today.

Chapter 6 will continue with observations and results on my case study as well as tie together the synthesis of my argument. The primary goal of this chapter is to answer the question of why Dauphin Island is the way it is. What are the primary themes and features in Dauphin Island's cultural landscape? From newspaper articles, council agenda meetings, interviews, and fieldwork observations, I will report my findings on the way Dauphin Island identifies itself today as a local community and a tourist getaway. After researching the island and its identity there is one thing for certain, it is complicated. When you have multiple voices competing to determine the island's future it is sometimes hard to find common ground. Talking to people about the island and what it means to them resulted in many different opinions. In addition to these diverse opinions, the situation is further complicated by the always present threat of environmental devastation due to continuing beach erosion and possible destruction from hurricanes. However, the predominant theme from the locals seemed to be an opposition to change. I argue that human beings are not purely economically rational actors and therefore assuming a certain mentality is near impossible, no matter how great the economic benefits may be. In addition to the natural hazards of living on a barrier island, Dauphin

Island is riddled by many opposing voices on policy and practice. Islanders seem proud of their identity that is deeply rooted in the past and opposed to change. It is because of these reasons collectively that Dauphin Island has not developed into the traditional tourism destination that was once envisioned by planners.

### **1.3 Geographical Themes and Methods**

This thesis is a study of Dauphin Island's human and cultural geography. These broad fields are more defined by themes such as social memory/heritage, tourism, and cultural landscape. It is from this lens that I will define the place-based identity of Dauphin Island, Alabama and its current state of economic development.

In my thesis research I have assessed the current economic standing of Dauphin Island and how it was influenced by the town's identity, tourism, and history. Most of this research is qualitative in nature. I have three hypotheses as to why it is the way it is today. First, is my assumption that many residents are enthralled with the historic preservation of the island and do not want to alter the traditions and heritage of their rich culture. Second, is the theory that islanders are just simply opposed to accepting and moving towards an economy promoting tourism. And lastly, is the possibility that the perceived impacts of the island's unstable environment cripples economic development as it pertains to residential loss, industrial build up, or business opportunities.

Qualitative research is largely about personal observation and archival research analysis. What has been previously observed and what can be observed today. By observing the everyday workings of the island and its residents I saw the data in its natural setting. In *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, Patton notes that this



requires “emphatic neutrality” (1990, 55). In other words, this neutrality refers to conducting research and observations with an open mind and sensitivity to understanding the issue without any judgment. The quality of my research and acceptance by the reader will depend on my unbiased observations. However I acknowledge that an unbiased assessment is impossible. Therefore I will consider methods for analysis that take reflexivity in research into consideration (Jootun et al, 2009). Reflexivity in my research is considering each step from my methods, research, and conclusions mirrored with my own objectives and/or impulses. It is my own check and balance on my project. The island in the context of sense of place will be central to my understanding of the island and therefore, my personal familiarity with the Dauphin Island will enhance my understanding of its patterns and processes.

Qualitative data can be beneficial to trying to understand or explain something that is not easily described quantitatively (Stauss & Corbin 1990). This is the reason that the majority of my fieldwork will fall into this category. It is not easy to quantify the emotional attachment of a lifelong resident of the island versus a summer vacationer’s emotions. Nor is it easy to quantify any human behavior. Human beings are not always rational or predictable; therefore qualitative, as opposed to quantitative, research and descriptions have best suited my efforts.

While some fieldwork was done in taking notes on the surroundings and patterns around town, much of my data collection has come from interviews. Interview data was complemented by a review of newspaper articles from the Mobile Public Library, Dauphin Island Sea Lab, and Montgomery state archives. These articles investigated

previous and current development efforts on the Island in addition to any change in the economic standing or new entrepreneurial advances.

For the interview process I composed a set of questions pertaining to the past and present daily activities on the island, success and failure of businesses, and potential plans for the future. I contacted each interviewee via e-mail, phone, or face to face and presented them with an overview of my study and my interest in their words. I anticipated the interviews to develop differently for each person, therefore a semi-structured approach was used. I believe these variations have only strengthened my research.

There were some of my interviewees that did allow me to tape record our interview. After these conversations, which ranged from 10 minutes to one lasting over an hour, I used transcription equipment to type out the interview verbatim. There were also instances where I would take notes on an interview. These field notes and interview transcriptions have been an extremely useful and important part in my research.

According to IRB protocol the transcriptions and notes were locked in a secure filing cabinet as a matter of confidentiality. All confidential interviews were given pseudonyms in place of their real names. In the end I conducted 19 formal interviews and several more informal conversations that resulted in useful data.

In order to organize my data and allow myself to draw concrete conclusions I manually coded my interviews, field notes, and other sources accordingly. My attempts in coding and labeling were made by trying to extract the emergent ideas or themes an outsider would find from the document rather than based on my own memory (Bogdan & Bilken 1998). These codes are categories that allow the data to be organizationally subdivided to draw coherent conclusions (Dey 1993). The coding began as descriptive

labeling and then through revisions, progressed into more abstract categories. The initial emergent themes or labels were codes such as, “1950s development efforts” and “ghost stories common among locals” which then fell into the larger themes I developed like “change” and “history.” The largest emergent themes this coding process resulted in were categories such as history, tourism, sense of place, and change. These are the themes that helped develop my analysis of Dauphin Island’s current cultural state.

#### **1.4 Conclusion**

This cultural and social study on Dauphin Island’s identity is the product of my graduate research which drew upon sources ranging from newspapers, fictional books, and photographs, to face-to-face interviews and the diaries of 17<sup>th</sup> century explorers. My topic involved recreating a historical base of the island starting with the shell mounds dating back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century and continuing through to the present day 21<sup>st</sup> century. I used primary and secondary sources for this historical research. I also conducted my own interviews, and made my own observations of the case study through fieldwork. The next chapter will show how social science and particularly geography has evolved to pose and answer similar questions to the ones found in my thesis.

## **Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Introduction to Cultural Geography**

Generally there is not one certain point in time when a town comes together and people make a sort of pact or agreement to maintain modest and content lives. Rather it comes from years and years of sharing a culture and stories native to the land and its residents. Dauphin Island is no different. If you know anything at all about the area it is more than likely from a brief lesson in Alabama History during the Civil War, or perhaps the occasional news clip relating to the most recent hurricane. The true identity of the island would be foreign to anyone until they immersed themselves in the history, heritage, and culture of the place.

Over the past century, the term culture has been long debated within the discipline of geography. Geographers will typically define the concept of culture as it plays out across the landscape, history and ecology. American geographer, Carl Sauer was heavily influenced by anthropological work and further developed a concept of culture with respect to its geographic implications. This resulted in coining the notion of the cultural landscape. Cultural landscape according to Sauer is an outcome of physical and cultural transformations on an “area” or “region” (Sauer 1925, 321). Sauer equates place facts as part of the makeup of cultural landscapes with time facts making up a certain historical period. Essentially, historical events and present geographic elements

(ethnicity, population, climate) of a society generated the culture and played out upon the physical environment. In a rejection of the previously accepted deterministic approach to the environment, Sauer and his followers were more open to the idea that the environment simply defined a range of possibilities in the eventual cultural transformation. Sauer is traditionally cited as the first US scholar to make the claim that the cultural landscape is a product of human activity (Sauer 1925). Sauer's works had far reaching influences such as Lewis (1983) who teaches readers that though the layers of past cultural experiences by human actors, we must "read" the landscape as a reflection of past and present human practices.

In the latter twentieth-century, however, Sauer's long accepted concept of culture came under critique. Culture is not a static determined thing, but rather dynamic. It is alive and changing. According to James Duncan (1980) culture is shared and adaptive. It is not a constant phenomenon but should be studied as a temporal process. One way to identify and assess change in various cultures is through the cultural landscape.

Landscape therefore is fundamental to the study of cultural geography. In *Geography and History: Bridging the Divide*, Baker (2003) encourages geographers to question how and why the landscape was made, and also what does the landscape mean? These questions are important to the way cultural and human geography as fields have developed.

As Duncan highlights, there is a temporal or historical element to studying landscapes that results from cultural change. Samuels (1979) refers to this type of inquiry as a "landscape's biography." In order to understand this biography, you must know about the historical roles of individuals, their actions, and ideas with regard to creating the landscape. While Samuels places emphasis on the agency or the author of the cultural

landscape, Cosgrove (1984) attempts to look deeper into the symbolic nature of social structures impacting the cultural landscape. Cosgrove uses the visual landscape to theorize an understanding of culture and society. In addition, Cosgrove notes the importance of studying people's homes and sense of belonging or locality and identity. These characteristics are contrasted by what he sees as dangers to their familiar patterns in the form of change and modernization. This idea of people valuing their home and local identity over modernity and change is an ideal framework for my case study on Dauphin Island and will be discussed more, later in this thesis.

In addition to the influence of humans on the landscape, landscape can in fact implicate many "hidden" aspects of a community's social life. By asking how and why landscape matters, geographers will often attempt to connect a landscape to a broader pattern or social network. In other words, they ask whether this place can be related to the landscape or social processes of another place (Massey 1993). Perhaps the best way to answer these questions is by creating and comparing case studies of various cultural landscapes.

Schein (1997), for example, focuses his landscape study on a suburb in Lexington, Kentucky. The historic area known as Ashland Park has been evaluated based on architecture, insurance mapping, zoning, historic preservation, and consumption. By evaluating these patterns, Schein adds Ashland Park to the many discourses on the cultural landscape. Schein argues that while there is not one specific model of the US cultural landscape, case studies such as his can help to illustrate a framework for understanding places across the country. Landscape is always a process of change and therefore can never be interpreted as a concrete form of social life. My research on

Dauphin Island can also illustrate a cultural landscape of an island community in southern Alabama. US cultural landscape case studies like Ashland Park and even Dauphin Island are especially interesting to the wider realm of geographic literature because they show the paradox between American ideals like individualism, free-will and power versus the more constrictive values of society and neighborhood organizations. Dauphin Island for example, struggles to negotiate its future along the global tourism to local isolation spectrum.

While geography is undoubtedly a visual discipline, there is more to interpreting a landscape than what you see. You must also use your mind to interpret your vision. Meinig (1979) focuses on ten different lenses while viewing a landscape: as nature, habitat, artifact, system, problem, wealth, ideology, history, place, and aesthetic. The idea is that we bring our own beliefs and values to each landscape that we view. Therefore these landscape studies are nodes that intersect within overall landscape discourse in that all draw upon a socially constructed framework. Meinig further cautions scholars to keep in mind this unavoidable bias but continue to explore the subject. This human element of geographical literature also plays a part in the next theoretical perspective I have used to evaluate Dauphin Island.

## **2.2 Place**

Space and place are words used to describe how a part of the earth is transformed into an intangible feeling of a people's home. Yi-Fu Tuan (1976) is credited as ushering in humanism as a paradigm in geography. He studies the world by examining the way people interact with nature as well as how their feelings or ideas turn spaces their own

places. For example, Bienville Boulevard on Dauphin Island, Alabama is a seemingly average four lane road. This is the main road on the island stretching from its western point of development across to the easternmost point. However in the month of February this road witnesses the earliest Mardi Gras parades of the season. Families and friends line their pickups along the shoulder and median of the road transforming Bienville Boulevard into a special place on this island. In the summer months this same road is a witness to hundreds of trucks and trailers parked for miles along the road while the boaters are miles out in the Gulf of Mexico for the annual deep sea fishing rodeo. Similarly, Dawn Bowen (1997) explores perceptions and imaginations of a place that are exemplified by people's quest for a certain type of paradise in "Margaritaville." The place created in someone's mind can be just as real as a place that is found on a map.

A person's attachment to place has been further explained in geographic literature and beyond. JB Jackson (1997) is a commonly cited author for such studies. Jackson did extensive fieldwork and wrote on the American portrayal of aesthetics and memory through landscape. He importantly focused on the everyday features such as roads, barns, fences, and garages rather than monumental architecture of elites. One interesting example is the evolution of gravesites from private graves beside homes or in private gardens, to the most historically common churchyard cemetery. Americans have typically buried their loved ones in some form of public, communal site with individual headstones and epitaphs. However, Jackson explained that in recent decades much larger monumental cemeteries like Gettysburg have developed. He also concluded by detailing the latest landscape trend in the installment of memory gardens where headstones were once and small stars are all that mark the graves. The deciding factors for burial sites



across the world are often greatly influenced by religion. Jackson acknowledged this as an important influence but by studying this part of landscape evolution we can learn how our society handles the painful reality of death and also the preservation of memory. Human reflection on a place is greatly influenced by shared memories and societal norms. This shared vision of a community will directly relate to my work on Dauphin Island. While the makeup of a place is greatly influenced by its history, there are other factors involved. The next section of this chapter discusses another humanistic approach to geographical research, namely one that tethers individual and group identity to a location.

### **2.3 Place-Based Identity**

People across the world have an undeniable connection to their home or place. Place based-identity is a concept that is increasing in popularity (Johnston 1991, Blake 2002). Cultural geography and landscape often play a large role in this feeling of attachment because they emotionally link people to the material world. For example in Colorado there are mountaineers that actually call themselves the “Fourteeners” because they claim the peaks at 14,000 feet or more in elevation (Blake 2002). Their perceived conquest of nature has intertwined within their identity. While geography as a discipline argues for or against the separation in ideologies involving physical and human geography, there is no question that places are different not only because of their physical makeup but also because humans make them different. Humans attribute differences to places based on how they perceive or value the area (Johnston 1991).

There have also been place-based studies on areas that have created their own new identities. After Bikini Atoll was devastated due to nuclear testing, the people recreated their own landscape and constructed their home as a place with a rich culture and resources. Fighting to clear their image as place affected by nuclear fallout, locals have attempted to market the tropical islands as a tourist hot spot. This is not the only example of place reproduction. Social and historical change plays a role in developing this identity positively and negatively (Davis 2005).

Sociologists also have a stake in place-based identity. Large landmarks or attractions are obvious trademarks of a place's landscape but simple architecture and ordinary buildings can also represent a meaningful attachment (Gieryn 2000). Social memory has enhanced our understanding of cultural landscapes and place-based identities. More specifically, social memory is the idea that people will remember past events or places as current circumstances require. Social memory is not necessarily based on the historical events of the past, but the way people collectively remember or interpret those events and use them today (Hoelscher and Alderman 2004). The way people or a place presents themselves and not the way things actually evolved to that point exemplify social memory. People combine their memories and history to assign their attachments and values to a place. Hoelscher and Alderman's (2004, 345) work on racial and ethnic identity highlights that "[o]nce the sole preserve of psychology, the study of memory now extends to anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, literary studies, communication, history, and – increasingly geography."

Memories are critical to understanding sense of place. Jeffrey Olick (2009) writes that the key component to social memory studies is that an institution or place needs

these stories and memories to exist. The common bond through memory that a community shares can become a territorial justification for a place. Humans are not completely rational actors in our environment. We tend to act out of emotion or in a way that has become natural or habitual over time, which is in essence a definition of culture.

Similarly, geographer Dydia DeLyser (1999) examines the influence tourists have on the attractions in California. One tourist attraction she focuses on is the restoration of historic ghost towns, specifically on Bodie, California. DeLyser notes the importance of photographs, artifacts, and landscapes that are highlighted in people's memory. These items were often scattered around the town to accentuate the memories of a place that a tourist expects to see while visiting the state park. The image of the pioneer western town is restored as an "authentic" tourist attraction that promises live up to the visitors' expectations. This authenticity, real or staged, is what the tourists seek and when they trek to Bodie. The practice of reconstructing the perceived past is explicitly evident on Dauphin Island. Fort Gaines has been restored to appear as it seemingly did for the Confederates. There are even canon firings, as well as weekly blacksmith and other demonstrations at the fort. The fort is an iconic part of the island's cultural landscape and because of memory it plays a role in the tourist experience.

