

CAPE HANLOPEN THROUGH HISTORY

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Delaware Coastal Zone Management Program

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CAPE HENLOPEN THROUGH HISTORY

From the earliest hunters and gatherers, to modern sunbathers and beachcombers, Cape Henlopen has always attracted visitors to its shores. Long before the first Europeans arrived, Native Americans camped on Cape Henlopen's many sand spits. The finger-like projections reached into the shallow bay and provided ideal spots from which to harvest the abundant fish and shell fish.

EARLY EXPLORERS

The first recorded discovery of the area was made by English explorer Henry Hudson, in 1609. A log book on Hudson's ship, the "Half Moon," contains the first description of the Delaware Bay. Since Hudson sailed in the employ of the Dutch East India Company, the Dutch claimed the bay and named it the "South River."

The following summer a ship owned by the Virginia Company was blown off its Bermuda-to-Virginia course and came to rest in the bay. The English commander of the "Discovery," Samuel Argall, named the curious body of water in honor of the governor of the Virginia Colony, Thomas West, the third Lord "De la Warr". The bay would become known as Delaware Bay.

In 1614, the "Fortune," captained by Dutch navigator Cornelius Jacobsen Mey sailed into the bay. Mey gave his last name to the northern cape (known today as Cape May, N.J.) and his first name to the southern cape. The false cape now located near Fenwick Island he named Cape "Hindlopen," after a town or a personage in his mother country. An early map maker mislabeled the capes, switching the names Henlopen and Cornelius, and to this day the southern cape has been known as Cape Henlopen.

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FIRST EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT

In the spring of 1631 a group of 28 Dutch mariners arrived at the mouth of the Delaware Bay. Their intent was to establish a whaling settlement at the present site of the City of Lewes. This first colony was named "Zwaanendael," Dutch for "Valley of the Swans," so named for the many swans found there. Soon after their arrival, the colonists were killed following a dispute with a faction of local Native Americans. It was thirty years before another colony was re-established on Cape Henlopen. This second Dutch settlement, was also the New World's first Mennonite community.

The Dutch, then the Swedes and English settled along the Delaware Bay and River in the early 17th Century. The Dutch remained in control of the area until 1633 when the English attacked Dutch outposts. England gained control of Dutch holdings in North America following the Second Anglo-Dutch War.

PENN'S LEGACY

England's Duke of York in 1682, deeded to William Penn the lands below the southern boundary of Penn's Province of Pennsylvania. The area (today's State of Delaware) became known as the "lower three counties" of Pennsylvania. In that same year, Penn granted a petition by an Edmond Warner to establish a "coney" or rabbit warren on Cape Henlopen. In granting Warner's request, Penn stipulated that the Cape and all its natural resources (timber, fish, berries, etc.) were to be for the common usage of the people of Lewes and Sussex County. Of course, the rabbits were Warner's property. In essence, Penn gave Cape Henlopen and probably all of the coast to the public. It could be said that the Cape was designated a "park" long before Delaware had become a state. Some 200 years later, a lawsuit brought by concerned citizens, would cite the Warner Grant to prevent the sale of what had become surplus ocean-front property. Penn's act of generosity would help to secure for all Delawareans one of the most beautiful seashore parks on the eastern seaboard.

THE CAPE HENLOPEN LIGHTHOUSE

By the middle of the 18th Century, the volume of shipping in the Delaware Bay had increased to the point where the safety of vessels using the bay was a major concern. Shipwrecks around the treacherous Delaware coast were commonplace and resulted in great loss of life and cargo. In the early 1760s, Philadelphia ship owners and merchants used a public lottery to raise the money necessary to build a permanent lighthouse on Cape Henlopen. At the time of its construction (about 1765) the 60 ft. lighthouse stood atop a high sand dune, about a quarter of a mile from the ocean and 3,300 ft. from the northern tip of the Cape. The Henlopen Lighthouse became one of the most important navigational aids in the New World. In the final years of its existence, the lighthouse teetered on the brink of the 80ft. "Great Dune." On April 13, 1926, the lighthouse toppled into the sea, a victim of the continuous erosion of the Cape's Atlantic beaches.

THE REVOLUTION

Since it was rich in grain and removed from the theater of land warfare, Delaware became a main supplier of food for Washington's troops. At the outbreak of the war, a permanent look-out was posted at the Henlopen Lighthouse. Lewes was garrisoned and boats of the Continental Navy kept up an almost constant harassment of British ships. Despite these efforts, the British took virtual control of the Delaware River and Bay. During the fall and winter of 1777 and the spring of 1778, Delawareans lived in constant fear of enemy raids. British ships landed when and where they chose and carried-off whatever provisions they could find.

