

The History of Long Beach Island, NJ

Early History and Use as a Shipping Route

Long Beach Island, NJ, has been inhabited continuously since the late seventeenth century. First used by hunters looking for game, a shipping route around the northern tip of the island became increasingly important for New Jersey and New England during the nineteenth century. The Barnegat Inlet, located just north of Long Beach Island, connected Barnegat Bay and Ocean County with the Atlantic Ocean. As early as 1609, the English navigator and explorer Henry Hudson noted that the mouth of the bay “hath many shoals, and the sea breaketh upon them”. In other words, the sea surrounding Long Beach Island was a dangerous one, and the Barnegat Inlet, while a necessary passageway for freight and whaling ships, was nonetheless a frightening prospect for sailors. “Barnegat” itself is derived from the name the Dutch gave to the bay and its inlet in 1614: “Barendegat”, which means “Inlet of the Breakers”. Storms and dangerous waters, therefore, have always been part of Long Beach Island's colorful history.

The Lighthouse on Long Beach Island

As New Jersey lies directly in the path of sea lanes from Europe, there was no avoiding the “Inlet of the Breakers” for many sea captains in the early history of the United States. Dangerous though it was, sailors continued to brave the inlet's unpredictable waters and low-lying, invisible barrier beaches with its shifting reefs.

In the nineteenth century, shipwrecks became so common that the United States government felt compelled to intervene. In 1834, Congress gave \$6,000 for work on a lighthouse on Long Beach Island's northern tip. By 1835, the lighthouse was operational, but was considered by most mariners to be utterly inadequate. The lighthouse did not flash, and the light it provided was not sufficient for sailors. Furthermore, the lighthouse had been constructed in a place that, a decade later, was already threatening to fall into the sea. In 1855, construction began on a new lighthouse; by 1857, the original lighthouse fell into the Atlantic Ocean.

The new Barnegat Lighthouse cost \$40,000 instead of \$6,000, and stood 165 feet tall – the second tallest lighthouse in the United States. The lighthouse remained an important fixture on Long Beach Island's northern tip until it became another relic of history in 1944.

The Beginnings of Tourism on Long Beach Island

The first summer vacationers on Long Beach Island were the Lenni Lenape Indians. With a more permanent home on New Jersey's mainland, the Native Americans found the hunting and fishing on Long Beach Island to be superb, and made temporary homes on the island each spring and summer.

By the mid-1860s, the whales around Long Beach Island had been hunted into extinction, and local businessmen needed a new way to make their money. Early visitors to Long Beach Island traveled from as far away as New York to enjoy the hunting and fishing. In 1851, Thomas Bond bought one of the early hotels built on the island and marketed it to hunters, fishermen, and socialites from New York to Philadelphia. His hotel became a popular spot, and operated until 1885. He was pushed out of business by a crop of newer, more modern hotels that began to appear around Beach Haven in the 1880s.

In 1886, the Pennsylvania Railroad line built a railroad line across Barnegat Bay onto Long Beach Island. Before that time, the only access onto the island was by boat, but now tourists could travel from Philadelphia or New York to the island with a lengthy but safe and comfortable train ride. The train line made tourism on a mass scale possible, and Long Beach Island became the playground of the well-to-do more than ever before.

Shark Attacks!

One of the darker, stranger chapters in the history of Long Beach Island was the Jersey shore shark attacks of 1916. Between July 1 and July 12 that year, four people were killed by sharks, and one injured.

The attacks couldn't have come at a worse time. Already, New England was weathering a summer heat wave that turned out to be deadly, not to mention that the polio epidemic was in full swing. Looking for an escape from the heat and a way to protect their children from polio, thousands had fled to seaside resorts and summer homes on Long Beach Island and elsewhere.

The first shark attack came on July 1, just off the coast Long Beach Island's resort town, Beach Haven. Twenty-five year old Charles Vansant was vacationing with his family at the Engleside

Hotel. Although he shouted for help once the shark began to attack, most of the other vacationers took him to be yelling at his dog and ignored him. By the time the lifeguard pulled him from the water, it was already too late; Vansant bled to death on the beach. Four more attacks would take place off the Jersey shore, with only one survivor. As a result of the attacks, sharks were hunted almost to extinction on the east coast, and the attacks and hunting only heightened the disturbance in the already delicate psyche of post-World War I Americans. Movie buffs might also be interested in knowing that the famous shark attacks off the Jersey shore would later serve as the inspiration for a little novel called *Jaws*.

Tourism on Long Beach Island in the Twentieth Century and Today

Tourism on Long Beach Island experienced one more major setback in the twentieth century: the Ash Wednesday Storm (also called the Great Atlantic Storm) of 1962 nearly destroyed Long Beach Island altogether. A fierce storm that ripped up beaches from North Carolina to New York, the 1962 storm is considered by the US Geological Survey to be one of the most destructive storms in recorded history. Lasting more than three days, taking forty lives, and costing hundreds of millions of dollars in property damage, virtually every boardwalk on the island was destroyed, and the island itself was broken into several pieces. Eighty percent of the island's structures were either damaged or completely destroyed.

It was the southern section of Long Beach Island, particularly around Beach Haven, that survived the 1962 storm the best. Today, historic, elegant Victorian homes which have survived several dangerous "northeaster" storms can still be found on the southern end of the island. Traveling north through the island, the commercial development begins to thin out, and the residences become even wealthier.

Today, a little less than 10,000 people make Long Beach Island their year round home, but that population swells tenfold in the summer, when vacationers from New York, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and elsewhere in the northeast make the island their summer home. The white sand beaches, amusement parks, and shopping draw families every summer and fall. Meanwhile, Long Beach Island's significant place in the history of the northeastern United States draws its share of American history buffs.