



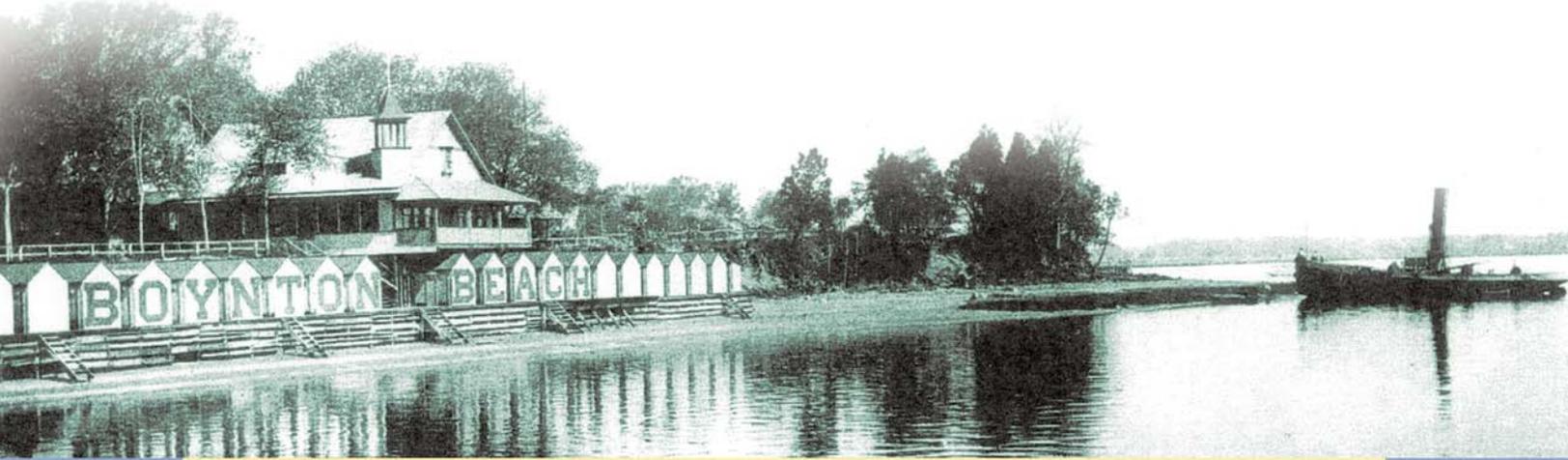
# Sewaren's Heyday

Years before the Misses America paraded in Atlantic City, and Henry Ford introduced his Model T—or for that matter, the arrival of the notorious *Jersey Shore Show*—there was Sewaren, an important destination for summer vacationers. Sewaren’s shoreline fronts on Staten Island Sound—a.k.a. the Arthur Kill. The town lies between Port Reading and the city of Perth Amboy and is one of the ten communities that comprise Woodbridge Township in Middlesex County. Several far-sighted gentlemen of the late nineteenth century saw great possibilities for the development of Sewaren’s waterfront into a seaside resort which would be easily accessible by water and rail transportation from Northern New Jersey and New York City.

In 1872, New York financier John Taylor Johnston (1820-1893), a Plainfield resident and President of the Central Railroad of New Jersey, purchased approximately 300 acres along the shore of the Arthur Kill in what was then called East Woodbridge and made plans to develop the area into a healthful seaside vacation spot. Johnston and his family drafted road surveys and deeds from Old Road to the water’s edge. Sadly, his dream was never fulfilled because of a financial downturn, but Johnston’s son-in-law, Robert DeForest built a grand summer hotel, The Sewaren House, in 1887 with a double row of open porches where guests could enjoy the salt air and sea breezes. In its prime, the hotel, located south of Ferry Street on the beach side of Cliff Road, welcomed Thomas Alva Edison, US President Grover Cleveland who came to fish and the popular stage actress Maude Adams among its notable guests. The fashionable hotel closed its doors in 1913 and was later destroyed by fire.

In 1877 Maine native Cassimer Whitman Boynton (1836-1908), a local fire brick, hollow tile, and sewer pipe manufacturer and community activist, opened Boynton Beach on the waterfront not far from where The Sewaren House would be built. The complex featured a bathing beach with bathhouses, pony rides, shooting gallery, nickelodeon (an early movie theater where a film or variety show could be seen for five cents), bowling alley, roller coaster, merry-go-round, a fleet of 100 row boats, photographic booths where tintypes were taken, Punch and Judy shows, and a restaurant complete with New York





City chefs. He hired orchestras to play for dancing every summer Saturday night, affairs that found young and old dressed in their very best clothes and where chaperones kept watchful eyes on their straying young ladies. The highly-polished hardwood floor in Boynton's dance pavilion acquired a glowing reputation as the best dance floor in the state.