## **2.4 Tourism**

As the literature on social memory suggests, tourism is another important aspect of my research on Dauphin Island. Much of the tourism literature cites the six stages of evolution as a place embraces the industry. These stages are emergence, involvement, growth, consolidation and maturity or stagnation followed by decline or rejuvenation

(Butler 1980). Destinations go through a sort of lifecycle as they develop into a tourist economy. The Greek island of Mykonos has struggled to assess the environmental aspects that tourism has had on the island. Carrying capacity must be considered and its citizens want governmental policies in order to maintain the island's identity apart from tourism (Coccosis 1996). While the literature here mainly treats the cycle as a literal process, I believe that a more loose interpretation can be used to include places that look for reinvention in place of rejuvenation. Case studies by other scholars support this understanding of the process. Often the successful tourist economy is not just a rejuvenated one, it is reinvented. Many small islands around the Caribbean and North America have ecological concerns regarding tourism development including waste and pollution (McElroy 2003). Many of the environmental concerns for development presented here are in the category of growth and how to best maintain that growth. Regardless of the developmental phase and economic gains from an industry, citizens can still show an environmental sense of place.

Economically today, Dauphin Island is less influential than when it was first discovered. Tourism is generated however through establishments such as the old Confederate Fort Gaines or the Indian shell mounds. Efforts for revitalization over the past five years have been in progress. One interesting report examined all of the possible slogans that might be bestowed upon the island as a type of attractive pull factor to encapsulate many of the stakeholders' true feelings and ideas. Each slogan reveals their impression of their own identity and culture: "Dauphin Island: A rare find, It's about what we don't have," "Village by the Sea," "Nature's Crossroads," "Slice of Paradise," "Little Island with a Long History," and "Beaching, Birds, Boats-Where time stands

still.” This puts into perspective the types of things islanders would want to highlight in a revitalization attempt and reveals much about the place identity (Five E’s 2007; 3). To them it is not about beach casinos or high rise condominiums that characterize neighboring Gulf Shores and Biloxi, but an alternative to those types of places.

In addition to marketing the island with a new brand catch phrase, there are several ideas for further promoting the town’s development and economy. One of the most popular ideas is to restore the downtown area making it a walk-able retail and beach recreational center, similar to the boardwalk area at Gulf Shores. Since financing beach re-nourishment has been a problem in the past, funding these new revitalization efforts will also be challenging. Much of the most recent development plan involves government cooperation such as lowering taxes and even possibly requiring a user entry fee to cross the bridge onto Dauphin Island (Five E’s 2007; 9). Even with a progressive town council, a common theme throughout this planning proposal remains preserving the community’s distinct cultural traits and identity.

Historical and heritage tourism have had significant economic impacts around the world. Public and social memory play a role in the identities of a place. One destination that seems to be the epitome of historical restoration from public memory is Colonial Williamsburg. James Miller (2006) uses Williamsburg to highlight the contradictions surrounding heritage tourism and social, or in his words “managerial memory.” Williamsburg was planned, researched, developed, and marketed in the 1930s. On the surface what seems to be a valiant attempt at preserving patriotic and historic American values, Miller cautions that the site was driven by capitalist expansion and commercial development. In 1926, the plan for

the complete restoration of a colonial center in Williamsburg, Virginia was financed by \$3,000,000 from John D. Rockefeller. After its completion, there were private and public efforts to promote the “living museum” and factual recreations, which had indeed been studied and engineered by elite scholars on the topic. Miller’s study of Colonial Williamsburg does not negate the importance of this type of tourist attraction, but poses questions of the compatibility between industrial-commercial development with historic recovery and cultural conservation. In a consumerist world, future oriented “development” can seem contradictory to the heritage or memory of the factual past (Miller 2006).

As evident from the previously mentioned ghost town of Bodie, California, and Williamsburg, heritage tourism is a substantial part of the industry. Another interesting example of this is on the Japanese island of Okinawa. In World War II, the Battle of Okinawa caused horrors to the island’s people, infrastructure, and landscape. Despite US occupation since 1945, Okinawa and mainland Japan have sought to “re-imagine” Okinawa as a tropical beach destination. Often referred to as “Japan’s Hawaii,” the island has undergone years of rebuilding and adapting to the modern day tourists’ expectations from streets lined with tropical, non native flowers, to restroom facilities at battle sites. Today the most prominent attraction on Okinawa is not a historic battle site or a US base camp, but the restored Shuri Castle from the pre-modern Ryuku Kingdom (1429-1879). In 1945, the Shuri Castle was shelled and destroyed by the USS *Mississippi*, which oddly enough resulted in hoisting a Confederate flag for three days following the attack . Today there are bus tours that will visit battle

sites and US military bases, but the Okinawan heritage that is actively advertised and promoted to tourists is from this Ryuku dynasty. They wear the traditional clothing and share the cultural practices with tourists from this era, thereby promoting a different identity than the horrors from World War II (Figal 2008). Okinawan's have made conscious efforts to develop this type of heritage tourism and oversimplify the events of the past scarred by war, to make the present more livable and perhaps more appealing.

Dauphin Island is special in a more subdued, relaxed kind of way. Beside its tourist hungry neighbors Gulf Shores and Orange Beach there is no comparison. A tourist brochure for the island highlights attractions such as the Estuarium, Audubon Bird Sanctuary, Isle Dauphin Golf Club, historic Fort Gaines, kayak rentals, campgrounds, and charter boat fishing. The restaurant and shopping selections are few and far between. Visitors to Gulf Shores however can choose from hundreds of restaurants and shops, in addition to the zoo, putt-putt golf, Fort Morgan, multiple golf courses, water and amusement parks, and sky rise condominium complexes for miles. What then makes these two similar locations such opposites?

As you can see from the infrastructure established in Gulf Shores, their tourism industry is significantly more developed than Dauphin Island's. Gulf Shores and Orange Beach can be analyzed on the life-cycle spectrum between growth and maturity, Dauphin Island has historically faced stagnation and therefore now more focused on rejuvenation attempts. In a study done by Auburn University professors and students titled "The Southwest Alabama Working Waterfront Inventory Project," which included parts of Mobile, Bayou la Batre, and Dauphin Island, many of the area's economic

concerns are addressed (Byrd, Hite, Marzen & Martin 2009). For instance their survey revealed that though most respondents say tourism as a positive thing, they were not enthusiastic about condominium development. Also, over half of the respondents thought that state and federal regulations were an impediment to economic development in the area. These contradictory opinions show the conflict with threatening to develop a primitive landscape and economic opportunity. When asked about the factors hindering expansion for businesses two common responses were “shortage in cash flow” and “lack of good help.” Waterfronts struggle with regulations and developmental issues all over the country but there must be something characteristic of this area that directly affects these businesses.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have reviewed various theoretical literatures. Introducing how cultural geography lays the foundation for my case study on Dauphin Island. Social memory provides the framework for my historical approach to the island and its past. Shared memories real or invented, often promote a place-based identity or sense of territoriality to a location. Both social memory and place-based identity influence tourism practices.

Dauphin Islanders’ collective memory is full of stories of fisherman, soldiers, explorers, and storms. Perhaps the island’s partial isolation lends itself to a more secluded and tight knit community. Perhaps the island’s deeply rooted memories of the past are the reason for its laid back approach to life and the economy. Perhaps the people wish things were different but just do not have the means to make a difference. These islanders share



a common history, economic status, and affection for their place on Earth and it is evident that the island is and will remain a unique place, not only in the world but also in peoples' minds. Understanding the process behind this uniqueness of a shared identity is central to my research and will be further analyzed in the following chapters.

## Chapter 3: Dauphin Island History

### 3.1 Introduction

Dauphin Island is a small community located south of Mobile, Alabama at the western mouth of Mobile Bay (See figures 3 and 4). As a population, the island has a unique heritage and identity. Some see it only as a sleepy fishing village while others



Figure 3. Satellite image of South Alabama (Landsat 2005)

enjoy vacationing in the peaceful paradise. To locals, the island is a sort of best kept secret. There are several reasons for the island's identity and atmosphere today.

Historically, the island has a rich tradition of foreign influence beginning in the sixteenth century. Since then the island has been inhabited by five different nationalities (Kennedy



Figure 4. Satellite image of Dauphin Island (Landsat 2005)

1980). Contemporary residents still share folk tales and stories that have been passed down for centuries. A sense of shared heritage and sense of place allows locals and return tourists alike share a common bond and affection for Dauphin Island.

### **3.2 Native Influence**

Of course a history of the area cannot fail to mention the important influence of the native population. The larger tribes in the Southeast were the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee, and the Upper and Lower Creeks who were constantly trading furs and balancing diplomacy. The shell mounds on Dauphin Island are evidence of another mystery. Indian Mound Park or Shell Mound Park today is a bird refuge and conservation

park on the northeast side of the island where archeologists have dated the mounds to the Mississippian era (1100 to 1550 AD) (Waselkov 1999). Folk histories explain the mounds as an important stopping point along a pilgrimage route of Native Americans from what is now the southeastern region of the United States on their way to the distant Mayan or Aztec Empires in Mexico. Part of this romantic explanation is based on the S shape of the mounds, a serpent, suggestive of a symbol of worship for Native American Indians (Rayford 1956). Recently, archeologists from the University of South Alabama have conducted excavations here to more accurately assess the pattern of these shell middens. A more accepted explanation of the mounds is that the people of Bottle Creek village which was located in the Mobile-Tensaw delta would migrate to the island seasonally to harvest oysters and fish off the north coast. The oysters were dried and stored as a backup food supply in case the village's crops failed. After roasting the oysters there, the shells were left and over hundreds of years formed mounds (Waselkov, 1999). Today the area is covered with grass and trees. Many plants and trees in the park are native to anywhere from the Appalachian Mountains to the Yucatan Peninsula (Horton 2003).

### **3.3 Early History**

The early history of this island at the southernmost point of Alabama has remained a vivid part of the imaginations of the people who inhabit the island today. Histories of diverse peoples; Native American, Welsh, Spanish, French, British, Yankees, Confederates, Americans and more have intertwined upon the landscape of Dauphin Island and Mobile. Dauphin Island is a product of the interactions between different

people and cultures for more than five centuries. Some of these diverse influences are more accurately documented than others. Regardless, written descriptions from early European explorations of the region remain as the very first geographical accounts we have of this part of the world.

While the Spanish voyages are the most documented, some scholars suggest earlier European arrival in the area. There is speculation and even some documented history related to legends of Prince Madoc of Wales first entering Mobile Bay in the twelfth century. There are also the pre-Columbian myths about voyages to Mobile Bay from Amerigo Vespucci where scholars have claimed the Italian navigator anchored at Dauphin Island before exploring the Bay around 1497 (Thomason 2001). The first documented visit to Dauphin Island by Europeans took place in 1519 when the Spanish explorer Alonzo Pineda visited the island and mapped its boundaries. Pineda was ordered to go around the northern Gulf Coast by Francisco de Garay, a Basque conquistador companion to Columbus and governor of Jamaica. He was asked to report back with a possible water route to the Pacific and find the mythical *Bahia del Espiritu Santo* or Bay of the Holy Spirit (Thomason 2001). This mythical bay could have been Mobile Bay, Pensacola Bay, or possibly Galveston, but to the Europeans it promised calm waters deep and wide. Strategically important for its capability to shelter many vessels but also uniquely surrounded by shores covered by exotic creatures. Instead of a water route, Pineda found friendly natives that were eager to trade. The next known expedition was by Narvaez, who was sent by Cortes, who did not encounter friendly natives. Narvaez died at sea after a few Indian conflicts, but Cabeza de Vaca returned to Spain to tell of his

experiences in La Florida and encourage the king to fund a new enterprise (Thomason 2001).

While Hernando de Soto, the captain general and governor of Cuba, enjoyed success from conquistador campaigns in Nicaragua and Peru in 1539, he mobilized for his conquest of La Florida that had been granted by the king. His legacy in the Southeast persists; Hernando De Soto is one of the many European names that are now seen on buildings, neighborhood entrances, and street signs throughout the region. De Soto is most commonly known throughout the South as the Spanish conquistador who crisscrossed the region's lush vegetation spreading disease and warfare throughout the Mississippians' nation. Unfortunately, the native population and its practices have remained an enigma largely because of the explorers' destruction (Clayton, Knight & Moore 1993).

De Soto's *entrada* and the LeMoyne Brothers "discovery" are the two most commonly cited anecdotes from the beginning of the Island's history. Aside from the recent archeological work on the contested route De Soto took through the Southeast, much of this early history comes from the manuscripts written by the early explorers. In particular the journal of De Soto's private secretary, Ranjel, has been informative and is one of about four accepted narratives from the De Soto expedition. De Soto's path through the Southeast is a source of debate among historians, archeologists, and geographers. Regardless of his route, it seems that after encountering chief Tascalusa at Mauvila, De Soto probably gave up on his dreams for success in uncovering the North American equivalent of Cortes' Aztec Empire or Pizarro's Incans (Duncan 1997).

Perhaps because of De Soto and Narvaez's fate in the southern interior, Spain lost interest, giving way to the subsequent takeover of the French colonists.

In *Fleur de Lyse and Calumet*, Andre Penicaut (1723) narrates twenty-two years of French colonization in the Louisiana territory where Dauphin Island was the setting of one of their major ports and settlements. Upon arriving at the island on February 2-3, 1699, Iberville and his men were "terrified" by the piles of human skeletons numbering more than sixty and therefore named the island "Massacre Island" (p. 11). Penicaut identifies the massive grave to be part of the Mauvila nation who had died of disease. Contemporary speculation has ranged from attributing the graves to be a common burial practice of the natives possibly uncovered from a hurricane, or a result of a battle involving De Soto's men or enemy natives. The actual cause or reason for the large pile of remains may not ever be known but what is sure is that the regional native tribes frequented the island prior to any European landing.

Folk history has also developed alongside documented history and contributed to the island's identity. In Julian Lee Rayford's (1956) book, *Whistlin' Woman and Crowin' Hen*, there is story after story of oral history about Dauphin Island and the surrounding areas. Rayford collects the memories that have been passed through generations now told by the locals, about the fig trees that were brought to the island and planted by Isabella, De Soto's wife, and about the meaning behind the island's original name, "Massacre Island". Isabella's legacy has a special meaning to the community still today. In addition to the cherished story of her fig trees, it is said that she sorrowfully awaited the return of her husband, Hernando De Soto and the arrival of supplies from Havana and Maldonado's fleet. Tragically, after the failure at Mauvila, De Soto turned northwest,

died on an expedition designed to extend his territory, never returning to the island (McNeely 1974). Another famous tale from the island is about a lost treasure. The story goes that in the early eighteenth century, there was a travelling priest that would hold mass at a small church on the island. The only asset the church had was a large golden and jeweled cross that was so bright fisherman would sometimes use it as a landmark for navigating while they were out at sea. One day the priest heard of some pirates attacking on the other side of the island. In an attempt to protect his church and the cross he climbed up to remove the cross and threw it down a well. According to the story the well containing the gold cross has never been found (McCann 2012).

Because of the connected sliver of land on the south side of Dauphin Island the waters here provided the perfect safe harbor for settlement (See Figure 5). The early Dauphin Island French settlement included a fort, a church, houses, neighborhoods, a

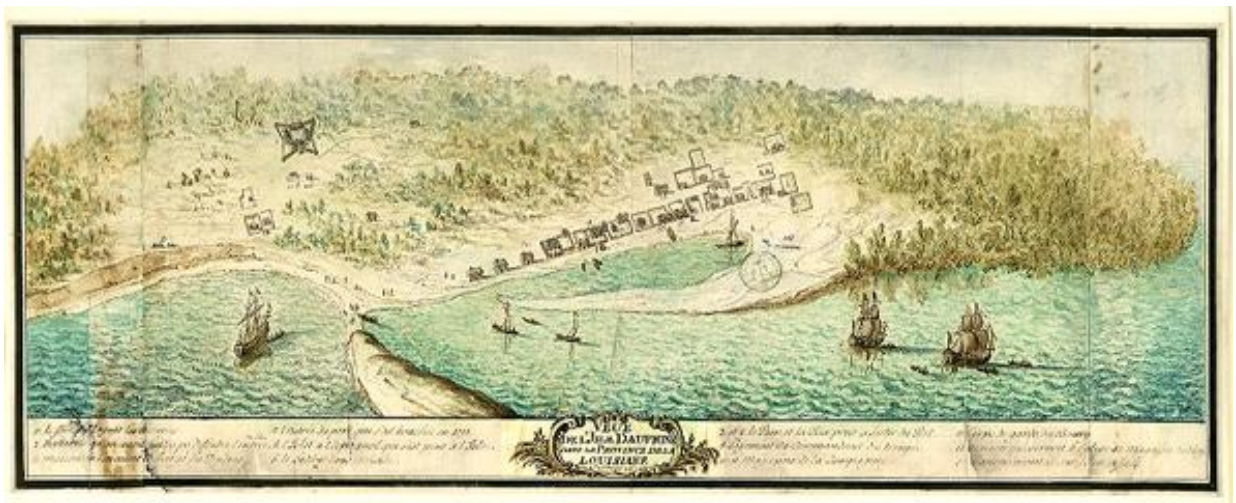


Figure 5. 1717 French drawing of Massacre Island (Kennedy 1980)



couple of warehouses and constantly arriving ships with supplies from the neighboring Biloxi settlement or Central America and Europe (Thomason 2001).

