

A Look at George Lafayette Carter

Over a century ago, there was a “Howard Hughes” type businessman before our generation knew of Howard Hughes – the man who revolutionized the world’s view of flight for commercial aviation. Just like Hughes, he was a man of mystery, a person with vast and varied business holdings, and most importantly – a man of vision. His name was George Lafayette Carter.

He was a man of mystery. George Lafayette Carter was born January 10, 1857, near the town of Hillsville, in Carroll County, Virginia. From humble beginnings and a person with modest education, he surpassed the achievements of almost any other individual of his time who would rise to prominence from the Appalachian Mountains. His life was characterized with a style of self-imposed anonymity, never seeking attention or acknowledgment for any of his work.

Many men, mostly from “outside” the Appalachian region, became famous as entrepreneurs, coal barons, and railroad builders. However, one man, born and raised in Southwest Virginia, built such an empire and, **more than any other man**, brought industrial development to the five-state region of Southern Appalachia. Yet, George L. Carter is today virtually unknown even in the very places he once owned and developed. His business career lasted more than 50 years and generated millions of dollars and thousands of jobs. The product of that work can still be seen around us.

He remained a private person. He **shunned publicity to the point of obsession** preferring no pictures, no recognitions, and no awards for all his acknowledgments, nor did he want anything written about him. He handled most business dealings through agents and attorneys. He liked to hold meetings at night in hotel rooms. At the time of his death in 1936, he had directed his son to destroy many of the papers and materials that would give insight to his life and work.

He was a man of incredible loyalty. If he liked you, he would do anything for you. If he did not, he avoided you. A long-time associate and brother-in-law J. Fred Johnson, whose name is synonymous with the development of Kingsport, came to those opportunities through George L. Carter. It was Carter’s large land acquisitions that are the root of the Model City. Later that relationship soured, and the two reportedly never spoke again.

The vast business holdings included a wide and varied array of interests. A sampling included extensive real estate holdings. At one time or another, he controlled over 350,000 acres of mining land in Southwest Virginia and southern West Virginia, 8,000 acres in the Kingsport area (where he conceived the idea of expanding the city when his railroad came through), about one-fourth of the area of present day Bristol, several hundred acres in Johnson City (including the historic “Tree Streets”), and the first 120 acres eventually used for the Normal School that became East Tennessee State University. Carter’s businesses included twelve banks, flour mills, iron mills, coal mines, foundries, railroads, the *Bristol Herald-Courier* newspaper, an ocean shipping company, and the necessary dock and pier operations for movement of coal and lumber. He obtained much of his working capital from New York investors during a time when America’s demands as an industrial power were plentiful without venturing into the undeveloped Appalachian Mountains.

A fair and progressive employer for the time, **he owned the town** of Coalfield, West Virginia. In this true company town, he provided the houses, stores, churches, police, clergy, and medical services that made up the life for the mines. For the time, it looked more like an Alpine Village than the begrimed coal towns of most of America. In his later years, after he had sold most of his businesses, he had several thousand acres on which he produced grain, beef cattle, sheep, hogs, and turkeys, which he shipped to market. Even then he had as many as 200 people from the area to work on his farm operations in Southwest Virginia.

With his limited education, he was self-taught in business and may have been a remarkable, if untrained, engineer. The basic infrastructure we see today in much of the area's CSX Railroad is a result of his work. At first, he hoped to place the base of operations in Bristol, where he began building in 1902, but locals upset Mr. Carter, and he moved to Johnson City in 1906 where he purchased several hundred acres on the south side.

Beginning with the acquisition of existing rail lines and new construction in the early 1900s, Carter created the Clinchfield Railroad covering 277 miles with 50 tunnels, numerous trestles, and viaducts. One tunnel was almost a mile long. Built chiefly by hand and animals, the tunnels were high enough that the tallest man could stand on a box car going through the tunnel. Many of these tunnels continue in use on the CSX rail system today. At the same time, it was the most expensive railroad in terms of miles of construction built, taking more than a decade to complete. This was George L. Carter's greatest accomplishment.

His vision of a school that brought us all together – this college for began to take shape in **1909 when the State of Tennessee** approved the addition of three normal schools for teacher training, one for each Grand Division of the State – East, Middle, and West Tennessee. When the selection committee, including Tennessee's Governor, came to Johnson City to consider the location, city elders were going to show the Carnegie section. George L. asked the committee not to make a decision until they saw the location he proposed on the south side of Johnson City.

Overnight, he employed the railroad and contractor to cut a road and gravel and level select pieces of the property. The next morning Carter met the committee with three cars for the viewing. His offer was made without cost to the state. Carter added some cash, organized the support of the city and county for sidewalks, electricity, and trolley transportation. Carter's Johnson City site was selected. With these acts, he should be considered the father of East Tennessee State University.

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