



PALM BEACH THE LEGACY OF CAMELOT

BY GLENN SWIFT

AS PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES, JOHN F. KENNEDY MADE SOME OF THE MOST CRUCIAL DECISIONS IN AMERICAN HISTORY, INCLUDING HOW TO MANAGE THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS, WHILE AT THE “WINTER WHITE HOUSE” IN PALM BEACH.

It is unlike any other place in Florida. With its Gatsby-era architecture, stunning mansions and posh shopping, Palm Beach has always been known as a playground for the rich and famous. For well over a century, it has served as the winter address for much of America’s aristocracy. The Rockefellers, Vanderbilts and DuPonts have long since been associated with this elitist enclave. But no family has ever quite personified “Palm Beach chic” like the Kennedys. And for one brief shining moment in the early 1960s, a handsome young president and his beautiful wife, whose family seemed to symbolize the very essence of youth and vitality, captivated America. Together, they projected a sense of warm-heartedness and joy, despite their wealth and connections.

During that short-lived moment of extraordinary pageantry, the Kennedy estate at 1095 N. Ocean Blvd. became known as the “Winter White House.” It was not your typical presidential lodging, however, and a far cry from the Kennedy mansion in Hyannisport, MA. Having neither air conditioning nor heat, the modest home lacked many of the creature comforts to which America’s royal family had grown accustomed. Despite its shortcomings, the “beach house” (as the family always referred to it) was a wonderful place for fun and relaxation – an ideal setting in which to escape the pressures and rigors of life. The estate was not always, however, merely the scene of sunbathing and touch football. Some serious moments were also spent there.

In the winter months of 1954–1955, John Kennedy chose the family’s Florida hideaway as the site of his recuperation from the back surgery that had nearly killed the young senator. Eerily, on several occasions, Jack arrived at the Palm Beach International Airport and was taken off the plane by stretcher. Despite the

pain and discomfort of his condition, it was during this period of recovery that JFK wrote his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Profiles In Courage*. A few years later, in April 1959, John made his fateful decision to run for the presidency of the United States of America, and first planned his campaign while in Palm Beach. In the fall of 1962, when America stood on the verge of World War III during the Cuban Missile Crisis (Oct. 18–29), President Kennedy held several key meetings in Palm Beach in the midst of the crisis' most critical moments.

Some of the fondest memories of JFK among older Palm Beachers took place while Kennedy was senator of Massachusetts. Many glowingly recall how he and Jacqueline were often seen strolling along Worth Avenue – Palm Beach's most elegant and fashionable shopping district – in casual Florida-style attire. As the story goes, John had a particular penchant for khaki slacks, penny loafers and no socks. Years later when John assumed the presidency, the family's relaxed Bohemian lifestyle abruptly changed. Suddenly, trips to town were made in motorcades. When attending St. Edwards Catholic Church, the family now had Secret Service agents sitting on either side of them. For John and Jackie, the carefree days of walking the pristine streets of Palm Beach were now a thing of the past.

Although best known for that special time, the Kennedy's Palm Beach legacy dates to long before Camelot. Shortly before the turn of the last century, Mayor John "Honey Fitz" Fitzgerald of Boston began making annual winter visits with his family to the exclusive island paradise. The mayor's favorite daughter, Rose, was particularly fond of the locale's lavish tropical surroundings. One story, however, recounts that there was a time when she wasn't too thrilled about making the trip. It was February 1911, and Rose was in love with Joseph P. Kennedy, son of a leading Massachusetts politician and businessman. Apparently, Rose was very much in love with Joseph and wanted to be with him at his junior prom at Harvard University, not on a 1,200-mile train ride with Mom and Dad. Although Dad won out on this occasion, Rose married the flamboyant Joseph a few years later. For their honeymoon, the young couple eagerly chose the sun and splendor of Palm Beach. A Kennedy legacy had been born.

During Prohibition (1920–1933), Palm Beach was more than just sun and fun for the Kennedy family. Joseph, already a successful Wall Street broker, was also secretly involved in another less cultivated "business" – bootlegging. Although he was a far cry from the stereotypical gun-toting gangster of that notorious era, when it came to shrewdness, few were his equal. Joseph effectively utilized Palm Beach as the center for his illegal activities and had large amounts of liquor clandestinely imported from nearby British-held Nassau, Bahamas. Allegedly, Joseph's silent partner in the islands was none other than Roland Simonette, a prominent Nassau "Bay Street" businessman who later became the first premier of the Bahamas shortly before its independence in the late 1960s. Simonette was not the only one in cahoots with Joseph. Local lore has it that many a warehouse along the Intracoastal Waterway, adjacent to the Port of Palm Beach, was filled with "Kennedy booze" during that time.

Joseph's fondness for Palm Beach did not end with that of Prohibition. In 1933, he purchased what later would become known as the "Kennedy Compound" from

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 BY PRESIDENT
 EISENHOWER AND
 OFTEN CONFUSED
 WITH THE “SEQUOIA”
 – A SIMILAR YACHT
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department store magnate, Rod Wanamaker. Wanamaker had hired internationally renowned architect, and future Palm Beach icon, Addison Mizner, when he built the house a decade earlier. Although Mizner designed the house in his trademark Moorish-Gothic style, the home was rather plain looking and quite unlike most of the other well-known Mizner projects (e.g., The Breakers Hotel and the Boca Raton Resort & Club) that have influenced the style of most of the landmarks in the community. Although Joseph hired architect Maurice Fatio to undertake some minor remodeling shortly after moving in, the home would remain largely unaltered and served as the family’s winter residence for three generations.