Conquistadors throughout the Americas and Penicaut and De Soto included, wrote of constant fear of starvation. Perhaps that is why the French settlement also extended north up Mobile Bay and the River to establish settlements among the Mauvila. Failed crop production was supplemented by hunting and fishing was practices. Disease also threatened new arrivals. In 1704, a group of French women, The Pelican Girls, were sent to Dauphin Island and Mobile for the colony's bachelors to marry. However, before arriving, many of the crew was sickened by yellow fever. Disease and sickness posed a serious threat in the early days of the colony. Iberville himself died of fever in Cuba in 1707.

In 1711, Iberville's brother Bienville renamed the island Isle Dauphin after French King Louis XIV's great-grandson and heir, the Dauphin, and the ominous Massacre Island was abandoned (Thomason 2001). After a few years of storms, flooding, fighting off British pirates and disease, Louisiana, now governed by Antoine Cadillac, who later founded Detroit, established a few more forts inland among the Mauvila Indians (McWilliams 1953). Relocating the settlement's capital up and down the delta, these sites of Old Mobile grew into permanent colonies. Cadillac was convinced the warehouses on the island would be more useful if the main fort were located there instead of twenty-seven mile bluff north at Mobile. In general he was unhappy with the settlement in Mobile and escaped to Dauphin Island with his family in 1715. After a hurricane in 1717 caused the shifting sand bars to enclose the active port at Dauphin Island, its role for the colonies became more about protection, which resulted in the

construction of a fort (Kennedy 1980). The French were convinced of the island's strategic location and therefore were determined to adapt to its physical geography. For nearly two decades, Mobile and its port at Dauphin Island held the capital seat of Louisiana.

### **3.4 5 Flags**

Historically, many governments have controlled Dauphin Island: France, Spain, Britain, Confederate States of America, and today the United States of America. The island was used as a port to Mobile Bay because of its deep, safe harbor and supply of timber. It remained a strategic location throughout the colonial period when it changed hands to the British in 1763. Because of the hot summers and turbulent weather in Mobile, British colonists deemed Mobile and as they called it "West Florida," "good for nothing but destroying Englishmen" (Fabel 1987, 49). Many of the new English colonists devoted their efforts to trading with the Native Americans and were described as a rowdy crew. Because of the traders rough nature, the British colonists begged the remaining French colonists to stay in Mobile and pledge their allegiance to Britain. To entice the French to stay they offered a generous distribution of land. Many large land grants were given to settlers and often royalty as a type of bribe. Montfort Browne, an unpopular interim governor of Mobile Bay, was once given twenty thousand acres of his choosing and which allowed him to give Dauphin Island to his brother. As a territory of France and Spain, the island was used as a strategic port location but under British rule, the common economic themes in Mobile and Dauphin Island were the slave trade and the business practices surrounding the Indian trade (Brown 2011).

The American Revolution presented another hostile takeover of the area. Spain was in control of the area to the east of Louisiana known as Florida; and had joined the war against the British. So Spanish forces from New Orleans, and Havana sailed into Mobile Bay bypassing Dauphin Island and captured Mobile in March of 1780 under the leadership of Bernardo Galvez. Spanish Mobile continued the previous methods of negotiating with the natives to serve as a buffer to Anglo-American expansion in the northeast (Thomason 2001). French influence however remained prevalent throughout Spanish Louisiana and Mobile as well. One historian concludes that because Spanish rule was mild, most inhabitants remained satisfied with the Spanish military officials controlling Mobile and that basically the Spanish merely governed a French community (Hamilton 1910). More accurately though is the idea that Mobile and its Port Dauphin were occupied by a very heterogeneous population. While the population data of Dauphin Island in the early 1800s is unknown, the expanding Mobile territory was about 1,537 inhabitants by 1805 (Thomason 2001).

After the War of 1812 and British blockades of New Orleans, Mobile, and Baltimore, America was aware of the importance of strong coastal defenses. Moreover British forces were using ports like Mobile to send supplies to their Creek, Choctaw, and Cherokee allies who were fighting the United States across the Southeast. In 1813, President Madison ordered the military annexation of Mobile which was actually “West Florida” and part of the Spanish territory (See Figure 6). The war resulted in British defeat and the displacement of Native Americans. Alabama was no longer controlled by Europeans (Thomason 2001).

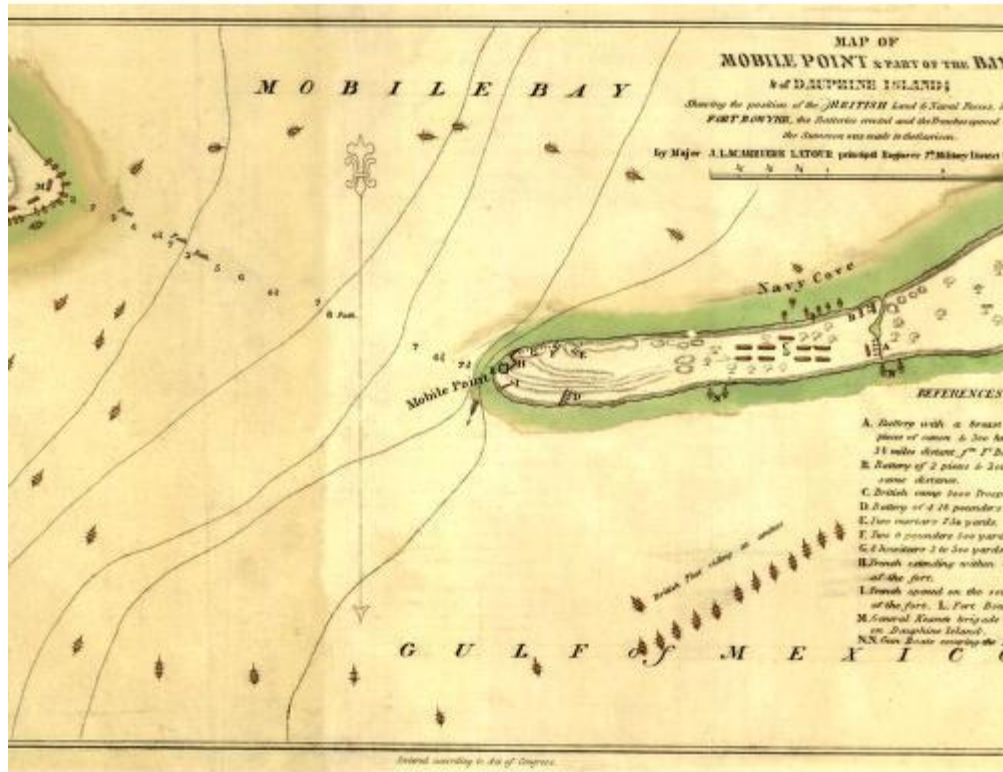


Figure 6. Blockades at Mobile Bay during the Battle of 1812 (Alabama Department of Archives and History 1815)

During the first half of the nineteenth century, Mobilians entered the cotton trade and the city grew into one of the more populated southern cities. Addin Lewis was the first American mayor of Mobile who, like many other newcomers, moved to the South from Connecticut in search of economic advancement (Thomason 2001). By the 1850s however as sectionalism swept the region, any northerner turned southerner was pressured to swear allegiance to the Confederacy (Doss 2001). While Mobile and southern Alabama were booming alongside the cotton trade, the United States helped plan and fund efforts to solidify the positioning of its defenses on Dauphin Island. Finally in 1853, Congress named the completed fort after General Edmund Pendleton Gaines. The general gained the reputation as an honest and skilled military man, from his campaign to track down Aaron Burr to his proficiency with the Indian Wars across the

Southeast. While most of the fort was completed by 1861, the final touches were added in the years leading up to the Battle of Mobile Bay (Dauphin Island Park and Beach Board 2010). In the midst of the Civil War and the South's secession, Mobile and Dauphin Island would be the stage of a very influential battle.

### **3.5 Civil War**

As conflict erupted over extending and maintaining slavery throughout the expanding United States, Alabama seceded as the fourth southern state in 1861. During the early years of the war, blockade runners sustained the Confederacy's war effort. Arms from Europe and Central America (Havana) entered through Mobile and were sent to Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, and Georgia (Hearn 1993). Geographically, Mobile was seen as a very influential coastal port. It was strategic to the Confederacy for mobility and collecting war materials, and important to the Union for further hampering the industrially weak southern states. After his success at New Orleans in 1862 where he became a war hero, Admiral David Farragut was responsible for leading the Yankee attack on Mobile Bay (Hearn 1993). Farragut's old friend Admiral Franklin Buchanan had been given command of all the naval forces at Mobile, which included 3 major fortifications: Gaines at Dauphin Island, Morgan at Mobile Point, and Powell at Grant's Pass. These 3 places and their importance are illustrated in Figure 4 which shows the Confederate holdings during the Union attack on Mobile Bay.



Figure 7. Battle of Mobile Bay (Civil War Preservation Trust 2012)

On August 2, 1864 Union forces landed on Dauphin Island and laid siege to Fort Gaines. August 5, Farragut and the Union naval forces entered the bay engaging fire with Fort Morgan, 3 miles away from Dauphin Island at the mouth of Mobile Bay. All the while, Union ships were attempting to dodge the sunken “infernal machines” or

torpedoes made out of beer kegs and attached to electricity on shore. The torpedoes at the entryway of Mobile Bay sank the *Tecumseh* and 93 of her crew on August 5, 1964 (National Park Service 2012). Here is presumably where Farragut heroically stated, “Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead!” For the Confederates, Buchanan led a bold stand from the *CSS Tennessee* but finally Fort Morgan and Mobile surrendered on August 23 and the mouth of the bay was closed off (see Figure 7). The total estimated casualties were 1,822 (US 322; CSA, 1,500) (Hearn 1993). After the Civil War, Fort Gaines as a military outpost was only used moderately for operational and staging strategies around WWII.

### **3.6 Modern History**

In 1866, the Alabama Legislature passed a resolution which would approve and fund research on the possible construction of a bridge from the mainland to Dauphin Island. Very little came of this initial idea. In the early 1900s, the Mobile Ohio railroad company proposed a plan to extend a railroad bridge to the island for coal transportation for ocean-going coal burning vessels. In 1911, records show that Congress sold 700 acres of Dauphin Island to the Dauphin Island Railway and Harbor Company on the condition that they build a railroad to and from the mainland and a cargo dock on the Gulf (Harbinger 1999). The effort was derailed however when engineers concluded the marshy ground would not support a locomotive (McNeely 1974). Also during this time a failed idea was proposed to develop an eight mile boardwalk across the beach front sand dunes and make a name for the island as a coaling station (Thomason 2010). Had this idea been

carried out, or even rational, the island was to be a highly trafficked exporter of coal from places like Pittsburgh and Birmingham (Figure 8).

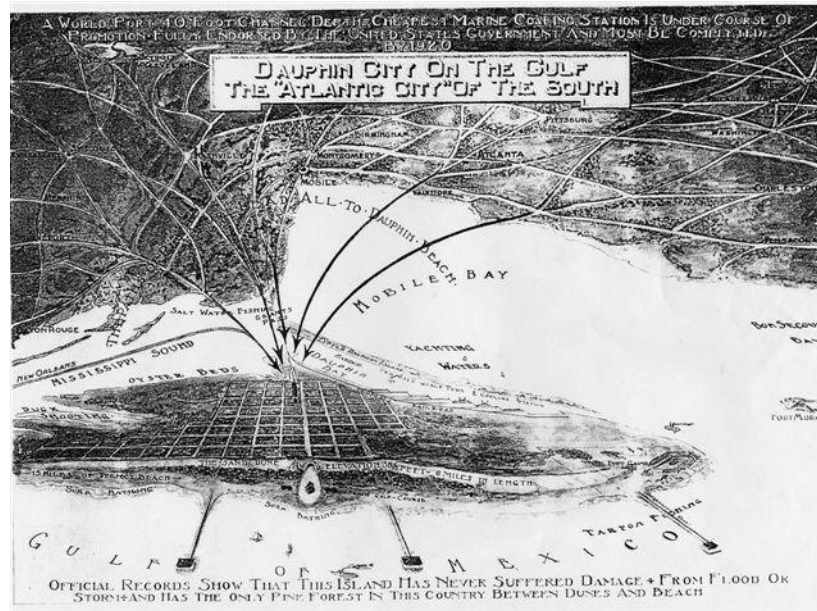


Figure 8. Proposed idea to create the “Atlantic City of the South” and use the island as a marine coaling station in 1920 (Dauphin Island Park and Beach Board)

In 1929, the first Alabama Deep Sea Fishing Rodeo was held on Dauphin Island. Attracting 260 contestants in its initial year, the competition has grown annually and now attracts tourists from all over the country (Hinson 2001).

### 3.7 Development

The next important attempt at development on Dauphin Island came in the 1950s. The 1930-40 census records show the island, Fort Gaines included, with about 300 people who lived by farming, fishing, and raising cattle and goats. There were two small stores and a one room school house. Dauphin Island remained isolated longer than most other Gulf Coast beaches in Mississippi and Florida that were allowed connectivity by



roads like Highway 90. This is why local promoters' efforts to build a bridge were the initial steps to development. The first bridge attempt failed because of engineering and expense, but the next proposal in the late 1930s seemed promising when the Reconstruction Finance Corporation was willing to spend \$900,000 on the project. The RCA was an influential piece of reform established by President Hoover to help re-establish confidence in the banking system during the economic crisis (Olson 1988). Because many banks were tied to railroads through bonds, it seemed Dauphin Island may be getting a bridge. Unfortunately, World War II squashed that attempt. Post-war a similar plan was proposed to Alabama Governor "Big Jim" Folsom. Folsom rejected the idea but the Mobile Chamber of Commerce still persuaded the county to hold a referendum allowing a one-cent per gallon gasoline tax that would help pay for the bridge. In July 1949, this proposal was also defeated (Patterson 1999). It was not until the 1950s that Mobile's Chamber of Commerce finally achieved success in developing the island with the construction of a four mile bridge connecting it to the mainland (McNeely 1974). Governor Gordon Persons was more interested in the bridge idea than Folsom had been and therefore the Chamber had the state agree to the bridge project and a contribution of \$1.3 million. Instead of the gasoline tax, the Chamber issued \$2 million in revenue bonds and imposed a \$1 toll from 1955-1963. At the time, the investment seemed to greatly benefit Alabamians. One Birmingham news source described the development efforts as "the multi-million-dollar vacation paradise wonderland program" (Patterson 1999). Dauphin Island was showing great potential as a tourist attraction in southern Mobile County.

With post war success, came a push for expansion and growth. Mobile's Chamber of Commerce saw the island as a great asset to attracting tourists and in turn, boosting the local economy. After the bridge plan, the Chamber's first obstacle was buying the island for land speculation. Particularly troublesome was that by 1953 a company by the name of Gulf Properties Corporation owned most of the island. The purpose of this business group was to hold all of the land until infrastructural developments including a bridge could add value to the island. There is a story that goes along with identifying the original owners of Dauphin Island; Frank Boykin, Mobile's Congressman from 1935-1962 was riding a train from Mobile to New York City in 1929, when a man from Jasper named Breck Musgrove asked Boykin for a \$50,000 loan. If granted the loan, Musgrove offered to "put up Dauphin Island as collateral." After Boykin agreed to give him the loan and Musgrove failed to pay it back, Boykin, Forney Johnston, and others formed Gulf Properties Corporation and held the title for 90% of the island (Boykin 1973).

