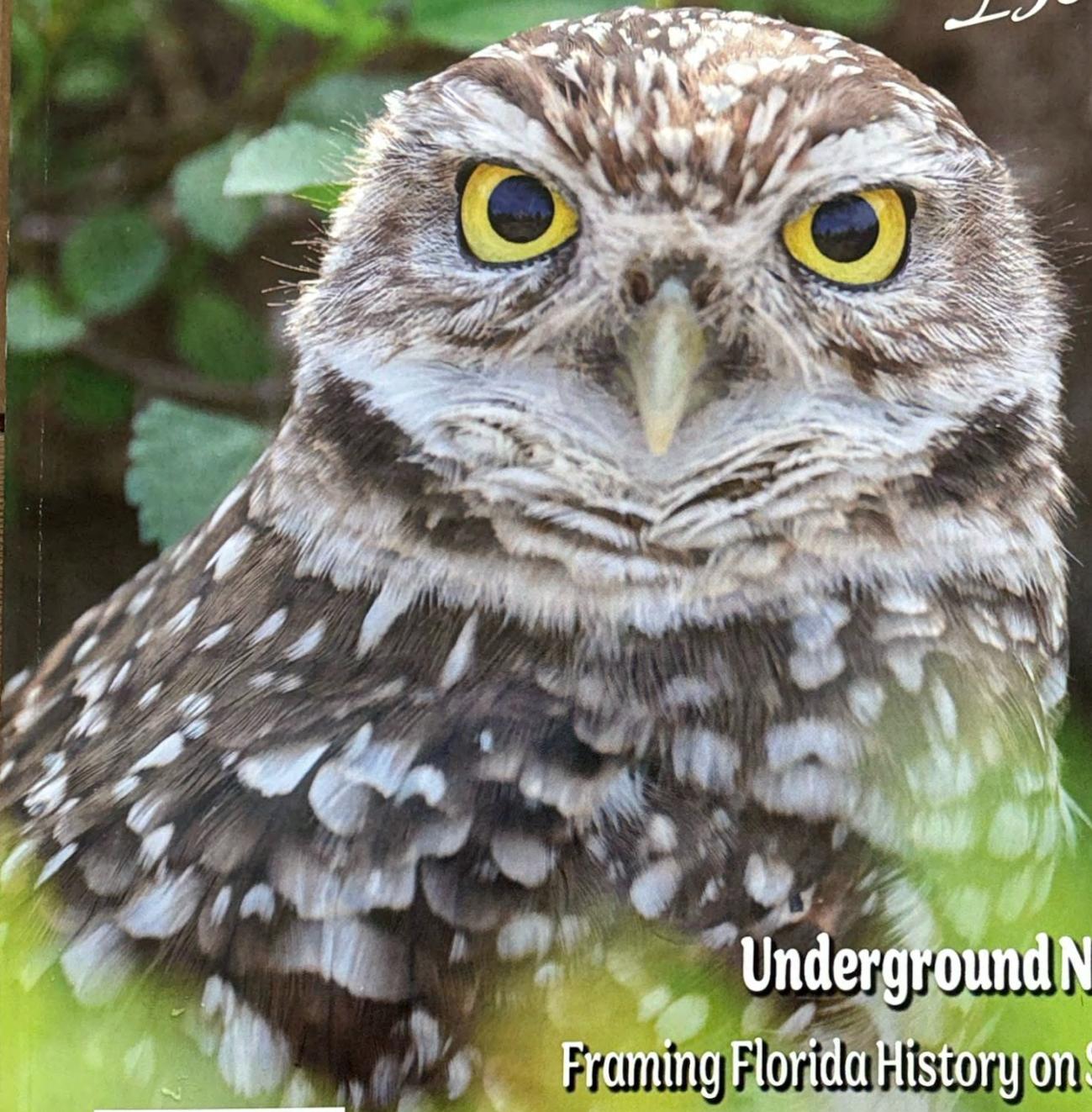


The Magazine of Boca Grande

GASPARILLA

Island



Underground Neighbors

Framing Florida History on Shore Lane

A Makeover for Useppa Island

Cruisin' for Classics in Southwest Florida

