

Hobcaw Barony, Georgetown, South Carolina



By Sydney Miller

Belle Baruch was not accustomed to losing. A natural athlete, she won more than 50 sailing trophies by age 17. While living in Europe between 1928 and 1937, the accomplished equestrian captured more than 300 medals in show jumping and steeplechase. But in 1935, she almost lost the prize she desired most—her family’s beloved home, Hobcaw Barony.

Hobcaw Barony is the sixteen-thousand-acre preserve on the coast of South Carolina where Belle spent her childhood winters learning to track, trap, hunt, and fish. When she took over the property, she had to learn forestry as a science and as a practice. Gifted and smart, she succeeded at both. In doing so, she made possible the institute for marine and forest research that today has a global reach.

Hobcaw was initially owned by her father, Wall Street financier Bernard Baruch. His career began in 1891 when, three years after graduating from City College and just shy of twenty-one years old, he was hired as an office boy by the brokerage house A. A. Housman & Company. In his free time he not only read, studied, and researched the American industrial landscape but also took night school classes in bookkeeping and law. By 1895, he had become a junior partner. A calculated but risky \$300 investment in the American Sugar Refining Company in 1897 earned him a profit of \$60,000 in just a few months, a payoff worth \$2.1 million in 2022. After buying a seat on the New York Stock Exchange, he began investing his energy and cash in mining, rubber, sulfur, and railroad concerns.

His wealth led to new opportunities and friends. When in 1917 America entered the Great

The Hobcaw Barony tour includes a stop at Bellefield Plantation, the home of Belle Baruch, completed in 1937. Belle interspersed indigenous flowering plants of the South with the live oaks.

War, Baruch was named chairman of the War Industries Board and then served as a member of the delegation advising his friend President Woodrow Wilson at the Paris Peace Conference. While in Paris, he struck up a warm, life-long friendship with Winston Churchill. Churchill was one of the many politicians and powerful friends who spent time with the Baruchs at Hobcaw.

Isabel Wilcox Baruch—born in 1899 and known as “Belle” to all—accompanied her father on the mission to France, a country to which she would return often. But both Belle and Bernard were always glad to return to his sportsmen’s retreat: Hobcaw Barony in Georgetown,

South Carolina, a little more than one hundred miles east of his birthplace.

Barony does not refer to the nobleman's title *baron*. Rather, it is a measure of land—twelve thousand acres—granted by the English king to one of the eight Lords Proprietors of the Carolinas. In 1718, John Lord Carteret (later Earl Granville) received Hobcaw Barony. Twelve years later he sold the undeveloped land without ever seeing it.¹ Over the next century it was divided and subdivided into plantations.

The barony land reached from the Waccamaw River to the Atlantic Ocean; “Hobcaw” is a Waccamaw tribal word meaning “between the waters.” The land Carteret sold was rich and productive. In addition to cypress swamps, which were converted to rice fields, the barony included pine forests that produced timber and naval stores, high ground for subsistence crops and livestock, and tidal marshes.

Through 1861 the various owners prospered, but none of their fortunes survived the Civil War and Reconstruction eras. By the late nineteenth century, instead of cultivating rice, many impoverished landowners were “cultivating” northern sportsmen to hunt the abundant game. Bernard Baruch initially came to Hobcaw as a fee-paying duck hunter in 1905. He clearly enjoyed the outing and the place. So much so, that he surprised his hosts with an offer to buy the property. Within two years, he had reassembled most of the original barony and added another four thousand acres and was soon inviting guests to his private game preserve.² Baruch was one of the first northern millionaires to purchase a former rice plantation for hunting. These sportsmen-owners helped rebuild the depressed agricultural economy of South Carolina in the early years of the twentieth century.

“THE YOUTHFUL DIANA”

When Baruch and his family arrived at Hobcaw in 1905, the forest consisted of young timber and trees left from a diameter-limit cut in the late 1800s.³ Most of the uplands that had been cultivated for vegetables and feed crops were allowed to revert to forest. Baruch's goal was a forest that supported high game populations for himself and the guests of the hunting preserve. This land plan suited that purpose admirably.

Belle was five years old in 1905. The Baruchs' typical residency at Hobcaw was November through April, so she grew up spending winters there. Guests were always coming and going, eager to enjoy the family's hospitality and the duck hunting—both legendary. In addition to Winston Churchill, the guest roster included such luminaries as businessman Solomon R. Guggenheim, publisher Joseph Pulitzer, General George C. Marshall, popular composer Irving Berlin, writers Jack London and Edna Ferber, and President Wilson's widow, Edith Bolling Wilson.

