

Towns of Belmar and South Belmar  
(Town of Ocean Beach)  
New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail  
East of State Route 71, South of Shark River Inlet  
Belmar  
Monmouth County  
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1009

HABS  
NJ  
13-BELMA  
4-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HABS  
NJ  
13-BELMAR  
4-

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
TOWNS OF BELMAR AND SOUTH BELMAR  
(Town of Ocean Beach)

HABS No. NJ-1009

Location: New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail, East of State Route 71, South of Shark River Inlet, Belmar, Monmouth County, New Jersey.

Significance: Belmar and South Belmar developed as a result of the general speculative development of the New Jersey shore which became possible in the late nineteenth century with the coming of the railroad. Beyond its resort history, Belmar is significant in communications history for the experimental transatlantic radio complex built in 1913 by the Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company. Taken over by the U.S. Army in 1941, the site gained further significance in modern communications history, as the birthplace of radar.

History: Between 1875 and 1880, the railroad began bringing visitors to the shore communities south of Ocean Grove and Bradley Beach. Speculators anticipating opportunities for land development "followed the tracks" down the shore to Ocean Beach, now known as Belmar.<sup>1</sup> The founders, originally from Ocean Grove, speculated that people might want to move up to larger, more luxurious homes on the Jersey Shore.<sup>2</sup> For \$100,172.50<sup>3</sup> they bought what amounted to a 372-acre peninsula of land bounded by a mile of Atlantic Ocean on the east, and a mile-and-a-half of the lake and inlet formed by the Shark River to the north and west. Operating first as the Pleasant Beach Association, then the Ocean Beach Association, they used the usual superlatives to describe their development to prospective buyers. "This tract is considered the finest location on the Atlantic Coast for a summer resort one of the most beautiful landscapes imaginable."<sup>4</sup>

In 1875 the 2-year-old Ocean Beach Association advertised half-price lots for hotel builders. The following year, a stage line was established between Ocean Grove and Ocean Beach and a promotional auction was held during one of Ocean Grove's camp meetings, to sell lots in the new community. Potential investors traveled on excursion tickets from cities along the Pennsylvania line, which added extra cars for travel to the auction from Philadelphia. The successful scheme resulted in the sale of 135 lots and a record number of passengers aboard the Pennsylvania railroad.<sup>5</sup> By 1878, Ocean Beach entertained the patrons of five hotels: Riverview House, Colorado

---

<sup>1</sup> June Methot, Up and Down the Beach (Navesink, NJ: Whip Publishers, 1988), 108.

<sup>2</sup> "Ocean Grovers Founded Belmar," newspaper clipping, (collection Monmouth College Library, Long Branch, NJ, n.d.)

<sup>3</sup> "Ocean Grovers."

<sup>4</sup> "Ocean Grovers."

<sup>5</sup> "Ocean Grovers."

TOWNS OF BELMAR AND SOUTH BELMAR  
HABS No. NJ-1009 (Page 2)

House, Neptune House, Fifth Avenue House and Columbia House.<sup>6</sup> Twelve 80' wide avenues were laid out perpendicular to the shore, each block being divided into 50' by 150' lots. Depending on location they were sold for \$300 to \$1,500, with deeds which required buyers to build cottages.<sup>7</sup>

In 1890 the more elegant town name of Belmar was adapted from the French words Belle Mer, or pretty sea.<sup>8</sup> Ocean Avenue along the Atlantic was paved with gravel and lined with a row of large, wood-framed houses.<sup>9</sup> The business district developed along F Street, which functioned as an extension of the Main Street that ran all the way to Long Branch. A boardwalk was added in 1905.<sup>10</sup>

In 1908, another auction was held in what was to become South Belmar, on undeveloped land back from the sea between Belmar and Spring Lake.<sup>11</sup> Taking offices in Steinbach's Department Store in Asbury Park, the Ocean Grove Park Association held drawings to give away pianos, tea sets, opera glasses, diamonds, watches, silverware and ice cream makers, in order to draw crowds before each day's auction that August. The Atlantic Coast Electric Railroad ran streetcars from Asbury Park every five minutes, and prophetically, automobiles brought people over from the railroad station.<sup>12</sup> For a time, the new development was called Ocean Grove Park, perhaps strategically, however one account claims that the name was adopted because "the property borders on the ocean and because the western end of the tract is covered with a fine grove of Jersey Pine trees."<sup>13</sup> Its streets were laid out on an angle from Belmar's grid.

