

# The Montauk That Might Have Been

*I stand as on some mighty eagle's beak,  
Eastward the sea absorbing, viewing,  
(nothing but sea and sky,  
The tossing waves, the foam, the ships  
in the distance,  
The wild unrest, the snowy curling caps  
—that inbound urge and urge of  
waves,  
Seeking the shores forever.*

—“From Montauk Point,” by Walt Whitman, in  
“Sands at Seventy” (1888)

By JONATHAN COHEN

**O**N Sept. 21, 1925, at the height of the Island's real-estate boom, Carl Graham Fisher, the developer of Miami Beach, bought nearly 10,000 acres that make up just about all of Montauk Peninsula with nine miles of waterfront. It was another of Fisher's big dreams to build an extravagant resort and to create what he called the “Miami Beach of the North.”

Montauk—which meant “the fort country”—was the Island's “Wild West” from 1660 up to the time when Fisher bought it from the Pennsylvania Railroad, Long Island Rail Road and the Montauk Company. The first “proprietors” pastured sheep, cattle and horses, and rented pasturage rights to people as far west as Patchogue. They used to have cattle drives “on” Montauk in the spring and “off” in the fall. The last one took place in 1926.

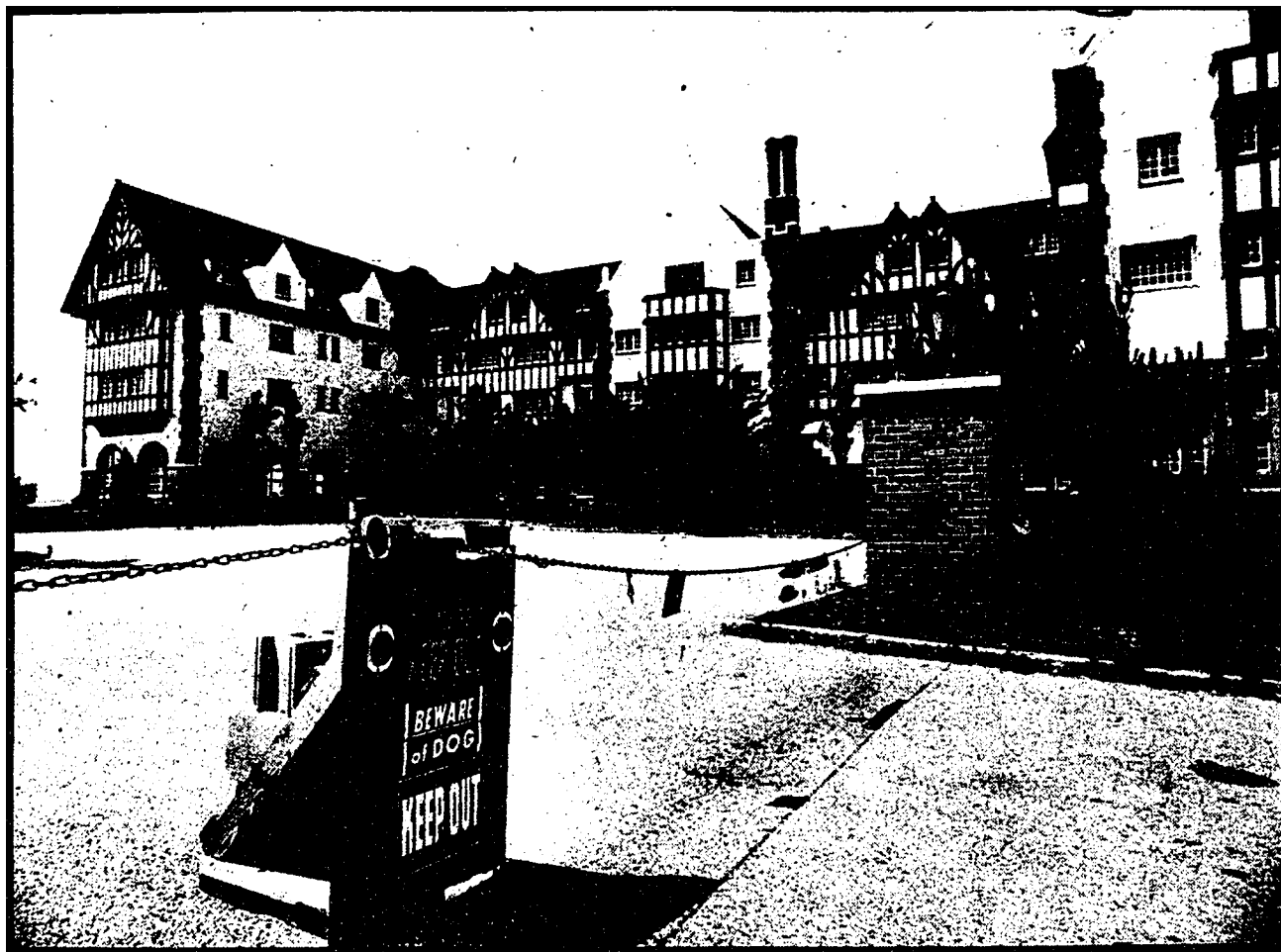
Fisher's Montauk was to cost hundreds of millions. He saw it as a Northern resort that would have Old World charm—a dream city of medieval cottages with thatched roofs, windmills, blooded sheep with shepherds and dogs to herd them, splendid hunters, hunting dogs. Roads and streets, business buildings and hotels would be hidden behind low hills and grassy moors.

