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The Koreshan Legacy: Koreshan building plans stir passions in Estero

The College of Life Foundation wants to build a commercial and residential development called Riverplace on lands surrounding the Estero River. Critics say it has nothing to do with the legacy or history of the communal society.

Sunday, May 13, 2001

By CHAD GILLIS, cegillis@naplesnews.com

- *Part one of a two-part series*

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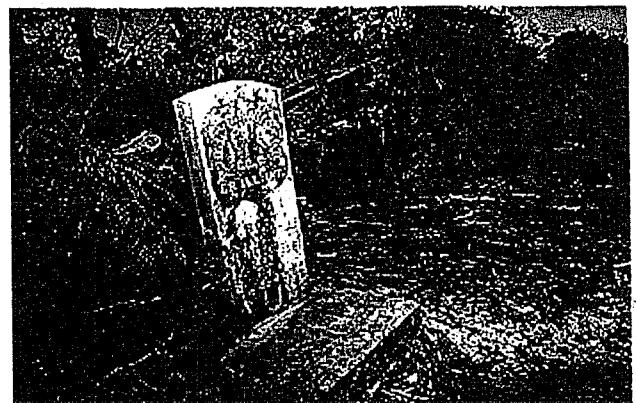
GRAPHICS: [Koreshan State Historic Site](#) | [The Riverplace of Estero](#)

ESTERO — Deep in the heart of one of Southwest Florida's most modern and luxurious gated communities lie the remains of John Sargent.

An Illinois native born in March of 1846, Sargent now rests under a dingy headstone bearing his name and little else. The burial site sits 100 feet or so from a lavish clubhouse inside Pelican Sound, surrounded by high-priced, Mediterranean-style homes and a lush green golf course.

More closely, the cemetery is encircled by several native pine trees, some recently slashed melaleucas, a faded sunflower seed package and a crumbled can of Milwaukee's Best.

Sargent's grave is one of 55 in this tiny, forgotten cemetery. The burial ground has no name. Few people in Pelican Sound or Lee and Collier counties know it's



The grave of John Sargent is one of 55 in a small cemetery in the middle of Pelican Sound. The College of Life Foundation is responsible for upkeep of the burial site, although the not-for-profit corporation has no plans to clean the grounds. *Michel Fortier/Staff*

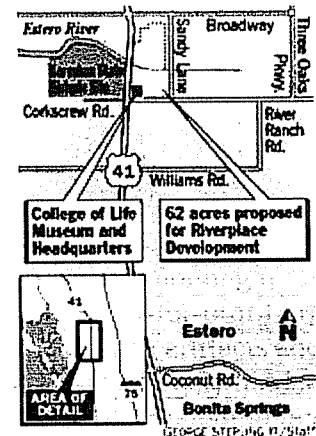
there. The land is covered with scrubby brush overgrowth and littered with trash and decaying pine needles. Only a handful of the graves are still marked.

The site is not exactly a glamorous tribute to a group of Lee County pioneers, especially considering that Sargent and the others buried on the grounds are a key link to one of this country's most significant and intriguing communal societies: the Koreshans. The cemetery is a tarnished reminder of an industrious people who once maintained one of the most successful communal societies in the country and were decades ahead of their time when it came to equal rights for women and minorities.

Upkeep of the cemetery is charged to the College of Life Foundation, a not-for-profit, multi-million dollar corporation formerly known as the Koreshan Unity Foundation.

Like the cemetery, the foundation is also tucked away from view on the northeast corner of U.S. 41 and Corkscrew Road. The foundation's stated mission is to safeguard the history and legacy of one of the state's most important historical settlements as well as the people who built and thrived within the society.

Some Koreshan descendants and others, however, say the College of Life Foundation is nothing more than a development company hiding behind the guise of a not-for-profit organization. They complain that the foundation has kept Koreshan artifacts and hundreds of thousands of pages of documents and photographs largely hidden from the public, that the museum is open to the public through appointment only and that the foundation is run by a three-member, self-perpetuating board with no direct links to the Koreshan past and no oversight.



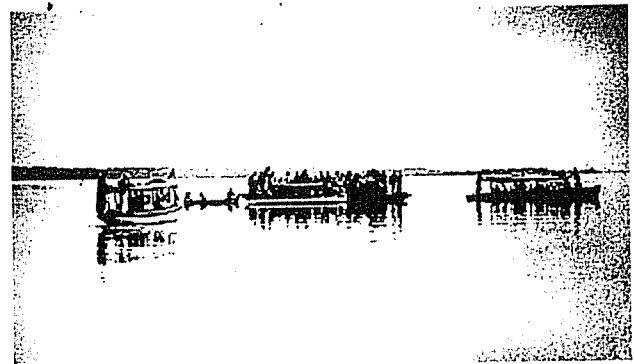
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Critics also note that the Koreshan land holdings, which once included thousands of acres in south Lee County, have been sold off or given away over the years. The foundation now owns only 138 acres, with much of it slated to be developed in ways the critics say have nothing to do with Koreshan history, including a marina, hotel and restaurants.

Mimi Straub, president of the Estero Historical Society, said the foundation has no intention of preserving the Koreshan legacy.

"I don't think they give a hoot (about historical preservation or education)," Straub said. "They're strictly interested in M-O-N-E-Y." Foundation president Charles Dauray, who's been with the corporation for more than two years, says his plan to build a commercial development on more than 60 acres of former Koreshan land is a legitimate way of continuing the Koreshan legacy. He notes that the original Koreshans envisioned Estero as one day being the New Jerusalem, a utopian city of 10 million.

"What we are doing here is the fulfillment of what the Koreshans ultimately wanted to do," Dauray says.



Koreshan boats line the calm waters of Estero Bay. At one time, the Koreshans owned much of the land around the bay. Today, the College of Life Foundation, the corporate entity that controls the remaining Koreshan assets, owns fewer than 150 acres. Courtesy College of Life Foundation

Two distinct factions have developed since Dauray accepted the position of foundation president in January 1999.

On one side sit critics, most with long-standing ties to the Koreshans, including some direct descendants, who question Dauray's plans for development and the recent land transactions he's brokered. They complain the foundation ignores its obligation to promote Koreshan history.

The other side fully supports the foundation and its plans to build restaurants and a retreat-style campus in the heart of the community. Many in this second group are people relatively new to the Koreshan story and the Estero community.

Although the corporation's mission centers around historic conservation and education, officials at the state's department of historical preservation said they were unaware that the foundation exists.

Building wealth

At the peak of the Koreshan Unity movement in the early 1900s, the group owned what today would be considered a real estate empire. Its holdings included 7,500 acres extending from just south of Fort Myers down to the northern tip of Bonita Springs. The group owned all of Fort Myers Beach and Bonita Beach as well. Today, that land would be worth billions.

Starting around 1908, with the death of Koreshan leader Cyrus Teed, the society declined into a company with little money and diminishing amounts of land.

Less than 10 years ago, the Koreshan Unity Foundation — now the College of Life Foundation — was nearing financial collapse. According to former board members, the foundation, which served as the corporate arm of the Unity, had only a few thousand dollars in its bank account. Members were few and funds were short.

Over the years, most of the land had been given away — some to the state for preservation — or sold.

Donations include land that is now called The Koreshan State Historic Site, including acreage on Mound Key in the middle of Estero Bay.

Today, the group's holdings total 138 acres, most of it centered near Corkscrew Road and U.S. 41. The land includes 62 acres slated for commercial development.

