

South Seaville Methodist Camp Meeting Grounds
New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail
Dennisville Road, One mile West
of U.S. Highway 9
South Seaville
Cape May County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1049

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

SOUTH SEAVILLE METHODIST CAMP MEETING GROUNDS

HABS No. NJ-1049

- Location: Dennisville Road, One mile West of U.S. Highway 9, South Seaville, Cape May County, New Jersey.
- Significance: South Seaville, the first Methodist camp meeting-based resort in New Jersey, was established between 1863 and 1864 during the post Civil War revival of Christian enthusiasm for rustic retreats. Its settlement began a legacy of religious resorts in New Jersey.
- History: Tucked away in the pines, inland of what is now Sea Isle City, the settlement of the area pre-dates the camp meeting, developing as a result of the construction of the King's Highway in the early 1800s. Farms and lumbering camps were scattered throughout the area in 1860, when the Cape May and Millville railroad laid down tracks through the forest. As a significant railroad stop, South Seaville offered stagecoach transportation to Beesley's Point, a more populated town near Great Egg Harbor. The area economy profited from bay industries; clams were harvested locally, while Chesapeake Bay oysters prospered in special beds before being shipped to Philadelphia as "Cape May Salts."¹

Despite the early maritime prosperity, the coming of the camp meeting changed the image of South Seaville. According to tradition, the first camp meetings were held "under the leafy canopy of oak trees. Between 1865 and 1874, Methodist campers gathered at the Cape May County Agricultural Fairgrounds.² Common to every meeting was the ephemeral nature of the assemblage, a seasonal occasion for the faithful to commune in a natural setting. In 1875 the camp was permanently established as the "South Jersey Camp Meeting Association located at Seaville Station, Cape May County, N.J." The founders drew an ambitious plan, with 100s of numbered lots grouped in rectangular blocks and arranged around parks. The streets, named for past Methodist bishops, ran parallel to a central park where benches and a platform symbolized the main meeting ground. These more permanent structures retained much of the camp's earlier transient feeling. Buyers were expected to build a canvas or frame structure on the land within one year. Most of the cottages were simple, two-story, balloon-frame dwellings with open porches and gingerbread trim. Often appearing like tents themselves, the cottages did not offer protection against the cold winter months. Those who chose not to purchase property usually rented canvas tents, ranging in price from \$5.00 for small "A" tents to \$15.00 for 12' x 16' wall

¹ George F. Boyer and J. Pearson Cunningham, Cape May County Story (Avalon: Avalon Publishing Co., 1975), 131-2.

² Audrey Sullivan and Doris Young, A Time to Remember: A History of New Jersey Methodists' First Camp Meeting, South Seaville, New Jersey, 1864-1988 (South Seaville, NJ: South Seaville Camp Meeting Assn., Inc., 1988), 73.

tents.³ By 1877, ninety cottages had been built and sixty tents pitched. These were assembled around a central meeting place, a pavilion, which was a 20' square structure, with three board and batten walls and an open front, facing a seating area. Like the residential architecture, the pavilion exuded a rustic feeling, seemingly evolving from its "camp" origins. Behind the pavilion was an office with preacher's accommodations. In an 1877 director's meeting, the Vice President of the association, J. Milton Townsend, suggested the construction of housing for summer visitors. A boarding house was completed in 1881 and a kitchen added the next year. In 1892, an additional room was attached to the rear of the building. The main room of the barn-like structure is still used as a dining facility.⁴

By 1890, the meeting required a more permanent auditorium building. "The Prayer Meeting Tabernacle" was "moved in front of the pavilion and enlarged to make an auditorium sixty feet long and fifty-four feet wide." A huge gable roof covered both wood-frame structures, open on all sides.⁵ Itself a kind of canopy, the plain white front of the building is inscribed with a fanciful inscription proclaiming "Seaville and Salvation" beneath the trees.

A variety of original cottages remain today including several two-story, two room balloon frame cottages with corner pegs, as well as larger steep roofed dwellings with gothic windows, most with Victorian gingerbread detailing. The open porches and side wings of others seem to imitate the earlier tents with their canvas flaps propped open for air. Entering the South Seaville meeting today, the visitor passes modern all-weather homes before approaching the older section of the camp. Despite wiring for modern conveniences, the Seaville meeting retains its original forest retreat atmosphere that methodists still enjoy each season.

Prepared by: Camille Gatza
HABS Historian
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- Sources: Boyer, George F., and Cunningham, J. Pearson. Cape May County Story. Avalon: Avalon Publishing Co., 1975.
- Sebold, 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 the Interior, 1991.
- Sullivan, Audrey and Doris Young. A Time to Remember: A History of New Jersey Methodists' First Camp Meeting, South Seaville, New Jersey, 1864-1988, South Seaville: South Seaville Camp Meeting Association, Inc., 1988.

