

Geographical and Historical Background

"Let's Go Down to Hampton Beach

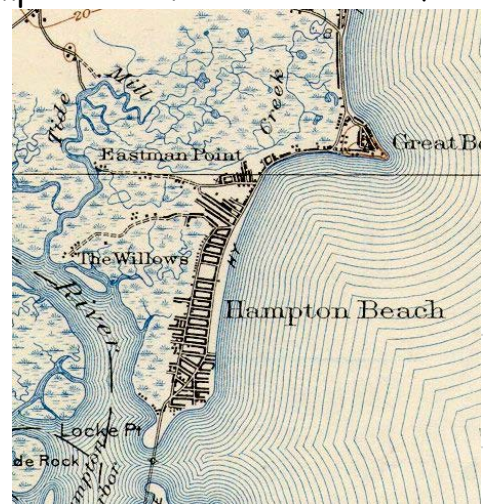
- "As Sung by 'BILL' Elliot, Hampton's Famous Singing 'Cop'"

Hampton beach is a barrier chain, or a strip of land that protects the mainland from the damaging effects of waves and hurricanes off the ocean.¹ It is surrounded by the salt hay marshes that first attracted English settlers to the area 375 years ago in 1638.² The town did not learn to appreciate the recreational assets of the beach until the 19th century. In 1897 the Hampton Beach Improvement Company began the recreation and entertainment-based development of the beachfront. The State of New Hampshire acquired the beach in 1933 and took responsibility for maintaining it.³ The State also maintained and added to the buildings that the HBIC had developed. The beach has been constantly evolving since the early 1800s and continues even today.

Geographical Setting

Hampton Beach is located on the southern half of the New Hampshire coastline, just north of the mouth of the Hampton River. The beach itself is on a barrier chain or barrier island that runs north to south. It is not a true island as it is connected to the mainland on its northern end. It is also connected to Seabrook on the southern by the State Route 1A via the Neil R. Underwood Memorial Bridge.⁴

A barrier chain is a wide beach that provides protection for the mainland from destructive forces like storms and large waves.⁵ Hampton Beach Proper is 1.2 miles



Map of the Hampton, NH seacoast
(Picture courtesy of the Department of Resources and Economic Development)

long.⁶ The entirety of Hampton Beach State Park stretches from the southern Hampton Beach State Reservation on the Hampton River and north to High Street, interrupted only by Great Boar's Head. As seen in Hampton's surrounding salt marshes, a barrier chain is only habitable in some places, but these inhabitable areas were the very reason that the English originally chose to settle in Hampton.⁷

A prominent feature on Hampton Beach that has been important to its occupants since the settlement of the town is Great Boar's Head. It is a large land formation that lies on the northern end of the central beach area of Hampton Beach State Park and appears on maps as a point that extends



Aerial view of Great Boar's Head, from the north.
(Picture courtesy of Lane Memorial Library)

into the ocean. It is a "lenticular moraine or drumlin," which is a long and rounded glacial deposit.⁸ According to a Hampton resident born in 1833, Great Boar's Head got its name because of a large rock that once protruded from the bank. The rock made the steep bank appear as the profile of a boar's head, looking at it from the south. The rock apparently broke off and fell into the ocean

before the turn of the twentieth century which forever removed its iconic silhouette.⁹

Historical Background

In 1638, Hampton was known as "Winnacunnet," a Native American word,¹⁰ when it was settled by order of the General Court of Massachusetts.¹¹ The name was changed to Hampton the next year at the request of Reverend Stephen Bachiler, the leader of the settlement.¹² The General Court of Massachusetts chose to settle Hampton because of its surrounding salt hay marshes. The vast marshes provided an "inexhaustible supply" of



Salt hay farmers on Hampton's marshes
(Picture courtesy of Lane Memorial Library)

salt marsh hay to feed the settlers' cattle.¹³ The town originally incorporated land from the current New Hampshire towns of Seabrook to Kingston to Rye.¹⁴ At its peak size, it covered around 100 square miles of the Seacoast.¹⁵

The development of the Hampton Beach area began in 1897 with a 99-year lease that gave the Hampton Beach Improvement Company developmental rights to the beach.¹⁶ Consequently, the HBIC also had control of the character of the beach as it was built up over the years.¹⁷ A trolley line was constructed in 1897¹⁸ which eventually connected Hampton Beach to several surrounding towns, and even to Boston.¹⁹ During the turn of the twentieth century, several iconic beachfront buildings were built within a few years of each other. Once complete, these buildings had a large impact on the development of Hampton Beach's activity center.