SALT WORKS

Salt was an essential imported element in early America, because it was used in the preservation of food. The British blockade of American ports during the Revolution and the War of 1812 created serious shortages of salt. Various methods were tried in order to produce salt by evaporating seawater on open sand. These enterprises had limited success, but were most productive during the War of 1812, when salt works operated, reportedly on the flats beyond the site of the Henlopen Lighthouse. By the middle of the 19th Century, commercial salt production in the Cape Henlopen area was located south of Gordon's Pond.

THE HMS DeBRAAK

The Cape Henlopen Lighthouse did much to make the entrance to the Bay less hazardous. However, summer squalls and winter ice floes continued to sink ships. The most noteworthy among them was the British Brig, the HMS DeBraak, which sank off the coast of Cape Henlopen in May of 1798. Spanish prisoners who survived the sinking reported that the ship was carrying a large amount of gold. Although historical research discounts this claim, the DeBraak has obsessed treasure hunters for years. Finally, in 1984, the wreckage of the DeBraak was discovered in 80 ft. of water, just off Cape Henlopen. Since then, many objects have been recovered. Although no substantial treasure was found, the number and variety of artifacts (including the captain's inscribed ring) have given us an invaluable look at English naval life in the late 18th Century.

THE WAR OF 1812

Delaware's coast was again exposed to the enemy during the War of 1812. As in the Revolution, the British heavily relied on their mighty navy to defeat American forces at land and sea. Early in the spring of 1813, a British fleet occupied the mouth of the Delaware Bay. Its intent was to strangle the maritime trade of Wilmington and Philadelphia. The English invaders demanded fresh food and water from the townspeople of Lewes. The citizens refused and on April 6, 1813, the British began a long-range naval bombardment of Lewes. Trees on marshes obstructed the view of the enemy and damage to the town was minor. American militia assembled on the beach discouraged would-be landing parties. Until hostilities ceased, small farms along the Delaware shores continued to suffer great losses of sheep, poultry and cattle at the hands of British raiding parties.

DELAWARE BREAKWATERS

The two lengths of stone barriers which form the harbor of Lewes are commonly known as the "Delaware Breakwater." But officially, the inner harbor is the Delaware Breakwater and the outer one, more than twice the former's length, is the "Harbor of Refuge." Each barrier has its own navigation lights which are visible from shore. As in the case of the Henlopen Lighthouse, the mounting loss of life and cargo along the Delaware coast sparked the merchants and ship owners of Philadelphia to petition and receive federal assistance in the building of a shelter for vessels at the mouth of the Delaware Bay. Construction on the inner barrier began in 1828, and was completed about 1839. Work on the outer breakwater began in 1892 and ended in 1898. Together they provide acres of safe anchorage for vessels.

QUARANTINE STATION

At the end of the 19th Century thousands of immigrants fled poor economic conditions in Europe by emigrating to America. In 1884, as part of a nationwide effort to prevent the entry of epidemic disease into the country, the U.S. Government established a quarantine station on Cape Henlopen's bayshore in the area of the Delaware Breakwater. This isolated location allowed authorities the opportunity to board all ships making for ports such as Wilmington and Philadelphia. The U.S. Navy took control of the station from 1917 to 1918. By this time, most of the screening of immigrants had shifted to Ellis Island in New York. The Delaware Breakwater Quarantine Station was abandoned in 1926.

LIFE SAVING STATION

A Life Saving Station was established in 1897 on a one-acre tract just south of the Cape Henlopen Lighthouse. The station, which was staffed by Coast Guard volunteers, joined others staggered along the coast. The function of the life-saving service was to check for floundering ships and bring survivors ashore. To this end, volunteers would patrol the beaches and employ large lifeboats in their rescue efforts. The location of the Life Saving Station now lies underwater.

WORLD WAR II

In 1941 the U.S. Army established a military base at the mouth of the Delaware Bay. "Fort Miles" controlled all Delaware Bay and River entrances and exits. Germany and its allies had marked the Delaware Valley as a prime target because of the ships, trains, ammunition, clothing and petroleum products manufactured there.

During the war years the Cape's natural features were used to the Army's advantage. Along the Delaware and New Jersey coasts dunes were raised or created to camouflage ammunition and personnel bunkers. Gun emplacements were hidden among the dunes, while an anti-submarine mine field was operated from a dune hide-a-way. Concrete observation towers were built as aids in aiming the 16-inch guns hidden in the dunes below. Some of these towers remain standing today and are used for fire control and recreational observation. Many abandoned bunkers still lay intact underneath dunes.

~~In 1964 Cape Henlopen State Park was dedicated, following the purchase of some 1,641 acres of land from the U.S. Department of Defense. The park has~~

~~continued to grow since that time.~~

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Zwaanendael Museum, Lewes, Delaware.

In 1964, Cape Henlopen State Park was dedicated following the purchase of some 1,641 acres of land from the U.S. Department of Defense. Since then, the park has continued to grow in size and popularity. Its acres of shoreline, bayshore, pinelands, freshwater ponds, and cranberry bogs annually attract thousands of visitors to the park.

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