Early postcards document Belmar's swift growth, as well as reflect how Belmar was changed by larger trends in American life. By the 1910s, residential Second Avenue, a block south of the Shark River near the ocean, was lined with substantial houses and hotels. A few years later rows of parked automobiles also lined the streets. Meanwhile, modest hotels such as the Brunswick were followed by larger, ritzier ones such as the Melrose Inn, the Sagamore, and the Carleton. In 1925, the American

---

<sup>6</sup> Methot, 108.

<sup>7</sup> "Ocean Grovers."

<sup>8</sup> "Various Names Adopted and Changed in Succession Before Name Belmar Adopted in 1889," Asbury Park Press (Asbury Park, NJ, August 1, 1968), 10A.

<sup>9</sup> "In 1890....," then-and-now photos, Asbury Park Press (July 28, 1974).

<sup>10</sup> "Only yesterday," photo and cutline, Asbury Park Press (Asbury Park, NJ: June 4, 1972), np.

<sup>11</sup> "Developing an Ocean Front: Big Strip of Belmar's Ocean Front Being Improved," newspaper clipping (July 29, 1908, name of publication unknown, collection Monmouth College Library, Long Branch, NJ)

<sup>12</sup> "Developing an Ocean Front."

<sup>13</sup> "Developing an Ocean Front."

Legion built a structure at Route 35, Eighth and River Avenues, which included a gym, basketball court, dance floor, bowling alleys and a small arms rifle range.<sup>14</sup> This downtown building later became Belmar's municipal offices. Today the substantial, Spanish-revival building stands intact but derelict, municipal offices having moved elsewhere. By the 1970s-80s Belmar had taken its place as an upper middle-class suburban community. Its business district, like some others along Main Street, between Long Branch and Sea Girt, held its own against malls, though the early business blocks were reconfigured during the 1960s to resemble a mall. On its grid of streets stand large numbers of well-maintained foursquare and Colonial Revival homes.

The stately Belmar Fishing club, at the base of the Shark River Drawbridge, reminds boardwalk strollers of the borough's maritime tradition. A narrow iron bridge that spanned the Shark River, connecting the community with Avon-by-the-Sea to the north, was replaced in 1927<sup>15</sup> with the draw bridge still in service. Cursed by motorists for halting traffic, it nonetheless makes crossing the Shark River an event and serves as a reminder that on the Jersey Shore there are modes of transportation other than the automobile. Visible to the west of the bridge is the New York and Long Branch railroad draw bridge, a complicated mass of steel that lifts to allow boat traffic to pass.

At the mouth of the Shark River inlet another draw bridge marks the final exit to the sea, and the place where a type of fishing boat identified with Belmar, the appropriately-named party boats, begin their business. In 1950, "the cost to an individual fisherman for a day's boat trip was as low as \$3.50, including bait. For from \$40 up, a party of six or eight could charter a boat, complete with a captain who knew the fishing grounds."<sup>16</sup> This became both a great tradition and, by the 1970s-80s, a major local industry for Belmar. Such boats as the "Lenny" and "Yankee Sword" offered "VIP service," on boats equipped with "the newest computers and electronics, including the revolutionary Chromascope Fishfinders."<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, Belmar had made another kind of communications history, the relics of which sit on the shores of the Shark River in Wall Township. In 1913, the British-based Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company began building its Belmar experimental transatlantic radio complex. A year later Edward Armstrong--later a key figure in the development of the FM radio--headed a group which demonstrated a regenerative

---

<sup>14</sup> "Then & Now," photo and outline, Asbury Park Press (March 8, 1981), np.

<sup>15</sup> "Bottleneck dates to the 20s," Asbury Park Press (Asbury Park, NJ: December 5, 1971), NP.

<sup>16</sup> Harold Wilson, The Jersey Shore three vols. (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1953), 1008.

<sup>17</sup> "Borough of Belmar," brochure (Belmar N.J.: Belmar Chamber of Commerce, ND, ca. 1980, Collection Monmouth College Library).

TOWNS OF BELMAR AND SOUTH BELMAR  
HABS No. NJ-1009 (Page 4)

circuit, which greatly improved intercontinental radio reception.<sup>18</sup> Still remaining are the Mission-style, two-and-one-half story, forty-two room Belmar Station Hotel, where unmarried Marconi staff resided, and the tile-roofed cottages where top officials lived. At one time, a French chef was in charge of the kitchen, and a twelve-acre garden supplied vegetables. According to the magazine Wireless World, the hotel's "bedrooms are charming while the private sitting rooms will be a delight to all who can afford this added luxury."<sup>19</sup>

During World War I, the U.S. Navy took over the laboratories and station. By 1924 it was obsolete and research here was discontinued. Less auspicious history followed--the site became state headquarters for the Klu Klux Klan. In 1937, the property was bought by Reverend Percy Crawford, a Philadelphia evangelist, who briefly operated a liberal arts school called Kings College.<sup>20</sup>

