

BENJAMIN RACUSIN

'A loss for the island'



FILE • Staff photo

In this August 1983 file photo, Helen Racusin holds the Bible as her husband, Benjamin, is sworn in as Hilton Head Island's first mayor.

Hilton Head Island's first mayor — a man of 'considerable talents' — dies at 98

"He was just a good man, and a man who lent his considerable talents to the benefits of his community. He will be missed. And I will miss him personally."

Mayor: Drew Laughlin

By BRIAN HEFFERNAN
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Benjamin M. Racusin, who pushed for "full government with limited services" as the Town of Hilton Head Island's first mayor, died late Sunday at the Fraser Health Center in The Sea-
brook. He was 98.

"He had an extraordinary life," said his cousin and caretaker, Carol Schembra. "And he was an extraordinary man."

A service celebrating Racusin's life will be at 2 p.m. Sept. 14 at the First Presbyterian Church of Hilton Head Island, according to Schembra, who said he died of natural causes. His wife Helen died in 2011 at age 91.

Racusin was elected mayor Aug. 2, 1983, beating his opponents by wide margins. He had been involved in several community groups and spearheaded the 10-year push for incorporation of the barrier island.

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RACUSIN

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Racusin headed the Hilton Head Community Association, and was a member of the Commission for Island Government and the Island Emergency Council. He played a leadership role when a barge knocked the bridge to the island out of service for six weeks in 1974.

He advocated a government that would put zoning rules in place to slow down development. Racusin believed that services such as sewer and water should be provided by public service districts and police protection by the Beaufort County Sheriff's Office instead of the town.

"We're not against development. We want quality, planned development," Racusin had said.

He promoted public beach access, beach nourishment, the Cross Island Parkway and completion of water management and land-use plans.

Racusin's two-year mayoral term was not without controversy. Within 14 months of his election, he was harshly criticized for appointing a secret committee to tighten land use rules. He later apologized for the secrecy.

The land-use plan was adopted after Racusin left office in 1985, but his push for change lived long after his term on Town Council.

Although he was not alone in his attempts to slow waterfront, commercial and haphazard development on Hilton Head, Racusin's voice was heard above the others.

Even after leaving office, Racusin left behind a list of



FILE • Staff photo

In May 2010, Hilton Head Island Mayor Tom Peeples, left, presented Benjamin Racusin, the island's first mayor, with a framed certificate commending him for his service during Racusin's 95th birthday celebration at Town Hall.

Although he was not alone in his attempts to slow waterfront, commercial and haphazard development on Hilton Head, Racusin's voice was heard above the others.

recommendations that would prove beneficial to island residents as years passed. Suggestions included water service to rural island areas, better control of Broad Creek boat traffic and development of a volunteer town civil-defense system.

Racusin grew up in Johnsonburg, Pa., and earned a bachelor's degree in history and political science from Alfred University in western New York state. Before serving as an enlisted man and later as an officer in the U.S.

Army Air Corps during World War II, Racusin taught history and coached football, boxing and track in Oswego, N.Y., public schools.

In 1947, he joined the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency for a 24-year career that took him to the Far East and Pacific Ocean islands. In the 1960s, he returned to the United States as a Washington-based CIA training officer. He retired in 1971 as the chief of the CIA language school.

He was active with the Boy

Scouts and was president of the Community Association from 1972 through 1974.

Some say his most difficult task involved work on the Human Relations Council, a group formed in the early 1970s to achieve harmonious relations between island newcomers and native-island property owners.

Thomas Barnwell Jr., who served on the group with Racusin, said the two had disagreements. Barnwell, a native-island leader, wanted the town to provide expanded services, such as water, sewer and law enforcement; Racusin favored more limited town services.

However, the two "learned to disagree agreeably," Barnwell said Tuesday.

He said Racusin "was a person that had an interest in providing

whatever he possibly could for the benefit of people and humanity."

"I regret very much that an old friend has gone," he added.

The council on which the two served disbanded, but Racusin's dream of unity never faded.

Nearly 10 years later, during his race for mayor, Racusin again pushed for harmony.

"The situation is still strained," he had said during his mayoral race. "That should be one of the goals for the town government — to bring unity to the island."

