

Fort Myers, Florida: Edison-Ford Homes - Part 2

Visitors to the Edison and Ford Winter Estates in Fort Myers can only appreciate the massive restoration that began in 2003, after years of minimal maintenance under the city's ownership. A ten-million-dollar initial fundraiser was undertaken to create a multiyear restoration project plan for the estates. <gulfshorelife.com>

"A non-profit corporation, the Thomas Edison & Henry Ford Estates, Inc. governs and manages both the Edison and Ford estates for the City of Fort Myers which has owned the Edison property since 1947 and the Ford property since 1988. These original historic properties consist of 18 acres containing botanical gardens and 19 buildings. The corporation is designated as a 501(3) non-profit charitable educational organization. The properties are listed on the National Historic Register, the Historic Florida Landmark, the National Chemical Landmark, and an original Save America's Treasures of the National Trust for Historic Preservation." <edisonfordwinterestates.org>

Edison's Arrival

"Thomas Edison purchased 13.5 acres of waterfront property in 1885 while seeking an escape from the harsh New Jersey winters. Lumber mills weren't yet available in Fort Myers, so blueprints, based on his own sketches, were sent to a contractor in Maine. Structural larch panels were sent down on a schooner to be assembled on-site. The two original Craftsman-style homes were each about 3,000 square feet, with high pitched roofs and wraparound porches."

Ford's Arrival

"In 1914, Henry and Clara Ford, along with their son Edsel, visited Fort Myers at the invitation of Thomas Edison. They enjoyed the visit so much that two years later, Ford purchased the home adjacent to the Edison Winter Estate. The two-story riverfront home was built in the Craftsman architectural style. The Ford's sold The Mangoes in 1945 to a private family who then sold the estate to the City of Fort Myers in the late 1980s. The Ford Winter Estate was opened to the public in 1990." <edisonfordestates.org>

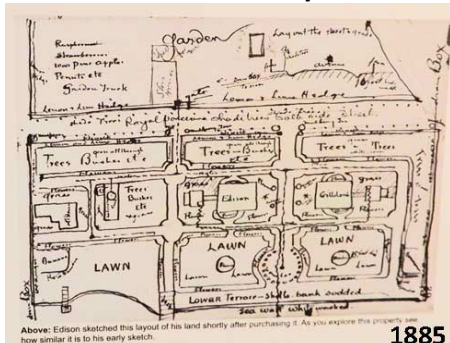
What is a Craftsman Home?

"If late-19th century Victorian homes were built to show off the advances of American manufacturing and the innovation of industry (with their over-the-top details in every direction), then the Craftsman movement that followed was a direct counter response to that, emphasizing hand-worked goods and buildings over the mass-produced. At the turn of the 20th century, the American Craftsman architectural movement spun out of the British Arts and Crafts movement, a similar response to the Industrial Revolution in Europe, which proponents felt devalued human labor. <housebeautiful.com>

" Craftsman homes emphasize horizontal lines and showcase natural materials, originality of design and the visibility of handicraft. The common features of the Craftsman style include low-pitched gable (triangular) roofs, overhanging eaves with exposed rafters and beams, heavy, tapered columns, patterned windowpanes, and a covered front porch. <khov.com>

This photo program give you glimpse of the Edison and Ford homes. We were not allowed inside, but our guide provided an excellent description of what the interior was all about and its historical use.

Thomas Alva and Clara Bryant Edison's Home: A Historical Perspective



Above: Edison sketched this layout of his land shortly after purchasing it. As you explore this property, see how similar it is to his early sketch.

1886

Edison Builds His New Florida Home

Edison and Gilliland hired Alden Frink, a Boston architect, to prepare plans for their homes and laboratory along the river. The design featured modest two-story rectangular shaped structures with external wings for a kitchen and support staff. The lab was to be a one-story rectangular building with a water tower.



Left: A view of the Gilliland home, home of the Edison family. Below: Edison, Frink, and Frink are seen here relaxing on the porch. If you look closely you can see workers on the original photograph.

"The air is perfect, the weather, as you see, is beautiful and the days are a constant succession of blue skies and warm sunshine and to all I owe my rapidly returned health."

—Thomas Edison, New York World Magazine, March, 1887



1966

The Museum Opens

Though thousands toured the homes and gardens of the Edison Estates, the site did not have display space for the artifacts collected from Thomas Edison's long and inventive working life. This changed with the opening and dedication of the "Edison Museum of Science" on February 12th at 2PM. Thomas Edison's son, Charles, served as the guest speaker and participated in the official ribbon cutting ceremony.



"I am considered as sort of a museum freak"

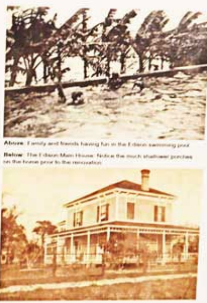
—Thomas Edison, February 1896, Newark Reflector (Ohio)

1906-1910

Seminole Lodge is Established

Following his business dispute with E. J. Flannery, Edison did not return to Fort Myers for 12 years, but began visiting regularly in 1903. Five years later, the opportunity to purchase the old Flannery estate arose and Edison took it. The property would provide an extension for his business activities, significantly altering the two business residences. Changes included converting the kitchen wing into the resident bedrooms, restoring the existing porches, and building a pergola connecting the existing houses.

In 1910, Edison hired W. H. Wallace & Co. to construct a swimming pool and bath house for the family. The pool complex became one of Miami's favorite scenes and the property was remained unchanged until 1920.



"The swimming pool is great and we are having some fine times as it."

