

SEA ISLE CITY HISTORY

-- NUNS AT THE BEACH --

(Before 1962 and the Great Nor'easter)

They called them convents, retreat houses and religious vacation homes. Once, they could be seen up and down the beachfront in Sea Isle City, especially concentrated in the space of a dozen blocks south of downtown. The Clergy were here to relax and to enjoy the city's amenities – just like any other tourists.

The religious orders represented reads like a litany:

Sisters of Mercy of Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Maryland; Sisters of Saint Joseph, Saint Dominic, and The Holy Child; Daughters of the Redeemer; Augustinian Fathers; and Oblate Fathers of Washington, DC. There were more.



Two Sisters of St. Joseph enjoying Sea Isle in the 1950s

The architecture of these shorefront retreats displayed a smorgasbord of styles and sizes, from typical beach town homes to the latest in Victorian mansions. Over time, some changed names, some changed hands, some moved, some were damaged and restored, but most were eventually beaten to death by the wind and the sea. The buildings were all gone after the great nor'easter of March, 1962. Today, they make up a part of Sea Isle's past heritage worth revisiting.

The Sea Isle City Historical Museum has provided a collection of archived photographs which give a glimpse into this earlier landscape. Traveling from north to south:

Saint Rita's Cottage (26th Street and the beach)

A "cottage" is usually pictured as a simple, single-level structure, accommodating just a few people. This wasn't one of those. The humble Saint Rita of Cascio, Italy, for whom the cottage was named, would have thought it a grand palace.

The Augustinian Fathers used Saint Rita's as a summer retreat. The men could be seen walking the beach in their traditional long black cassocks, reading their daily breviary. The masses they celebrated at the cottage were often attended by residents of the town.



Saint Rita's Cottage on the beach at 26th Street

The Pittsburgh Sisters of Mercy (48th Street)

The story of the Pittsburgh Sisters in Sea Isle began in 1897 with the visit by one of the Sisters to her actual sister who was a Sister of Saint Joseph. Sister Mary Madeline O'Donnell liked it so much that she convinced her Pittsburgh hierarchy to rent a small, furnished cottage for the summer.

Things developed from there. Thanks to relatives of the Sisters, in 1900 they were able to build "St. Mary's Sanitarium" on the corner of 48th Street and the boardwalk. It was modernized in 1927 and expanded to accommodate 36 occupants.

St. Mary's naturally suffered through many storms. It was a way of life. The cottage was severely damaged by the hurricane of 1944, after which it was restored and improved. But then came March 6, 1962, when a tidal wave struck the cottage – and St. Mary's was gone.



St. Mary's Cottage – Pittsburgh Sisters of Mercy (48th St. & the boardwalk)

But the Sisters weren't left without a cottage near the beach. Claude VanHook had established the Sea Isle Hospital and Training School in 1926 at the southwest corner of 48th Street and Pleasure Ave. In 1958 it was sold to the Pittsburgh Sisters of Mercy to use as a vacation home which they called "St. Anne's Cottage." Forty years later, a fire all but totaled the home, and it was ultimately torched by a fire school for practice.



*St. Anne's Cottage – Pittsburgh Sisters of Mercy at 48th Street & Pleasure Avenue
(The red brick building was part of the hospital)*

Our Lady Star of the Sea (49th Street)

Just a block south of the Pittsburgh cottage, the Dominican Sisters of the Most Holy Rosary set up shop along the beach at the end of 49th Street. The two undated photos below illustrate the dramatic transformation of their convent from a simple shore house to the complex shown at the right.



The original Star of the Sea Convent



The later, expanded version

In the 1920s the order had the temerity to charge seven dollars a week for a nun to stay at the convent during the summer. They thereby ran afoul of the tax man, who claimed this negated their tax exempt status. So the Sisters decided to sue the City of Sea Isle City. They lost.

The Philadelphia Sisters of Mercy (51st Street)

The Philadelphia Sisters' involvement in the Sea Isle community peaked when they operated Mercy Hospital from 1953 to 1969 and taught at St. Joseph School from its opening in 1963.

But the Sisters had had a presence in the town long before that. From a material standpoint, their most outstanding achievement was the magnificent convent at 51st Street on the beach. This great gray Victorian mansion was built in the 1890s.

The following image, taken from an artificially tinted postcard, shows the Philadelphia Sisters of Mercy two-building complex at the left (south). The Dominican Star of the Sea Convent is shown two buildings to the north of the mansion. The difference in both style and size between the two is pretty striking.



Panoramic view from about 48th Street to 52nd Street

The Philadelphia Sisters must have thoroughly enjoyed their sojourns at the mansion. The Sea Isle Museum provided these photos:



