

# John Ringling and Bird Key at Sarasota, FL

<http://www.luxurysarasotarealestate.com/history-of-bird-key.php>

## History of Bird Key



In the early 1900's Lindsay Worcester of Cincinnati was vacationing in Florida to recover from an illness. She and her friends took a boat ride to Bird Key for a picnic. She ultimately fell in love with the small island and told her husband that she wanted to spend her final years there. Thomas Worcester, her husband, purchased Bird Key from the state of Florida. Their goal was to build a grandiose waterfront home.

Construction of their new home began around 1911/1912. Worcester added to the 14 acre island by dredging up 30,000 cubic yards of dirt. He also planted trees and other tropical foliage for the island to take shape. Worcester named it New Edzell castle after the ancestral Scottish estate of his wife. The home took 3 years to build at a cost of over \$100,000. Unfortunately, Lindsay Worcester died in 1912 prior to the completion of the home.

John Ringling ultimately purchased Bird Key in the 1920's with a plan of building a vacation home for his friend and U.S. President Warren Harding. Unfortunately, that never came to fruition as Harding died in 1923.

Ringling built the Ringling Causeway from the mainland for easy access to Bird Key, St. Armands Circle and Lido Key with plans for houses, restaurants, shopping, hotels and entertainment. This was the first bridge to traverse the Sarasota bay. He even used his own circus elephants to haul timber for the bridge. In the late 1920's the country went into a depression and the real estate market collapsed.

Ringling's sister, Ida Ringling North, moved into the Worcester mansion on [Bird Key](#). In 1936 John Ringling died and bequeathed the island to his sister Ida. She lived there until her death in 1950. Bird Key saw little activity during this time period.

In 1951 Ida's son, John Ringling North, was the President of the Bird Key Development Corporation. They intended on expanding Bird Key to over 300 acres. However, the Sarasota community wasn't excited about the plan. During a contentious public hearing, State Representative James Haley asked the Ringling group's attorney, "Why don't you go back to New York and run your own business?" After several modifications and a number of hearings, votes and court actions, the Ringling proposal was shelved.

In 1959 Arvida purchased Bird Key. The approved plat included 511 lots, 291 of which are bay or canal front properties, and 220 of which are landlocked (now called "garden homes"). Lots were priced from, \$9,000 to \$32,000 and sold quickly.

## Bird Key

<http://www.sarasotahistoryalive.com/stories/journals-of-yesteryear/bird-key-the-jewel-in-sarasota-bay/>

Bird Key: The Jewel in Sarasota Bay

**Author:** Mark D. Smith, former County Archivist Email: [jlahurd@scgov.net](mailto:jlahurd@scgov.net)

Source: Sarasota County History Center Photo Credit: Sarasota County History Center

At the beginning of the last century, Bird Key was a small island in Sarasota Bay, rising only a few feet about the surrounding shallow grass flats. In 1911, Thomas Martin Worcester of Cincinnati began to build on the key by dredging a channel through the grass flats to his dock and using the dredged material as fill to raise the level of the land. Worcester built the first expensive home on any island in the Sarasota Bay region. It was named New Edzell Castle after the ancestral home, Edzell Castle of his wife, Davie Lindsay Worcester, of Scotland.



Thomas Worcester had purchased the 12 acre island in 1906, and they had come to winter in Sarasota several seasons before beginning construction. Davie Lidsay died in October 1912. Testimonials and memorials published after her death provide a romantic view of the woman who did not live to see the completion of her husband's "labor of love."

Friends in Kentucky and Ohio remembered her devotion to philanthropic endeavors such as the Ohio Humane Society, and the Home of the Friendless and Foundling. In a letter written from Sarasota, she described in detail the birds, fish and vegetation that could be seen on the approach to Bird Key. This was the ideal setting for her "palace."

New Edzell opened formally with a reception on February 17, 1914. After having watched from a distance the construction over nearly three years, the press marveled at the electric and gas lights that illuminated the building at night, the steam heat, and the hot and cold water in every room. After attending the reception, a *Sarasota Times* journalist wrote, "Combining the useful with the beautiful, as was the order of her life, stands a monument made with hands, set in one of nature's fairest temples, to the memory of a gifted and a good woman."

