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At the Kennedy Compound

By LAURENCE MICHIE

The Vineyard home of the late Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis remains in family ownership and is being extensively renovated to accommodate the needs of a new generation.

Mrs. Onassis and her family have treated the 400-acre estate in Aquinnah - some of the most ecologically diverse and sensitive land on the Island - with extreme care, to the relief of those concerned about the fragility of the varied flora and fauna there.

Since the death of Mrs. Onassis in 1994, however, rumors have gusted across the Vineyard like a particularly worrisome northeaster. First there was talk that her children and heirs, Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg and John F. Kennedy Jr., planned to sell the property. Then, following the death of John F. Kennedy Jr. in an airplane accident in waters near the Island two years ago, a new wave of speculation was rampant.

Those rumors can be put to rest.

Caroline Kennedy and her husband, Edwin Schlossberg, are rebuilding the vacation retreat to specifications tailored to suit their needs and the needs of their three children.

And, like Mrs. Onassis, they value both the pleasures of Island relaxation and the privacy that traditionally can be found here. For that reason they decline to comment publicly about their Vineyard plans, although they have made it known that they plan to nest in Aquinnah for seasons to come.

Their reticence hardly needs explanation. There have been helicopters hovering over the Aquinnah house with videotape cameras whirring, and footage has been used on national television.

A pair of legal notices have been the only signals of the activity at the Kennedy-Schlossberg property. One announced a hearing on a plan to renovate a guest house and construct a pool, the other scheduled an Aquinnah planning board meeting on the siting of a structure. Workers building the new facilities have been enjoined to practice a shyness of speech as resolute as that of the family, so details of the reconstruction now under way are not available. It is known, however, that only a small portion of the previous Onassis residence is being retained. There has been extensive demolition and rebuilding, and the resulting dwelling area for all practical purposes will be new.

Mrs. Onassis bought most of the property, now assessed by the town at some \$12 million, in 1978. The purchase of such a large and environmentally complex aggregation of parcels in what was then the town of Gay Head and now is Aquinnah was notable not only because of the celebrity of the purchaser but because of the land itself and its ties to the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah).

The federally recognized tribe has labored mightily to retain and retrieve its spiritual and physical homeland at the geographically distinctive western tip of Martha's Vineyard. There were town hearings in 1979 on the plans filed by Mrs. Onassis to build a two-story, Cape-style, wood-shingled house, along with a four-room guest house and a garage, plans that were complicated by the structures' proximity to wetlands.

Then, in 1980, a decade-long legal wrangle began. Mrs. Onassis bought a portion of ownership of an acre and a half of beachfront that was enclosed by her property. Other owners included members of the Vanderhoop family, which has been prominent in the Wampanoag tribe for many generations. As up-Island beach property, the land was extremely valuable when reckoned by dollars. As the site of ancient Wampanoag gatherings, however, the beach was considered by the tribe to be sacred land, beyond the realm of purely monetary measure.

When the planning board voted 6 to 1 to approve the construction of the three Onassis buildings, the dissenter was a Vanderhoop. That was an entirely separate matter, but it illustrates the complex interweaving of dealings in the town. The beach had been owned by Wampanoags since the state surveyed and partitioned Gay Head in 1870; Mrs. Onassis purchased a 17 per cent interest in the lot from a tribal family descendant in 1980. The issue finally was resolved in 1990 by a land swap, with Mrs. Onassis contributing land outside her estate in exchange for the beach.

Aquinnah's ecology is as complex as its politics, and for the past two years the entire town has been designated as a district of critical planning concern by the Martha's Vineyard Commission. The designation carefully restricts any potential construction within the town, where there have been instances of new homes being built and the clearing of water views without regard to the effect on the environment.

Despite the occasional bumps in her transactions with the town and the tribe, Mrs. Onassis was widely liked and respected in Aquinnah as well as on the Vineyard as a whole, and two factors in particular contributed to the esteem in which she was held.

First, she jealously guarded the integrity of the delicately balanced environment in which her estate was set, frequently turning to Island wildlife experts and biologists for advice and assistance.

Second, amid a life of more unwanted public attention than can be grasped by reason, she came to the Vineyard as a ship in rough water comes to harbor. She rode her bicycle and paddled her kayak, saw family and friends, and sometimes drove down-Island to see her chum Dorothy West, who was one of the writers in her stable at Doubleday. She respected the traditional values of the Vineyard, and the Vineyard in turn granted her privacy here.

It appears that now the Kennedy-Schlossberg family intends to maintain those qualities of respect for the land and private dignity.