

The Early Years

"Winnacunnet shalbee called Hampton"

Since its settlement, Hampton Beach has evolved into a destination for entertainment and leisure for all New England. However, the beach was not what first attracted European settlers to the area. 375 years ago the colonists arrived in the area now called Hampton and Hampton Beach. The landscape was quite similar to what exists now from the salt marshes to the sandy beaches to Great Boar's Head. However, the area was not used for recreation and relaxation as we use it today. 200 years passed before the local community realized Hampton Beach's potential to become the recreational center of the region.

Town Settled and Renamed

In the 1630s, most of New Hampshire's seacoast remained unsettled and untouched by European colonists. Not long after settling Portsmouth, called Strawberry Banke at the time, the General Court of Massachusetts ordered that the area south of Portsmouth be settled as well. This land was particularly attractive because of its accessibility to the Hampton River and the salt marshes that surrounded it.¹ In 1636, the General Court of Massachusetts issued an official order that the land in question be claimed for Massachusetts by establishing a plantation and building a house upon it.

Two years later, Englishman Reverend Stephen Bachiler and his men carried out that order.²



The Hampton, N.H. town seal was created on the 300th anniversary of the town in 1938. On top of the shield the original Hampton Academy, opened in 1885, is pictured with its iconic steeple. Great Boar's Head is shown to the left while the salt marshes and the farmers' haycocks can be seen to the right. (Picture courtesy of the Town of Hampton)

Stephen Bachiler was seventy-seven at that time and was described as a kingly man who stood as erect as the pine trees that stood on the land he was settling.³ A town was established and it was not long before it spanned as far south as Salisbury, Massachusetts, as far north as Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and as far west as Kingston, New Hampshire.⁴ At its largest, the new settlement was approximately 100 square miles and took up about half of New Hampshire's seacoast.⁵

The newly settled land was called "Winnacunnet," a Native American word which translated to "Beautiful Place of Pines." According to Lucy Dow, a Hampton historian and author, this name was not a misnomer; the land was "an unbroken wilderness" full of enormous pine trees.⁶ She imagined a place that was heavily forested with small meadows of greenery and wildflowers. These meadows broke the "gloom of the dark forests" whose "interlacing branches stretched far upward in awful majesty."⁷ Even so, in 1639, the town was officially renamed "Hampton" at the request of Reverend Bachiler after the English area of Southampton. It was commonly referred to as "Hampton"⁸ and was the place he had had his previous pastorate.⁹ The official record of the change stated "Winnacunnet shalbee called Hampton" which fully secured English ownership of the land.¹⁰



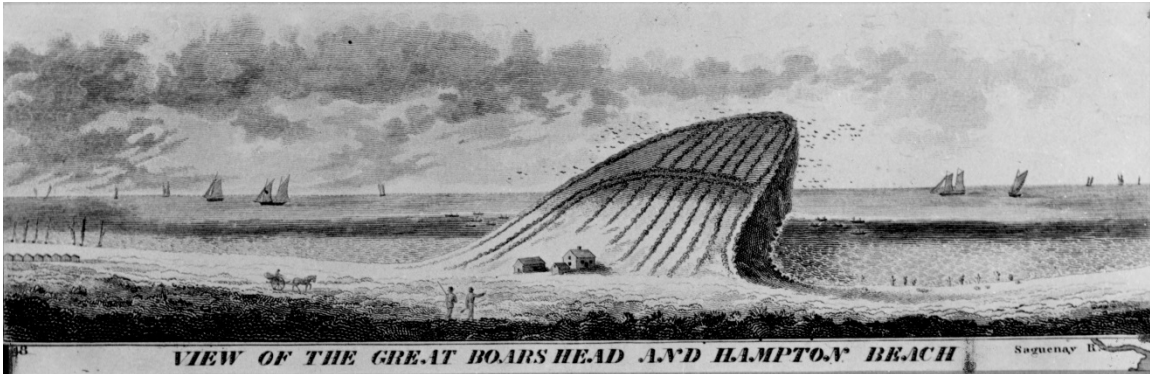
A booklet about the early history of Hampton; it was written by Lucy Dow and published during the town's 250th anniversary.
(Picture courtesy of the Hampton Historical Society)

This area was not chosen at random to settle. Rather, the General Court of Massachusetts chose this area as the ideal spot to establish a settlement due to its easy access to the Hampton River and its surrounding salt marshes which could provide ample amounts of hay to feed their cattle.¹¹ Even though the settlers lived along the seacoast and the river, they were initially farmers rather than fishermen¹² and the entire economy was agrarian-based.¹³ The settlers farmed more than just the salt marshes; even Great Boar's Head, the large,



A postcard that pictures the salt hay marshes that still surround Hampton Beach. In the distance, haycocks, or piles of hay placed on small stilts to help the hay dry out, can be seen for miles.
(Picture courtesy of Lane Memorial Library)

round glacial deposit just north of Hampton Beach proper, was covered in crop fields, as seen in period sketches of the area. It was because of these crop fields on both the marshes and the mainland that the town of Hampton was able to become a stable and nearly self-sufficient settlement.



