

Town of Atlantic City
New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail
North end of Absecon Island, South of Absecon Channel
Atlantic City
Atlantic County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1033

HABS
NJ
1-ATCI,
19-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

TOWN OF ATLANTIC CITY

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Location: New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail, North end of Absecon Island, South of Absecon Channel, Atlantic City, Atlantic County, New Jersey.

Significance: Atlantic City, the most famous of the speculative New Jersey resorts, conceived in the 1850s, was the first resort created in conglomeration with the railroad industry and signaled the opening of the shore to extensive growth. The support of railroad investors and local manufacturers made possible the construction of the Camden and Atlantic railroad in order to create the ideal resort. While Atlantic City has become analogous with the "boardwalk" resort, today the boardwalk is lined with glitzy casinos, amidst a contrasting destitute urban community.

History: Though contemporary vacationers at Long Branch and Cape May witnessed great improvements in resort transportation and accommodation earlier in the century, none could predict the transformation brought by the railroad. Not only did the revolutionary system of travel bring an ever-increasing number of tourists, but also the birth of entirely new resorts. The most famous of these, Atlantic City, originated as a traditional health resort and only gradually became known for seaside glamour. According to local histories, Jeremiah Leeds purchased most of Absecon Island, located in Atlantic County, five miles from the mainland. Though one source mentions a "public house" on the island as early as 1815, Jeremiah's wife Millie operated the only boarding house there.¹ Her hotel, an attractive retreat for Philadelphia sportsmen, was one of the few buildings on the island when Dr. Jonathan Pitney began exploring the area in the 1830-40s. Inspired by the climate and location of the land, the physician envisioned a bathing village for wealthy Philadelphians. The idea was encouraged by glass and iron manufacturers as well as railroad investors, who were eager for efficient local transportation routes. In 1853 Camden and Atlantic Railroad engineer Richard Osborne laid out the city streets, creating a fully planned "paper" city by 1854.

On July 1, 1854, the day the railroad brought a select group of 600 news and businessmen to the United States Hotel, Atlantic City began its physical and metaphoric growth as a choice resort. Born of a promotional scheme, the city thrived on the imagery of excess and pleasure. In his plan of "the first, most popular, most health-giving and most inviting watering place," Osborne incorporated a sense of nationalism along with an unspoken faith in the city's future prominence. The streets extending from the beach to the inland marshes were named after states, while those running parallel to the ocean took the names of the seven seas.² The promise of the railroad inspired entrepreneurs, such as Thomas Bedloe to build accommodations for

¹ Alfred Heston, Jersey Waggon Jaunts (New Jersey: Atlantic County Historical Society, 1926), 796.

² Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration, New Jersey: A Guide to its Present and Past (New York: Public Library of Newark and New Jersey Guild Associates, Viking Press, 1939), 194.

thousands of expected guests. Lured by the potential of Osborne's "first" and "most popular" resort, Bedloe came from Philadelphia in 1852 and began constructing a hotel, the Bedloe House, completed in time to greet the first railroad passengers. The history of the United States hotel, destination of the special inaugural train, illustrates the speculative nature of such early investments. The hotel's first owners, Michener and Neleigh, spent too much money on accommodations for the anticipated crowds and were forced to sell the building after only two years. The business fell into the hands of its builders, Philadelphia lumber merchants Brown and Woelepper. Though high demand necessitated a new wing along Atlantic Avenue in the early 1860s, by 1892, the "property passed into the hands of John S. Davis and Elwood Jones, who cut the land up into cottage sites and moved the hotel to the Pacific Avenue side of the square. This section was afterwards razed and the land converted into building lots."³

The wealth and prominence of the first Victorian hotels is made graphically clear by drawings in the Woolman and Rose Atlas published in 1878. In addition to picturing the United States hotel, guaranteed notoriety through its connection with the railroad, Woolman depicts the Colonnade House, the Haddon House, the Seaside House, Germantown Cottage and several private residences. The city's reputation as a retreat for invalids, with "the proverbial dryness of the atmosphere, and the health invigorating sea breezes is considered by some to rival Florida."⁴ Hotels, like the HaddoHouse, offered covered porches with views up and down the beach, as well as special basement and parlor heaters providing year-round climate control. Placed in a central location, the hotels were within walking distance of the railroad depot, post office, city hall, and hot and a cold seawater bathing establishment. The Seaside House at the end of Pennsylvania Avenue seemed to sit right on the beach.⁵ Hotels were often expanded to keep pace with the increasing tourist trade. The Hotel Dennis grew from a two room summerhouse in 1860 to a twenty-two-room house in 1867, and a 150-room hotel in 1892. That year the first brick hotel was constructed, followed twelve years later by the first "fire-proof hotel," the Chalfonte, also one of the best preserved today. In one of the most impressive hotels, the Marlborough-Blenheim, Philadelphia architect William L. Price actually combined two previously existing buildings, the 1902 Marlborough house and the Blenheim house. When the Marlborough-Blenheim was rebuilt in 1906, it claimed a place in history as the first hotel in the world constructed of reinforced concrete. Thomas Edison, the inventor of the new method, oversaw the concrete pouring.⁶ The hotel was the first to offer private baths in every room and hot and cold saltwater on tap, modern conveniences it