Local Social Scene



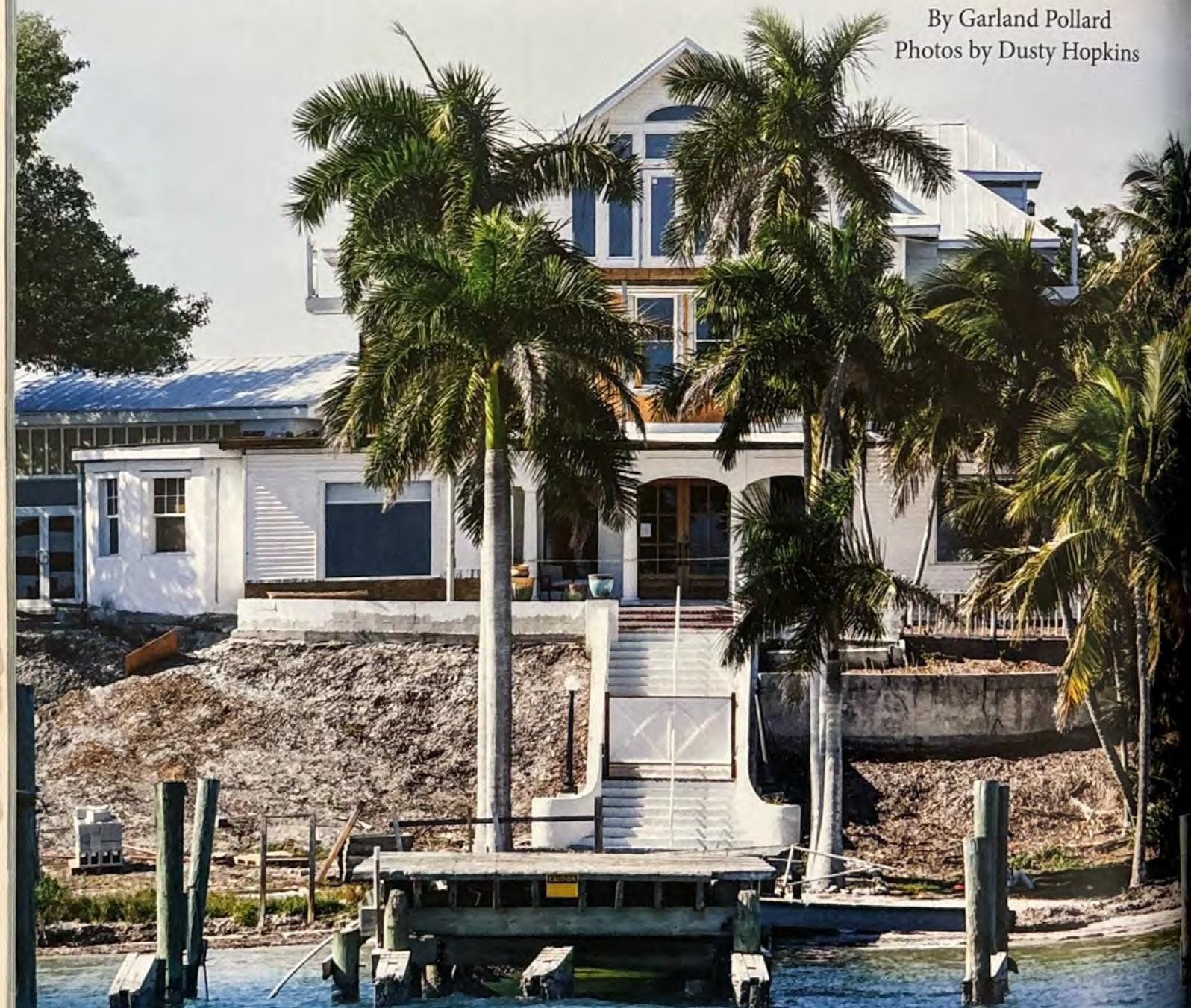
March/April 2026



A Makeover for Useppa Island

The island's next era begins as resident owners undertake a comprehensive restoration of the historic Collier Inn.