While the foundation owns only a tiny fraction of the land the Koreshans once controlled, it hasn't been short of money for several years.

The monetary drought ended in 1993 when former foundation President Jo Bigelow, who died earlier this year, sold 176 acres at the west end of Corkscrew Road, the last large parcel of Koreshan land, to developer WCI for \$5.1 million. Bigelow was the first non-Koreshan to be named foundation president.

According to the payment schedule on the sale contract, WCI paid off the debt in 1998. The land is now a gated golf-course community containing the burial site.

"I don't think they give a hoot (about historical preservation or education). They're strictly interested in M-O-N-E-Y."

— Mimi Straub, Estero Historical Society president

More big-dollar land sales followed.

In 1997, Bigelow and crew even tried to negotiate a sale for 76 acres once controlled by the Nature Conservancy, an organization that manages and monitors environmentally sensitive lands across the country. The foundation had deeded the 76 acres on the southwest corner of U.S. 41 and Corkscrew Road to the Nature Conservancy in 1966 to avoid paying taxes on the property.

The Conservancy transferred the deed back to the foundation in the late 1970s with a restriction that the land be used only for conservation purposes.

Nevertheless, Bigelow tried to sell the property to developers for \$3.3 million. The Nature Conservancy sued, and the sale was halted when a circuit court judge ruled in favor of the Conservancy.

Members of the Koreshan Unity Alliance, a not-for-profit group that represents the Koreshan State Historic Site during grant requests, pleaded with the foundation to donate the land to the state for use in conjunction with the existing park. Today the land is vacant and the foundation has no plans for its future use because the conservation restriction prohibits the land from being developed.

In 1999, the foundation sold a gulfside home on Fort Myers Beach for \$415,000. Dauray was offered rent-free living at the beach home but instead sold the dwelling and lives in a second-floor apartment above the foundation museum. The Rising Tide Cottage was the last foundation holding on the barrier island once owned wholly by the Koreshan Unity.

Less than two years ago, the foundation sold a 10-acre tract of land on Williams Road to Naples Community Hospital for \$500,000.

Then the foundation reversed course and began buying land.

Since the sale to the hospital, Dauray has spent nearly \$4 million assembling the 62 acres planned for development, including seven parcels the foundation bought along Corkscrew Road between U.S. 41 and Sandy Lane.

According to Lee County Property Appraiser records, the 138 acres owned by the foundation are assessed at more than \$8 million. If the properties were sold today, the asking price would be significantly higher.

The retreat

In September of last year, the College of Life Foundation unveiled plans for Riverplace, a commercial and residential development on lands surrounding the Estero River.

Current plans call for 175,000 square feet of commercial uses, including a low-intensity marina, 165 residential units and 100 hotel rooms as well as a couple of restaurants. Lands planned for Riverplace were mostly purchased over the last couple of years using money compiled from land sales of former Koreshan properties. Dauray said the commercial uses would be mostly for small shops, such as a shoe-repair business.

Plans for Riverplace are expected to go before a county hearing examiner soon, probably this summer. In the end, county commissioners will decide the fate of a development that critics say has nothing to do with the legacy or history of the Koreshans.

Dauray, however, says the development would receive approval from the Koreshans and Cyrus Teed, the cult's charismatic leader who led followers from Chicago to Estero in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

"Teed would be delighted that we're preserving this property and at the same time have a practical use for this property," Dauray said during an interview in the office of the foundation museum.

Dauray said Riverplace would be an educational and retreat campus that would host religious, environmental, educational and historical conventions.

Plans for Riverplace also include a boat launch. The entire foundation property planned for Riverplace encompasses some 60 acres, starting at the northeast corner of U.S. 41 and Corkscrew Road and spanning east to Sandy Lane. A portion extends along U.S. 41 north of the Estero River.

Greg Stuart is spearheading the development. He also serves as chairman of Lee County's Local Planning Agency.

The plans are being closely watched by some local residents who have seen the foundation go from a waning organization on the brink of financial ruin to a multi-million dollar corporation with elaborate development plans.

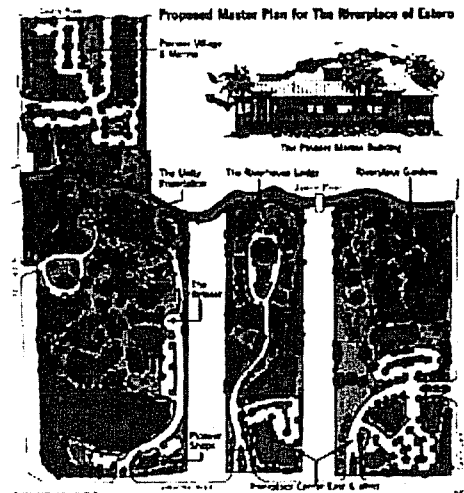
George Horne, an Estero resident who worked for the Koreshan Unity for decades before resigning shortly after Dauray was named director, said he is wary of Dauray and the development plans.

Horne is a Koreshan descendant. He and his wife Evelyn have been a part of the Koreshan story for more than 50 years. The Hornes have spent most of their lives working for the Koreshans, whether at the settlement or the foundation.

"(The Koreshans) wouldn't think too much of it," Horne said of the proposed commercial rezoning plan. "Hedwig Michel would have run (Dauray) off. She didn't put up with that kind of foolishness." Michel preceded Bigelow as president, a position she held until her death in 1982. She was considered to be the last Koreshan.

Soon after Dauray took over the foundation in early 1999, Horne quit a job he's held most of his life after receiving a letter from Dauray that Horne said promoted a silence from within the organization.

"He sent us a memo that said we weren't supposed to talk to anyone about the foundation and what they were doing," Horne said. "He was barking up the wrong tree and I just quit." Evelyn Horne is skeptical of Dauray and his plans as well.



Click on the image above for a full size version of the graphic.

"I think the Koreshans would be turning over in their graves if they knew what was happening. They're heading in the wrong direction."

— Russ Hanna, Former foundation board member and Koreshan State Historic Site volunteer

"What is left of the Koreshan legacy?" asked Evelyn, who also worked for the Koreshans for half a century.

"The community is wondering what he's going to do with all this land and where's all the money going." Straub of the Estero Historical Society said she's tried on several occasions to work with Dauray and former president Bigelow, but has had little success.

A longtime volunteer at the Koreshan State Historic Site, Straub said Dauray's plan is not necessarily flawed. But, she said, Riverplace is more about turning a profit than meeting the mission statement of the foundation, which revolves around historical education and preservation.

"If he would preserve the wooded area it could be a real asset to Estero, but I don't trust him," she said.

Russ Hanna, a former foundation board member and Koreshan State Historic Site volunteer, said he can't understand why Dauray and company would be planning an elaborate commercial development on a site that could offer the public a tremendous historical treasure.

"I think the Koreshans would be turning over in their graves if they knew what was happening," Hanna said of the proposed development. "They're heading in the wrong direction." Dauray said Riverplace will cost around \$25 million and take five to 10 years to complete. He said the foundation will create separate corporate and trust entities to manage the commercial portions of Riverplace. He called it a partnership with the private, not-for-profit foundation.

Dauray said the critics, along with state park officials, are simply jealous that the foundation has amassed wealth while the park is continually facing cuts from the state. He said both Bill Grace, head of the Koreshan Unity Alliance and a former foundation board member, and managers at the Koreshan State Historic Site have drooled for years over the thought of controlling the foundation's property and records.

