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## Carl Fisher: Wild Developer Who Tried to Build a Resort at Montauk



CARL FISHER, THE MAN WITH A MONTAUK DREAM, PHOTO: COURTESY MONTAUK LIBRARY

JUNE 26, 2014 BY DAN RATTNER

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Last Tuesday, in a grand ceremony involving lots of local dignitaries, the plaza in the center of downtown Montauk was renamed after a man named Carl Fisher.

The likelihood is that you've never heard of Carl Fisher. But the fact is that Carl Fisher, a multimillionaire, was the man who in 1926 and 1927 laid down the foundation of the resort that Montauk is today. It had been almost entirely vacant pastureland before. But he imagined it and had architectural plans drawn up to his specifications.

He ordered the plaza built. He ordered all the streets that surround the plaza built. There had been nothing but a field before that. He laid out all the roads in Montauk and built nearly all of them. He built glass-enclosed tennis courts by the railroad station (it is the Playhouse today), the 160-room Montauk Manor, the Montauk Surf Club with its 300-yard-long wooden boardwalk, cabanas and Olympic-size pool. He even, in downtown Montauk, built pink sidewalks (he chose the color; some still remain).

Out of town, he built the Montauk Yacht Club. He built a racetrack (now Fairview Avenue) that winds its way around the [Montauk Downs Golf Club](#) (which he also built), and you can go on YouTube and you'll see one of the races held on that track. He built a polo field out toward the lighthouse. He created Montauk Harbor by dynamiting the narrow sandbar that connected Lake Montauk to Gardiner's Bay. He built both the Catholic and Protestant churches on the roads he created in town, he built a group of stores east of the plaza that still stand, he built Shepherd's Neck, a section of Montauk designed to look like a small English village (still here), he built the Montauk Inn (now [Sole East](#)), he built about a dozen homes in the grand half-timber English style, and he brought in sheep to munch on the grass in the countryside. He also built a new railroad station for Montauk. There had been none since 1907, when the last one burned down. Montauk Beach, as he called it, would have been a high-class resort peninsula with a main city of at least 100,000 when completed. But he never finished. And then, in 1939, he died, broke.

### Carl Fisher: Wild Developer Who Tried to Build a Resort at Montauk

stands alone in a field today because this entire project ultimately failed.

In 1925, when Carl Fisher bought essentially the entire peninsula of Montauk, all that was here were about 150 fishermen in a squatters' village on the arc of Fort Pond Bay, owned by the railroad, and half-a-dozen wealthy families who had built Stanford White mansions in the dunes east of [Ditch Plains](#) in 1895.

And that was it. Population 160 on a total of 10,000 acres of wild, rolling dunes, cool summer breezes and fogs that came in from the sea. And then he turned an army of 5,000 workmen loose and let the dirt fly. Everything he built has stood the test of time, with the exception of the Surf Club. The club, with its hacienda stucco walls, its Olympic-size pool, its boardwalk and cabanas, was washed away by the sea in a series of hurricanes in the 1950s. There is a new Montauk Surf Club on the site, built in 1983, and its condominiums.

Who was Carl Fisher? By the time he came here he was 51 years old. Earlier, in 1912, at age 38, he had built Miami Beach. It had been a vacant island of mangos and weeds when he bought it. He had imagined it as a resort city in the hacienda style and it was a wild success, bringing him millions. Now there was Montauk. It was three times the size of Miami Beach. But when he was finished with it, it would be a replica of an English countryside resort town, with shepherds, horses, sheep, half-timber buildings and, downtown by the beach, the tall city he had begun. The advertising for it read "Miami in the Winter, Montauk in the Summer."

Fisher was born in 1874 and raised in difficult circumstances in Greensburg, Indiana, not far from Indianapolis. His father was an alcoholic. Carl was diagnosed with severe astigmatism at an early age and got headaches when studying, which made it difficult for him in school. He left school at 12 and got odd jobs to help support the family. He worked in a grocery store and a bookstore, and had a booth on the railroad platform where trains departed Indianapolis for a while, selling tobacco, candy and newspapers.

He bought a bicycle and opened a repair shop in Indianapolis. Then he opened a store that sold bicycles. To bring attention to this shop, he took a bike up to the roof of the tallest building in Indianapolis and, with a crowd assembled, pushed it over the railing. The police got involved after that little stunt. But soon he was running several bike shops, and he became a bicycle racer. Around 1900, he opened what is believed to have been the first auto showroom in America, in Indianapolis. He was 26. He had a hot-air balloon lift a car from his showroom and had it flown over the city, with the name of his dealership on the balloon for all to see. He photographed the stunt and bought advertising headlined "The Stoddard-Dayton was the first automobile to fly over Indianapolis. It should be your first automobile too." Then he took up auto racing. For a while, he held the world auto speed record, just under 60 miles an hour, for the measured mile, which he achieved on a dirt track.

