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Montage Palmetto Bluff



ARTICLE BY MORGAN STEWART



The Belle of the Ball Once Again

GRACE, PALMETTO BLUFF'S ICONIC MOTOR YACHT,
DEBUTS AFTER EXTENSIVE RESTORATION

In November 2023, the next chapter in the remarkable story of *Grace*, one of the last existing pre-World War I gas-powered yachts, began on the picturesque May River that runs through the heart of Bluffton, South Carolina. Under the guidance of The Grace Club—a newly formed founder/member sponsored, not-for-profit organization—after extensive restoration, the beautiful antique motor yacht built for the purposes of commuting across New York Harbor, returned in all her glory to her home at Palmetto Bluff. Named in honor of Grace Graham Vanderbilt, the sister of the original owner of Palmetto Bluff, Richard T. Wilson Jr., and wife of Cornelius Vanderbilt III, the iconic vessel is ready for her next act.

Grace's story began in 1913 when Joseph B. Cousins contracted the New York Yacht, Launch and Engine Company to build a motor yacht for his personal use. Built in Morris Heights, New York along the Harlem River, after completion, the yacht was delivered to Cousins in Brooklyn, where she was used for recreation and travel back and forth to New York City. The original name of the yacht was *Sispud II*, and she was built in the style referred to as a Double Ender Commuter Yacht. At 60x12.5 feet, the framework was constructed with steam-bent white oak ribs with a white oak keel as the base; the planking below the waterline was yellow pine, while the above planking was cedar. Her original motor was a four-cylinder, 50-horsepower gasoline engine with a top speed of 12 miles per hour. Located in the engine room were two bunks, a toilet, and a

sink for the two-person crew required to operate the vessel. The remainder of the below-deck area consisted of a stateroom with a twin bed, a salon with a dining area, and a galley.

Cousins eventually sold the *Sispud II* in 1925 to James Adams and his wife Gertie, owners of the James Adams Floating Theater, who used the vessel as their live-aboard while traveling the Eastern Seaboard from the Chesapeake Bay to North Carolina. The 800-seat floating theater was built on a barge and pulled along the waterway by tugboats to coastal towns of the South, bringing music, shows, and vaudeville acts to isolated areas.

In 1926, Edna Ferber, a noted novelist, traveled with the theater during the summer season and wrote the novel, *Show Boat*, based on her experiences traveling with the troupe and living aboard *Sispud II*. The novel became an award-winning Rodgers & Hammerstein Broadway show and later a motion picture. Adams sold his interest in the theater to his brother in 1930, but continued ownership of the yacht.

Sispud II had two additional owners: Dr. Jay Paul Jeter, a dentist from Philadelphia (1937-1960) and Richard M. Tunis from Kennett Square, Pennsylvania (1960-1963). In 1963, Henry and Stella Szablewski from Lansdale, Pennsylvania, purchased *Sispud II* and renamed the vessel *Acquilla* from the Latin for "Eagle." They sailed her in Chesapeake Bay but, after Henry's death, Stella could not manage the vessel herself and eventually abandoned her at Swan Creek Marina in Rock Hall, Maryland in 1980.

In 1990, Earl McMillen, III of Newport, Rhode Island, owner of McMillen Yachts, Inc. which restored and maintained a fleet of classic wooden ships, found *Acquilla* being used as an out-of-water residence. After learning that The Cloister at Sea Island, Georgia was looking for such a yacht, McMillen's team undertook a two-year restoration project, finishing in 1996. *Acquilla* was renamed *Zapala*, in homage to the name of the personal yacht of The Cloister's developer, Harry Coffin, in the 1920s.

After Palmetto Bluff opened in 2004, the community was looking for a period piece from the Wilson Family era at the turn of the century until 1926. As the yacht was built in 1913—two years before the Wilson mansion was



↑ The Grace takes guests of Palmetto Bluff out for a tour of the May River.

completed—it was a perfect fit. Palmetto Bluff purchased the yacht in 2004, and the vessel was renamed *Grace*, after the youngest sister of R.T. Wilson, Jr., the wealthy New Yorker who purchased the 18,000 acres he named Palmetto Bluff in 1902. The vessel's namesake, Grace Graham Wilson, was married to Cornelius ("Neily") Vanderbilt III and was a society hostess in New York and Newport. For 15+ years, *Grace* provided a unique member experience on the May River, affording guests incredible views of the property, the Town of Bluffton, and surrounding waterways.

In December 2020, *Grace* experienced a main engine overheat which caused a cracked block, beginning a period of slow deterioration which resulted in the yacht being placed on land. In December 2022, a Palmetto Bluff Club member formed Operation Saving *Grace* to find a path forward towards putting her back into service. In partnership with Southstreet Partners, one of the largest owners and operators of private residential club and resort communities in the United States (including Kiawah Island, Palmetto Bluff, The Cliffs, Naples Grande, Barnsley Resort and Residences at Salamander) and the management team of the Palmetto Bluff Club, they worked collaboratively for the past year toward this shared objective.

Under the guidance of The Grace Club, the iconic ship has been brought back to her former glory. Built on the solid foundation of the partnership structure that was created between The Grace Club founders and Southstreet, a full-speed-ahead approach to restoring

Grace was adopted. Restoration work included replacing the engine, repairing hull damage, refinishing and repainting the hull and exterior, refinishing the interior, replacing the navigation system, and acquiring recertification by the U.S. Coast Guard. The Grace Club requested the use of purpleheart wood, renowned for its durability and rot resistance, to use in *Grace*'s restoration. Southstreet's commitment to the endeavor included transferring title of *Grace* to The Grace Club, providing long-term, rent-free access to the Grace Dock, and supplying ongoing marketing and communications support for The Grace Club operations.

"*Grace* is an elegant and iconic motor yacht with a storied background and rich history spanning 110 years. A dedicated group of homeowners felt compelled to bring her back into service for the benefit of our neighbors and the larger Bluffton community," Lee Leonard, president of The Grace Club said. "Working together with Southstreet Partners, a group of Palmetto Bluff members formed Operation Saving *Grace*, to return her to her full glory. I'm proud to say she is standing tall and became available for scheduled cruises, as well as private charters, in November of 2023."

"We are grateful to The Grace Club for their dedication and partnership in protecting *Grace*—one of Palmetto Bluff's iconic symbols—and we are happy to have been able to support this worthy endeavor," Rob Duckett, president of operations for Southstreet Partners said.

The Grace Club will provide operational oversight and have responsibility for all maintenance of *Grace*. Their primary goal will be to operate *Grace* for the benefit of all Palmetto Bluff members and their families, Montage hotel guests, and the greater Bluffton community including charitable organizations and youth groups. 🌊

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