

Introduction

LONG ISLAND STRETCHES FROM THE NEW YORK CITY boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens to a lonely, wind-blown point 120 miles east in the Atlantic Ocean. Montauk is the name the Indians gave to this last place, and if one had never driven the length of Long Island, it would be hard to imagine that these final 12 miles could be part of the same country—much less the same state.

Acres of forest parkland extend from Block Island Sound across the two-mile peninsula, until steep eroded bluffs fall off into the ocean. Looking west from the centuries-old Montauk lighthouse, a rocky coast gives way to small shifting beaches and then finally to long stretches of uninterrupted sand and dunes. Hidden in the interior are dozens of small lakes and ponds that are home to a variety of fish, waterfowl, and wildlife. All of this is surrounded by the rich ocean waters that attracted the first early sportsmen to Montauk.

It seems that everyone who visits this lonely peninsula falls in love with it. The first to make their home here were the American Indians, who thrived on fish and wild game. In the 18th century they shared the land with the East Hampton proprietors, who grazed their

cattle every summer on the bountiful prairie grass. These proprietors forced the Indians off the peninsula in the 19th century. The few who remained left when Arthur Benson bought their land in 1879 for a hunting and fishing preserve for the pleasure of his friends. He engaged Frederick Olmstead and Stanford White to design a colony. The military, when it returned from the Spanish American War in the Caribbean, was quarantined in Indian Field, at what is today Theodore Roosevelt County Park.

Sharing Montauk today is a year-round population of less than 4,000 local people. This number leaps to more than 22,000 summer residents made up of tourists, second-home owners, yachtsmen, and home renters.

Critical to understanding how Montauk came to embody such an unlikely contrast of resort destination, working community, and nature sanctuary is the story of one volunteer organization, the Concerned Citizens of Montauk, the members of which have fought since 1970 to save this unique place from becoming another victim of unbridled development.

But the seeds of conflict between those who saw something special in Montauk to protect, and those who saw mostly profit in the ocean views and sandy beaches, began in the early part of the twentieth century. It was 1924 when two larger-than-life men confronted each other over what was then 10,000 acres of cattle pasture. First came Robert Moses, the brash head of the newly created Long Island Parks Commission, announcing his intention to establish 24 parks—starting with two in Montauk. At that time Montauk was owned by the estate of the late Arthur Benson.

What started as a friendly negotiation between Moses and the Benson estate suddenly turned hostile when Miami Beach real estate tycoon, Carl Fisher, began talking about his plans to develop Montauk as a northern counterpart to his just-completed Miami success story. The Bensons immediately jacked their price up from less than \$50 an acre to \$250. Undeterred, in August of 1924 Moses seized land for his parks using New York State's right of eminent domain: 158 acres near the Montauk lighthouse, and 1,700 acres in the area now known as Hither Hills State Park.

One year later, Carl Fisher bought the remaining 9,000 acres of Montauk for \$2.5 million and set about to execute his grand scheme. By 1927 he had completed work on several impressive buildings: the huge Tudor-style Montauk Manor hotel, a seven-story office tower, the Montauk Yacht Club, an 18-hole golf course, polo fields, and a flamingo pink art deco beach club, complete with an Olympic-sized saltwater swimming pool. Unencumbered by any worries about the environment, he also bulldozed a hole in the dunes between Block Island Sound and what was then the largest freshwater lake on Long Island—Lake Montauk—to create a safe harbor for yachts and fishing boats.

Less noticeable, but equally influential on Montauk's future, Fisher filed 10 maps laying out a plan for where and how residential development would proceed. With no regard for Montauk's unique hill-and-dale topography, limited water supply, or drainage patterns, Fisher's plan resulted in a patchwork of half-acre and smaller lots. The sole purpose of this subdivision was to maximize financial gain.

Slow real estate sales in Miami Beach in 1927 and 1928 stretched Fisher's finances and slowed progress on his Montauk development. Then in 1929, the stock market crash cut the foundation out from under the roaring twenties building boom—taking Carl Fisher with it. On May 26, 1932, the Montauk Beach Development Corporation and its primary stockholder, Carl Graham Fisher, declared bankruptcy at the other end of Long Island in a Brooklyn court.

In the years up to and including World War II and continuing through most of the 1950s, development in Montauk was almost nonexistent, with the exception of a military contingent who served at Camp Hero near the lighthouse, and who stayed to make Montauk their home. In the absence of any interest from out-of-town buyers, a small number of local families began to acquire significant holdings of Montauk real estate from what had been Fisher's Montauk empire, as managed by various bank holding companies. Montauk was also growing as a commercial fishing center, which brought fishermen from as far away as Nova Scotia. During the 1950s Montauk's reputation as a prime sportfishing location started to attract a few adventuresome "summer people." To these outsiders, prices still seemed more than reasonable. In 1956, after a few scotches at the already well-known

Shagwong Tavern, one proud new owner was caught boasting how he had just bought an estate with three houses and 25 acres of hilltop property for just over \$50,000. A friend and local realtor told him that he thought it was a lousy deal, he was busy buying ocean-front property at one dollar a foot.

As the Long Island road system improved—including the infamous L.I.E.—the building boom began. Land prices started to accelerate in the 1960s, and local residents who had suffered through 30 years of hard times began to recognize the potential of Montauk real estate as a means to supplement whatever income they were making from commercial fishing and the limited tourist trade.

In 1970, one proposed development that embodied all the short-sighted aspects of Fisher planning, as well as the new land rush mentality, collided with the new phenomenon of environmental activism. This happened to coincide with the year of the first national Earth Day. The result was the formation of the Concerned Citizens of Montauk, an organization that has ever since fought to preserve Montauk's unique wilderness and to guard the purity of its bays, harbors, lakes, and fresh water supply. Today approximately 60% of the Montauk peninsula is preserved open space. How this was accomplished was not an easy endeavor—CCOM volunteers frequently attended two and even three meetings a day on different problems, waiting three and four hours to make sure public officials heard what they had to say. And the group was not popular with many in the Montauk community. In 1997, a 100-year history of Montauk included a list of every community organization—no matter how small or how new—with the exception of CCOM. And it was CCOM that had worked more than anybody to preserve what was being written about. This is the story of this organization and the people who volunteered because they loved Montauk.

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