By Garland Pollard
Photos by Dusty Hopkins



Florida, as a travel destination for generations, has many great old resorts. One such grand place is on Useppa Island. It is the Collier Inn, famous on so many Florida postcards. It started as a Gilded Age mansion, sitting on a small hill, with white steps going up to the entrance.

Its home is historic Useppa, which sits just west of Pine Island. It is home to not only the Collier, but about 100 residences, a fire station, a museum and a dock operation. It is all private; many locals have memberships to its popular Useppa Island Club.

Even though many Florida resorts survived depressions and war, their fate is not guaranteed, particularly if they are made of wood. Most of the Belleview-Biltmore in Clearwater was demolished in 2016, despite it being a beloved home to many famous guests, including Marilyn Monroe and Joe DiMaggio.

This fall, during renovations, the old Collier Inn almost disappeared. On Tuesday, Nov. 4, maintenance worker Peter Frazzetta, up early, noticed a flame at the top.

"He gets up early and grades the roads before light," said Useppa Fire Rescue Chief Marc Mascarelli, at the time. "He saw the flicker. If it wasn't for him, the Collier Inn would be gone."

There is at most only a two-person fire team on the island.

The fire could have smoldered outside the inn overnight. An island resident smelled smoke earlier, but they were unable to locate it. Additionally, during the dry season, there are many smoke smells around.

The building had been gutted for renovations by its new owner, and so the fire traveled up the whole height of the wall. Because of the conditions of the weather, including the dryness and the wind, Mascarelli said that it could have been a "total catastrophe." No one was injured.

"It was a real close call," said CEO Steven Mezynieski, who runs a construction and development company in Southampton, New York and is part of a new group that has purchased the Inn and all of the club operations. "Another five minutes, the Collier wouldn't be standing here, but definitely it worked out, and it set us back a little bit, but we'll deal with it, and we'll address it and we'll come back from it."

History From a Golden Age

Long before it became a retreat for industrialists, spies and presidents, Useppa Island was a place of human activity stretching back thousands of years. That deep history is documented today in the island's Barbara Sumwalt Museum, which preserves evidence of Useppa's earliest inhabitants.

About 10,000 years ago, Useppa was not an island at all; one could have walked from Gasparilla Island to Useppa. Sea levels were far lower, and the land that would later become Useppa stood as a high point along a natural dune ridge. One of the museum's most striking artifacts — a 10,000-year-old spear point — dates from this period. It was discovered after a heavy rain in 1987, a reminder of how much of the island's past still lies beneath the surface.

As the Ice Age ended, melting glaciers caused sea levels to rise, gradually transforming the landscape. By roughly 500 B.C., Useppa had become part of the broader Caloosahatchee tradition, named for the indigenous people who shaped much of Southwest Florida's pre-European history. Their world was defined by vast shell middens and an intricate, water-based way of life — sort of a prehistoric Venice with the feel of Disney's Jungle Cruise — built around fishing, trade and canals. These waterways were so extensive that travel across the region could be accomplished safely by boat. Traces of this civilization remain buried in shell mounds throughout the area, and the Useppa museum even houses the remains of two individuals who lived on the island about 600 to 800 B.C. The two sets of faces have been reconstructed by forensic archaeologists, to give a picture of these residents. There was another burial find; a man who died around 2,400 B.C.

Useppa held one of the many Calusa mounds that dotted the region. The Collier Inn itself was built atop one of these ancient formations, a location that has helped protect the structure from flooding. According to the Useppa Historical Society, village life on the island faded after about A.D. 1200, though the broader Calusa presence in Southwest Florida continued. The island still has four ridges, the Collier Ridge, the Southeastern Ridge, the Calusa Ridge and the Southern Ridge.



Facing page, the Collier Inn under restoration; the white steps will reopen this spring. At right, Useppa CEO Steven Mezynieski and Chairman Simon Bound, in front of new dock and bulkhead.



Top, the Collier Inn and pool, under restoration. The pool has already reopened. Left, construction at the Collier Inn last fall; the owners are moving to re-open the hotel this spring. Above, the chess set and other outdoor activities will all return. Facing page inset, the restored croquet lawn is named after Bob Sumwalt, who died in 2014 but was a long-time member of the club.

