

Cape may as a summer resort town



- Will Stevens

A resort town is a town or city that relies heavily on the tourism as a main driver to its economy. Considered among the oldest resort towns in the United States, Cape May, New Jersey is situated at the southern tip of the state of New Jersey, and has provided beachgoers with a beautiful town since the mid 1700's. Owing to its rich history as a whaling community, its role in both of the world wars, superior bird watching landscape, its recognition as a National Historic Landmark, and New Jersey's large tourism industry, Cape May continues to enjoy success as a popular summer destination.

According to The City of Cape May, the history of Cape May can be traced all the way back to the late 17th Century when the land was first settled. Its status as a beach destination began in the mid 1700's when horse-drawn carriages arrived from Philadelphia. Over time, hotels were built and the Cape became the major beach destination for cities such as Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, and Washington. It wasn't until 1863, however, when the railroad between Philadelphia and Cape May was completed, that families began building summer vacation homes down the shore. Several fires have engulfed Cape May, and have resulted in the towns desire to maintain a "small town" feel and not have to compete with the high rise hotels that other resort towns have. This decision is crucial to the history of Cape May architecture and is the main reason why the city is considered a National Historic Landmark. The Cape May canal, Cape May – Lewis Ferry, and the Cape May Coast Guard Station have also contributed to the history of Cape May. (City of Cape May)

In Philippos J. Loukissas' journal article about the impact of regional development, he states, " An increase in connections with the outside world also is assumed to have the positive effect of introducing new ideas into the community." This hints at the importance of the Janelle model used by economic geographers, and can be applied to this history of Cape May as well. When the railroad between Philadelphia and Cape May was finished, this only further deepened the ties between the new places, and began the construction boom of vacation homes down the shore. Alternatively, the completion of the Garden State Parkway and the initiation of services on the Cape May – Lewis Ferry have done wonders to connect Cape May and provide greater tourist exposure. The Garden State Parkway allows easier vehicle access with connectivity to the rest of the New Jersey highway network, and the Cape May – Lewis allows Delawarean residents and travellers further south to access the Cape by way of the Delaware Bay.

Tourism is obviously a major component of Cape May's history, but it is also important to understand its role in New Jersey's economy as a whole. In 2008, tourism expenditures in New Jersey were \$38.8 billion supported by over 70 million visitors. Kenneth McGill even states in his report about New Jersey tourism that, " NJ Tourism is larger than the entire GDP of 120 countries." And that, " 1 in every 9 NJ workers owes his/her job to tourism." McGill also states that New Jersey's tourism industry is 2.1 times more concentrated than the US average, meaning that the percentage of workers directly or indirectly employed by the tourism industry is 2.1 times greater than the average US state. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the core tourism industry is the third largest private sector in the state, supporting over 350,000 jobs.

Another staggering statistic presented by McGill is that other than investments and business travel, the in-state contribution to the total tourism expenditure is only 20%, while the out-of-state contribution is more than 3 times that, at 64%, while Diane Wieland states that over 75% of visitors to Cape May County come from out-of-state.

When comparing the tourism statistics of Cape May County to those of the entire state of NJ, it is clear that the economy of Cape May is heavily reliant on the activities of the tourism industry. In McGill's report on the tourism industry in New Jersey, it is stated that 48.1% of the entire economy of Cape May County can be attributed to the travel and tourism industry. This is the largest percentage of all counties in the state, and shows just how important the industry is to southern New Jersey. McGill and Diane Wieland confirm the importance of Cape May as a summer resort town and popular vacation home destination in their statistics. McGill shows that over 50% of rental income of the entire state comes from Cape May County alone. Wieland also shows that nearly half of all rental and 2nd home properties in all of New Jersey are located in Cape May County. In fact, according to Wieland, 47% of all residences in Cape May County are considered 2nd homes or vacation homes. (Wieland)

Tourism in Cape May is not limited to just beachgoers looking for a relaxing vacation. The Delaware Bay, especially the New Jersey banks, is world-renowned locations for bird watching. In Joanna Burger's report on the affects of tourism on the local ecology, she mentions that the Delaware Bay area benefits from its low-lying mud flats and coastal marshes that are

conducive to migrating shore birds. It was not until recently, however, that experts have realized that the millions of birds that pass through the Delaware Bay are attracted there by the abundance of horseshoe crab eggs in the springtime. The city of Cape May has taken advantage of this unique characteristic and has encouraged eco tourism to the area. (Burger)

My own experiences have been greatly influenced by the touristic, seasonal nature of Cape May. My grandparents first purchased a property down the shore over 30 years ago, so the beach has been a big part of my family's lives since before I was born. We have been taking weekend trips down the shore for my entire life, and I have spent the entirety of the summer, from when school gets out until Labor Day, in Cape May for almost 10 years. Our house isn't big by any means, but it has enough beds that most of our family can be down simultaneously, and we have regularly had about 10 people on any given weekend. I can say with confidence that my family conforms to the typical summer vacationer stereotype. My grandparents will usually head down before Memorial Day to open up the house and get everything set up for the summer. Memorial Day is the first big weekend of the summer, and we are all usually down there. My sister and I are the only two that stay with my grandparents for the entire summer, and we enjoy seeing our parents and aunts and cousins on weekends that they come down and visit. My sister and I also contribute to some of the tourism statistics that I stated earlier. Both of us have seasonal jobs that rely completely on the summer tourism activity in Cape May. My sister is a beach tagger, collecting money for the city of Cape May for people to use the beaches, and I was a lifeguard at a

local campground. Both of these jobs are only sustainable during the summer months as the population of Cape May swells.

Much of mine and my family's experiences can be explained in Reiner Jaakson's article called "Second Home Domestic-Tourism". Many passages from his article relate directly to my life and experiences down the shore. "The second home offers a sense of identity at many levels, approximating in microcosm a concentric-circles model of ethnocentricity." (Jaakson 378) This is true with many small towns, but especially true with Cape May. It is nice to be able to identify with other people who have shore homes and also spend their summers down the shore; comparing experiences through a shared commonality and lifestyle. "The very idea of a second home that is used primarily, if not exclusively, for leisure and recreation has an element of make believe." (Jaakson 379) The fact that it is the summer means that I have no other responsibilities other than to relax and enjoy myself. Because I am not in school five days a week means that my time spent in Cape May is used as a sort of escape from the real world where I can go to the beach and swim in the ocean and sleep in as long as I want and enjoy the hot summer weather.

Our summer home provides me with a relaxing retreat from normal life, but it also allows our family to be much closer. "The second home provides for family togetherness of a different kind from that available in the city."

(Jaakson 379) This is especially true for my family. We are a very close family anyway, all living within 15 minutes of each other at home, but the closeness of our beach house allows us to have tighter bonds. "The smaller physical space and the immediate outdoors facilitate a closer family togetherness"

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(Jaakson 380) These two quotes from Jaakson perfectly encapsulate the dynamics within my family. While we live close together at home, we don't visit each other often. It is a completely different story in the summertime. My sister and I are excited to spend time with our aunts when they come down and visit, and I enjoy spending time with my cousins when they are down too. Our summer home provides a platform for all of our family to come together and spend time with one another.

Throughout its history, Cape May has evolved from a whaling community into one of the nation's oldest beach towns. Its location at the southern tip of New Jersey and its long-standing popularity with Philadelphians and other out-of-state tourists have cemented Cape May's position as one of the most popular summer beach towns in the country.

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