He hoped to make Montauk the future harbor of New York City and argued that passengers from Europe could save a day by disembarking at Montauk, where 47 ocean-going ships could put in at its harbor.

In her book “Montauk: Three Centuries of Romance, Sport and Adventure” (Star Press, 1938), Jeannette Edwards Rattray recalled: “When, early in 1926, the rumor went around the Hamptons that Carl Graham Fisher was about to arrive in Fort Pond Bay on his yacht, Shadow K, there could have been no more excitement if visiting royalty had been imminent. Carl Fisher, then in his early fifties, was already an almost legendary character.”

He was a self-made man, described as unassuming and shy and what his contemporaries called a “live wire.” Born in Greenburg, Ind., in 1874, he attended

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The New York Times/Louis Manna

## Montauk Manor, closed in 1963, and the Carl Fisher Building, partly used

a one-room school until he was 12 and then peddled newspapers and candies on trains. He had a job in a bookstore and later worked in a bank. Then, like Henry Ford, he had a bicycle repair shop.

His financial climb began in 1904 when he organized the Prest-O-Lite Company, which supplied the first gas tanks for automobile head and tail lights. When it was sold out by Fisher and his associates, it brought many millions.

Fisher used to race bicycles and bobsleds. In the early days of the automobile, he became a racing driver, so daring that his pictures were seen in the sporting pages of the papers as often as Babe Ruth's and Jack Dempsey's at a later date. He held the world's two-mile record in 1904, with a time of 2 minutes 2 seconds.

In 1909 he built the Indianapolis Speedway as a test ground for experimental cars. He was also one of the founders of the Lincoln Highway, linking the Atlantic and Pacific Coasts. The Dixie Highway running North and South was his idea, too.

Fisher went to Miami on a vacation in

1913, when there was no Miami Beach—only a tangle of mangroves and sawgrass in Biscayne Bay. Largely as a result of his vision, enterprise and finances, it grew from a swamp to a thriving city and world-famous resort.

After his Miami success, he turned to Montauk and organized the Montauk Beach Development Corporation. He planned construction for three palatial hotels, designed in the Tudor style, at commanding points on the land; a bathing pavilion; three golf courses; polo fields and barns for 200 horses; a half-mile gentlemen's driving track; 20 miles of bridle paths and three covered tennis courts, with seating for 15,000. He said that he would build good schools, both public and high-class private, along with a church and a pastor's home.

