

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, August 4, 2008

Commuting to the Seashore: From the big Eastern cities with good-paying jobs, commuting to the Atlantic shore with its cool breezes became popular by the late 19th century. The railroads capitalized on this opportunity, as, without them, the idea would have been impossible. From Boston, a trip of less than an hour would deliver you to many resorts on the North Shore and the South Shore, such as Swampscott, Marblehead, Gloucester, Hingham, Nantasket, and Scituate. The family could stay in a “beach cottage” from mid-June until Labor Day, and the breadwinner could spend the nights and weekends, while attending to his business in the city each working day.

From New York, resorts on the mainland along Long Island Sound in both New York and Connecticut were within an hour's ride from Grand Central Station. George M. Cohan's popular song “45 Minutes from Broadway” referred to his country place at New Rochelle. The beaches of Long Island were equally accessible, and commuter trains on the Pennsylvania Railroad also ran to the Ocean County (New Jersey) resort towns of Long Branch, Asbury Park, Point Pleasant, and Bay Head. Some high-end resorts along this stretch were Deal and Spring Lake, where fancy Victorian “cottages” and large resort hotels also flourished. President Garfield died in 1881 in an elaborate cottage near Deal.

The resorts along the South Jersey shore from Long Beach Island to Cape May were especially popular with Philadelphians trying to escape the summer's heat. Excellent rail service made it possible (and somewhat practical) to work in the city every day while spending the nights with the family at the shore. Although most train trips from Philadelphia or Camden took over an hour, upper-middle-class citizens who could afford a comfortable summer cottage close to the ocean would occupy it for over two months, even though the man of the house had to be in his office every day. If you had a cottage at Beach Haven, for example, you could leave the office about 5:00 and arrive to be with the family for a late dinner about 7:00. Arising early, you could say goodbye about 7:00 and be back in the office before 9:00. Instead of enduring often-stifling heat in Philadelphia while trying to sleep, the cool evening breezes off the ocean made it worth the long commute.

The less popular Delaware and Maryland ocean resorts did not have the luxury of fast train service from anywhere. Although Rehoboth had passenger trains running down the middle of its main street, and Ocean City, Maryland, had rail service to a pier west of the inlet, there was no direct service from big cities, and they were too far away. From Baltimore or Washington, the Annapolis ferry to the Eastern Shore connected with a slow train across the peninsula, but the elapsed time from these cities would have been at least four hours, and from Wilmington and Philadelphia it was not much better. Railroads played a very small part in the development of these resorts; it was not until highways improved, automobiles became the principal means of transportation, and the Chesapeake Bay Bridge was opened in 1951 that they began growing “by leaps and bounds.”