So when Mobile's Chamber of Commerce became interested in developing the island in 1954, the group raised over \$6 million in the speculation of Dauphin Island land and then bought the island from Boykin's company for \$950,000 in cash. A group of planners and developers met with real estate companies and settled on a plan of 2,500 lots at the initial development proposal meeting in 1953. Before the bridge was finished the planning group had offered to take investors over to the island for a look around. These early days of development led to experiences like lunches made of sardines with warm drinks, and boat rides on oyster boats crammed with 15-20 people. Before boarding these small boats for the five mile trek across the channel, passengers were gathered at the end of the Cedar Point fishing pier. On the first day of these excursions in 1954, so many

people crowded the end of the pier that it actually began sinking and some were forced to fall into the shallow water. Surprisingly, most of these future residents found these adventures exciting and overcame such circumstances to move forward with the island's development in the 1950s (McNeely 1974). The income from the selling of lots went into a trust fund that the Chamber used on public works such as the Isle Dauphin Golf Course, a \$50,000 beach resort casino called Sand Dunes Casino, as well as remodeling a military building into recreation facility called Fort Gaines Club, a camp ground, and several private parks.

### **3. 8 Sand Island Light**

Another major piece of Dauphin Island history can be seen from many parts of the island's southeast coastline. In 1837, the original Sand Island Lighthouse was a fifty five foot iron spindle on a sand bar directly south of the east end of Dauphin Island that lit the horizon for thirty miles. The second Sand Island light was constructed in 1858 after problems with erosion destroyed the first and was this time built as a conical brick tower, the tallest ever erected on the Gulf Coast. Unfortunately, in 1863 a Confederate general angered by the proximity of the Yankees, ordered seventy pounds of gunpowder to be placed under the lighthouse destroying the two hundred foot tall icon. The third lighthouse that remains today was constructed in 1872 at 132-feet tall and accompanied by a two-story keeper's house. The keeper's house was destroyed by a fire in 1973 (Hall 2008). Over the past century, the island has completely eroded away and the solitary lighthouse has stood unlit on a mound of granite boulders (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Third and Current Sand Island Lighthouse (Press-Register 2010)



Figure 10. Sand Island Lighthouse along with dredging operations (Sam St. John 2011)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of this research this was the status; now the island has disappeared again due to erosion.

Sand Island remained isolated and non-functional until October 2011 when six million dollars of a federal fund post-BP oil spill contributed to a dredging operation that would solidify Sand Island and eventually be open it to the public (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Sand Island Lighthouse along with dredging operations (Sam St. John 2011)

Will the restored landmark become a booming tourist attraction? And will all this work on restoring the current island simply erode again? It seems only time will tell but in the meantime there is a very happy island community hopeful for its triumph (Raines 2011).

With the construction of the bridge, hotels, and restaurants during the 1950s there was more excitement for the future, however many of these potential economic opportunities have failed. Tourism seems to be the most evident; yet according the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA) in 1998 Dauphin Island only had 150 rental units, compared to over 7,000 units to the east at Ft. Morgan, Gulf Shores, and Orange Beach (Patterson 1999). Today the number of rentals is considerably higher (about 1,000 units) even considering hurricane threats and the recent BP oil spill (Flint 2010). Some sources say that the town's greatest source of revenue comes from the 11% lodging tax collected (Cano 2012).

At the time of the 2010 Census, Dauphin Island's total population was 1,238. The mean household income was \$65,023 from private wage and salary (51%), government (34%), and self-employed workers (14%). There were 1,818 housing units and only 582 occupied. Of these, 486 housing units are owner-occupied. From the remaining 1,236 vacant housing units, 837 are for seasonal, recreational, or occasional use (US Census 2010). This means that 46% of the total housing units on Dauphin Island are considered

vacant and therefore this absentee population of property owners is important to understanding Dauphin Island's identity.

Today the most recent landmark that history has bestowed on the island is Katrina Cut. Hurricanes have repeatedly rolled over Dauphin Island, shifting its sands and washing away its structure. Katrina was no different. However, the island's identity cannot simply be explained using a historical timeline. Tourists and locals alike enjoy Dauphin Island for its laid back nature. Rest and relaxation on this fourteen-mile long island is a way of life. There is a special and unique atmosphere year round that makes Dauphin Island one of the South's best kept secrets. Does this atmosphere stem from a cultural identity where its citizens are clinging to a historic preservation of the island's culture and do not want to tamper with their traditions? Do the islanders simply not want an advanced consumerist tourism economy? Or are the perceived threats of an unstable environment crippling any possible substantial development? These are the questions I will answer in subsequent chapters.

## **Chapter 4: Planning for the Future**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In 2007, a planning initiative was formed to help envision the economic future of Dauphin Island. The project worked with community residents and officials to create an economic development plan titled *Dauphin Island Strategic Plan: A 20 Year Vision*. This planning process was funded in conjunction with the Town of Dauphin Island and the following: Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium and the University of Southern Mississippi; the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, State Lands Division; and the Dauphin Island Sea Lab and Mobile Bay National Estuary Program. Approximately 1,000 stakeholders participated throughout the process. The focus areas agreed upon were things such as community development, economic improvement, environmental protections, unified governance, and utilizing the island's natural and cultural assets. The finished project was a call for a town development plan in order to sustain the town's economic livelihood and environmental mindset, while addressing the diversity of stakeholders and challenges of living on a barrier island (Five E's Unlimited 2007).

## 4.2 Participation Results

After Hurricane Ivan in 2004 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the Town of Dauphin Island and other community stakeholders decided they needed a clear plan to guarantee a future economy. In order to identify the changes the community deemed important, the project took an assessment by asking questions of the stakeholders. Not only did the report identify the goals and the strengths of the island, but it also categorized the community's weaknesses and points of decline. The following list exemplifies the overarching planning questions articulated by stakeholders and town officials in an early planning meeting:

- How can the Dauphin Island Community come together to develop a common vision for what the island should be in 30 years?
- How can the Dauphin Island Community plan for and develop improvements to Island infrastructure that are environmentally sensitive and hurricane resistant?
- How can the Dauphin Island Community engage in economic revitalization and expansion of money-making opportunities including tourism and business growth in a way that capitalizes on its community assets?
- Can the Dauphin Island Community manage growth, through implementation of Smart Growth concepts, sustaining the unique environmental quality of the island, including the beaches, dunes, maritime forests, wetlands, and marshes that make the island a special place?
- How can the Dauphin Island Community maintain and improve housing diversity so that work force and other affordable housing for island commercial/retail establishment workers will be available?
- How can the Dauphin Island Community improve/expand its arts/community/recreational facilities and opportunities and access to water?
- How can the Dauphin Island Community improve provision for social/community services on the island?
- Composition of the island is such that we have various entities. How can we better work independently and interdependently as a community?
- Can the Dauphin Island Community better coordinate its governing activities, financing activities, and the organizational capacity of the current entities? (Dauphin Island Requests for Proposals 2006)



These are the questions that guided the design of the planning process toward a sustainable future. After awarded a grant, the Town of Dauphin Island contracted with *Five E's Unlimited* of Seattle, Washington, a private service company specializing in sustainable economic development, to help facilitate the process and consult on sustainability matters. In order to ensure the plan was “community driven,” stakeholders were encouraged to participate by completing a survey distributed throughout the community and in general forum meetings, workshop settings, targeted group meetings, telephone interviews, and impromptu dialogue with people in the streets. This resulted in communication with 976 people, 659 of which completed the survey.

The survey asked stakeholders to “list the top three personal complaints about living and/or doing business on Dauphin Island” and identify (by checking a box) the main issues of concern that the plan should place its focus (Five E's Unlimited 2007, 2). The majority of the respondents identified themselves as property owners with an equal division between full-time and part-time residents. Table 1 shows the results of the top three complaints. The lack of shopping and eating on Dauphin Island was the predominant concern. I can also attest to certain times throughout the year when there simply was not a single restaurant open for dinner on a Friday night. Competing government entities, as evident in my case study chapter on the various competing agencies in Dauphin Island, and beach erosion were also highly ranked. The island is governed by the Town Council but also greatly influenced by organizations such as the Dauphin Island Park and Beach Board, Dauphin Island Property Owner's Association, and the Dauphin Island Sea Lab. Table 2 shows the responses to the section where they

were asked to rank the concerns that needed to be addressed in the future planning of Dauphin Island. The top concerns related to beach conditions such as erosion and re-nourishment maintenance. Many of these concerns may vary or be attributed to the type

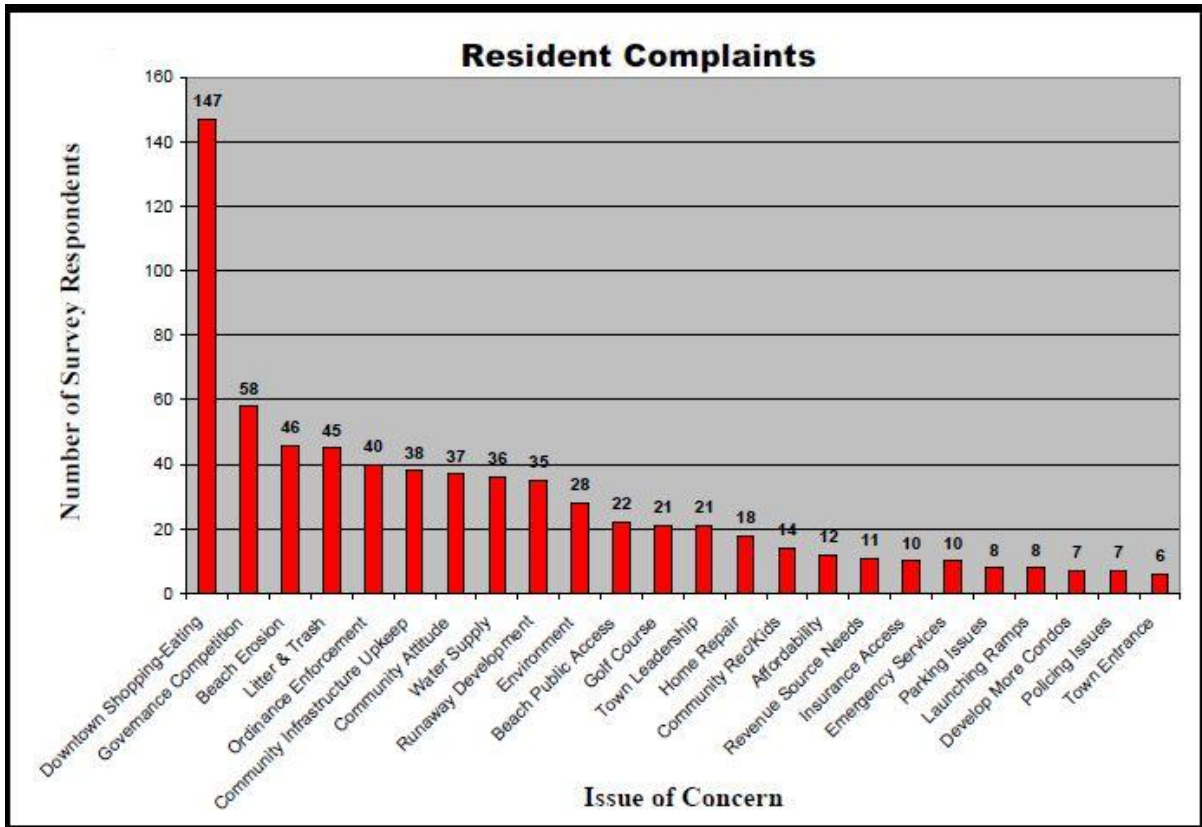


Table 1. Resident Complaints in response to stakeholder survey (Dauphin Island Interim Report 2007)

of respondent (full time or part-time resident) and where the resident lives or owns property. For example, most of the respondents with a concern for stability of the beaches after storms and erosion were property holders from the west end, where most of the hurricane damage is typically felt. Likewise, the east end property holders were more concerned with beach access and zoning/ordinance enforcement. The different interests of the respondents show the variety of opinion among property owners. Because of the

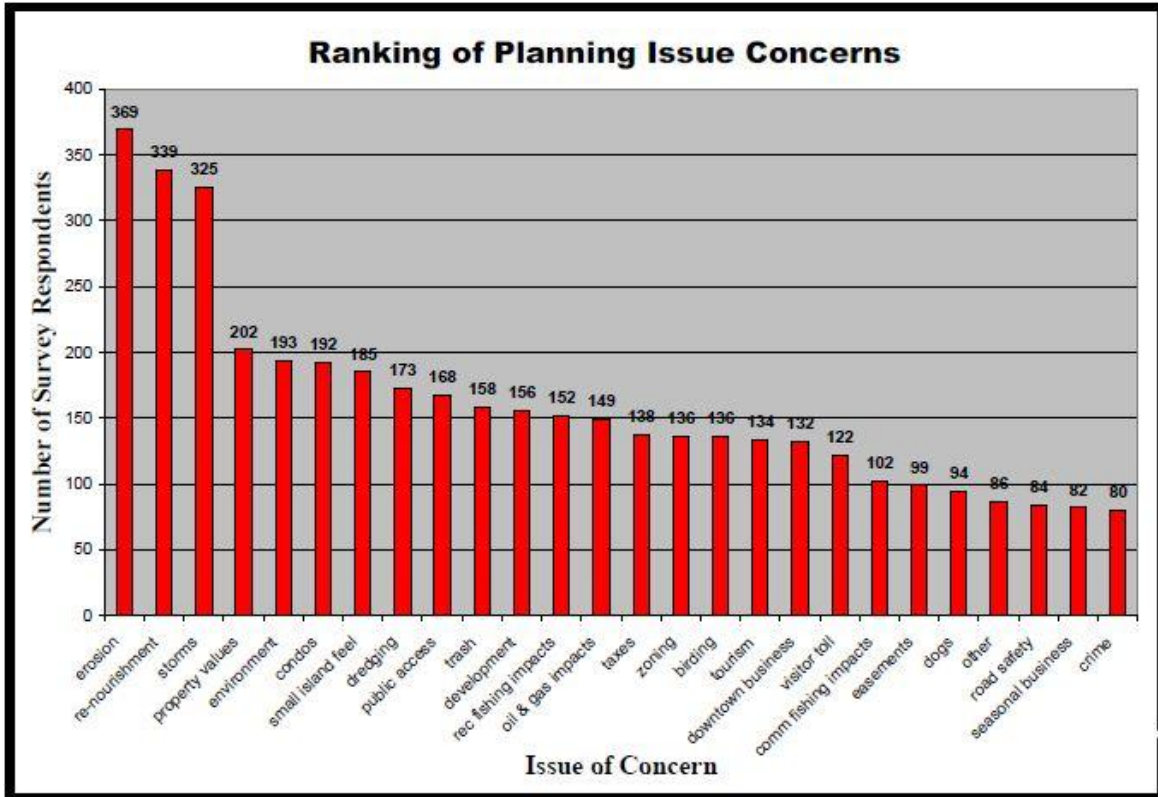


Table 2. Ranks the issues for future concern (Dauphin Island Interim Report 2007)

different landscape on each section of the island (narrow beach spit to the west and higher elevation maritime forests to the east) it would be impossible to have a homogenous response in regards to the environmental concerns of the island. The gap in interest between environmental concerns and business development for a planning initiative seems to be contradictory. This can be explained through literature on sustainable tourism development. Cater writes that there is no other economic activity more controversial than tourism. He groups the competing interests into four categories: the host population, tourist guests, tourism organizations, and the natural environment. Cater believes that because the industry affects many different sectors, development attempts may be problematic. The best solution is a compromise involving tradeoffs

between the different groups (Cater 1995). In the case of Dauphin Island, the high interest of environmental concerns may lend itself to a more eco-friendly development approach.

Important to my research is the level of interest in maintaining the small island feel which is ranked above development and tourism but below environment. These aspects, however are all intertwined as changes in the environment whether it is natural or man-made could detract from the small island feel that is important to many Islanders and tourists. Tables 3 and 4 show the distribution of residents by address on the island (West to East see Figure 11) and how they responded regarding the environment, birding, and tourism; then condos, development, and small-island feel.



