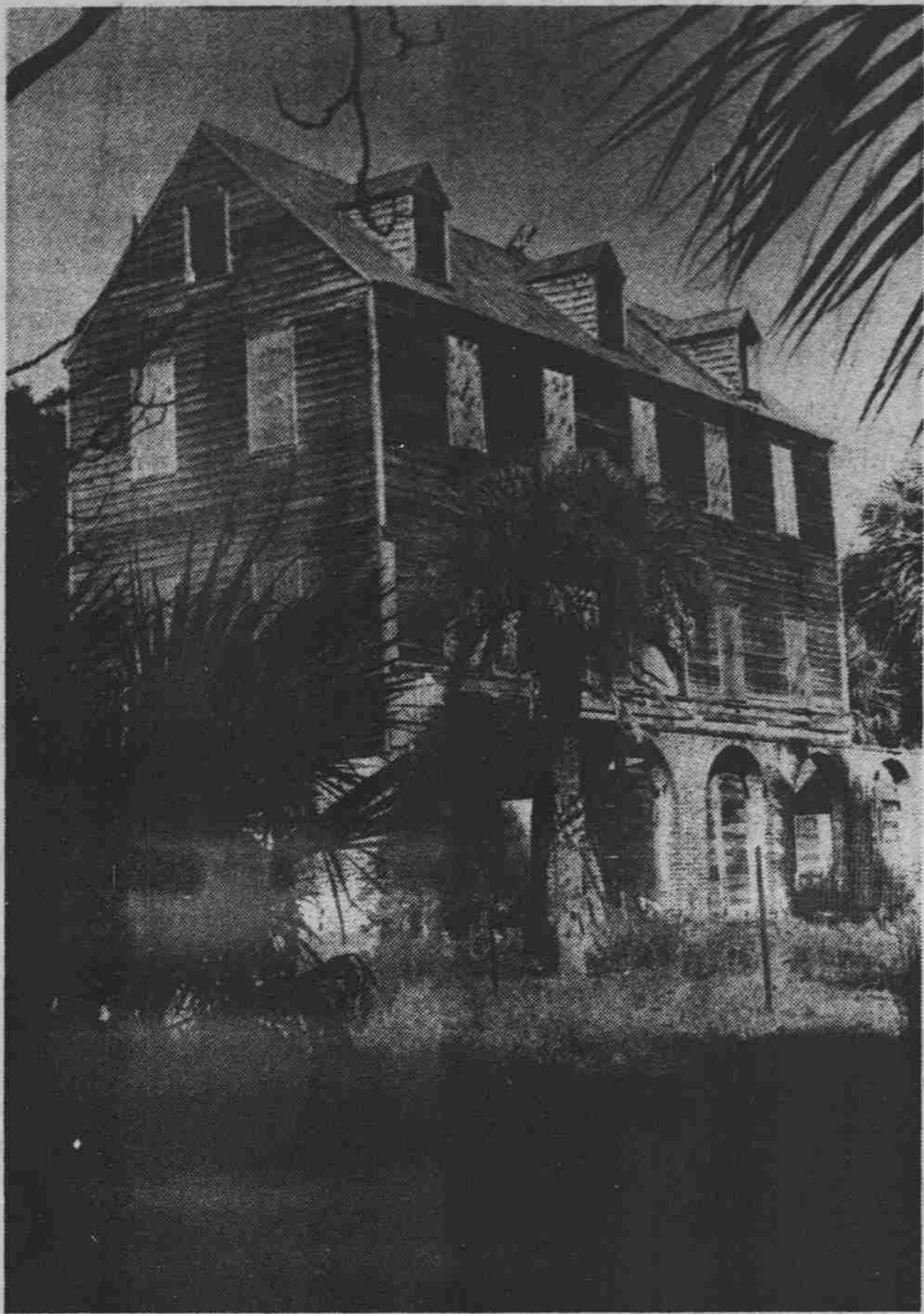


Kiawah Island:

Sheikdom of Kuwait invests \$17 million off South Carolina coast



A weathered plantation house, built in the 18th century by South Carolina Governor Arnoldus Vanderhorst, stands alone on the interior of Kiawah Island. It will soon, however, be surrounded by condominiums, beach houses, golf courses and tennis courts. The developers of the island plan to restore the Vanderhorst mansion and transform it into a museum.

From paradise to playground

Twenty-five years ago, C.C. Royal, a lumberman from Aiken, S.C., bought a coastal island near Charleston for \$125,000. The island was a semi-tropical paradise, shaded by palmettos and moss-hung live oaks. The land paid for itself in timber.