Racusin later received a Bahá'ís of Beaufort County Human Rights Day award for his "undaunted efforts in promoting justice, fairness and unity in our area during his tenure as mayor."

Mayor Drew Laughlin said Tuesday that Racusin's passing "is a loss for the island," as well as a personal loss for him and his wife, Jane.

"One of the benefits of becoming mayor was that Jane and I got the opportunity to know Ben personally," Laughlin said.

"He was one of those people who, as you got to know him, you thought, 'Well, I'd like to be more like that,'" he said.

Laughlin said he sometimes looks back with awe at the leadership and foresight of the men and women who helped form the town — especially Racusin, who he said was remarkably humble.

"He was just a good man, and a man who lent his considerable talents to the benefits of his community," Laughlin said.

"He will be missed. And I will miss him personally."

Follow reporter Brian Heffernan at twitter.com/IPBG_Brian.



BENJAMIN M. RACUSIN

A Celebration of Life

2:00 PM

SEPTEMBER 14, 2013

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
HILTON HEAD ISLAND, SOUTH CAROLINA

Board Member of the Hilton Head Island Community Association; Chairman, Commission for Island Government; Recipient, Chamber of Commerce Alice Glenn Doughtie "Citizen of the Year Award"; Member, Committee of 27 negotiating Sea Pines Covenants and Restrictions; Organizer and Co-Chairman, Island Emergency Council; Board Member, Hilton Head Island Human Relations; Council Member, Coastal Environmental Coalition; Elder and Member of Session, First Presbyterian Church; Treasurer and Board Member, HHI Hospital Auxiliary; Board Member, Child and Youth Development Center; Advisory Board Member, First Carolina Bank; Co-Organizer, Board Member and Vice President, Hilton Head Chapter, TROA; Chairman, Emergency Committee, 1974 Skull Creek Bridge outage; Assistant District Commissioner, Boys Scouts of America; Member, BSA District Commissioner's Staff of Pioneer Scout Development; Organizing Committee and Board Member, The Community Playhouse; Former member, U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, Flotilla 10-11; Honorary Member, Rotary Club, named "Paul Harris Fellow" in 1985; Recipient, First Presbyterian Church Distinguished Service Award; Sertoma "Service to Mankind" Award; Bahais "Human Rights" Award, The "Order of the Palmetto" Award by SC Governor Richard Riley; Member, Committee for Incorporation Transition Committee; Member, Ad Hoc Committee to Develop "Special District Development Standards" for Hilton Head Island; Chairman, S.C. District 123 Citizen's Committee for Bridges; Treasurer/Member Beaufort Jasper Mental Health Association; Board Member, The Seabrook; President and Member since 1972, HHI Community Association; Member, original Advisory Board, Sea Pines Property Owner's Association; Board Member, S.C. Municipal Association; Old Colony Trust; Hilton Head Humane Association; Hilton Head Rescue Squad; Chairman, the Advisory Board to Trustee in (Ginn) Bankruptcy; Chairman, 1991 Town of Hilton Head Island Commission to update the Comprehensive Plan; Trustee Emeritus, the Heritage Classic Foundation; Member, Former Mayors of Hilton Head Island; Supporter of many Island Charities, and a friend and mentor to many.

their children Darcy and Philip of New York City; Peter and his children, Carla and Peri and their mother, Asiye Kay of Clinton, Connecticut; Nancy Racusin of Atlanta, Georgia; Scott Racusin of Pasadena, California; Karen Racusin of Glendora, California and their sons, Eric and Heidi of Upland, California; and Adam and Samantha of Austin, Texas; family of the late Norman and Bette Racusin, former residents of Hilton Head Island; sister-in-law Marilee Schuler of Russell, Kansas; nieces and nephews; Melanie and Chuck Waymaster of Lawrence, Kansas; Mike and Malissa Schuler of Hot Springs, Arkansas; Marilyn and Kevin Gederberg of Augusta, Kansas; Marianne and Kirk Ward of Perry Oklahoma; Elaine and Pat Hilger of Russell, Kansas; Mark and Jeannette Schuler of Manhattan, Kansas; Jim Looney and his wife Susan Strohl of Centennial, Colorado; John Looney and his wife Julia Ball of Longmont, Colorado; and their respective children and grandchildren; and on Hilton Head Island, his cousin, Carol Levinson Schembra, husband Philip and their son, Christopher of New York City.

