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Indispensable

The story of America is incomplete without history from the bottom up.

—Donald DeVore, historian

Cobwebs were at the top of her list. They were a nuisance. She wasn't launching her attack without a hairnet. Fall had been warm and winter mild for Atlantic City—perfect conditions for spiders. Although few of the long-legged creatures could have survived, their remnants would be everywhere. It reminded her of spring cleaning several years earlier when she was interrupted by the delivery of her neighbor's baby boy. The child's father had come running to fetch her away from work. What a joy that was! Her mother, and *her* mother, and *her* mother, as far back as anyone knew, had all been midwives. The privilege of ushering a life into the world was a special gift, even if it sometimes meant being present for the heartache of losing a child. But this was no time for daydreaming. She had a war to wage.

Cotton mops and a long-handled cornstalk broom were her weapons of choice. She leaned on the door and set her metal pail and bag on the porch. Before putting the key in the lock, she pulled her hairnet from her crisply starched apron together with one of her husband's worn handkerchiefs and fixed them in place. Steeling herself for the toil ahead, she opened the door and chuckled as she might at a bad joke she'd heard before. Her brief cheerfulness came from the satisfaction of finding what she had expected and finally getting back to work. Any rejoicing was gone in a heartbeat. She looked around and knew there was much to be done.

Arms outstretched, swinging her broom much like a machete, she began making her way through the boardinghouse, room by room.

The staircase, hallways, and every lighting fixture were decorated with delicate gray strands. Some of them clung to her head, contrasting with her brown skin and black hair. They were pesky, forcing her to stop and swipe them away. Bit by bit, constantly scraping the broom with her hand and flicking clumps of what-all she'd rather not think about to the floor, she swept small bundles into piles. Then she picked up several throw rugs, mats, and runners and shook them out on the porch, draping them over the railing to air in the sun. Once the cobwebs were conquered, she switched to her wet mop and washcloths. Retracing her steps, every floor, baseboard, and door was wiped clean with a solution of Lysol and water. She liked the clean smell it left behind and knew the owner did, too. But a better smell was her lunch.

Placed snugly to one side of her burlap bag, wrapped in a dishtowel, was a large sandwich. It was a favorite: cooked cabbage between two thick slices of hard-crusted, homemade bread, slathered with coarse brown mustard. Her sandwich had a familiar aroma all its own. Sitting at the head of a long table where, during "the season," guests gathered for breakfast, she was accompanied by a dozen ghost-like figures created by tall-back chairs covered with sheets. Munching slowly, she smiled to think that in a few weeks she'd be at her regular job as head laundress and seamstress at the Chalfonte Hotel. Someone else would be serving meals to the vacationers from Philadelphia seated at the table. Let *them* try to make the guests happy. She had waited tables in a boardinghouse as a teenager. It wasn't fun. She had jumped at the chance to use her sewing skills and wasn't looking back.

She enjoyed every morsel of her sandwich, washing it down with sweet tea from a milk bottle stopped with a cork. When she was done, she wrapped the bottle in the towel and placed it in her bag. In a moment, she was back on her feet.

Next, she washed the windows—inside and out—scrubbing them with water and vinegar, leaving them open to let out the staleness. After each room was free of cobwebs and dust, and the windows were sparkling, she attacked the bathrooms, scouring the sinks and toilets with Bon Ami. Winding down, she brought the rugs back in from the porch and went room to room closing the windows. Her final step was wiping down every chair, table, chest of drawers, handrail, and doorknob with a mild solution of Fels Naptha.

She breathed a sigh of relief and exhaustion, knowing what pleased her most was getting everything done in one day. Had her work spilled over to a second day, there would have been no extra pay from the owner. Worse still, her schedule would have been side-tracked. She had another boardinghouse waiting for her tomorrow and each day after that, nonstop 'til Good Friday. And she wasn't alone. The same routine was being played out all over town. As Atlantic City of yesteryear readied itself for the annual onslaught of visitors, black people were there to make it all happen.

Throughout most of Atlantic City's history, if the job was dirty, difficult, or dangerous—the "three Ds"—black people were there to perform the task. Remove the black experience from Atlantic City's history and it becomes nothing more than a beach village.

Understanding what a wondrous thing it was that blacks came to play an essential role in Atlantic City's rise to prominence requires historical context. Some facts: First, in 1804, New Jersey became the last northern state to abolish slavery, and later laws weren't friendly to runaway slaves. Second, in the presidential election of 1860, New Jersey was the only northern state that refused to support Abraham Lincoln (the same was true in 1864). Third, during the Civil War, the New Jersey Legislature adopted several "Peace Resolutions" supporting the Confederacy and denouncing the Emancipation Proclamation. Fourth, New Jersey initially rejected the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which abolished slavery; it wasn't until 1866, after 31 other states (including most of the Confederacy) had acted favorably that New Jersey ratified the 13th Amendment. Finally, following adoption of the 15th Amendment in 1870, guaranteeing blacks the right to vote, New Jersey's Legislature waited five years to permit freedmen to vote.