He even planned to open a radio station to duplicate WIOD—Wonderful Isle of Dreams—at Miami Beach.

The work began early in 1926, and soon newspapers carried ads with the slogan, “Miami Beach in Winter, Montauk in Summer.”

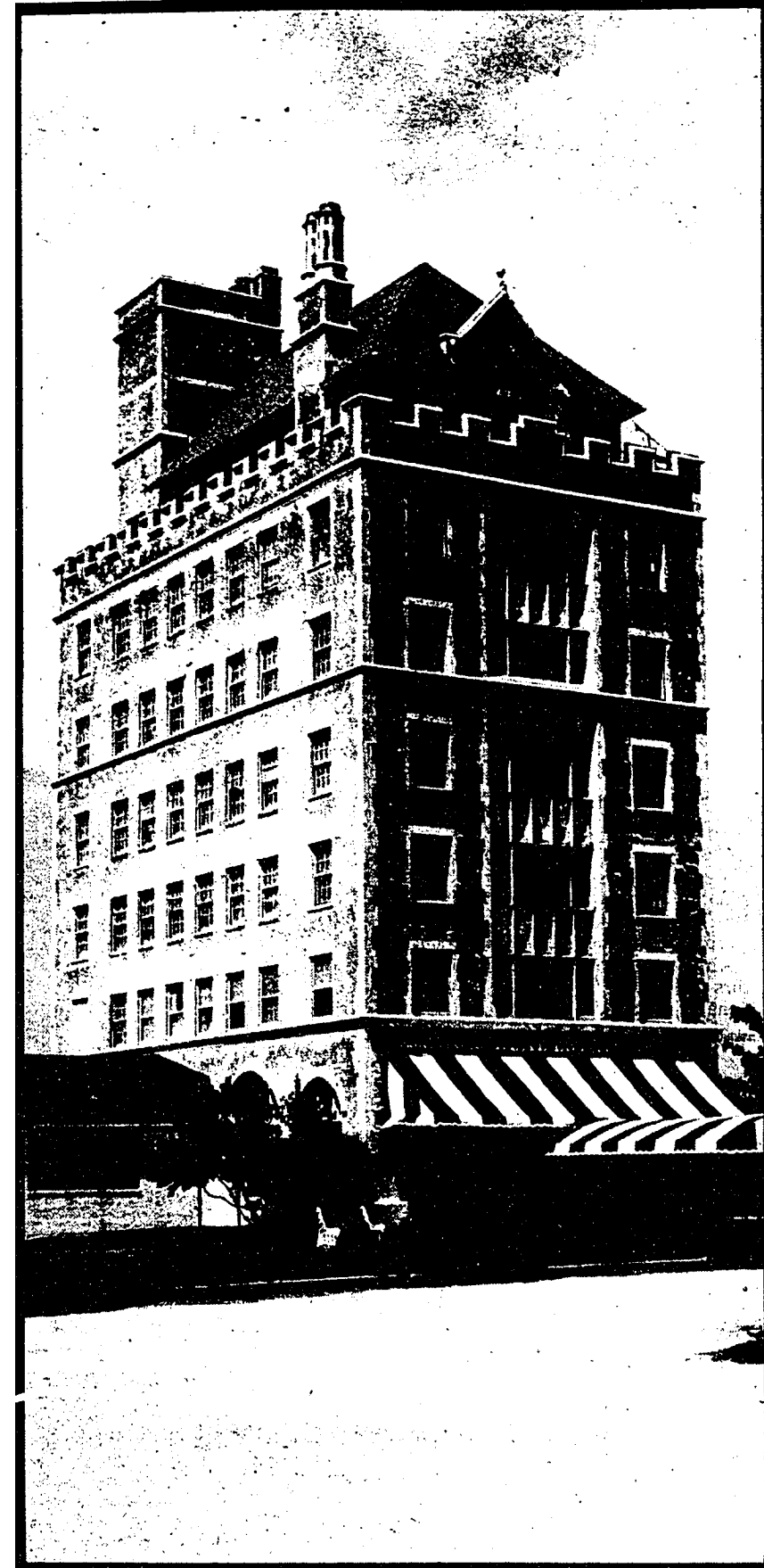
Fisher first built a little skyscraper seven stories high. It stood “like a grain elevator” in the dunes, an exact copy of his new Florida office. “Fisher's Silo,” it was called, and its height had a purpose. From the windows of that lonely tower, he could show prospective land buyers the entire sweep of the sandy peninsula and the golf courses he had built behind Signal Hill, and he could paint before their dazzled eyes the dream city of tomorrow.

