

South Seaville Methodist Church
Meeting Grounds, Auditorium
New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail
Wesley Park
South Seaville
Cape May County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1049-A

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

SOUTH SEAVILLE METHODIST CAMP MEETING GROUNDS, AUDITORIUM

HABS NO. NJ-1049-A

Location: South Seaville Camp Meeting grounds, Center of Wesley Park, Dennisville Road (one mile west of U.S. Highway 9), South Seaville, Cape May County, New Jersey

Present Owner: South Seaville Camp Meeting Association

Present Use: Methodist camp meeting grounds meeting hall

Significance: The auditorium-- huilt from the combined and enlarged tabernacle and pavilion structures-- is the main structure and focal point for the South Seaville Camp Meeting, the first Methodist camp meeting-based resort in New Jersey. It was in this structure, intended to replace the original open-air auditorium, that the revival meetings were held.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: The auditorium was erected in 1890 from the previously built Prayer Meeting Tabernacle (1883) and the Pavilion (1877). The former tabernacle was then enlarged ten feet, with a rafter extension of twelve feet on either side, creating a 54' x 60' structure.¹
2. Architect: Unknown
3. Original and subsequent owners: South Seaville Camp Meeting Association
4. Builders, suppliers: The Tahernacle and Pavilion were combined and enlarged to form the auditorium by Benjamin McKeague, under the direction of Rev. Jacob Price.² The Pavilion was originally constructed by Nicholas and Youngs Corson.³
5. Original plans and construction: The Pavilion was originally a 20' x 20' structure erected in 1877. The 20-foot-square structure had a hipped roof with hracketed eaves, and board-and-batten-covered walls on three sides, each with five pointed-arched gothic window openings with

¹ 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, NJ: South Seaville Camp Meeting Assn., Inc., 1988), 73.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, p. 65.

shutters (fourth side open).⁴ The Tabernacle, erected in 1883, was a 30' x 50' open-air structure built of 8' posts resting on a sill, with a gable roof.

6. Alterations and Additions: Posts have been removed and a cubicle added. New benches (from Ocean City) were added, and the structure has been enclosed with screening.

B. Historical Context:

Some historians trace the origins of the camp meetings to outdoor religious gatherings of the Second Great Awakening in the late 1790s and early 1800s. These events, popular in frontier communities of Ohio, Kentucky and Tennessee, were characterized by the participants' frenzied barking and jerking to manifest their efforts to achieve salvation.⁵ Though originally a mix of Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists, the frontier gatherings became increasingly Methodist. On the east coast, Martha's Vineyard saw the creation of the first permanent meeting grounds in 1835--but interest in these events waned in the decade before the Civil War. When Reconstruction witnessed the incorporation of many permanent camps, these new organizations had to battle with the popular image people held of the barking and leaping religious fanatics. These mid-Atlantic post-war camps were far more sedate than the earlier gatherings.⁶

South Seaville was the first of nine camp meetings chartered in South Jersey in the decades following the Civil War--Mt. Tabor (Denville), Ocean Grove, Seaville, Pitman Grove, West Jersey Grove (Malaga), Ocean City, Island Heights, and National-Park-on-the-Delaware.⁷ The National Association for the Promotion of Holiness (also known as the National Camp Meeting Association) was organized locally in Vineland--and crusaded conveniently and vigorously at the region's meetings. Several early members were also instrumental in the founding of the South Jersey camps; the national association did not charter grounds of its own.⁸ The camps were locally-controlled, although Methodist churches and the National Camp Meeting Association supported them unofficially.

The post-war trend towards vacationing also explains the camp meetings' popularity; the meetings provided a Christian alternative to the secular seaside resort. Since the camps were usually chartered as religious corporations by the state legislature, they functioned as miniature municipalities where association directors wrote the rules, usually excluding liquor. In Seaville, for example, the directors regulated personal behavior and commercial trade within and near the

⁴ Ibid., pp. 65-66.

⁵ William Clements, "The Physical Layout of the Methodist Camp Meeting," Pioneer America Vol. 5 January 1973, p.9.

⁶ Charles A. Parker, "The Camp Meeting on the Frontier and the Methodist Religious Resort in the East--Before 1900," Methodist History (April 1980), pp. 179-184.

⁷ Ibid., p.184.

⁸ Ibid., pp.189-190.

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campgrounds.⁹ The mix of religious and vacation purposes created a tension apparent in Seaville's first years¹⁰, and evident today.