European contact brought new chapters. During the period of British rule, Cuban rancheros began visiting Southwest Florida. When Florida returned to Spanish control in 1783, those Cuban connections continued. In the early 19th century, Useppa hosted a fishery run by José Caldez, along with storehouses and dwellings. That era ended abruptly in 1836, when Seminoles killed a widely despised customs agent on the island. The Smithsonian's M.H. Simons visited the island in 1882, noting its sparse population and natural state.

Useppa's transformation into a private retreat began in 1894, when streetcar magnate John Roach purchased the island. He built a winter home and expanded his lodge into what became the Useppa Inn, attracting notable visitors such as writer Zane Grey and Theodore Roosevelt. Baron Collier acquired the island in 1911, but after his death the inn gradually fell into disrepair.

Throughout the history of the Inn, the archaeology has been of interest. In 1947, state archaeologist John Griffin came to the island when a human burial was found while excavating a tennis court. There have been many other digs, including in 1980.

Perhaps the island's most surprising role came during the Cold War. In the lead-up to the Bay of Pigs invasion, Useppa was used by the CIA as a training site for a counterrevolutionary force intended to overthrow Fidel Castro. Volunteers arrived from Miami to undergo testing and training, including instruction in CIA codes.

After passing through a succession of owners, Useppa entered its modern era in 1976, when Garfield Beckstead purchased the island. He renovated the inn and revived its fortunes. Another milestone followed in 1984 with the founding of the Useppa Island Historical Society. In 1996, the entire island, not just the Collier Inn, was added to the United States National Register of Historic Places, recognized for its extraordinary blend of history and archaeology spanning millennia.

The museum, and the old inn, will be the centerpiece of the revival, Bound hopes. The idea is to offer day trips, with the museum as a draw.

"The museum is very important," said Simon Bound, the new chairman of the group Useppa Island Partners LLC. "Getting people to come here, see the museum and then come to lunch."

The Purchase Group

The rebuilding process for the island will continue, as it has for centuries. The resort had its first opening just before the new year, after the work of a group of homeowners called Useppa Island Partners purchased the club in September.

"We literally have been working seven days a week, now-days, for the past five months," Mezynieski said. The idea for a resident purchase of the island came after the death of previous Useppa owner Garfield Beckstead in 2021. The island had been battered by hurricanes, and it was hard to keep up.

"Over the past years, every time there was a hurricane or something, we would have crews come down and help clean the island and just really help the owners," Mezynieski said. There were legal issues between the old owners and some homeowners, as well.

Useppa Island Partners was created in May 2025 for the express purpose of buying the club and island operations. Useppa Island had been rescued from ruin by the late Garfield Beckstead, who purchased it in 1976. He not only restored the island, but reopened the Useppa Island Club. Mezynieski and his wife, Gretchen, had an interest of their own regarding the island after Beckstead's death.

"I've been negotiating with the owners for the past couple of years, trying to purchase the island, but it was never realistic," said Mezynieski, who has lived on Useppa for 12 years. "We were negotiating a deal, and then Simon had put a group together that was negotiating to purchase the island."

Bound bought a house on Useppa in 2015 with his wife, Maggie. Bound is a

former Royal Navy diver who spent 30 years in finance with Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley. He had the time to put the finances together and understand things like the contract language. The group came together out of shared interests.

