

Town of Brigantine
New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail
North of Absecon Inlet
Brigantine
Atlantic County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1032

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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 BRIGANTINE

HABS No. NJ-1032

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Location: New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail, Brigantine Island, South of Little Beach, North of Absecon Inlet, Brigantine, Atlantic County, New Jersey.

Significance: Brigantine Island is best known in association with Captain Kidd, who supposedly buried treasures on the island in the late seventeenth-century. The island, gradually populated over the eighteenth-century, developed dramatically as a resort in the 1880s when the railroad connected the island to the mainland, providing easy access the area. Today, Brigantine exists as a suburb to Atlantic City.

History: On an island of its own, Brigantine is located in Atlantic County just above Atlantic City. The Lenni-Lenape Indians called the area "Watamoonica," which means "playground," and it is thought that, during the summer months, the Indians produced wampum here, which were beads made from shells used for money or ornaments. Brigantine is best known, however, from the period prior to its resort development, as the playground of the notorious Captain Kidd. William Kidd (1645-1701), a Scottish sea pirate, is said to have buried treasure in the dunes on Brigantine Island. He reportedly slit the throats of his assistants, so that they could not reveal the hiding place. In 1699, he was betrayed by a crewmember, captured, and taken to England for trial, where he was hanged in 1701.¹ Captain Kidd was not alone in his attachment to the area. Captain Teech, better known as "Blackbeard," hid from the British on the back side of the group of islands known collectively as Brigantine Island. Legend recounts that he hid submerged in the waters of the meadow until the enemy had passed, drawing his breath through a hollow reed in order to survive.²

Nehemiah Nickerson and family were the first known inhabitants of the island, settling in the 1730s. In 1760, John Smith, of Smithville, leased 800 acres from landowner John Ladd and erected a house on the beach. James Baremore, part-owner of the island, also built a residence and is thought to have sold some land between 1802 and 1835. By 1805, there were seven houses on the island, including a boarding house operated by Baremore. Baremore's original house perished in a storm in 1830, and its replacement was also destroyed ten years later.³ In addition to the boarding house, there were other hotels in Brigantine at an early date. Issac

¹ Atlantic County Cultural and Heritage Commission, Atlantic County Past and Present (n.p.: Atlantic County Cultural and Heritage Commission, 1976), 11; William McMahon, South Jersey Towns (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1973), 37; William McMahon, Historic South Jersey Towns (Atlantic City: Presa Publishing Co., 1964), 238; Blanche R. Burbank, "Brigantine Beach," in Atlantic County Historical Society Yearbook, 143.

² McMahon, South Jersey Towns, 37-38.

³ McMahon, South Jersey Towns, 39-40; Burbank, 143.

Holdzkom built the Holdzkom House in 1838, and Henry Smith, grandson of James Baremore, erected the Brigantine House in 1857.⁴

It has been estimated that over 300 shipwrecks have occurred off of Brigantine Island since the late 1700s. In 1854, the "Powhatan" perished at sea, causing the loss of 354 lives. Forty four of the bodies washed ashore at Brigantine and were interred in a group burial in Smithville. Almost twenty years later, in 1873, a Life Saving Station was established on the island. In time, a second station was added, but neither remain today.⁵

This slow and steady growth rate was challenged in 1880 when two separate companies were formed to develop Brigantine as a seaside resort community. The Ocean Island and Brigantine Development Company controlled the northern half of the island, and the Brigantine Improvement Company worked in the south. The street system was laid out and the Methodist Church and the first post office were established. The two development companies merged into one in 1892, suggesting that there had not been enough business to support both. The Brigantine Land Company operated a steam train from the Reading Railroad tracks, bringing passengers across the meadows from Oceanville. The tracks were washed away in a storm in 1903, and were never replaced. Trolley service, also, was offered on the island until 1908. A double-decker car was used, probably more as a gimmick than as a necessity. Although there were less than 200 people in residence, Brigantine was incorporated as a city in 1897.⁶

A second development spurt occurred during the 1920s, consistent with national and regional trends. Yet another land company, the Island Development Company, was created in 1923, and offered lots for sale. Many houses were built during this time, as were the 1927 Brigantine Hotel and 1927 Brigantine pier. In 1924, a \$1,000,000.00 bridge was erected between Brigantine and Atlantic City, originally operated as a toll bridge, but purchased by the county in 1925, and made a free span. The bridge perished in a hurricane in 1938. Its replacement was likewise destroyed in 1944. The current bridge was constructed in 1972.⁷

Today, Harrah's and Trump Castle casinos stand at the foot of the bridge, acting as a gateway into the Atlantic City area. From the top of the bridge, Brigantine appears as a town of condos; new residential development extends into the wetlands on land so close to the water it appears uninhabitable. At ground level, the town is a more stable

⁴ Burbank, 144.

⁵ Burbank, 144.

⁶ Burbank, 146; McMahon, South Jersey Towns, 42; McMahon, History and Legend, 240.

⁷ Burbank, 146; McMahon, South Jersey Towns, 43; McMahon, History and Legend, 240.

mixture of commercial and residential buildings. On the Absecon Bay side, the marine mammal stranding station watches out for local wildlife across from the Mariner's Cove and Moon Bay condominiums. The main road leads into "lighthouse circle," named for a miniature lighthouse in its center, and then branches off into several routes across the island. Despite the recent residential development, older neighborhoods remain intact, illustrating Brigantine's consistent role as a suburb of Atlantic City.

Prepared by: Camille Gatza
HABS Historian
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- Sources: Atlantic County Cultural and Heritage Commission. Atlantic County Past and Present. Mays Landing, NJ: By the Author, 1976.
- Burbank, Blanche R. "Brigantine Beach." Atlantic County Historical Society Yearbook: 143-44.
- McMahon, William. South Jersey Towns. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1973.
- 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 Interior.
- _____. Historic South Jersey Towns. Atlantic City: Press Publishing Co., 1964.

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.