



Salisbury Beach: A Destination Since the 1850's

by

Joyann Reynolds

Industrial Survey Volunteer

Amesbury Carriage Museum

Amesbury, Massachusetts

August 5, 2022

Salisbury Beach: A Destination Since the 1850's

by
Joyann Reynolds
ACM Industrial Survey Volunteer

Most of us have heard of the famous Flying Horses of Salisbury Beach (a carousel) and the wooden roller coaster, and later the Dodge 'em cars. But how about some of the other attractions of yesterday's Salisbury Beach? The Diving Horses, Ferris wheel, hot air balloons, dance halls....

Salisbury Beach was a summer retreat that offered not only the fresh ocean air and a beautiful beach. It also had hotels, restaurants and entertainment that drew people from all around. And it was a getaway even average Amesbury and Salisbury Mills workers could afford. Only six miles away from the mills, it provided a complete change of scenery. Tourists and locals loved the carnival atmosphere, lanterns hung across the road, flags flapped in the wind from every rooftop, the smell of seafood was in the air and music drifted out from each hotel.

There were dance halls, restaurants, a roller skating rink and swimming pools. And if it rained, no problem. Bowling alleys, billiard halls and a theater near the hotels offered indoor entertainment. Groceries could be delivered to your cottage door. A candy shop tempted those with a sweet tooth. Even photography studios were there to create mementos as reminders to return next summer.

The first known hotel was built in 1855 by Alfred Titcomb, and by the 1860's many hotels and cottages were available for rent to accommodate the growing number of visitors. Those that could not afford hotels pitched tents and camped. Salisbury Beach became so popular that by 1867 the yearly Salisbury Beach Festival attracted 20,000 people!

A HOTEL ON SALISBURY BEACH. Visitors to this place will be pleased to learn of the erection of a large and commodious house at this favorite place of resort. It is erected and to be kept by Mr Alfred Titcomb of this village. To those who wish for retirement, a fine view of the broad Atlantic, a good beach, good bathing privileges,—a kind and attentive landlord, we commend them to visit Salisbury beach and the "Atlantic House."

The distance from the depot at East Salisbury to the hotel, is only about two miles, and a carriage will be in waiting on the arrival of each train from Boston and Newmouth to convey visitors to and from the Hotel.

A stable one hundred foot in length is also in process of erection.

Article about the new Atlantic House hotel at Salisbury Beach in the May 24, 1855, issue of *The Villager*, an Amesbury newspaper. <http://amesbury.advantage-preservation.com/>

Transportation to and from the beach from the 1850's through the early 1900's was provided by horse and carriage, railroad, and steamboat. One of these steamboats, called *Merrimac*, could carry 1,100 people and made two round trips daily during the summer. Pulling carriages full of people and baggage across the sand proved a challenge for the horses so a wooden plank road was built to allow horses and carriages to bring in travelers from the train depot in Salisbury. The new plank road also kept down the dust, which sometimes covered passengers making their way to hotels. Trolley cars soon took over from horse-drawn carriages, but the automobile had become the chosen means of transportation by 1910.



Road to Salisbury Beach c.1910. Postcard. ACM, S.P.R.R.H.S. Collection.



Broadway, Salisbury Beach, c.1910. Postcard. ACM, S.P.R.R.H.S. Collection.

Salisbury Beach was also famous for entertainment. Before the 1950's amusement rides, other entertainment, such as J. W. Gorman's Diving Horse Show, drew thrill-seeking visitors. The traveling show featured a pair of pure white horses who would dive from a platform 40 feet above the water. It was said they were not trained to dive – it was in their breeding.

Adding more excitement were hot air balloons, which could be seen lifting off from the beach throughout the late 1800's. Then there was the large wooden roller coaster that once stood between Broadway and Ocean Ave. It was rebuilt several times over the years. Culver's Flying Horses were there too, but destroyed in the 1913 fire. It was replaced by a merry-go-round that survived until 1977 when it was removed.



J. W. Gorman's diving horses at Salisbury Beach, c.1910. Postcard. ACM, S.P.R.R.H.S. Collection.



Balloon ascension at Salisbury Beach, 1885. Postcard. Private collection.

Live musicians, comedians, magicians, acrobats and dancers were just a few of the shows the hotels would provide for the guests each week. There were also baseball games to be seen and picnics to enjoy on the beach.

