

HISTORY



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The Beach Club offers access to the beach and ocean activities, of course, as well as a luxury pool.



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Yes, John's Island was named after a man named John

Ecclestone family transforms scrub land into elegant golf club

By Craig Dolch
For Progress & Innovation

Let's get this out of the way first: Yes, John's Island was named after a man named John.

He was a farmer named John La Roche, who arrived on the piece of land in 1880 and, despite its scruffy appearance, saw it ideal for his business. The ocean-to-river property was nestled between three miles of sandy beaches along the Atlantic Ocean and the Indian River Lagoon.

Without La Roche, there wouldn't be a John's Island. Maybe a Bill's Island, perhaps.

And without E. Llwyd Ecclestone Sr., there wouldn't be a John's Island Club — host of next month's U.S. Mid-Amateur Championship.

Ecclestone had spent the previous decade building Lost Tree Club 75 miles to the south in North Palm Beach. Today, Lost Tree Club is one of the world's most exclusive communities, home to golf legend Jack Nicklaus and plenty of CEOs of major companies.

In the mid-1960s, however, Ecclestone was so deep in debt at Lost Tree — he had mortgages with five banks at one point — he almost gave up on the development. His decision to remain was

the smartest move he made.

Until he got a phone call early in 1969 from someone representing the estate of Fred R. Tuerk, a one-time president of the Chicago Stock Exchange. Tuerk had acquired La Roche's former piece of land, still a bunch of scrub and bush, and was looking to sell it to Ecclestone.

Even at 67, Ecclestone was ready for another challenge.

"They wanted a place like Lost Tree," said Helen Ecclestone Stone, one of Ecclestone's daughters. "I'm sure my dad learned a lot from Lost Tree."

He knew the need for a championship golf course. So Ecclestone hired Pete Dye and Nicklaus to build the South Course. At least that's what the signs said.

"Jack never helped Pete on that course," said Alice Dye, Pete's wife who accompanied him on those many trips to John's Island. "Jack could never get a contract signed with Ecclestone, so he never got paid and never did any work. But they kept up this big sign that said 'Designed by Dye and Nicklaus.'"

Dye had plenty of help when he, Alice and their two sons designed another course, the North, in 1971. Among the other workers involved? A young Bill Coor, who



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has teamed with Ben Crenshaw to become one of the most dynamic partnerships in golf architecture.

"He was our dog-sitter," Dye said of Coor.

Under Ecclestone's guidance, John's Island became quite a success. One of the key moves was the early hiring of Errie Ball, a head professional from Chicago who had the distinction of playing in the first Masters. (Ball was the last surviving player at the '34 Masters, passing away in Stuart last year at 103.)

"John's Island was in the middle of the boonies," Alice Dye said, "but once they got Errie Ball in there, everything changed. He brought a lot of wealthy people down from the Midwest and that



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really helped change the atmosphere at John's Island. It went from rustic to elegant."

But in 1981, Ecclestone died of cancer. The job fell to his daughters, Helen Ecclestone Stone and Jane Chapin (her husband Roy was general manager). By 1986, the business belonged to the former.

"I just stepped in," she said. "I had to keep it going."

A year later, the prudent decision was made to hire top architect Tom Fazio to design a third course, 6 miles west of the club called, fittingly called the West. Building another course was the kind of a perk needed to convince the members to buy the club from the owners.

Fazio built a gem on the West Course, where he could rely on a natural sand ridge he first spotted 20 years ago when he was design-

ing Jupiter Hills to give the layout elevation change seldom seen in Florida.

"The property was magnificent," Fazio said. "And the club gave me almost everything I asked for."

Few residential developments in the U.S. have three championship courses, much less three built by the likes of Dye and Fazio. John's Island gradually expanded into 1,650 acres that includes 3 miles of beachfront. The club has about 1,300 memberships and almost 500 residences.

The club — as well as Vero Beach — will receive much national publicity for hosting the U.S. Mid-Am on its West and North courses, the first USGA championship held on the Treasure Coast.

Without Ecclestone, none of this might have happened.