One of the first of these buildings was the Hampton Beach Casino, built in 1899 by Wallace D. Lovell.²⁰ Lovell had it built with the intention of making it



Hampton Beach Bandstand and the Casino
across the street
(Picture courtesy of Lane Memorial Library)

an attraction in itself.²¹ The Casino has continually updated both its entertainment offerings and exterior architecture to follow the changing times and tastes. Another building was the Hampton Beach Bandstand that was built across the street from the Casino in 1901. It was originally constructed to complement the Casino by holding daily concerts that could be viewed from either the beach or the Casino

balcony.²² The bandstand, like the Casino, soon became an attraction in itself.²³ Several buildings were constructed around the bandstand, including the Comfort Station, the popcorn stand, the Chamber of Commerce, and the life-saving station.²⁴

These amenities increased Hampton Beach not only in size, but also in the amount of people that visited and could be accommodated. The beach became populated by rentable cottages, large hotels, and businesses specifically



The Ashworth Hotel
(Picture courtesy of Lane Memorial Library)

catering to tourists.²⁵ Many of these businesses were on the beach road that is now Ocean Boulevard.²⁶ This area continued to grow even after two devastating fires in 1915 and 1921.²⁷ According to an article written for Hampton's 300th Anniversary celebration in 1938, the town did not realize for the first 200 years that the beach was its biggest asset.²⁸

The State Acquires the Beach

By the 1930s, the Town of Hampton was overwhelmed with the large financial burden required to maintain the sandy beach of the barrier chain.²⁹ As a result, the Town transferred ownership of Hampton Beach to the State of New Hampshire by selling it for \$1.00 in 1933. The Deed of Sale stated that the beach was transferred to the State under the requirement that it will only be used for "public highway, park and recreational purposes forever." It also prohibited the establishment of any concessions on State land so as not to compete with local commercial businesses. The State was directed to maintain the bandstand, comfort station, Chamber of Commerce building and "similar structures," as well as the playground and parking areas.³⁰

Five years later, during the 300th anniversary celebration, it was written that, "If town and State combine to conserve the Beach and to protect it from destruction from the tides and the sea, the future of the Beach will be even greater than the past." This echoed the hope of all who were involved in the maintenance of Hampton Beach.³¹

Maintaining the Beach

In 1933, a law was passed that authorized several methods the State

Hampton Beach sand dunes in the early 1900s
(Picture courtesy of Lane Memorial Library)



intended to use to maintain and improve the beach. One of the actions the law specified was to build a seawall to protect the beach.³² The natural sand dunes that were on Hampton Beach were characteristic of a classic barrier chain. The dunes were on the innermost or western side of

the beach forming a ridge. Normally, the dunes rose and fell in natural cycles so that the beach and the mainland were always protected.³³ By the 1930s, around the time the State acquired the beach, the sand dunes were almost completely leveled. This was due to both Hampton Beach's dense development and natural causes.³⁴

As a result, the State was required to build seawalls along the beach to assume the function once held by the dunes. After extensive planning that began in 1932, seawall construction was officially underway in 1947.³⁵ The normal progression that replenished the dunes every year was completely halted by the seawall that has replaced them.³⁶

Another initiative that the 1932 law authorized was the addition of land to Hampton Beach. Soon after the State acquired the beach, sand was dredged from the Hampton River and poured onto the southern tip of Hampton Beach State Park. This added fifty new acres of land to the beach and was called Hampton Beach State Reservation. In order to maintain this section of the beach, the Hampton River is dredged approximately every 5-6 years to replenish it. This process still continues today. Within the next few years, a State bathhouse and parking lot were built on the Hampton Beach State Reservation.³⁷

