

PRESERVATION *perspective*

Summer 2021

Read on for stories on preserving New Jersey's African American history and opportunities for heritage tourism this summer in New Jersey.

Journey to the Sourlands, and a Journey through Centuries: Stoutsburg Sourland African American Museum

Rikki Massand
June 15, 2021

The Stoutsburg Sourland African American Museum (SSAAM), currently showcasing a one-room schoolhouse at the southwest end of Montgomery Township, and its affiliate Stoutsburg Cemetery in Hopewell Township, will be better able to welcome visitors and introduce a full history of slavery and black settlement in the state as a cornerstone to New Jersey's African American heritage trail. SSAAM began with the historic former Mount Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church, which is entering Phase 2 restoration with support from a 2021 grant of \$20,808 from the Somerset County Cultural & Heritage Commission to SSAAM. Grant funding is administered through Somerset County as part of the County History Partnership Program (CHPP), established by the New Jersey Historical Commission in 2015, with local re-granting across New Jersey's 21 counties. Currently SSAAM is awaiting bids from contractors to complete needed HVAC installation. Since the 1800s the building has been intact with no heat or A/C, and some cosmetic work will also be done.

A 1.2-acre lot fronting Hollow Road in Montgomery was jointly purchased by two partnering nonprofit organizations, SSAAM and the Sourland Conservancy, to build the new environmental and cultural center that will serve as a community and programming hub, and a link between the AME Church and Montgomery's Bessie Grover Park. Announced in fall 2020, this project is supported by a Preserve New Jersey Historic Preservation fund grant from the New Jersey Historic Trust: SSAAM received \$50,000 (in matching funds) for a site master plan of the future museum & education center currently housed in the former Mount Zion AME Church.



Mount Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church

Two lifelong friends and former classmates at Hopewell Valley Central High School, Pennington Borough native and current Borough Councilmember Beverly Mills and Sharon (Elaine) Buck of Hopewell Borough, have spearheaded the efforts with 15 years of research into African American history in this region. A culmination occurred in 2018 with the publication of their first book, "If These Stones Could Talk" but since the stories are still being

unearthed, today they're working on a second book. The pair has a consulting firm bearing the namesake of Beverly Mills' maternal fourth great-grandfather Friday Truehart. At age 13, young Friday was brought to the Hopewell Valley by Rev. Oliver Hart, former pastor of the Old School Baptist Church in Hopewell Borough.

Mills describes the one-room schoolhouse as a step back to the 1800s. The experience to visitors, however, starts with the tales of Africa where the slaves were taken from, and how their TransAtlantic voyage via slave ships took place.

"These are things we were not taught in school — we never heard a word. When we started to write our book we found so much information on African American presence here; while we researched we found we're related to these people we were researching. They are literally our African descendants," Buck explained.



Beverly Mills and Elaine Buck

Stories of African Americans in the Sourlands will finally have an epicenter to bring sizable audiences to. "We'll have restrooms plus a kitchen in there so we can make delectable, traditional African

American fare. Educational programs, including virtual tours of the region, can shift top in-person from holding them over Zoom due to the pandemic," Buck noted.

Mills explains this will be a new space envisioned to tell the black history of the Sourlands "in the way it should be told." In the 1800s, there was so much involved in "why black people had to take matters into their own hands," she said. At Stoutsburg Cemetery, when ground-penetrating radar was used 10 to 12 years ago some anomalies were discovered. Elders in the Hopewell Valley told Mills and Buck there were originally two sections of cemetery: the early section and the one currently outlined. The deed for land the cemetery is on reads from Randolph Stout, a Moore family member, to a trio: Stacy Stives, Moses Blew (as in Blawenburg) and Henry Lane, officially recorded in 1869. But burials here precede this date by decades.

Mills noted that Stacy Stives was the son of Revolutionary War veteran William Stives (1760-1839) and one of the first black inhabitants of the Sourlands; he was also a member of the Old School Baptist Church in Hopewell for over 40 years. "One thing we do know is that people of color that were members of that church would have been buried away from white people who were members," she said.

