



Hugh Taylor Birch

The Father of Fort Lauderdale Beach...

The man who gave Fort Lauderdale almost 3-miles of open beachfront and 180-acres for our own Central Park.

HUGH TAYLOR BIRCH

WHO WAS HE?
WHERE DID HE COME FROM?
WHY SHOULD WE REMEMBER HIM?

Let's start at the beginning. Hugh Taylor Birch was born to Erastus and Sally Birch in 1848 on a farm in the Wisconsin wilderness. In the 1850s, the family, now with six children, moved to Indiana where Erastus Birch



dredged the nearby Kankakee River, draining and reclaiming the land along its banks. For this work Erastus was given thousands of acres which in time, made him a wealthy man. This, it is thought, is what formed Hugh Taylor Birch's love of land and his belief in improving land.



The Birches moved again to Ohio in 1857, when Erastus Birch was asked to be an administrator of a college started by his friend Horace Mann called Antioch College. In 1869, Hugh Taylor Birch attended Antioch College where he was the star pitcher on the baseball team, began a drama club, and insisted on adding courses on nature to the curriculum.



Birch left Antioch to study law in Chicago. In 1872, he began serving as Assistant State Attorney for Illinois and, during this time, he met and married Mariah Root from Buffalo, New York. Together, they had three children, a daughter named Helen, and two sons, one of whom died at 5 of diphtheria. They lived for 40 years in a house on Michigan Avenue in Chicago where Birch became a successful lawyer, eventually serving as General Counsel for Standard Oil.

Birch's interest in nature and land acquisition led him to purchase land in and around Chicago until 1893, when the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition (World's Fair) opened and drew huge crowds. Birch attended and saw Henry Flagler's "Rolling Florida Exposition"—a railroad car made of wood, lined with photos of Florida and filled with tropical Florida produce. Intrigued by the exotic exhibit and to escape the crowds, Birch took the summer off to travel south to Florida by train. One of his fellow travelers was Henry Flagler himself, who invited Birch to his Palm Beach home.



Maria and Hugh Taylor Birch

Once there, Flagler told Birch of his dream to extend his railroad all the way to Key West through the undeveloped sub-tropical wilderness of South Florida. In search of land to purchase and perhaps plant citrus orchards, Birch borrowed a sloop and sailed further south. A violent storm forced him to take shelter in an inlet that led to Lake Mabel—now known as Bahia Mar Yacht Basin. He fell in love with the beauty of the area and decided to stay.

From 1884 through the 1920s, Birch purchased hundreds of acres of land between the Atlantic Ocean and the Middle River for anywhere from \$1 to \$4 an acre. His land holdings included almost 3 miles of ocean front we now call Fort Lauderdale Beach. Birch hired a property manager named Jeff Locket, an entrepreneurial African-American business man, who became Birch's confidante and friend, dubbing him "Big Boss".



In 1919, hoping to lure his daughter, Helen, to south Florida, Birch gave her 35 acres to build a home on as a wedding present. Birch actually supervised the construction of what is now Bonnet House while Helen and her new husband, Frederick Bartlett, a muralist from Chicago, travelled to Europe. Birch lived at Bonnet House for a number of years even after the passing of his daughter, Helen, until Bartlett's marriage to Evelyn Fortune Lily.



By his late 60s, Birch's wife, Mariah, and all three of his children had passed away, and so, "Big Boss", this tall, quiet man known for his white hair and beard, became reclusive, preferring the beauty of nature to people. He began experimenting with different species of plants and trees and introduced both the coconut and royal palm tree to south Florida.



Left to Right: Clay Bartlett, Hugh Taylor Birch, Helen Louise Birch Bartlett, Frederic Clay Bartlett,



Birch Experimented with exotic plants and trees.



Terramar House 1940

In 1940, at the age of 90, with his family gone, Birch began building his five-bedroom, five-bathroom Art Deco Mediterranean revival modern-style home on the Atlantic Ocean, for \$15,000. His caretaker, Jeff Lockett, lived on the property nearby in a house built for him by Birch.

Although ever-protective of his property, Birch eventually gave the City of Fort Lauderdale a 50-foot strip of land running through his property for Sunrise Boulevard leading to the bridge over the Intracoastal Waterway. Shortly after, he donated land between his house and the beach for what is now A1A to the state of Florida. In 1942, as a thank you to the people of Florida for the healthy life he lived here, Birch donated 180 acres to the State to protect it from development and to be used and enjoyed by future generations as a state park.



Finally, he gave three miles of beach to the City of Fort Lauderdale with the stipulation that it remain undeveloped, visible and accessible to the public forever.

In 1943, Hugh Taylor Birch passed away. He was never called The Father of Fort Lauderdale Beach and has not been remembered in any other way besides keeping his name as part of the 180-acres he donated for a state park. The park has become our Central Park; and the three miles of beach made Fort Lauderdale a mecca for tourists, giving us our main economic engine. It is what drew college swim teams to practice here resulting in a movie, called “Where the Boys Are”, that only added to Fort Lauderdale’s allure.