Throughout the 19th century, on the issue of race New Jersey was the least progressive state in the Northeast. That the southern part of the state would become a destination for freed slaves and their children venturing north in hope of a better life, less than a generation after the Civil War, is one of the marvels of American history. The story begins with a country doctor.

Jonathan Pitney was an unlikely real estate developer. A physician whose medical practice took him to the small towns along South Jersey's coast, Pitney was frustrated by his struggle to make ends meet. After 30 years of serving his patients, he was broke—some say

dependent on his mother-in-law. Living in the mainland community of Absecon, Pitney could see "Further Island" from his office. Created by the tides and storms, this barrier island was a wild place, dominated by sand dunes, marshes, and waterfowl. Before the American colonists arrived, the island was used as a summer campground by the Native American Lenni Lenape of South Jersey, who called it "Absegami," or "Little Sea Water." Few people in the state even knew where it was.

Further Island was a pristine but desolate place when Pitney first ventured there in the 1830s. The only people living on the island were descendents of a Revolutionary War veteran, Jeremiah Leeds. Before Pitney began thinking aloud about his fantasy, the Leeds families owned nearly the entire island. Returning often, Pitney was charmed by the serenity and natural beauty of "Absecum Beach," as it was referred to on state maps at the time. Pitney believed that this wild, sandy island (which would eventually be named "Absecon Island") had potential as a health resort, a place where doctors could send their well-to-do patients to convalesce. The problem was getting people there. Roads of the day connecting the many villages of South Jersey were often little more than footpaths. Pitney knew that travel by stagecoach wouldn't do. A railroad from the Delaware River in Camden to the Atlantic Ocean at Further Island was the answer.

Pitney dreamed big but floundered about for several years until he won the support of Samuel Richards. "Richards" was a name known and respected throughout New Jersey. The family was the most powerful south of Trenton and among the largest landholders in the eastern United States. At its peak, the family's holdings collectively totaled more than one-quarter of a million acres. Samuel Richards understood the importance of a rail line between Philadelphia and Absecon Island. A rail line linking his landholdings to Philadelphia would increase their value, making it possible for him to turn some of his vast acreage into cash. Richards latched on to Pitney's idea and all but made it his own. Lobbying state legislators, he secured a charter for the Camden-Atlantic Railroad in 1852.

With the granting of a railroad charter, Richards recruited investors, primarily other large landowners hoping that a railroad would increase the value of their holdings. Construction began in earnest in August 1853. Starting at the Delaware River, the right-of-way slashed through

a vast pine forest known as the Jersey Pine Barrens. Trees were cut, hills leveled, and swamps filled as the new railroad made its way east. A straight line was surveyed from Cooper's Ferry in Camden directly to Absecon Island. The train tracks went around nothing. This new railroad was built by the quickest and cheapest means possible: that meant African-American workers who had escaped slavery and Irish laborers who had fled famine in their homeland.

Clearing the right-of-way involved the backbreaking work of pulling stumps, hauling gravel and stones for the railroad bed, wrestling with timbers, and lugging rails. Cutting a path through South Jersey's vast, mosquito-infested Pine Barrens was tough going, but things got worse as the right-of-way left firm ground and approached the meadows. The mosquitoes were replaced with swarms of greenhead flies, and the chores involved in draining the meadows and marshlands in order to create the railroad bed were dreaded tasks. Standing knee-deep in salty, murky waters, wearing flimsy, homemade clothes and usually barefoot to keep their shoes from being destroyed, black workers wielded axes or pushed and pulled the end of a two-person saw to fell trees and large bushes. Often stumps had to be removed. Then the workers had to handle rope and chains without gloves while trying to steady a team of horses no happier than they were to be standing on the slimy bottom as the stumps were pulled. Finally, these African-American and Irish laborers lugged shovels filled with muck and mire to create channels directing the flow of water away from the railroad bed.

Although there are no hard numbers on the makeup of the work-force that built the Camden-Atlantic Railroad, we know that black hands were involved from the beginning. If the work to be done entailed the three Ds, it's a safe bet black workers were the first assigned.

"The First Colored Man" as described in an early volume of Atlantic City firsts was "Billy" Bright. Mr. Bright, along with his wife, Mary, and son, Daniel, lived in a shanty on Rhode Island Avenue in 1859. The 1860 U. S. Census reveals that the Bright family had taken in a boarder, a practice that would later become the norm for many black families in Atlantic City. The boarder was one Daniel Thompson, a 75-year-old native of Delaware whose occupation was described as "gunning." Before moving to Absecon Island

after likely working as a laborer on the construction of the railroad, Billy Bright and his family lived in a small village comprised of seven black households in Hamilton Township, a heavily forested community 15 miles west of Absecon Island. This tiny village of farmers, craftsmen, and laborers dated back to the 1840s and was comprised of freed people hailing from Northeastern states, primarily New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New York.

