

Historic Survey of Ocean County Park

By Pat Johnson

Ocean County Park in Lakewood is the county's very first park in the system that now includes 27 parks and conservation areas. Originally one of John D. Rockefeller's residences, the mansion, out buildings, and 634-acre grounds were gifted by his children to the county in 1940 three years after his death.

According to Director of the Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission Tim Hart, a preservation plan in the works includes rehabbing and re-purposing the outbuildings and getting the park on the National Register of Historic Places.

In the 1960s, as a budget cutting measure, the county tore down the Rockefeller mansion that had also once been the Ocean County Hunt and Country Club. But there are 18 auxiliary buildings left in good shape that can be re-purposed into classrooms and exhibit spaces, said Hart.

Over the years the park has served residents with green space for strolling in exotic tree-shaded paths and picnic grounds, for playing tennis, pickleball, softball and disc golf, swimming and fishing in three ponds,



Rockefeller estate featuring Joe Louis' training boxing ring, 1936.
Photo credit: Ocean County Cultural & Heritage Commission.

and a popular dog park. One outbuilding has been utilized by the recreation department for pottery and two greenhouses are home to the Master Gardeners of Ocean County. A program called 'First Tee' teaches golf to youth.

The history of the park is what makes Historic Register status worth pursuing. "Lakewood became a resort because it was supposed to be 15 degrees cooler in the summer and 15 degrees warmer in the winter than New York City," Hart said. Rockefeller, the world's first billionaire, added his Lakewood estate to his other properties include: Kykuit in Sleepy Hollow, New York and Casements in Ormond Beach, Florida. Rockefeller spent the spring and fall in Lakewood.

The oil magnate started amassing Lakewood farmland around the turn of the century and then purchased the Ocean County Hunt and Country Club in 1902 from millionaire George Jay Gould. Foxhunting and golf were the primary sports. The 9-hole golf course was the site of the first P.G.A. style golf tournament held January 1, 1898. It was held in the snow and featured competition between two brothers. Val Fitzjohn defeated his brother Edward 92 to 88. The prize was \$150. In 1936, heavyweight boxer Joe Lewis had an exhibition fight there before his first bout with



New York Giants at Ocean County Park.
Photo credit: Getty Images.

Max Schmeling. During World War II, the estate was used by the New York Giants and its farm club for spring training (1943-1945). It was also utilized by the Jewish Welfare Board USO.

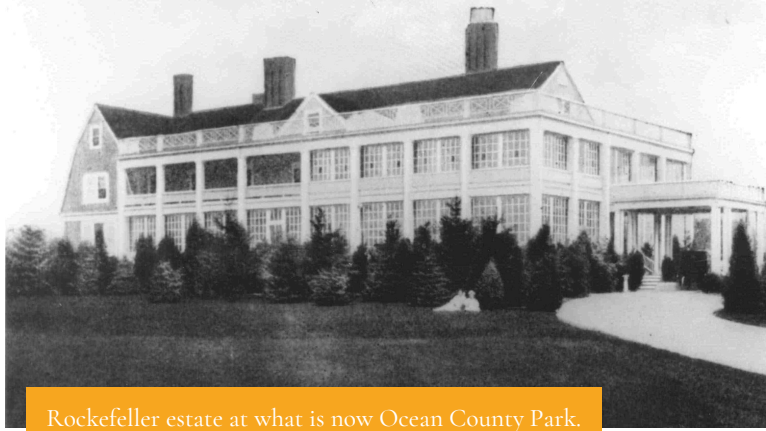
Rockefeller was also famously interested in what we now call the 'farm to table' movement, employing dozens of workmen to grow all the household's produce. The estate also had cows to provide milk and dairy and sheep for meat. Trees and an apple orchard were planted. Hart said Rockefeller was always a shrewd businessman - he would sell these commodities between his estates.

The county's first park was also the original home of the Ocean County Fair from 1947 to 1981 until it was moved to the Miller Airpark in Berkeley Township. It was also been the scene of National Dog and Kennel Club shows, as well as, major archery competitions.

Hart explained that during the social upheaval in the early 1920s there were anarchists that posed a danger to the wealthy, so Rockefeller had a clock tower built to be utilized as a guardhouse with floodlights and a machine gun platform. The roads were made of gravel to alert guards of intruders.

The size of the property diminished from 634 acres to 323 in the mid-1950's when Ocean County donated acreage to expand the campus of the Lakewood school system and also sold property to the park's east. The beach complex was developed in the 1970s. Within the city of Lakewood, Ocean County Park is still a very

Home of Mr. John D. Rockefeller, Lakewood, N. J.



Rockefeller estate at what is now Ocean County Park.
Photo credit: Ocean County.

attractive parcel of green and open space.

The redevelopment of Ocean County Park includes an assessment of the outbuildings, identifying ADA (American with Disabilities Act) improvements, upgrading water and sewer utilities and adding central air conditioning to some of the buildings. Recreation needs and program planning will be included. Hart said this preservation plan is just the first step in a multi-year project to make the County's first park into a really first rate facility. Ocean County Commissioner Ginny Haines, who serves as chairwoman of Parks and Recreation actually lived on the grounds of Ocean County Park as her father was the groundskeeper. In a county-produced film she recollected how the park was a wonderland for her and her siblings. The video can be seen here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xULPkHtsids>

Golf at Ocean County Park.
Photo credit: Ocean County.

