

CATBOATS AS PROMOTERS OF TOURISM

Would it be presumptuous to say that Catboats spawned a tourism industry that began along the New Jersey barrier islands during the mid to late 1800's? I don't think so. Without the trusty, seaworthy Catboat most visitors could not have gotten to the out islands. Of course there were a few paddlewheel steamboats, but it was the large Catboats, holding as many as a dozen people, and sometimes even towing a barge, that brought guests to largely uninhabited islands to stay in the few hotels.

And how did the building materials get to these islands to build the hotels? Some of these materials were obviously the flotsam from shipwrecks, the coastal trade being mainly building materials; but large Schooners and Catboats brought much to the islands. Proprietors of hotels advertising in city newspapers may have been the first promoters of tourism, but without Catboats this flourish of visitors would not have had a chance. I'm talking about a time before bridges for both railroads and cars were built to these islands. Catboats were the main, and sometimes only, mode of transportation.

Let's take Long Beach Island, New Jersey for example. It is an eighteen mile stretch of sand, known in the 1700's and early 1800's, as Eighteen Mile Beach or Barnegat Beach, popularly coined by an early real estate developer to be "six miles at sea" (it is actually between 2 ½ to 4 miles depending on the area).

Dusty stagecoaches, pulled by horses, clippity-clopped through the lonely Pine Barrens. Roads were non-existent. Paths were formed through the woods by wooden wheels digging into the sand. Occasional taverns offered food, drink and lodging to the weary travelers. A lone shell or broken gourd provided relief from thirst in the cedar water creeks. Visitors were dropped off along the coast. In the case of the Beach Haven end (southern end) of Long Beach Island visitors left from Clamtown, better known today as Tuckerton. Families also came via Pennsylvania Railroad on railroad spurs to Tuckerton, their embarkation point for Long Beach Island.

Boat captains in wool coats and ties greeted their passengers in anticipation of the trip ahead. Black sailor hats adorned their heads. Ladies fanned themselves and swatted at the mosquitoes while laughing gulls and ospreys cackled overhead. Long white dresses of the women and children waved in the breeze. Bags and trunks were stowed under dark canvas dodgers/cuddy cabins.

Sometimes the big canvas Catboat sails could be set right away. Other times the boats were pulled to the mouth of Tuckerton Creek awaiting a favorable breeze. One embarkation point was Edge Cove in Tuckerton, a deep area with a long dock, where tourists lined up waiting for a Catboat to sail them across the bay. Stays on Long Beach Island varied from a few days to three summer months. Depending on the wind direction the trip to Long Beach Island could be made in a minimum of an hour or two. Inclement days found the women and children huddled under tied-down canvas, sheltering themselves from the elements. At other times there was little or no wind so trips were long or even postponed.

"Shore Chronicles: Diaries and Travelers' Tales from 1764 – 1955" is a collection of diaries and articles edited in 1999 by Margaret "Pooch" Buchholtz. An unknown writer in 1824 wrote about his trip across the bay to Beach Haven:

"About twenty passengers embarked in a small sloop (Catboat), which, by the aid of two men, was towed along the bank against the tide, down a serpentine salt water creek two miles to Little Egg Harbor Bay. Taking leave of the mainland, we stretched across with a fair wind and a gentle swell. After a miniature sea voyage of seven miles over a bay studded with small islands of salt grass, we anchored."

Joseph Horner built one of the earliest establishments on the southern end of Long Beach Island in 1815. It later was the enormously popular hotel soon to be called Bond's Long Beach House after its proprietor Captain Thomas Bond. Built in the reeds and salt hay close to the bay, it had a billiard room and a bowling alley. George B. Somerville in the 1914 edition of "The Lure of Long Beach" wrote about life at Bonds:

“The life of the guests was free and easy at Bond’s House in the old days, as became such an out-of-the-way resort. Fishing, bathing and shooting filled the daylight hours, but the evenings laid something of a tax upon the ingenuity of the guests, and occasionally a donkey’s head mask, attached to a shawl-covered quadreped, appeared in the halls and brayed, greatly to the consternation of the feminine guests, who by this sign were enabled to guess the ‘the boys’ were becoming hilarious.’

A week’s stay at Bond’s cost \$7.00. Gentlemen of wealth spent their days fishing and gunning; both birds and fish being unlimited. “Sea bathing” was popular with the ladies and the children, who also played games and visited with other guests on the porch. Candlelight was used at night. Food, whiskey and the cigars were top notch. A great master of ceremonies, Captain Thomas Bond was an enthusiastic card player and superb musician. His hospitality made everyone want to return time and time again.

Long Beach Island also had other hotels and boarding houses before the 1880’s. Life at the northern end of the island in Barnegat City included the Sunset and the Oceanic, both long hotels with full-length porches. Harvey Cedars boasted the Long Beach Club House or Double Jimmie’s as it was known after its owner James James. The Mansion of Health was located in Surf City.

Life in Beach Haven flowed with activity from the Beach Haven House and the Parry House. Tucker’s Beach, sometimes reached by a walk from the southern end of Beach Haven and sometimes kept apart by an opening inlet, had the Columbia and St. Albans hotels.

In the mid 1880’s the Pennsylvania Railroad began to build spurs from the population centers of Philadelphia and New York to the coast. Stop offs for Long Beach Island were Manahawkin and Tuckerton. Travelers switched from the trains to the Catboats, off for a week or two of fun on Long Beach Island. Long Beach Island was becoming a place for tourists, both summer visitors and sportsmen during the other seasons.

In 1886 the owners of the Tuckerton and Long Beach Island Railroads built a railroad bridge to the island. One track led north to Barnegat City, another south to Beach Haven. Enthusiastic visitors packed the dirty railroad cars. More hotels and boarding houses were built on Long Beach Island. Scores of Victorian cedar-shaked homes soon lined the streets of the newly formed Boro of Beach Haven. Supplies and building materials arrived by train.

The days of Catboats being used to bring visitors was waning. The railroad became the easiest way to travel, not to mention the quickest. Tourism was on the rise thanks to the sturdy boats that had originally brought so many people across Little Egg Harbor, Manahawkin and Barnegat Bays to Long Beach Island.

Catboats, still popular, began to shift from a strictly utilitarian use to one of pleasure. Sailing clubs sprang up along the coast in the last decade of the 1800’s along the New Jersey coastline. Racing Catboats, much as New Jersey Yacht Clubs do today, became a favorite pastime.