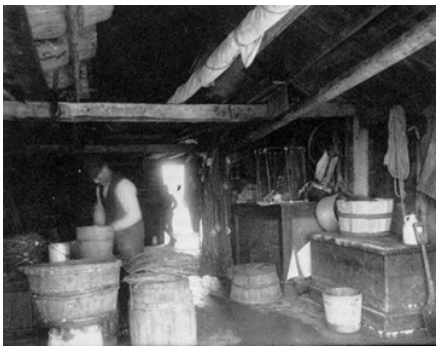
Great Boar's Head is a drumlin, or a long, rounded deposit left by a glacier.
(Picture courtesy of Lane Memorial Library)

The Beach Transforms

In the 18th century, many of the locals eventually became fishermen and the business quickly grew. The development of the fishing, lobstering, and clamming market resulted in the first instance of the colonists using the beach.¹⁴ The fishermen also used the beach to build their fish houses to store their equipment.¹⁵



Fish houses built on North Beach
(Picture courtesy of Lane Memorial Library)



A man standing among his fishing equipment in a fish house on the beach
(Picture courtesy of Lane Memorial Library)

For more than 150 years, Hampton Beach was not used for recreation, but for agriculture and fishing. As Randall, author of *Hampton: A Century of Town and Beach*, noted, the people who lived in Hampton in 1639 had "neither the time nor the inclination to wander the sands of the barrier island we now know as Hampton Beach."¹⁶ As more and more people became fishermen, a need arose for living quarters near the beach.

In response to the fishermen who needed beachfront housing, local businessmen took the opportunity to build the first few hotels of Hampton Beach to accommodate them. The earliest hotels on the Hampton coastline were constructed on Great Boar's Head and the beach road to board the fishermen when they were not working. Thus, the fishing business was directly responsible for the start of what would become the booming Hampton Beach hotel business.¹⁷ Towards the turn of the 19th century, the fishing business began to decline and leisure time inversely increased.¹⁸



Tourists standing in front of the Eagle House Hotel located at the base of Great Boar's Head after 1830
(Picture courtesy of Lane Memorial Library)



Tourists at The Union House hotel between 1860 and 1890 at the corner of Lafayette and Winnacunnet Street
(Picture courtesy of Lane Memorial Library)

Businessmen took advantage of the changing economy and quickly transformed their hotels into more than just housing for the local workers. They became places where people could spend their free time, both indoors and outside on the beach.¹⁹ The business' transformation proved so successful that the 19th century at Hampton Beach became known as the "Hotel Era!"²⁰ Some examples of major hotels that were built, maintained, and even sometimes rebuilt after destructive fires were the Hampton Beach Hotel, the Boar's Head Hotel,

The Rockingham, the Eagle House, the Ocean House, and the presently well-known Ashworth Hotel was built later in the beginning of the 20th century.²¹ As Hampton Beach gained more hotels, it became a destination in and of itself. However, the people who traveled to Hampton Beach wanted more to do than what the beach could provide on its own.



The Winnisimmet or Winnicomet House, the first hotel on Great Boar's Head, painted between 1819 and 1854
(Picture courtesy of Lane Memorial Library)

Hampton Beach Becomes a Destination

Even though the beach had "few attractions other than natural surroundings," it nevertheless became a popular destination.²² As the fishing

business declined and more tourists were visiting Hampton Beach for recreation, the demand for hotels and more exciting activities was also on the rise. In 1819, one of the first hotels on Great Boar's Head was built by Abraham Marston Jr. and Amos Towle. It was called the "Winnisimet" or "Winnicunnet" hotel, which seem to be variations of the original town name "Winnacunnet." However, this particular hotel was more than just a place to stay the night: this was one of the first to be considered a "resort."²³ It earned this title because it was a multi-purposed hotel that offered both boarding rooms and entertainment. The increase in "resort" hotels and recreational activities gave Hampton the distinction of being "one of the America's first summer recreational centers."²⁴

Hampton Beach's fame grew as people came from further away to spend their leisure time at the beach. In 1843, John Greenleaf Whittier, a poet from the New Hampshire seacoast area, wrote a poem called "Hampton Beach". It was about a day trip that he took out to the beach to escape the busyness of city life, if only for a few hours.²⁵ In his poem it was clear that the beach had transformed into a vacation spot. As Randall stated, Whittier's poem described the beach before it was developed and anyone could "pitch a tent anywhere and commune with nature," as Whittier himself did.²⁶ One of the stanzas in his poem, "Hampton Beach," illustrated the relaxed atmosphere of the beach:



John Greenleaf Whittier,
1807-1892
(Picture courtesy of SeacoastNH)

*Good by to pain and care! I take
Mine ease to-day:
Here where these sunny waters break,
And ripples this keen breeze, I shake
All burdens from the heart, all weary thoughts away.*²⁷

Another gives special recognition to the natural beauty of Hampton beach:

*What heed I of the dusty land
And noisy town?
I see the mighty deep expand
From its white line of glimmering sand
To where the blue of heaven on bluer waves shuts down.*²⁸

Through advertising, word of mouth, and literature such as Whittier's poem, people from all over northeastern Massachusetts and the New Hampshire seacoast heard about all Hampton Beach had to offer. Lucy Dow praised Hampton Beach for seamlessly combining "fashion and rusticity" and "bustle and solitude." The popularity of Hampton Beach sharply increased when new forms of transportation provided easier access to the growing recreational center.

