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## For Rent: Carl Fisher's Old Digs in Montauk

By Russell Drumm

(June 3, 2010) Much has been written about Carl Fisher's vision, about how around 1925 he saw in his mind's eye Montauk as a grand resort like Miami Beach, the one he'd created out of a mangrove swamp on the southern tip of Florida.

It never happened, of course, although by 1929, the year the stock market crash wiped him out – that and the Miami hurricane and his penchant for Scotch whiskey – Fisher had erected a number of buildings that have become a big part of Montauk's persona.

They include the Fisher Building, that incongruous high-rise in the middle of town, now the condominium complex called the Tower, the Tudor-style Montauk Community Church and all the other Tudor-style houses, the Montauk School, the Montauk Playhouse, the Montauk Manor, and, of course, Mr. Fisher's Southern-Colonial-style mansion that he sited on one of Montauk's highest hills.

Assuming a renter can be found, the grand house will be occupied for the first time this summer by someone other than a Fisher or members of the Akin family, who purchased it from Fisher's widow in 1956. Ellen Akin, the widow of the late Robert Akin Jr., has listed the house exclusively with



The mansion as it appears today.

Nancy Keeshan

John Keeshan of Keeshan Real Estate in Montauk, whom the family has known for many years.

Today it is hard to fathom that the Fisher house was built at a time when you could count the number of buildings on your hands, okay, and your feet, but not many other body parts would have been needed.

There were the Montauk Association “cottages” designed by Charles McKim and Stanford White, as well as Second House, and Third House, both of which housed families who managed the herds of cattle that grazed in Montauk each summer in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. First House burned in 1917.

The year after Robert Akin Sr. bought the house and seven acres from Margaret Fisher, he snapped a series of photographs from the mansion’s third story facing east, the same vantage, but for the height, shared with its white-columned front porch.

The photos, shot in series from north to south, were later combined into a panoramic view of Montauk. Way in the distance, the top of the Montauk Lighthouse can be seen, as well as the Montauk Yacht Club, another surviving Fisher complex, along with Montauk Harbor itself, which the developer created by blasting through sand dunes on the north end of the then-freshwater Lake Montauk to form an inlet.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the photograph – which shows Montauk pretty much as Carl Fisher actually saw it – is the near total absence of trees, only the rolling hills and cattle-friendly grasslands for which the Montauk peninsula was known.

That particular view has disappeared under decades of tree growth, vines, and exotic lawn flourishes. The house is less exposed these days, surrounded by trees and perhaps grander for it.

“They had bought property on the lake and were planning to build a house but somehow became aware that the Fisher house was for sale,” Ellen Akin said of Robert Akin Sr. and his wife, Elizabeth, her parents-in-law. “Bessy wanted it, and the old man gave Bessy what she wanted.”

“Bob [Jr.] and I met in 1960 and married the same year. I didn’t know enough at the time to appreciate the house. I grew up in a town that had all of the Washington homes except Mount Vernon. The whole Washington family lived there. Wonderful Southern Colonial houses. The Montauk house was modeled after the Southern Colonial style, so I didn’t appreciate it until later when I knew the history,” Ms. Akin said.

In 1926, Carl Fisher and four partners purchased 9,000 acres of Montauk for \$2.5 million and got down to work almost immediately. Between 1926 and 1930 a work force of about 1,000 people toiled to realize the dream. Among them were Emma Webb, Fisher’s secretary, and her husband, Richard Webb, one of his architects.

Mr. Webb designed and built Fisher’s house. The Webbs remained in Montauk after Fisher’s fall. “Those Fisher buildings are landmarks,” Mrs. Webb was quoted as telling *The Star* in 1984. “It’s only after the first Fisher buildings were built that Montauk started to grow into what it is today,”

The Akin house exudes history. Its interior is manor-like, but in country fashion with dark pine-paneled walls, a grand curving staircase of glowing hardwood, cabinets, nooks, and cupboards obviously fitted meticulously by artisans of a former age. A fire on the top floor 10 years ago might have destroyed the landmark, but it survived thanks to the quick response of the Montauk Fire Department.

The mansion's high-ceilinged living room with its stone fireplace on one end has the feel of a country church but for the yellow-felt-topped billiard table at its center, the one that Paul Newman enjoyed hustling on.

"Paul Newman was a guest. He was a pool shark," Ms. Akin said. "We have a great pool table in the living room, and he'd heard about it. One of his good friends had played it and told him, 'You got to go play.'"

"He and Bob really became good friends. He was a really down-to-earth guy. We had a great time with them," Ms. Akin said of the actor and his wife, Joanne Woodward.

Bob Akin was a race-car driver and so was Paul Newman. They met on the race circuit. Mr. Akin was killed in 2002 while racing a 1988 Nissan GTP ZX-Turbo in the Walter Mitty Historical race at the Road Atlantic track in Georgia. He was 66. His brother, Bill, lives in Montauk not far from the family estate.

Ms. Akin said the decision was made to rent the longtime summer retreat because her children, Robert, Susie, and Joanna, were busy with their own lives and those of their children, and "recognize they don't use it as much as it deserves to be used. They all love Montauk."

"The house is historical. It's Montauk's grand estate," Mr. Keeshan said, adding that the rental had an asking price available to interested parties by calling the office in Montauk.