On arrival every November, each of the Baruch children signed the guest book with name, address, and comments. When she was eleven, Belle entered, “This place is nicer than words can express.” At sixteen, under “Address,” Belle wrote, “I wish it was Hobcaw Barony instead of West 52nd Street,” and in the “Remarks” column, “Home again.”

Belle's love of Hobcaw Barony was enhanced by its superintendent, Jim Powell, who taught her about the woods and waters. She learned to ride horses (and would later become an accomplished equestrian) on the still unpaved roads. All three children hunted with their father, especially enjoying his annual deer drive. In 1913, with hunters from all over the county, Belle shot her first deer. As

the *Georgetown Daily Item* reported, “There were 40 deer jumped, and eighteen shots fired, which resulted in only one deer being brought down, and that was killed by Miss Baruch.”⁴ Her success was also reported in the New York papers, with one dubbing her “the youthful Diana.”⁵

Once the Great War had concluded, Belle began to spend most of each year in France, eventually settling in Pau, a horsey enclave near the Pyrenees. However, her heart was always in Hobcaw, which she called the “friendliest woods in the world.” By Christmas 1934, she was asking her father about buying Hobcaw from him. Even after having spent the last several years competing in Europe, she considered it home. She was worried that as her father aged he might give it to her brother or sell it to somebody else or—worse—divide it, then sell it. A skillful hunter, she wanted to keep the wildlife habitat intact. After some delay, he agreed to sell her part of Hobcaw Barony—initially five thousand acres—in 1935.⁶ He was delighted Belle shared his love of the place and made a gift to her of one-half the purchase price as a demonstration of his pleasure. With another war in Europe looming, he wanted his high-profile ex-pat daughter with a Jewish surname out of Europe. Offering her part of Hobcaw proved to be the perfect lure. Included in their bargain was the condition that Belle begin managing the place.

Management of Hobcaw Barony was a tall order. As Mary Miller details in her biography of Belle, *The Baroness of Hobcaw*, responsibilities included oversight of “the various water systems and power and refrigeration plants, laundry, ninety miles of roads, four bridges, three Black villages, the church, two schools, the dispensary, docks and water



Belle Baruch turkey hunting at Hobcaw in 1937. Her desire to maintain good wildlife habitat motivated her to purchase the property from her father.

towers, boat landings, and several houses for various White employees on the property.”⁷ Not to mention all the boats, motor vehicles, farm equipment, machinery, and Belle’s two airplanes—she was a licensed pilot—and the fuel tanks and pumps necessary to keep them running.

Up to this point of her life, Belle, who knew the land from years of hunting on it, understood little of forestry and forest management. Then war came. With wood desperately needed for the war effort, the War Production Board formed the Timber Production War Program in 1943 to

increase the nation’s lumber supply.⁸ Belle and her father began supplying Hobcaw wood to the Georgetown Paper Mill’s newly established container plant, which made weatherproof boxes used by the U.S. Armed Services to ship supplies to troops overseas.

Bernard Baruch once again served his country during wartime by acting as a presidential adviser. Early in 1944, President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s declining health concerned his doctors, who prescribed rest. The president accepted his friend’s invitation to do so in South Carolina and stayed nearly a month. Baruch turned over Hobcaw House to FDR and his people, opting to stay with Belle in Bellefield—the house she had built a few miles north. The exhausted president fished and enjoyed the grounds and sites. “At night, driving through the great corridors of trees, he might see the deer . . . motionless, against the mossy trunks.”⁹ His wife Eleanor wrote, “Hobcaw was just the right place for Franklin, who loved the country and the life there.”¹⁰

Shortly after the president’s visit, more woods were logged. With Belle as manager and her father as owner, two tracts were cut in 1944 and 1945; the proceeds were donated to Converse and Clemson colleges. The decision foreshadowed a closer relationship with Clemson.

In 1943 Bernard sold another portion of the property to Belle, bringing her holdings to fourteen thousand acres. After the war, many of the African American men who had lived and worked on Hobcaw Barony did not return, instead leaving for factory jobs in nearby Georgetown and elsewhere. Belle then hired White residents of Georgetown. A local man named Nolan Taylor was her superintendent; with the help of seven other employees, the two of



Bernard and Belle Baruch in 1957. Of the three Baruch children, Belle had the strongest attachment to Hobcaw.

them maintained the property and all its woods, waterways, shores, and structures.

One new structure was the hangar Belle built to house her airplanes. She took up flying as her arthritis began to curtail her horseback riding. Many times Belle flew her plane to personally pursue and buzz poachers on her property.

In 1951, she invited Ella Severin, a friend from her days in France, to come for a visit. Although she never intended to remain in the United States, when Belle asked her to stay on, Ella accepted. She proved to be a

highly compatible partner for Belle, aiding her in the running Hobcaw Barony and other pursuits.