What’s more important, Hugh Taylor Birch—“Big Boss”—gave us the beauty and quality of life we now enjoy as residents of Fort Lauderdale. Perhaps dubbing Birch “The Father of Fort Lauderdale Beach”, is an idea whose time has come...

Hugh Taylor Birch Property - 1940



The Gift That Made Our City
- approximately 3 miles of
Fort Lauderdale Beach

BACK TO THE FUTURE: **The Glory Days when almost one million people visited the park each year.**

Hugh Taylor Birch State Park was officially opened as a state park in 1954. Birch's gift was to be used and enjoyed by visitors and residents alike. Although, he loved the beauty of nature, his goal was not only to protect the natural environment, his goal was to "improve it"—his words—and he made extensive alterations and additions to his land over the years that included building a 1.2 mile sea wall on the Intracoastal Waterway.



After Birch's 180 acres became a state park, a small railroad, called the Tweetsie Railroad, was added to the park in the mid-sixties. It wound through the park in a three-mile loop carrying riders from the Atlantic Ocean to the Intracoastal Waterway, through a coastal dune hammock, over a high trestle overlooking a fresh water lagoon, through a 300-foot-long tunnel, past the mangroves, canopies of live oaks and banyan trees—for only 50 cents.



In the '50s and '60s, other amenities introduced into the park were a horseback riding stable, picnic pavillions, children's playgrounds, rest room facilities, a garden center, a restaurant, and boat rentals on the lagoon. It wasn't until 1990, that a visitor center was opened in Terramar –Birch's home.

Cabanas overlooking the beach were reserved and served by the restaurant, then called "Coco's Café". The café served hot dogs and hamburgers and "the world's greatest grilled cheese sandwiches" not to mention the milkshakes and ice cream cones favored by beach and park goers alike.

THIRTY YEARS OF DECLINE...

The park was the most popular attraction along the Atlantic seaboard, bringing as many as one million visitors a year from the early 1960s through the mid-1980s. Most of those activities ceased sometime in the mid-'80s and the park entered a period of decline. Today, annual park visitors number around 300,000.



THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT

We have new park management: Park Manager David Dearth and Assistant Park Manager Jennifer Roberts along with new Friends staff, a rejuvenated board of directors and new Honorary Council. We also have active support groups: the Seagulls, who hold events to raise funds for the our VIP membership level called the Terramar Society, and our new young professionals group called the RNGRs (pronounced rangers). Finally, we are excited to welcome our **new park concessionaire:** BG Capital. BG Capital will upgrade all concessions such as kayaks, canoes, wave runners, and bicycles as well as re-open the restaurant that will include the original name of Coco's in the new name. Stay tuned! There is lots of excitement ahead.



David Dearth
Park Manager

Jennifer Roberts
Assistant Park Manager

FUTURE PLANS: Bringing Birch back to its former glory

The Friends of Birch State Park has launched a \$12 million capital campaign, \$8 million will come from public funds and \$4 million from the community.

We have obtained state and federal grants of almost \$5 million to:

- Rebuild the crumbling sea wall on the Intracoastal Waterway
- Add a 230' public floating boat dock on the Intracoastal Waterway

Other accomplishments:

- We are now an official Water Taxi stop and have purchased golf carts that bring some of the Water Taxi's 350,000 annual passengers to the beach and concessions or for a tour around the park.
- We plan ADA upgrades to all facilities including rest rooms, playgrounds, and picnic pavilions.
- Birch's home, Terramar, closed now for over a decade, will reopen to the public as a Visitor and Education Center while the lawn will serve as an event site for weddings and other activities.

- BG Capital, our new concessionaire, is upgrading all beach and park rental amenities and will reopen the café as BG Coco Café and Outdoor Center for park visitors during the day. Cabanas, umbrellas and lounges will be added to the mix. The marina will rent peddle boats, paddle boards, canoes, kayaks, wave runners and bicycles.



Water Taxi



OTHER PROJECTS WILL INCLUDE:

- The clearing of Long Lake, our fresh water coastal dune lake, of invasive plant life, allowing boaters to access the entire mile-long lake.
- The old railroad trail will be made into a safe exercise trail through a Tressels to Trails grant for hikers, dog-walkers, runners and bikers.
- A walkway will be built over a portion of our 45 acres of mangroves.
- The addition of an art and education stage near the Intracoastal Waterway will enable us to hold concerts, plays and educational programs for children and adults.
- A butterfly meditation garden with benches will offer visitors a place to rest.
- Upgrades to picnic areas will include new small pavilions, tables, cookers and trash receptacles





Friends of Birch state park is a 501(c)(3) Non-Profit Organization formed to help preserve, conserve, enhance, and promote Hugh Taylor Birch State Park through community support.

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