"There are those in the community who were trying to take over the assets of the foundation," Dauray said.

Bigelow, who Dauray admits promoted separation between the foundation and the community, often gave similar responses when asked why she refused to work with state volunteers and historians.

Dauray calls it B.C. — Before Charles.

He said his critics have yet to reach out and contact him about their concerns. Dauray says he is trying to right a public relations nightmare fueled by former president Bigelow.

The public has perceived the foundation to be a



The Koreshan general store was located along the west side of the Tamiami Trail. The building on the left, which still stands today, served as a stop-off for tourists and supplied area residents with food and other products. Critics say the College of Life Foundation and its predecessor, the Koreshan Unity Foundation have done a poor job over the years of preserving the documents and artifacts of Koreshan life and making them available to the public. Courtesy College of Life Foundation

secretive group for years, Dauray said, adding that he plans to change that image.

"For me to turn this ship around takes time and I've had to fight a very bad reputation that Jo Bigelow left behind," Dauray said. "It takes time to reach out and get this done." Dauray said he plans to use Riverplace as a cultural campus that will foster handcrafted artwork, botanical gardening and host seminars and other community activities. He said he would eventually like to relocate some of the area's deteriorating historic buildings, such as Needles and Pins on U.S. 41, to the property.

The building housing Needles and Pins was first used decades ago by the Soto family to ship jelly and fruit across the country. The products were taken from local groves.

Buildings such as that, he said, could be used to house lectures on historical and quality-of-life issues and demonstrations on crafts.

He said reaching out to the community will become more of a foundation trademark in the future.

"I'm opening it up," Dauray said. "At least give me a chance to open it up so the community can participate." Paul Shriver, a Naples attorney who performs legal work for the foundation, echoed Dauray's contention that the foundation leader's critics are just envious.

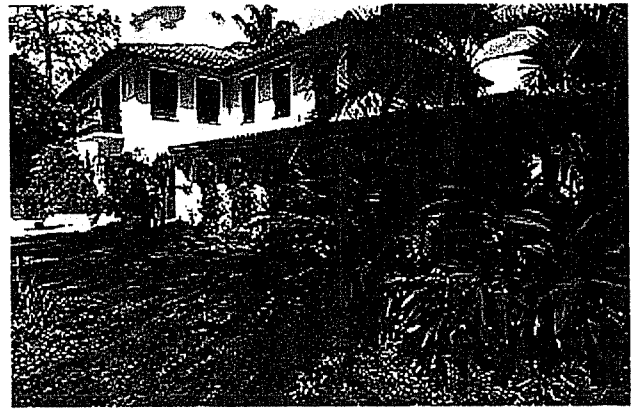
"I'm interested in helping him shape a community and campus use," Shriver said. "There's more important things to do (than spend time quarreling with Koreshan descendants) and I consider the source." Larry Newell, an Estero resident who's been active in community affairs, particularly development issues, also praises Dauray and his development plans.

"The plan is to set up an intellectual and cultural center," Newell said of Riverplace. "From what I hear and see, it is a very positive development and should be an asset to the community." Newell described Dauray as a driven man with high expectations for the foundation, the Estero community and Florida Gulf Coast University.

"As far as I can determine, (Riverplace) is an opportunity for Estero," Newell said. "I would suggest that the community should get behind it." Dauray said he's reached out to the Koreshan State Historic Site as well. Park manager Jeanne Parks said she and Dauray have an improved relationship, better at least than Parks and Bigelow enjoyed.

Parks said she's open to working with Dauray and the foundation. She said Dauray even talked to her about rekindling the solar and lunar festivals, which were important Koreshan holidays. Dauray says he would like to hold the festivals at the state park because the foundation doesn't have enough space and parking for the events.

"At this point we haven't dropped the idea," Parks said.



Pictured is a lavish home along the Estero River owned by the College of Life Foundation. Foundation officials plan to use the home as part of a retreat campus on the northwest corner of U.S. 41 and Corkscrew Road that will include residential and commercial uses. *Michel Fortier/Staff*

"What we are doing here is the fulfillment of what the Koreshans ultimately wanted to do."

— Charles Dauray, College of Life Foundation president

Parks said she has no complaints about Dauray, saying he is a vast improvement over Bigelow.

"It's up to Charles," Parks said of any future relations between the park and the foundation. "I'm open to any suggestions he's got. But I'm not sure our interests are the same regarding the preservation of the Koreshans." The foundation and the park have had a rocky relationship from the start. When Michel donated the land to the state for the park, the majority of furniture, books and art were deeded to the foundation instead of being left in the buildings.

The asset division triggered an alienation between the park, whose officials said the buildings had little historical relevance without the artifacts, and the foundation. Bigelow fueled the tension by refusing to work with the park or state archivists and historians.

The mission

Board members at the foundation say the group's mission is based on education and preservation of the legacy of one of country's most interesting and significant religious societies.

Critics say the foundation is putting all its effort into its development plans and spending little time or money preserving one of Southwest Florida's most important historical treasures.

As evidence, they point to the annual solar and lunar festivals, both of which were key points in the Koreshan celebratory calendar. The foundation has halted all of its festivals regarding the Koreshans, though it continues to host programs that seem to have little to do with the Koreshans. One such program was a recent \$15-a-plate barbecue dinner that raised money for the Lee County Sheriff's Department K-9 Unit, which trains from land and a small house donated by the College of Life Foundation.

Grace, who's known throughout the state for his interest and involvement in historical preservation, said the foundation doesn't appear to be spending any money meeting its mission statement of educating the public about the Koreshans.

"They're a development corporation now to make money," Grace said. "They've spent very little time and effort and money as far as what they should be doing to preserve the Koreshan legacy." Dauray called the barbecue a good interim use of Koreshan land until development starts. He says he does hope to bring back the solar and lunar festivals, albeit on the state historic site instead of foundation property.

Riverplace, Dauray said, is very much in line with the goals of the foundation. He said he's fulfilling what the Koreshans wanted to do in the beginning — become the center of a large metropolitan area.

As for the cemetery, Dauray said the foundation has no intention of restoring or clearing the unkempt burial site.

"We've never had a call on that cemetery," Dauray said. "Nobody cares. The early Koreshans didn't put up headstones because they believed in reincarnation. There's no use putting up headstones if you're coming back next week."

"The plan is to set up an intellectual and cultural center. From what I hear and see, it is a very positive development and should be an asset to the community."

— Larry Newell, Estero resident active in community affairs

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The Koreshan Legacy: Koreshan beliefs sprang from idea to improve Christianity

Koreshan founder Cyrus Teed settled in Estero in search of a utopian dream

Sunday, May 13, 2001

By CHAD GILLIS, cegillis@naplesnews.com

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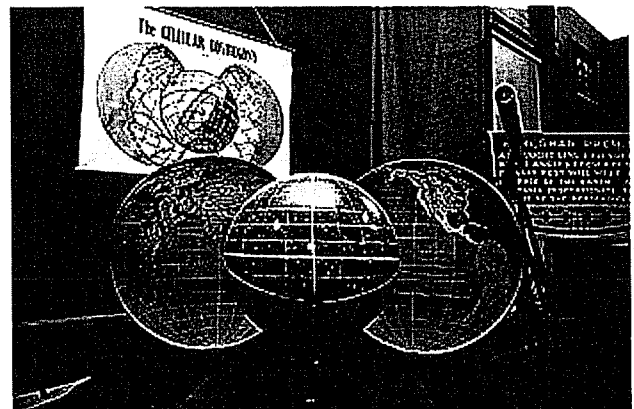
Founding the basis for a religious cult while fostering a thriving medical practice was no small feat, especially a century before the widespread use of the Internet and e-mail.