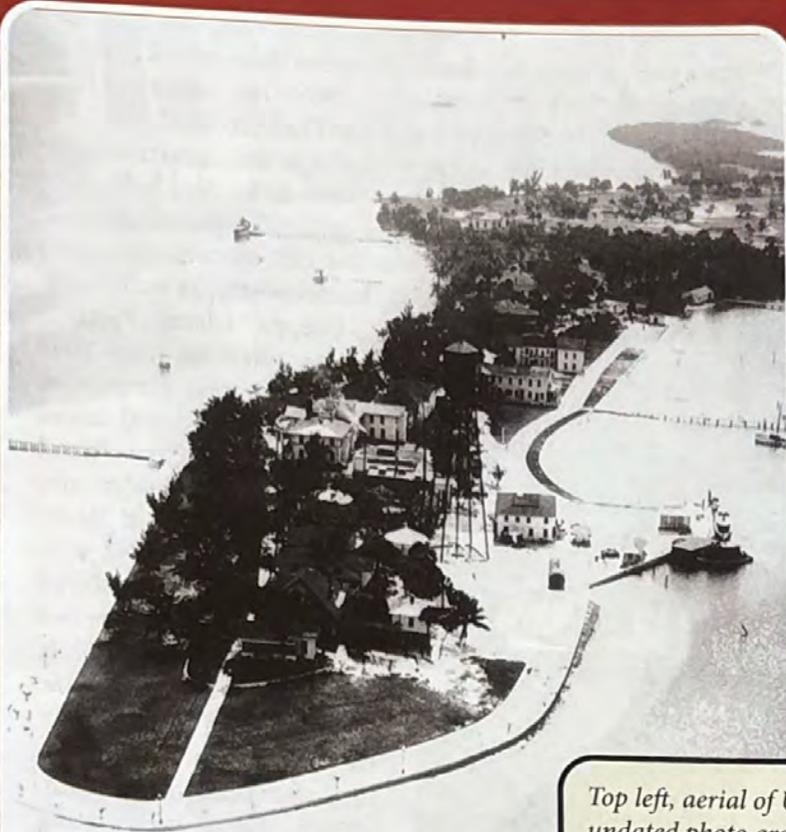
"One day we did a Zoom call. We said, 'Listen, we should actually join forces,'" Bound said. "It was still a torturous process, but we agreed."

They also agreed to a price with the Beckstead family, around \$16 million. The sale closed in September 2025. "We decided we would team up and get together on what would be the best scenario for the island," Mezynieski said. "And it was for us to have a group of homeowners who truly are a part of the island, to collaborate." The idea was for the group to bring their skill sets together, as it is such a big undertaking. There are other residents who are coming together as managing directors.



A look Back at Usseppa Island

circa 1800-1900's

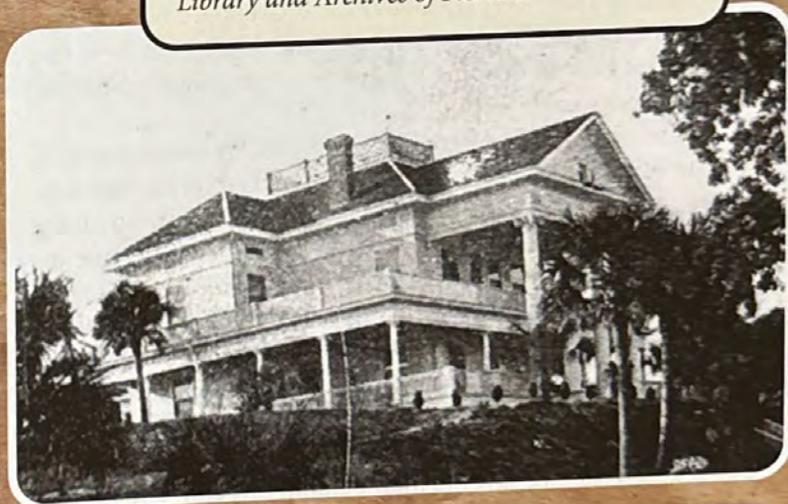


Top left, aerial of Useppa, in an undated photo around 1930; notice how developed the island was during that era, with large docks and walkways. Right, an unidentified hotel guest. Below, a 1940s group including Hermann and Marie Fleitman, 5th and 6th from the left. From 1907 to the 1920s the hotel on the island was called the Tarpon Inn; it was demolished after closure during World War II and subsequent hurricanes. Florida Memory Project photos, State Library and Archives of Florida.





Here, the lobby of the demolished Tarpon Inn, from a postcard. Below, two views of the Collier Inn, part of the late Louise Frisbie's collection. Frisbie, a historian, wrote the book 'Florida's Fabled Inns' and her collection is now with the state of Florida. At left is a later view of the Collier Inn, from Florida's state archives. All these photos are in the Florida Memory project collection in Tallahassee, part of the State Library and Archives of Florida.