The Railroad Brings Vacationers

In 1840, the newest form of transportation finally reached Hampton Beach: the railroad.²⁹ As Joseph Dow, author of *History of the Town of Hampton*,



The Hampton railroad depot
(Picture courtesy of the Hampton Historical Society)

stated, "with the advent of the railroad, travel increased, ideas broadened, trade advanced, [and] property became more available," and Hampton Beach was no exception.³⁰ For many visitors, a day at the beach was not enough. With the beach more accessible through the railroad system, the amount of tourists who visited and the amount of time these visitors

intended to stay was increasing.³¹ According to an unknown author of the mid-19th century quoted in Randall's book, people came for a short stay at the beach because it provided fun things to do and a comfortable place to relax, all at "moderate charges."³²

As a result of these new visitors, hotels became quite elaborate and strived to provide more activity and entertainment to accompany the beach itself. These resorts had features like dancing halls and restaurants attached to them. Before long, the hotels themselves became "local social centers" with all sorts of activity to entertain the masses.³³ There were even some instances of more extravagant entertainment-based additions to the businesses of Hampton beach, such as a dance hall being turned into a roller-skating rink in the 1880s.³⁴ As the businesses of Hampton Beach became more focused on recreation and entertaining tourists, a culture arose that was very different from any other in the area.



Visitors sit on Hampton Beach in their street clothes (Picture courtesy of Hampton Historical Society)

As the turn of the 20th century approached, Hampton Beach experienced several major transitions that changed it forever. Several of the iconic additions to the beach were added within a few years of each other. Aspects of the beach that still exist today were developed and it drew new people from further away. Click NEXT to read about Hampton Beach's major transition period in *Turn of the 20th Century: "A Seaside Tourist Destination."*

Sources

- ¹ Randall, Peter E. *Hampton, A Century of Town and Beach*. Portsmouth, NH: Peter E. Randall Publisher and the Town of Hampton, 1990, 268.
- ² New Hampshire Department of Resources and Economic Development. Division of Parks and Recreation. *Results of Phase IA Site Assessment, Hampton Beach State Park Redevelopment*. By Carol S. Weed, Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc. Concord, N.H., November 2009, 14.
- ³ Ross, Rev. J. A. *Historical Sketch of Hampton N.H., For 250 Years, 1638-1888, And Of The Congregational Church In Hampton, N.H.*. Haverhill, MA: C. C. Morse & Son, 1901, 2.
- ⁴ *Results of Phase IA Site Assessment* 14.
- ⁵ Lane, L. K. H. . "Historic Hampton." *The Granite Monthly*, July 1896.
<http://www.hampton.lib.nh.us/hampton/history/historichampton.htm> (accessed September 19, 2013).
- ⁶ Dow, Lucy. *The Beautiful Place of Pines: A Sketch of Hampton, N.H.*. Portsmouth, NH: Journal Steam Printing Establishment, 1888, 3.
- ⁷ Ibid 4-5.
- ⁸ Dow, Joseph. *History of the Town of Hampton: From Its First Settlement in 1638 To the Autumn of 1892. History of Hampton, New Hampshire*. Vol. 1. Edited by Lucy Dow. Portsmouth, NH: Peter E. Randall, 1988, 14.
- ⁹ Marston, Lucy A., and John M. Holman. Lane Memorial Library, "WINNACUNNET: "Beautiful Place of Pines". Accessed August 13, 2013. <http://www.hampton.lib.nh.us/hampton/history/holman/winnacun.htm>.
- ¹⁰ Joseph Dow 12.
- ¹¹ Randall 268.
- ¹² Joseph Dow 514.
- ¹³ *Results of Phase IA Site Assessment* 14.
- ¹⁴ Ibid 14.
- ¹⁵ Randall 539.
- ¹⁶ Ibid 1.
- ¹⁷ Ibid 2.
- ¹⁸ Ibid 5.
- ¹⁹ Ibid 6.
- ²⁰ Ibid 1.
- ²¹ Joseph Dow 503-505.
- ²² Randall 13.
- ²³ Ibid 6.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Ibid 21-22.
- ²⁶ Ibid 21.
- ²⁷ SeacoastNH.com, "Whittier's "Hampton Beach"." Last modified 1998.
Accessed August 27, 2013. <http://www.seacoastnh.com/poems/hampton.html>.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Joseph Dow 330.
- ³⁰ Ibid 330.
- ³¹ Randall 19.
- ³² Ibid 15.
- ³³ Ibid 30.
- ³⁴ Ibid 33.