Figure 11. Aerial Photo of street names on Dauphin Island (USDA Farm Service 2012)

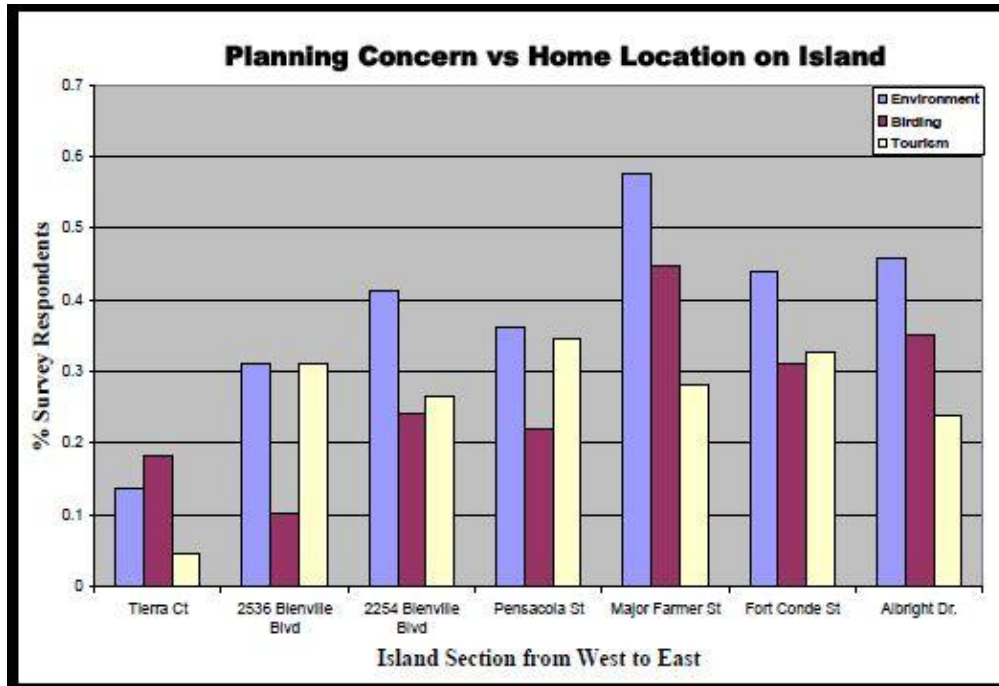


Table 3. Responses to concerns with the environment, birding and tourism shown geographically (Dauphin Island Interim Report 2007)

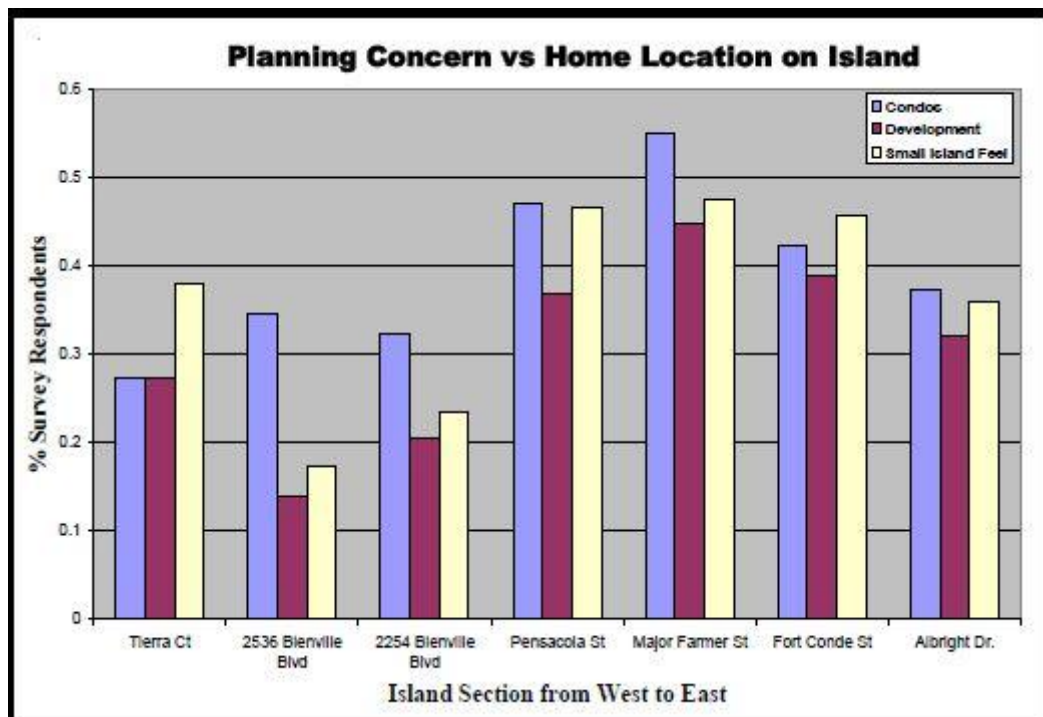


Table 4. Responses to condos, development, and small island feel shown geographically (Dauphin Island Interim Report 2007)

These two tables show that for residents on the east end, which is the more wooded area of the island, more concern is shown for birding and the environment. Whereas people midway between the east and west ends are more concerned with balancing the condominium development and maintaining the small island feel.

### **4.3 Creating a Plan**

Toward the beginning of the planning process, there were also community vision workshops held by the planning group. There were 49 stakeholders present to record what they would like to envision for the island in 20 years. There were 6 general focus areas addressed: Community, Environment, Culture, Governance, Economics, and Tourism. The topic of environment received support for management, conservation, and protection of healthy ecosystems. A unified governance of the island's political infrastructure was also a popular issue. From the culture section, workshop participants indicated what they preferred to see the future with a diverse population of permanent residents, part-year and seasonal residents, as well as week/weekend/day-trippers. This diversity was favored over a proposition to develop "local history museums that document/communicate historical cultures on the island" (Five E's Unlimited 2007, 12). This seems to represent the preference of attracting regular tourists and residents over developing a historical attraction. From this evidence, I draw the conclusion that building a community and profit is more important than actual history. Locals, at least the majority of these respondents, do not support my thesis argument that highlighting their distant past is important to their current identity. The final two hot topics for the future were a small, downtown village that includes waterfront activities and retailers, and promoting

nature-based, responsible tourism activities. While these 6 focus areas were not defined by the planning report, the workshop referred to the categories' elements for the future vision of Dauphin Island. Much of the activities in the workshops were designed based on the responses to the survey.

After identifying the desired future of the island and brainstorming with specific goals to reach this vision, the last part of stakeholder participation came in the form of interacting with an internet map to identify their favorite places of the island. The



Figure 12. Stakeholders mapping their favorite places (Dauphin Island Interim Report 2007)

objective was to represent places spatially not just by their physical attributes (streets, parks, businesses) but also by the personal emotions or experiences they evoke. This representation of both space and place helps identify the important locations on the island that go beyond tangible assets. Figure 12 is the document generated by the stakeholders who made several entries to map their favorite island locations.

The areas that received the most attention were the Audubon Sanctuary, Fort Gaines, Shell Mounds, Golf Course and Isle Dauphine Club, downtown businesses, and the airport. These are the most prominent landmarks among locals. Everyone living on the island seems to connect with at least one of the sites listed above. In addition to mapping the locations, participants were encouraged to add a description and /or important characteristics. Here are a few comments relative to my research of the island's development that were quoted from the survey response data:

- The airport puts us on the map.
- Shell Mounds Park enjoys a world-renowned reputation as one of the 10 best places in the US to observe bird migration.
- This should not be allowed to be developed, but kept as an example of natural barrier island habitat.
- Preserving the bird sanctuary will preserve a look into the island's past. (Dauphin Island Interim Report 2007, 16)

#### **4.4 Final Report**

After these initial meetings and responses the planning team published a report recommending 6 focus areas grouped into 2 categories for future improvements based on the data collected from the workshops, surveys, and favorite places map. Within the economic revitalization theme the first focus would be the development of a Central Village Business District and East End Business area (Figure 13). Toward this goal efforts should be made to revamp the entrance to the island, offer business incentives to



attract diverse retailers, develop of cottage industries, add a commercial tourist district on the east end near ferry, and provide a form of public transit between tourist spots on the island. The following figures portray some of these ideas versus the reality (Figures 14 and 15). Notice the blue shaded area recommending mixed use development at the northern entry point of the island. Today this area is mainly undeveloped except for a marina, a bank, and few sporadic residences. One recommendation in the final plan calls for the boat storage building to the left of Figure 15 to be decorated with a large mural for a more aesthetic entrance.



Figure 13. Possible areas for developing a Centralized Business District (Dauphin Island Strategic Plan 2007)



Figure 14. A more aesthetically pleasing entryway would add to a visitor's first impression on the island (Dauphin Island Strategic Plan 2007)



Figure 15. Current entryway onto Dauphin Island (Photo taken by author 2012)

The next focus for an economic revitalization strategy was to develop and preserve a working waterfront for commercial fishing, recreational boating, retail, and

residential uses. By incorporating a mixed use facility for boat slips, shops, lodging, and charter fishing operations it would also honor the cultural heritage of this historic fishing village. The key to this type of development, according to the planning committee, is having the proper zoning ordinances.

Geographers, urban planners, anthropologists and others have provided substantial literature on tourism and its impacts on host societies and migrating tourists themselves. One of the most recent and relevant sources on tourism is John Urry's (2002) book *The Tourist Gaze*. Urry discusses the postmodern tourist industry and defines today's tourist and their expectations. His ideas center on the tourist seeking something different from their everyday lives of mundane and routine activity. Most importantly, Urry encourages more tourism studies to help investigate the realities of the larger society. In other words, what can be learned about a place from the different experiences by tourists and non-tourists? How does a society identify or market itself to tourists? Why? And is this proposed identity the same as the reality? These are the questions that tourism scholars consider when researching today's societal norms (Urry 2002). Dauphin Island in its essence, is a laid back community and, illustrates this escape from reality and modern chaos that Urry is describing. In the Final Report the proposed plans for development strive to attract tourists while still maintaining the relaxed small-town feel that Dauphin Island offers its tourists.

There is no question that several tourist destinations around the world have been negatively impacted from rapid development and growing numbers of tourists. For example, Jerome McElroy (2003) examined 51 small island locations and considered their application to the Tourism Penetration Index. This is an adaptation of Butler's

lifecycle model mentioned in Chapter 2. McElroy highlights the deforestation, erosion, lagoon pollution, reef damage and beach loss associated with tourism expansion of hotels/condominiums and cruise ships in the Caribbean. In the Mediterranean, such expanding infrastructure has filled salt ponds, rerouted shorelines, and polluted waters. All over the world there are examples like these where unplanned development and tourism have led to destruction of a society's identity. Dauphin Island stakeholders seem aware of these hazards and therefore seek a more sustainable development path.

Not all development and tourism is bad, though. The benefits of tourism dollars are undeniable. According to the World Tourism Organization, in 2011, 983 million international tourists travelled the world. Tourist receipts totaled an estimated \$1.2 trillion. That is an average of \$3.4 billion a day spent by tourists (World Tourism Organization 2012). The industry is huge and only getting bigger. In order to develop a sustainable tourist economy, destinations across the world are now seeing a trend towards "ecotourism." Sustainable tourism must be preplanned and if done correctly, I believe it will only benefit the host society. Ecotourism preserves the cultural and natural heritage of a place by promoting local history and practices then channeling money back into local initiatives (Stronza 2001).

The following figures represent this working waterfront idea as it could be implemented on Dauphin Island for future economic purposes. Currently there is not any waterside infrastructure like the Figure 16 depicts. This type of aesthetically pleasing development with a small community feel is the type of land use planners envisioned.

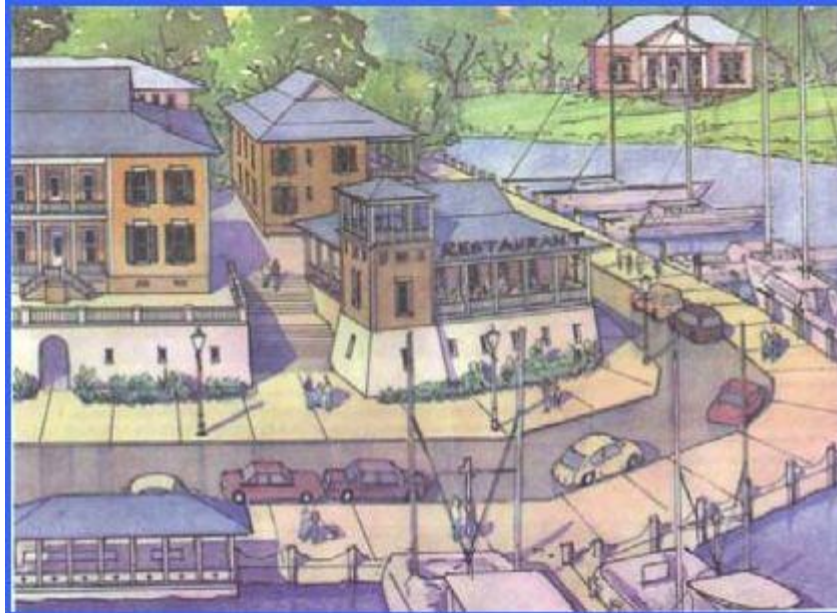


Figure 16. Proposed picture of a mixed land use working waterfront (Dauphin Island Strategic Plan 2007)

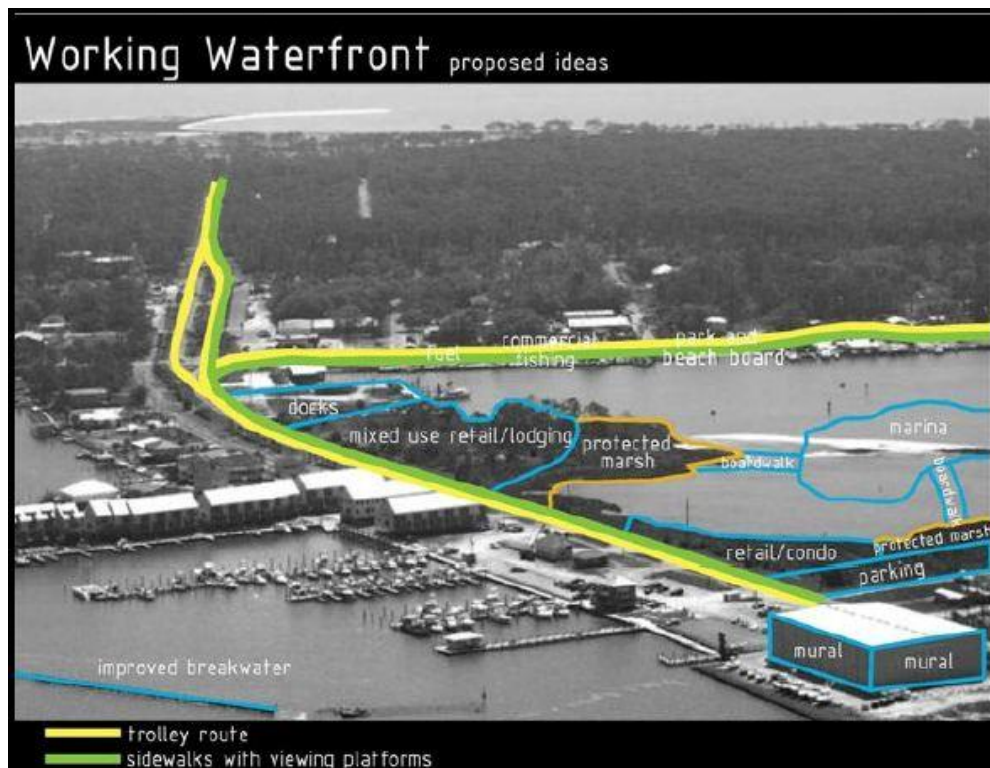


Figure 17. Proposed mixed land use waterfront (Dauphin Island Strategic Plan 2007)



Figure 18. Areas to consider developing a working waterfront, while still preserving environmentally sensitive areas (Dauphin Island Strategic Plan 2007)

Figures 17 and 18 show the outlines for potential land use of the working waterfront.

