

# John Curry, staple of Lowcountry tourism, dies at 78



Curry

Staff reports

John Curry, who helped shape the state and Lowcountry tourism industry, established Hilton Head Island as a destination resort and was a key player behind the town's incorpora-

tion, died late Friday night at Hilton Head Hospital.

Curry, 78, was president of The Curry Co., a resort operations and international consulting firm.

His career began at Yosemite

National Park, where his family's company operated all concessions and hotel operations. Curry later moved to the Walt Disney Co., where he worked as administrator of hotel planning and director of resort

operations for Walt Disney World in Orlando, Fla.

He came to Hilton Head Island to serve as executive vice president of Sea Pines Co.

Please see CURRY on 11A

## CURRY

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He later formed Sand Dollar Management, a property management company.

Curry soon got involved in community activism and joined the Community Association, the predecessor to the town government. He became co-chairman of the group as the push for incorporation reached a fever pitch in the early 1980s. Curry was one of the main proponents for making Hilton Head its own town so it could enact its own zoning regulations and laws. The effort was successful and Curry ran for the island's first mayor, but lost to Ben Racusin.

Curry served as chairman of the state Hotel and Motel Association, and for 17 years led the Hilton Head Chamber of Commerce's Visitor and Convention Bureau. He also was chairman of the Hilton Head Island Olympic Task Force.

His work also included helping to draft the state's accommodations tax, an overnight tax on lodging, ensuring that some of the money collected returned to the industry for marketing, and served on the statewide oversight committee as well as the town's Accommodations Tax Advisory Committee.

He served as the trustee for the Hilton Head Holdings bankruptcy, from 1986 to 1987.

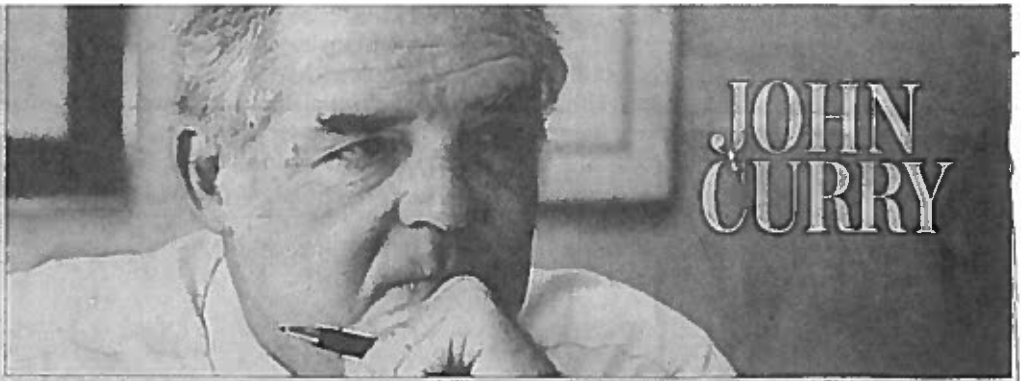
The \$100 million bankruptcy involved five of the island's planned communities, including Sea Pines. The company owed \$10 million to more than 2,000 unsecured creditors, many of them local businesses. Curry oversaw resort operations, as well as working to keep the Heritage Classic professional golf tournament on Hilton Head. He helped to establish the Heritage Classic Foundation, a nonprofit group that took over staging the tournament, in 1987 and served on its board until his death.

He was a member of the Beaufort County Aviation Board; both the South Carolina and Hilton Head accommodations tax committees; the Congressional Travel and Tourism Caucus Advisory Board; and S.C. 2000, a group created to implement the recommendations of the Commission on the Future of South Carolina.

In 1972, he was named the Alice Glenn Doughtie Citizen of the Year by the Hilton Head Chamber of Commerce.

In 1987, he was awarded the Order of the Palmetto by Gov. Richard Riley for administering the National Governors' Association Conference, held on the island. In 1993, he received the Fred Brinkman Award at the S.C. Governor's Conference on Tourism and Travel.

He was a member of First Presbyterian Church on Hilton Head Island.