Boynton, a teetotaler, kept a strict watch over the decorum of his guests and did not permit any liquor to be served at Boynton Beach. In 1907 DeForest petitioned the Woodbridge Township Committee for a liquor license, but Boynton protested because he believed that a saloon would be demoralizing for Sewaren. DeForest's petition was denied.

Two symbols long associated with summer fun, the hotdog stand and the merry-go-round, operated next to one another at Boynton Beach, also called Sewaren Beach. A nearby drink stand sold ice cream sodas, orangeade and phosphates. (Long gone from the soft drink scene, phosphates were sparkling beverages made from carbonated water and a dash of phosphoric acid flavored with lemon or other fruit syrup.)

A Ferris wheel, also called a pleasure wheel at the time, towered over the Boynton Beach landscape. (George W. Gale Ferris, a mechanical engineer from Illinois, built an enormous wheel for the

Chicago World's Fair in 1893, thereby attaching his name to the now familiar amusement.) And perhaps the most unusual of Boynton's attractions was the Bamboo Slide, a curious, curving downward slide usually filled with laughing, squealing, waving young vacationers seated side by side.

Boynton Beach management only opened the resort to African-Americans one July day each year. In 1913, a poster for the resort read: *Colored Salt Water Day, Wednesday, July 23d, Bathing, Boating, Dancing, All Attractions, Come And Bring The Children.* Still, that was a small step when it is remembered that most similar resort areas were "white only" at the time or segregated.

Located next to the Sewaren House Hotel, Acker's Picnic Grove and Boathouse was another addition to this fast-growing resort and flourished for many years after the hotel and Boynton Beach closed. Acker's was a popular venue for Sunday School picnics. It attracted many boaters, fisherfolk, and couples ready to enjoy a romantic afternoon rowing on the sparkling waters of Staten Island Sound.

Henry Acker, the first of his family to settle in Sewaren, raised plants for seeds to supply the Peter Henderson Seed Company, a well-known horticultural establishment in Bergen County. Another family member, R. O. Acker built boats.

The Acker family also operated a canning factory in Sewaren which employed about forty women to process locally grown tomatoes. The story is told that these glass jars of tomatoes were prized commodities among local housewives.

An advertisement for Acker's appearing in a program booklet distributed at the dedication of the Woodbridge Municipal Building in 1924 invited visitors to enjoy bathing, boating and crabbing. Skee Ball and "Aquatic Meets at Frequent Intervals" were featured activities.

Excursion ferries, rowboats, trolleys, trains, bicycles, and later the automobile brought the summer folk to Sewaren. In 1892 Boynton purchased the steamboat, *Pauline*, to run every Tuesday and Saturday from Sewaren to Bayonne and Elizabethport. Ever the astute businessman, Boynton knew that easy transportation to Boynton Beach was the key to success. Later a steamboat sailing daily between New Brunswick and New York