Three years later, Hurricane Hazel was the catalyst for Belle's return to logging at Hobcaw Barony. The Category 4 storm made landfall just north of Hobcaw, bringing an eighteen-foot storm surge and peak wind gusts of more than one hundred miles per hour. Belle and Ella were in Paris at the time. Bernard Baruch cabled them about the hurricane and said he was selling the fallen trees on his property; he urged her to follow suit.

The hurricane salvage that she sold to the Beal Lumber Company totaled two million board feet. A Beal vice president advised her to cut the rest of her land because "60% of the timber was overmature (ripe in his words)." ¹¹ With that and the offer to pay \$100,000—\$1.1 million in 2022—Belle was convinced. A few months later, she signed her first timber contract and began actively managing the Hobcaw Forest. ¹²

For the next ten years, Belle set out to methodically cut and regenerate the forest. She sought professional management advice but personally supervised the implementation. Each year from 1955 until her death in 1964, Belle sold at least 1.4 million board feet to local mills; usually her total was in excess of 2.5 million. Because her goal was to protect soils and residual timber, her sales were run two at a time, one on a wet site and one on a dry site. Such a plan allowed logging even during wet weather without harming the soil.

According to Thomas M. Williams, professor of forest hydrology at the Baruch Institute of Coastal Ecology and Forest Science, all sales were made only on marked timber. The residual stands contained from thirty to sixty square feet per acre of basal area. The adopted forest plan called for cutting the entire forest to this density to allow regeneration, then removing the residual after the new stand was established. The cuts done in 1964 and 1965 on the northeast corner were the second cut in this sequence. When done with proper care, prepared seedbed, and control of competing vegetation, this type of cutting is called the seed tree or shelterwood method, depending on the residual stocking. Shelterwood was Belle Baruch's preferred system of natural regeneration and an accepted practice of the day. ¹³



Belle placed Ella Severin (right) and a board of trustees in charge of carrying out her vision for Hobcaw.

WITH HER WILL, THERE'S A WAY

Belle died from cancer in 1964, one year before her father. By the terms of her will, her estate established a private foundation “for the purpose of teaching and/or research in forestry, marine biology, and the care and propagation of wildlife and flora and fauna in South Carolina, in connection with colleges and/or universities in the state of South Carolina.”¹⁴ She named the foundation after her father, but he demurred and requested that the trustees so honor his daughter. Thus it is the Belle W. Baruch Foundation (BWBF, or Baruch Foundation) that holds Hobcaw Barony.

In her will, Belle wrote, “I have spent many happy hours on the Hobcaw property . . . This property came to me through my father, Bernard M. Baruch, and I wish to establish a

memorial to him for charitable and educational purposes and use the Hobcaw property as the nucleus for these beneficial uses.” She named as trustees New York City businessmen and her long-time companion, Ella Severin, also granting the latter life interest in her house Bellefield.

Once settled at Bellefield, Ella and the nonresident trustees went right to work. Decisions about the land, water, buildings, employees, heirs, and animals (both domestic and wild) had to be made, so the trustees needed to become familiar with the place quickly. Resolving how best to move forward while executing Belle’s wish that the plantation become a place for teaching and research dominated their efforts in the early years. Especially daunting was determining how to use the seven thousand acres of forest.

Is an undisturbed forest the best for research? Should they allocate a portion for tree farming? Many experts volunteered their unsolicited advice, including Richard Pough, president of the Natural Area Council; Matthew J. Brennen, a director of the Pinchot Institute for Studies in Conservation; and Kolman Lehotsky, chair of the Department of Forestry at Clemson.

In a letter to her cotrustees dated March 1, 1976, Ella wrote, “Belle’s concept of beauty was the way the woods look today and that she on numerous occasions told me she would like them to look this way always.” She continued, “We do not need any more experts [to] come and tell us what we can do. There are only two alternatives and the sooner we decide the better it will be for all concerned.” Belle’s wishes won the day.



The Baruch Foundation works with colleges and universities in South Carolina on its many research projects, and hosts school groups, at Hobcaw. Belle set up the foundation “for the purpose of teaching and/or research in forestry, marine biology, and the care and propagation of wildlife and flora and fauna in South Carolina.”

The Belle W. Baruch Foundation Forest Policy, declaring that no more than a thousand acres would stand as an undisturbed forest and the remainder be managed in an “manner agreed to by the trustees,” was adopted on May 11, 1967. To carry out this policy of forest management, the board of trustees engaged Clemson University.

