

Event Brief: Ford & Edison Winter Estates

The Edison and Ford Winter Estates in Fort Myers, Florida, are the winter homes of two of America's most influential innovators. The Estates offer a glimpse into the lives and work of Thomas Edison and Henry Ford and the culture of invention and industry that helped shape the modern world.

About Thomas Edison & Henry Ford

- **Thomas Edison (1847–1931)** was one of America's most prolific inventors, holding more than 1,000 patents. His innovations included the phonograph, electric lighting, and electrical power systems. He purchased this property in 1885, when Fort Myers was a frontier town of only 349 people.
- **Henry Ford (1863–1947)** transformed the automobile industry by making cars affordable to ordinary people and pioneering the moving assembly line. Ford and Edison became close friends, and Ford purchased the neighboring property in 1916.

What to Look For

I. The Laboratory — Work as Experimentation

Edison established a laboratory on the property soon after arriving in Fort Myers. In 1927, Edison, Ford, and Harvey Firestone joined forces in this laboratory to find a domestic source of rubber. Edison tested more than 17,000 plant samples, eventually selecting goldenrod as the most promising. Notice the tools, equipment, and working spaces that remain. Innovation required experimentation, persistence, and thousands of attempts. The laboratory is now a National Historic Chemical Landmark.

II. The Guest House — A Meeting Place for Great Americans

The Edison Guest House welcomed prominent figures including Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone, and President-elect Herbert Hoover. Edison and Ford's friendship grew from these visits, eventually leading Ford to purchase the neighboring property.

III. The Gardens & Pool — Making Room for Beauty

The estates include formal gardens, tropical plants, a reflecting pool, and one of the country's early residential swimming pools. More than 1,700 plants representing over 400 species grow across the grounds, including enormous banyan trees. The Moonlight Garden was designed by landscape architect Ellen Biddle Shipman for evening enjoyment. The Edisons and Fords deliberately created beautiful spaces for leisure, conversation, and enjoyment.

Cultural Formation: Why These Estates?

I. The Need for Cultural Formation

The Institute forms virtuous leaders for the marketplace and public square. This requires more than just professional skills; leaders must be formed with a deeper sense of meaning and an appreciation for truth, beauty, and goodness. Accordingly, education should "combine excellence in humanistic and cultural development with specialized professional training."¹

To that end, The Institute provides a core suite of professional skills that all leaders need, personal formation to enable them to use those skills well, and cultural formation that cultivates the search for truth and forms "the human spirit...in such a way that there results a growth in its ability to wonder, to understand, and to contemplate..."²

II. The Edison & Ford Estates

The Edison and Ford Winter Estates provide a concrete setting for this wonder, contemplation, and search for meaning. As you explore, look beyond the inventions themselves. Notice the habits, relationships, and curiosity that surrounded their work. Consider what their lives reveal about creativity, perseverance, friendship, and the proper place of work in a well-ordered human life.

¹ Pope Saint John Paul II, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, 23.

² *Ibid.*

