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Sea Island SPORTING

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The first regatta was held in Rockville in 1899. In its heyday it drew over 300 entrants, but with a declining interest in sailing over the last few years, it typically has closer to fifty boats.



At the Sea Island Yacht Club, Grayson Carter readies his boat, the GRAY GHOST, built by Citadel graduate, Mike Groshon in 1994.

“ YOU KNOW WHAT THE SEA ISLAND ONE DESIGN IS, RIGHT? IT’S THE BOX THE Y-FLYER CAME IN. ”

That’s a joke to a handful of sailors in the Lowcountry of Charleston, South Carolina, and to many more requires some explanation. Sea Island One Design sailboats are part of a landscape’s southern style so inherent as to beg inspection, how did it become so beautiful? The Sea Island One Design is built to a set of secret standards, but as for its environs, with record development encroaching daily, it’s easy to remember many things stay beautiful by being left alone. But there is a second answer, and that’s in the calculated history of its stewards, men and women at once careful, ambitious, creative, and intentional.

Leaving the Charleston Peninsula, it takes almost an hour to drive the length of Maybank Highway to the edge of Wadmalaw Island, and the village of Rockville.

Maybank Highway begins on the suburban developed James Island, then stretches across Johns Island where one can veer south to Kiawah Island. Johns Island’s long history of spot zoning has resulted in a myriad of new subdivisions and restaurants, and Charleston County’s long-debated decision to complete I-526, a perimeter loop that will connect West Ashley to Johns Island, will forever change the landscape of the once rural sea island. If one carries on, though, they’ll cross over onto Wadmalaw, and dead end in Rockville.

Like most things in Rockville, access to the public is restricted to its oldest thing, Hanckel Mound, a pre-historic Native American shell midden deposited in a ring shape. From crest to crest, it was originally at least 158 feet in diameter, but over the last fifty years, its remaining eight feet have dwindled. Comprised mostly of oyster shells, periwinkles, animal bone, and pottery shards can be found throughout its creek-facing edge. About 20 of these shell rings can be found along a 150-mile stretch between South Carolina and Georgia. They are all believed to date into the second millennium B.C. and contain some of the oldest pottery ever found in North America.

For now, Wadmalaw remains fairly unscathed due largely in part to its majority agricultural zoning. It was once home to mostly cotton and rice plantations, but with the end of slavery cotton died out by the 1920s and smaller plots came into production. Sophia Seabrook Jenkins spent most her life on Wadmalaw and explains its tranquil style as a holdover from another time.

“Though the families of the late 1800s and early 1900s were more or less impoverished by the war, they had inherited the tastes of a wealthy antebellum society. The grown-ups played chess and whist, ‘Marooned’ (as it was then called) on the beach, had occasional horse races and tilting contests, fished and hunted. The young found entertainment in song and dance. Gathering at the waterfront, sitting on benches, watching the moonlight on the river was a summer evening habit, only broken by repairing to the hall on the old green where the two-step or the waltz was danced to music from the accordion or violin. One wonders if the young people of today have as happy a time,” wrote Jenkins.

Today, little has changed, including the island’s population count. The town of Rockville sits at the end of Wadmalaw. Getting there and back is a scenic drive, one my family used to make when they came to visit me in college in Charleston. Back then we didn’t know anyone in Rockville. We would just go. We never went to the Angel Oak or the U-pick strawberry farm, but instead just drove to this idyllic village where there was nothing to do but look out over the boat ramp. I have wanted to grow old in Rockville since I was young. It’s

Top left: The Regatta is a family tradition with generations of families from the Sea Islands participating. **Bottom left:** Sunfish, Optimists, Lasers, Y-Flyers and E-Scows compete



in the Regatta, but the SIOD is the belle of the ball. **Center:** These are not fast boats, but boxy day sailors elegant in their simplicity. **Right:** Signs of life in Rockville are muted in a kind of sublime tranquility.



that kind of place.

“Rockville—what a town! If you ain’t been here, you ain’t been nowhere, because that’s precisely the location of this one-horse hamlet,” wrote Donald Rutledge in Rockville. “This is the only place in the world where the people outnumber nothing else. You could put this whole town in the bow of the Undine and still have enough room for a medium-sized mule. The village has no hotel, cabs, or movie theaters, and if you ask a native how to get to the drugstore, he’ll go into convulsions with laughter. Things are so quiet and peaceful down here that ears are as worthless as a four-card flush.”

The town is one half of a square mile sitting on the north bank of Bohicket Creek. It is dotted with two churches and, on its southwest edge, a yacht club. A seafood company, a boat yard, and a Boy Scout camp flank its inbound drive otherwise canopied by Live Oaks. Both the nearest post office and the school are outside the village proper. Since its founding in

1784, little that is visible to the naked eye has changed. In the center of the village there is a house with an old post beneath it, so discreet you will miss it without really hunting for it, and to really hunt for it you have to be quite nearly on private property. It’s not that there are no signs of life in Rockville. It’s that the signs are muted in a kind of sublime tranquility. Rockville is all there is to Rockville. The private residences, the yacht club and churches, and certainly Hanckel Mound, are not tourist attractions. You are best to drive out on a Sunday, park by the church and pretend to be lost if someone asks why you’re wandering around its few dirt roads.