For its first eight years 1863-1871, the Seaville meeting was announced by the Bridgeton District Presiding Elder and met at the Cape May County Agricultural fairgrounds. Since the 1830s, Cape May County's Methodist churches had held revivals and meetings which attracted large crowds.¹¹ South Seaville historians Atria Sullivan and Doris Young raise the interesting (and unanswered) question that if in its first years the meeting was firmly within the hands of local clergy, why was the creation of a permanent camp taken up by laity?¹² The earliest minutes from the South Jersey Camp Meeting Association are dated July 22, 1872. The local lay leaders organized, elected officers, and located a permanent wooded camp ground. The first lot-leasing was on July 16, 1875, and in 1876 the Association incorporated. The directors-- prominent Cape May citizens--set up the association as a stockholder's corporation, where one leased the lots and built/purchased/rented the cottages or tents.¹³

The South Jersey meetings varied widely in the extent to which they were commercial real estate ventures; the Seaville Association took pride in this relative immunity from real estate speculation (the leases were for 99 years). A 1904 promotional pocket notebook presented this image to the public:

What is Seaville? It is an old-fashioned Methodist Camp Meeting, where all denominations are welcome, and where the doctrines of God's word are clearly and earnestly preached, by consecrated men. While it is not a distinctly Holiness Camp Meeting, a full gospel is preached and scriptural holiness, free from fanaticism and human theories, is prominently taught....We offer no worldly amusements, no real estate transaction, and officers and preachers receive only their expenses.¹⁴

Besides lot-leasing, the Association's other source of income came from the auctioning of "privileges." In 1875 these included: "providing a boarding table and facilities for lodging in a large tent, hack service from train to campgrounds, hay and feed stand, sale of oysters, ice cream, confectionery, tobacco and cigars, drinks, fruits, barber facilities, plus other

⁹ Sullivan and Young, A Time to Remember, p. 83.

¹⁰ Ibid., Chapter 5.

¹¹ Ibid., p.44.

¹² Ibid., p.49.

¹³ Ibid., pp.59-64.

¹⁴ 1904 promotional booklet, collection of Mrs. Doris Endicott. Also reprinted in Sullivan and Young, A Time to Remember, p.164-5.

miscellaneous items--bootblack, photos, spectacles, etc."¹⁵

The new permanent grounds were a short buggy ride--about 3/4 mile--from the South Seaville railroad station established in 1863 by the Cape May and Millville Railroad (the fairgrounds had been about the same distance from the station). South Seaville had been an important crossroads town prior to the rail stop, but the railroad would bring tremendous growth to this town as it did to others located along the rails.¹⁶ The Camp Meeting relied heavily on the railroad, a fact perhaps embodied in the organization's legal title--"South Jersey Camp Meeting Association located at Seaville Station, Cape May County, N.J."¹⁷ The overriding purpose of these summer meetings were to draw crowds, and thousands at a time would arrive for the revivals; early newspaper articles and promotions mention excursion trains from Philadelphia and Cape May.

The crowds who came to Seaville had their own social divisions--those who owned cottages, those who used tents, and the day-trip excursionists. The records also indicate that black excursionists visited the camp on specially-designated days; one record mentions a train from Cape May arriving at the end of the season. African-American women worked in the camp's kitchen, while the ice delivery men were black.¹⁸ These questions of how economic class and race have shaped the methodist camp's history need further exploration.

The character of the early Seaville community, as shown in its architecture and early records, shows internal tensions. The meeting was founded by influential Cape May county families; the directors in 1875 drew up a plan which was quite urban--extremely dense, with 500 lots, and laid out primarily in a grid, with Avenues named after deceased Methodist ministers, and park-squares. Yet simultaneously the founders valued the "grove" quality of the meeting grounds; the early camp rules show particular care for the sheltering shade trees.¹⁹ One 1877 newspaper editorial expressed the view that the permanent Seaville meeting marked an end to formerly egalitarian years. "Evidently the good old days of Methodist camp meetings, when all who would go an partake freely of the rich gospel feast, without regard to his means, or as to how he should tent upon the hallowed spot; if he had no canvas, his tent of sheets and bed quilts was just as "ten" as the \$700 cottage of the present day."²⁰ Tents were not as favored in Seaville as in Ocean Grove, and the regulated community of neat cottages seemed to this writer

¹⁵ Sullivan and Young, A Time to Remember, p.63.

¹⁶ Jeffrey Dorwart, Cape May County, New Jersey: The Making of an American Resort Community (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), p.114.