South Jersey was home to African Americans long before Atlantic City came to be. According to the 1850 U.S. Census, "Freed Colored" families lived in neighboring Egg Harbor Township, Galloway, Hammonton, Mullica, and Weymouth. Runaway slaves from the Upper South were attracted by the solitude and, more importantly, the isolation of the Pine Barrens. For modest sums, they could acquire or rent a small plot of woodlands, carve out a farm, and make a place for their families. These people did their best to live in anonymity knowing that New Jersey's laws granted them no protection from being reclaimed by slave masters. The men of these communities—where many lived by their wits as farmers and craftsmen relying on bartering—would have jumped at the opportunity to earn real money. There's every reason to believe they played a major role in building the railroad to Atlantic City. What's not known is whether everyone who labored on construction of the railroad was a *paid* worker.

Historians speculate that not all the African-American workers were freed persons at the time Atlantic City was being developed. Even after the elimination of slavery by the legislature, given New Jersey's mind-set, which respected the "right" of visitors to bring slaves with them, the transporting of slaves to work on the railroad may have occurred. According to historian Richlyn Goddard:

> The Atlantic City population was recorded as part of the county census prior to receiving its municipal charter in 1854; therefore, the first census for the city was reflected in 1860. When comparing the manuscript census from 1850 to 1860, the differences were striking because only two free-black households, the Brights and the Jeffries, a shoemaker, were recorded on June 5, 1860 by the census enumerator, F. R. DeVinney as "Free Inhabitants in Egg Harbor Township, Atlantic City Post

> Office." Live-in servants at three hotels were also recorded, thus a total of 19 blacks were documented that year. In light of the fact that the census schedules reported a total of 164 black persons residing in Atlantic City in 1860 … it is feasible to deduce from the evidence that the 145 undocumented blacks in that census were enslaved laborers.

New Jersey's attitude toward slavery being what it was, Goddard's analysis is persuasive.

That slave labor was used to some extent in constructing the railroad and the early buildings on Absecon Island is more likely than not. As for freed black workers, there's no need to speculate as to whether they provided the bulk of the labor given how affordable they were relative to their white counterparts. With the cheap labor of African-American workers, the new rail line was ready for use in less than a year.

Cooper's Ferry Terminal in Camden was the site at which guests gathered for the inaugural trip of the Camden-Atlantic Railroad on July 1, 1854. The first train, an "official special," consisted of nine passenger cars, all filled. Ferryboats from Philadelphia brought a stream of guests, each with a printed invitation, and hundreds of the curious who came to see the first iron horse leave for the seashore. More than 600 passengers—newspapermen, politicians, and notables of the day—were invited to help promote the resort. There were several black persons on board as well. They were the porters who handled the passengers' baggage and the wood tenders who split the oak logs and fed them into the locomotive's furnace.

Huge clouds of smoke signaled the train's arrival as it reached the end of the rail line in Absecon at water's edge, shortly before noon. The guests were given life preservers and then herded onto large rowboats for the trip across the bay, the rowing likely done by African Americans and/or Irish immigrants, as this was the type of work only they performed in that era. A second train chugged through the sand dunes delivering the visitors to the door of the resort's first public lodging, the United States Hotel, where black servants awaited them, handling their bags and escorting them to their rooms.

After a sumptuous meal, prepared and served by black hands, the guests strolled along the ocean's edge, taking in the remains of six

shipwrecks visible from the shore. A sprawling four-story structure built to house 2,000 guests, the United States Hotel was owned and operated by the railroad. By year's end, when fully constructed, it was not only the first hotel in Atlantic City, but—at 600 rooms—the largest in the nation. Once the private debut was over, the public was invited. The remainder of the summer was a success, with nearly every train leaving Camden filled to capacity. The first season earned rave reviews from visitors. Philadelphia area patrons were charmed by the novelty of the entire idea—a train ride through the forest, ending at the seashore. Although it was a proud time for Jonathan Pitney, his beach village was a long way from a full-fledged resort. It was *rustic*, to put it mildly.

True to its beginnings as a farm island, the cattle of local farmers were allowed to run free. Atlantic City's main thoroughfare, Atlantic Avenue, was originally a cow path. Cattle were driven by farmers in the inlet area to the lower end of the island to graze in pastures that later became the cities of Ventnor and Margate. As late as the 1880s, one could see dozens of cows being herded by black farmhands from one end of town to the other and then returned at night through the center of the village on Atlantic Avenue. Faithful to their heritage, black farmhands supplemented their families' diets by trapping muskrats, rabbits, fox, and turtles, which they harvested on their treks to graze cattle. By the 1880 U.S. Census, nearly 1,000 black persons called Atlantic City home. They worked at everything from washing clothes and cooking meals to tending cattle and building hotels. But the town grew slowly.