In 1941, the U.S. Army bought the ninety-three acre Marconi site, renaming it Evans Signal Laboratory, apparently after Colonel Paul Wesley Evans, a World War I signal officer,<sup>21</sup> and resumed telecommunications research. A number of outbuildings and a variety of wartime and postwar structures remain from the Evans development.<sup>22</sup> Just one of the thirty original radio towers was still standing in 1981. But an Army news release, now in the collections of Monmouth College, testifies to the importance of this site to modern communications history, acknowledged as the birthplace of radar. "Scientific history was made on January 10, 1946," publicist Harold Berman wrote that week. "The pulses of radar energy were travelling with the speed of light, 186,000 miles per second, striking the moon and reflecting there from a round trip of almost one-half million miles."<sup>23</sup>

Prepared by: Alfred Holden  
HABS Historian  
Summer 1991

---

<sup>18</sup> Gail Hunton and James McCabe, Monmouth County Historic Sites Inventory Summary Report (Lincroft, NJ: Monmouth County Parks System, 1984; reprint, 1990), 181.

<sup>19</sup> Harold A. Zahl, "Tales of Yesteryear...In Case You Have Forgotten," magazine article (Unidentified, collection Monmouth College, Long Branch NJ), 2.

<sup>20</sup> "Some points of interest regarding the Evans Site, Belmar N.J.," (Unsigned Manuscript, Collection Monmouth College Library, Long Branch NJ, n.d.)

<sup>21</sup> "Some points of interest..."

<sup>22</sup> "Some points of interest..."

<sup>23</sup> "Moon Reach by Radar," news release, Army Service Forces (Bradley Beach, NJ: Headquarters, Signal Corps Engineering Laboratories, January 25, 1946), 1.

TOWNS OF BELMAR AND SOUTH BELMAR  
HABS No. NJ-1009 (Page 5)

Sources:

- "Borough of Belmar." Belmar: Belmar Chamber of Commerce, n.d., ca. 1980. Collection Monmouth College Library.
- "Bottleneck dates to the 20s." Asbury Park Press, 5 December 1971, n.p.
- "Developing an Ocean Front: Big Strip of Belmar's Ocean Front Being Improved." 29 July 1908, n.p., name of newspaper unknown, Collection Monmouth College Library.
- Hunton, Gail, and James McCabe. Monmouth County Historic Sites Inventory Summary Report. Lincroft, N.J.: Monmouth County Parks System, 1984; reprint, 1990.
- "In 1890." Then-and-Now Photographs. Asbury Park Press. July 29, 1974.
- Kobbe, Gustav. The New Jersey Coast and Pines. Short Hills: By the author, 1889; reprint, Baltimore: Gateway Press, 1977.
- Methot, June. Up and Down the Beach. Navesink, NJ: Whip Publishers, 1988.
- "Moon Reach by Radar." news release. Bradley Beach: Army Service Forces Headquarters, Signal Corps Engineering Laboratories, January 25, 1946.
- "Ocean Grovers Founded Belmar." newspaper unknown, Collection Monmouth College Library. [n.d.] n.p.
- "Only Yesterday," Asbury Park Press. March 10, 1974.
- Selbold, Kimberly, and Sara Amy Leach. Historic Themes and Resources within the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail: Southern New Jersey and the Delaware Bay. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Interior, 1991.
- "Some points of Interest Regarding the Evans Site, Belmar N.J." (unsigned manuscript), [n.d.] Collection Monmouth College Library, Long Branch N.J.
- "Various Names Adopted and Changed in Succession Before Name Belmar Adopted in 1889." Asbury Park Press, August 1, 1968, 10A.
- Wilson, Harold. The Jersey Shore. three vols. New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1953.
- Woolman, H.C. 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.

TOWNS OF BELMAR AND SOUTH BELMAR  
HABS No. NJ-1009 (Page 6)

Zahl, Harold A. "Tales of Yesteryear...In Case You Have Forgotten." unidentified magazine article, collection Monmouth College, Long Branch N.J.

Project Information:

This project was sponsored by the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail (NJCHT) of the National Park Service, Janet Wolf, director. The documentation was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), Robert Kapsch, chief, under the direction of HABS historian Sara Amy Leach, project supervisor. Three historians completed the research during summer 1991: Field supervisor Sarah Allaback (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Alfred Holden (University of Vermont), and Camille Gatza (North Carolina). David Ames (University of Delaware) made the large-format photographs. Historian, Elizabeth Harris May (George Washington University), edited the HABS reports.