JOHN CURRY

# ISLAND BIDS FAREWELL TO A FOUNDER, A FRIEND

By TIM DONNELLY • [tdonnelly@islandpacket.com](mailto:tdonnelly@islandpacket.com) • 843-706-8145

A veritable who's who of Hilton Head Island dignitaries, politicians, community members and business leaders representing the island's modern era filled a church hall Monday to say goodbye to a man many credit with shaping, then saving, their town.

Many of those people talked about how much John Curry will be missed.

Not having him around on the island is like not having the humming of cicadas bouncing off the palmetto trees, said Dave Ames, a friend of Curry's for 20 years.

"It is so much a part of our island environment," Ames said of the cicada. "Then I thought how different the island will be without John. He has been a constant presence for 35 years."

With Curry's sudden death Friday of a brain aneurysm at 78, the island lost one of its founding fathers, and the crowd that packed the 1,000-seat First Presbyterian Church showed how broad his influence reached, from the early days of Sea Pines to the recent operations at the airport.

Members of the Heritage Classic Foundation walked up the aisle in the tartan jackets usually reserved for the Verizon Heritage golf tournament. Family and friends mingled with business associates, telling stories about how Curry remained a guiding force in the area's tourism and hospitality industry throughout his life.

John Miller, Curry's pastor at First Presbyterian for 17 years, said he asked Curry just a few weeks ago when he planned to retire.

"He said he would continue to do what he was doing until his dying day," Miller recalled.

Ames, who shared office space with Curry and served on the county's Aviation Advisory Board with him, shared stories about Curry's love of toys, from the small electronic gadgets such as a GPS system and Blackberries, to the large ones, such as boats, cars and airplanes.

"Planes gave him a sense of freedom,"

Ames said. "Boats served as floating entertainment centers."

Flying was a lifestyle choice for Curry, Ames said, and he used his plane to give rides to visitors or journalists, and volunteered his services for charity flights.

When he served as trustee for the island bankruptcy in the 1980s, it was Curry's leadership that saved the island from almost certain economic disaster, Miller said. Homeowners have Curry to thank for their property values today, he said.

Curry also was no stranger to criticism. He was a lightning rod for people wary of increased tourism in the early days of Hilton Head, when Curry served as executive vice president of the Sea Pines Co. He later sparred with different interests over turning Hilton Head into its own town and on the future of the airport, another community institution he had helped support for decades.

But despite differences, Curry always exuded the warmth of the hospitality industry he championed, and used his hearty belly laugh to try to sell others on his point of view.

"At the end of the day, he wanted to remain a friend," Ames said. "At John's core was a desire to help people."

9/30/08

THE ISLAND PACKET

A Celebration of Life  
in Memory of  
**JOHN FOSTER CURRY**

September 29, 2008 ~ 2:00 p.m.



*Be still and know that I am God.*  
Psalms 46:10

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**First Presbyterian Church  
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Hilton Head Island, South Carolina**

**A Celebration of Life in Memory of  
John Foster Curry  
May 1, 1930 – September 26, 2008**

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<i>Prelude</i>	Susan Glenn, organist
<i>Call to Worship &amp; Opening Prayer</i>	Dr. John Miller
<i>*Hymn: Eternal Father, Strong to Save</i> (verses 1 & 4)	No. 562
<i>Old Testament Reading</i> Psalms 91: 1-7, 11 Isaiah 40: 1-8	The Rev. Sam Martin
<i>Special Music: The Last Mile of the Way</i>	Lavon Stevens & Friends
<i>Reflections</i>	David Ames
<i>*Hymn: Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee</i> (verses 1 & 3)	No. 464
<i>Meditation</i>	Dr. John Miller
<i>New Testament Reading &amp; The Lord's Prayer</i> Romans 8: 35, 38-39	Dr. Douglas Fletcher
<i>*Hymn: God of the Ages, Whose Almighty Hand</i> (verses 1 & 4)	No. 262
<i>*Benediction</i>	Dr. John Miller
<i>*Postlude</i>	Susan Glenn, organist

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*\*congregation standing, as able*

## The Credo of John Curry

*It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out  
how the strong man stumbled, or where the doer of deeds  
could have done them better. The credit belongs to the  
man who is actually in the arena,  
whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood,  
who strives valiantly, who errs and comes short again and again –  
who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions,  
and spends himself in a worthy cause, who, at the best,  
knows in the end the triumph of high achievement,  
and, who, at the worst, if he fails,  
at least fails while daring greatly so that  
his place shall never be with those cold  
and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.*

- Theodore Roosevelt -

Kindly remain in your places until the family has departed. The Curry family will host a reception at the Sea Pines Conference Center immediately following the memorial service. Enjoy the nourishment as an expression of God's love, visit with each other in fellowship and celebrate John's life with laughter and joy.