For Cyrus Teed, it was hardly enough to keep his industrious mind from wandering into other ventures.

Teed, who was born in upstate New York in 1839, spent the majority of his life searching for a Utopian dream.

Teed was one of many philosophers across the country who challenged the conventional ideas of religion, social life and politics following the Civil War.

His religion, called Koreshanity, was based on reincarnation, communal living and the idea that our planet is actually a concave cell with life existing on the inner surface. The Koreshans have no connection to the Branch Davidians cult led by David Koresh that was involved in the armed standoff with federal authorities outside Waco, Texas, in 1993.



A globe at the Koreshan State Historic Site shows a

Teed's beliefs stemmed from what the doctor called a spiritual illumination around 1870. Teed claimed that while he was meditating, a woman appeared who revealed to him many universal truths. From that experience on he considered himself a prophet of God, one chosen to lead the world into the next phase of Christianity.

basic Koreshan belief that life existed inside a hollow globe. Koreshans believed that the universe was a concave sphere. *Dan Wagner/Staff*

Charles Dauray, president of the College of Life Foundation, said Teed's teachings also promoted education, hard work and economic soundness.

Cyrus Teed taught followers that the universe is a cell, probably the most well-known Koreshan belief. He taught that all of life existed inside a hollow sphere and that mankind lived on the inner surface of the globe. From his teachings sprouted a thriving civilization in a part of Florida where few had previously ventured.

"They weren't just idealists," Dauray said. "There were practical business people also. They realized that to get along you had to have an ability to make a living contributing in a meaningful physical way to the society." Teed's beliefs also centered around rights for women and minorities, a radical concept a century ago.

He established a printing business, an educational system for his followers, a furniture manufacturing company and a sawmill.

Lyn Rainard, a professor of history at Tidewater Community College in Virginia, who is currently working on a book about the Koreshans, described Teed as an extremely ambitious leader who wanted desperately to be viewed as a significant figure.

"It was his dying desire to organize a community and a dying desire to be seen as an important person," Rainard said. "There is some evidence that Teed was bi-polar. He would disappear for long periods of time and then he would come back (to the settlement) and be charismatic, or manic, however you want to look at it." Rainard said Teed was constantly exploring new ideas, sometimes even changing his teachings in an attempt to garner more society members.

"I don't now if he consciously did that but you did see some changes in his beliefs and there was some nervousness in the community from it," Rainard said.

"He was constantly on the road to gather individuals for his community and money." Did Teed actually believe his own teachings or had he simply found a way to convince people to give over their possessions to his communal settlement? Rainard said he's unsure.

Irvin Solomon, a history professor at Florida Gulf Coast University, said he thinks Teed actually believed he was a prophet and that his scientific and religious theories were factual.

"My first inclination is to say, 'Yes, he believed,'" Solomon said.

Teed died in 1908 and was buried in a tomb on Fort Myers Beach. During a hurricane in the 1920s, his body was washed out to sea.



A Koreshan sign located in the state park's Art Hall defines religious principles. Koreshan leader Cyrus Teed considered his religion the latest version of Christianity and Judaism. *Dan Wagner/Staff*

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The Koreshan Legacy: Leader preached reincarnation, communal living, celibacy and equity

Sunday, May 13, 2001

By CHAD GILLIS, cegillis@naplesnews.com

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In 1894 a handful of Chicago residents came by boat to Estero with the idea of building the world's most prominent religious Mecca. They envisioned a city of 10 million on the coast of Southwest Florida that would be called New Jerusalem.

Cyrus Teed, a New York doctor who called himself Koresh, promised followers a peaceful life of communal existence in anticipation of the second coming of Christ. Teed considered himself a prophet of God, an immortal healer and spiritual guide sent by heaven to lead humanity.

His religion preached reincarnation, communal living, celibacy and equity.

He claimed socialism was the key to eliminating the power of money and what he called wage slavery.

Heaven and hell, he told followers, were not actual places but conditions of the mind.

Teed also taught followers that the universe is a cell, probably the most well-known Koreshan belief. He taught that all of life existed inside a hollow sphere and that mankind lived on the inner surface of the globe.



Cyrus Teed stands beside a large tarpon taken from local waters. Though Teed was a small man, he had big ideas, including views on equality for women

From his teachings sprouted a thriving civilization in a part of Florida where few had previously ventured.

and minorities that were decades ahead of their time. Teed died in 1908.
Courtesy College of Life Foundation

And though the Koreshan beliefs may seem strange by today's standards, breaking away from mainstream America was not uncommon in the years after the Civil War, nor were spinoff religions based on Christianity.

The Koreshans were one of numerous religious groups that sprang up with the idea of improving or expanding Christianity. A common thread in all the groups was the idea of a Utopian civilization that could right the wrongs of society and government.

Irvin Solomon, a history professor at Florida Gulf Coast University, said to understand who the Koreshans were and why they built a communal compound, it is necessary to take into account the time in which the group was formed.

For their time, Solomon said, the Koreshans were not as strange as their beliefs might suggest.

"They were anything but kooks, which is what some people call them today," Solomon said. "Most of the Koreshans were extremely articulate, bright, hard-working people. They were very cultured and placed a great amount of emphasis on education." In the beginning, Teed led some of the Koreshans' most outstanding leaders to the banks of the Estero River. The group lived with the area's first homesteader, a German native named Gustave Damkoehler.

"They were anything but kooks, which is what some people call them today. Most of the Koreshans were extremely articulate, bright, hard-working people. They were very cultured and placed a great amount of emphasis on education."

— Irvin Solomon, FGCU history professor

Damkoehler gave the Koreshans more than 300 acres. Historians say he was swayed by Teed into believing the Koreshan teachings and later subscribed to their beliefs, at least for a few years.

Teed envisioned the property, which at the time encompassed most of southern Lee County and Fort Myers Beach, as becoming the heart of a religious kingdom that would one day be the center of the world.

Within a decade or so of Teed's arrival, the cult numbered at least 200. Teed held scientific experiments he said proved his theories, such as the world being concave, and passed his beliefs on to members.

Some of the key ideology revolved around women's rights.

Women at the settlement were even allowed to influence governing decisions, a rarity at the time.

Seven females lived in the Planetary Court, a building erected to house the settlement's ruling women. The number seven was chosen in relation to the number of known planets at the time.

The skilled workers in the commune built several of

Florida's most modern devices, including a centrifugal clothes dryer and a publishing house that was the community's most successful financial endeavor.

"They had the most profitable press in Florida in around 1905 to the 1920s," Solomon said.

The Koreshan printing business was called Guiding Star Publishing House.

A general store along what was then the Tamiami Trail, today U.S. 41, provided groceries for locals and a stop for early Southwest Florida tourists. The Koreshans even provided electricity in Estero when most of the county still relied on candles.

Lyn Rainard, a professor at Tidewater Community College in Virginia who's writing a book on the group, described the Koreshans as one of the most significant Utopian societies in U.S. history.

Rainard says the settlement is a way to delve into the mindset of many Americans near the turn of the 20th century. Across the country, U.S. citizens yearned for a better and more fair life, she said.