—Mina Edison, 1912

1947

A Ford Farewell

Mina Edison died her beloved Florida estate to the city of Fort Myers on February 18th for the price of one dollar. In doing so she hoped her homes and gardens would serve as a tribute to her husband, America's greatest inventor. After sixty-two years of ownership, Mina departed Seminole Lodge for the last time on April 19th and returned to West Orange. Mina died on August 24th at the age of eighty-two. The following day the Fort Myers News-Press announced the sad news. "Mrs. Mina Edison Dies, Fort Myers Grieves Loss of City's First Citizen."



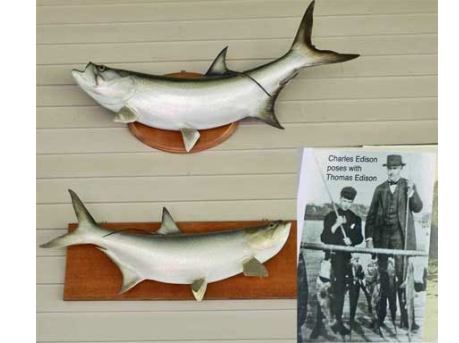
"My faith and belief in the eternity of the people of Fort Myers prompts me to make this sacred spot a gift to you and posterity as a Sanctuary and Botanical Park in memory of my honored and revered husband, Thomas A. Edison, who so thoroughly believed in the future of Fort Myers."

—Mina Edison, March 6, 1947

Above: Mina Edison on the Seminole Lodge grounds circa 1920

Above: Charles Edison, at right, cutting the ribbon at dedication of the Edison Museum of Science. From left the group to your left you can see the same group of the Benjamin Lee, painted by Thomas Edison in 1908

Edison's Main House



1916

Celebrity Neighbors

Two years after Ford's visit to Fort Myers, Robert W. Smith offered to sell him his riverfront property adjacent to Edison for \$25,000. At the time, the property featured a main house and caretaker's cottage, and included over 180 feet of river frontage. After extended negotiations, on June 6th Ford purchased his winter retreat of nearly 4 acres for \$20,000 (over \$400,000 today).

With a variety of mango trees lining the McGregor Boulevard entry to the home, the property became known as "The Mangrove." The Ford's would typically visit Fort Myers for a few weeks around February to celebrate Edison's birthday. The Fords completed construction of their year-round home Fair Lane, in Dearborn, Michigan in the same year.

"My best friend is the one who brings out the best in me."
—Henry Ford



Left: Thomas Edison, Clara Ford, and Henry Ford stand on the porch of The Mangrove.
Below: View of the Ford house through the mangrove trees.



Thomas Edison's Father
Samuel Edison Jr.
(1804-1896)
Digby, Nova Scotia
Canada

Mother
Nancy Elliott Edison
Died 1871

Thomas was the youngest of 7 children with Nancy



Ford's House

1945

The Fords Leave Fort Myers

After Edison's death in 1931, the Fords rarely visited Fort Myers, and even rented the property out. Not expecting to generate a profit, Ford eventually sold The Mangroves to the Biggar family for \$20,000—the exact amount he paid for it in 1916. The Biggars lived on the estate until 1968 making many architectural changes over the years.

They enlarged the caretaker's cottage and turned it into a guest house with a modern kitchen. Today the Ford Caretaker's cottage serves as the Cottage Shoppe. The Biggar family also constructed the garage located on the estate that houses part of the Estates' antique vehicle collection.

"Change is the law of life."
—Henry Ford,
February 1936,
American Magazine



Above: An unidentified man stands outside the Caretaker's Cottage. If you visit the cottage today, you will see it has been greatly expanded.



Inside Henry Ford's Mangoes Estate

Built in 1911, Henry Ford's house displays characteristics of the American Bungalow architectural style. It features deep, covered porches and sturdy columns. Details include cypress ceiling beams, yellow pine moldings, and built-in benches. In the Dining Room and Pantry, custom cabinets and window seats disguise ample storage.



Henry Ford

"Anyone who stops learning is old, whether at twenty or eighty. Anyone who keeps learning stays young."

"My best friend is the one who brings out the best in me."

"The only real mistake is the one from which we learn nothing."

<goodreads.com>



Thomas Alva Edison

"One might think that the money value of an invention constitutes its reward to the man who loves his work. But speaking for myself, I can honestly say this is not so...I continue to find my greatest pleasure, and so my reward, in the work that precedes what the world calls success."

<thomasedison.org>

Edison-Ford Winter Estates: Part 1-Overview; Part 3-Botanicals/Ford's Automobiles; Part 4 Museum; Part 5 Edison's Laboratory

Sources: <https://www.edisonfordwinterestates.org/>, <https://www.publicgardens.org/about-public-gardens/gardens/edison-and-ford-winter-estates>, <https://www.gulfshorelife.com/2020/10/08/retrospective-edison-and-ford-winter-estates/>, <https://www.housebeautiful.com/design-inspiration/a25227127/craftsman-style-houses/>, <https://www.khov.com/blog/what-is-a-craftsman-style-house/>, <https://www.visitfortmyers.com/listing/edison-and-ford-winter-estates/39817>, <https://www.tclf.org/landscapes/edison-and-ford-winter-estates>, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edison_and_Ford_Winter_Estates, <https://www.thomasedison.org/the-edison-family>, <https://www.edisonfordwinterestates.org/visit/tickets-tours/>, <https://www.thisismysouth.com/visiting-edison-ford-winter-estates/>, <https://www.keywestexpress.net/prepare-and-go/fort-myers-beach-activities/edison-ford-winter-estates>, https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/203714.Henry_Ford, and https://localwiki.org/fortmyersfl/Edison_and_Ford_Winter_Estates.

acuri.net John R. Vincenti Edison-Ford Winter Homes-Part 2