The goal was a forest for research and education. (Today, Hobcaw is open to families and school groups; guided tours highlight the barony’s history, ecology, and research and begin at the Hobcaw Discovery Center.) The management strategy was to create “a mosaic of stands from 50 to 200 acres in size which represented the distribution of

species best suited to available sites and distribution of ages throughout the life span of loblolly and longleaf pine.”¹⁵

Early in its affiliation with the foundation, Clemson foresters employed three approaches: thinning the stands established by Bernard Baruch to encourage vigorous growth plus insect and disease resistance, completing the second cut of stands managed by Belle Baruch in the shelterwood sequence, and executing a series of salvage cuts to contain the southern pine beetle epidemic. The merchantable timber sold in those years did not reach the volume of Belle’s sales, but the research value of the forest was increased with the

harvesting of overmature trees and eradication of the pine beetle.

By the early 1970s, the Belle W. Baruch Forest Science Institute of Clemson University had constructed a small building on the property for resident scholars and staff. A forest research lab, built in 1989, facilitated on-site research: no longer would samples have to be sent to Clemson for processing.

Hobcaw Barony researchers have produced some influential results. For example, Thomas M. Williams’s studies in forest hydrology led to the first statement of best management practices for forest operations in South Carolina and formed the basis for the South Carolina Forestry

Commission's *Best Management Practices for Forestry* handbook.

For more than twenty years, the Hobcaw Forest was managed as outlined in the initial policy implemented in the late 1960s, with a thousand acres undisturbed. By the late 1990s, however, how to manage a forest for timber production was no longer a pressing question; scientists now needed to know more about managing for wildlife, aesthetics, and other values. Accordingly, the board changed the foundation's purpose and adopted a plan to focus on unique, threatened, and endangered species.

To execute their updated objectives, the trustees brought the land conservation function in-house, relieving Clemson of its supervisory duties and hiring forester George Chastain to administer the management plan. His charge was to increase the forest's research value, especially as it would inform protection of the threatened red-cockaded woodpecker and the longleaf pine ecosystem.

Longleaf pine research results have proven meaningful in many applications. Hobcaw's longleaf forests are a laboratory for studying carbon and water cycling. Clemson University, in partnership with The Nature Conservancy and South Carolina Natural Resources Conservation Service, is currently conducting a multiyear project that will determine the longleaf pine forest's ability to sequester carbon and water. The team measures the rate of ecosystem carbon sequestration from 120-foot-tall research towers positioned in newly restored and mature longleaf stands. The data will not only inform private landowners about the merit of this valuable species but also aid policymakers in managing land for mitigating climate change.¹⁶

On the forest floor, another recent study focused on the firefly. Researchers at the Baruch Institute of Coastal Ecology and Forest Science—as the Baruch Forest Science Institute is now known—had received anecdotal reports that the lightning bug population was diminishing. Initially, they thought to examine the response of fireflies to prescribed burns, a regular occurrence in every pine tract. In the first year of the project, the researchers used twelve habitats found on Hobcaw Barony as their study area and invited citizen scientists to assist in the count.

Word spread, and by the next summer the Vanishing Firefly Project went live with a mobile app for citizen-science census takers to use. Researchers learned that “fireflies are a very local animal,” according to J. C. Chong, an entomologist at Clemson who co-leads the project with Clemson biogeochemist Alex Chow. “They don't disperse very much . . . [so] if you destroy that particular environment, the fireflies will be gone too.” The app is now used around the world to determine whether firefly populations are declining and why.¹⁷

These are just a few examples of the research carried out at Hobcaw Barony today. In the last years of her life, Belle Baruch spent time thinking about what would become of Hobcaw Barony after her death. Did she ever imagine that its future would include research with global implications for something as big as longleaf pines or as small as a firefly? We don't know. But her decision to devote this unique property to research on forests, wildlife, and waters has made both possible.

Sydney Miller is director of development at Hobcaw Barony. You can learn more about the history of the site from

precolonial times to the present, and the different research conducted there, at hobcawbarony.org.

NOTES

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3. Thomas M. Williams and Donald J. Lipscomb, “Logging History of Hobcaw Forest,” *Forestry Bulletin, Department of Forestry, Clemson University* Number 38 (October 1983): 3.
4. *Georgetown Daily Item*, December 4, 1911.
5. “New York Girl of 13 Kills Deer,” *New York Herald*, December 30, 1911.
6. Hutchisson, “The Baroness Of Hobcaw,” 135.
7. Mary E. Miller, *Baroness of Hobcaw: The Life of Belle W. Baruch* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), 116.
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10. Eleanor Roosevelt, *This I Remember* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), 327–28.
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13. “Forester Sees Need for Larger Trees in South,” *Crops and Soils*, August–September 1967, 10.
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