"They were pulling away from a society they thought was in decay and they were trying to provide a model for others to follow," Rainard said. "The late 19th century was a period of accumulation of wealth by fewer and fewer people and the power of government was also in the hands of fewer." Teed and his followers were a significant, but short-lived, blip on the communal society radar.

"If you look at the history of communal settlements, they've been sprouting up since the period of the Revolution," Rainard said. "There've often been people frustrated with the direction of where things are going." Mimi Straub, Estero Historical Society president, has studied the Koreshans for decades and worked as a volunteer at the Koreshan State Historic Site. She described the Koreshans as a diligent lot with a keen business sense.

"They weren't just a religious society," Straub said.

"They had an economic dream. (At one point) they were looking for land in Haiti because they knew they could manufacture there." Koreshan business holdings extended from a furniture manufacturing plant in Bristol, Tenn., to a hotel in Costa Rica.

Members even developed a school system within the community, called the Pioneer University of Koreshan Universology. Music, songs, plays and lectures were held regularly at the settlement's Art Hall. The society thrived for years.



Cyrus Teed, center, poses with members of the Koreshan Unity. Teed lured followers to the banks of the Estero River by promising a communal life with the second coming of Christ. The last Koreshan died in 1982. Courtesy College of Life Foundation



Cyrus Teed, left, sits among Koreshan belongings at the Unity settlement. Teed built a communal society by convincing members to give all their worldly belongings to the cult. The Koreshans were the first in Southwest Florida to have electricity. Courtesy College of Life Foundation

Shortly after the turn of the 20th century, the Koreshans were dealt a blow with the passing of Teed.

Teed died in 1908 from injuries suffered in a brawl in Fort Myers with local politicians and government employees.

Days later, when he failed to resurrect from the dead, members began to doubt their spiritual leader, a trend that snowballed into a decades-long decline of the once-prosperous society.

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The Koreshan Legacy: Koreshans once-shared assets now ruled by select few

Sunday, May 13, 2001

By CHAD GILLIS, cegillis@naplesnews.com

- *Part two of a two-part series*

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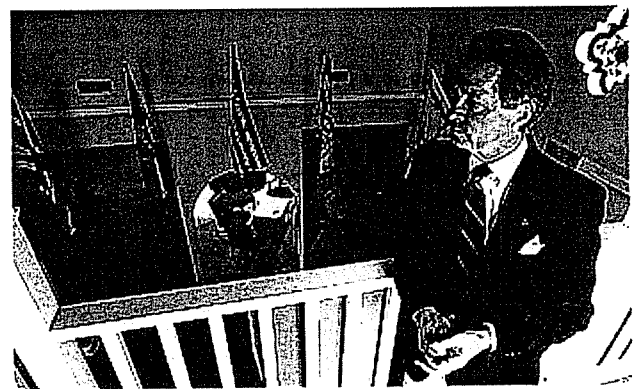
More than a century ago a religious group settled the banks of the Estero River with the idea of bettering their world and founding the perfect society.

Obsessed with constructing a Utopian example for the rest of the world to follow, the Koreshans believed in equal rights for all at a time when women and minorities were considered second-class citizens.

They followed communal principles, choosing a life of collective wealth and possessions. Koreshan members gave up all their worldly belongings in exchange for life in a religious cult. No one owned anything, and the brunt of their efforts focused on sharing.

Today the Koreshans are only a memory.

A society that once consisted of more than 200 people with land totaling 7,500 acres has since dwindled to three board members and 138 acres. A communal society, considered by many to be one of the most significant in U.S. history, has been chiseled to a handful of employees who are part of a self-governing board.



Charles Dauray, College of Life Foundation presidents, stands on the second floor of a large home located along the Estero River. The house, along with several properties near Corkscrew Road, was purchased since Dauray stepped aboard the foundation two years ago.
 Michel Fortier/Staff

College of Life Foundation is now the corporate arm of Koreshan Unity, the incorporated business name of the settlement. As such, it sets the salaries of the board president and any employees and makes all business decisions, including land sales and purchases. It was the foundation that came up with the plan for Riverplace, a 62-acre development that will include meeting space, a hotel, restaurants and marina on the Estero River.

The board consists of Charles Dauray, foundation president; Sara Rea, a paid employee; and attorney Joe Cox. None of the board members has higher education degrees relating to historical preservation, restoration, education or business.

Much of the criticism of the foundation stems from the origins of the board, the power it wields and its lack of formal oversight by anyone else.

Board members are appointed by the board itself.

Dauray has the power to hire and fire all involved, and critics say it is doubtful his employee or attorney would dare to vote against any action he proposes.

The only way Dauray could be fired would be by a vote of the other two members.

Until just a few years ago, the board consisted of five to nine directors who served on the board and voted on most decisions. That changed shortly after the foundation sold 176 acres of land to a company now called Watermark Communities for more than \$5 million in 1993. The land has since been transformed into Pelican Sound Golf & River Club, a gated community at the west end of Corkscrew Road that eventually will have 1,300 homes.

After the transaction, Jo Bigelow, the board president at the time, restructured the decision-making process and centralized the power into the hands of the board president. Since then, the board has been self-appointed and self-governing, electing its own members and making all land-sale and purchase decisions. Dauray was selected as president by Sara Weber Rea, local Realtor Andy DeSalvo and Bigelow.

Dauray took centralization one step further by asking most board directors to resign.

Russ Hanna, a Lee County resident of 15 years who served on the board for about four years, said he was fired after he refused Dauray's request to resign.

"I received a letter from Charles Dauray saying that he would like all the existing board members to resign," Hanna said.

Hanna didn't heed the request. He said he was amazed at the makeup of the new board.

"Charles Dauray and one of his employees and attorney Joe Cox was all that was on the board," Hanna said.

Hanna said Dauray fired him. Dauray says Hanna resigned.

Dauray said the foundation is a private, not-for-profit company that makes its own decisions, just as any private corporation would.

"It's none of their damn business," Dauray said when asked about criticisms of the board from former directors and others with ties to the Koreshans.

Hanna, though, said the centralization of power has allowed Dauray to make decisions without a functional, independent board to approve or dissent.

He said the idea of Rea and Cox disputing anything Dauray proposed would probably result in their being fired.

"It's a dictatorship," Hanna said. "With Jo Bigelow it was a dictatorship and with Charles Dauray it's a dictatorship. (He's) running things with one of his employees. Dauray has absolute control. It's no different than when Jo Bigelow ran it. She was an autocrat." Bill Grace, a Fort Myers attorney who also served on the board during Bigelow's reign, which lasted from 1982 until 1999, says the new board seems less interested in preservation and education and more interested in pursuing its development plans.

"What's a not-for-profit doing getting a rezoning?" Grace asked.

The board has not always operated in its current fashion. An Oct. 12, 1994, letter to foundation board members from Cummings & Lockwood, a legal firm Cox is a part of, stated that the bylaws had been changed so the board could operate in a "modern" capacity.

"The foundation's board of trustees will be responsible for making all decisions regarding the foundation's affairs, including the election and removal or future trustees," the letter states. "... Mrs.

Bigelow feels that the modern concept of a self-perpetuating board of trustees (that is, the board of trustees is responsible for its own elections and removals, etc.) is critical for the smooth and efficient administration of the board." The letter goes on to say that the president of the foundation, not the board, would appoint other foundation officers.

Today, the College of Life Foundation consists of three directors with no other members, a departure from the communal tradition of the Koreshans.

Dauray said that's the best way for the foundation to function. He said his decision shortly after his arrival to ask most board members to resign was an attempt to streamline the decision-making process.

