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Fred C. Trump, Postwar Master Builder of Housing for Middle Class, Dies at 93

By TRACIE ROZHON JUNE 26, 1999

Correction Appended

Fred C. Trump, one of the last of New York City's major postwar builders, died yesterday at a hospital in Queens. He was 93 and lived in Jamaica Estates, Queens.

Although Mr. Trump was stricken with Alzheimer's disease six years ago, he still retained his title of chairman of the board of Trump Management, a title he held since the company was formed in the mid-1960's.

Mr. Trump, like Sam LeFrak, another master builder, helped change the face of Brooklyn and Queens with thousands of homes for the middle class in plain but sturdy brick rental towers, clustered together in immaculately groomed parks. Although overshadowed in the news for the last two decades by his flamboyant son Donald, Mr. Trump, a self-made man, built more than 27,000 apartments and row houses in the neighborhoods of Coney Island, Bensonhurst, Sheepshead Bay, Flatbush, and Brighton Beach in Brooklyn and Flushing and Jamaica Estates in Queens.

His estate has been estimated by the family at \$250 million to \$300 million, but Mr. Trump did not believe in displays of wealth -- with one exception. For decades, he insisted on a Cadillac, always navy blue, always gleaming, and always replaced every three years, its "FCT" license plate announcing its owner wherever he went.

He was a frugal man. According to his sons, he would routinely drive his Cadillac to one of his many construction sites after the day's work was over. Wearing a natty suit -- with his chiseled features and wide grin, he resembled a silent-film star -- he would walk through the studs and across the plywood floors, picking up unused nails to hand back to his carpenters the next day.

Frederick Christ (pronounced Krist) Trump was born in New York City in 1905. From World War II until the 1980's, Mr. Trump would tell friends and acquaintances that he was of Swedish origin, although both his parents were born in Germany. John Walter, his nephew and the family historian, explained, "He had a lot of Jewish tenants and it wasn't a good thing to be German in those days."

His father was a barber who arrived from Kallstadt, Germany, in 1885 and joined the Alaska gold rush. By the turn of the century, he owned the White Horse Restaurant and Inn in White Horse, Alaska, while also supplying food and lumber to the miners. He went back to Germany to court his neighbor Elizabeth Christ and married her in 1902. When they returned to New York, they settled down in a single-family house in Woodhaven, Queens. They had three children; when Fred C. was 13, his father died of pneumonia.

Two years later, at 15, he started his own construction business while continuing his high school education. He knew he was too young to build entire houses, so he thought of building housing for the new mode of transportation then sweeping the nation; after all, those newfangled automobiles needed garages. Too young to sign checks, he became partners with his mother, Elizabeth: they called their company E. Trump & Son. His mother, who was a dynamo in her own right, was the partner who signed the checks.

Their business was a success, and one of the things he did with his earnings, his sons said, was to help send his younger brother John to Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute, then to Columbia for his master's and then to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he received his Ph.D.

When he started at Brooklyn Poly, John Trump was planning to become an architect and to go into business with his brother Fred. The two actually built one or

two houses together, Mr. Walter said, but before long, they realized they had two very different philosophies.

"They laughed about it together later," their nephew said. "John designed the house, and before it was finished, Fred wanted to sell it; you know, that's what you do when you're in real estate. But John was a scientist; he wanted to wait until it was totally done. After about a year, my uncle John switched to electrical engineering."

As he grew older, Fred Trump began building single-family houses in the late 1920's -- most of them in Queens -- which were sold for \$3,990 each. The concept of supermarkets was new back then, too, and when Mr. Trump built Trump Market in Woodhaven in the middle of the Depression and advertised, "Serve Yourself and Save!" it was an instant hit. About a year later, Mr. Trump sold the store for a profit to the King Kullen chain.

In World War II, Mr. Trump built barracks and garden apartments for the Navy in Chester, Pa., Newport News, and Norfolk, Va. When the fighting was over and apartments for returning servicemen and their families were in short supply, he branched out into middle-income housing; he built Shore Haven in Bensonhurst in 1949 and Beach Haven near Coney Island the next year for a total of 2,700 apartments. In 1963, he put up the 3,800-apartment Trump Village in Coney Island -- five years after his contemporary, Mr. LeFrak, began LeFrak City in Queens.