Last February, Royal's widow and six children sold the barrier island to the sheikdom of Kuwait for \$17 million. To the wealthy Kuwaitis, the 10-mile long island was not a paradise, but an investment. They immediately began plans to transform it into a lush seaside resort.

Although the names are new, the plot of the Kiawah story is a familiar one along the Carolina coastline. Rising real-estate taxes have made it practically impossible for private owners to maintain large tracts of idle coastal land, and one by one, the coastal islands have been surrendered to large development companies.

Kiawah is one of the last remaining refuges for the variety of exotic wildlife that previously flourished along this country's southern Atlantic shores. Disturbed by an occasional bird-watcher or fisherman, deer, racoons and wild pigs wander freely through its wind-pruned forests. The island's most precious inhabitants are the brown pelicans that fish for sea bass in the surrounding waters and the loggerhead turtles that nest on its beaches.

Unfortunately, these animals are seeing their last days of privacy. Construction crews have already begun their invasion, and as soon as a re-zoning request is granted by the Charleston County Council, a site is being cleared for the island's first resort facility—the Kiawah Inn.

The sale of Kiawah is only the latest in a succession of island sellouts that has included Baldhead Island, Seabrook Island, Pawley's Island, Hilton Head and others.

Dr. Richard Porcher, a biology professor at The Citadel in Charleston who is working

on a state-sponsored study of the South Carolina coast, has calculated that more than half of the state's coastline has already been developed, and another third is either planned for development or privately owned.

"Only 17 per cent of the coast has been preserved for future generations," Porcher said. "This is an unfair and unwise proportion."

Porcher is on the conservation committee of Charleston's chapter of the Audubon Society, and plans to appear before the county council in an attempt to block the petition to re-zone Kiawah Island from agricultural use to planned development.

The re-zoning petition will most likely be granted. "I'm afraid most of them (the county council) at this point are tending towards the development," Porcher said.

Porcher feels the state government will also be unsympathetic with the conservationists' cause. "The political structure of the state is all for the development of Kiawah," he said. "We'll get no help from them whatsoever."

Apparently few people in the area aside from the traditional preservationist crusaders—the Audubon Society and Sierra Club—are protesting the development. Most are indifferent, and many welcome the investment and the job opportunities that will be created as a result of construction.

There are currently 21 houses, belonging to personal friends of the late C.C. Royal, on Kiawah. Most owners have acquiesced to the invasion of their isolated island.

"We've always felt that eventually the island would be developed," said Dr. Richard Sosnowski, a native of Charleston who co-owns a beach house with his father and brother. "We just hope that as much of the natural state of the island will be preserved as possible."

Sosnowski and his neighbors may take some consolation from their lost privacy: after development, the resale value of their property will be greatly enhanced.

Dr. Samuel Hunt, a psychiatrist from New Haven, Conn., is the only property owner visibly protesting the development. "Kiawah is one of the few remaining islands on the Eastern seaboard," he said. "It is a priceless natural resource. It should not be developed



Construction machinery has already invaded Kiawah and sits idle along the dirt roads waiting for the re-zoning proposal to be passed by the Charleston County Council. The first building constructed will be the plush Kiawah Inn.

for the benefit of a few wealthy people. It ought to be preserved without development for future generations."

Before the Kuwait transaction, the gate on the dirt road leading to Kiawah was padlocked, and keys were distributed only to the C.C. Royal family, a small handful of property owners and a few of their friends.

"If the preservationists had their way, the island would be locked up and totally preserved. There would be no people," Frank Brumley, general manager of the Kiawah Beach Company said. Kiawah Beach is the organization overseeing the development of the island for Kuwait. A public beach is included in the company's planned complex of high-cost condominiums and beach-front and fairway-view lots. "Charleston Company needs a good, quality, environmentally well-balanced beach-front recreation area,"

People are certainly not a new species to Kiawah. The island was first settled in the

latter part of the 18th century by Arnoldus Vanderhorst, who later became governor of South Carolina.

Kiawah remained a Vanderhorst family possession until it was bought by C.C. Royal in 1952.

In 1961, a bill was introduced in the U.S. Senate proposing the acquisition and conversion into a public recreation area. Royal, with the help of South Carolina Governor Ernest Hollings and U.S. Senator Strom Thurmond, fought the proposed acquisition. "They'll have to pitch me into the Atlantic Ocean," Royal told the Charleston News and Courier at the time.

Royal remained dry and the acquisition attempt was defeated.

With Kiawah's price tag now at \$17 million, the federal government seems to have lost interest in acquisition; and the island is destined to become a playground for extravagant tourists.

Residents undisturbed

Environmentally-balanced development?