He said the foundation had too many employees and too many board members to be effective when he took over.

"I asked for those people who were not here year around and who had a minimal amount of participation to resign," Dauray said. "They were not totally committed to what we were doing."

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The Koreshan Legacy: Rich Koreshan history largely kept private

College of Life Foundation plans to display the archives at Florida Gulf Coast University within three to five years.

Sunday, May 13, 2001

By CHAD GILLIS, cegillis@naplesnews.com

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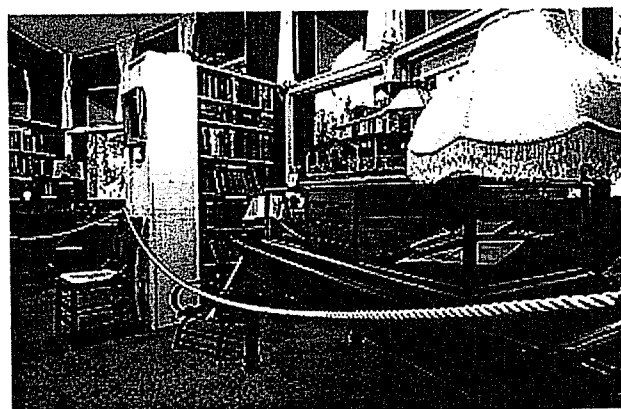
GRAPHICS: [Koreshan State Historic Site](#) | [The Riverplace of Estero](#)

The heart of a religious cult that braved an untamed Southwest Florida more than 100 years ago still beats faintly in an air-conditioned vault that few have entered.

The fire-proof concrete room on the first floor of the College of Life Foundation museum on the northwest corner of U.S. 41 and Corkscrew Road contains nearly 250,000 letters, books and photographs as well as scientific data and artwork. The collection also include a complete list of Koreshan members, from reams of documents on Koreshan founder Cyrus Teed to information on even the least influential residents.

It's a repository rich in local history that also contains materials significant to the entire country, such as letters from President Andrew Jackson.

This cultural wealth has sat mostly undisturbed for more than two decades. The loosely organized collection is cluttered on shelves and in stacks, some nearly 6 feet high. The room is not open to the general public and has been seen only by a select group outside of foundation officials.



Ropes within the College of Life Foundation Museum section off shelves of Koreshan books as well as artwork and furniture. Much of the material in the museum was taken from the Koreshan State Historic Site after former Koreshan president Hedwig Michel donated the land to the state in 1961. *Michel Fortier/Staff*

The mass of information and artifacts is considered to be the soul of the Koreshan settlement. It holds many of the keys to understanding who the Koreshans were and why they sprouted a successful communal society in the swampy wilderness along the Estero River.

Jo Bigelow was extremely protective of the foundation and its archives, an enormous collection of Koreshan letters, books and artwork. She denied state archivists and historians access to the collection on several occasions.

Before being stored at the foundation museum, the materials were mostly scattered throughout what is now the Koreshan State Historic Site in Estero. They were gathered by former Koreshan President Hedwig Michel and placed in the vault around 1979.

Michel, a German Jew who fled Europe during World War II, took over the foundation reins in 1960 and spent the rest of her life hoarding the Koreshan legacy.

Rather than promoting the history of the community, she worked diligently to keep the records private.

"Mrs. Michel was wary of anyone seeing the records.

That's where it started," said Dr. Lyn Rainard, a professor of history at Tidewater Community College in Virginia who's been working on a book about the Koreshans for years. "There's a tendency for people to feel an ownership of their history and want it written the way they see it. I think that is what's happened at the foundation." Michel's era ended with her death in 1982. Jo Bigelow, who worked for Michel as a secretary, took over the organization, becoming the first non-Koreshan to lead it. Bigelow led the foundation until passing control to current foundation president Charles Dauray in 1999, two years before her death at age 86.

Bigelow was extremely protective of the foundation and its archives, an enormous collection of Koreshan letters, books and artwork. She denied state archivists and historians access to the collection on several occasions.

While critics say Bigelow was paranoid in her attempts to keep even historians from reviewing the Koreshan records, Dauray said she was simply being prudent. Dauray admitted that Bigelow at times welcomed confrontation over the archives.

"She did what she had to do at the time she was in charge and that was hold everything together, preserve and contain the materials that we have so they wouldn't just be given over to other entities in spite of the fact that they seem to think they should have them," Dauray said.

To this day, the archives are not public. Those who have been denied access criticize the foundation for ignoring what they say is an invaluable collection.

Some locals have pleaded for years with the foundation to turn the materials over to professional archivists and historians. A handful of the dissenters are Koreshan descendants.

They want public display. The foundation, however, has never complied.

"Our contribution will be to have this collection on loan, which is a platinum collection for (FGCU). It will add great credibility to the university. And it puts the collection under professional supervision."

— Charles Dauray

That may change soon, according to foundation officials who say the archives will be on display at Florida Gulf Coast University within three to five years.

Dauray said he is working closely with FGCU's history department, specifically history professor Irvin Solomon. Dauray and the university both set aside \$5,000 last year that's tagged for cataloguing the materials.

"Our contribution will be to have this collection on loan, which is a platinum collection for the university," Dauray said. "It will add great credibility to the university. And it puts the collection under professional supervision." The ultimate goal, Dauray said, is to build and maintain an \$8 million library at FGCU to house the foundation collection. He said the foundation hopes to fund a chair in historical studies.

"What we're giving the university has great substance," Dauray said. "It's one of the most important historical, archival treasures in Florida." But it's been more than two decades since the materials were transferred to the vault. For years state researchers and historians have offered to catalogue the archives for free. The foundation never accepted the offers.

Bill Grace, a member of Koreshan Unity Alliance and a well-known figure locally and statewide in matters of historic preservation, says he is concerned the public will never have access to the records of one of the country's most significant utopian societies.

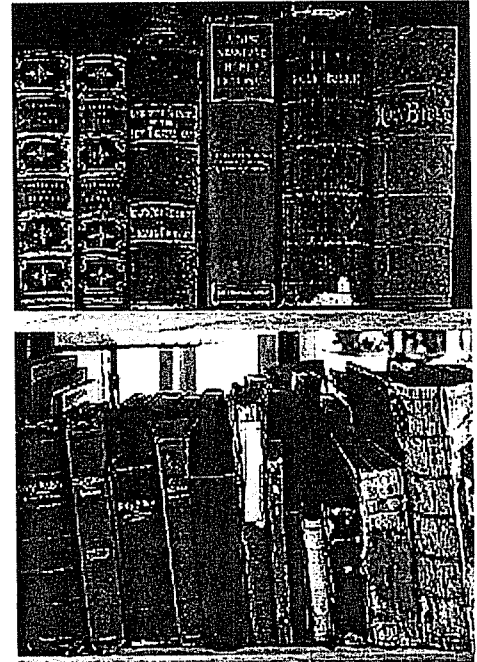
Grace said he also fears much of the materials have been either hidden or changed over the years by foundation officials paranoid about revealing details of Koreshan history.

"I'm afraid it's gone," Grace said of the Koreshan story. "It's all been edited." Dauray said the reason the archives have sat untouched for so long is because the university is not yet prepared to house the collection.

Sara Rea, a board member who's been with the foundation for 12 years, said the collection is not currently on display because the foundation was always short on funds and because former president Bigelow was incapable of managing such a vast array of documents, photos and artifacts.

