

Father and Son: The Cleveland Years

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John D. Rockefeller, Jr. was born January 29, 1874 in the Rockefeller mansion on "Millionaire's Row" now E. 40th St. and Euclid Avenue. His mother Laura Spelman was a schoolteacher and devout churchwoman whose family had moved from Akron to Cleveland. The father businessman, entrepreneur and industrialist was well on his way to becoming one of the richest men in America. In that same year John, Sr. bought a tract of land 4 miles east in rural East Cleveland also fronting on Euclid Avenue. Originally the property was intended as an investment in a "water cure and place of resort". When the venture failed Rockefeller completed the rambling Victorian structure on the crest of the heights overlooking Lake Erie.

Forest Hill was to become the family's beloved summer home for over 30 years. Eventually the estate grew to over 700 acres spanning the cities of Cleveland Heights and East Cleveland. Two lakes, one for boating, swimming, and ice skating were dug. A half mile track was laid out to exercise the fast driving horses. Large expanses of lawn were maintained and "miles of winding gravel roads, bridle paths and foot trails were constructed". Bridges of native stone quaried on the property were built to cross the deep ravines and brooks.

By all accounts it was here, Forest Hill, that the father nurtured and fostered in the son what John, Jr. called "a passionate awareness of the outdoor world". And it was here that "under his father's tutelage he first developed his life long interest in landscapes and road building".

In 1923 John D. Rockefeller, Jr. was deeded the property by his father , and in collaboration with architect Andrew J. Thomas planned a residential development that would "stand as the finest example of community planning in America". Today those original 81 French Norman homes comprise Forest Hill Historic District placed on the National Register of Historic Places. In 1938 approximately 235 acres were given to the people of the cities of Cleveland Heights and East Cleveland as Forest Hill Park: "that the beautiful woods, valleys and open spaces—so dear to me during the happy days of my childhood and youth—are to be forever for the enjoyment of the people".