Ben's lasting legacy is his selfless service to his country and to Hilton Head Island. His long and colorful life of action and dedication to improve the lives of others is cause for remembrance and celebration. Ben was passionate about philanthropy and those quiet heroes who made huge differences.

He was an early and devoted supporter of Dr. Jack McConnell, founder of Volunteers in Medicine Hilton Head Island, recognizing that it was our responsibility to assure that every one of our neighbors had access to health care regardless of their ability to pay. Like Ben Racusin, Dr. Jack McConnell wanted to improve lives.

Memorials to honor the goodness of Ben Racusin and continue the work of Dr. McConnell can be made to Volunteers in Medicine Hilton Head Island, 15 Northridge Drive, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina 29926 or online at www.vimclinic.org or to The Seabrook of Hilton Head, 300 Woodhaven Drive, Hilton Head Island SC 29928. Correspondence may be sent to Carol Schembra at 16 Armada, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina 29928.

Arrangements are being handled by the Island Funeral Home and Crematory on Hilton Head Island.
www.theislandfuneralhome.com.

"The World Would Be A Better Place If There Were More Gentlemen Like Ben Racusin"

Benjamin M. Racusin, 98, passed away on August 11, 2013 on Hilton Head Island. He was born on May 19, 1915 in Johnsonburg, Pennsylvania, the son of the late Carla and Max Racusin. He was preceded in death by the love of his life, Helen Schuler Racusin in 2011. Ben and his wife Helen had been members of the Seabrook and Fraser Health Center community for the past 15 years. They enjoyed their intellectual friendships.

Ben Racusin led an intriguing life giving service to his community as a leader, a statesman, a former military officer serving in China with the OSS/CIA and as the distinguished first Mayor of the Town of Hilton Head Island.

He graduated with a liberal arts degree from Alfred University in Alfred, New York. After graduating, he accepted a position to teach history, political science, coach football, boxing and track in the high school in Oswego, New York.

In 1942, he answered Uncle Sam's call and was assigned first to the Army Air Corps in Miami Beach as an athletic noncom. Shortly after, he was selected to attend Officers Candidate School and returned to Lowry Air Force Base in

Denver. In December 1944, after extensive training, he was recruited to volunteer for duty in China and left for the Far East and Pacific areas with the Office of Strategic Service (OSS), the predecessor to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). He returned to Shanghai in December, 1946, and met his bride-to-be Helen Schuler, from Russell, Kansas. They married three months later on March 9, 1947. When Helen took her discharge, she joined Ben at the OSS. They both had successful careers with the CIA, ending as training officers in 1971.

Ben and Helen were the power couple in the early 70's with their involvement in many community organizations. In May, 1983, a referendum of incorporation was passed by over 60 percent of the votes cast. A group of Islanders asked Ben to run for Mayor. Ben won the election and had a huge task to achieve. August 5, 1983, Racusin and his Town Council took their seats and the Town of Hilton Head Island was born. It was a humbling experience and Ben had a tremendous job to do to get the building blocks in place. It was a hard working group and they all realized the unique position they were in.

Ben's involvement included...First Mayor of Hilton Head Island; President and

On November 5, 2008, Mayor Thomas D. Peeples and the Hilton Head Island Town Council bestowed an incredible honor by naming the Building and Council Chambers at the Town of Hilton Head Island, the Benjamin M. Racusin Town Council Chambers.

Ben is survived by his brother and sister-in-law Rita and Herbert Kay of New York City and Madison, Connecticut;

ON HILTON HEAD ISLAND

First mayor inducted into hall of fame

About 350 people attended a ceremony Thursday to honor the late Ben Racusin.

By DAN BURLEY
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Hilton Head Island's first mayor, Ben Racusin, was posthumously inducted into the Hilton Head Hall of Fame on Thursday.

About 350 people honored Racusin at a ceremony hosted by the Hilton Head Island Rotary Club. Racusin died on August 11, 2013. He was 98.

Carol Schembra, his cousin, accepted the award in his honor.



Racusin

"Ben never asked for accolades," she said Friday. "All he did was work for the people in the community. He had a compassion for making this a better place."

Racusin, like many on the island, was not a native.