The exact age of Stoutsburg Cemetery is unsolved, and there is no official count of how many people are buried there. Sourland Mountain legend Sylvia DuBois, born a slave but later taking freedom into her own hands with a strike to her slave mistress, is another real story brought to life through Stoutsburg Cemetery archives. She is believed to have lived to 116 years old (at least) and had a stint as a bouncer at her infamous Sourlands' tavern.

Though death records were well documented in the 1800s, local cemeteries were segregated. Mills researched a bill from 1884 that then altered continued segregation in burial.

"It wasn't until legislation that deemed it illegal to segregate people in cemeteries based on color that this changed. However, black people in the Sourland Mountain region founded Stoutsburg Cemetery so they would not have to deal with any indignities when it came to laying their loved ones to rest. We now know that they made a business deal with a local farmer who had extra land called the Moore's Farmland," she said.

Buck explains, "These discoveries are like putting a big puzzle together. It's all taken shape here in Montgomery and Hopewell. People were brought to this area after being brought across the Atlantic, into New York and Philadelphia, and sold at auction then transported here via Perth Amboy or Camden — using the Raritan Bay and Delaware River.. New Jersey was very complicit with slavery, just like in the South, and there's more to learn when we start with asking, 'why was NJ the last northern state to abolish slavery?'

As their research and plans for public presentations still evolve, Mills concluded, like many present day historians, she continues 'to be amazed how New Jersey was so firmly entrenched in slavery.'

"The economic underpinnings of America's original 13 colonies was all due to slavery. Asking Why this and Why that brings up a whole other list of questions about things we were never taught, and I guess it was not deemed important enough to include in our school history lessons. Rev.' Hart left

Charleston following the British invasion, and his patriotic leaning. He brought slaves north when he came to pastor the Old School Baptist Church, seeking a new life for himself. It's ironic these patriots fought tooth and nail to be free of British rule but they kept slaves and could see no problem with it. Hart was one of those people, even writing in his diary 'we (colonists) will not be slaves'; he was a slave owner and his young slave ended up my fourth great-grandfather, who lived in the Sourland Mountain region for the rest of his life," she said.

--- Author, content strategist and historic preservation activist Rikki N. Massand serves as Associate Editor of his hometown Montgomery News in Somerset County. He also covers Hunterdon County government, planning and economic development for Flemington's TAP into online news and freelances for multiple tristate area 'newszines.'

Rikki is a regional historian and local advocate in his present municipal government-appointed roles on the Montgomery Township Landmarks Preservation Commission and as township liaison to the Delaware & Raritan Canal Commission. He is also experienced in not-for-profit administration and advocacy as office administrator, records manager and bookkeeper for a local United Church of Christ.

Rikki holds master's degrees from Columbia University and Quinnipiac University. His work has appeared in print titles including China Daily, amNew York, Syosset Advance, AsianWeek and more.

Gethsemane Cemetery: A Historic African American Burial Site in Little Ferry, NJ

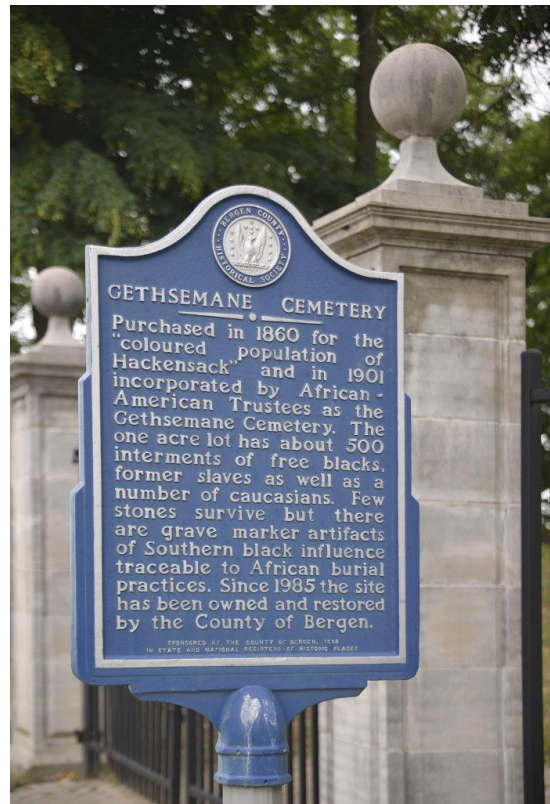
William Neumann
June 13, 2021

Gethsemane Cemetery might simply be described as the final resting place for the remains of 500 African Americans. But, as with many cemeteries, this "finality of life" is just the beginning to a rich history.