Planners highlighted the development areas in blue while still leaving the orange spaces as protected environments.

The third strategy suggested to create a sustainable future through economic revitalization was through tourism and resource protection. This emphasis is something I have found to be particularly relevant to my research. This is also the section of the plan the town administration and island residents seem to be implementing now more so than any of the other recommendations. The plan outlined an environmentally sound strategy for the island to capitalize on its natural assets while still promoting tourism and creating a unique place to visit. Maintaining the small-town feel has been identified as an

important concern of residents and therefore development needs to mirror the islanders' sense of place. Dauphin Island offers a variety of historical, cultural, and nature-based tourism locations to support such efforts. The final planning report encouraged the island to continue promoting activities such as birding, beaches, boating, swimming, kayaking, fishing, golfing, wind surfing, walking/hiking, history appreciation, stargazing, weddings, biking, and sailing as tourist attractions. In addition to the events that the island already hosts like Fishing Rodeos, Mardi Gras, Junior Miss, Sea Lab Discovery Days, and Fort Gaines historical reenactments, the plan recommended that they consider the potential for additional future events. Suggested attractions included a variety of festivals, for example art; bird and butterfly migrations; oyster and heritage; musical and theatrical presentations; and even dinner cruises. Since the publication of the Strategic Plan, many of these events have actually happened within the past five years and experienced tremendous success as defined by high attendances.

Another interesting recommendation that emerged from the planning process but has not yet happened was for the island to capitalize on its history/culture tourism through a "walk through time." Today there is no comprehensive museum of Dauphin Island history on the island and I think this could be a successful and simple attraction for the island. The plan also recommends an advertising focus upon of the ecotourism approach.

#### **4.5 Ecotourism and Growth Control**

Ecotourism can also be called "community-based tourism," "cultural tourism," or "alternative tourism" (Stronza 2001). A general definition of this idea refers to forms of tourism that go along with natural, social, and community values while hosts and guests

enjoy positive interactions and experiences (Eadington & Smith 1992). On Dauphin Island ecotourism is mainly promoted through the Audobon Sanctuary with nature trails and bird watching. The Sea Lab also contributes to education about the diverse ecosystems hosted by the island. The Shell Mounds and Fort Gaines are also historic sites that can continue to gain attention from tourists while minimizing the environmental impact tourism has across the globe today.

Since the rise of the tourism industry across the world, social scientists have analyzed many destinations and how they have embraced development. There are numerous accounts of positive and negative impacts of tourism development. The Indonesian island of Siberut has recently faced two different types of tourism development. The first group of tourists came as backpack tourists seeking a type of jungle adventure on indigenous territory. Many of the native peoples in Siberut still practice their traditional religions, dress in their traditional garb, and dance their traditional dances. This type of 'back to the basics' tourism has since been diminished by the recent attraction of surfers to Siberut off shore waves. The new surfing industry has been accompanied by luxury hotels and facilities. Economically, the argument can be made that everyone stands to have an equitable share in these resources, however, the problem in Siberut is that no plans have been made to ensure such an outcome (Persoon 2003). Sustainable development plans for the future can prevent this type of exploitation. This is relevant to Dauphin Island and its planning attempts at traditional ecotourism. Long range planning that is ecofriendly and mindful of the residents' wishes can help guarantee a future economy for Dauphin Island.



Much of my historical research on the island led me to many great archived newspaper advertisements, articles, and pictures on the opening of Dauphin Island in the 1950s. Figure 19 comes from an independent Dauphin Island newspaper published in 1957 portraying life on the brand new Dauphin Island.

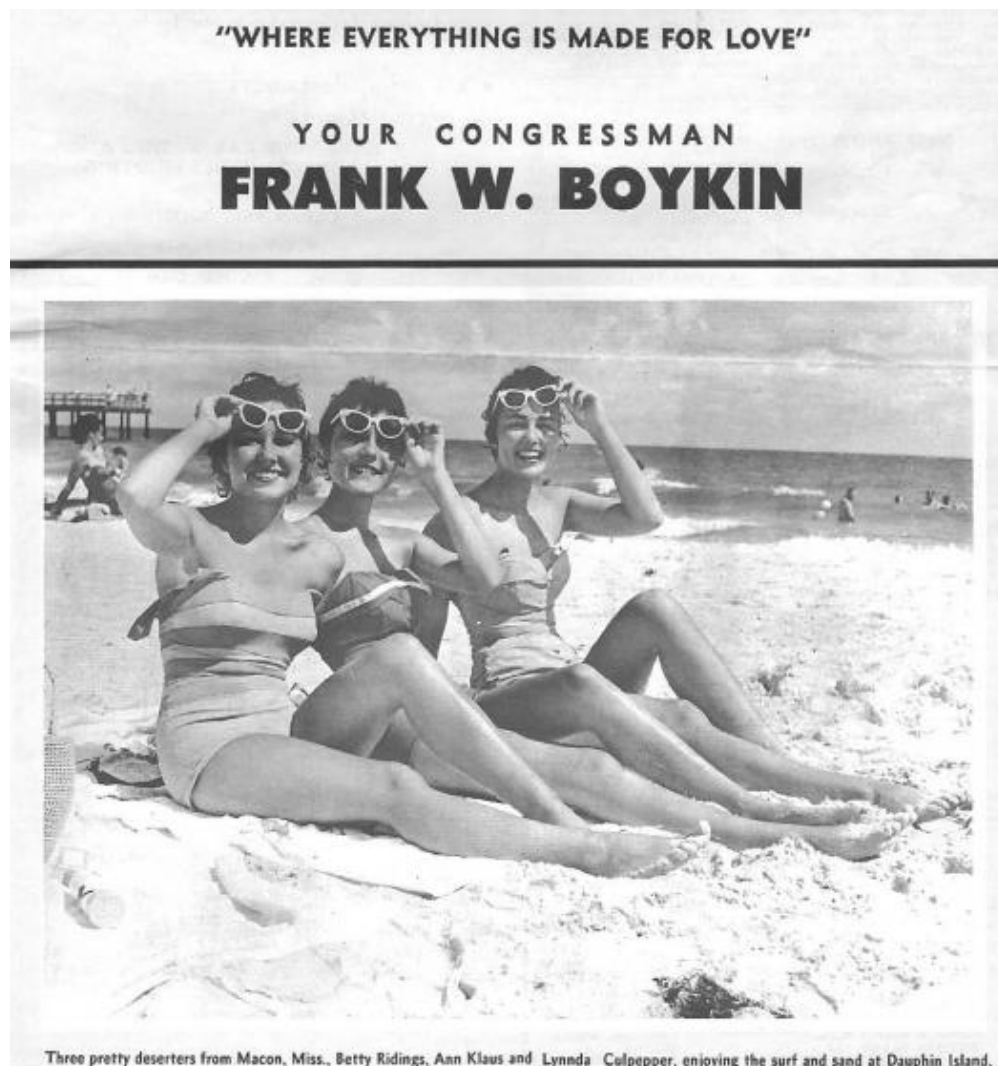


Figure 19. 1950s advertisement of Dauphin Island (*Dauphin Island News* 1957)

For decades Americans have valued media representation as a venue to identify and convey place identity. Another study on the representation of a place and its tourists centers on the Caribbean island of Grenada. Grenada has recently become a popular

destination for cruise ships and stay-over tourists alike. Unique to Grenada is the importance the island has placed on promoting ecotourism. Nelson (2005) analyzes the role that signs and images play in promoting tourism there. In particular, he explores the visual tools used to market a place or attraction in Grenada for their underlying messages and not simply the words or direct information. For example, Grenada has attempted to capitalize on spices and nutmeg in particular. They lay claim to the most spices per square mile than any other place in the world. There are daily tours of spice plantations and the Grenada Board of Tourism has adopted the slogan, “spice up your life” as its website banner. Grenada had also been considering expanding its heritage and history tourism. Like many other Caribbean countries, Grenada has been influenced by many outsiders and therefore international architectural influences can be seen across the landscape. While enjoying the current economic benefits of tourism they are continuously seeking alternative ways to attract people and money. Grenada’s tourist brochures, which do not seem much different from Dauphin Island’s, reflect images of nature, local people, and a unique place to visit. By participating in this 2007 Strategic Plan Dauphin Island residents have already made a proactive effort to voice their own interests in their future.

One avenue the island does seem to be taking advantage of is social media networking. Many of the recent festivals and happenings are broadcast on different Facebook pages as you can see in the following images (Figures 20 and 21).



Figure 20. The set up for 2012 Bluegrass Festival at Historic Fort Gaines (Photo taken from Dauphin Island Park & Beach Board Facebook 2012)



Figure 21. DIPBB Facebook page advertising Birding with its cover photo (Photo taken from DIPBB Facebook page 2012)

The second section of the 2007 Strategic Plan's Final Report-Implementation Recommendations is entitled Growth Control. In this section, the Planning Committee made recommendations for controlling East End development as well as protecting water and other natural resources. Figures 22 and 23 show the development of the east end before and after the 1950s development that has been discussed more thoroughly in the history chapter (Chapter 3).



Figures 22-23. Before and after development on east end of Dauphin Island (Dauphin Island Strategic Plan 2007)

From the above images you can see the addition of many streets which were all pre-planned and named to represent some part of Dauphin Island's history. Also notice the dense Maritime Forests on Dauphin Island's east end. These are not commonly found on other barrier islands. Here they serve as an anchor for Dauphin Island by stabilizing island sediment. The forests also serve as a habitat to the island's diverse wildlife. Protecting these forests and using programs to promote low impact development processes is a key to developing the island for a sustainable future (Five E's Unlimited 2007).

Humans can and have transformed the ecosystems on Dauphin Island through development. This is why environmental groups such as the Dauphin Island Sea Lab had an important role in the planning process. There are environmental consequences to development. However when the community is informed and proactive in the development process, it alleviates the possibility for unintended consequences (Flint 2010).

The Growth Control implementations from the plan also included a section on West End Beach Development. This is one problem area of the island for which no one seems to have a solution. The problems with erosion and hurricane damage are accepted and various methods of beach re-nourishment will always be tried and tested (Figure 24). However the Strategic Plan study questioned the type of development on the west end. As you can see from Figure 25, this land offers great access to the Gulf of Mexico and the Mississippi Sound/Mobile Bay.



Figure 24. Berm/Beach re-nourishment strategy on Dauphin Island West End (Associated Press 2007)



Figure 25. West end of Dauphin Island looking east (Sea Briefs 2007)

Because of the beach access, this is the more popular vacation destination with numerous beach house rental homes lining the waters. The plan not only suggested more research in shoreline stabilization but also more business incentives and/or zoning changes to the west end. Right now the area attracts “condo flippers,” but perhaps more mom and pop stores and recreational activities for kids on the west end would help generate more revenue for the Town. As part of the grant that funded this strategic plan, the Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium assisted in the cost-benefit analysis of potential future shoreline protection plan’s for the west end. Mayor Jeff Collier was quoted on this particular issue in 2007:

The toughest challenge is shoreline stabilization. There’s no cheap, easy fix. It will be an ongoing situation with the actual eroding away of land. Being a barrier island, we’re losing land. As far as the strategic plan-it is very rich with preserving the charm of the island, but we need growth and development. There has to be a balance. How do we balance it and be progressive enough that we can sustain ourselves economically, socially, and environmentally? (MASGC 2007)

The final section of the Strategic Plan completed in 2009 was Island Governance. The plan recommended that the four separate entities (Town of Dauphin Island, Dauphin Island Park and Beach Board, Dauphin Island Property Owner’s Association, and the Water & Sewer Authority) facilitate more cooperation and regular communication in order to move the island forward. The key to implementing these development plans is money. One final result was the recommendation to shift dependency from taxes on rental homes towards growing a more diversified business community while preserving the cultural heritage. In order to make this happen, these organizations need to work together (Flint 2010).

Since the completion of this plan in 2009, there have been several parts implemented including the addition of businesses and tourist festivals. There are also a lot of things that have not changed. Through my interviews and dialogues with the community, I also believe there are more stakeholders who are unaware of this document and its suggestions. Economic development happens at a different pace and through different tactics all across the world. In Dauphin Island, there are plans in place but substantial change and growth has yet to be seen. As the next chapter will illustrate – much of this is again related to a lack of progress with respect to Island Governance.



## Chapter 5: Competing Voices

### 5.1 Introduction

Dauphin Island is a unique case study for economic. On the surface it provides an impression of a small sleepy fishing village but after taking a deeper look into this appearance, I have discovered some contradictory information. Despite measuring only 1 ¾ miles wide and 14 miles long there are numerous different entities, some organized and some not, that compete for different types of economic development or against development all together. I have found that newspaper reporting and specifically the *Mobile Press-Register*, describe an island that is always hopeful and making efforts to boost or improve its tourism economy which is contradictory to the notion of competition from my other sources. Interviews lead me to believe that most Island officials want to promote tourism in order to bring growth and capital to their town despite the opinions of residents and pre-existing owners. Opposition comes from locals and elderly wanting “no change,” environmentalists against harmful development, and similarly birders also opposing development that could hinder their hobby’s habitat. These contradictions expand into political, business, and non-governmental entities. Dauphin Island is governed by the Town Council but also greatly influenced by the Dauphin Island Property Owner’s Association (DIPOA), Dauphin Island Chamber of Commerce, Dauphin Island Park and Beach Board, Friends of Dauphin Island Audubon Bird

Sanctuary (DIBS), Dauphin Island Foundation, Dauphin Island Sea Lab, Island Watch and migrating tourists. These are the many groups and organizations competing for a voice in Dauphin Island's future (see appendix for list of acronyms).

## **5.2 Town Council**

Perhaps it would help explain the situation if we look at each entity individually. The obvious starting point is with the Dauphin Island Town Council. This is the governing body of the town, comprised of a mayor and five council members. Generally, the Town Council of Dauphin Island meets on the first and third Tuesdays of each month and the public is encouraged to attend open meetings. Jeff Collier has been the mayor of Dauphin Island for the past thirteen years and is currently considered a part-time mayor earning \$600 a month. This part-time status is important to the current political atmosphere on the island because of recent debates on whether the position should be elevated to a full-time job. These discussions began in July 2011 and since then council members have been investigating possible options for the matter. Elections for the Dauphin Island Town Council will be held August 28, 2012 and Mayor Collier is undecided as to whether or not he will seek a third term (Andrews July 2011).

Previously, Mayor Collier was also employed as the Isle Dauphine Golf Course Manager for 35 years. At age 15, Collier began working as the "golf cart guy, water guy" and continued up the managerial ladder maintaining the only job he's ever had, besides mayor (Murphy 2011). In December 2011, Dauphin Island Property Owner's Association's President Jack Gaines announced they elected to close the golf course citing financial reasons, which of course put Mayor Collier out of a job and hence all the

discussion on boosting his mayorial status to full-time. The Dauphin Island Property Owner's Association (DIPOA) currently owns and operates the two-hundred-acre golf course spanning a mile of beach front on the southeastern side of the island. Not only was the closing of the golf course significant because of the obvious loss of jobs, like so many Americans are experiencing, but for Dauphin Island as a whole it could be a significant hit to the tourism economy given its role as a major attraction. Mayor Collier was not only emotionally hurt by the loss of this place that was seemingly a second home for him but also concerned about the lasting effects, "This is going to hurt the community from a jobs and tax revenue standpoint. It would bring people to the island who otherwise might not come here" (Andrews 2011).

### **5.3 Property Owner's Association**

As the golf course issues suggest, there is substantial community influence by the Dauphin Island Property Owner's Association. The DIPOA was originally established during the 1950s development effort to encourage the further purchase of lots as well as provide additional public use areas for any of the original property owners of the island after the building of the bridge in 1954 (Park & Beach Board History 2010). As I mentioned in the history section, Chapter 4, Mobile's Chamber of Commerce raised \$6 million from land sales of the island. After the Chamber's costs were paid, seventy percent of the remaining profit went to the DIPOA. The other thirty percent was used to set up the Park and Beach Board, which will be discussed later. In an interview with a DIPOA member, the non-profit organization was explained to me as a group or committee that takes on the safety, security, or interests of a neighborhood. They are not

part of any municipality and therefore cannot enforce laws or regulations, rather they implement codes. These are essentially covenants that must be abided by the property owners. He went on to emphasize the uniqueness of this particular POA: “Here we have a 30-million dollar, 1-mile waterfront property. So this group is different. And that makes this POA unique in the country today, because of that” (McCann 2012). This is important because the golf course has the *potential* to be one of the major tourist attractions on the island controlled by the DIPOA. Originally the course was for private club members only but after the Isle Dauphin Golf Course and Club declared bankruptcy in 1991, it opened to the public although still owned by the POA (Patterson 1999).

