

Town of Wildwood  
New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail  
Eastern end of State Route 47 on  
County Road 619  
Wildwood  
Cape May County  
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1047

HABS  
NJ  
E-WILDW,  
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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

# HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

TOWN OF WILDWOOD

HABS No. NJ-1047

HABS  
NJ  
5-WILDW,  
1-

Location: New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail, Eastern end of State Route 47 on County Road 619, Wildwood, Cape May County, New Jersey.

Significance: The Wildwoods, developed in the 1890s, have never claimed to be anything other than what they were, four tightly packed communities relying on summer tourist patronage. The area developed its personality in the 1950s, experiencing a new surge of tourism with the completion of the Garden State Parkway. Today, in contrast to Stone Harbor's insistence on repose and good taste, the barrier island just south "welcomes the world" to a wide assortment of boardwalk amusements, restaurants and resort motels.

History: During the 1870s, a group of fishermen founded the village of Anglesea on the northern shores of Five Mile Beach. A decade later, maritime activity spread to the central part of the island. Though the West Jersey railroad ran a line from Cape May Court House to Anglesea in 1884, land speculation on the main part of the beach resulted through the efforts of Philip Baker. Associated with the Holly Beach group, Baker also founded the Wild-Wood Beach Improvements Company, beginning with the purchase of 100 acres between Cedar and Pine avenues. The borough of Wildwood, incorporated in 1895, grew on land Baker had called "uninhabitable and inaccessible" only ten years before.<sup>1</sup> Rather than admiring the beaches so lauded today, early settlers were impressed by the area's natural vegetation.

During the 1890s, Philadelphia papers advertised a building boom in Wildwood and illustrated the progress by stating that "forty cottages were available for rental and several hotels had accommodations for more." Entertainment for local guests was supplied in the form of a band concert pavilion near the beach, joined by a carrousel in 1892. Early photographs of the Holly Beach area, now the City of Wildwood, show boats and piers scattered across the sand like driftwood. As late as the 1930s, tourists visited "the port of call for the Atlantic fishing fleet" and watched boats bring in shipments of cod and mackerel that "are among the largest on the coast."<sup>2</sup> Since the founding of Holly Beach as a health resort amid "wild woods," Wildwood has undergone a social and architectural transformation. Though the beaches still entertain large crowds, contemporary visitors do not come to Wildwood for its tangled vegetation or fish-laden boats. Wildwood's distinctive resort personality developed in the 1950s. Encouraged by the completion of the Garden State Parkway, promoters built resort hotels to attract lower and middle class modern "excursionists." Wildwood offered cheap, exciting entertainment for the day, as well as accommodations for extended stays

---

<sup>1</sup> George F. Boyer, Wildwood-Middle of the Island (Egg Harbor City, NJ: Laureate Press, 1976), 12.

<sup>2</sup> 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), 646.

at reasonable prices. Wildwood provided an appealing alternative to the surrounding out of fashion "fun" resorts, such as Atlantic City and Asbury Park, and the high class resorts such as Stone Harbor and Cape May.

Wildwood's strip development focuses on attracting the passing motorist. Brightly lit signs reach over Ocean Drive to entice the hungry into restaurants, clubs and hotels. Despite its nineteenth and early twentieth century heritage, preserved in a sprinkling of civic and residential structures, Wildwood's business occurs along the commercial strip. Recently, promotor's borrowed an idea from Cape May, the Jersey shore resort best known for drawing revenue from its architectural heritage. Twenty years ago, the Mid-Atlantic Center for the Arts organized trolley tours around the city. During the summer of 1991, Wildwood's promoters asked MAC to sponsor a tour of local "futuristic" architecture built between 1954 and 1964. "Back to the 50s" featured a variety of novel styles, including "Pu-pu platter," "Chinatown Revival," and "Jetson Fins" represented by examples of hotels, motor inns and restaurants. Befitting its reputation as a fun, up-to-date resort, Wildwood's awareness of a distinctive architectural and social history puts it at the "cutting edge" of the preservation movement.<sup>3</sup>

Prepared by: Camille Gatza  
HABS Historian  
Summer 1991

- Sources:
- Boyer, George F. Wildwood-Middle of the Island (Egg Harbor City, NJ: Laureate Press, 1976), 12.
- 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.
- "Love Nostalgia? Go Back to the 50s." Wildwood Free-Time Calendar (June 27-July 3, 1991), 13B.
- Sebold, Kimberly, and Sara AmyLeach. 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 the Interior, 1991.

---

<sup>3</sup> "Love Nostalgia? Go "Back to the 50s," Wildwood Free-Time Calendar (June 27-July 3, 1991), 13B.

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.