Located in a small but busy part of southwest Bergen County, this 1 acre of land was first deeded in 1860 to three white Hackensack citizens who stated it would be "a cemetery for the colored population of the Village of Hackensack. The first documented burial was in 1866. At times it was known as the "Moonachie Colored Cemetery" (after a nearby road), the "Hackensack Colored Cemetery" and "San" or "Sand Hill Cemetery" (a name for the surrounding area.) On the 21st of March 1901 and with the passing of white ownership to a black trusteeship of seven it was respectfully renamed Gethsemane Cemetery.

People interred in Gethsemane demonstrate important aspects of the history of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Visiting the graveside of Elizabeth Dulfer reveals her incredible journey through life. Elizabeth was born a slave in 1790, freed in 1822 and then acquired some of the largest brick making clay deposits in the area. Many of the Gethsemane burials reflect an association with laborers who worked in these local clay pits. She rose to become one of the wealthiest land owners in Bergen County. During her lifetime she even assisted the organization of a smaller African-American

cemetery in Bergenfield, NJ. She lived to be 90 years old and was interred in 1880.



Bergen County Historical Society's historic marker for Gethsemane Cemetery

Samuel Bass, a prominent sextant with the Hackensack First Baptist Church, intended to be buried in the all white Hackensack Cemetery. Because of his color, his last wish was denied and was rested in Gethsemane. In January 1884, the denial became a heated controversy locally and nationally which enraged New Jersey Governor Leon Abbett to declare that "The regulation that refuses a Christian burial to the body of a deceased citizen upon the ground of color is not...a reasonable regulation" Two months later the New Jersey Legislature enacted the "Negro Burial Bill" that desegregated the state's cemeteries. Discovering a marker for William Robinson, it simply states he served on the USS Savannah during the

Civil War. And although they have no grave markers, two other Civil War veterans Silas M. Carpenter and Peter M. Billings served with honor with the Tenth Corps' 29th (Colored) Connecticut Volunteer Regiment. There are so many stories revealed within Gethsemane!

Preserving a sacred African American burial place

Arnold E. Brown is of one New Jersey's most respected authorities on African American culture. His family has lived in Bergen County since the 18th Century and his experience has helped him drive extensive research on the occupants of Gethsemane Cemetery. As an attorney in 1980, he became involved when a local title searcher suggested checking into an open piece of property that might contain African Americans graves. Arnold realized the significance of the property and recognized a need to rescue it from eminent redevelopment. Mr. Brown initiated talks with Bergen County for help.



Arnold Brown conducting a 2021 Gethsemane tour on Juneteenth

On each Juneteenth, during the past decade (excluding 2020), Arnold Brown has led personal tours of Gethsemane Cemetery to commemorate the Jubilee.

Some of the ideas Arnold hopes people will take away from a visit to Gethsemane are the unique contributions from the lives the people memorialized therein. He also believes the cemetery demonstrates fundamental West African burial customs and explains the African concepts of four cycles of the life or "moments of the sun" and why afterlife caretakers would scatter the dead's personal belongings around the grave and how erecting east facing memorials would facilitate the spirit's rising rebirth with the coming of the new sun. Arnold says "the sanctity of life is important and how you treat someone when they are no longer here and have gone beyond. You got to have respect for lives lived" Arnold Brown is planning a comprehensive book on African American history throughout Bergen County.

The last burial in Gethsemane in the 1920's began a gradual period of neglect and vandalism. Finding garbage along with broken markers and stolen headstones was sadly common for concerned neighbors. After Arnold Brown's persistence in 1985 Bergen County took possession and secured Gethsemane Cemetery. Extensive field work and research began that included surface archeology, gravestone conservation and repair by expert cemetery mason Bob Carpenter, non-invasive Ground Penetrating Radar and documentation of the cemetery's residents. Much of this was (and still is) guided by Bergen County's Department of Parks / Division of Cultural and Historic Affairs (DCHA) This culminated in a 1992 report prepared by Joan H. Geismar, Ph.D. known as Gethsemane Cemetery in Death and Life: A Bergen County Historic Site in an Archaeologist Perspective that fed into a successful 1994 listing on the NJ State and National Registers of Historic Places. Since that time, much has been done to continue

the research. To access a PDF of the 1994 nomination to the National Register of Historic Places search with terms: "gethsemane, cemetery, national, register"