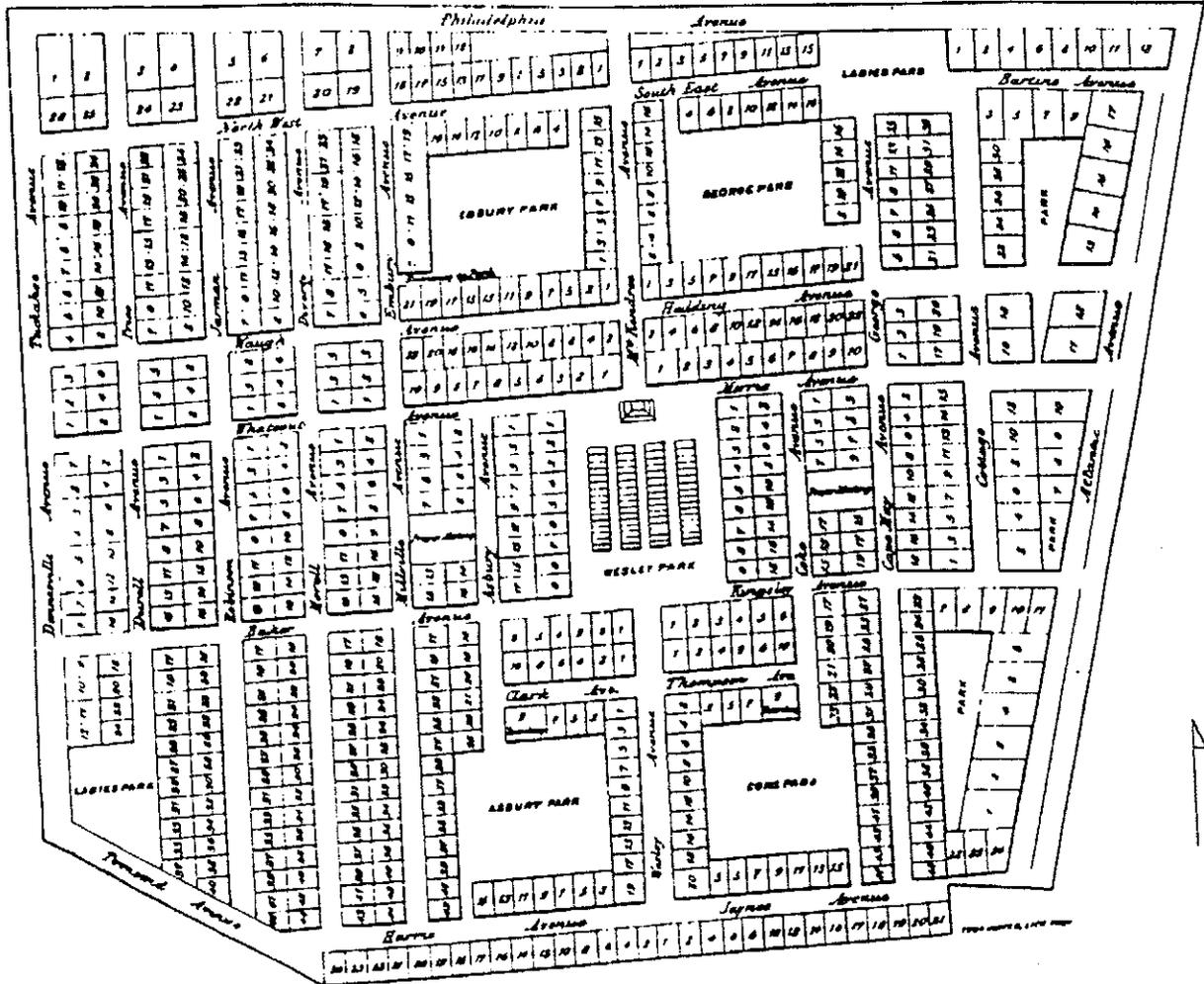
³ Sullivan and Young, 63.

⁴ Sullivan and Young, 61-79.

⁵ Sullivan and Young, 73.

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.



