

SEA ISLE CITY HISTORY

OUR FOUNDER - CHARLES K. LANDIS

(His life before Sea Isle 1833-1879)



When Charles Kline Landis bought the land for Sea Isle in 1880 he was 47 years old. He had already been a lawyer, a wily entrepreneur, a real estate speculator, a community builder, a science-fiction writer, and perhaps even an insane murderer – by his own admission.

Landis was born in Philadelphia in 1833. When he was just 15, he began to study law. Four years later he opened his own law office. Then he discovered real estate.

In 1856 Landis formed a partnership with Richard J. Byrnes, a banker, for the purpose of engaging in the real estate, stock, and note business. Shortly thereafter the partners secured several tracts in "Old Hammondton" and turned it into the city of Hammonton. Three years later the town had more than 2,000 inhabitants and was a successful agricultural community – "The Blueberry Capital of the World."



Hammonton Fruit Growers Union Store



Main Street in Hammonton

But C.K. wasn't satisfied. He sold his share in the business to Byrnes and crossed into Cumberland County with his eye on the fertile countryside which was to become Vineland. He purchased 20,000 largely uninhabited acres along a rail line to Camden. (The happy seller's wife called him a lunatic.) But in his vision Landis saw tree-lined streets with well-defined lots, factories, fruit farms (especially grape orchards), but no alcohol. This all became true for a time, with Vineland ranked near the top in agricultural production for townships in the state of New Jersey. Landis was 28 years old.



Main Street in Vineland



Landis's home in Vineland

Around this time, Charles became involved with the establishment of yet another town. He called it "Landisville," and envisioned it as the seat of a new county – also named after himself. This apparently was a bit much for the locals who began calling him "King Landis," and the plan was dropped. Landisville never grew to the prominence he had imagined. Today it's a part of the Borough of Buena along U.S. Route 40.



Early Landisville – Route 40 Looking East

In 1868 Landis decided to try a different kind of adventure: he married Clara F. Meade, the niece of General George W. Meade of Civil War fame. The couple had four children – all boys.



Wife Clara



Sister Matilda, his children and Landis

Although they later divorced, Charles had once defended Clara's honor in a most aggressive manner:

Uri Carruth was the owner of The Vineland Independent newspaper, and was generally in opposition to all Landis did. But his fateful step was to support a rumor that Charles wanted to commit Clara to a mental institution. On March 16, 1875, Landis marched into Carruth's office and shot him in the head. Carruth died from his wound seven months later, and Landis was brought to trial. In a controversial verdict, Charles was acquitted

by reason of temporary insanity. He said at the time: "Twas true, I murdered Carruth most foully, but just at that particular moment I was insane."



Carruth, the victim



Carruth's office, the murder scene

In this same period, Landis somehow found time to write a book titled "A Trip to Mars as Described by an Eye Witness" – definitely far afield from his everyday business. Perhaps he wrote it as an escape, perhaps to explain his vision of a true utopian society. Perhaps both. It's a good read. (Jules Verne and H.G. Wells only went to the moon.)



Meanwhile, inspired by a trip to Italy in the 1870s, and probably getting a little restless, C.K. embarked on yet another dream: to create his own "Venice by the Sea" in New Jersey. Landis dispatched his agents on a search up and down the coast, and it was eventually decided that the perfect spot was a small island just 30 miles southeast of his home in Vineland.

The story, of course, continues with Landis's purchase of Ludlam's Island in 1880 and his transformation of this semi-wilderness into Sea Isle City – his final dream. To learn more about this amazing man and his accomplishments, and about the history of Sea Isle City, please visit the Sea Isle City Historical Museum at 48th Street and Central Avenue (on the first floor of the Sea Isle City Library). Access our website at www.seaislemuseum.com . Call 609-263-2992 with any questions. Current hours are 10:00am – 3:00pm Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, plus 6:00pm – 8:00pm on Monday.