*Their world was defined by
vast shell middens and an
intricate, water-based way
of life — sort of a prehistoric
Venice with the feel of
Disney's Jungle Cruise*

The group grew organically after an earlier effort by a member and local hotelier was not approved by owners. "The best thing for the future of the island was for a group of homeowners to buy it, not an individual, because it's better off community-owned," Bound said. "I initially found nine people, and we were chatting and chatting. I put a call to Steve and Gretchen [Mezynieski] one Saturday morning, and we decided to join forces because we had two groups talking."

Bound said that while they have raised a significant sum to buy the island, they will need to raise more. "A single individual could do this, but a group of homeowners is much more likely to succeed," Bound said, "and bring the community along with them, because there are 120 homes on the island."

One of the other investor-owner couples is George and Lynn Preckwinkle. They have been homeowners since late 2019 and were social members for a few years before that, coming from Cabbage Key. "We tried to dock at Useppa, and they were very polite and said, 'It's a private island.' I think the next day I found out how to become a member. There was the answer," George Preckwinkle said.

He is retired from the hardware business. He also has a background in finance, legal and retail, and served on the Sangamon County Board. Preckwinkle's family owned a group of Ace Hardware stores in Illinois. The team has other expertise. Joe Salas and his wife, Row, operate the Hotel Baker in St. Charles, Illinois, west of Chicago, which opened in 1928. The Salases will be looking at front-of-house issues and technology.

Another owner is Ken Hanford, who is from Ohio and has a manufacturing company. He initially came to the island with his father. "My dad and I, one day we were out, and we drove down and went and saw the membership director, and he said, 'Take a golf cart around the island. Tell me what you think.' So I came back and signed a contract, and we joined that day," Hanford said.

He had always intended to just be a social member, but the interest grew. "We went on vacation with my family," he said. "We have four children. And then the next week we bought a house. We had just fallen in love with the natural beauty, and like George said, we met so many nice people as we traveled around the island, and then such impressive people. We've got some really great relationships."

Bound believes that the resident ownership will be a plus.

"We thought for the best outcome is for a small group of homeowners to buy this place," he said. "Because then you can raise the capital to fix it up, but you don't have the threat of over commercialization, right? That's basically the magic."

One thing that they had to face for residents was the issue of the assessments on property.

"Dues and assessments have been way too low for too long," Bound said. "So when we put the package together, part of it was to say to the homeowners, this is the plan. We're going to double your dues and assessments, because otherwise the business model makes no sense."

The Operation

"In three and a half months, a huge amount has been achieved," Bound said. So far, the group has spent \$5 million to bring the operations of the historic club and island back to its heyday. Renovations and reopenings include a beach club created at the Useppa marina, new food and beverage from noon to 6 p.m. each day, a re-laid croquet court, reopened tennis courts and the pool area, all totally rebuilt.

The island opened again for social events at a pre-New Year's Eve party on Dec. 30. Across the board, they have the expertise to handle the contracting internally; the biggest job by far has been getting the marina area completed, so access is easier and the docks are safe.

While it is a labor of love for all of them, it is definitely a profit-making enterprise. "We'll make money," Bound said. "Sixteen million doesn't buy you a number of houses in Boca Grande." They decided not to make the operation a Homeowners Association, but instead focus on the Collier Inn as a linchpin to market the island.

"You've got this place, but it needed fixing. We intend to make money, not because we're greedy, but because we've taken the risk," Bound said. "And if you go into it saying, 'we'll break even' you're going to end up losing money."

The whole enterprise is also an exercise in personality. Bound is enjoying the community aspect of it. It has not always been easy between 120 homeowners, some also investors, all living together on a small island.

"It's actually quite an interesting study in sort of human psychology and communities. I think all are the same the world over," he said. "So 90% of people, good. 5% okay, 5% complete troublemakers, on everything. It's the same."

All 10 founders are putting in sweat equity. "The 10 founders are a very talented group," Bound said. In advance of restoring the Collier Inn, Mezynieski was able to work through the issues with the individual contractors. There is much of that sort of expertise going into the project.