*When he shall die,  
Take him and cut him out in little stars,  
and he will make the face of heaven so fine  
that all the world will be in love with night,  
and pay no worship to the garish sun.*

- William Shakespeare -



*No threnody for John -*

*He filled each day with all that he loved  
and he knew happiness because he gave himself away.  
His selfless nature reached beyond his own station in life  
and touched others in profound and lasting ways.  
His greatest joy was to be on the water or in the sky,  
and it was in the sky that his spirit soared.  
Remember him as a man who saw possibilities in life,  
recognized no limitations and reached upward to higher climbs  
so that good could reign.  
In all matters he was transparently honest.  
May God bless the beauty of his soul  
and welcome him gently into his new life.*

- With love from Val -

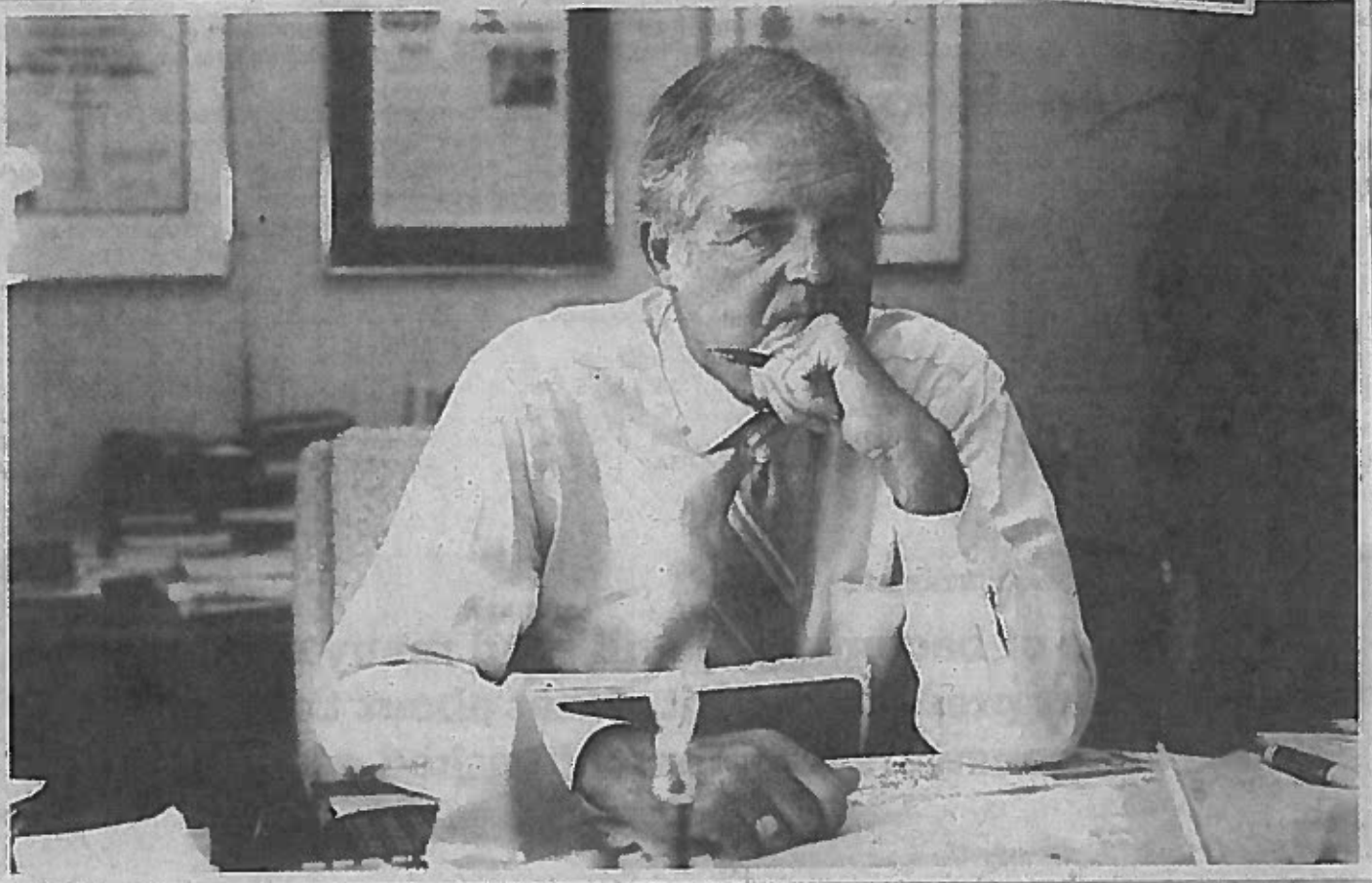


John Curry, who helped guide Hilton Head through one of its darkest hours, leaves us

# 'a lasting legacy'



John Curry in March.



File photos • The Island Packet

John Curry at his desk in July 1988. Curry, who helped save Hilton Head's tourism industry in the 1980s, died Friday.

By JANET SMITH and DAVID LAUDERDALE  
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**F**or 35 years, John Curry had a singular impact on the development of Hilton Head Island's tourism industry and the island's place in the world.

That impact came in a determined pursuit to keep Hilton Head viable, even through the toughest of economic times, and to maintain what drew millions of visitors and the island's nearly 40,000 permanent residents here in the first place.

Curry, 78, died Friday night at Hilton Head Hospital after suffering a brain aneurysm during lunch with his wife, Valerie, and friends at the Hilton Head Yacht Club.

Only the late Charles Fraser, who carved a new community out of the forests of Sea Pines and set the stage for future planned communities, did more to shape the island's

destination and residential community. In the process, he shaped tourism statewide.

Along the way, he played a critical role in creating the Town of Hilton Head Island and establishing the island as a year-round resort community. He also helped negotiate and get through the legislature the state accommodations tax, which has provided millions of dollars in marketing money for the local tourism industry, as well as funding for arts and cultural groups here.