Thomas Worcester left Sarasota not long thereafter, and in the early 1920s, John Ringling purchased Bird Key, Otter Key, Wolf Key and several other unnamed mangrove islands. With these purchases, he became the owner of all the keys between the bay and the gulf immediately in front of the city of Sarasota. He planned to convert the Worcester home into a summer White House for President Warren Harding, but Harding's death in 1923 changed his plans. The Bird Key mansion then became the home of John Ringling's sister, Ida Ringling North, until her death in 1950. John Ringling began to develop the keys during the Florida Land Boom of the mid 1920s. Ringling Estates opened on St. Armands Key in February 1926 and a bridge connecting the keys to the mainland was also completed in 1926. However, by the end of the year, sales were falling and the boom was ending. Aside from the new Ringling Causeway going through it, Bird Key remained untouched after the Land Boom ended.

After the death of John Ringling in 1936, his estate was in probate for 10 years before clear title could be given to his holdings. By 1950, what emerged, as far as the keys were concerned, was a group of corporations that owned them, all headed by John Ringling's nephew, John Ringling North. In 1951, the Ringling Interests proposed to develop approximately 277 acres of land around Bird Key and to fill 37 acres on north Lido Key.

The master plan for the development of Ringling Isles was prepared by noted architects Ralph and William Zimmerman in 1951 but was revised eight times before the city commission accepted it in 1952. But the debate did not stop there with the plans. The city required many changes to the plan and after six months of debate between the Ringling Interests and the City, the plan was approved in March 1953.

Although approved by the city, little was done with the development until 1959 when Arvida Realty, Inc. purchased the Ringling Interests' holdings on the key. Arvida planned to fill in Bird Key to allow for 511 lots, 291 water-fronts and 220 off-water sites. This would be the luxury place to live in Sarasota. One unique feature of the development would be an underground electric utility system, consisting of nearly 146 miles of electrical cable. By building standards in 1959, this utility system was ahead of its time. Arvida began to promote Bird Key heavily by the use of newspapers and the media. One example of these ads in the following that appeared on January 17, 1960, in the Herald-Tribune: "Who hasn't dreamed of living on a tropical island? Where the climate is always mild, where the beauty is everywhere, where silence is broken on by the rustling of the palms and the sound of the sea as it washes the shore. All of this is yours on beautiful Bird Key, set like a jewel in the waters of Sarasota Bay."

For over 50 years, Arvida Realty, Inc. has succeeded, with its Bird Key and Longboat Key developments, in making Sarasota the luxury place to live.

### **Famous Floridians: John Ringling**

<http://fcit.usf.edu/florida/lessons/ringling/ringling.htm>

John Ringling is perhaps most remembered as a circus showman and promoter. But he is also remembered as the man who brought art and culture to Sarasota, Florida in the early 1900s.

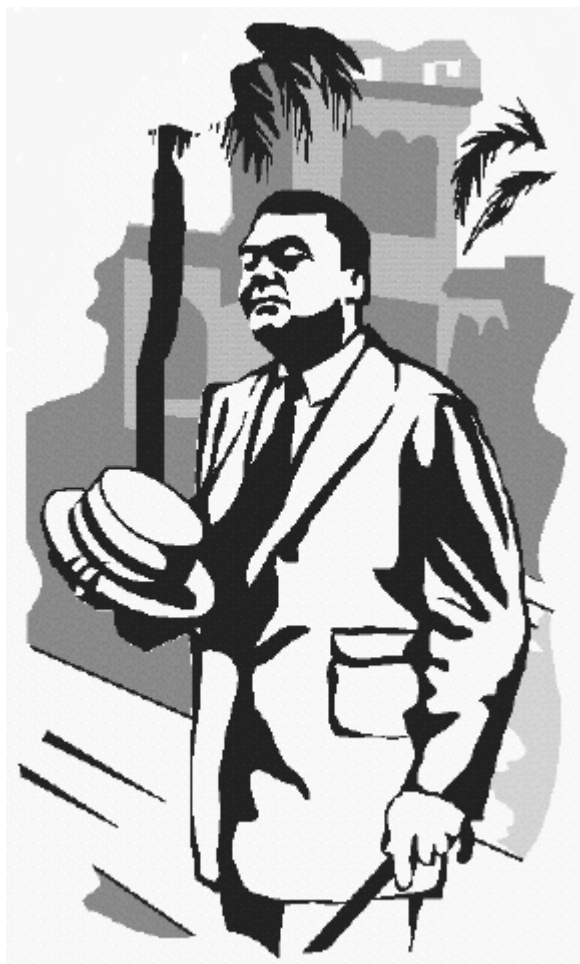
He was the best known of the five Ringling brothers. Together, the brothers started the most successful circus in the world in 1884. In 1907, the brothers bought Barnum and Bailey Circus in London.