Jim Tufts, a young North Carolinian, is a zealous outdoorsman and a member of the conservationist Sierra Club.

He is also a dedicated employee of the Kiawah Beach Company, an organization planning the development of Kiawah Island in South Carolina.

Tufts sees no real conflict between his personal interests as a conservationist and his profession as a developer. "These areas are going to be developed," he said, "and I want to help see to it that they are developed properly."

Kiawah Beach, owned and financed by Kuwait, is a recently formed extension of

was established to protect the eggs, which normally become the prey of raccoons and opossums.

Brumley hopes the development will have a minimal impact on the turtles. "Out of 10 miles of beach front, there are only seven miles that we consider developable. It happens, and damn lucky for us, that the area that is least developable is the area of the highest nesting impact of the turtles."

The company also plans to establish rookeries to insure the survival of the rare island birds.

Brumley, who was in charge of the Amelia Island development in Florida before the

"We totally control the exterior of the house, as well as where the house is placed on the lot," Brumley said. "We have the right to disapprove the design of a house purely on aesthetics." Several of the handful of houses already on the island are somewhat obnoxious to the tastes of Brumley's 40-man organization and have been sighted for eventual reworking.

Brumley readily admits the development may damage the island's ecological balance. "There's going to be a change," he said. "There's got to be. You can't insert that number of people on the island and expect not to have some adverse effect on the

Stories and photos by Alan Murray

Insight

Wealth awes tiny country

Thinking the developers are environmentally and socially responsible is like saying it is better to have a genteel person rape you than a brutal person. Either way, it's still rape.—the only protesting property owner on Kiawah Island.

Sea Pines Company, a multi-million dollar concern, responsible for the development of the Sea Pines Plantation at Hilton Head, S.C., and Amelia Island near Jacksonville, Fla. The company prides itself on construction of comfortable, low-density resorts in a natural environment. "They are the best in the country," Tufts said.

Frank Brumley, vice-president and general manager of the Kiawah Beach Company, stresses his organization's concern for the environment. "What our company does best," he said, "is blend into the natural scape."

Brumley's claims seem to be more than a superficial attempt to appease an ecology-conscious public. His company has contracted an environmental research corporation to make an extensive study of the island, its vegetation and wildlife. "We will put the development in the areas that are least sensitive and totally preserve those that are more sensitive."

Over the past summer, the company also funded a study of the rare loggerhead turtles that nest on the island's beaches. A hatchery

Kiawah concern was established last April, suggests the Sea Pines Plantation at Hilton Head as a general model for the Kiawah development. He stresses, however, that the resort area, like the island itself, will be unique.

The development is planned for a 15-year period and will include beachfront condominiums, single-family fairway-view lots, several plush inns, golf courses, tennis courts and other recreational facilities. The architecture will be designed to complement the natural environment, and no structure will be higher than five stories.

Much to his contractors' distress, Brumley intends to insure that as few trees are cut down as possible. Many will be re-located, and eventually a tree nursery will be established somewhere on the island.

Blending, a concept which appears to be antithetical to most seaside developments, is a near obsession with Kiawah Beach. The design of houses built by owners of single-family lots will be subject to the discretion of the developers.

ecology. It's our job and responsibility to minimize that impact.

Brumley also acknowledges that low density, environmentally oriented development inherently means high prices. The projected cost of a two-bedroom condominium is \$60,000 or more, and interior, wooded, third-acre lots will be no less than \$15,000.

Brumley does not, however, see the island as being an enclave for the rich. The more luxurious condominiums and high-priced lots, he admits, will be fairly exclusive, but the inns and the lower-priced condominiums will be within financial reach of middle-income families.

Many Charlestonians, including the island property owners, are glad the island will be developed under the guidance of the environmentally and socially responsible Sea Pines Company.

But one property owner, Dr. Sam Hunt, disagrees. "That," he said, "is like saying it is better to have a genteel person rape you than a brutal person. Either way, it's still rape."

For years, Kiawah has been a haven for wildlife of all sorts. Herons, egrets and ibises fly over the island's semi-tropical forests, alligators sun-bathe beside its marshes and horses graze in its fields. The Kiawah Beach Company, developers of the island, plan to preserve the animals and their habitats as best as possible, but their large scale construction will undoubtedly upset the island's fragile eco-system.

Unlike the residents of N.C.'s coastline who are fighting valiantly to prevent the development of the Jockey's Ridge area, South Carolinians are for the most part acquiescing to the gradual encroachment of their entire coast by resort developers. Local protest to the Kiawah development has been minimal, and the proposal to re-zone the island from agricultural use to planned development is expected to be passed unchallenged by the Charleston County Council.