In the past decade the DIPOA has experienced annual budget deficits. Many

**Summary of “Total POA” and “Golf Operations Only” Income and Expenses: 2000-2010<sup>1/</sup>**

POA Fiscal Year <sup>2/</sup>	Total for POA			Golf Operations Only <sup>3/</sup>			Membership Dues <sup>8/</sup>
	Income <sup>4/</sup>	Expense	Profit/Loss <sup>5/</sup>	Income	Expense <sup>6/</sup>	Profit/Loss <sup>7/</sup>	
2000	459,122	565,674	(106,552)	289,025	381,009	(91,984)	120
2001	544,700	605,169	(60,469)	310,482	377,057	(66,575)	70
2002	449,760	568,501	(118,741)	292,707	359,060	(66,353)	145
2003	322,852	576,029	(253,177)	281,464	377,979	(96,515)	340
2004 <sup>9/</sup>	424,936	530,614	(105,678)	277,597	314,564	(36,967)	11,715
2005 <sup>10/</sup>	389,280	435,183	(45,903)	185,020	237,922	(52,902)	17,100
2006	472,698	376,591	96,107	113,453	195,495	(82,042)	98,135
2007	403,269	477,274	(74,005)	132,068	278,403	(146,335)	112,762
2008	466,887	461,381	5,506	170,764	233,686	(62,922)	93,004
2009	590,943	515,624	75,318	175,781	232,672	(56,891)	106,217
2010 <sup>11/</sup>	382,097	533,276	(151,178)	162,652	271,551	(108,899)	90,485
2011 <sup>12/</sup>	463,310	621,373	(158,063)	242,654	346,319	(103,665)	78,363
<b>TOTAL LOSS</b>	-	-	<b>(896,835)</b>	-	-	<b>(972,050)</b>	-

5-Figures with ( ) represent losses. The total POA profit/loss amounts include data for all POA operations including the golf course.

6-Golf expenses include advertising, payroll, contract labor, golf cart leases, golf equipment sales, and 70% of the total annual repair and supply costs.

12- For 2011 the “Total for POA” and “Golf Operations Only” include \$84,000 of oil spill claim money from BP.

Table 5. Dauphin Island POA Fiscal Report with selected footnotes (accessed from DIPOA forum)

Board members point towards the golf course as being the source for their depleting budget. The immediate suggestion is increasing annual dues from \$100 to \$250. Predictably, many property owners are demanding explanations and are beginning to scrutinize the DIPOA's management of their assets. Table 5 shows the annual sum of DIPOA's income and expenses from 2000-2011.

As you can see from the above figures, the golf course is a major source of depletion from the POA's budget. The cumulative loss over the past 11 years from the gold course was \$972,050. Before closing the golf course in 2011 the DIPOA President Jack Gaines and Board Members considered several different means for funding the golf course. Many property owners do not even play golf and therefore demanded a change.

Since I began my research, the DIPOA's largest asset, the golf course, has reopened to the public. On December 29, 2011 just weeks after its closing, the DIPOA gathered several volunteers to mow the grass and maintain the holes in order to reopen the Isle Dauphine Golf Course and Club along with the GulfView Grill on site. Reports have claimed that the strategic attraction will remain open until at least Labor Day of 2012 thanks to the DIPOA's efforts. More information on the golf course and the DIPOA's management will be discussed in Chapter 6.

Another example of the POA's clout comes from the recent settlement of a nearly decade long lawsuit against the federal government. In 2000, the DIPOA blamed the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' work in dredging Mobile's ship channel for the erosion and land loss on the island. In November 2009, a federal judge granted property owners \$ 1.5 million toward beach restoration (Sayre 2009). Overall, the DIPOA is one of the more organized and powerful groups on the island.

## 5.4 Park and Beach Board

Another influential group on Dauphin Island is the Park and Beach Board. This organization was also formed alongside the POA during the 1950s development era (funded by the excess profits of Dauphin Island land sales) and given the task of representing the interests of any non-property owning islander, or in other words, tourists. As a representative of all tourists to the island, the DIP&BB is responsible for attractions such as the public parks, boat launches, and public beach. While interviewing the Director of the DIP&BB, he described his work as overseeing Ft. Gaines, Cadillac Square, Dauphin Island Campground, Audubon Bird Sanctuary, Public Beach, Aloe Bay, and Bayou Heron (Capps 2012). The DIP&BB has recently made updates to the campground areas and had Fort Gaines designated as one of the 11 Most Endangered Historic Places due to coastal erosion (Altman 2011).

The current goal for this entity is promoting ecotourism. This can be explained as encouraging tourism that is low impact and promotes the natural habitats, essentially “low foot traffic.” Specific ideas of ecotourism that might be applied to Dauphin Island include small guided bird trails, educational opportunities with farm raised oysters and taking vessels into the bayou for chances to witness shrimping and oystering □ □ □ essentially any way to promote the natural habitat and the way of life among the people on and around the island (Capps 2012). There are two main hindrances to this approach. One is the lack of funds. DIP&BB is still trying to benefit from money delegated after the BP oil spill in 2010. These monies however, usually come with stipulations for some big event like a concert or cookout and require collaboration with other organizations for

venues. The second conflict is working together towards change. Because of the many conflicting interests among property owners, tourists, and public officials, it has been a slow process to see any advances in tourism and the development of ecotourism come to fruition.

## **5.5 Birding Community**

As mentioned earlier, Dauphin Island is ranked globally for its superb birding environment. Birders, as they are called around town, travel to the island from all over the world to enjoy the Dauphin Island Audubon Bird Sanctuary and the 347 different species of birds that stop off on Dauphin Island. While the DIP&BB is responsible for the maintenance and improvement of the sanctuary, there are other groups impacting this realm, such as Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) and the National Audubon Sanctuary. These birders represent a large group of tourists whose interests are collectively represented by a nonprofit organization once called “Friends of the Audubon Bird Sanctuary.” The “Friends” have been attempting to purchase several undeveloped lots around the island to ensure they remain wildlife refuges. Today they have re-organized and expanded under the name Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuaries, Inc. (DIBS) (DIP&BB- Birding 2010). DIBS is lead by their executive director, Dr. John Porter and the organizations objectives are as follow:

- 1) Maintain a network of quality stopover habitats.
  - 2) Work with government and other agencies to ensure a balance between human land uses and conservation.
  - 3) Educate landowners about practices that strengthen the island’s unique ecosystem.
  - 4) Promote the economic value of ecotourism by attracting more birders to Dauphin Island.
- (Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuaries- Mission Statement 2012)

In addition to these objectives, DIBS has raised about \$1.3 million for protecting the birds' habitat on the island within the recent decade (Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuaries-Home 2012). The following map in Figure 26 shows the 7 currently protected bird sanctuaries.



Figure 26. Designated Bird Sanctuaries (Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuaries 2012)

With the introductions of the previous groups, you can start to see the complicating process of achieving any harmoniously accepted new development on the island.

## 5.6 Sea Lab

In any work regarding research and writing on Dauphin Island, it is impossible to ignore the Dauphin Island Sea Lab (DISL). DISL was founded in 1971 by the Alabama state legislature to conduct marine science research and education, participate in coastal zone management policy, and educate the general public through the Estuarium, a public aquarium on the island. The Director of the Sea Lab is currently Dr. John Valentine



(DISL- About Us 2012). Researchers and teachers at the DISL not only study the marine life around the island, but because of their extensive research in the habitat, it makes them expert authorities on island development and whether or not it could be dangerous to the many ecosystems that Dauphin Island hosts. From the sand dunes on the south side that protect the interior during a storm to the forests that serve as an anchor to the barrier island, the DISL wants to keep development to a minimum in order to preserve the fragile system. In one specific example from a documentary on Dauphin Island produced in 1995, a Sea Lab biologist, Judy Stout, notes the bulkheads that were built for homes and the airport on the north side resulted in the loss of over one hundred acres of wetlands that once supported the Diamond Back Terrapin, which is now an endangered species of fish (Phillips 1995). Environmentalists and members of the Sea Lab feel a strong responsibility to only promote development that will work in harmony with the natural processes of the island (Phillips 1995).

## **5.7 Island Watch**

Island Watch is a group that is harder to define. Their website is presented like a sporadic blog without any clear themes or organization. More difficult as well is that they seem to have stopped updating the website in 2006 and began only doing postal service mail outs. What information I was able to gather from the website gives information about the oversight of other organizations such as the DIPOA ([islandwatch.webs.com](http://islandwatch.webs.com)). Recently amidst the current POA elections, Island Watch sponsored a series of mail outs informing property owners of the many candidates' bios/past performances. The main topics of criticism related to the failed golf course and the mismanagement of the POAs

fiscal assets. Ultimately, the letter blamed inactive and passive previous Board Members for the failure of the golf course and in the end suggested voting for the five alternative candidates Island Watch recommended. In general, Island Watch is an alternative periphery group that tries to instill some checks and balances on the most powerful groups like the POA and Town Council (Mail out 2012).

### 5.8 Chamber of Commerce

The Dauphin Island Chamber of Commerce is another nonprofit organization that is very eager to encourage tourism and provides a few amenities to member businesses on the island. Currently, the Chamber is promoting the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Gumbo Festival as well as other art festivals and fishing tournaments in the Spring and Summer of 2012. There are currently six people on the Board of Directors with Gene Fox as President. The



Figure 27. Map of Chamber of Commerce Member Businesses (Dauphin Island Chamber of Commerce - Welcome 2012)

Chamber's motto or sales pitch is "Discover Dauphin Island . . . it's how real family vacations used to be" and their website's banner headline reads: "Where there are no traffic lights and life moves at its own leisurely pace" (Dauphin Island Chamber of Commerce - Welcome 2012). Figure 27 is a map of the Chamber's member businesses advertised on their website. Membership in the Chamber of Commerce grants businesses a listing on the website directory along with a website link, the opportunity to advertise in the Chamber's welcome guide (20,000 distributed copies), listing on Chamber map (shown above), and the opportunity to network with other member businesses (Dauphin Island Chamber of Commerce 2012). There are currently about 90 membership businesses ranging from accommodations and restaurants to beauty salons and contractors.

## **5.9 Dauphin Island Foundation**

The Dauphin Island Foundation is another periphery group that tries to facilitate a way for the many groups to intersect and come to agreements on Island related issues. The Foundation was established in 1971 with organizational assistance provided by Auburn University Economic Development Institute. The Foundation is comprised of the Mayor, president of the POA, president of the Water and Sewer Board, President of the Chamber of Commerce, president of the Park and Beach Board, and sixteen other representatives/directors representing other a collection of interests among the island. The Foundation's efforts are generally related to organizing efforts for grants, contracts, endowments, etc. for educational, scientific, or literary mission (Dauphin Island Foundation 2012).

The idea is for everyone's voice to be heard and/or represented by at least one of the above organizations. The problem is that it doesn't seem to be working. As the island is slowly and gradually morphing geographically by waves and erosion, so is the face of this town. I believe that a more solid and unified town could make more rapid growth and development possible. Because this has not and is not happening, the sleepy fishing village image will continue unless one or more groups unify to harmoniously accept a change.

## **Chapter 6: Synthesis and Conclusions**

### **6.1 Introduction**

In January of 2012, I spent some quality time on Dauphin Island. I was conducting interviews and completing field notes, as well as taking advantage of rest and relaxation on the island. Personally, my favorite thing to do on the island is fish. One Friday afternoon, after hours of fishing yielded no catch, my friends and I went out for dinner. I drove to the sites of every restaurant I had knowledge of and found them all closed for business. In disbelief that there was not a single eating establishment open at 7 pm on a Friday, I even questioned a bartender of a local pub. It seemed we were out of luck. We eventually crossed back over the bridge and found a great seafood place about 15 miles north. In contrast, while doing research during the summer months, I found most restaurants packed with customers. Evidently there are issues with the seasonality of maintaining a restaurant year round on the island. As I questioned people on this issue I found the common response to fall within Town Council responsibilities. Many feel that the Town government of Dauphin Island needs to attract businesses with tax incentives to locate there and establish an economic base that can sustain through high and low tourist seasons.

Nowhere in my research did I find evidence that Dauphin Island was a place incapable of fostering a tourist economy. There are simply obstacles preventing these visions. The object of this chapter is to define and explain what I have found these

obstacles to be in light of the earlier geographic theory I introduced in Chapter 2. I will conclude by answering the question, why is Dauphin Island so different than the consumption-based tourism seen in other places across the Gulf Coast?

The results from my research have been categorized in three primary ways. The first is the locals' reluctance to change into a consumerist tourist economy that would attract the "Spring Break" type tourists looking for excitement and a party atmosphere. Their reluctance to change is evident from my fieldwork. The second category relates to Dauphin Island history. This is not the colonial history I was anticipating however, more like their perceived Golden Era of mid-twentieth century history. And lastly, are my observations about how the environment is generally seen or used as a hindrance to future development and perhaps a means of preserving a past ideal. These conclusions came from interviews, newspaper sources, and the present day identity of Dauphin Island.

## **6.2 Reluctance to Change**

Several instances throughout my field work left me pondering the word change. I personally have always tried to be open and welcoming to change. Not that change is always easy, but responsible growth and development are generally always good for a growing economy. So when people repeatedly told me that the community was opposed to change and set in their ways, it became something that I could not ignore. The facts are the facts. They choose to live there and stay connected with the past and their neighbors. Instead of accepting a globally evolving world and recreating pieces of their heritage as seen in places like Colonial Williamsburg (Miller 2006) and Okinawa, Japan (Figal 2008), Dauphin Island locals strive to stay the same. This has become their place identity.

And so, despite the seeming rational appeal of potential success that might come with a consumer tourist economy, the folks of Dauphin Island seek continuity instead.

This is not to say that everyone on Dauphin Island views their home and the world this way. Many people do welcome change and development. They just struggle with finding a cooperative party, attaining the necessary funds, and battling Mother Nature. This is why I have received many responses to the arguments presented as, “it’s complicated.” Through my research I found that often the people welcoming and pushing change are criticized for being outsiders. In some instances these are actually outsiders from government organizations or extension programs that try to tell the Islanders what they should do. In other cases, the people pushing change are actually residents and property owners but not a 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> generation resident. In forums and blogs I found people attacking a reformer by questioning how many meetings they actually attended or how many friends they had on the island. In a bigger city or town these connections may not be relevant, but in this small town it is.

