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THE Sea Pines STORY

BY JOSEPH B. FRASER



*Joe and Charles Fraser
with 1988 Heritage
winner Greg Norman*

AS TOLD TO MARGARET GREER

PROLOGUE: *On December 15, 2002, Charles Fraser was killed in a boat explosion off the Turks-Caicos Islands. Charles' wife Mary, his daughter and her son and her son's companion, and the boat operator all survived with minor injuries.*

Charles Fraser was 73 years old and was doing what he had done for 50 years: observing nearly untouched land and super-imposing in his brilliant mind just how that land could be improved for human enjoyment while preserving its natural beauty.

His genius in this field has earned him the title of "inventor" of the American modern resort and retirement community, and he began his dream on Hilton Head Island in Sea Pines Plantation while he was still a student of law at Yale University. His father, General Joseph B. Fraser, and partners had bought the southern tip of the island for the purpose of timbering. Inspired by Dr. Myres S. McDougal, Sterling professor of law at Yale, in the development of deed covenants, Fraser began his concept of a master plan. He believed his concept could only be implemented if the developer controlled every aspect of planning from street locations to the design of individual houses.

What we know today as Sea Pines Plantation was the first of its kind in the world.

By carefully selecting those hired by him, Charles Fraser's vision has spread to become a world-wide manifestation of a successful retirement environment.

His brother, Joseph B. Fraser, Jr., was working for their father in 1949 at their lumber company in Hinesville, Georgia, when the family interest in acquiring Hilton Head Island first surfaced. The Sea Pines story is really a Fraser family story.

— Margaret Greer

As we move toward the 50th anniversary of Sea Pines Plantation in 2006, I am filled with nostalgia and feel an urgency to put some of my memories and experiences down for the record. These memories may be at times haphazard, or jump around, but that's what the mind is prone to do.

My first trip to Hilton Head Island was back in 1949. Becky and I were married in November of that year and since I was the elder of two sons it was sort of taken for granted that I would go into my dad's lumber business in Hinesville, Georgia. In late December, Dad (General Joseph B. Fraser) said, "Son, I need you to go to an island on the South Carolina coast and investigate an offer to sell. It supposedly has great forests of virgin pine." So my cousin, who was also in business with Dad, and I came to Hilton Head and did what we called a timber cruise, which is estimating the



The Fraser family portrait. Joe is the tall one in the back.

island in slapped-together housing and work until Friday afternoon when we would return home. Charlie Simmons, who later became known on the island as Mr. Transportation, would meet us at Buckingham Landing on the mainland and take us by boat over to the dock at what is known now as Outdoor Resorts on Jenkins Island. We kept a truck on Hilton Head to get to our campsite. Simmons also supplied us with any food and supplies we would need. He had a little store immediately on the island across from the present Chamber of Commerce Welcome Center. When the road was widened to four lanes, he was out of business. Our camp was very temporary, very rough, just a line of cots and not much else. We set up on Calibogue Cay, almost exactly where I later built my house. Calibogue already had an old house that a caretaker had used when he worked for another owner, Roy Rainey. I remember it was surrounded by pecan trees. We occupied the house

as temporary shelter until we built our camp.

We cut no trees smaller than 16 inches in diameter. Lots of people cut 12-inch trees. Once the Korean War tuned up, Dad was called back to duty. A creosoting plant wanted to buy the remaining pine trees on the south end to treat for poles because the trees were so straight and tall; so we sold them what was left and they came in and finished the job. We were about to sell the land to a paper company when my brother Charles convinced Dad the following year that the tall pines should be left standing by the sea, and the land should be developed as a special kind of resort – a kind that had never been attempted before. A teacher at Yale strongly influenced Charles in a course on land planning. Myres McDougal was a specialist in the use of private covenants to implement comprehensive land use planning. Charles put long hours into coming up with the original master plan, which had to be flexible enough to meet changing demographics and economics as the project grew and matured.

With growing unhappiness among the original partners as to what



A view of the logging ferries that used to haul away Hilton Head's timber

volume of timber in order to determine the value. We took the figures back to Hinesville, and Dad said, "Boys, you made a mistake. There's no way there could be that much saw timber on that island. It's impossible." Dad had been to Hilton Head, but he really didn't see all the big pines because he didn't go to the south end. He joined us on a second trip and we found even more trees.

Fred Hack, also from Hinesville, had learned that the land was up for sale and told Dad about it. After seeing the timbering possibilities, he and Fred got together with a bid for then owners, Thorne and Loomis. They formed the Hilton Head Company and shook hands. Fred stayed on Hilton Head and we went back to Georgia to plan our next move.