He was born on May 19, 1915, in Johnsonburg, Pa., and earned a bachelor's degree in history and political science from Alfred University in western New York state.

During World War II, he served with the U.S. Office of Strategic Service, which would become the CIA. He then worked for the CIA in Shanghai, where he met the love of his life, Helen.

The couple moved to Washington, D.C., and worked for the CIA until their retirement in 1971.

They planned a life of travel but instead threw themselves into volunteer work on the island.

Racusin was a member of 40 different organizations, Schembra said, ranging from health and the arts to youth and humanitarian causes.

In the early 1970s, Racusin worked on the island's Human Relations Council, a group formed to foster harmonious relations between newcomers and

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MAYOR

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native-island property owners.

In his two-year term as mayor, Racusin advocated zoning, development standards and a plan to control growth.

He believed sewer and water services should be provided by public service districts. He promoted police protection by the Beaufort County Sheriff's Office, rather than the town.

He also championed public beach access, beach renourish-

ment, the Cross Island Parkway and completion of water management and land-use plans.

He joins Charles Fraser, Fred Hack, Charles Simmons Sr., Charlotte Heinrichs, Thomas Barnwall Jr. and Billie Hack in the hall of fame, ac-

cording to the Rotary Club's website.

"Ben would have been so honored to be amongst this impressive list of individuals," Schembra said.

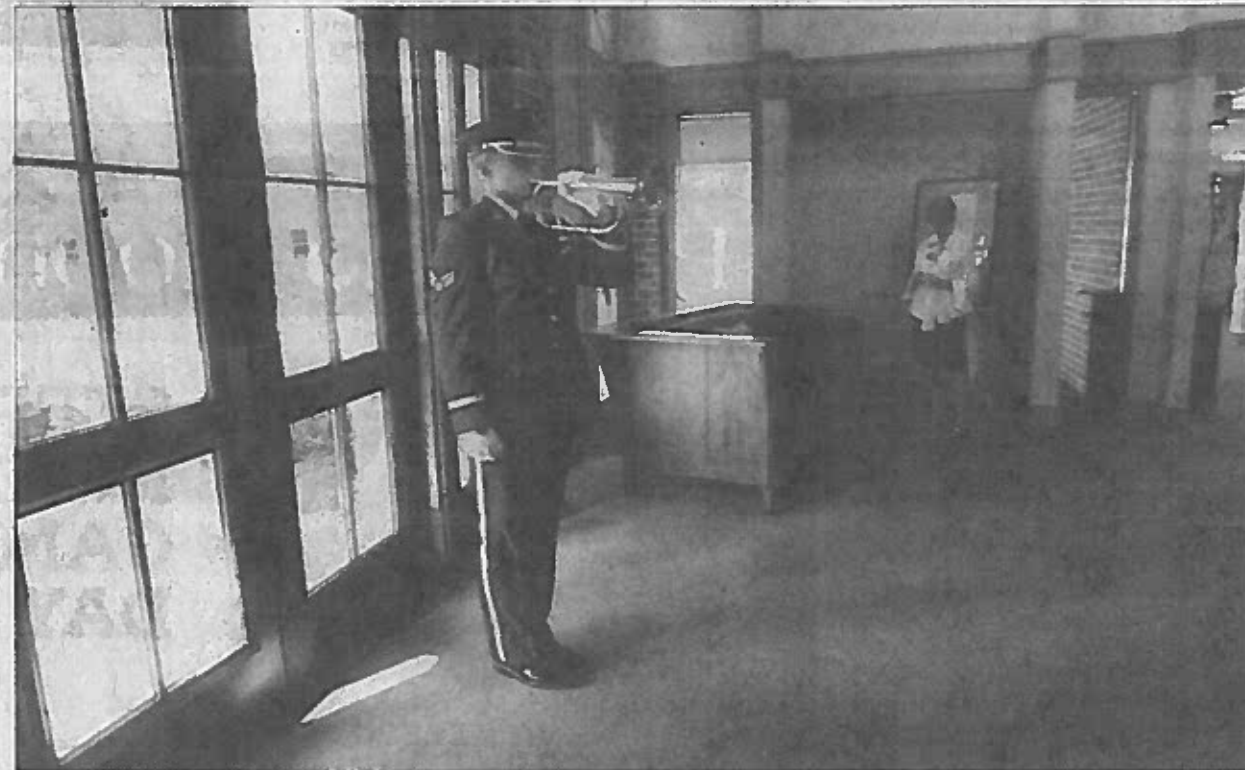
Follow reporter Dan Burley at twitter.com/IPBG_Dan.

