

A History of Kiawah Island

KIAWAH ISLAND, S.C. – The name “Kiawah” (KEE-a-wah) is derived from the Indians who lived in the area during the 1600s, where they hunted and fished. The advent of the European gun and diseases, such as small pox and measles to which the Indians had no built-in resistance, rapidly killed off those who were not enslaved. This resulted in the disappearance of the Kiawahs.

In 1699, George Raynor was given title by the Lords Proprietors. Based upon a letter written on February 28, 1700, by Quaker founder of Pennsylvania William Penn, it was believed that Mr. Raynor was a pirate: “Carolina is known to be harboring suspected pirates connected with Captain Kidd. They are settled as planters, etc., one, Raynor, their captain, lives in Carolina.” Despite Penn’s accusation of piracy, the island stayed in Mr. Raynor’s family until 1719, when Kiawah Island was purchased by John Stanyarne.

Over the next 50 years, the island was passed throughout Stanyarne’s family until it finally fell in the hands of the Vanderhorst family. General Arnoldus Vanderhorst, a Revolutionary War hero and twice mayor of Charleston, built his home on the eastern half of the Island in 1802. At about the same time, South Carolina’s first British Consul, James Schoolbred, acquired the western half of the Island. Until the late 19th century, when the Vanderhorsts consolidated title, both the Vanderhorsts and Schoolbreds occupied the Island.

After consolidation, the entire island passed from one generation of Vanderhorsts to the next, who successfully farmed sea island cotton until the Civil War. During the Civil War, the island was extremely vulnerable to enemy troops because of a lack of military protection. So, the Vanderhorsts abandoned the island and returned after the Civil War.

Upon his return, enough of Arnoldus Vanderhorst IV’s former slaves came back to Kiawah to enable planting to resume before 1880. But shortly thereafter, Arnoldus IV was killed in a hunting accident. Although long since deceased, his spirit still lives and his ghost has reportedly been seen on the island many times. Attempting to continue his father’s legacy, Arnoldus V continued farming, but to no avail as a series of natural disasters destroyed his efforts.

During those 200 years of Vanderhorst occupation, many events occurred in the colonies that affected Kiawah Island. Although there is no evidence of actual combat during wars, there is evidence of soldiers occupying the island during times of war. Soldiers in the Revolutionary War were issued passes allowing the sick and wounded junior officers to pass through the lines to get to Kiawah Island for rest and recreation, while soldiers from the War of 1812 were located on the island to protect the city of Charleston. The first shots of the Civil War, fired on April 2, 1861, could be heard on Kiawah Island coming from Fort Sumter, located just 21 miles away.

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During the Civil War, Union soldiers scribbled the graffiti “How are you General Beauregard” and “varitas vincit” (truth overcomes) on the walls of the Vanderhorst Mansion (which still stands today). Throughout World War II, U.S. Army teams were assigned to patrol the island’s coast with horses and jeeps.

The Vanderhorst legacy ended in 1951 when C.C. Royal, a lumberman, purchased Kiawah Island for a mere \$125,000. Just 23 years later, his heirs sold the same piece of property to a resort developer for \$18.2 million. In 1974, the land was developed into a world-class resort and residential area. In 1993, the current ownership purchased the portions of Kiawah Island that compose the Resort. In 2004, The Sanctuary at Kiawah Island Golf Resort opened.