Recently Bergen County's Division Director Cynthia Forster has been preparing for another round of Ground Penetrating Radar to improve site and grave mapping. When visiting Gethsemane there are handouts, guides and four meditation plaques situated around the cemetery displaying contextual information on all aspects regarding the African Americans resting close by. A Guide by Cell link is displayed at the cemetery's entrance "The DCHA is always ready to work with groups and single researchers." Cynthia also notes that if you are interested in research an/or a free tour by appointment of this secured, historic site you should contact: Bergen County Historic Sites at 201-336-7267 or at www.co.bergen.nj.us/parks. The cemetery entrance is on Summit Place off Rte. 46 in Little Ferry, NJ 07643.

"The life of the dead is placed in the memory of the living."- Cicero

--- William "Billy" Neumann is a Preservation New Jersey Board of Director and chairs the Marketing Committee. He is the former Chairperson of Bergen County's Historic Preservation Advisory Board and led Rutherford's HPC for five years. He has authored two local history books, several National Register nominations and presents talks, walks and demonstrations on history, historic preservation, commercial photography and beekeeping.

Approaching 200 Years of History, Timbuctoo's Evolution Continues

Rikki Massand
June 14, 2021

Guy Weston's fourth great-grandfather was among a handful of free African Americans who purchased land in his hometown of Westampton Township in 1829, integral to the movement for black settlements in South Jersey. Settlement at what became known as Timbuctoo began in 1826 when four African American men from Maryland purchased parcels of land from a Quaker businessman. The area soon developed as a community of both escaped slaves and free blacks at the time.

Today Guy is spearheading the cemetery and historic site's preservation efforts there nearly 200 years later. The South Jersey native currently living in Washington, D.C. is a writer, family historian and genealogical researcher, and a public health consultant focused on documenting and sharing stories of "antebellum free African Americans."



Guy Weston and Machell Still-Pettis, a descendant of the renowned Still family

The name Timbuctoo first appears in an 1830 deed but by later in the nineteenth century the 'village' had over 125

residents, a school, the Zion Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal African Church, and an adjacent cemetery. At present there are 11 remaining gravestones but over 100 graves were estimated to be at this site, according to results of a 2009 geophysical survey and initial archaeological excavation work, organized through Temple University as part of the Timbuctoo Discovery Project, a joint effort between Westampton Township, Temple U. community members and a specialist in African American history and genealogy. Of the 11 remaining stones, eight are of U.S. Colored troops that fought in the Civil War. But the survey revealed the untold stories Weston and others hope to present.

“There could be literally 100 graves here. Archaeologists and historians would imagine the 11 stones don’t represent near the totality of persons buried here. About 100 more exist, and there is biographical and historical information about those people and the communities they represented.”

Of particular help in the research of this site are circa 1850s archives in the New Jersey Mirror newspaper, which originated in Mount Holly in about 1818.

“The cemetery, since the mid-2000s, was known as Timbuctoo Civil War Memorial Cemetery. They spent \$1,500 with plaques as fancy markers bearing this name. But it turns out that the cemetery is the Zion Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal African Church cemetery. The real history of the cemetery is not only the U.S. colored troops, it’s the church that established it. The deed and incorporation certificate are dated 1854, although in that period entities existed for many years, decades, without being incorporated. The oldest gravestone at Timbuctoo dates to 1847,

and there’s a host of history about that church and its role in the Underground Railroad, with people that belonged to it,” Weston explained. The Timbuctoo Historical Society is working to identify the names correlating with unmarked graves from researching pension files and permits.

Today Timbuctoo features historical interpretive signage, secured through the support of Burlington County’s governing body.

“One sign is on the U.S. colored troops; the text has a bio of eight soldiers, and there is a QR code to scan to get detailed bio’s of each of them. We removed the name on the plaque to state Timbuctoo Civil War memorial, removing the word cemetery from it, so we could be comprehensive in our descriptions of this site,” Weston said.