Finding the money for the improvements needed to establish a permanent community on Absecon Island was much more difficult than securing investors for the railroad. Richards and his friends had what they wanted. Their land along the railroad right-of-way was selling to small businessmen and farmers. Plans for cutting through streets, leveling the dunes, filling ditches, and constructing the infrastructure needed to establish a permanent presence simply had to wait. For the next 20 years, Atlantic City limped along, remaining a wilderness island.

Predictions by early critics proved true. Pitney's plans for a health spa didn't materialize. The wealthy visited the resort occasionally, but few returned. As for the growing numbers of new people in Philadelphia, the cost of vacationing remained beyond their reach.

But that was about to change. As he had a generation earlier, Samuel Richards decided it was time to build a railroad. What he lacked in youth, he made up for in savvy and enthusiasm.

Richards understood what was happening in Philadelphia. Its population had exploded from 120,000 in 1850 to 850,000 by 1880. Thousands of immigrants arrived daily to work in the city's factories. Home to a staggering number of manufacturers in the iron and steel industry, Philadelphia's foundries produced one-third of the country's manufactured iron. They turned out everything from nuts, bolts, horseshoes, and machine tools to cast iron building fronts, ship plates, sewing machines, and—important to Atlantic City—amusement rides. Additionally, by 1857, Philadelphia had more textile factories than any other city in the world—more than 260, manufacturing cotton and woolen clothes, making fashionable attire affordable to the masses. At the time, Philadelphia had the most diversified industrial economy of any American city.

Factory workers were beginning to have expendable income for leisure time activities, and Richards believed that if Atlantic City could tap Philadelphia's working class, it would spur growth. He knew it could only happen if working men were able to afford a train ticket. For several years, Richards tried to sell his idea to the railroad's shareholders, but the directors of the Camden-Atlantic Railroad repeatedly rejected his idea for making travel to the resort more affordable. By 1875, Richards lost patience with his fellow directors and decided to build a new railroad of his own, the Philadelphia and Atlantic City Railway Company.

Prospects of a second railroad coming to Atlantic City divided the town. Jonathan Pitney had died six years earlier, but his dream of a sedate resort for the wealthy persisted. Most year-round residents were content with their island remaining a sleepy beach village where things perked up during summer but always at a genteel pace. But their opinions counted for little. As he had done 24 years earlier, Richards went to the Legislature and obtained another railroad charter. With his money and a second charter in hand, Richards set about constructing his new railroad. Nothing would stand in his way.

Construction proceeded at a fever pitch, with crews of black laborers working double shifts seven days a week. To cut down on construction costs, Richards decided to construct a "narrow gauge" railroad, so named because it was 14 inches narrower than conventional

railroads. Fifty-four miles of railroad track were laid in just 90 days. The first train arrived on July 7, 1877. The world had never seen anything like it. With the exception of rail lines built during wartime, no railroad had ever been constructed at such speed.

Matching the swiftness of the construction was the number of Philadelphians who lined up to board the new train. Tickets were priced for a class of customers who cared little that the cars they rode in were the dregs of the train yards. The price of a round-trip ticket was slashed in half, from the $3 charged by the Camden-Atlantic Railroad to $1.50. There were even "excursion" rates of $1 for a round-trip ticket. To a majority of Richards's customers, the price was all that mattered. The less visitors spent on train fare, the more they had to spend while visiting Atlantic City. Because there were no mass-oriented facilities at the time the second railroad began service, the Philadelphia and Atlantic City Railway Company developed "excursion houses" that provided a reception point, locker facilities, a dining hall, and an entertainment pavilion where musicians, singers, and jugglers performed for coins from the customers. Patrons could purchase a meal, see live entertainment, shoot pool, bowl, rent a bathing suit and locker for 25 cents, and take a shower before returning home on the last train to Philadelphia.

Increased train ridership and the development of larger excursion houses created job opportunities for black workers. There were no washers, dryers, vacuums, vending machines, paper plates, or microwave ovens. Towels, blankets, and bathing suits had to be washed. Meals had to be prepared, and cooking and eating utensils cleaned for re-use. The day-trippers from Philadelphia left behind a lot of work, and newly freed persons from the Upper South performed the necessary chores. But not all African Americans who arrived in town came to work.