³ Heston, 797.

⁴ H.C. Woolman and T.F. Rose, Historical and Biographical Atlas of the New Jersey Coast (Philadelphia: Woolman and Rose, 1878; reprint, Toms River, N.J.: Ocean County Historical Society, 1985), 329.

⁵ Woolman and Rose, 323-335.

⁶ Lee Eisenberg and Vicki Gold Levi, Atlantic City: 125 Years of Ocean Madness (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc.), 39, 43.

hid behind a dream-like exterior facade suggesting Far Eastern influence. A reporter for the New Cosmopolis did not know quite how to explain the Marlborough-Blenheim's captivating personality.

If Coleridge, in Kubla Khan, of Poe, the Doman of Arnheim, had described such a fantastic structure we should have understood, for they are men of imagination. The architecture might be Byzantine. It suggests St. Marco's at Venice, St. Sophia at Constantinople, or a Hindu Palace, with its crouching dome, its operatic facade and its two dominating monoliths with blunt tops."⁷

In 1979, a year after legalized gambling offered hope for urban renewal, the hotel was destroyed to make room for casinos.

From its early planning stages, Atlantic City grew around an efficient transportation system. In 1877, increased traffic led to the construction of a second train line to Camden called the Narrow Gauge, which was laid out in only ninety-eight days. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the largess and tracks stretched across the entire length of the island, linking Atlantic City with the communities of Margate, Ventnor, and Longport. The railroads operated steamboats from Longport at the extreme south end of the island, to Ocean City and Somers Point until the construction of the new highway route in 1918.

Despite its earliest origins as a health retreat, Atlantic City's resort-based economy necessitated a wide variety of year-round attractions. The boardwalk, touted as the first of its kind, was the combined effort of hotel proprietor Jacob Keim and railroad conductor Alexander Boardman. Both were concerned with keeping sand off rugs and seats in hotel rooms and railroad cars. June 16, 1870, just two months after they presented the city council with a petition demanding a "footwalk," a mile-long street was constructed of boards "one and one-half inches thick, nailed to joists set crosswise, 2' apart, built in sections, said to have been 12' long."⁸ The boardwalk's sectional design allowed it to be moved away from threatening storm tides and packed up for the winter. Though the original ordinance required that buildings be set back 30' from the walk, by 1880, when a second replacement boardwalk was completed, commercial buildings were permitted within 10'. The city directory of 1883 listed over 100 merchants, excluding itinerants, conducting business along the boardwalk. "There were fifty-two bathhouses renting rooms and suits, four small hotels, four guest cottages, two piers, fifteen restaurants and many stores."⁹ The success of the city can be measured by the wear and tear on the boards; four walks were constructed before the final steel-pile-and-girder boardwalk, extending from Rhode Island Avenue

⁷ Eisenberg and Levi, 48.

⁸ Eisenberg and Levi, 19.

⁹ Frank M. Butler, The Book of the Boardwalk and The Atlantic City Story (1954 Association, Inc., 1952), 6.

to Chelsea, was erected in 1896. The need for a new promenade corresponded with a significant increase in population, from 13,055 in 1890 to 46,150 in 1910.¹⁰ During the early 1900s the boardwalk was extended along the eight-mile shoreline of the island, linking the new communities of Margate and Ventnor with their more renowned neighbor. Margate, to the south, is renowned today as the home of Lucy the Margate Elephant. The 65' elephant was constructed in 1882 as part of a Philadelphia land-speculator's scheme to attract land buyers to Atlantic City. Today, Lucy stands 50' from its original location, now completely restored and a National Historic Landmark.¹¹