"When you see [Mezynieski] operate, he knows more than most of the specialists, like when the guy comes out to do the electric for them, yes, who's a deep specialist," Bound said. "He just does that. Steve knows as much as he does."



Here, one of the many garden paths on the island; the geography of the island is enhanced because of its ancient high ridge.

Operations Focus

One of the biggest priorities for the group of community owners is the Collier Inn. Iconic is an understatement. There are also more than 120 houses on the island, but the future of the profitability of the island will be to revive the hotel portion, both in dining and rooms and rentals, as the centerpiece. In November 2025, they had to reshore the foundations of the Collier Inn.

In addition, many of the owners rent their properties; upgrading the guest services will be key, as well as selling social memberships.

They do not have a general contractor; the leadership is taking care of as much as each has expertise.

"That's a lot of telephone calls and then thinking through. I mean, basic stuff, like new club rules," Bound said. There are no easy decisions when you have a historic place that trades on its own story and nostalgia.

"Simple decisions, like, what do we do with this tree? There are some trees that are sort of iconic," Bound said. And then there are the prosaic but important decisions that had not been attended to, particularly after three storms. "The golf carts were all knackered," Bound said. "Or absolutely nothing had been done to them for a decade. So we're going to buy 25 golf carts." That decision took hours.

One important area is at the docks, which is for welcoming guests. A new seawall was put up in two weeks, so that when one gets off the boat to come to the island, you jump into the beach club area. While they have opened the pool by the Collier Inn, they are planning a pool for the beach club area later. Down the line, they want to bring back what was called the Tarpon Bar and have a presence for a broker.

After the Collier reopens, there will be other basic things that need to be attended to.



Here, a garden path on the island.

“There’s a lot of other stuff that’s less interesting, like utilities, that have to be fixed, but that’ll go on again next year at the same time,” Mezynieski said. “The construction really has been going along. There’s so much to do, and I feel like every day is Christmas with not such a great present, because every day there’s a new thing that unveils itself that needs to be repaired. But as we discover the challenges, we address ‘em, and we just rebuild it and rebuild it properly.”

Technology does help. One of the best-known features of the island is the Pink Promenade, which runs along the high ridge of the island, amid flowering trees. It was originally made of shells and pink sand. Last fall, they were trying to mix colors to find out what the best one would be.

“Once we get the mix dialed in, because the truck, the ultrametric mixer, is computer-generated,” Mezynieski said. “It generates the concrete. So once we have our mix design programmed in, it’ll be the same every single time we pour it.”

Keeping a Great Florida Place

“This setting, I think, is unbeatable, like we’re sitting on the ocean, and it’s as though you’re in a jungle. I mean, it’s extraordinary,” Bound said. One of their social members has just been on a Pacific cruise: “a section of a world cruise, sort of Oz, up through the Pacific, West Coast, the states. And they’re biased,” he said, “But they concluded there’s not a lot better than this.”

This is a once-in-a-lifetime project. Just as Garfield Beckstead rescued it, or Baron Collier spied it, it needed a new group to cherish it and rebuild.

“And the biggest thing is we’re making sure that everything is properly engineered and properly built and designed, so that our goal is not just to patch it up, but to make sure that Useppa is here in another 100 years,” Mezynieski said.





A newly restored view of the beach and dock area at night, which is a focal point for arrivals.
Photo contributed

The Pink Promenade was originally made of shells and pink sand. Last fall, they were trying to mix colors to find out what the best one would be.



A recent rendering of the restored Collier Inn by Useppa artist Bev Anderson.



ENGLEWOOD

EXPLORE, EXPERIENCE, ENJOY

Sarasota County Government and the Englewood (CRA) inform, promote and engage businesses and residents in the Englewood CRA District.

Some of the more visible efforts include:

- Storefront Improvement Program
- Artscape, Englewood Sculpture Garden
- Pioneer Plaza and Dignam Family Stage
- Veterans Memorial and Freedom Pavilion

The Englewood Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) undertakes activities or projects for neighborhood revitalization and beautification.

These efforts include economic, business, civic, social and recreational development that will benefit the residents as a whole as well as surrounding communities and neighborhoods.



For more information, please contact englewood@scgov.net or call 311.