After the development of the second railroad, blacks living in Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Camden, working primarily as domestic servants or janitors, found that a trip to Atlantic City was also within their reach. To accommodate the "colored trade," most excursion houses scheduled what were known as "Colored Excursion Days" as early as the 1880s. They quickly became an annual event. At the end of each season, generally in September, the railroads offered their lowest priced outings. Many black people in the Northeast had relatives, friends, or fellow church

members who worked in Atlantic City. Some of these local black workers lived in the resort year-round, others left in the fall. With the encouragement of the railroads, these black hotel employees invited their friends to the shore.

Regardless of the railroad's business interests, the local establishment couldn't hide its feelings about black vacationers. "Dagos" and "kikes"—that is, first-generation immigrant Italians and Eastern European Jews—were one thing, but "coons" were quite another. African Americans were acceptable as workers, but seeing them as vacationers was disturbing for many of the town's white residents.

Speaking for many in the resort regarding Colored Excursion Days, a local newspaper, the *Atlantic City Daily Union*—never one to hide its feelings about "colored folk"—noted in 1892, "There's more than one new coon in town today; fully 8,000 of 'em." In 1898, the same newspaper reported:

> They are patronizing the street cars and the busmen are doing a good trade. The lunch counters and the buffets are gathering in plenty of nickels and dimes, for the colored folk are generous and, like Pittsburghers, spend every dime they bring with them and have only the return coupons of their tickets left when the day is done … Tomorrow they will be gone, and it is estimated that they will leave behind no less than $20,000 in hard-earned cash.

Two years later, the *Atlantic City Daily Press* commented on the excursion of 1900:

> Yesterday was a great day for the colored population. Over eleven thousand were brought in by the two railroads on the excursion train … A great long line of Sambos and Liza Janes was seen like a huge cineograph moving picture along the ocean front … The loud laugh of the happy Negro and the "yaller girl" made the Boardwalk ring … Considering the event and the low price of razors, it is wonderful that so few disturbances occurred during the day.

Through cheap train fare and excursion houses, Atlantic City was making vacations affordable for blacks and whites alike. The excursion houses proved that something besides hotels for the wealthy could succeed in the resort. As Atlantic City marched into the future, it wasn't possible for it to exist without the railroads, and the railroads could not have existed without Philadelphia's masses. Nevertheless, each year the precariousness of the town's existence became clearer. Repeat business was crucial. Visitors had to leave happy or they might not return. Year-round residents understood that the prosperity of both Atlantic City and the railroads hinged on success of "the season"—the 12 to 14 weeks from June through August. Whatever their tastes, guests had to have a good time.

Richards's new railroad prospered but had a short life. It was acquired by the Philadelphia and Reading system in 1883, which was part of the Pennsylvania Railroad. This was no small occurrence in the resort's history. Headquartered in Philadelphia, the "Pennsy," as it was called, was gargantuan. By traffic and revenue, it was the mightiest railroad in the nation. At its peak, it controlled nearly 10,000 miles of rail line. Atlantic City was now tied into that extensive network. As historian Harold F. Wilson has noted, "Immediately the name of Atlantic City became familiar in every ticket office in the land in control of that great and powerful corporation [the Pennsylvania Railroad]. The reputation of the place became national, and people from all parts of the country began to appreciate its health imparting properties."

After the advent of Samuel Richards's second railroad, there was no turning back. New buildings sprouted in Atlantic City like daffodils. Where once there had been a sand dune or a pond, there now was a boardinghouse or a hotel. The air was filled with the sounds of shovels, hammers, saws, and masonry tools. The people performing the work were an ethnic stew of Italians, Irish, Germans, and Jews. Generally, the masons were Italian, the carpenters were German, and the roofers and general construction workers were Irish. The merchants who sold tools, supplies, and work clothes were often Jewish. Women and young children, many of them Italian or Jewish, went from one job site to another hawking sandwiches and beverages.

One constant in the mix of workers who built Atlantic City was the role of "colored folk" (considered the least offensive term for African Americans at the time). These men and women performed

servile but critical roles in the building industry; in the case of the men, everything from mixing concrete and hoisting it up in buckets to the bricklayers, to lugging shingles up ladders to the roofers. In the boom era following Richards's narrow gauge railroad, only the most talented and persistent black man was able to work in the skilled trades. Black workers were viewed as a threat because they were willing to work at skilled positions for lower salaries than demanded by whites. As a result, they were generally only granted positions unwanted by whites in the building trades. As with the building of the railroad, if construction work entailed the three Ds, black workers were the first assigned. Regardless of a person's role, *everyone*, black or white, scurried about constantly, days blurring one into another, working at a feverish pitch from sunrise until after sunset.