The decade the boardwalk opened for commercial use, entrepreneurs stretched their imaginations to devise new, and creative ways of attracting trade and publicity. The first amusement pier was constructed in 1882 on shrewd business principles, "the aim being to occupy little space on the boardwalk, yet to pack as much amusement behind the entrances as was physically possible."¹² The sea destroyed at least one pier, built in 1881, and another the next year. Soon the city council was more worried about the damage done to its seacoast by commercial development than the effects of storms. In 1884 the city gained control over the beach area through a special "Beach Park Act," with limitations restricting the lengths of piers. Finally, laws were enacted prohibiting all new development on the ocean side, while tacitly encouraging development across the walk.¹³ Throughout the negotiations, the established piers continued to collect and display the exotic and extravagant. A 1928 account of the six piers--the Heinz, Garden, Steel, Steeplechase, Central, and Million Dollar--suggested self-contained environments resembling large hotels out on the water. "They furnish concerts by famous bands, motion pictures, vaudeville, minstrels, dancing, deep-sea net hauls, and just the still and far-out watching of the waves and the moon. They also house many large conventions."¹⁴ The Steel Pier, the longest at 2,000', entertained its public with horses who dove off 45-foot heights with girls on their backs. The Million Dollar Pier, famous for the amount spent by Captain John Young before 1906, was located at 1 Atlantic Ocean, also the address of the Captain's three-story home. Today, the ballroom, Italian villa and sculpture garden have been replaced by Ocean One, a contemporary mall offering skeetball, a food court, and the Black Forest Restaurant on its three respective levels.¹⁵

¹⁰ Butler, 9.

¹¹ Fodor's, Vacations on the Jersey Shore (New York: Fodor's Travel Publications, Inc., 1991), 160.

¹² Federal Writer's Project, New Jersey: A Guide, 213.

¹³ Charles E. Funnell, By the Beautiful Sea (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., Inc., 1924), 122.

¹⁴ New Jersey Chamber of Commerce, New Jersey--Life, Industries and Resources of a Great State (Newark, NJ: NJ Chamber of Commerce, 1928), 213.

¹⁵ Fodor's, 105.

The Atlantic City Convention Hall opened the year the stock market crashed marking the seventy-fifth anniversary of the city and providing seating for 41,000. Promoted as the largest in the world, the hall also boasted the organ of greatest dimensions with 32,000 pipes. The versatility of the structure was illustrated by its seasonal transformation into a winter ice-skating rink, a football stadium, a horse-show field, and a steeplechase track.¹⁶ In the late 1980s the convention hall underwent a \$23 million renovation with the hopes of attracting high-class conventions and sporting events.¹⁷ For more than fifty years, it has been most famous as the site of the Miss America Scholarship Pageant. Since the first competition held in 1920, called the "Fall Frolic International Rolling Chair Pageant," the pageant has attracted visitors to the area.¹⁸ An Atlantic City trademark, the pageant is also the target of severe criticism, hence the addition of "scholarship" to the traditional event.

By 1877 when Harper's magazine authors wrote "Along Our Shore," the urban development of the city was inextricably tied to the ever-increasing collection of spectacles lining the boardwalk. "The hotels, saloons, restaurants, and boarding cottages of all sizes are innumerable; and along the beach, which is semicircular, there are photograph galleries, peep shows, marionette theaters, conjuring booths, circuses, machines for trying the weight, lungs or muscles of the inquisitive, swings, merry-go-rounds, and all the various sideshows which reap the penny harvest of holiday crowds."¹⁹ Early versions of the ferris wheel arrived in the 1870s and were soon accompanied by merry-go-rounds and track rides resembling roller coasters. Issac N. Forrester built his "Epicycloidal Wheel," four huge wheels set at right angles, each carrying eight gondolas for two people, near the Seaview Excursion House in 1872.²⁰ The Excursion House advertised "the Mt. Washington Toboggan slide around 1889, four years before another ride combining wheel and rail was promoted in the Daily Union. The reporter describes how "the passengers will shoot down a toboggan slide to a groove in the large wheel," be taken up, and "whirled around five minutes."²¹

While some indulged in the excitement of mechanical amusements, others preferred to be tranquilly conveyed along the boardwalk in rolling-chairs. After several years of renting wheelchairs to invalid vacationers from his hardware store at 1702 Atlantic Ave., William Hayday realized he could market the rolling-chair for public boardwalk

¹⁶ Federal Writer's Project, New Jersey: A Guide, 198.

