

Montauk History

Montauk's rich scenic and natural resources have made it a desirable destination throughout history, first for agricultural purposes and later as a commercial and recreational fishing destination and summer resort area. Montauk has also had a rich, and colorful past touched and shaped by many of the most significant events and influential people of their times.

Presence of the Montauk Indians (Montaukets), the first occupants of the Montauk peninsula, has been documented as far back as the Middle Archaic Stage, or ca. 6,000-4,000 B.C. Prior to European occupation, the Montaukets lived in small camps and used the entire peninsula as hunting and fishing grounds. Both Fort Pond and Fort Pond Bay derive their name from a nearby fort built by the Montaukets.

Montauk's post European history began as one agricultural in nature. East Hampton was settled in 1648 and shortly thereafter the early proprietors recognized the potential for utilizing Montauk as pastureland for grazing sheep, goats, and cattle. By 1660 these proprietors had acquired rights from the Montaukets to all of Montauk for the purpose of establishing common pasturage. Second House, one of three houses built across Montauk as shelter for the keepers tending the livestock, was constructed on the southerly shore of Fort Pond, in an area that now represents part of downtown Montauk which was pastureland at that time. The herds of livestock pastured in Montauk had to be defended from the British seeking to replenish food supplies during both the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812.

The Trustees managed Montauk as common pastureland for over 220 years until a partition suit brought by a group of shareholders forced the sale of the land. Arthur W. Benson, a Brooklyn financier, bought all of Montauk in 1879 and subsequently formed the Montauk Association for the purposes of constructing a small summer colony. Two illustrious figures of their time, landscape architect, Fredrick Law Olmstead of Central Park fame and architect Stanford White were hired to design this summer colony and seven "cottages" that are located in an historic district to the east of the downtown area. This marked the beginning of the resort development of the hamlet.

In 1895 Austin Corbin, president of the Long Island Railroad, purchased land from the Benson family, envisioning the creation of a Trans-Atlantic Port of Entry and extended the railroad from Bridgehampton to Fort Pond, just north of the present downtown area. Although his dream of establishing an international port was never realized, the railroad established weekly fishing excursions to Montauk that brought sports fisherman from New York City. By the late 1800's Montauk had become known as a first class fishing and hunting retreat, but had few accommodations for guests. A small inn stood at the location of the Montauk Manor and a few private homes provided accommodations.

Montauk has played a direct role in a number of this country's major conflicts. In 1898, the Great Plain between Fort Pond and Lake Montauk, consisting of approximately 5000 acres, was transformed into a tent city referred to as Camp Wyckoff when Col. Theodore Roosevelt and 30,000 Rough Riders, arriving home from the Spanish American War were quarantined at Montauk until they were certified free of yellow fever and typhoid fever.

Strategically located on the tip of the South Fork peninsula, Montauk has been used as Army, Navy, Coast Guard and Air Force bases and played an active role in the country's defense system during both world wars. During World War I, a United States Naval Training Station and Naval Aviation Base were established on the shores of Fort Pond Bay. At that time the only existing structure in the current downtown area was a hangar for air balloons located on the eastern shore of Fort Pond.

The extension of the LIRR to Montauk created markets in New York City for the fishing industry and a fishing village sprang up north of the railroad tracks, around Fort Pond Bay, representing the first center of development in Montauk. By the 1920's, the village consisted of hundreds of small wooden fisherman's houses and businesses related to the fishing industry including fuel, supplies, and a crushed ice industry for packing fresh fish shipped to the Fulton Fish markets. Montauk remained sparsely settled by a small group of fisherman until the 1920's. The WWI hangar and Second House represented the only documented development in the current downtown area.

The Long Island State Park Commission, headed by Robert Moses, acquired land by eminent domain in order to establish state parks at Hither Hills and Montauk Point in 1924, setting the stage for more tourism. In 1925, Carl Fisher, developer of Miami Beach during the Florida land boom of the 1920s, purchased 10,000 acres in Montauk to construct an exclusive summer resort for the wealthy that he referred to as the "Miami Beach of the North". As part of this development he formed the Montauk Beach Corporation and filed Subdivision Map #174, the Fort Pond Business Section, in 1926, laying out the downtown Montauk business district in a grid pattern with lots that were generally 40' x 100', with 70' wide road right of ways, 20' wide service alleyways, and a central boulevard and green. This pattern represents downtown Montauk today.

Fisher employed more than 800 workers in the construction of dozens of commercial and recreational buildings. A six story building that headquartered his offices, known as the Fisher Building, and today referred to as the Tower, and four other two-story buildings housing stores and offices were constructed in the downtown area. Fisher also constructed numerous homes, roads, and recreational amenities, including a yacht club, golf course, indoor tennis courts, polo grounds, and horse stables, intended to transform the area into a sportsman's paradise and world class resort for the wealthy and socially prominent. To provide docking for boats owned by these affluent guests, Fisher blasted open a channel connecting Lake Montauk to Block Island Sound.

The Montauk Manor with 178 guest rooms was constructed in 1926 and Gurney's Inn, built by W.J. and Maude Gurney, the managers of one of Fisher's hotels in Miami Beach, in 1927. These inns were constructed in close proximity to the downtown area. Fisher constructed six commercial buildings as offices, stores, a restaurant/tavern, and a movie theater within the boundaries of the current downtown study area. Fisher chose a Tudor Revival style of architecture for all of the buildings associated with his development. This architectural style set the character of the hamlet and particularly, the downtown area. Pink sidewalks used in his Miami Beach development scheme were also incorporated into the downtown Montauk development scheme. The stock market crash in 1929, ruined Fisher's finances and brought his dreams of completing this resort to an end. However, the Montauk that tourists see today is in large part the vision of Carl Fisher.

In the September 1938 hurricane, floodwater breached the land spit between the Atlantic Ocean and Fort Pond in an area with no development. At the time, there were approximately 14 buildings in the downtown area, including the Fisher Buildings, three gas stations, and several single family residences. The only structure in the downtown area to be damaged in the hurricane was Whites Drug Store. It was located in the Fisher Theater building, had windows and walls blown out, but no flood damage. The fishing village on Fort Pond Bay was severely damaged by both flooding and wind and buildings were washed off their foundations. The Fishing village was restored several months later and remained the commercial center for several years more.

During World War II, Montauk was part of the Eastern Coastal Defense System, and Montauk was transformed from a small sparsely populated resort and fishing community to a military one. The U.S. Navy used Fort Pond Bay as a torpedo testing range and a number of war-related facilities, including docks, hangars, and barracks were constructed in the hamlet. Buildings in the fishing village on Fort Pond Bay were either razed or relocated to other areas in order to allow for the installation of these facilities. The Navy utilized the Tower and other Fisher buildings in the downtown area for officers' quarters and offices.

The inexpensive fishing excursions run by the LIRR since 1933 were discontinued after 1953 when the channel to Lake Montauk was dredged and the fishing boats relocated there from Fort Pond Bay.

The building boom after World War II brought numerous subdivisions comprised of relatively small lots, many given away with newspaper subscriptions in New York City. More modest summer cottages and homes were constructed throughout the hamlet. In the 1960's numerous motels sprang up in the downtown area to accommodate visitors seeking affordable vacations. As the summer and year round population grew, the downtown area expanded to provide more year round goods and services.