Year after year, from early spring through late fall, Atlantic City was a beehive of activity swarming with workers living in tents, sleeping on cots, eating in makeshift chow halls, and working seven days per week. Workers signed on for the season, knowing they'd work every day until the weather turned. For nearly three decades, from the latter part of the 19th century into the second decade of the 20th century, "Tent City" rose up from the sand every spring, pitched at different locations, following the growth of the resort. The residents of Tent City were mostly itinerant laborers and tradesmen, sometimes with their families, usually not. These crews of workers were brought to town by Philadelphia contractors and established businesses looking to get in on the action at the shore.

Black workers were excluded from Tent City. Those who had the means pitched a tent of their own near their worksite. Those who didn't were forced to live in stopgap flimsy housing—often abandoned bathhouses or small shacks they constructed themselves—or rent from a family that had established itself in the resort. Regardless of their race or living circumstances, there were few idle people. Many tolerated horrible living conditions just for the chance to earn decent wages, greater than anything they could hope for in farming or domestic work.

The several decades of Atlantic City's growth in this period formed the town's permanent character. With "the season" a small fraction of the year, the merchants lured to town by the second railroad knew that, in order to make a return on their investments, they

had to cater to the wants of their customers. It was inevitable that the resort would acquire the tastes and assume the character of its patrons. With merchants migrating from throughout the Northeast region leading the way, Atlantic City became a resort for the working class. Thousands of hoteliers, restaurateurs, building tradesmen, and laborers came to town looking to cash in on its growth and many remained, making it their home.

Between the years 1875 and 1900, Atlantic City's year-round population increased from less than 2,000 to nearly 30,000. By the turn of the century, the only city in South Jersey having a greater population was Camden, which had an important port and thriving industries. But in the summer, the resort became a major metropolis, its population ranking in the top dozen cities in America. "In-season," the city's daily population exceeded 200,000, with weekends hovering at nearly 300,000. Compare that with the 1900 census figures for Newark, with 246,000; Jersey City, with 206,000; Camden, with 76,000; and Trenton, with 75,000.

First- and second-generation Irish, Italians, and Jews, most by way of Philadelphia and New York, came to town and brought their citified ways with them. During the same time frame, the African-American population increased from less than 500 to nearly 7,000, representing more than 23 percent of the town's population. Thousands more black workers came each spring, living with friends and family, or sleeping in makeshift quarters in hotels for the season.

At the turn of the 20th century, there was no community like Atlantic City anywhere in the country. In New Jersey, and particularly the South Jersey region, it was an oddity. The resort was unlike any of its neighboring towns and unlike any place the people on the mainland had even heard of. The surrounding villages were sparsely populated, primarily by white Anglo-Saxon farmers and fishermen, while the resort was an ethnically diverse, populous city visited by strangers from far and wide. The tastes and desires of Atlantic City's visitors were far from "proper" in the prevailing view of its neighboring communities. For many, gambling and drinking on Sundays made it a wicked place, a modern day Sodom and Gomorrah.

Also setting the resort apart was the scale of the construction that was occurring. Hunting waterfowl and trapping small game on Absecon Island were no more. Hundreds of train cars carrying lumber, bricks, and gravel arrived each spring. Intense development was

occurring on a barrier island that neighboring farmers understood all too well was merely a large sand deposit created by the tides. The "Further Island" that had captured Jonathan Pitney's imagination was little more than spindles of sand rising up from the ocean floor. The process by which the island was formed is ongoing. The only *constant* feature of barrier islands is that they are subject to the whims of nature: waves, currents, tides, winds, storms, and sea level change, all with the potential to wreak havoc. Atlantic County's farmers understood the island's character. It's possible that Richard Osborne, the engineer who prepared the first city map, did as well, but you wouldn't know that from his development plans.

Parceling the island into neat squares and rectangles, the street grid designed by Osborne created many narrow lots ideal for small homes and boardinghouses. These early structures were built in rows, sometimes with meager side yards, often with common walls. No one on the mainland could conceive of living in such a manner. In addition to modest residences and boardinghouses, outlandish structures were being built. Hotels, five to ten stories high, were erected in a region where barns had been the tallest buildings for as long as anyone could remember. Atlantic City's piers were built *not* for fishing, but instead for entertaining visitors atop the ocean. The island's only protection from the Atlantic Ocean, a natural system of sand dunes, was leveled and a wooden walkway constructed, all for the pleasure of visitors. Add to the mix as many as 50 or more trains a day roaring through mostly farm fields and forest—where everyone traveled by horse and wagon—and one can see why residents of nearby towns were stunned by what was going on in Atlantic City. Making things even more unsettling in the minds of its neighbors was the city's booming black population. During the last decade of the 19th century, more than 90 percent of Atlantic County's African-American residents lived in the resort.

To its neighbors, Atlantic City was a marvel and a mystery. In relation to the rest of the county and South Jersey, it was a world unto itself. Within a single generation after Samuel Richards's second rail line, Absecon Island had transformed from a quiet beach village that shut down at the end of each summer into a socially complex, bustling, and—as we shall see—morally conflicted and politically corrupt city with an economy based solely on tourism.