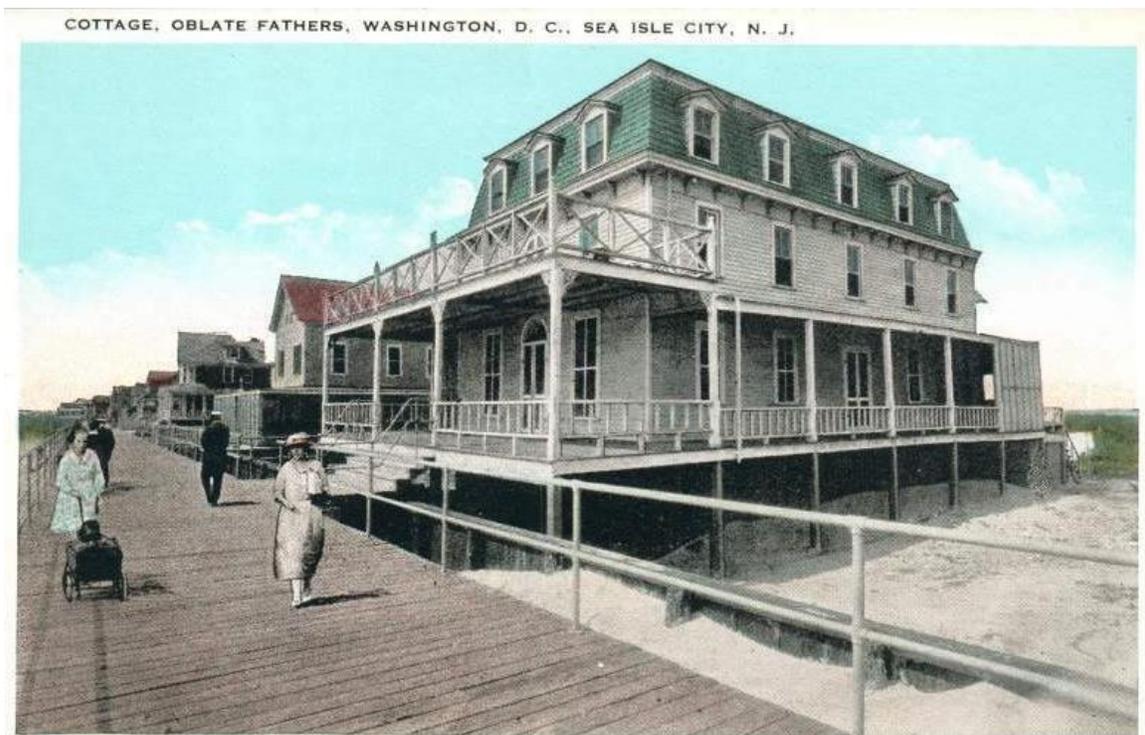
Anticipation of vacation (mid 1940s)



Nuns at the beach (mid 1950s)

Oblate Fathers of Washington, DC (53rd Street)

A few blocks farther south at 53rd Street, the Oblate Fathers occupied two summer cottages side-by-side at the beach. This was one of them:



Sisters of Mercy – Baltimore, Maryland (60th Street)

In 1915, the estate of William F. Rowan deeded property at 50th Street and the beachfront to the Baltimore Sisters of Mercy for a convent. The cost was \$4,700.00, equivalent to \$132,000.00 today – still a bargain. The Sisters called their convent “Mercy Cliff,” although it was also known as “Half-Way House.” The names are a bit of a mystery.

At first look, it seems that the two undated images of the convent shown below couldn't be of the same building. But they are. The original Mercy Cliff was enlarged and the upper floors remodeled in later years. The image at the right probably postdates the 1944 hurricane, after which the boardwalk extended to, and ended at, 60th Street.



This seems to have been the southern boundary of early religious buildings. Like all the others, the Baltimore convent was washed away in the 1962 storm. The City bought what was left.

And there were others

If we back off just a bit from the beach, more early religious buildings appear on the list. Two examples are the Mercy Hospital property and the Convent of the Sisters of the Holy Child.

Surf Hospital, founded by Dr. Frank Dealy in 1946, was sold to the Sisters of Mercy in 1953, who renamed it "Mercy Hospital." When it was sadly closed in 1969, the Sisters turned it into a vacation home, and later replaced it with a three-building complex. Today, it's the site of the Saint Joseph by-the-Sea Retreat House which fills the block between 58th and 59th Streets, just a block from the beach.

The Convent of the Holy Child was established at the northeast corner of 48th Street and Pleasure Avenue. The Sisters administered to the sick and homebound of St. Joseph's parish. The building is still standing and still looks pretty much the way it looked in 1952.



Mercy Hospital



Convent of the Holy Child (1952 postcard)

Beachfront Charities

There was another category of ecumenical presence in the early days – that which provided a place at the shore for those who couldn't afford it, especially children. Examples were Camp Cardinal Dougherty between 26th and 27th Streets at the beach, St. Joseph's Home for Boys at 13-53rd Street, and All Saints' Sea Shore Home at 55th Street on the boardwalk.

Camp Cardinal Dougherty, which operated from about 1923 to 1940, was run by the Archdiocese of Philadelphia to give hundreds of inner city boys the opportunity to experience the fresh air of Sea Isle City in a self-governed, camp-like environment.

St. Joseph's Home for Boys, built in 1900 and originally called "Gordon's Seaview," was also operated by the Philadelphia Archdiocese as a summer retreat for inner city boys. After it suffered a devastating fire in 2002, its rooftop cross was donated to the Sea Isle Museum and currently stands in the garden behind 4208 Landis Avenue.

In 1901, All Saints purchased the property once known as Prospect Hall and converted it into a charitable summer home. Its official name was "All Saints' Sea-Shore Home for Women and Children." It was operated by the Sisters of St. Clement's Episcopal parish of Philadelphia.



Camp Cardinal Dougherty



St. Joseph's Home for Boys



All Saints' Sea Shore Home

All the buildings pictured in this article are gone now, save one. None that was standing at the beach on the day of the '62 nor'easter managed to survive. Some years later, Mother Mary Irenaeus Daugherty of the Pittsburgh Sisters of Mercy wrote in a letter to the Sea Isle Museum, "God again saw fit to show us who is Master of Sea and Earth, Wind and Waves." Amen.

To enjoy our collection of photos, literature, and artifacts, please visit the Sea Isle City Historical Museum at 48th Street and Central Avenue (inside the Library). Access our website at www.seaislemuseum.com . Call 609-263-2992. Our current hours are 10:00am to 3:00pm on Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday, and 1:00pm to 3:00pm on Friday. Admission is free.

**This “Spotlight on History” was written by
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All images were provided by the Sea Isle City Historical Society

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