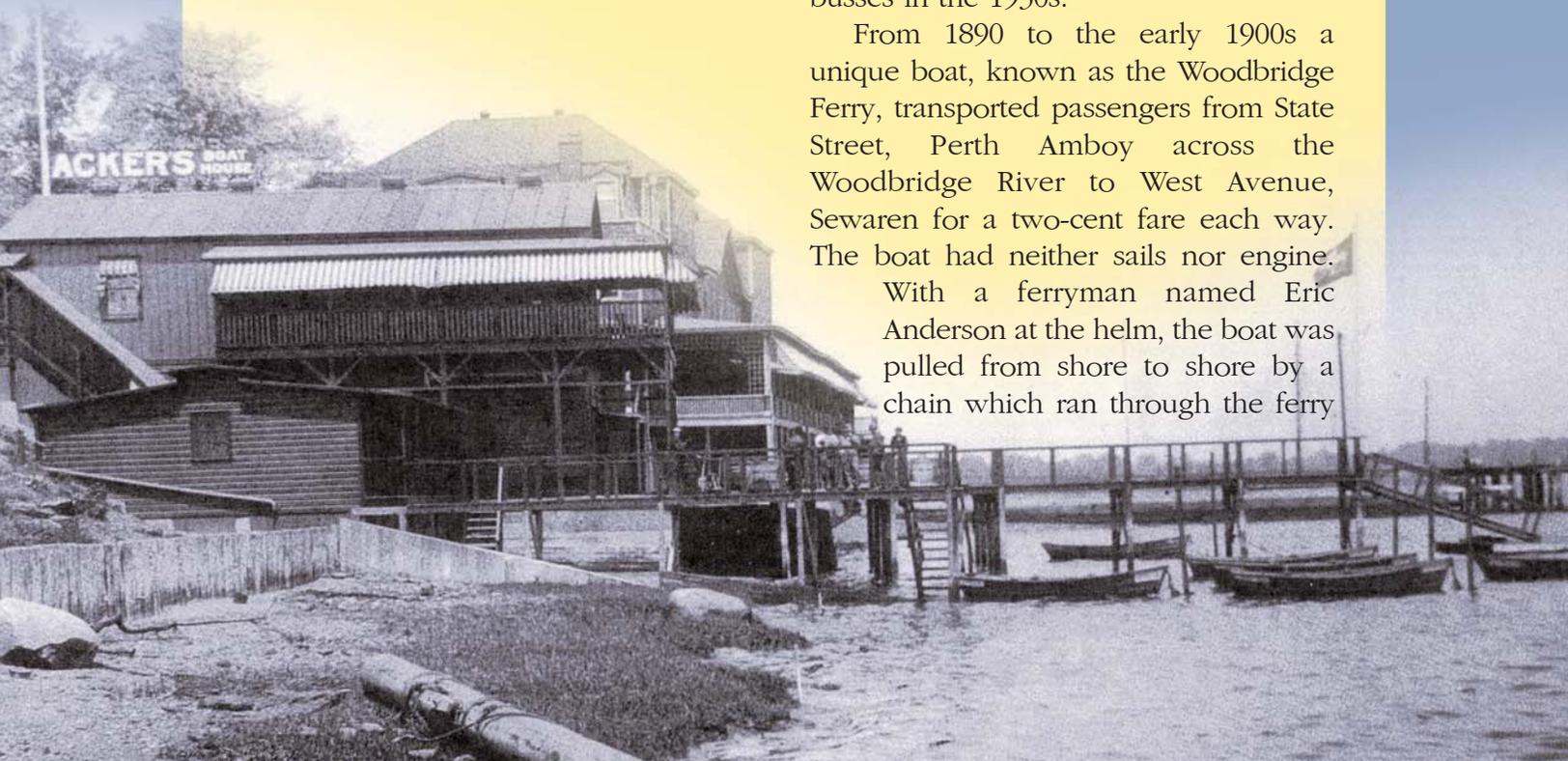
City stopped at the Sewaren House Hotel to deliver mail and passengers and take on locally grown salt hay for the New York livestock market.

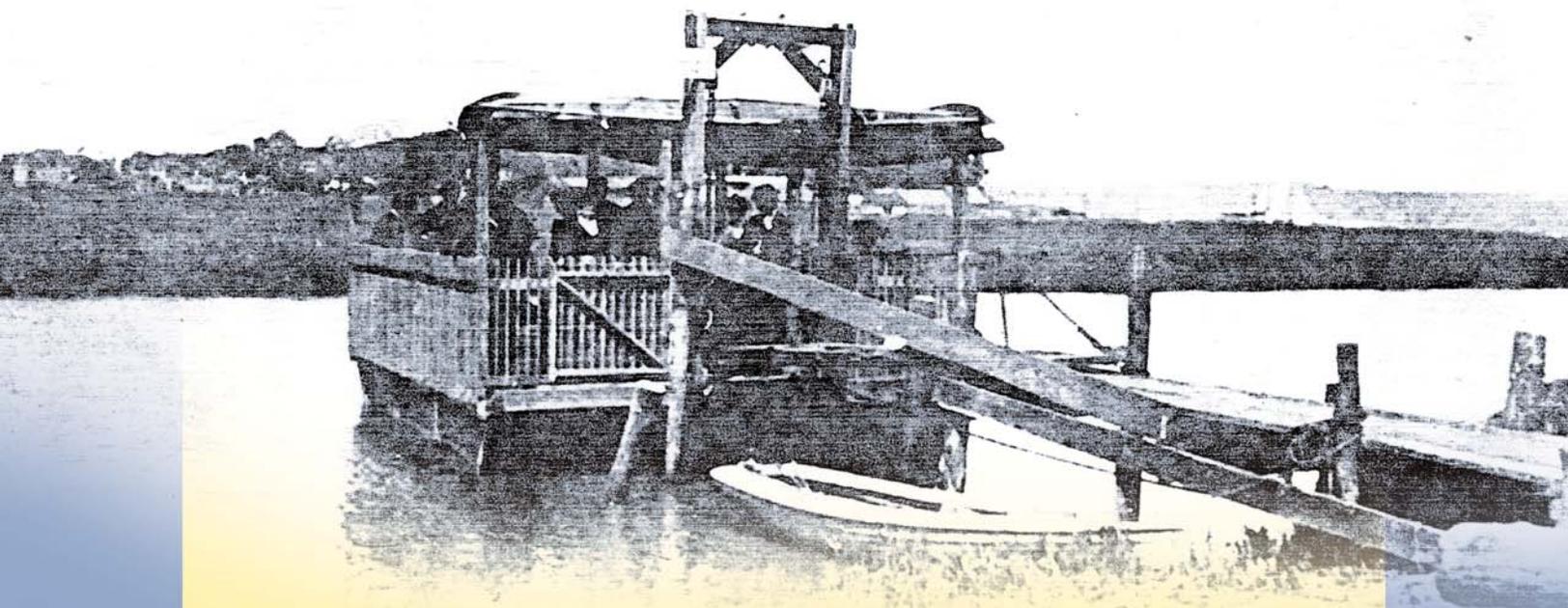
The Pennsylvania Railroad carried vacationers as far as the Woodbridge station, a few miles away. Johnston built the picturesque Central Railroad Station in Sewaren which also served for a time as the post office. Townsfolk picked up their mail there, and vacationers purchased one-cent stamps for the postcards they mailed to family and friends.