In 1904, Fisher was approached by a man who had gotten the patent for inventing sealed car headlights. Fisher, together with a friend named James Allison, bought the development rights to it and in very short order made a fortune. For about 10 years, every car sold in America had Prest-O-Lite headlights. In 1908, at 32, he partnered with Allison, Arthur C. Newby and Frank H. Wheeler (owner of a carburetor company) to finance the building of a speedway in downtown Indianapolis. A statue of Carl stands at the entrance to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway today.

At this point, Fisher was a major celebrity in Indianapolis. There were even Carl Fisher fan clubs at local high schools. The following year, Carl met a 15-year-old high school student named Jane Watts, a member of one of those fan clubs. She had a scrapbook full of newspaper clippings about him. When Carl first saw her, he told her he would marry her. At that time, it was not unusual for an older man to take a bride who was 16 or 17. But at the wedding, which took place at Jane's parents house, Carl asked Jane to say to the newspapermen who were covering this event that she was actually 24.

Several events took place during the courtship and early years of this marriage, told by Jane in a book she later wrote called *The Fabulous Hoosier*, which best describe what Carl was really like.

There was to have been a honeymoon. Carl told Jane he was having a yacht built to take her off on it. But when it failed to get finished in time, he said he'd use it later for a holiday trip going down the Mississippi to New Orleans with two of his business associates, John Levi and Harry Buschmann. Noting this was their failed honeymoon yacht, she insisted he invite her along. He did. The men teased and played pranks on her during this trip. They dared her to chew tobacco, they dared her to bite off the head of a fish she'd caught. She did it all and was soon accepted and enjoying all the fun.

In New Orleans, Jane writes how her husband took his two unmarried buddies to the tenderloin district and did not get back until 2 a.m.—with a gold bracelet for her and a story that the owner of the jewelry store where they bought it had been so put off by their shabby, dirty clothing that, even though they had paid cash, he had called the police, who detained them for a while. Later that night, the guys bought a whole roast pig and played football with it, which brought another police encounter. Playing football with a roast pig after 1 a.m. was, apparently, illegal in New Orleans.

In 1913, Fisher built a 12-room mansion for his wife in Indianapolis and filled it with servants for her to oversee. She was 19. Also in that year, Fisher conceived of the idea of building a paved highway connecting New York City to San Francisco. The Lincoln Highway, as he called it, would cost \$10 million, and much of it was paid for by his friends in the automobile manufacturing and supply business. But money also came from former President Teddy Roosevelt and Thomas Edison, both friends of Fisher. And there was a check from sitting President Woodrow Wilson. In 1916, Fisher spearheaded the building of a paved highway from Indianapolis to Miami. He led the parade of cars that first made the trip on it. It soon extended north to the Canadian border and to Florida's southern tip.

A few years earlier, while on vacation in Miami with his wife, the millionaire Fisher, contemplating what everyone told him should be a happy early retirement, looked out across the water to an undeveloped barrier island. There was a half-built wooden bridge that extended from Miami that had not yet reached this island, under construction by a 74-year-old farmer named John Collins, who now had run out of money. Fisher couldn't get this wild strip of island out of his mind. And so, in 1913, he bought it, finished the bridge, brought electricity out to the island under the bridge and people in trolley cars on top of it, and with more bridges, which he called "causeways," developed Miami Beach into a major resort city of 30,000 people during the next 10 years. He laid out the streets, sold lots to others, built big resorts he personally owned and famously, when President-elect Warren Harding came to Miami Beach to play golf, rented a circus elephant to "caddy" for the two of them. Soon, he and Jane had a 100-foot yacht and an even bigger mansion on the island. Jane loved to dress up and go to fancy parties. Fisher hated such parties but went anyway.

In 1924, Jane gave birth to a son they named Carl Fisher, Jr. It was a terribly long delivery, lasting several days, and Carl dropped everything to be with her. When the baby was born he brought everyone over to meet his new son. But then the baby, at three months, took sick, began losing weight and, in spite of anything doctors could do, died. Both parents were distraught. Carl was so upset he told Jane he never wanted her to have a baby again. He couldn't bear it. The next year, however, Jane pressed him to adopt a son from a neighbor's family in Indianapolis who wanted the baby to have a better life. Carl said he wouldn't be part of it, but she did it anyway. Though he later relented and put his name on the adoption papers, the couple argued and soon decided they could not stay together. They parted amicably—Carl was very generous to her—and they remained friends for the rest of their lives.

It was soon after this that Carl Fisher decided that there was little else for him to do in Miami Beach and that he should look for his next project. He decided it would be Montauk.