"He made a great contribution; he filled a very big hole in the market," Mr. LeFrak recalled. "We took Queens; he did more in Brooklyn. He was a great builder who rallied to the cause like we did; he built housing for the returning veterans. I guess you could say we're the last of the old dinosaurs."

In 1936, Mr. Trump married Mary McLeod, who had come to this country when she was 19 from Stornoway, Scotland. Miss McLeod had two sisters who lived in New York; shortly after she arrived, her sisters took her to a dance, where she met Fred Trump. They had five children. In addition to his wife and his sons Robert and Donald, he is survived by two daughters, Maryanne Trump Barry of New York City, who is a Federal judge, and Elizabeth Trump Grau of New York City. Another son, Fred Trump Jr., died in 1981. Both his brother John and his sister, Elizabeth Trump Walters, are dead.

Mr. and Mrs. Trump liked to assist young people who hungered for a career in real estate. Richard Levy, now a senior vice president at Tishman Real Estate, said that when he was in his early 20's, he remembers going to Mr. Trump's office, a reconverted dentist's office in the Beach Haven development near Coney Island. "I felt like Custer," he said. "There were all these huge wooden Indians all over the place." Mr. Levy looked at a wall "covered with plaques from every organization and pictures with Presidents, and here's this giant of a man -- he was well over six feet -- and he just stuck out his hand and said 'Hi. My name is Fred.' "

Mr. Trump then started to discuss a baseball game played the night before. When Mr. Levy left, he said to Robert Trump that he was surprised to find the elder Trump was such a baseball fan. From young Trump he learned, "He wasn't a fan at all, but he knew I was."

In the recession of the 1970's, Mr. Trump, who retained ownership of most of the rental buildings he built, started buying up apartment buildings from other builders, who had run into trouble keeping up their properties. According to Edward S. Gordon, a commercial real estate executive, Mr. Trump amassed the buildings in a "very quiet way." Mr. Gordon praised Mr. Trump's business acumen, saying, "Most smart men and women paid attention to the ball; Fred Trump focused on the shadow of the ball."

Mr. Trump was a demon for controlling costs. Besides collecting unused nails, Mr. Gordon said, Mr. Trump often performed the exterminating chores in his buildings by himself. "He became an expert," Mr. Gordon said.

When it was time to order the thousands of gallons of disinfectant necessary for his thousands of apartments, Mr. Trump gathered samples of all the available floor cleaners on his desk. "Then he sent them out to a lab and found out what was in them and had it mixed himself," Donald Trump recalled. "What had cost \$2 a bottle, he got mixed for 50 cents." And he knew how to get the most of his workers when they used those chemicals. "He would walk up to some little guy polishing something, and say: 'Wow, this is the best shine I've ever seen,' " Mr. Levy said. "And that guy promptly started scrubbing away like crazy."

In the mid-70's, Mr. Trump lent support -- and a small amount of money -- to his son Donald's aspirations of becoming a developer. "But what he lent was mostly knowledge; Donald really did it on his own, along with whatever boost he got from being Fred Trump's son, of course," Robert Trump said.

Recently, Donald Trump said he was happy his father stuck to Brooklyn and Queens. "It was good for me," the developer said, chuckling. "You know, being the son of somebody, it could have been competition to me. This way, I got Manhattan all to myself!"

Fred and Mary Trump donated the pavilion that bears the Trump name to the Jamaica Hospital Medical Center in appreciation of the care received there by Mrs. Trump. They gave a two-building rental complex in Brooklyn to the National Kidney Foundation of New York/New Jersey and to Community Mainstreaming Associates of Great Neck, an organization that provides homes for functionally retarded adults. Mr. Trump gave another building to the Cerebral Palsy Foundation of New York and New Jersey, which has since turned it into co-op. He also supported the Hospital for Special Surgery in Manhattan, the Long Island Jewish Hospital and the Kew Forest School in Queens, where his children went to school.

Mr. Trump liked to be surrounded by familiar things and familiar people. He still employed Amy Luerksen, his secretary for 59 years. And he and his wife of 61 years still lived in the red-brick Colonial they built in 1951 on a half-acre lot in the leafy, middle-class suburb of Jamaica Estates, in Queens.

Correction: July 16, 1999, Friday An obituary of the real estate developer Fred C. Trump on June 26 misstated the location of the White Horse Restaurant and Inn where his father supplied food and lumber to miners in the gold rush. It was in the Yukon Territory, not in Alaska.