It wasn't long, in the spring of 1950, before I was coming over here with a crew consisting of 14 blacks and five whites and what we called a ground sawmill, one that can be moved from place to place. We would make the trip every Monday morning and camp on the



The old house on Calibogue Cay in an illustration dating from 1914



Left: Joe Fraser in the early days of Sea Pines. Below: Joe (far left) and Charles (far right) are all smiles on the day Sea Pines went public.

should be done with the land, the Frasers decided, in 1958, to buy the southern end of Hilton Head from Hack and his partners for \$800 per acre, a very high price. You need to remember that, at that time, Beaufort County was considered a “poverty pocket.”

Charles had graduated from law school and was working for a law firm in Augusta, but he couldn’t get Hilton Head off his mind. So he quit law and came to the island to live and



a trail wide enough for a Jeep cut off down to the beach.

Charles actually thought ocean-oriented lots would be all he could sell, but the Boston-based planner, Stewart Dawson, of Sasaki, Dawson and DeMay, came up with the innovative T-roads that make up the “seaside” lots. In the beginning, oceanfront lots sold for \$5,350, quickly jumping to \$7,500.

Road building necessarily moved quickly because lots needed to be sold. Charles had himself a house built on the second row of Green Heron Road and, by 1960, was using it as both an example of his idea that Sea Pines houses should blend with the landscape and as a place to entertain clients staying at the new William Hilton Inn. Some of these clients were actually turned down as buyers if they didn’t meet the rather high criteria of Charles and his three other executives.

Let’s fast forward from those early years because this is the Heritage issue and I want to talk about the beginnings of the golf tournament and of Harbour Town. We can come back to a year-by-year story of Sea Pines in the next installment.

The selling of land in Sea Pines was forever the first order of business. Without sales revenue, interest on loans could not be paid and more money could not be bor-

rowed. Beach-oriented lots had been an easy sale; golf courses had lured buyers to the inland lot. A wooded lot might sell for \$10,000 whereas a fairway lot would sell for twice that price. Same land, just a different aspect (view).

The only thing that remained was to get people to the back side of the island – land along Calibogue Cay.

In his original land design for Sea Pines, Sasaki had a small harbor almost exactly where Harbour Town is located. Charles (Fraser) dreamed of Harbour Town exactly as it turned out. He and Mary had gone on a junket and looked at Mediterranean, or pedestrian, villages where the streets were too narrow for automobiles. This is what he wanted for Harbour Town. We needed some type of symbol for the new harbor, and Charles came up with the lighthouse idea – a real winner. We started building it before the plans for the top of the lighthouse were finished. The lighthouse has been so successful for photo ops that it was made the carefully guarded logo for Sea Pines.

When the construction of the Harbour Town Yacht Basin was nearing completion, we needed an idea (hook) to get people back there. Golf had proven right before; so Charles came up with the brilliant idea that we needed golf to put Harbour Town on the map.

Based on evidence that golf in America began in the Carolinas (in particular, Charleston) and the Georgia low country, a golf tournament called “the Heritage” could take place on the Harbour Town Golf Links. The



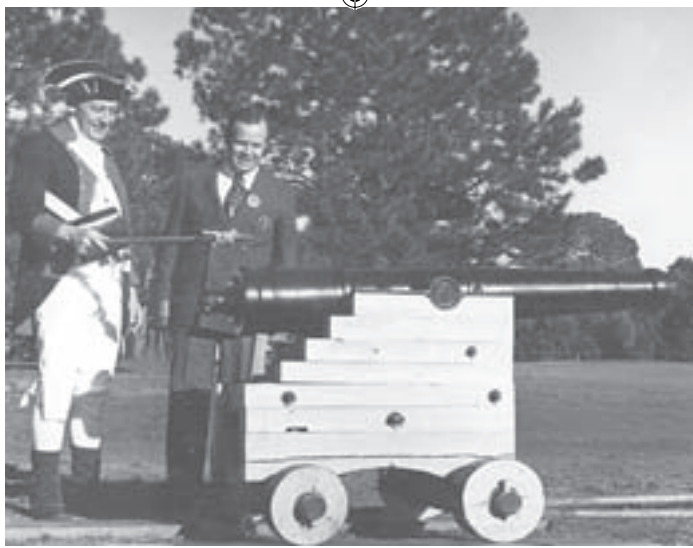
Arnold Palmer accepts his prize (’69); the Harbour Town lighthouse takes shape.

promote his ideas. On June 20, 1957, the Sea Pines Company was formed. Charles, 28 years old then, became president and I became senior vice president (age 30). Our dad served as chairman of the board. Our offices were situated in a trailer where a large bank is now located on Sea Pines Circle. There were no telephones on the island; so we parked a car behind the trailer with a mobile phone in it. It was rigged so that, whenever the phone rang, the horn would blow. A few roads followed old plantation roads and

course, designed by Pete Dye and Jack Nicklaus, was barely under way when Charles planned the tournament with help from Charlie Price, a noted golf writer and historian. In fact, an asterisk on the original brochure directed the reader to a disclaimer at the bottom: “if the course is ready.” If the Harbour Town Golf Links were not ready, the first Heritage would be played on existing Sea Pines golf courses.