Timbuctoo, NJ Excavation Site

Municipal and private land ownership considerations contribute to some tightrope-walking in preservation efforts. “Timbuctoo is an entire 50-acre area. The excavation site was on land owned by the township but Timbuctoo consists primarily of privately-owned land. There is much publicly-owned land in Timbuctoo, it is

however a residential area and most people who live there did not know they were on historic land before we got all this started in 2009," Weston said.

In 2015 the Westampton Township Committee appointed a Timbuctoo Advisory Committee, which Weston became the chair of. He resigned from that position early this year. With the August 2019 incorporation of the nonprofit Timbuctoo Historical Society the plans to establish a dedicated organization and fundraising program came forward.

American Legion Post 509 took an interest in our cemetery, due to the US Colored Troops buried there. They helped us obtain a \$1000 grant from the Wal-Mart Foundation, to put up a road sign for the historic site's entrance. Weston noted that the newly established historical society, set up as a nonprofit, helps for obtaining funding from such corporations moving forward.

Guy says a few important "preservation issues" remain. As a result of archaeological work beginning in 2009, in 2011 the site was determined eligible for listing on the New Jersey Register of Historic Places with a (COE) Certificate of Eligibility. But there has not been adequate follow-up with NJSHPO to this listing potential. Weston hopes this effort gets completed by 2022.

Land ownership of the historic site has continued to evolve. There is a boundary discrepancy between marked grave sites and the legal boundary line, with graves extending at least 18 feet beyond that point according to multiple archaeological examinations.



Timbuctoo NJ Memorial Marker

Some site work still in progress include an arched entranceway, and fencing. Weston notes that the cemetery is "a preexisting non-conforming entity in a residential area, so we actually have a few zoning hurdles around simple things such as our signage and fencing as there is no provision for it."

A major effort for Timbuctoo in the year ahead will be community engagement and education.

"Community members and elected officials in the greater South Jersey region, and across the state, need to understand why this work is important and there should not be obstructive efforts in the attempts to preserve the cemetery grounds. For example I had to do a utility markout on-site to put our signs up, because the construction official was concerned about utilities running under the cemetery. Of course I inquired about how often cemeteries need to perform utility markouts? If that were the case you would need to do one every time a burial occurs and we know that does not happen."

Weston plans to expand educational efforts for area municipal officials, staff and to

elected officials, and even to community groups and residents “to better understand preservation work for African American cemeteries, and for cemeteries overall.”

“They serve as important repositories for our history, genealogy and culture, and must be preserved,” he said.

“Funding was one issue, and it makes sense for historic preservation to take place outside of the context of politics. You can be full-steam ahead with support and excitement and then all of a sudden there’s a change in the local government’s makeup, changing the dynamics of support we receive,” he said.

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Cape May’s African American History is Highlighted with New Museum

Maria Boyes
June 17, 2021

At the southernmost tip of the state lies Cape May, long identified as “America’s original seaside resort.” Not only does Cape May have the prerequisite beaches and charming retail district but what makes it stand out amongst other shore towns is its beautiful array of Victorian Bed & Breakfast inns. Cape May City was nationally designated as an historic landmark in 1976, and the Victorian history of the town has been promoted for decades. As a result, Cape May has an extended and robust tourist season highlighting the historic architecture through year-round themed tours, exhibits and events.

In addition to the well-known Victorian-era inns, another aspect of Cape May’s history has recently emerged and is quickly gaining attention. A few years ago, history enthusiast Bob Mullock, was researching documents for a Civil War tour he planned to give at his hotel in conjunction with Cape May MAC (Museum Arts Culture), a non-profit organization formed in the early 1970s specifically to save historic architecture from the wrecking ball.

The information he uncovered in a newspaper article from upstate New York proved that Cape May was not only a stop on the Underground Railroad, but that renowned activist and abolitionist Harriet Tubman had a strong presence in town during the 1850s. “It was just amazing – the story of the Civil War and Cape May’s role including Harriet Tubman,” said Mullock. Research showed that to escape the slave states, freedom seekers would

cross the Delaware Bay guided by the Cape May Lighthouse to reach New Jersey. As a result, this area was a meeting ground for many abolitionists during that time and in an interview, Harriet Tubman confirmed that Cape May was used as her "headquarters."



