

August Heckscher (1848-1941)

Industrialist, Real Estate Developer, & Philanthropist

There are few immigrants who so remarkably and quickly caught the American spirit. As James Flint Curtis writing for *New Age* in February 1928 phrased it, "...[August Heckscher] stands as a beacon of light on the horizon of our land."

Born in Hamburg, Germany, August 27, 1848 the son of a German doctor, August Heckscher was to become one of the foremost capitalists and philanthropists in the United States. One of his enduring gifts was the purchase and development of land, in the Town of Huntington, now known as Heckscher Park and the home of the Heckscher Museum of Art.

August Heckscher attended grade and high schools in Germany and Switzerland, and then began his business career in 1864 with an importing firm in the town where he was born. Three years later when his father died, the young Heckscher took his \$500 legacy, buckled it inside his belt and started out to seek his fortune in America.

August Heckscher was to fulfill the "American dream" of financial success and personal accomplishment. Arriving in this country, he went to work in his cousin Richard's coal mining operation as a laborer, while studying English at night. Several years later he formed a partnership with his cousin under the name of Richard Heckscher & Company. The firm also concentrated on coal mining and was eventually sold to the Philadelphia-Reading Railroad. August Heckscher then turned his attentions to zinc mining and organized the Zinc and Iron Company, becoming vice-president and general manager. In 1897, it was consolidated with other zinc and iron companies into the New Jersey Zinc Company with Heckscher serving as the general manager.



In 1904 he resigned his position with the New Jersey Zinc Company and organized the Vermont Copper Company, taking the position of president. He was also to become president of a number of other iron, coal and power companies. August Heckscher later turned his attentions to the real estate field, organizing and becoming president of the Anahama Realty Corporation which conducted extensive operations in New York. His keen vision of the opportunities for building expansion and growth in Manhattan and Long Island led to his reputation as one of the foremost real estate operators.

The multimillionaire New York real estate operator, iron ore and zinc mining industrialist, achieved his success through hard work and determination. Toward the latter years of his life, August Heckscher began the most important chapter of his career, as a philanthropist. He specialized in social issues and child welfare. He created the Heckscher Children's Foundation (now home of El Museo del Barrio) and sought to eradicate slum dwellings in New York City. He advocated the erection of model tenement houses to be rented for as little as \$6 a room. Heckscher established playgrounds in lower Manhattan for children and purchased and dedicated to the public Heckscher State Park in East Islip, Long Island, a tract of 1,469 acres.

In 1918 Heckscher purchased the Prime property adjoining the historic Old First Church in Huntington, and after landscaping it into a park at a total cost of \$100,000, he turned its control over to a board of self-perpetuating trustees. He also arranged for an Endowment Fund of \$70,000 for its upkeep. Later, an athletic field was added by Heckscher, for school children and adults.

Months later in 1919, August erected a beautiful beaux-arts fine arts building (now the Heckscher Museum of Art) at a cost of \$100,000. He filled the museum with over 185 works including art from the Renaissance, the Hudson River School and early modernist American art. His collection was particularly noteworthy for including the best American artists of the day such as Ralph Albert Blakelock, Thomas Eakins, George Inness, and Thomas Moran. In 1920 when the museum opened, the works were valued at many hundreds of thousands of dollars. Heckscher dedicated this museum and the park to the people of Huntington especially the children with the following words, "to the little birds that migrate, and to the little children who fortunately do not."

A year after this gift, August Heckscher gave significant funds for the erection of the Grand War Memorial on Main Street, to the east of the then Huntington Library (now known as the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Building). Heckscher and his wife, the former Miss Anna Atkins of Pottsville, Pennsylvania whom he had married in 1881, were also known as a generous benefactors of the Huntington Hospital and St. John's Episcopal Church.

August Heckscher passed away on April 26, 1941 at the age of 92, survived by his two children, Anna and Maurice. *The Long Islander* described him in an obituary as "perhaps the finest benefactor that Huntington ever had." In Huntington, Heckscher was known to many as a warm personal friend. During his years when Wincoma (a section in north Huntington) was his home, he took a lively interest in the affairs of the community. August Heckscher was quoted as saying, "God in his great kindness has given me wealth, which I feel I have neither earned nor deserved. It is my plan to spend much of this for the uplift of children especially." Today, hundreds of thousands of residents and visitors enjoy the lasting legacy created by August Heckscher each time they visit Heckscher Park and the Heckscher Museum of Art.

Photo: Penrhyn Stanlaws, *August Heckscher*, 1925, oil on canvas, 47 1/2 x 34 1/4 in., Heckscher Museum of Art; August Heckscher Collection

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