¹⁷ Doris and Sullivan, 60.

¹⁸ From reminiscences of older visitors, Sullivan and Young, A Time to Remember, p. 27 and 34. The stories include one mention of a visit from the KKK.

¹⁹ Sullivan and Young, pp.276-9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.58.

to represent a class snobbishness.

On the other end, The Cape May Ocean Wave in 1874 proposed that the camp meeting had become old-fashioned and declassé. "Christians, nowadays, they say, wear too good clothes to kneel in God's own temples, and kid gloves stifle the indispensable camp meeting applause that should greet the return of a lost soul. People do not expose themselves with the willingness of former years to evening dews, damp couches on the ground, colds, rheumatism, mosquitoes, the disagreeable insects and crawling things of the woods or vicinals, storms, and the thousand inconveniences of camping out, for the cause of Christ."²¹ Taken together, these two contemporary newspaper stories underline the complicated and changing relationship between the built environment and peoples' lifestyle and philosophical outlook.

Despite its location in the woods of South Seaville, the camp meeting was not isolated from the institutions and people of Cape May County. For example, Sullivan and Young point out that several temperance groups had a strong presence at the camp, and one year early in the century the county's school graduation was held in the South Seaville Auditorium.

The Auditorium-- as the place where the meetings are held-- is the focal point of the camp. It is a large, simple, open-air structure whose gable roof with adjoining sheds give it a tent-like appearance. The earliest camp meetings were held under a "leafy canopy of oak trees," with the congregation sitting on the ground or on benches before a platform on which stood the preachers, etc. Occasional interruptions in the meetings due to inclement weather eventually lead to the suggestion that a covered auditorium be erected. It was concluded, however, that rather than erect a new structure, the Tabernacle be moved to the front of the Pavilion, combining and enlarging these to serve the purpose. Thus, in 1890, the necessary changes were made by Benjamin McKeague, under the direction of Rev. Jacob Price. The 30' x 50' Tabernacle and the 20-foot-square pavilion, together with a 10 foot extension to the length and the overhanging eaves formed an auditorium measuring 60' x 54'. The rafter extensions-- clearly visible today-- create the gently sloping sheds to either side of the gable roof.²²

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The auditorium is a large, simple open-air structure with a gable roof with shed additions, board-and-batten siding in the gable ends and screening else where. There is a screened entry vestibule, but the structure is otherwise utilitarian in nature and void of an ornamentation.
2. Condition of fabric: Interior and exterior are in excellent condition.

²¹ Ibid., p.56.

²² Sullivan and Young, p.73.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The rectangular auditorium is approximately is 54' x 60'.
2. Foundations:
3. Wall construction: The auditorium is largely open air; merely the structural stud framing enclosed with screening. The gable ends of the structure are of board-and batten construction.
4. Structural system, framing: The wood-frame structure consists of large posts and studs, along with internal columns to support enormous roof trusses.
5. Porches: There is a small gable-front entry porch or vestibule, enclosed with screening.
6. Decorative features, trim: The building is void of architectural detail, but is somewhat ornamented by undulating sign boards with fancy lettering and scrollwork painted onto them.
7. Openings: As on open-air auditorium, there are no formal doorways or windows. The structure is enclosed with screening and there is a simple entry porch with double screen doors.
8. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: The auditorium has a large, steep gable front roof with shed sections to either side-- enhancing the tent-like appearance. It is covered with asphalt shingles.
 - b. Cornice, eaves: The roof overhangs but is without ornamentation.

D. Site:

1. General Setting: Located on the "inner circle" of the meeting grounds, surrounding area designated as Wesley Park. Cottages face the auditorium on each side.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Old views: The best sources of historic photos, besides Sullivan and Young's book, are the private collections of South Seaville residents. Although Sullivan resides in Florida, she has a cottage in South Seaville, and can most likely be reached through the Camp Meeting Association.