¹⁷ Robert Santelli, The Jersey Shore: A Travel and Pleasure Guide (Charlotte, N.C.: Fast & McMillan Publishers, 1986), 155.

¹⁸ Fodor's, 104.

¹⁹ Riding, William H. "Along Our Jersey Shore," Harper's New Monthly Magazine LVI, (December 1877-May 1878), 336.

²⁰ Funnell, 62.

²¹ Funnell, 63.

transportation. Since 1887, when Hayday sent his first commercial wicker chairs rolling down the walk, the rides have been an Atlantic City tradition. At the height of their popularity, in the 1920s, only the hotels employed more workers than the rolling-chair service. Though business declined during the war, the pastime made a comeback beginning in 1948, when the Blue Chair Company introduced a line of motorized vehicles made of sheet steel. The Shill Rolling Chair Company purchased these in 1955, and created a new version with a traditional wicker body in place of the steel hull. The new combination satisfied customers' desire for nostalgia and a fascination with technological innovation, two cravings liberally indulged in Atlantic City, while virtually wiping out the manually pushed rolling chair. This most traditional version of the chair still frequents the boardwalk; in 1984 Larry Belfer began offering rides from the closed Appollo Theatre at New York Avenue and the Boardwalk.²² For those seeking a more expedient trip, a thirteen-passenger jitney runs up and down Pacific Avenue and provides service to the marina district casinos.²³

Salt water taffy, indisputably the most famous boardwalk edible commodity, was popularized by David Bradley in the early 1880s and epitomizes the image of romantic seaside vacations. The chewy candy was purchased in Atlantic City and distributed around the country by returning tourists. Joseph Fralinger made his fortune by packaging the candy in souvenir boxes. With his wealth from the taffy business, Fralinger constructed a theater for a trained-horse show, "Bartholomew's Equine Paradox." When the show went on the road in 1892, Fralinger remodeled the building to house the Academy of music, the boardwalk's first real theater.²⁴ After further alterations in 1908, the building became Nixon's Apollo Theater.²⁵ Fralinger's distinctive, elongated taffy is still sold in special boxes advertising, among other views, the picturesque beauty of Atlantic City at sunset.

Appropriately, a wide variety of easily distributed views, the first American picture postcards, were also an Atlantic City product. The wife of local printer, Carl Voelker, took a trip to Germany in 1895 and brought back the European idea. Her husband marketed the postcard as an advertising tool for Atlantic City hotels. Soon "view cards," purchased at shops along the boardwalk, such as Hubin's Big Post Card Store, and mailed for a penny, became a required form of documenting the vacation experience.²⁶ As today, early postcards took a range of forms, from simple views of significant buildings to more humorous depictions of local characters.

²² "100 Years of Boardwalk Rolling Chairs--1884 to 1984." *Atlantic County Historical Society*, 10 (October 84), 11-18.

²³ Fodor's, 100.

²⁴ Ed Davis, *Atlantic City Diary--A Century of Memories* (Egg Harbor City, NJ: Laureate Press, 1980), 14.

²⁵ Funnell, 50.

²⁶ Davis, 17.

An architectural monument reminding visitors of Atlantic City's maritime location, the Absecon Lighthouse still stands (irreconcilably inland, now) at the corner of Rhode Island and Pacific avenues. The founder of Atlantic City, Jonathan Pitney, was also the inspiration behind the construction of a light on Absecon Island. Though Pitney wrote to the federal government describing the need for a beacon to guide ships, his pleas were ignored for twenty years. Finally, numerous shipwrecks, including the famous Powhatan disaster of 1854, proved his point; the government began construction of the lighthouse in 1856. Lieutenant George Meade, who later achieved fame for leading troops in the Battle of Gettysburg, supervised much of the technical construction. An 1872 engraving of the lighthouse, commissioned for the Camden and Atlantic Railroad, shows the structure towering over visitors promenading along the first boardwalk and bathers and boats bobbing in the surf. The 171-foot tall light tower dominated a group of bathing tents and pavilions.²⁷ Now located in a high crime area of low- and middle-income housing projects, it only symbolically recalls the days when visitors to the island were impressed by "the striped tower of the Absecon Light rising to a stately height from a low belt of foliage."²⁸ Fodor's 1991 Vacation Guide does not recommend a visit.²⁹