The late Laurie Auchterlonie (honorary professional and master clubmaker of the R & A of St. Andrews) suggested that since golf is a Scottish game and the Fraser family is of Scottish descent, why not use the tartan as part of the Heritage tournament. That was a stroke of genius. You take bagpipes, tartans, kilts, and the lighthouse; you got it.

The first “Heritage” was held from November 25 through December 1, 1969. We were laying carpet in the clubhouse up until the day of the tournament. I was on the “carpet” team and missed the first day of play because I went home and crashed in the bed. But the parade consisted of tournament officials in Heritage gold jackets, bagpipers in kilts—an unbeatable combination. The Heritage plaid jacket (a variation on the Fraser clan tartan) came later. Of course there were no houses along the 18th fairway, very few boats in the harbor, no shops, and only the skeleton of the lighthouse was visible. The gallery was limited to 5,000 people. If we sold more



Each Heritage tourney begins with the traditional firing of the cannon.

tickets, there would be no place for people to stay; the island only had four hotels.

The purpose of having the tournament was to bring people and publicity to see this new style of retirement living on a relatively unknown island and feature property off the beach and on the interior of the island. Wind blew hard during that weekend and it was cold, making life pretty miserable for everyone except Arnold Palmer, who pursued a wire-to-wire victory

and claimed a large portion of the \$100,000 purse. Palmer’s win, after a long dry spell, made headlines for both the popular golf champion and the fledgling course, establishing Harbour Town Links among the best courses in the United States.

After four years of worrying about the weather and needing television coverage without football competition, the tournament was switched to the spring. Without television the Heritage would probably have died. We needed television to show off the beauty of Sea Pines Plantation. The spring 1973 Heritage brought 15,000 people. Fifteen years later attendance topped 100,000.

Heritage Week became a demarcation line in the social and business life of the island. Everything rentable was taken, business and personal yachts filled the Harbour Town Yacht Basin, and the tourna-

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ment became a major moneymaker for South Carolina. The glory days kept up until 1987. After three years of mismanagement by the Heizer Corporation followed by Ginn Holdings' involuntary bankruptcy, the 1987 Heritage was in jeopardy, with the island business community believing Sea Pines and the Heritage could not survive. John Curry was appointed trustee by the courts to run the companies and that was the year the Heritage Classic Foundation was formed to find financial support and to manage the tournament.

By then the purse had reached \$650,000, and the PGA Tour Commissioner (Deane Beman) required letters of credit for \$1 million to back the prize money and the PGA required much-needed repairs and improvements to the Harbour Town Golf Links. John Curry called me and said, "Joe, we need some help. We need to save the Heritage tournament. You're the only one I know who has the time, the interest and the talent (to do so). Sol Blatt and I met and decided we needed to put together a group of local businessmen. So, will you help us?"

We raised \$300,000 for the company to restore the golf course to playable condition. About ten men agreed to letters of credit for the needed million, but Commissioner Beman reduced the amount to a half million,



Golf great Arnold Palmer, left, with respected visionary Charles Fraser ('69).

including money for the Heritage purse, and it was required that this be a non-profit endeavor. (The purse for the 2005 MCI Heritage has been raised to a record \$5,200,000.)

I became chairman of the board of trustees for the Heritage Foundation. We got a 501 C3 designation, and that's a success story in itself. The Heritage Foundation has grown into an organization that, in 2004, gave over \$1,300,000 to local charities and college scholarships. The title sponsor is MCI. Other monies come from the pro-am, other sponsors who use tents and sky boxes, from what we call hospitality sponsors, and from

regular fans. I've always said, "Don't be satisfied with the status quo. If you're standing still, you're automatically going backwards; so you have to keep coming up with new ideas."

We now have about \$2 million in a reserve account; so if we run into a problem with a title sponsor, we have a little bag of money.

All along, island residents have volunteered their time to make the tournament a resounding success. The 1988 Heritage showed television audiences what they wanted to see: a beautiful island and a popular champion, Greg Norman, with beautiful weather. I was tournament chairman that year. What an experience! ■

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