Among other things, he arranged with Robert Moses to bring a parkway out to Montauk. Carl held parties at the Surf Club, polo events at the polo fields (now Indian Field Ranch) south of Third House. The 150 or so fishermen in their shacks on Fort Pond Bay were just fine, and he'd bring one or another of them to various parties to show them off. Many of his wealthy friends from the automobile industry came to buy lots—Champion, Olds, Kleisrath, Chrysler—and stood out on the terrace of the penthouse to see all the activity going on. Trains bought other interested property buyers out, and teams of salesmen based in the tall office building showed them around. Carl wrote Jane about all this—I wish you were here, he told her. Carl was now spending some of his time in Montauk and some in Miami Beach. He was 50 years old.

Jane, in her book, tells an interesting story about a younger man she met in Paris after she and Carl were divorced, who she took back to Indianapolis to meet her folks. She wanted to marry him and wrote Carl about him.

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#### Carl Fisher: Wild Developer Who Tried to Build a Resort at Montauk

"Jane, I'll be damned if I'll let you marry some stranger. You bring him down here [to Miami Beach]. I'll pay all the expenses—and I'll let you know if he's any good."

Amazingly, she did just that, and he approved.

After that, with the couple back in Indianapolis, Carl wired her again to say he was building a house for them in Miami Beach. A big house. He sent her plans. Jane said it was too big. Carl wired from Montauk, "Hell, why do you want to change anything when I tell you it's all right! Besides, it's practically finished. I'll have it all furnished, ready for you to move in to when you come down."

Jane in later years became considered the Queen of Miami Beach. She was married and divorced many times, and wrote that was because they were all boring compared to Carl.

Carl put his available cash into building Montauk. But then, in September of 1926, a hurricane with 115-mile-an-hour winds devastated Miami Beach. Hundreds of people died. Most everything was devastated. He went down and saw it himself, but announced it would all be rebuilt. That, however, took two years, and it was many years after that before it returned to its earlier glory.

At this point, Carl needed financial help. His fortune, estimated as high as \$100 million, was now half gone in the hurricane in Miami Beach. Friends urged him to abandon Montauk and return full-time to oversee Miami Beach. But the Montauk construction was proceeding. He was committed to Montauk. He sold his stake in the Indianapolis Speedway to try to raise money for Montauk. He sold his mansion in Miami Beach to help complete Montauk.

Black Tuesday, October 29, 1929, signaled the start of the Great Depression. Montauk went bankrupt in 1931, and not only Fisher but all his stockholders lost everything. Years later, in 1938, when a banker gained control of Fisher's holdings in Montauk, Fisher invited him down to Miami Beach, where he was living in a small house in retirement, in failing health and drinking heavily. When they met, Fisher still talked about how they could do this or that to save Montauk, a sparkle in his eyes. He died in July 1939, at the age of 65.

The big office building remained abandoned until 1963. At that time, the holders of much of the property in Montauk opened an office on the ground floor of this building and, under the name "Montauk Improvement Company," began selling off many of the lots. Things went slowly.

Four years earlier, when I was 16, my dad moved our family to Montauk from New Jersey after buying White's Pharmacy in that town that year. I started *Dan's Papers* in 1960. And the next year I approached Frank Tuma, the manager of the Improvement Company, and asked him if I could use one of the abandoned desks and chairs on the upper floors for my first *Dan's Papers* office. He said sure. The elevator did not work. I walked all the way up to the Penthouse and looked around. There was a grand bedroom with the remains of a king-size bed, there was a living room and bar. I chose to set up my office on the mezzanine, right above the activity on the ground floor, and Frank let me put a telephone in, with the wire going out the window and down from my "office" to the ground floor. Frank's receptionist took my calls.

I spent many days up there, writing stories on a manual typewriter (there was no electricity), conducting business, even one time agreeing to meet an IBM salesman who climbed the stairs to get up there to sell me an electric typewriter. I pointed out, when he finished telling me about its features and wanted to plug it in, that there was no electricity.

The upstairs was frozen in time from when the Fisher offices went bust. There were calendars on the walls open to the year 1938. There were files full of papers everywhere. I saved some of these papers—there are letters that Fisher in Miami Beach was writing to his manager here, Tom Ringwood in Montauk, in 1935. Fisher, in Miami Beach, was still making suggestions about what to do. Recently, I donated these papers to libraries, some to the Montauk Library and some to the Wolfsonian Library in Miami Beach.

Numerous books have been written about Fisher. Here are some quotes about him from people who appear in the pages of *Castles in the Sand*, written by Mark S. Foster in 2000.

"He was all speed. I don't believe he ever thought in terms of money. He made millions, but they were incidental. He often said, 'I just like to see the dirt fly.'"—Jane Fisher

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"If you look at Fisher's entire life, it's a marathon. It's a race. It was a race to achieve the top of whatever field he was in at the time. Everything he did he went into with his heart, his soul, his money, and he would not stop until he reached the end. He wanted to be there the quickest and first."—Howard Kleinburg

So now "The Plaza" in downtown Montauk is "Carl Fisher Plaza." And you know all about him.