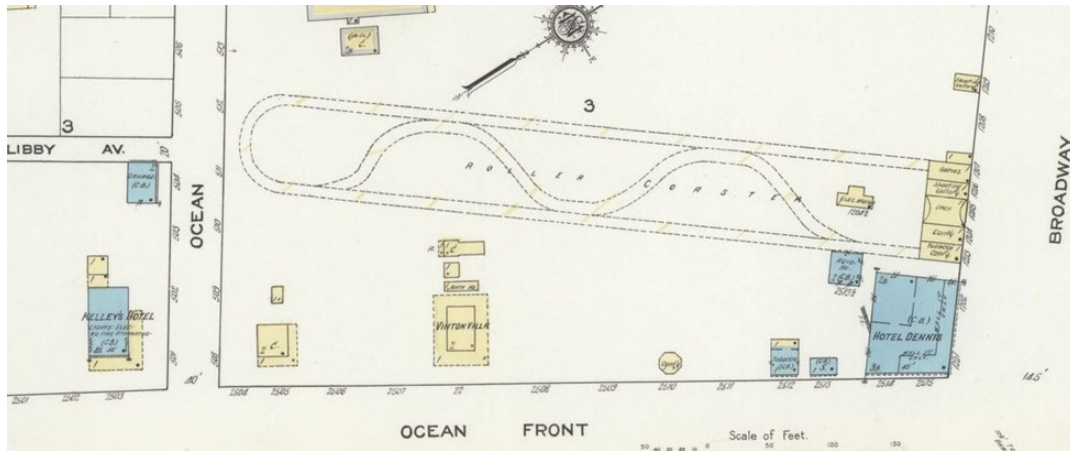
But one thing that hasn't changed is the food. As far back as the 1860's, people were drawn to the fried seafood restaurants along the beach. Even back then, patrons could get their fix of fried clams, chowder, ice cream and beer at Salisbury Beach. And unlike other nearby beach towns, Salisbury served alcohol. (This sometimes became an issue when things got out of control.)

Salisbury Beach reached its peak by 1900. It was estimated that the summer population of Salisbury Beach was about 3,000, with the number of daily visitors reaching as much as 10,000 in 1898. But the growth was not to last. Three fires devastated the area, the last of which was in 1913. It burned close to 200 buildings including cottages, hotels and businesses. At the same time, locals started to venture farther away as automobile ownership increased. With these and other factors, Salisbury Beach's Victorian fame came to an end.

Since those days, many attempts have been made to bring the beach's popularity back, but it has never matched its former glory. Still, who knows what the future holds for this historic regional playground? Plans are currently underway to bring back the carousel, and new ideas for rejuvenation always seem to be just around the corner.



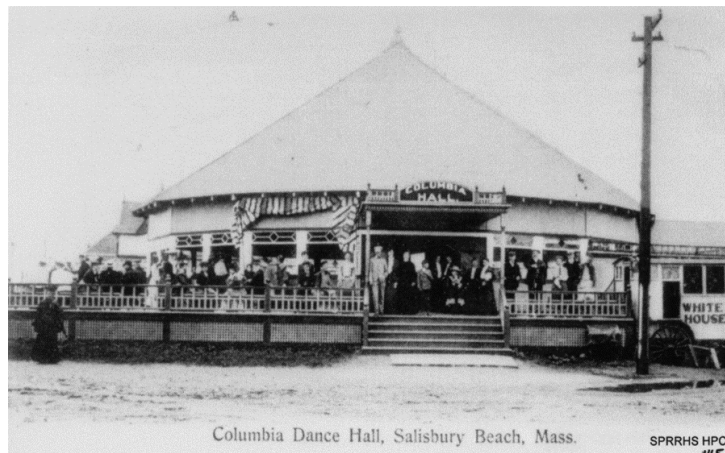
Snow-covered Salisbury Beach in February, 1975. The wooden roller-coaster in the center of the photo was removed in 1977. <https://www.boston.com/news/local-news/2014/01/09/salisbury-beach-through-the-years/>



Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from 1914 showing the roller-coaster and other businesses at Salisbury Beach. https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn03837_004/.

**BROWN'S RESTAURANT,
SALISBURY BEACH,**
NEARLY IN FRONT OF THE HOTEL,
WHERE may be found a good assortment
of Fruit, Nuts, Confectionery, Cigars
and Pickles. Also
**ICE CREAM,
Small Beer and Lemonade.**
Particular attention paid to providing Tea
and Coffee for parties. Also, Chowder Fixings
supplied to parties, who can thus save them-
selves the trouble, at a trifling expense, of
bringing such articles.
N. B. Chowders got up to order.
Those in want of anything in the above line
will please give us a call.
R. BROWN.
Salisbury Beach, July 31, 1862.

Advertisement for Brown's Restaurant at Salisbury Beach appearing in the September 11, 1862, issue of *The Villager*, an Amesbury newspaper. <http://amesbury.advantage-preservation.com/>



Columbia dance hall at Salisbury Beach, Mass. Previously the Flying Horses building. Postcard. ACM, S.P.R.R.H.S. Collection.