"It was because we didn't have the money and Mrs. Bigelow didn't have the knowledge and the ability to do it," Rea said. "We wanted it done by a professional ... (But) we didn't have the funds and we didn't have the knowledge." Critics, though, say the foundation has taken in millions of dollars in land sales in the last few years, and that cataloguing archives is a relatively cheap endeavor.

"They've always kept the archives private and away from any valid research," Grace said. "They should be talking about interpreting the Koreshan history on that site." When asked why it's taken so long for the foundation to start the process of cataloguing the archives, Dauray, who's been foundation president



Koreshan beliefs were based on existing religious works, such as the Bible, as well as scientific and political theories. Pictured are several old Bibles sitting on shelves inside the College of Life Foundation Museum. *Michel Fortier/Staff*

for just about 21/2 years, said: "I come along and I see the vision of the future, which is the partnership with the university. What more can you ask for?" Solomon, an FGCU professor who teaches Florida history, called the collection a priceless resource for the university. He said he plans to teach courses on communal societies in the future and will use the archives as the main resource.

"It's extremely valuable in terms of primary sources and it's perhaps the Koreshans' most lasting gift to Florida," Solomon said. "People in Southwest Florida really don't know much about the Koreshans, but these materials would bring state, national and even international recognition to the university." Solomon is working with a student intern on the early stages of cataloguing the collection. They're starting with the bound books and working their way toward the more delicate materials, such as hand-written letters.

Rainard of Tidewater Community College has been studying the Koreshans since the early 1970s. He did his master's thesis at the University of South Florida on the Koreshans in 1974. Rainard is currently working on a book about the communal settlement.

"There are letters and diaries and there's a very extensive report on the geodetic study done in Naples," Rainard said of the archives.

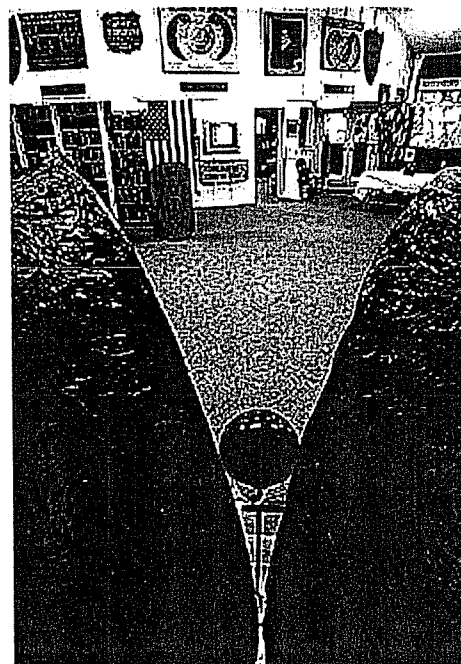
"Most of them are in their original format." The geodetic study was an elaborate experiment conducted on local beaches. Koreshans toted a long, straight board three miles down the shore, sighting it along the horizon line and making meticulous measurements and calculations every foot of the way.

When they pronounced their theory proved on May 8, 1897, the plank was 75 inches closer to the ground from the point where they started, demonstrating to them that the earth's surface curved inward, not outward.

Rainard is one of the few given permission to enter the archives, and access was granted only after years of pleading with former foundation president Bigelow.

He described the archives as a historical treasure, although the papers, books and other relics are fashioned more like a cluttered storage facility than an archival grail.

"They are not organized as of the last time I saw it," Rainard said. "It was not the type of thing that you can selectively pick things out."



The inside of the College of Life Foundation is decorated with hundreds of Koreshan artifacts and books. Pictured in front is a Koreshan representation of universe. Koreshans believed the Earth was a hollow sphere with life existing on the inside surface. *Michel Fortier/Staff*

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The Koreshan Legacy: Cult's assets, legacy now split among three separate groups

Sunday, May 13, 2001

By CHAD GILLIS, cegillis@naplesnews.com

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When the Koreshans settled near the Estero River in a then-remote wilderness, the group was a unified community consisting of a visionary cult leader and his wide-eyed followers.

The group thrived for decades, building some of the area's most impressive structures and machines of the time as well as providing luxuries such as electricity to nearby neighbors. Koreshan Unity was a communal settlement based on shared wealth, knowledge and duties.

That attitude ended after the Koreshan demise, a process that started in 1908 and continued well into the 1960s. Three entities sprang up in the aftermath: Koreshan State Historic Site, Koreshan Unity Alliance and Koreshan Unity Foundation, recently transformed into the College of Life Foundation.

All three stake claim to a mission of preserving the Koreshan legacy.

Officials with Unity Alliance and the historic site work together to preserve the buildings and artifacts located at the Koreshan State Historic Site on the northwest corner of Corkscrew Road and U.S. 41.

The foundation, which sits across the street from the historic site, has focused over the years on internal interests and has rarely worked in conjunction with the park.

The state historic site consists of 110 acres that were the center of the Koreshan settlement. Hedwig Michel, a former Koreshan Unity president who died in 1982, gave the land to the state in 1961, hoping state officials would recruit new Koreshan members and restore the crumbling buildings.

Since then, the state has controlled the property and has worked to mend the deteriorating structures and artwork. About 50,000 people visit the park each year and the park holds 10 public events annually.

The Koreshan State Historic Site contains a dozen buildings ranging from a general store along U.S. 41 to smaller cottages formerly used to house new members. Most of the buildings were erected around 1905. The site also contains a boat landing on the Estero River, elaborate vegetative gardens and Michel's grave. Officials with the site are pursuing grants to restore the buildings, which they say need hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of reconstructive work.

Koreshan Unity Alliance is a citizens support group that lobbies at the state level for park-related grants.

Headed by Koreshan descendant Bill Grace, the alliance's sole purpose is to secure restoration funds for the park.

Charles Dauray's philosophy is that if the Koreshans were alive today they would be building educational and cultural campuses like the one he's now proposing.

While the Koreshan State Historic Site is based on preserving the Koreshan settlement as it was shortly after the turn of the 20th century, the College of Life Foundation promotes itself as today's Koreshans.

Charles Dauray was named president of the foundation in January 1999. His philosophy is that if the Koreshans were alive today they would be building educational and cultural campuses like the one he's now proposing.

The park is a tribute to the past. The foundation, Dauray says, continues the Koreshan legacy through a more modern means.

College of Life Foundation is a separate entity with no ties to the state park system or historic preservation efforts. It's a private company and has official not-for-profit status with the beneficiary being the foundation itself.

Dauray runs a three-member board of directors that includes himself, a foundation employee and the foundation's attorney. The board is self-governed and self-appointed; there are no foundation members other than the board.

The foundation has millions of dollars in assets, mostly held in land, and operates independently of any review committee.

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The Koreshan Legacy: College of Life Foundation president Charles Dauray

Sunday, May 13, 2001

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Just over two years ago, Charles Dauray stepped aboard the College of Life Foundation as the eighth president in the corporation's 100-year history.

Born in Charlestown, R.I., in 1942, Dauray attended high school at LaSalle Academy in Providence. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in political science from Providence College in 1966.

Dauray's family moved to Naples in 1960. Ten years later, Dauray himself moved to Naples full time.

A former manager of the Naples Yacht Club, Dauray was part owner of Wurst Place restaurant before becoming chair of the Collier County Historical Society.

He's also held a real estate license and sold property in the Naples area. He ran unsuccessfully for the Naples City Council as well.