#### CENTER OF THE STORM

Curry's work was not without controversy. He often was caught up in the clash of competing tourism and residential interests and served as a lightning rod for those who thought the island was changing for the

#### IN MEMORY

A memorial service for John Curry, 78, is at 2 p.m. Monday at First Presbyterian Church, 540 William Hilton Parkway.

Surviving are his wife of 36 years, Valerie; three sons, David (Rozana) Curry of Burbank, Calif., Edward (Kelly) Curry of Toluca Lakes, Calif., and Donn Curry of Portland, Ore.; two grandchildren, Matthew and Adam Curry; a brother, David Curry of Berkeley, Calif.; and a former daughter-in-law, Lynn Curry. He was preceded in death by his twin sister, Jeanette; and his first wife, Martha Weathersbee Curry.

In lieu of flowers, send



# LEGACY

Continued from 1A

He played that same lightning rod role at the Hilton Head Island Airport, serving on the Beaufort County Aviation Advisory Board for many years.

Native islander Perry White said he and Curry agreed on little, if anything, in 35 years of tangling on issues from incorporation of the island to expansion of the airport.

But White said their disagreements were never personal. They even swapped stories about lessons learned from their grandfathers.

"I had tremendous respect for John, and I think he had respect for me," White said. "John's contributions were tremendous. I'll miss John. He was one of the mediating forces on the Airport Advisory Board, and with all the firebrands coming on now, I'm beginning to appreciate that more."

The last time the two saw each other was at a recent Beaufort County Council committee meeting. Curry handed White a copy of a proposed charter change to the airport advisory board.

## BACK FROM THE BRINK

One of Curry's toughest business challenges came in November 1986, when he was tapped to run Hilton Head's largest employer as it plunged into bankruptcy.

Curry was named trustee for Hilton Head Holdings Corp., a company that had been cobbled together from the assets of two longtime island companies — the Sea Pines Co. and the Hilton Head Co. — less than two years before. The company owned property and business operations in Sea Pines, Shipyard, Wexford, Port Royal and Indigo Run. Its collapse directly affected a third of the island, but the entire community reeled from the blow.

