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Lessons from Staten Island's past: Our beach communities

Published: Friday, September 14, 2012, 6:17 PM   Updated: Friday, September 14, 2012, 6:17 PM

Staten Island Advance
By

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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- The long history of Staten Island beaches as summer resorts really began after the Civil War. The area between Fort Wadsworth and Great Kills are the best examples of the borough's beach communities.

Driven by a health movement, beach areas were considered ideal locations to spend summers and improve one's health. A boardwalk was built from Fort Wadsworth to Midland Beach along a string of hotels, inns, bathhouses and amusement parks to permit strolling and gazing at the ocean.

Beach-goers came from other parts of New York City, most notably Brooklyn and Manhattan. Ferries from both cities were the main link to Staten Island.

Communities like South Beach and New Dorp Beach greatly benefited from their natural assets and saw a great expansion in development. Since this phenomenon was a seasonal occurrence, most of the development consisted of temporary homes called bungalows.

These unheated wood-framed structures on concrete block piers were placed on small plots of land in very close proximity to the beaches. Often, they lacked plumbing. The bungalows were a bit larger than customary changing rooms, but provided reasonable accommodations to urban families seeking the sun-drenched beaches, fresh air and escape from the congested city.

NEW DORP BEACH)

New Dorp Beach's origins can be traced to the 1600s. Early Dutch and English settlers were responsible for the first buildings, but it wasn't until the late 1800s that the coastal areas really became an attraction and their real estate gained considerable value.

A picture postcard from the glory days of New Dorp Beach shows Lang'   s Hotel.

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Photos Courtesy of AIA, Staten Island

Street views like Seafoam Street and Center Place,

The partitioning of large land pieces into smaller ones to accommodate bungalows became common. The last street before New Dorp Beach is Cedar Grove Avenue. Roughly more than a mile long, it lays between New Dorp Lane and Ebbitts Street. At one time, the beach side of the street had many hotels; sadly they've long disappeared. The opposite side is a tight network of streets that once were completely comprised of bungalows.

From one particular section of Cedar Grove, a tight grid of narrow streets and alleys best exemplifies what these beach communities once were like. With street names like Neptune, Waterside and Seafoam, one can't help but be irresistibly transported to another time or to an ongoing summer.

The bungalows of the 1900s have been transformed into year-round dwellings. New siding materials have made them more resistant to the weather. With full plumbing, heating, air conditioning and hookups for cable TV, these structures are home to hundreds of families, still benefiting from the sun, sea breezes and beach walks.

are typical of a tight grid beach development of another era.

This idyllic place is not without its perils, though. The shallow elevation makes it susceptible to flooding and obvious exposure to sea storms. Its tiny streets quickly become inundated, upsetting residents' daily routines. While major storms are rare, residents always have endured the unpredictable weather and returned to their homes.

Beach communities encapsulate the human attraction toward the sea. Regardless of the difficulties presented by the weather, homeowners resist and deal with the natural forces by improving their buildings and the ever-changing shorelines.

Staten Island beaches are a unique patrimony, deserving of our attention and care as older communities have taught us.

Architect's Corner, written by members of the Staten Island Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), appears twice a month in the Home section.

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Street views like Seafoam Street and Center Place, are typical of a tight grid beach development of another era.