As I mentioned in Chapter 5, the Dauphin Island Property Owner’s Association is a major player in the daily functions of the island. At present day the DIPOA is, for lack of a better word, broke. The cumulative loss over the past 11 years from the golf course was \$972,050. Before closing the golf course in 2011, DIPOA President Jack Gaines and Board Members considered several different means for funding the golf course. Many property owners do not even play golf and therefore value the golf course assets differently from the golf enthusiasts. As this has been an ongoing obstacle, the most recent information I have gathered came in the form of a long overdue questionnaire to property owners in May of 2012. Stan Graves was one of the primary board members

who pushed for the implementation of this questionnaire to be included in the ballot and proxy envelope for the May, 2012 Property Owner's election. The following is a summary of questions that were asked in order to get a better understanding of what property owners were willing to consider with regard to the future of the Association and particularly the financially struggling Isle Dauphine Golf Club:

1. Would you be willing to lease or sell the golf course, which is POA property?
  2. Would you be willing to change from voluntary to mandatory membership dues?
  3. Do you think the Board should pursue an alternative management structure for the golf course?
- (Selected questions from the DIPOA questionnaire mail out 2012)

Approximately 3000 members were sent voting and questionnaire information. There were 749 members who sent back their completed ballots and about 78% of those contained a response to the questionnaire. The overwhelming response to these questions was the property owner's desire to allow someone else to manage the Golf Course and Club. Over 90% of respondents opted for the leasing of the Golf Course and recreational facilities to a specialized management company. Though it is a high approval, it still only represents moderate change because of their reluctance to totally give up control of it, even though many may have no vested interest in golfing. Only 36% of the voting property owners were willing to sell the Golf Course. The only question that did not result in a clear direction for the Association was concerning the dues structure, 53% voted yes, they would be willing to support a necessary mandatory dues structure and 47% responded no, they would want to keep the current voluntary dues structure. Not paying dues currently means you are not eligible for the discounted rates on all activities of the Isle Dauphin. During the time of this questionnaire the concerns surrounding dues



were not just whether or not they should be mandatory but due to the budget deficits, Board Members were considering increasing the amount. In addition to these statistics on yes or no responses, the DIPOA posted a list of the comments recorded in the questionnaire. The following comments reveal the broad range of responses and motivations of many property owners:

1. “To whom would you lease or sell property: developers or native conservancy. Big Difference I believe the POA property should be conserved as recreational source, or natural space, whether controlled by the POA or another responsive entity. It should not be developed.”
2. **Concerning: Would you be willing to amend the Constitution to allow the lease of sale of POA property?**  
“Lease not sell” (many responses with comment)
3. **Concerning: Would you be willing to sell the Golf Course?**
  - a. “Shut Down, but not sell. Close – golf course – Open small hotel and camping sites.
  - h. “Golf courses are an increasingly expensive luxury which are causing financial havoc to communities around the country. (See Daufuskie Island)”
  - i. “Only if it remains a golf course”
  - j. “No, but sell lots surrounding the golf course”
4. **Concerning Leasing the Golf Course:**
  - a. “only if DIPOA mbrs receive discount.”
  - g. “qualified management company?”( Selected comments from the DIPOA Questionnaire 2012)

The comments that I have quoted above reveal the broad spectrum of sentiment towards not only the DIPOA but also the Town, in addition to some inclination of an opposition to large scale development efforts. Obviously the DIPOA is riddled with criticism and currently being scrutinized because of the recurring negative budget. The significance of all this current DIPOA information has double meaning to my observations about change on the island. First, this recent DIPOA information regarding the budget and the golf course is exemplary of the island’s complicated political structure. The survey itself was included along with the election ballot, therefore split

votes could be indicative of the attitude towards certain Board members wanting to increase membership dues, or disapproving of the POA's relationship with Town officials. Second, the fact that this survey was completed is a step in the right direction for change, but its fraught with conflict rather than consensus. These responses give the POA a direct vision for the future of their association with the golf course. To my knowledge this paneling of opinions from property owners is more information than the Board has had in the past. Only time will tell what changes the Board and Town will bring based upon the opinions of its residents. Presently, the Isle Dauphin remains an asset of the DIPOA and currently remains open for business solely by the effort of volunteers from the community.



Figures 28. 1950s image of Isle Dauphin (Dauphin Island History Archives circa 1950s)

Figure 29. 2005 image of Isle Dauphin (*Mobile Register* 2011)

Another example of the stubbornness to accepting change comes directly from Dauphin Island's landscape. As geography is a visual discipline, theories such as space and place and place based-identity can be products of the landscape. Often times there may be a large, obvious landmark that connects people to a place such as the mountaineers in Colorado who call themselves the "Fourteeners" (Blake 2002) or perhaps the negative reminder from the nuclear fallout in the Bikini Atolls (Davis 2005). Other places, Dauphin Island included, may develop their identity from the more ordinary buildings and architecture (Gierwyn 2000). Much of the Island's infrastructure remains frozen in time. Take for example the familiar marker of the golf course and country club (See Figures 28 and 29). The architecture portrays that of the 1950s "Space Age" identity. Many may refer to these years as the Golden Era that valued family and a wholesome environment. In addition to a nuclear family home, color television, and shopping malls, 1950s America understood bomb shelters and witnessed the Civil Rights Movement. According to the 2010 Census, Dauphin Island's population of 1,238 was 99% white making it perhaps indeed the "last white suburb in America" (Cano 2012). This pre-civil rights post-war era in the South is important to understanding the Island's identity today.

Despite the locals' unwillingness to accept change, the Dauphin Island Property Owner's Association recently had a budget report created to restore the pool and club area but currently the figures for such a project are far out of reach. The hostility among residents who dismiss the opinions of the more newer community members and the evidence seen from this cultural landscape resemble

a reluctance to change and therefore highlight the place identity of the Island and its inhabitants.

If the community continues along this quest for a fair compromise of POA assets and dues as well as raising the funds to revitalize the Isle Dauphin, then that could be a small step in breaking the trend of no change. Unfortunately, because of the political structure and absentee property owners on the island there is a small group of property owners and town council members that possess a lot of control over the island. Often the administrative board or council hold authority on others. This leads into my category of the historical ties found in my research because of the fact that this type of political influence has existed since the Island's creation. After Mobile's Chamber of Commerce sold the island and handed over the reins to the very first Dauphin Island organization, the DIPOA, the proposed day trip getaway spot for Mobilians was forever heavily influenced by the politics of private property owners.

### **6.3 History**

My own personal interest in history aside, my initial knowledge of the island came from school trips to Fort Gaines, the Dauphin Island Sea Lab and the Estuarium. My sixth grade Alabama History class surely spent weeks on the topic. Many people I came in contact with elsewhere in the state also experienced these same lessons of Dauphin Island's rich history and biodiversity in grade school. However, through my research I found that locals were typically not as interested or versed in this part of the island's history as I originally suspected. There were definitely some who made it their

goal to know every last fact and folk tale. In general, the responses to my questions on history resulted in an average appreciation for the centuries of prior influences. However, when asked what they felt the top tourist attraction or possibly one of their favorite places on the island was, the answer was commonly only “Ft. Gaines.” One place had come to represent all that was history for the residents of Dauphin Island. This led me to the conclusion that it was the tourists, day trippers and extended stay visitors that have taken interest in the local history. They are the ones visiting the fort and the Native American shell mounds, not the locals.

So what does this mean? Not all locals are expert historians of the 1700 and 1800s but all locals do seem to be experts on the more recent history and social memory of the island. Ironically on Dauphin Island you do actually have historical documentation of pirates and many European influences, but this is not the heritage Islanders recount. The post-1950s history of promoting this family-oriented beach destination is the social memory with which locals identify. They are not recreating colonial buildings like Williamsburg, staging sites as the mythic “Wild West” of Bodie, or tracing the strategic battle operations from wars of the past like Okinawa (Miller 2006; Delyser 1999; Figal 2008). The tourism they want to attract is the laid back, family seeking a getaway from the chaos of the outside world all the while nostalgic of the simpler times. A past that does not require residents to change their present sense of place.

Instead of a familiarity with the Battle of Mobile Bay, the Native influences, or the original French settlers, locals are quick to tell you about the way things were and how they wish things still were today. This signifies a prevalent sense of social memory but not one from the distant past. Older locals and sometimes fifth or sixth generation

Islanders try to keep doing things on the island the way they have for the past 20-50 years. Well, a lot has happened in the past 20 years, not only with an economic downturn but also hurricanes and oil spills. There is no doubt that things will change on the island, it just may not be a difficult process because of a community that is rooted in their past and opposed to change.

#### **6.4 Dealing with the Environment**

As alluded to in Chapter 4, one very important hindrance to further economic development, is money. Most of the Federal funding Dauphin Island receives goes into shoreline stability, restoration, or research. Despite the desires of residents as reported in the Strategic Plan, funding for revamping the downtown commercial business is not readily accessible. Granting these businesses incentives would in turn maximize profits in the area and potentially take away some of the financial shortages but without the Town's willingness, this is not possible. This too is relevant to the anti-change mindset. By aligning themselves as environmental protectionists, they still remain a tight knit community that can continue to resist change/development.

Dauphin Island is no stranger to hurricanes and destruction from natural forces. There are constant efforts to rebuild and maintain a long stretching sand berm on the west end, as discussed in Chapter 3. However, while interviewing locals and tourists of Dauphin Island, the environmental hazards are not the overarching fears that you may expect. Many residents will tell you that people can be susceptible to natural disasters anywhere. And since the island's main cause for concern comes from hurricanes, there is typically much more warning of such a storm than there are with tornadoes or floods

across the country (Mantle 2011). Not only are the residents notified early on and therefore granted time to prepare, but because they have chosen to live on a barrier island, they are notably more knowledgeable and responsible about the hazards.

Throughout my research I found that typically the outsiders to the island are the ones who are more wary of potential natural hazard consequences. Locals just accept the geographic location that they have chosen to live in and see it as a part of life.

Though local permanent residents are subject to their environment, that does not mean they are complacent. In fact I discovered several letters from property owner's lobbying Alabama Senators, Alabama Department of Conservation & Natural Resources, and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for an increased awareness of the value funding has to Dauphin Island's shoreline restoration. The following points are commonly cited for requesting fund from the BP Oil Spill Settlement Restoration:

- Strengthen Alabama's only barrier island
  - Protect Alabama's largest continuous salt marsh habitat in the Mississippi Sound
  - Protect the oyster reefs that have gone into being brought back to life
  - Protect the inshore estuarine habitats of the Mississippi that serve as important nursery areas for many commercial and recreational species that depend on this area
  - Protect the Island from the forces of tropical storms and hurricanes that have damaged and eroded the beaches and dunes that have previously protected the Island.
  - Dauphin Island acts as the protector of the mainland/Mobile County coastline.
  - Help to re-establish critical nursery areas/dunes for sea turtles and other important animals such as the piping plover and other shoreline birds.
  - Provide a protection for existing structures on Dauphin Island
  - Contribute to the integrity of integrity of our neighbor state's barrier island's through improvement of sand movement westward through the littoral system and their marsh and oyster habitats.
- (A Letter from Glen Coffee to Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources 2012)

Most attention to the attention towards restoration efforts come from property owners on the west end of Dauphin Island where most of the erosion damage is felt. In 2011, the Town of Dauphin Island completed a \$1.9 million study including the implementation and design of a shoreline restoration plan (Coffee 2012). All that is needed now is the funding. As with many other ongoing projects in the area, only time will tell if adequate funding will come through to help protect Alabama's coastline.

By striving for environmental funding, residents exude a place identity that is linked to nature. If you recall, I listed a series of possible slogans for Dauphin Island to market itself with. This "branding" exercise was from the Strategic Plan (2007) and included the following: "Dauphin Island: A rare find, It's about what we don't have," "Village by the Sea," "Nature's Crossroads," "Slice of Paradise," "Little Island with a Long History," and "Beaching, Birds, Boats-Where time stands still" (Five E's Unlimited 2007; 3). The identity and social memory that is produced here is an idea of a natural paradise much like Jimmy Buffet's "Margaritaville" (Bowen 1997). This is the current ecotourism the community strives to promote, instead of the "Spring Break Mecca" with its large scale development. Ecotourism as described earlier seems to be the node around which locals may maintain their place identity while at the same time recognize tourist revenues.

## **6.5 Community Events**

I cannot conclude this chapter on the present day dynamics of Dauphin Island's economy and political structure without addressing their many successes. After analyzing the community's ailments and speaking with residents and tourists alike, there was still



an overwhelming sense of love and pride for the place. “Birders” as they are called on the island are very quick to remind you that Dauphin Island is one of the top birding sites in the Southeast. Often during Spring, Fall, and Winter migrations birders will hold up traffic to admire various Neotropical birds stopping on Dauphin Island after their 600-mile journey across the Gulf of Mexico.

In following up with concepts mentioned from my chapters on identity and ecotourism development, it is also important to mention events reflective of these ideas.



Figure 30. Art in the Park Flyer (Chamber of Commerce 2012)

As previously stated, many locals have begun to promote ecotourism on Dauphin Island. This is defined as any “low impact, low foot traffic” activity that highlight the community’s cultural heritage (Capps 2012). Not only does this include the birding mentioned above, but also includes historical tours, art festivals, seafood cookouts, and fishing tournaments. All these activities are promoting and enhancing the Dauphin Island way of life.

In April of 2012 Dauphin Island hosted the Gumbo Cookoff followed by Crawfish Boil that were both promotions of the Chamber of Commerce and attracted large crowds. I have also observed a trend toward an emerging art colony on the island enhanced by events such as the 3<sup>rd</sup> annual Art in the Park Festival.

As you can see from this flyer (Figure 30), the festival attracted families and offered a variety of educational activities. In addition, the largest and longest running event on Dauphin Island is the Annual Alabama Deep Sea Fishing Rodeo. Since its creation in 1929, the Deep Sea Fishing Rodeo attracts thousands of participants and spectators (Dauphin Island Chamber of Commerce 2012). These are the types of activities chosen to attract tourism. This is the type of “tourist gaze” referred to by Urry. The Islander’s want tourists to escape their own realities and learn about society on a barrier island (Urry 2002). Enhancing and promoting Dauphin Island’s natural assets with events like this are essential to their future tourism economy and maintaining their sense of identity.

## 6.6 Conclusions

The big picture is that Dauphin Island is an example of an alternative to the traditional tourist destination. Can an island with beautiful beaches and sunsets offer a different experience to travelers than the largely consumerist tourism industry exemplifies elsewhere? Yes. It can and it does. While Dauphin Island definitely has its struggles, cooperatively, environmentally, and financially, it does still fit the mold as a successful alternative to the typical American consumer vacation. The three keys to future success are establishing an infrastructure that attracts year round businesses, facilitating cooperation among various local organizations, and enhancing ecotourism. By researching the island history, political and organizational system, and interviewing its residents and tourists alike, I have traced Dauphin Island's place identity, as it relates to ecotourism, history, and their reluctance to change.

As I have stated in this thesis, Dauphin Island, Alabama is a unique place for a variety of reasons. Tourism development is evolving slowly. They are focusing on an ecotourism approach to prevent further destruction to the island's ecosystems. This ecotourism plays out across the landscape in several ways. Locals have embraced the art and music festivals, seafood cook-offs, and bird watching educational programs. Because of the many organizations with conflicting interests as well as a local population that is opposed to change, the island will probably never experience the revenue from consumer tourists that are seen in elsewhere across the Gulf Coast. But that conflict too seems to be a part of the identity – engrained within the local residents' notions of what constitutes Dauphin Island as place. And the main point to take away from this thesis is that, this alternative approach to a beach destination and the tourism industry is ultimately okay.

You can have a successful albeit non-traditional approach to the tourism industry. In fact, as I presented in Chapter 3, many places across the world are also following this same route to a sustainable future. Dauphin Island is often revisited by tourists because of what it does not have. Being a secret island at the mouth of Mobile Bay and among the Gulf waters is something locals take pride in. As local Islanders and tourists will tell you, Dauphin Island is unique. Whether vested in its rich history, blossoming art, abundance of wildlife, or yearly traditions like Mardi Gras and the Rodeo, Dauphin Island stands alone as a quaint, laid back beach community. There are endless examples of what Dauphin Island is not, but this does not take away from the identity of a place striving to solely function on “island time.”

I mentioned at the beginning of this study that I was drawn to the island as I grew up and became more appreciative of the things that the island does not offer. I now have a more well-rounded idea of why this is. Through a cultural geography framework, I understand the place-based identity Dauphin Island has come to possess. The locals are proud of their island. They can be wary of outsiders, but most isolated places are. This does not translate into an unwelcoming nature. While they are not racing to change and be the place most teenage Spring Breakers flock, they are open to visitors who want to share in the simple pleasures that represent their home. The island’s cultural geography is rooted in their recent past, unwilling to tamper with their traditions. They are not necessarily opposed to further developing their tourist economy, just particular on the type of tourist they are willing to attract. And finally while the perceived threats of an unstable environment do create obstacles for development, they are not significant deterrents to the sense of place that Islanders have for Dauphin Island.

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## **Appendix- Commonly used acronyms**

DIPOA – Dauphin Island Property Owner’s Association

DIBS - Dauphin Island Audubon Bird Sanctuary

DIP&BB – Dauphin Island Park and Beach Board

ADCNR – Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

DISL – Dauphin Island Sea Lab

COC - Chamber of Commerce