Nationally, the tourism industry was in its infancy. In that era, there were only a handful of vacation spots, and they were reserved for the wealthy. Outside of cities, the hotels that existed were generally large guesthouses, which welcomed people only for lengthy stays. They weren't geared toward working class patrons. Atlantic City was a sharp contrast to the norm. Cheap transportation, coupled with affordable rooms, meals, and attractions to suit a broad range of tastes, made the resort a favorite not only of Philadelphia's blue-collar workers but of the newly rich, as well, many of whom were looking for excitement.

Atlantic City understood its role well. Its mission was twofold: to provide lodging for thousands of vacationers and to keep them entertained the entire time they were in town. The many thousands of diverse people who flocked to town during the summer months shared a unique community of feeling unlike anything else that existed in the United States at the time: *They were there to have a good time*. The new "city" that had evolved out of Pitney's beach village stands alone in American history: It was the first dedicated principally to pleasure—social experimentation on a grand scale. Unlike all other U.S. cities that had come before it, Atlantic City had a singular purpose: to provide leisure-time activities for vacationers. The city's very existence was dependent on money spent by out-of-towners, and resort merchants had something for everyone.

As the *Philadelphia Press* reported in the summer of 1904, the resort's 50th anniversary, "There is no one that can visit Atlantic City, from the King of England to the $10 a week clerk, who will not find accommodations to suit his taste and pocketbook." The article noted that the same was true for entertainment. "As to amusement, there is no place in the world where amusement is reduced to the exact science that it is here … and should a new form of 'shoot the shoot' or toboggan slide turn up in England or Africa, it would be set up here within the same week. Here amusement is carefully studied by the proprietors of the different places as is fashion by the moditiate."

Pioneering amusement rides began shortly after construction of Samuel Richards's second railroad. These mechanical devices had three principal forms, still familiar today: the merry-go-round, the Ferris wheel, and the roller coaster. All three rides were popular in Atlantic City as early as the 1880s. What's hard to grasp today is the

excitement these rides generated and how important they were in making the resort a popular destination. Whether for factory workers or farmers, shopkeepers or professionals, a ride on a Ferris wheel or roller coaster was excitement beyond anything experienced in their daily routine. At the time, Philadelphia was the largest producer of mechanical amusement rides in the world, with more carousels manufactured there than in any other city. Atlantic City provided nearby manufacturers with an opportunity to experiment and display the latest models. Thrill rides were erected all over town, some in clusters and others—particularly the very large ones—free standing. Each ride had a storied and sometimes fanciful history and was promoted as a wonder of the modern age. The principal element they shared was the use of modern technology for pleasure instead of work. Rather than making *things*, these machines were designed to make people happy.

Maintaining the original mechanical amusements was dirty, difficult, and often dangerous work. Countless gears had to be greased, nuts and bolts tightened, and cables kept taut without frays. It was more than hard work. A careful eye had to be kept to ensure the safety of the riders. Generally, it was African-American workers who tended to these tasks behind the scenes, while white workers greeted the riders and collected their tickets.

Amusement rides were just part of the entertainment package evolving in the 1890s. Within the first decade of the 20th century, Atlantic City was the largest city in the world dedicated exclusively to entertaining the traveling public, annually hosting more than 3 million guests. It was estimated that by 1903, the typical visitor was spending $25 per week and that the resort's annual revenue exceeded $100 million. Within five years, the annual receipts were estimated in excess of $200 million. Although some of those receipts may have been from "kings," most was spent by "clerks."

Most amusements, whether for royalty or ordinary folk, were found near the Boardwalk. An Atlantic City first, the Boardwalk began as a means to keep tourists from tracking beach sand all over town. First constructed in 1870, it quickly became a busy street with hundreds of businesses facing the beach. By the dawn of the 20th century, there was nothing like the Boardwalk anywhere in the world. It quickly evolved into the town's central nervous system,

with grand hotels and storefronts lining it on the land side and piers on the ocean side.

Businesses along the Boardwalk helped to foster an emphasis on retail sales that would characterize Atlantic City for years to come. Every foot of the Boardwalk was dedicated to assisting its strollers to part with their money. Atlantic City played a major role in fostering the illusion that spending money was a pleasure unto itself. Some social historians believe that Boardwalk merchants introduced the concept of the "spending spree" into American culture.