Charles Dauray

Dauray is currently Florida's president for the Izaak Walton League of America, a nationwide conservation organization.

He has served as the vice chair for Habitat for Humanity in Collier County, was a charter founder of the Southwest Florida Archeological Society and founding chair of the Collier Young Republicans club.

Dauray lives in an apartment inside the College of Life Foundation museum on the northeast corner of U.S. 41 and Corkscrew Road. The foundation was formerly known as the Koreshan Unity Foundation.

According to tax records, Dauray is paid \$35,307 annually as president of the foundation.

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The Koreshan Legacy: Articles of Incorporation for College of Life Foundation

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College of Life Foundation, Articles of Incorporation

1. To promote and encourage public knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the Koreshan Unity and its members throughout the United States.
2. To preserve, maintain and secure in perpetuity the archives, records, accounts, manuscripts, documents, photographs, books, publications, ephemera, art objects, artifacts and other materials relating to Koreshan history, religious faith, scientific system, economic philosophy, cultural and artistic attainments and daily life.
3. To undertake research into all aspects of Koreshan history, scientific theory, philosophy and material culture and to publish the same in scholarly, as well as more popular formats.
4. To maintain and operate a library, exhibition gallery, museum and auditorium devoted to the pioneer legacy of the Koreshan Unity and its members and of the residents of Southwest Florida in general.
5. To solicit funds from governmental agencies, foundations and other organizations and the public, in support of its objectives.
6. The corporation may receive and maintain a fund or funds or real and/or personal property and shall apply the whole or any part of the income and/or principal thereof, exclusively for charitable, scientific, literary and/or educational purposes, including, but not limited to, the purposes and activities heretofore

described. Such income and/or principal may be applied by such agencies and means as shall from time to time be found appropriate and as are lawful for a not for profit corporation.

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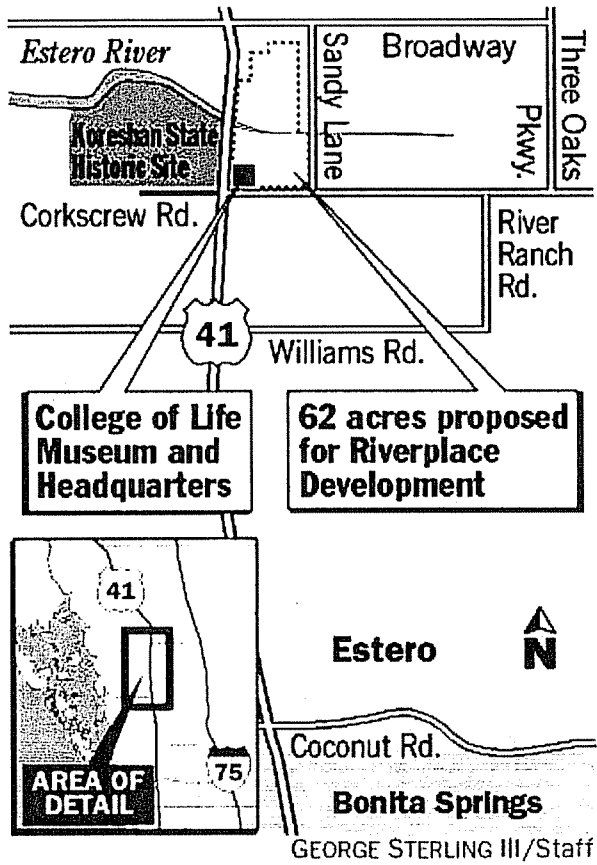
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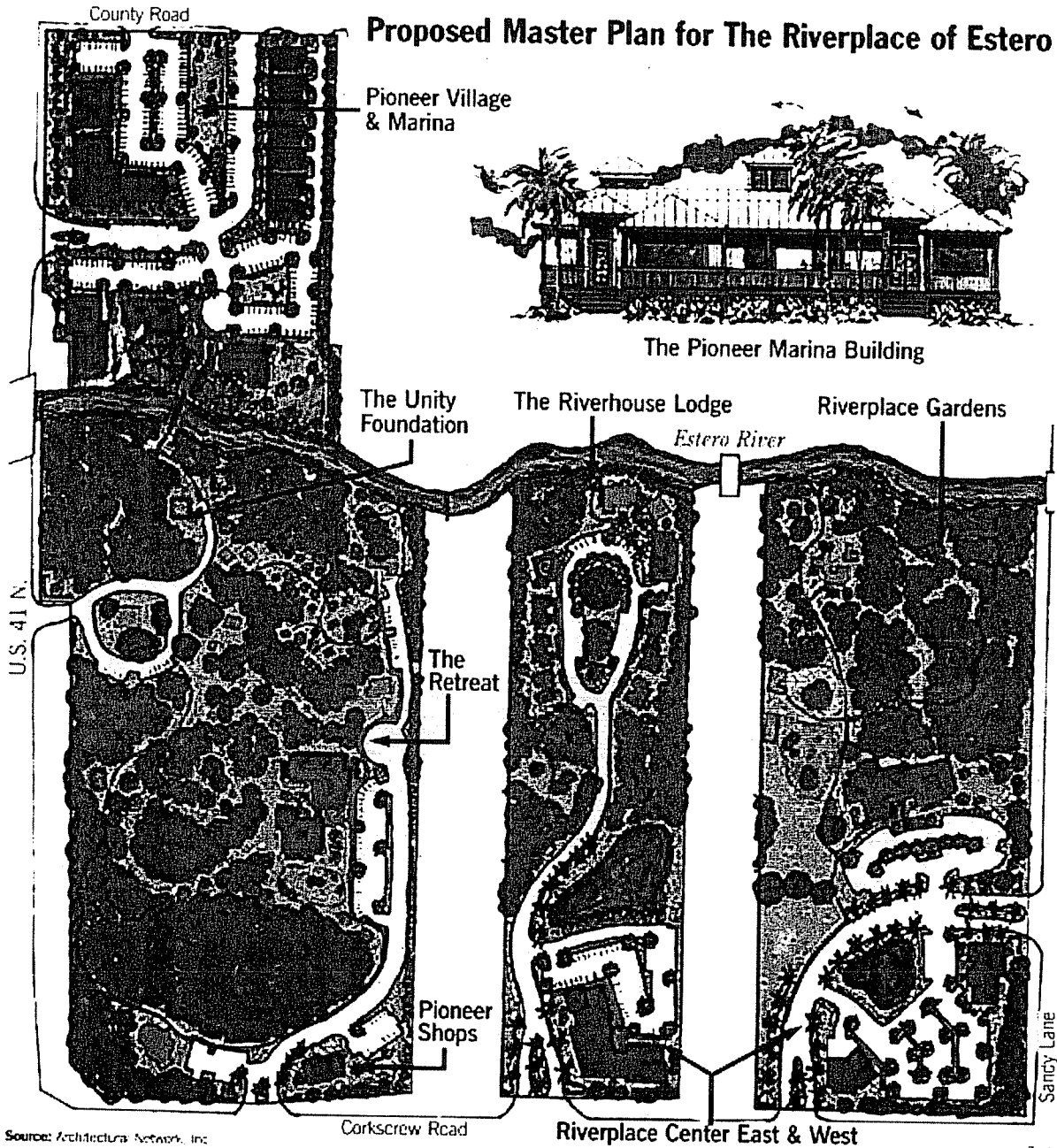
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Proposed Master Plan for The Riverplace of Estero



Source: Architectura Network, Inc.

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