

## The Story of William John Howey

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Most Americans are dissatisfied with their likely choices for president.

They want someone different — an outgoing character who is resolutely honest, personally successful, and civic-minded. In a nutshell, they want William John Howey.

This largely-forgotten tycoon was the most prominent citrus planter on Earth during his Roaring Twenties heyday. A skilled real estate developer, his sphere of influence extended far beyond his home base in Florida.

Despite being a member of America's most powerful socioeconomic strata, he was a man for all seasons and engaged presidents as easily as day laborers.

Born the son of an Illinois minister in 1876, Howey started out as a life insurance salesman at age sixteen. He moved on to various landowning ventures in Oklahoma, then became an automobile manufacturer in Kansas City. He produced a few cars, but soon set his sights on Mexico's prosperous pineapple industry.

He did well for himself there, but revolution forced him back to the United States in 1907.

Anxious to plot his next move, he took off for Florida, finding that it was a place ripe with opportunity for someone with his agricultural and real estate skills.

Settling in the Sunshine State's central region, he began cultivating citrus and soon sold entire groves. Immensely successful, he relocated to the rolling hills of Lake County, about forty minutes north of Orlando.

It was there that Howey took on a challenge almost beyond comprehension.

Deciding to build a resort town amidst his new groves, he attracted wealthy Northeasterners and Midwesterners in droves. Today called Howey-in-the-Hills, it sits on a high slope above a long chain of lakes, resembling southern California more than typical Florida.

Eventually featuring blocks of Mediterranean Revival villas, an ideal port setting and two resorts — one of which would be turned into an exclusive prep school and later demolished — Howey's village was an initial success.

Downstate, however, a serious problem was developing. The Miami land boom went bust long before Black Tuesday. Investors became paralyzed with fear about the value of Florida land. Howey, a

remarkably honest man, had absolutely nothing to do with the fraud which South Florida speculators engaged in.

Nevertheless, Florida landowners saw their property values plummet.

Undaunted, Howey decided to enter politics. He ran for governor in 1928 under the banner of his beloved Republican Party. Campaigning on a staunchly pro-commerce platform, he amassed almost 40 percent of the vote; more than any preceding post-Reconstruction Republican.

Despite falling short, Howey devoted himself to making the Florida GOP a viable statewide entity; especially with incoming waves of new residents from north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

He found trouble with native Dixiecrats, however. One of his most unpopular goals was to eliminate poll taxes — a move which would have given the black community a chance to vote. Howey ran for governor again during 1932, but was defeated in a rout.

The Great Depression hit Howey hard, but did not ruin him. He managed to sell a great deal of his holdings beforehand and built a castle-like estate which stands to this day.

Howey's final years were spent trying to popularize the Florida GOP. While caring little for segregation, he advocated firing blacks from the state Republican ranks. His 1932 loss convinced him that black interests repelled otherwise receptive white voters. Howey believed a competitive two-party system would ultimately serve all, but must first be marketed to whites by whites. Only afterward might his GOP-branded limited government ideals become law. Opposing Jim Crow played directly into Dixiecratic hands.

The Southern Strategy long before Nixon's time.

Howey died of a heart attack on June 7, 1938, at the age of 62. It is unfortunate that after the man's passing, his legacy was generally forgotten. He lived the American Dream with a passion. In the face of financial meltdown or crushing electoral defeat, Howey refused to betray his conscience. Like him or not, he did what he thought was right.

Without a doubt, America's economic and political landscape needs more individuals of this caliber.

Howey embodied the American spirit, and deserves to be remembered for nothing less.

Just imagine what he might have done in the Oval Office, let alone Tallahassee.

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