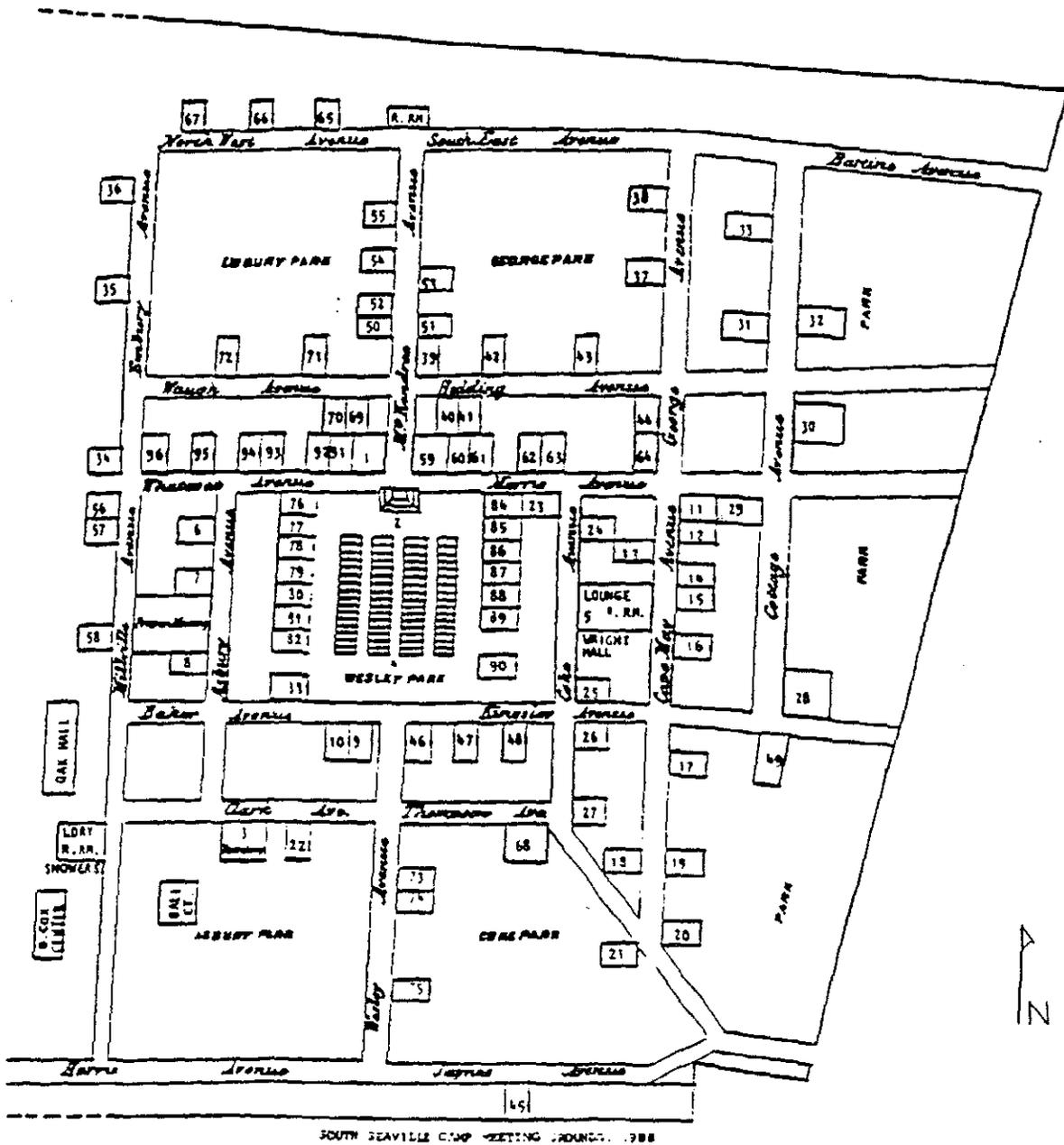
B. Primary and unpublished sources: For anyone researching South Seaville, one book is indispensable: Atria Sullivan and Doris Young, A Time to Remember: A History of New Jersey Methodists' First Camp Meeting, South Seaville, New Jersey, 1864-1988 (South Seaville, New Jersey: The South Seaville Camp Meeting Assn., Inc., 1988). According to Sullivan and Young, no official records exist for 1863-1872, but one can find material in newspapers. The Directors' meeting minutes since 1872 have survived, and lot lease records. Sullivan and Young tracked down 50 camp programs--40 from 1947 forward. Many of the present cottage-owners have printed material, leases, photographs, postcard views, and artifacts. Mrs. Doris Endicott has several scrapbooks of material, particularly relating to her cottage.

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Local newspapers--including the Cape May Ocean Wave, the Cape May County Gazette, and Star of the Cape--proved to be valuable in Sullivan and Young's research. See also Kimherly Sebold 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).

PART IV. 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.



"South Seaville Camp Meeting Grounds 1988"
 (numbers denote individual cottages, Auditorium seats shown in center)
 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.