From that tower, Fisher, pointing through its windows, sold to one man for cash \$180,000 worth of Montauk. Ten thousand dollars for one acre was considered a modest price in those early days of Montauk.

Miles of good roads were under construction. Electric-light plants, water mains and huge nurseries for growing shrubs and trees, to be used later to beautify the land, were established.

On June 1, 1927, Montauk Manor was opened on Rocky Ridge—a million-dollar fireproof hotel with 178 guest rooms, a dining room for 500 and a magnificent view of the Atlantic, Block Island Sound,

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# A Dream of Another Miami

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Fort Pond Bay, Lake Montauk and Fort Pond.

The opening dinner of the big hotel—to inaugurate the building of Montauk Beach, the “greatest summer resort on the Atlantic Coast”—was an auspicious occasion. Speakers compared Carl Fisher, for his daring, skill and initiative, to Charles Lindbergh, who had just made

his epical trans-Atlantic flight.

For the next few years, Montauk Beach was a lavish resort. In 1930 an exuberant ad sang out: “Come to Montauk Beach—at the top of Long Island’s sunrise trail—you who love to play!

“On Long Island’s slender tip, 125 miles at sea, where constant ocean breezes, salty with the tang of the sea, sing a cool refrain all summer, distinguished builders are creating America’s finest summer home colony.

“Every sport is here, in superlative array—from golf over two delightfully unique 18-hole courses to indoor and outdoor tennis, riding to hounds and bathing in a 150-foot salt-water pool at the ocean’s edge. Charming homes are sprinkled over the green hills, and new homesites are being chosen daily. For where could there be a better place to rest and play? And at the end of a day’s relaxing enjoyment there is Montauk Manor. . .”

The bursting of Florida’s real-estate bubble came first, with the Florida hurricane of 1926 hard on its heels, and this caused the work on Montauk to be halted. Like other financial giants, Fisher was trapped by the circumstances leading to the Wall Street crash of 1929. Soon after that, the Montauk bonds fell due. But the Island’s real-estate boom was over.

In her biography of her former husband, “Fabulous Hoosier” (McBride, 1947), Jane Fisher recalled: “Carl might have told the bondholders: Take your bonds. You bought them and you’re as responsible as I am. Many of these in-

vestors were Carl’s friends. But now they were afraid to risk more.”

Fisher tried to obtain lower assessments, and when he failed, the Montauk Beach Development Corporation went into receivership in May 1932. Later the project was reorganized, and the Carl G. Fisher Company took an active part.

“But by that time, Carl was too ill to care,” according to Jane Fisher. “Montauk was Carl’s first and only failure.”

On July 15, 1939, Carl Fisher died in a hospital in Miami Beach, at the age of 65. His master plan for Montauk turned to dust, and the few remaining projects he designed say little today about his

grandiose Montauk Beach.

Today it is a real tourist town, for which Fisher paved the way, full of hotels, motels, shops, restaurants, fishing boats, even the oldest cattle ranch in the United States. The great Montauk Manor has been closed since 1963—there are “Beware of Dog” signs in the windows—and many local residents think of it as an eyesore.

Only the active golf and racquet club—and especially the yacht club—recall the high style Fisher tried to create at Montauk, the “Miami Beach of the North.” Waves of summer vacationers go there for something else nowadays. ■