Harriet Tubman Museum

Cynthia Mullock, Executive Director of the Harriet Tubman Museum, is an attorney who spent her childhood in one of Cape May's famed Bed & Breakfast inns. As Bob's daughter she explains, "My family and I are strongly committed to historic preservation." In 2018, when she learned about the significant African American history in her hometown, she created a non-profit to save and restore the dilapidated house and ultimately fund the museum. She credits many volunteers who gave their time and talent stating, "It became an incredible community project that just took on a life of its own."

Listed as one of Preservation NJ's Most Endangered Places in 2012, the former parsonage which now houses the Harriet Tubman Museum was part of the Macedonia Baptist Church dating back to the late 1700s. Once owned by Quaker abolitionists, it was threatened by a proposed redevelopment plan that would have razed the vacant building. Today, freshly renovated, the house stands

squarely within the section of Cape May that includes: the former African American Franklin Street School, the home of prominent African American entrepreneur and abolitionist Stephen Smith, and the historic Macedonia Baptist and Allen AME Churches.

Since then, the museum's opening (which became virtual during the pandemic) has garnered both local and national attention. Recognized by Smithsonian Magazine as one of the Top 10 Most Anticipated Museum Openings in 2020, last year Governor Murphy attended an in-person ribbon-cutting ceremony on Emancipation Day. Earlier this year, the Harriet Tubman Museum received additional accolades as one of USA Today's 10 Best New Museums of 2021 and will be open to the public beginning Juneteenth this year.

CCA (Center for Community Arts), is a multicultural educational organization which developed the Underground Railroad Trolley Tour and runs it in conjunction with Cape May MAC, which is responsible for the restoration and promotion of many of the city's landmark buildings. Hope Gaines, a member of CCA's Community History Committee, has been a volunteer for over 20 years. "Everyone thinks that Cape May is just this pretty Victorian town, which it is," she says. "But there was this whole other area of Cape May that was primarily black-owned homes and businesses. The addition of the Harriet Tubman Museum will enhance the importance of black history to Cape May."

Warren Coupland, Chair of the Historic Preservation Commission, is also devoted to preserving this history. A 24-year resident, Coupland credits Cape May's success to the importance of having a group of volunteers who are committed to

historic preservation. "There is quite a bit of time, energy and training that goes into being a Commission member," he says. Members of the HPC are required to have at least 8 hours of training each year, sometimes more.



Historic Trolley Tour

With a Certified Local Government status from the state, Coupland confirms they are a "strong" HPC. In addition to having devoted commission members, he states the importance of having a supportive mayor and council. "The entire city is a landmark designation and that encompasses over 600 sites," he says and points out that the Design Standards are strictly followed and incorporated into the zoning ordinance to ensure they are being enforced.

"We have been very successful in proposing several changes to the existing ordinance," says Coupland. For example, if there is an elevation to a structure to mitigate flood damage, the ordinance states that the historic integrity of the property must be maintained. In addition, the City of Cape May has put in place a Compliance Officer. Coupland explains that this officer not only reviews construction plans but will visit the site during construction to ensure the plans that were approved are the ones that are being implemented.

"In Cape May, the history of the African American community that was previously untold is now in the process of being told," said Coupland. "The HPC has recently submitted an application for a grant to formally recognize the total African American contribution to our national historic landmark." With a vigilant HPC, and the dedicated volunteers of Cape May MAC and Center for Community Arts, the residents of Cape May are committed to recognizing their African American history and make it as relevant and celebrated as their beautiful painted ladies.

--- Maria Boyes is a journalist who has written for newspapers across the country and penned a column in the NJ Courier News for several years. As a member of Preservation New Jersey's Marketing Committee and Chair of the Westfield Historic Preservation Commission, Maria values historic architecture.

She and her husband, Jim, live in a Victorian where they spend their free time, when not working on their home, volunteering for various organizations within their community.

Heritage Tourism Down the Shore

*Taylor Henry
June 7, 2021*

Heritage tourism is "traveling to experience the places, artifacts, and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and present," according to the National Trust for Historic Preservation. "It includes cultural, historic and natural resources." Essentially, heritage tourism allows travelers to make memories in unique places, and to reap the reward of really experiencing those places.