The company was in debt to the tune of \$100 million, 90 percent of that in real estate mortgages. But more than 2,000 creditors, many of them local businesses, were owed \$10 million.

The bankruptcy threatened not only individual livelihoods, but the reputation of Hilton Head as a first-class resort and the future of the island's premier sporting event, the Heritage Classic professional golf tournament. National media swarmed to Hilton Head to cover the story of a premier resort falling into disrepute.

The island company had been wrested from developer Bobby Ginn earlier in 1986 and put in the hands of a New York businessman, Philip Schwab. But Schwab's financial empire collapsed, along with the savings and loan industry, pulling down the Hilton Head properties.

Schwab was supposed to prop up the failing island com-



File • The Island Packet

John Curry announces a \$250,000 gift to local and state charities from the Nabisco Golf Team Charity Competition in December 1988. In 1987, Curry helped found the Heritage Classic Foundation, which stages the current Verizon Heritage, the PGA Tour event held each year in April.

## KEEPING THE HERITAGE

Saving the Heritage also was a primary goal. The PGA Tour was unhappy with the condition of Harbour Town Golf Links, where the Heritage was played. The course had been neglected as the Sea Pines Co.'s fortunes sank. Making matters worse was that the purse check for another Tour event held at Harbour Town in the fall of 1986 had bounced.

Curry flew to Jacksonville,

Fla., to meet with the PGA Tour commissioner. When told the only way to keep the Heritage was to sell Harbour Town Golf Links to the Tour, Curry got up and walked out. It worked.

The tournament stayed, and Curry then leaned on Angus Cotton, who had moved to the island in 1981 as general manager of the Marriott resort hotel in Shipyard, to produce a \$1 million letter of credit from local businesses to guarantee the purse for the 1987 tournament. To do it, they formed the non-profit Heritage Classic Foundation to stage the tournament. To date, that group's charitable giving from tournament proceeds has topped \$16 million.

In the end, the bankrupt company's Sea Pines assets went to residents of that community who put together their own company, Sea Pines Associates. Most of the other properties went back to mortgage holder Marathon Oil Co. Indigo Run ended up in the hands of the federal Resolution Trust Corp. and was sold to the Melrose Co. in 1991.

After getting baptized in the arcane world of bankruptcy law, Curry continued to work as a trustee in many other cases.

## 'HEADS IN BEDS'

But Curry's most enduring legacy will be his work in tourism.

"Before John, we had tourism

but it was almost always linked to selling real estate," Cotton said. "He was interested in putting heads in beds and pushing tourism in the off-peak months."

Curry and Cotton took countless trips to cold cities, pitching the island and offering tourism leaders there free stays back on Hilton Head.

Friends say that no matter where Curry went around the world, he always seemed to know people.

Cotton and others worked with Curry to shape the state Accommodations Tax Act in 1984. With assurances that part of the 2 percent tax on overnight lodging would go to local tourism marketing and to local organizations to promote tourism, Curry helped sell it to skeptical industry leaders statewide.

Curry, who led the island's Visitor and Convention Bureau for 17 years, also pushed legislation to relax state liquor laws and allow Sunday sales.

"He was very pragmatic," Cotton said, "very pragmatic. In the arts and education and a lot of other ways people didn't see, he was behind the scenes trying to smooth the way and work things out."

## FLYING HIGH

To understand Curry's involvement with the airport, one first must understand his

passion for flying, said Debra Ames, chairman of county Aviation Advisory Board and a close friend of Curry's. They shared office space for 20 years.

"I think he was happiest in the air," Ames said. "He just loved the adventure and the freedom flying gave him."

As a tourism leader, Curry also understood how important the airport is to the economy and the island experience, Ames said.

"John believed the airport provided an essential support for the standard of life on the island," he said. "The convenience of the island airport is tremendously important, and I knew that. And coming from the service business, he knew how important how a passenger feels about Hilton Head when getting off that airplane. He was always looking for ways to make the airport better, and he spent whatever time it took."

Bill Miles, president and CEO of the Hilton Head Island Bluffton Chamber of Commerce, said, "The Hilton Head Island we know today is in large part due to the tireless effort of John, with his wonderful obsession to get it right and make the unique destination it become. He created a lasting legacy for us all, with courage, true grit, determination with a real grace and style was all his own."