

# The Empires of Cleveland: The Van Sweringen Brothers and Ohio



## Invisible Giants: The Empires of Cleveland's Van Sweringen Brothers (Ohio) by Lynn Krawczyk

★★★★☆ 4.7 out of 5

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In the annals of Cleveland's history, no names shine brighter than those of Oris Paxton and Mantis James Van Sweringen. These visionary brothers, fueled by an unyielding determination and an astute understanding of transportation and urban development, left an indelible mark on the city and the state of Ohio. Their bold ventures, including the construction of the iconic Terminal Tower, the creation of the upscale Shaker Heights suburb, and the acquisition of the Nickel Plate Road railroad, transformed Cleveland into a transportation hub and spurred its economic and cultural growth.

### **The Early Years: From Humble Beginnings to Grand Ambitions**

Born in Wooster, Ohio, in 1869 and 1871, respectively, Oris and Mantis Van Sweringen grew up in a modest household. Their father, a Civil War veteran, instilled in them a strong work ethic and a deep appreciation for the power of education. Despite their humble beginnings, the brothers harbored ambitious dreams from a young age.

As teenagers, Oris and Mantis worked as telegraph operators for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. It was during this time that their fascination with the transportation industry took root. They witnessed firsthand the transformative power of railroads in connecting communities and driving economic development. Inspired by their experiences, they resolved to make their mark on the railroad industry and reshape the landscape of their hometown.

## **The Rise of a Transportation Empire: Building the Terminal Tower and Acquiring the Nickel Plate Road**

In 1903, Oris and Mantis Van Sweringen founded the Van Sweringen Company. With limited resources but boundless enthusiasm, they set out to establish a railroad empire. Their first major project was the construction of the Terminal Tower, a towering skyscraper that would become the centerpiece of Cleveland's downtown.

Completed in 1930, the Terminal Tower was an architectural marvel that stood as a testament to the brothers' vision. Its 52 stories made it the second-tallest building in the world at the time, providing panoramic views of the city and surrounding countryside. The tower also housed a bustling union station, connecting Cleveland to major transportation routes and solidifying its status as a transportation hub.

Alongside their work on the Terminal Tower, the Van Sweringen brothers expanded their railroad holdings by acquiring the Nickel Plate Road in 1929. This strategic move gave them control over a vital rail line that stretched from Chicago to Buffalo, further enhancing Cleveland's transportation network and boosting its economy.

## **Shaping Cleveland's Urban Landscape: Creating the Upscale Suburb of Shaker Heights**

In addition to their transportation ventures, the Van Sweringen brothers were instrumental in shaping Cleveland's urban landscape. In 1905, they founded the Shaker Heights Land Company and embarked on the development of an upscale suburb east of the city.

Shaker Heights was meticulously planned, with winding streets, spacious lots, and sprawling parks. The brothers envisioned a community that would cater to the needs of the city's affluent residents and provide a tranquil escape from the hustle and bustle of downtown. Their vision became a reality as Shaker Heights rapidly grew into one of the most sought-after residential areas in the country.

## **The Legacy of the Van Sweringen Brothers: A Lasting Impact on Cleveland and Ohio**

The contributions of the Van Sweringen brothers to Cleveland and Ohio cannot be overstated. Their visionary leadership, entrepreneurial spirit, and engineering prowess left an enduring legacy that continues to shape the region to this day.

The Terminal Tower remains a symbol of Cleveland's architectural heritage and a testament to the brothers' ambition. It serves as a vibrant hub for businesses, tourists, and commuters alike. Shaker Heights stands as a testament to their commitment to urban planning and community development, providing residents with an exceptional quality of life. The Nickel Plate Road became an integral part of the nation's transportation network, facilitating commerce and connecting communities across the Midwest.

Beyond their tangible achievements, the Van Sweringen brothers inspired generations of Clevelanders and Ohioans to strive for greatness. Their story serves as a reminder of the power of innovation, collaboration, and unwavering determination.

The Van Sweringen brothers' empire in Cleveland was more than just a collection of railroads, skyscrapers, and suburbs. It was a testament to their vision, their drive, and their unwavering belief in the potential of their hometown. Their legacy continues to inspire and shape Cleveland and Ohio, leaving a lasting impact on the lives of countless people.

Their story is a reminder that even the most ambitious dreams can be realized with hard work, dedication, and a willingness to embrace the challenges along the way. As we marvel at the towering heights of the Terminal Tower, the verdant beauty of Shaker Heights, and the bustling activity of the Nickel Plate Road, we pay tribute to the visionary brothers who left an indelible mark on our city and our state.



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