Reverend John Cornish first recorded a successful regatta in his diary dated August 20, 1842, and when cousins Jenkins Mikell of Edisto and John Sosnowski, skipper of the first Undine, of Bugby plantation raced each other in 1890, the tradition of the Rockville Regatta was born. Today’s Rockville Regatta is still held each August and brings the only public-facing activity to the village. Dozens of boats race, but many more

spectator boats show up for the Lowcountry’s most insular flotilla. 364 days of the year the village is underpopulated, and for one, it becomes far too full. It is possible for non-residents, by invitation, to cut through a yard or two without great discipline being enacted upon them. It was for the Rockville Regatta that the Sea Island One Design was first built, just after WWII in 1947, so that area yacht clubs could compete against each other. Cygnet, Undine (named for Sosnowski’s boat), Doghouse, and Marcheta were all built for this reason. These are not fast boats, but boxy day sailors elegant in their simplicity. Oliver Seabrook, together with naval architect Henry Scheel from Mystic, Connecticut, is credited for the design. The second generation of Sea Island One Designs was built in the 1980s, and a ninth boat joined the fleet in 2011. That’s where the second joke about Sea Island One Designs comes in, that they are the only growing racing fleet of wooden boats in the world. This is very dry sailor humor, to be certain.

All jokes aside, the Sea Island One Design represents what is smart about Rockville, the cessation, whether intentional or not, of development once something is right. In nautical design, form follows function. The beautiful style of Sea Island One Designs and of Rockville architecture is their ability to serve a purpose. Look at a pair of deck shoes or a simple yachtsman’s coat. Form follows function yields elegant simplicity. You see it in Rockville’s screen porches and haint blue ceilings. If surrounding zoning escalates, which some would argue is inevitable, a place in time will be lost. We’re not there yet, though, and for now, this Lowcountry Brigadoon sits idle and well.

On my thirtieth birthday, a friend invited me to sail from Charleston to Bohicket Marina, which sits just over the creek on the Kiawah side. Then we sailed the Alice Cup from Charleston Harbor to Bohicket. It has since moved to Sea Island Yacht Club in Rockville. It took all day to sail what would have been under an hour by car. I was coming out of a relationship



in part characterized by abuse, and certainly by a lack of fun. When we docked at the marina that night, all the local sailors spilled onto each other's boats for a post-regatta witching hour. A man in his fifties, a Hanckel, put a beer in my hand and told me to get off the boat and come join the others. I'd spend the next decade sailing with him. Eventually, I'd join the yacht club, befriend the builder of Sea Island One Designs, and commission my own.

In the 1700s the Hanckel family emigrated from Coburg, Germany, and in 1920 Francis Hanckel founded Coburg Dairy a few miles from Rockville where the Wadmalaw River meets the Stono River. Over the next sixty-seven years, the 100 acres on Coburg Creek, where some of them still live, became the largest independent dairy in South Carolina and eventually distributed into North Carolina and Georgia. The Coburg Cow, called Bessie, is a three-dimensional sign, that sits on Highway 17 and whose removal from time to time indicates the severity of inbound hurricanes. The dairy is gone, the farmlands are gone, and nobody thinks about the origins of the Coburg Cow as having anything to do with the slow erosion of Hanckel Mound, but Bessie the Cow is a rare exception of function following form in Lowcountry style that cannot be mimicked by even the latest development.

The truth is there is nothing inherently secret about Sea Island style. Rockville is just a Sunday drive away. 28 people a day move to Charleston, a number that has risen steadily for over a decade. Anyone can attend to watch the Rockville Regatta, and an invitation to compete requires only a small amount of friendliness.

Founded in 1967, Charleston Ocean Racing Association, or CORA, recently moved two of its annual regattas from Bohicket Marina to Sea Island Yacht Club. CORA is a public-facing, open invitation opportunity-to-sail nonprofit organization. It works with nearly all the local yacht clubs to host events. Grayson Carter is the treasurer at Sea Island Yacht Club, and former commodore. He owns two Sea Island One Designs, Island Spirit and Doghouse.

"There's a lot of history in our regatta and our Sea Island One Design class," Carter told the Post & Courier in 2018, when the boats turned seventy-years-old. "It's a feature of the local community and part of what makes sailing in Charleston so special."

The idea is not exclusivity. Quite the opposite. All are welcomed who want

Opposite: The PRIVATEER was built by Van Smith in 1989 and was the first new boat added to the fleet in about 40 years.

Top: The SIOD was first built in 1947 and the first boats – Cygnet, Undine, Doghouse, and Marcheta – were all built by the area yacht clubs to race for bragging rights.

Center: All are welcomed who just want to sail while in the Lowcountry.

Bottom: Dozens of spectators show up for the race, filling the streets of Rockville.

to sail a bit while in the Lowcountry. For those who do stay, very few new ideas are needed. It is more about doing the work to leave things how they are. It is a lot of work, the kind so encompassing it becomes a lifestyle, and a lot of fun. The only secret is in the doing.