



Thomas Norby is shown at work in Sea Pines on Hilton Head Island in this undated photograph taken by the late Doris Bowers.

## Former Sea Pines exec Norby dies; knew area's secrets

BY DAVID LAUDERDALE  
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**T**homas Norby knew where all the secrets were buried in Sea Pines - literally - as the man who for more than 30 years was responsible for making everything work, from toilets to dogleg-rights.

With his death July 28 goes rare knowledge of Hilton Head Island's development from the 1960s through 1990s.

Thomas A. Norby Sr., 80, was a native of Hinesville, Georgia, and a devoted associ-

ate of the Fraser family there, prior to their development of Sea Pines on Hilton Head beginning in the late 1950s.

The late Joseph B. "Joe" Fraser Jr. asked Norby to come to work in his new homebuilding business in Sea Pines in the early 1960s.

"He rose from equipment operator to vice president of Sea Pines," said Connie Smith, who worked for Norby for many years and is still employed at Sea Pines. "It's pretty amazing."

Norby told the story that his father died young, leaving seven sons and a daughter. The

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*Joe Fraser III, talking about Thomas Norby*

Fraser family supported him at the time. He was extremely loyal to the family and became invaluable to their keystone development on Hilton Head, headed by the late Charles E. Fraser, Joe's brother.

"He was a dear human being," said Mary Stone Fraser, Charles' widow. "He seemed to have a real knack to take over when something needed to be done. He seemed to just know when something needed to be done and he did it. He loved Sea Pines. He came up in the ranks. He was one of the few who was always deeply loyal to Charles.

"At (my husband's) funeral, literally everybody disappeared. I can just see him standing over there. He just took my arm and we walked to the clubhouse. He didn't say a word. And then he always made it his purpose to make sure the gravesite was well taken care of."

One of the four lakes in the Sea Pines Forest Preserve is named Lake Thomas for Norby.

He was a charter member of the Hilton Head Jaycees, an original volunteer and later assistant volunteer chief with the Sea Pines-Forest Beach Fire Department, which later merged into a Town of Hilton Head Island department. In 1974, when a barge knocked the swing-span bridge to Hilton Head out of service for many weeks, Norby was the field supervisor of mobile equipment and in charge of barging over equipment and cars.

At Sea Pines, he originally worked directly for the late Donald O'Quinn, who was in charge of road paving and building all infrastructure. He was later in charge of all operational support for Sea Pines Resort, including facility maintenance and building services.

Through the years, his duties included landscaping and overseeing golf course maintenance and security.

Joe Fraser III said that when the company got in financial trouble in the 1970s, Norby was one of the survivors.

"What made him so valuable to Sea Pines was that he just knew where everything was, who had done what and why they had done it and how everything fit into the overall development plan," Fraser said.

Later, after Sea Pines was fully developed, he was still there, "kind of the go-to guy to solve problems."

Norby's knowledge of the land covered the intricacies of modern land-use covenants, but also the days he picked oysters where Harbour Town would rise, or hunt 'coons at Baynard Cove. He knew what color the Harbour Town Light-house candy-cane stripes were supposed to be, where every significant tree was located and who complained about what.

In a 1979 interview, he told island journalist Jim Littlejohn:

"On New Year's Day, 1969, Joe Fraser and I walked the trails of the Forest Preserve together. The plans had been on the board for some time, but it hadn't been put together. I was responsible for the construction of the trails, the bridges and walkways and it gave me a lot of pleasure in doing it."

Norby learned landscaping not only from the national figures hired by Sea Pines, but from "Miss Pearl" Fraser, the mother of Joe and Charles Fraser. She had a large and highly acclaimed garden in Hinesville. Norby said he was among-grade-school children

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File photo

Thomas A. Norby Sr. had rare knowledge of Hilton Head Island's development.

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who were marched to the garden to see it in bloom each spring. Norby said Pearl Fraser put together a loose-leaf notebook of instructions on what to plant on Hilton Head and when and where to plant it.

Joe Fraser III tells about the day Norby and Miss Pearl were installing plants from her Hinesville garden at the company's new William Hilton Inn on South Forest Beach Drive (now the site of Marriott's Grande Ocean resort).

"Grandmother came over that day and somehow sprained her ankle," Fraser said. "Thomas was going to call Charles, but she wouldn't let him make the call. She just got Thomas to bring out a chair so she could sit there and supervise the planting."

Norby was in charge of the commemoration of Sea Pines' 50th anniversary.

Norby left the company in the economic downturn following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Connie Smith recalls.

He went to work for the Community Services Associates, and was the point person during construction of the Harbour Town Inn and conference center.

During that time, he needed a liver transplant and the late Joe Fraser Jr. led a campaign to raise money for Norby.

Norby and his wife, Sue, reared two children in Sea Pines. In recent years, he had moved to the Upstate to be closer to his children.

His obituary says private services will be held by the family. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to Sea Pines Museum and Forest Preserve Foundation, 175 Greenwood Drive, Hilton Head Island, SC 29928, or to the Georgia National Guard Family Support Foundation, 1000 Halsey Ave., Building 447, Marietta, GA 30060.

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