Aerial view of Hampton Beach State Reservation, created after the State acquired the beach.
(Picture courtesy of Lane Memorial Library)



The Bathhouse

The Bathhouse at the State Reservation was added in 1937 and has quite an amusing history.³⁸ By the end of the 1920s, bathing suits had become much more revealing than they ever were in the past. In 1928,



The State Bathhouse, built on the Hampton Beach State Reservation.
(Picture courtesy of Lane Memorial Library)

some people became increasingly concerned with the people walking around with just their bathing suits on when they were not directly on the beach. According to the protesters, something had to be done to stop people from “parading around the beach and particularly through the business section in scanty attire.”

In 1928, the protestors started calling for two municipal, or town-owned, bathhouses on both ends of Hampton Beach. This suggestion finally reached the Hampton town meeting in 1934 and an ordinance was passed as a result. It stated, “a suitable covering should be worn over bathing suits by all appearing in public places except when on the beach or when crossing the boulevard in front of private residences.” This “humorous situation” provided the opportunity to build the bathhouse that serviced the public for the next fifty years.³⁹

The new bathhouse was opened in July of 1937 on the Hampton Beach State Reservation that was created just three years earlier.⁴⁰ The construction took a team of 160 men forty days to complete.⁴¹ The building was maintained by the N.H. Forestry and Recreation Commission, a department of the State that is comparable to the Division of Parks and Recreation that maintains Hampton Beach State Park today.⁴²

The State Bathhouse sun deck
(Picture courtesy of Lane Memorial Library)



LET'S GO DOWN TO HAMPTON BEACH

*“Let’s get away from our troubles today,
I know a place where we may
The crowd is all there without trouble or care,
Ev’ry one cheerful and gay*

*Pleasure and joy for each girl and boy,
Happy and healthy at play
And if you once go,
You’ll find it so
Then you’ll be the one to say:*

*Let’s go down to Hampton Beach.
Hampton-By-The-Sea
Let’s go down to Hampton Beach,
That’s the place for me*

*Whether you go in the day or the night,
Ev’ry-thing there is just sure to be right,
So let’s All go down to Hampton,
OK Let’s Go! Go! Go!*

*Let’s go down to Hampton Beach.
Hampton-By-The-Sea
Let’s go down to Hampton Beach,
That’s the place for me*

*Whether you go in the day or the night,
Ev’ry-thing there is just sure to be right,
So let’s All go down to Hampton,
OK Let’s Go! Go! Go!”*

As Sung by:
“Bill” Elliot, Hampton’s Famous Singing “Cop”
Words and Music by:
Charles H. Leave, Conductor
The Hampton Beach Concert Band
Published by:
The Hampton Beach Chamber of Commerce and Development
Council, 1938

The bathhouse had an “ultramodern” style⁴³ and included 178 cubicles for changing,⁴⁴ along with tennis courts, shuffleboard, and other games.⁴⁵ According to a 1950s edition of a local magazine, “swimming [was] made easy” with the lockers, showers, and restrooms that serviced thousands of beachgoers.⁴⁶ On

top of the building was a sun deck which was used as an observation deck and a place to dine on items sold at the included refreshment counter.⁴⁷ By the 1980s, the building was considered outdated;⁴⁸ it was eventually torn down in 1986. In its place, a new and smaller structure was built in 1988.⁴⁹

The Seashell Complex

By the end of the 1950s, the state buildings that were included in Hampton Beach's center, such as the bandstand and surrounding buildings, were outdated. The buildings looked worn and were no longer efficient. The State owned buildings needed to be updated to follow the times and keep up with the constantly-upgraded Casino across the street.⁵⁰ After years of planning, the bandstand and surrounding buildings were torn down in 1962 and



1962 Seashell Complex

(Picture courtesy of the Department of Resources and Economic Development)

replaced by the multi-purposed the Seashell Complex. It included a lifeguard office, the Chamber of Commerce, new public toilets, the police station, the comfort station, the ticket and popcorn stands, and a large main stage which replaced the bandstand.⁵¹