Despite the marketing of sea and sand to promote commercial attractions and tourist commodities, many nineteenth-century vacationers still sought the real thing. Seabathing was a popular activity performed by young and old to maintain a vigorous and healthy constitution. In 1891 the Atlantic City Beach Patrol, a group of ten policemen, began to guard the beach during the bathing hours of 9 A.M. to 5 P.M. The next summer the city hired twenty lifeguards equipped with ten lifeboats to keep an eye on audacious bathers. That year, Adams and Jacksons' baths, located around Pennsylvania and Virginia avenues near the Steel Pier, were well-patronized facilities. Alfred Adams, "bathmaster," charged 50 cents a week for his services, which probably included access to changing rooms. Jackson's, known as a more luxurious bathhouse, accommodated 100 bathers and included apartments and restrooms with cots.³⁰ As the proliferation of fancy bathing facilities illustrates, seabathing quickly became more of a social exercise than a health-related activity.

Though many Americans do not realize it, most have spent hours bargaining for property along the streets of Atlantic City. In 1930, an unemployed salesman from Philadelphia reminiscing about summers at the resort, happened to draw the city plan

²⁷ Jack E. Boucher, "Atlantic City's Historic Absecon Lighthouse," (Somers Point, N.J.: The Atlantic County Historical Society, 1964), 7-30.

²⁸ Rideing, 335.

²⁹ Fodors, 109.

³⁰ Davis, 12-13.

on his dining room table.³¹ He fashioned cards with street names, adding Marvin Gardens, part of Margate (spelled Marven), and an additional "railroad," actually a local freight-transportation bus company. The family game soon became popular with friends, who demanded their own copies, and Charles Darrow began trying to market his invention. Though Parker Brothers refused the game when he initially offered it to the company in 1934, by the next year Monopoly had become so popular that it approached him. That fact that Monopoly has become an accepted part of American culture was made clear in 1973, when city planners attempted to combine Mediterranean and Baltic avenues into a single street, Melrose Avenue. The proposed change caused such an uproar that city officials called a special meeting to vote on the issue. The president of Parker Brothers, Edward P. Parker, eloquently expressed the significance of the game as an embodiment of American ideals.³²

While I certainly agree with the logic of having a street name remain the same for its entire length, I feel that this is a special case whose repercussions could possibly shake the very foundations of American tradition--and in particular a tradition that has spanned four generations and brought fame and fortune to your fair city.³³

Thanks to Parker and the loyal support of players throughout the United States, the two streets remain intact.

Trying to characterize various attitudes toward Atlantic City boardwalk life in 1939, the WPA guide to the city remarked that "to some it represents the concentrated Babbitty of America on parade."³⁴ Today, the island has been so transformed by development that many visitors, entranced by the sparkle of the casinos and the sea, do not even realize they've left the mainland. The proximity of the other communities also often goes unnoticed, as Atlantic City isolates itself in an aura of "anything's possible." Driving through the city of Atlantic City today, on the way to the boardwalk, first-time visitors might question the mythology of wealth and wonder surrounding the resort. The contrast between neighborhoods of decaying houses and dilapidated commercial buildings--leftover from prosperous Victorian years that lingered into the 1920s--and the more contemporary boardwalk development first became noticeable in the 1950s. A combination of factors resulted in the city's decline as a family resort--competition from other shore towns, the widespread use of automobiles leading to the demise of the railroad and a lack of interest in Atlantic City's old fashioned convention center.³⁵ In 1978, voters agreed that "casino

³¹ Maxine Brady, The Monopoly Book (New York: David McKay Company, 1974), 15.

³² Brady, 15-24.

³³ Brady, 23.

³⁴ Federal Writer's Project, New Jersey: A Guide, 190.

³⁵ Fodor's, 32-33.

gaming" used as "a unique tool for urban development" might bring back nineteenth century propriety and traditions.³⁶ Despite a marked increase in jobs, however, the distance between city and Boardwalk remains wide, as wealth centers around the plush casinos employ commuters from nearby suburbs, rather than city residents.³⁷ Today, the Atlantic City of spectacle and excess has retreated from the promenade to the casino interior, where society is replaced by its image, reflected in glittering chandeliers and gilt-framed mirrors. But even the most critical visitor is drawn to Atlantic City, fascinated by its power to embody certain American traditions and carry them into the future, if only in exaggerated form. The real Atlantic City may be thirteen casinos against a backdrop of economic disparity, but the history recalls a time of prosperity, an image that visitors still bring home on boxes of taffy, postcards and dinner plates.

Prepared by: Camille Gatza
HABS Historian
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³⁶ Fodor's, 33.

³⁷ Fodor's, 32.

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