**"Often we refer to big people in the community as tall timber.
In Ben's death, a giant Sequoia has fallen."**

The Rev. John M. Miller, a friend and former pastor of Ben Racusin's



At memorial service for Hilton Head's first mayor, BEN RACUSIN CELEBRATED AS ISLAND VISIONARY



JAY KARR • Staff photo

ABOVE: Air Force bugler Joshua Ward plays taps Saturday during the life celebration service for former Hilton Head Island Mayor Ben Racusin at First Presbyterian Church. Racusin, the island's first mayor, died on Aug. 11 at the age of 98. The Air Force honor guard was on hand to recognize Racusin's WWII service in the Army Air Corps. TOP: Racusin is shown in November 1984.

By DAN BURLEY • dburley@islandpacket.com • 843-706-8142

Ben Racusin held the first Hilton Head Island Town Council meeting in his house on Twin Pines Road. "We are now a town," he told the four other council members who sat in his den in 1983, "united in purpose, and that is to ensure the wealth, health and happiness of all people of Hilton Head Island."

Thirty years later, mourners on Saturday paid final tribute to Racusin, the island's first mayor. Racusin died Aug. 11 at 98.

He was remembered by friends and family as a volunteer and a visionary, a humble man who sought to balance the

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"When he saw her, he was immediately Shanghai'd," Miller joked. "That's where the expression comes from."

The couple moved to Washington, D.C., and both worked for the CIA until their retirement in 1971.

They planned a life of travel, but instead threw themselves into volunteer work on the island. Helen Racusin died in 2011.

Racusin was a member of 40 different organizations, Peeples said, ranging from health and the arts to youth and humanitarian causes.

"If there were ever a king of volunteerism, it would be Ben Racusin," Peeples said.

In the early 1970s, Racusin worked on the island's Human Relations Council, a group formed to foster harmonious

relations between island newcomers and native-island property owners.

"He had a worldview much broader than the guarded gate," said David Lauderdale, a columnist with the Island Packet and Beaufort Gazette, "a worldview that included those who were here before we got here."

In his two-year term as mayor, Racusin advocated zoning, development standards and a comprehensive plan to control growth. He believed sewer and water services should be provided by public service districts. He promoted police protection by the Beaufort County Sheriff's Office, rather than the town.

He also championed public beach access, beach renourishment, the Cross Island Parkway and completion of water management and land-use plans.

In his later days, Racusin lived at Fraser Health Center in The Seabrook.

"You hear the people at The Seabrook talk about Ben; if your heart could pop out of your chest, it would," said Philip Schembra, the husband of Ben's caretaker and cousin Carol Schembra.

Speakers, including his brother, Herb, remembered Racusin's sense of humor and love of books, spy novels being his favorite.

But mostly, he was remembered for setting the standard for Hilton Head's leaders.

"Often we refer to big people in the community as tall timber," Miller said. "In Ben's death, a giant Sequoia has fallen."

Follow reporter Dan Burley at twitter.com/IPBG_Dan.

RACUSIN

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island's potential for development with its natural characteristics.

"There was no playbook, no staff, no budget, no town code for Ben," former mayor Tom Peeples said. "He helped develop the comprehensive plan that's outlined the town's growth for 30 years."

The tributes came at First Presbyterian Church of Hilton Head Island, where the sanctuary was crowded with current and former town and county officials, friends and family, and where Racusin was a member and elder.

The Rev. John M. Miller, his friend and former pastor, said Racusin's penchant for bring-

ing people together as mayor helped the town cross racial lines at a time when the island was factionalized.

"He had a special touch, to integrate the immigrants and the native islanders," Miller said. "We are grateful to him for the bridges he built."

Racusin, like many on the island he oversaw, was not a native.

He was born on May 19, 1915, in Johnsonburg, Pa., and earned a bachelor's degree in history and political science from Alfred University in western New York state.

During World War II, he served with the U.S. Office of Strategic Service, which would become the CIA. He then worked for the CIA in Shanghai, where he met the love of his life, Helen.