

Fordlandia: Remembering Henry Ford's Brazilian Boondoggle



A group of Ford Motor Company employees at the 2.3-million-acre Fordlandia rubber plantation in 1931. (Henry Ford Museum)

Grand Rapids, Mich. – Sept. 13, 2026 - WOOD-TV/NBC -- The auto industry and arguably the world would look very different if it weren't for Henry Ford. Beyond automobiles, Ford's practices transformed the manufacturing sector, using efficiency to build industries to new heights.

Not every one of Ford's genius ideas turned to gold, however. The industrialist experienced his share of failure. Ford Motor Company was his third foray into the up-and-coming automobile market. He lost when he ran for a Senate seat in

1918 and experts say Ford's refusal to adapt his business strategies cost him his stranglehold on the car market in the 1920s.

One of his biggest failures was a boondoggle more than 3,000 miles away: an experiment/investment meant to help cement Ford Motor Company as the industry's top dog.

Ford purchased a swath of land in the Amazon rainforest and established a settlement to secure a rubber supply for his cars while testing his lifestyle theories on an unenthusiastic band of Brazilians. He named the settlement Fordlandia.

BUYING IN BRAZIL

Several factors brought about Ford's grand experiment in Brazil. By the 1920s, automobiles shifted from a novelty item to a mass-market necessity. American car manufacturers produced about 2.3 million automobiles in 1920. By 1930, they were churning out more than 5 million annually.

As a result, the demand for rubber soared. Rubber wasn't just needed for tires, which weren't nearly as reliable as the ones we use today. Rubber is also needed to make several other automotive parts, like fan belts, hoses, brake pads and even floor mats.



A 1934 aerial photo of a community in Brazil called Fordlandia that Henry Ford hoped would supply rubber for automotive production. The settlement was founded in 1928 and was abandoned in 1945. (Henry Ford Museum)

By 1927, Great Britain had a stranglehold on the global rubber supply. Instead of being a consumer and being at the whims of market prices, Ford wanted to invest and become his own supplier. That led him to Brazil.

By the following year, after some scouting and many discussions with government officials, Ford reached a deal for rights to roughly 2.5 million acres of land for \$125,000. The property was in the state of Para along the Rio Tapajos, one of the Amazon River's major tributaries.

On the surface, the move was simple: Create a giant farm for rubber trees to create rubber for your manufacturing needs. But the reality was much deeper. Historian Greg Grandin, who authored a book on Fordlandia, called Ford's project a way of "salvaging a vision of Americana that was slipping out of his grasp at home."

"That vision was rooted in his experience growing up on a farm in Dearborn and entailed using his wealth and industrial method to safeguard rural virtues and remedy urban ills," Grandin wrote.

Unlike the adventurers that typically dominate the stories of exploring the frontier, Ford's concept was much more conservative. According to Grandin, Ford was previously quoted as saying, "The man who works hard should have his easy chair, his comfortable fireside, his pleasant surroundings."

Cape Cod-style homes were built to house workers, complete with vegetable and flower gardens. In addition to a plumbing system and a power plant to provide electricity, Ford also had a church, a golf course, a movie theater and a dance hall erected within the settlement.

The settlement's hospital was designed by Albert Kahn, a famous American architect who designed many buildings in downtown Detroit and Ford's famed River Rouge Complex.

Below are multiple images of the hospital at the Fordlandia rubber plantation in Brazil.



The Albert Kahn-designed hospital at Fordlandia. (Henry Ford Museum)



Interior view of the open, airy ward at Fordlandia hospital. (Henry Ford Museum)



A patient is brought to Fordlandia's health care facility, which was designed by Albert Kahn. (Henry Ford Museum)



Brazilian President Getulio Vargas (fourth from left) toured Henry Ford's Amazon rubber plantation in 1940, which included an inspection of the site's modern hospital. (Henry Ford Museum)



The well-stocked pharmacy at the Fordlandia's hospital in Brazil. (Henry Ford Museum)

Ford also molded the farm after the efficiencies that helped his automotive company become a money-printing behemoth. Workers were paid a steady wage, an estimated 25% to 35% more than other local employers. And they were paid hourly and scheduled on eight-hour shifts.

Fordlandia was an enticing draw for the native Brazilians, but the project included a lot of blind spots that led to its downfall.



Plantation manager John Rogge, shown in a 1931 photo with a young rubber tree, oversaw Fordlandia for about five years. (Henry Ford Museum)

WHAT WENT WRONG

The settlement was founded in 1928. By 1945, Ford Motor Company had sold the land back to the government of Brazil at a steep loss. A few factors proved to be Fordlandia's downfall.

