

A Story of Steel Magnates & Sugar Barons

in Alpine, NJ

Central Vac Salespeople
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Builders are currently developing a 63-acre swath of land that contains the former home of Henry Clay Frick II, a descendent of steel magnate Henry Clay Frick.

Alpine, NJ, is not your average small town. Located less than 10 miles outside of Manhattan, Alpine boasts a median home price of \$3.4 million. It tied with Miami Beach for first place on *Forbes* "Most Expensive ZIP Codes 2007" list. Residents have included musician Sean "Puffy" Combs, comedians Eddie Murphy and Chris Rock, actor Wesley Snipes and former Yankee Gary Sheffield. Rumor has it Stevie Wonder has lived there for years. However, that's not all that makes the small town remarkable. Several of Alpine's most prestigious estates are shrouded with mystery and intrigue, which has ignited the imagination of one central vacuum salesman.

Pascal Boylan sells VACUFLO® Central Vacuums for Enhancement Systems of South Amboy, NJ. He's also an avid newspaper reader with an interest in local history. According to Boylan, long before the rockstars, funny guys and athletes got there, Alpine was home to sugar barons and steel heirs.

Manuel Rionda is one of the latter. Born in 1854, Rionda emigrated from Spain to Cuba when he was just 16. He became a dominant figure in the international sugar trade and eventually founded the Cuba Cane Sugar Corporation as well as New York's major sugar brokerage firm. In 1904, Rionda purchased a 13-acre parcel of land from the Riovista Land Corporation that stretched from the middle of Cresskill, NJ, to the edge of the Palisades.

Rio Vista estate, as it is still known today, encompassed a man made lake, library and a chapel surrounding a large gothic stone clock tower. Folklore has it that the sugar baron's wife Harriet leapt to her death from the top of the tower after seeing her husband with another woman. For years, legends and rumors swirled around "Devil's Tower." Some claim the structure is haunted, but to this day, Devil's Tower can be seen in Rio Vista, an upscale neighborhood in Southern Alpine.

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Sugar Baron Manuel Rionda built the gothic stone clocktower on the Rio Vista Estate so his wife could see Manhattan without leaving the property.



Industrialist Henry Clay Frick is another larger than life historical figure with ties to Alpine. Despite relatively humble beginnings, Frick became a multi-millionaire and one of the most powerful men of his time. He and one-time partner Andrew Carnegie worked side-by-side, building the American Steel Industry. While the steel magnate wasn't ever actually an Alpine resident, he was grandfather to one.

The Frick Estate, as locals know it, consists of a 7000 square foot mansion on a 63-acre property just over the Hudson River. The residence belonged to Dr. Henry Clay Frick II, grandson of Henry Clay Frick. Over the years, Dr. Frick, a Manhattan gynecologist and medical professor at Columbia, grew the estate by buying up neighboring properties. However, by 2005, the aging Dr. Frick and his family were ready to sell. In what amounted to the single largest home sale in the United States that year, real estate developer Richard Kurtz purchased the Frick Estate for \$58 million in 2006.

Today, these storied estates are a developer's-and a central vac salesman's-dream. Rio Vista, the old Sugar Baron's estate, has been transformed into an extremely prestigious estate development. Kurtz is taking a similar approach with the Frick Estate. He subdivided the property into roughly eight large lots ranging in size from five to 12 acres, upon which homes could be built.

Kurtz asked Sal and Chris Lombardo of Rock Ridge Construction Management LLC to build a stately home on one of the first lots- five acres known as #18 Frick Drive.

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"I had worked with Sal and Chris several times before so I called right away to congratulate them," said Boylan. "They told me they were planning to bring us in on it when the time came."

The Lombardos began the prestigious work and, true to their word, called on Boylan and Enhancement Systems to outfit the 30,000 square foot spec home with central vacuum. According to Boylan, the central vac dealer had done work for the builders probably a dozen times before: "They knew me. They knew our business. They were happy for us to do the job."

Boylan believes that trust and a mutual appreciation for quality is what got Enhancement Systems the work.

He said, "The first time I called on Sal and Chris Lombardo, they were working with another central vacuum dealer. They were not satisfied with the other dealer, so they gave me a chance. The Lombardos told me they were less concerned with the money than they were with us doing a good job."

From Boylan's perspective, that's the mark of a good builder. "I've had several other builders tell me they don't care about the quality and the cheaper product will do. In my opinion, when you represent something that's not quality, you end up with a lot of problems and hassles."

However, it's clear to Boylan that quality and reputation matter very much to the Lombardos. "Once we got Sal and Chris on our side, a lot of the other big builders in our area started following suit," he concluded. The Lombardos are also building several other homes near "Devil's Tower" in Rio Vista and Boylan and his team feel confident that will mean more business for Enhancement Systems down the line. In the meantime, Alpine, NJ, would make a great place to visit for anyone who's drawn to history, wealth and grand homes with central vacuum. ❖