In 1895 Boynton, DeForest and Henry Maurer, an enterprising inventor from Germany who manufactured roofing tiles and bricks, built the Woodbridge and Sewaren Electric Street Railway Company from Boynton Beach to Rahway. Year-round passengers in Woodbridge and Rahway found the Sewaren turnaround convenient for commuting to work. The line later continued to Perth Amboy and remained in business until Public Service replaced it with busses in the 1930s.

From 1890 to the early 1900s a unique boat, known as the Woodbridge Ferry, transported passengers from State Street, Perth Amboy across the Woodbridge River to West Avenue, Sewaren for a two-cent fare each way. The boat had neither sails nor engine.

With a ferryman named Eric Anderson at the helm, the boat was pulled from shore to shore by a chain which ran through the ferry





over an idler pulley. It was a primitive conveyance consisting of a wooden platform built on a barge and covered with a flat roof. A picket fence kept passengers safely on board. The ferry ceased service when a trolley bridge was built across the river.

Many year-round residents of Sewaren of the time enjoyed an active social life which revolved around the Land and Water Club, incorporated in 1892. Article II of the Club rules stated that the “objective of the Club shall be the mental and physical improvement of the members.” Although primarily involved in yachting competitions, the club held elegant dances where gentlemen dressed in full evening regalia, and ladies wore silk and satin ball gowns complete with long white kid gloves and diamond necklaces.

Helen Glidden Grant, a prominent Sewaren matron, organized the Sewaren History Club in 1903. She was also involved in the founding of the Sewaren Library and a Civic Association which encouraged citizens to participate in the affairs of the town and spearheaded environmental activities along the beachfront in later years.

Several stately mansions built as “summer cottages” remain along Cliff Road. These homes were often built in late Victorian architectural styles, such as the Queen Anne and the Shingle Style. Especially notable is the C. W. Ballard House, c. 1895, known as “Cedar Cliff,” owned for many years by the Clark/Burns family. Other early Sewaren surnames include Ames, Brown, Drake, Gimbernat, Giroud, Grant, Hawkins, Lewis, MacCallum, Rankin, Robin, Solace, Tombs, Turner, and Wiswall.

Various reasons have been cited for the demise of the Sewaren beach scene. Undoubtedly the growing affordability of the automobile (the “horseless carriage”) made vacation trips further along the Jersey shore as well as out-of-state resort areas possible for Garden State residents. And, of course, the oil industry’s huge storage tanks and encroaching presence along the Sewaren coastline brought a definite end to the town’s heyday. Boynton Beach was sold to the Shell Oil Company in 1927. But Sewaren itself (population approximately 2,800) continues today as a vibrant community within Woodbridge Township.



# And Finally, From Whence Cometh the Name of Sewaren?

**Sewaren had yet to be included on this 1872 map of Middlesex County. Rutgers University\***

Several ideas have been offered through the years concerning the origin of the unusual name, “Sewaren.” Johnston may have honored a friend, S. E. Warren, by bestowing his name on the village. Another story suggests that Boynton may have inadvertently named the community by hiring a Mr. Warren to work at Boynton Beach. Supposedly, a passenger alighting from a train at the Sewaren station asked a passerby for local information and was told to “See Warren!” As the question was repeated from person to person through the years, the railroad station became the Sewaren Station.

Writing in her 1969 *Timely Told Tales of Woodbridge Township*, local historian and Woodbridge Township teacher and school principal for 47 years, Dorothy F.D. Ludewig recounts the “See Warren” story.

She also researched the archives for a possible Native American derivation but was unable to find any helpful clues, but Ludewig does describe an early Dutch place name which she believed might shed light on the naming of Sewaren.

“Following Henry Hudson’s explorations in 1609 the Dutch had given the shores along the Atlantic Coast the name of Seawanhacky. It was made up of derivations of three Dutch words: *Zee* meaning sea and *wan* meaning fan. *Hacky* meaning a place where shells are found. Therefore Seawanhacky means a place where many fan-shaped shells were plentiful and such was the case in Sewaren where the waters of the Arthur Kill lapped the shores of the area and the receding tide left a coverlet of various kinds of clam and oyster shells on the beach.”