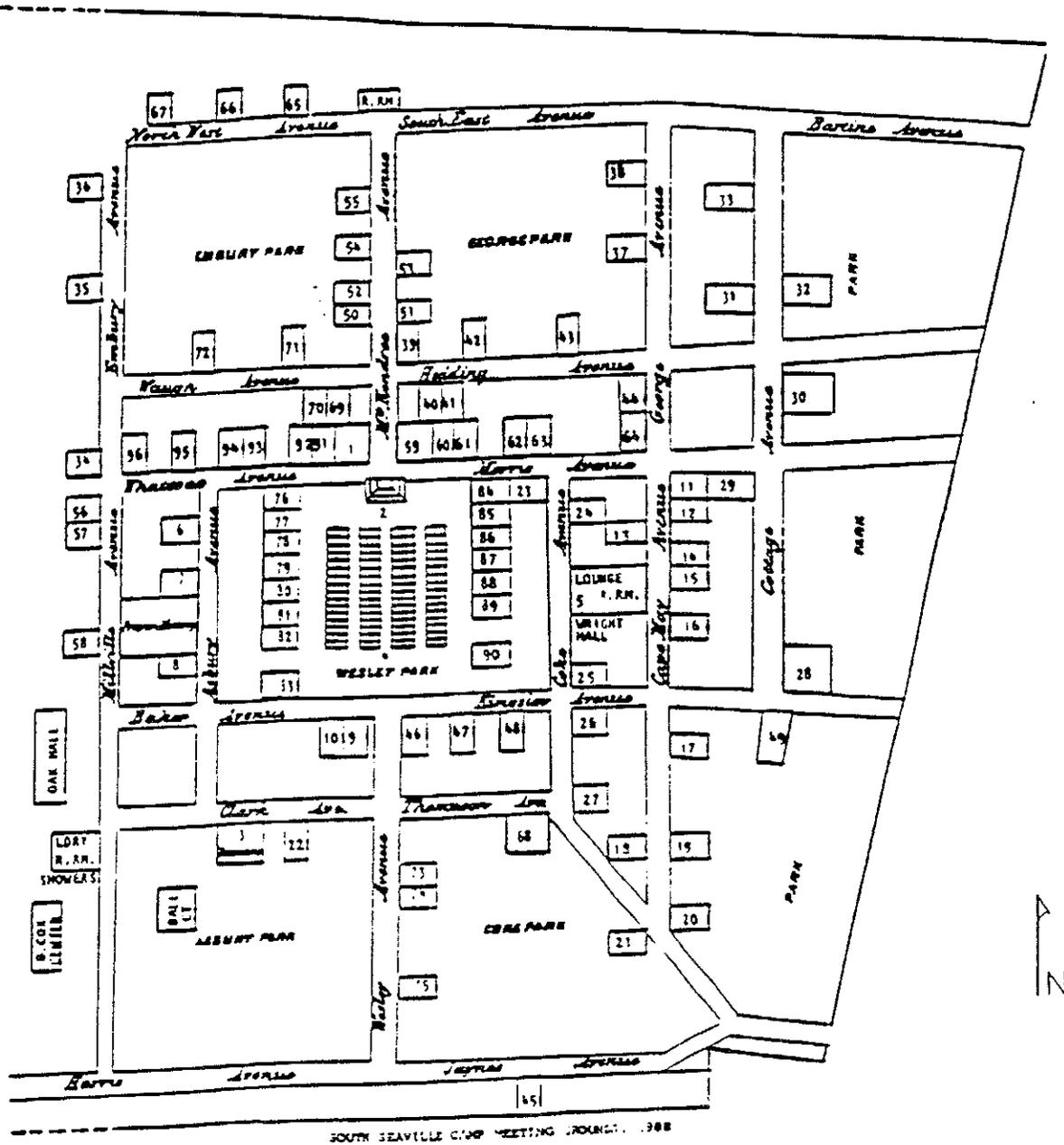
CAPE MAY GROVE

J.F. Morell, Tuckahoe, N.J.

of South Jersey Camp Assn., South Seaville, N.J. Instituted Aug. 1875.

"Cape May Grove of South Jersey Camp Assn., South Seaville, N.J.
Instituted Aug. 1875" (South Seaville Methodist Camp Meeting grounds,
as planned, by J.F. Morell, Tuckahoe, N.J.)

from: Atria Sullivan and Doris Young, A Time to Remember: A History of New
Jersey Methodists' First Camp Meeting, South Seaville, New Jersey, 1864-1988
(South Seaville, New Jersey: The South Seaville Camp Meeting Assn., Inc., 1988)
p. 62.



"South Seaville Camp Meeting Grounds 1988"
 (numbers denote individual cottages on grounds)

from: Atria Sullivan and Doris Young, A Time to Remember: A History of New Jersey Methodists' First Camp Meeting, South Seaville, New Jersey, 1864-1988 (South Seaville, New Jersey: The South Seaville Camp Meeting Assn., Inc., 1988) p. 303.