The complex was built in the Modern Movement style that was highly efficient and strove to emphasize the buildings'

surroundings rather than the structures themselves.⁵² This type of architecture was based on an initiative that the National Park System had introduced only a few years before called Mission 66. Mission 66 began in 1956 with a 10-year goal to bring many National Parks and their buildings up to modern standards of efficiency, comfort, and conservation. Many of the buildings that were constructed as part of this initiative were visitors' centers. With these new facilities, the NPS hoped to teach the park visitors about their responsibility to conserve the park land and help foster new attitudes toward the parks. The Mission 66 Program intended to communicate these values and priorities to visitors partly through the

architecture of the new buildings.⁵³

The buildings constructed as part of the Mission 66 initiative tended to have geometric shapes and were as open as possible to bring the outside in. They were created to have a balance between protection and use. It allowed people to enjoy the park and all it had to offer without creating a large public impact on the especially fragile ecosystems and natural resources of the park. This was an idea that was applicable not only to National Parks, but

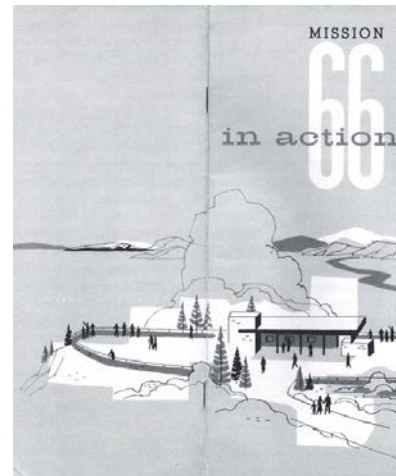
also to State Parks and several other institutions. According to the author of *Mission 66 Visitor Centers: The History of a Building Type*, "The Park Service Modern style—epitomized by the Mission 66 visitor center—once again led the way in establishing what was considered an appropriate approach to planning and designing the built environment in national and state parks." Following the example set by the NPS, Hampton Beach was one



2012 Seashell Complex main stage
(Picture courtesy of Lane Memorial Library)

of numerous State Parks and other agencies that built structures in the same Modern Movement style.⁵⁴

The 1962 Seashell Complex stood until it was replaced by the new and redeveloped Seashell Complex in 2012.⁵⁵ The new complex was the first recommendation in the 2001 *Hampton Beach Area Master Plan* that was created to imagine the next 50 years of Hampton Beach's developmental improvement.⁵⁶



Flyer for Mission 66
(Picture courtesy of the Department of Resources and Economic Development)

Aerial view of Hampton Beach from a biplane, taken in 1918

(Picture courtesy of Lane Memorial Library)



Hampton Beach has become a wildly popular beach resort for tourists from all over New England. Its history as a vacation spot stretches back over 100 years. However, the town of Hampton was settled over 250 years before development ever began at Hampton Beach. Click NEXT to read about the exciting time from the first settlement of Hampton in 1638 to the time just before development began in Early History: "Winnacunnet shalbee called Hampton."

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³ New Hampshire Department of Resources and Economic Development. Division of Historical Resources. *Hampton Beach Area Form*. By R. Walsh, J. Keane, and Carol S. Weed, Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc. Concord, N.H., 2009, 10.

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- ²⁰ *Hampton Beach Area Form 7*.
- ²¹ Randall 42-43.
- ²² *Hampton Beach Area Form 7*.
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- ²⁸ Warren.
- ²⁹ *Hampton Beach Area Form 10*.
- ³⁰ Deed of Sale from Town of Hampton, New Hampshire to State of New Hampshire, 26 October 1933 (filed 3 November 1933), Hampton, New Hampshire, Deed Book 894, page 44. Rockingham County Office.
- ³¹ Warren.
- ³² *Results of Phase IA Site Assessment* 15.
- ³³ Ibid 8.
- ³⁴ *Hampton Beach Area Form 9*.
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- ³⁷ Ibid 15.
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