One was the inherent "us versus them" mentality that many workers felt. Only Americans held supervisor positions. There was also a separate section of the village built exclusively for the American employees, including homes with better views and the first ones to get running water.

Moreover, many of the Brazilians bristled at Ford's strict social rules. Despite paying healthy wages, money for meals was automatically deducted from paychecks and they could only be received in the company's mess hall. Ford also set the menu with the food he believed was best for his employees, notably bland food like oatmeal, canned peaches and unpolished rice.

The vitriol came to a head late in 1930 when a riot broke out at the mess hall. Scores of workers vandalized the settlement, destroying generators, equipment and even their own homes.



A 1930 photo of workers at Henry Ford's "Fordlandia" settlement in Brazil.
(Henry Ford Museum)

Many of Fordlandia's managers fled the town by boat, while some were forced to retreat into the jungle. The town was in disarray for days until Fordlandia leaders convinced the Brazilian military to intervene.

Some of the hardest edicts to enact were Ford's teetotaling habits. Ford built a dance hall but restricted how they could dance. Protocol dictated by the company said there would be no bodily contact between men and women "except for the thumb and forefinger, which were to touch the woman's waist as if 'holding a pencil.'"

Alcohol was also banned, but that was almost impossible to enforce. One enterprising man built a saloon and brothel outside of Fordlandia and quickly became a popular spot for workers to spend their hard-earned money.

Ford's utopian ideal also failed because employee turnover was so high. Unlike in Detroit, there's little consumer society in the middle of the rainforest. Grandin wrote that the workers "didn't actually need the high wages that Ford was promising."



A 1931 photo of workers terracing the land in Fordlandia, Brazil. (Henry Ford Museum)

“They would work a few weeks or a few months and then they would disappear and ... go back into the jungle to work their plots, to produce their own food, and maybe they come back the following year,” he wrote. “This would drive the Ford managers mad.”

But the project ultimately failed because of Ford’s hubris. When he and his team mapped out the details of the settlement, they relied on themselves and not on experts, notably any botanists.

Fordlandia’s crews had trouble getting rubber trees to take hold. In his book, Grandin noted that *hevea brasiliensis*, the rubber tree that grows naturally in that area, grows easily in the wild. But the trees, planted in tight rows for the sake of efficiency, struggled.

By 1936, Fordlandia’s managers finally turned to a botanist who proposed several different methods. While they weren’t satisfied with the botanist’s ideas, they did move forward with one major change — a second plantation called Belterra.

Trees there were able to take root better in their tight groups, but the formation soon posed another problem. It allowed pests to spread quickly from tree to tree, devastating the crop.

Crews spent years fighting the insects. They found that pests started their attacks on any given tree from the bottom. Workers monitored the tree bottoms and killed off the insects whenever they could. But over the course of several years, the bugs adapted and outsmarted the work crews by starting their attack from the top of the tree. After years of back-and-forth with the insects, planting and replanting, the insects eventually won.

Through Fordlandia's lifetime, Ford and his company survived the Great Depression and World War II. By 1945, Ford was in poor health and the company's control fell to his grandson, Henry Ford II.

The grandson was the one to pull the plug on the Brazilian experiment, citing the projects notable costs and dwindling results.

FORDLANDIA TODAY

Plenty of traces of Fordlandia are still around today. Simon Romero, a reporter for the New York Times, has visited the village twice and says it stands alone as a bizarre relic.

"I had been to the Amazon numerous times before. I've explored various river basins up there, I've seen remnants of lost civilizations, and I've also come across ruins in different parts of Brazil, but I never saw something like this," Romero told Michigan Public in 2017. "It's really this American-style, Midwestern town."

About 2,000 people still live there, many in the homes that were built for the company's employees. But nature has already reclaimed much of Ford's facilities.

"Some of those buildings are now in ruin, including the hospital (designed) by Kahn, which I explored and it's really just a tragedy to see it in that state," Romero said.

Last May, state officials ordered the settlement to be restored and preserved. Years earlier, federal officials sued the country's architectural heritage agency for failing to preserve it sooner.

Brazil's federal prosecuting office called Fordlandia "a landmark chapter in the history of Brazil and of global industry" and one that should be preserved for future generations.

"The project (brought) cutting-edge infrastructure — including a hospital, running water, electricity and a movie theater — to the heart of the Amazon in the 1920s," the prosecutor said.

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