Ringling's circus travel often took him to Europe to look for new acts. There, he developed a taste for culture and art. He collected over six hundred Baroque masterpieces of art within five years. His collection of Peter Paul Rubens was thought to be the finest in the world. It included four so-called tapestry cartoons, giant paintings up to fourteen by nineteen feet in size.

Ringling and his wife started spending winters in Sarasota in 1909. He brought art and culture with him. He did it in such grand, circus style that he set the pace for the artistic and cultural development that came after him.

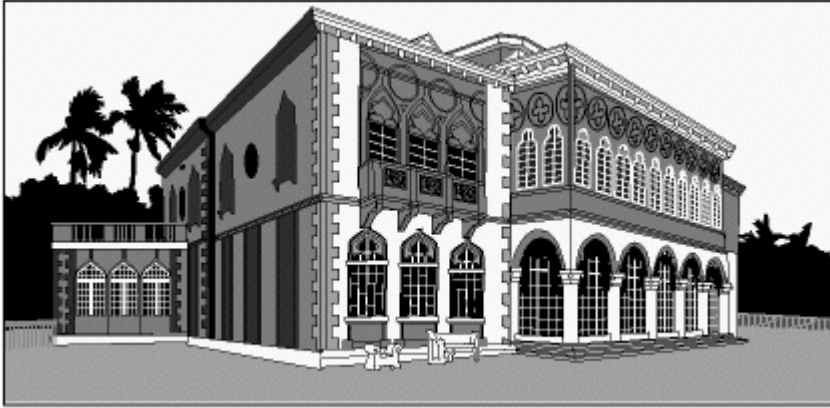
In 1924, Ringling started construction on an Italian renaissance home. It was designed to resemble the Venetian Gothic palaces that the Ringlings had admired on their extensive Italian travels. The home was named Cà d'Zan (Venetian for "House of John").

**Ringling had a part in developing the area of Sarasota. He owned and planned the Ringling Isles subdivision that included St. Armands Key, Bird Key, Coon Key, Wolf Key, and 2,000 acres on Longboat Key. With a business associate, he built the Ringling Causeway and bridge to St. Armand Key.** A year later he donated it to the city. Ringling was listed as one of the richest men in the world in 1925.



In 1927, John Ringling moved the winter quarters of Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus to Sarasota. The area became home to many great stars of circus fame.

The stock market crash of 1929 almost wiped Ringling out but he still had wealth in the form of his art. With his personality, developed by years of circus promotions, he was a master in pushing art projects.



On his death at age 70, Ringling left his home, his museum, and its art collection to the state of Florida. Today, thousands of people visit the Ringlings' historic home. The thirty-room mansion provides a glimpse of the good life in the 'Roaring 20s.'

Art is displayed and studied at The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art. It is an internationally recognized museum of Western European and American art. Visitors can see the

historic Asolo theater from Venice. And they can wander over 60 acres of landscaped grounds and statues.

The Museum of the Circus has been added. Anyone who has ever dreamed of running away to join "The Greatest Show On Earth" can relive those dreams at the circus museum. It's an experience for young and old alike.

The circus was the source of Ringling's early financial success. It was the vehicle that allowed him to indulge in his great love of art. Ultimately, the people of Florida received the benefits.