Heritage tourism is more than just a history exhibit. It is an immersive experience made possible by preservation efforts to save tourist locations from destruction by redevelopment. Some towns along the Jersey Shore didn't protect their unique places from shortsighted development, and as a result, are no longer characteristic destinations.

Resort towns are always trying to draw younger crowds. Do they realize young people seek out interesting places while traveling? "When sightseeing, three-in-four (71 percent) millennials enjoy exploring the history of an area," the National Trust recently found. The very things many towns think need to be demolished are the same things they should be embracing.

Read on to find out how South Jersey Shore towns' unique approaches to preservation are resulting in the power of heritage tourism.

Cape May, the oldest resort town in the US, is the crown jewel of Jersey Shore heritage tourism. Most of its houses, hotels and rooming houses were built in the mid-1800s in gingerbread-clad Victorian styles. A century later, those buildings were run-down, falling apart and downright spooky. When an 1879 Stick-Style mansion designed by Frank Furness was threatened by demolition in 1970, a group called Mid-Atlantic Center for the Arts (MAC) formed to save it. This catalyzed MAC to start historic districts and design guidelines, marketing the newly-restored buildings for their style and history. Their efforts spurred a renaissance of appreciation for all things Victorian and made Cape May a year-round destination. In fact, Halloween and Victorian Weekends are some of the busiest times of year in Cape May because of how haunted the town is!

Ocean City was founded as a Methodist Meeting Camp in 1879. In the heart of OCNJ is a vibrant downtown, an iconic boardwalk, and a residential historic district. Most of the 32 houses in the district were built in the 1880s under the guidance of the Methodists' development company. Redevelopment took its toll in the 1980s, with demolitions of old buildings and construction of new duplexes. But the city acted quickly by adding a historic preservation element to its master plan in 1988, and the historic district was born. Thousands of people celebrate OCNJ's architecture to this day, as evident in the Instagram page "Classic OCNJ." On the retail side of OCNJ are a downtown district with its own Main Street Program — Asbury Avenue — and a boardwalk lined with small businesses and enchanting amusements. It is worth emphasizing that, as OCNJ demonstrates, a boardwalk and a downtown can coexist and generate revenue!

Atlantic City has noteworthy records: the first boardwalk built in the US (1870), the place where salt water taffy was invented (1883), home of the original Miss America pageant (1921), location of the world's largest pipe organ (Boardwalk Hall Auditorium Organ, completed 1932), and site of the first legal casino outside of Nevada (Resorts Casino, 1978). There are eight spots in AC on the New Jersey Register of Historic Places plus 24 more that are eligible, all of which attract tourists. But it wasn't until 2019 that the city got a historic preservation commission after potential historic districts were identified. "Atlantic City's newly created Historic Preservation Commission positions the City to benefit from the positive economic impacts, including job creation, tax revenue generation, and increase in property values, associated with historic preservation," Mayor Frank Gilliam stated.



Historic Buildings in Atlantic City

The Wildwoods are renowned for the largest boardwalk in the state as well as for Doo Wop: the Populuxe commercial architecture and the music genre of the era. Hundreds of motels with elaborate neon and kitschy themed facades brought the Wildwoods into the national architectural spotlight in the 1980s-1990s. But soon after, the real estate boom of the 2000s coincided with the retirement of the motel's first-generation owners, many of whom cashed out. Over 100 motels, plus hundreds more homes, businesses, and rooming houses, were demolished faster than local preservationists could save them. Although today bright colors and vintage styling are incorporated into the towns' branding efforts, there are no active historic preservation commissioners in the Wildwoods, and historic buildings continue to be demolished. In 2019, a new organization, Preserving the Wildwoods, was established to educate the towns about their valuable places and to fight for protective legislation.



Historic Homes in The Wildwoods

Most Jersey Shore communities have their own identities. But the ones who are proud of their culture — the ones who actively preserve their history — are the ones who become destinations. So...what is your town about?

--- Taylor Henry is a lifelong resident of Wildwood, NJ, with a background in journalism. She earned an MA in Writing from Rowan University in 2021. Taylor is president of the Wildwood Historical Society, cofounder of Preserving the Wildwoods, and the author of the 2018 book Wildwoods Houses Through Time.

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