Despite its unassuming appearance, during JFK’s days as a senator, the house became a frequent gathering place for high-ranking dignitaries, heads of state and numerous celebrities. During Jack’s brief presidency, the home was known as the “Florida White House.” Flattering names aside, the unpretentious home was never quite fancy enough for Jackie. On many occasions, she would insist that she and Jack stay a few blocks away in the guest bedroom of long-time Kennedy friend and confidant, Col. Harold Paul. The opulent Paul mansion was a bit more in line with the tastes of the sophisticated First Lady.

Jackie never wavered, however, in her feelings for Palm Beach. Like all Kennedys, she held a close affection for the elegant community. Sentiments aside, during the Camelot years, the family tended to keep to themselves. After all, John was president and the affairs of state held priority. Security, fatefully enough, was always a concern. The family’s mostly insular social life during the presidential years, regretfully, has helped to perpetuate a myth that the island’s elite snubbed the family.

One of the most popular local legends is that the Kennedys, who were Catholic, were denied membership in the upper-crust Everglades Club and the equally pretentious Palm Beach Bath & Tennis Club. Although this apocryphal story was thoroughly debunked several years ago, many blue-haired, stiff-necked women continue to revel in the story.

After the tragic death of JFK on November 22, 1963, the Kennedys continued to winter at the beach house, but things were never the same. In 1984, David Kennedy, son of the late Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, died of a drug overdose in the Brazilian Court Hotel, just a few blocks away from the family estate. David had been ousted from the home after refusing to get help for his addiction.

Following David’s death, Rose’s health deteriorated rapidly. The strong-willed grande dame of the family, who had once directed traffic in front of the estate during a large family-held banquet (while wearing a formal evening gown no less), was about to breathe her last breath. Without the presence of the regal matriarch, the home lost much of its allure.

In 1991, the family once again was forced to face yet another painfully difficult situation. This time it was Kennedy cousin, William Kennedy Smith, who was charged and tried on the island for rape. The media seemed to be everywhere as the trial dragged on for months. The once happy beach house had now become known as the “Kennedy Compound.” Smith was eventually acquitted, but an era was about to end.



Two years later, and with heavy hearts, the family decided to put the estate up for sale. Sargent Shriver, who many years before had married Ethel Kennedy and is best known for heading up the Peace Corps under JFK, held the home's last gala affair. Despite an ominous bomb threat, over 300 guests attended the black-tie bash. Finally, in April 1995, the house was sold to Palm Beach socialites John and Marianne Castle for a reported \$4.9 million.

Shortly before closing on the property, Shriver organized the last family gathering at the estate the Kennedys called their winter home for so long, with 25 members of the proud Kennedy family present. There were no long dresses or tuxedos this time, but rather a cookout on the lawn – just like Rose, Joseph, John, Robert and so many other Kennedys had attended so many times before, so very happily, for so many years. The era of the “beach house” ended that day with a spirited game of touch football – a fitting tribute to an enduring legacy and to all the players who weren't there. ↴

KENNEDY FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHER BOB DAVIDOFF

For over 50 years, Palm Beach's Bob Davidoff has been photographing the rich and famous. His extraordinary talents have given him international acclaim and made him the photographer of choice for some of the most famous and influential people of our time. From U.S. Presidents Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, and British Prime Ministers Churchill and Heath, to numerous Hollywood celebrities and the super-rich, Davidoff has been there clicking away to capture their images. In many ways, Davidoff has been a part of history.

Davidoff began photographing the Kennedy family in 1957 when Jackie was pregnant with her first child, Caroline. He continues to speak with and photograph members of the family to this day. During the JFK presidency, Davidoff was approached by John and Jackie to capture the images of their family while at work and play in Palm Beach. Known for his discretion and tact, Davidoff developed a deep respect for the Kennedy family and became their esteemed confidant and friend. He still holds many fond memories of that very special time, a favorite of which is of an Easter egg hunt when John-John found the prized golden egg.

During the days of the “Florida White House,” Davidoff would take his photographs directly to the offices of what is now the *Palm Beach Post*, where they would be promptly sent out all over the world on the wire of United Press International. The remarkable photos included in this story were carefully selected from Davidoff's personal collection and provided by him. The author would also like to thank Davidoff's wife, “Babe,” and office manager, Gloria Mosch, for their kind assistance. As for the photographs themselves, all of them were taken by Davidoff while the Kennedy family was in Palm Beach. Although the images are now over 40 years old, the strength and vitality of those depicted is timeless.

IN 1933, JOSEPH KENNEDY PURCHASED A RATHER PLAIN-LOOKING BEACH HOUSE THAT IS BEST KNOWN TO MANY AS THE “KENNEDY COMPOUND.” AFTER BEING REMODELED, THE ESTATE AT 1095 N. OCEAN BLVD. BECAME THE WINTER HOME TO PALM BEACH'S MOST CELEBRATED FAMILY FOR THREE GENERATIONS. THE BEACH HOUSE ALSO PLAYED HOST TO MANY CELEBRITIES, DIGNITARIES AND VISITING HEADS OF STATE.