For many first-time visitors, Atlantic City was a fantasy island and the Boardwalk was Main Street, a wonderland of glitz and cheap thrills. "The Boardwalk was a stage, upon which there was a temporary suspension of disbelief; behavior that was exaggerated, even ridiculous, in everyday life was expected at the resort. The rigidities of Victorian life relaxed, permitting contact between strangers and the pursuit of fantasies." Atlantic City's grand promenade created for its strollers an illusion of social mobility that couldn't be found at other resorts. Coinciding with the emergence of the Boardwalk was an explosion of affordable clothing. The recently invented sewing machine made it possible for the working class to afford stylish garments "off the rack" without having to hire a tailor. Ready-made clothing blurred class lines and, for most of the resort's patrons, the Boardwalk became a showcase for their new clothes. A trip to Atlantic City was an excuse for getting dressed up. Strolling on the Boardwalk made visitors feel they were part of the "upper crust."

If blue-collar workers and their families were to spend a weekend in Atlantic City, not just an afternoon stroll on the Boardwalk, they needed places to stay that were within their means. Boardinghouses were the answer. Historian Charles E. Funnell has estimated that between 1880 and 1920 boardinghouses accounted for more than 60 percent of all rooms for tourists. For a modest investment, one could be up and running in a few months. Construction on dozens of small, wood-frame hotels and boardinghouses began in the early spring and were completed in time for the summer season. Surviving the *second* season was the key to making it. Lacking the glamour of the beachfront hotels, boardinghouses made it possible for middle-class families to have an extended stay at the seashore. Without boardinghouses, most of Atlantic City's visitors would have only been able to afford daily excursions. Typically, the accommodations were simple

to the point of monotony, but they were clean and comfortable, which was more than what most of the visitors had at home.

Boardinghouse owners and their patrons were a critical mainstay of the resort's tourist economy. With the rates charged by boarding-houses, a whole new cross-section of Americans found that they could afford a vacation. Factory workers, office clerks, postal employees, government workers, and teachers realized that they, too, could vacation in Atlantic City.

Key to success for Atlantic City's tourism industry was to give visitors what they wanted. The shortness of the season demanded repeat business. Visitors had to leave happy. If they didn't, they might not return. Atlantic City measured the tastes and whims of its patrons and found that a significant portion wanted to be able to drink on Sundays, enjoy the pleasures of the flesh, and take a chance at gambling. As one longtime resident opined, "If the people who came to town had wanted Bible readings, we'd have given 'em that. But nobody ever asked for Bible readings. They wanted booze, broads, and gambling, so that's what we gave 'em."

"Booze, broads, and gambling" are precisely what many of the guests staying in boardinghouses wanted. Vice—on a scale unlike anything available to vacationers during that era—quickly became an important part of the local entertainment package. The resort was booming in large part because of its commitment to making visitors happy, regardless of what the law allowed.

By the turn of the 20th century, the state's "Bishop's Law," which prohibited the sale of alcohol on Sunday, was being flaunted, houses of prostitution could be found in most neighborhoods, and gambling rooms were run in a wide-open fashion. With the arrival of spring, brothels bloomed and those that didn't pay police protection ran the risk of being shut down. One such instance was reported in the local press with the headline "Police Wipe out House of Ill Repute." The front page article reported, "A locally notorious house of ill repute in this City was wiped out of existence by the police yesterday … despite the vigilance of the police, places of this kind sometimes flourish without their knowledge … The conditions which the police found in the place were shameful and of such a repugnant nature that it was unfit for publication even in a police court, where ordinarily everything goes." Generally, such arrests were for show and had two purposes: to keep up appearances with law-abiding citizens and to

get the message out that the only brothels permitted were ones that paid a portion of their income to the local political powers.

As for gambling rooms, they were run in a similar fashion and the *Atlantic City Daily Press* reported on them frequently. One such article complained, "Persistent rumors are heard to the effect that extensive gambling houses and club rooms are being operated in the city … One is on the Boardwalk, in the very center of the city where thousands of visitors are passing daily. These places, we understand, are not simply little quiet card games that no one would seriously object to, but fully-equipped gambling houses where players can be accommodated with almost any game they desire." In a short time, the resort became known as the place to let loose, the spot to go for a hell-raising good time.

Word spread quickly, and Atlantic City became popular throughout the Northeast. In addition to being a place for hell-raisers, the resort's hospitality industry gained a reputation as a destination where vacationers were treated well. Regardless of their financial means, upon arrival in Atlantic City guests knew they would be pampered. But it took large numbers of servile employees to do the pampering. By the first decade of the 20th century, with a summertime population of 250,000 to 300,000 (of which only 35,000 were year-round residents), many unskilled workers were needed for everything from greeting guests and carrying bags to cleaning rooms and preparing and serving meals. Desk clerks, bellboys, waiters, cooks, dishwashers, chambermaids, laundresses, and janitors were in constant demand. These demands created a problem for Atlantic City.

Atlantic City couldn't compete for white workers in the economy of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In that era, there were few "career fields" for whites in the slowly emerging national hotel industry. Although nearly all hotels were owned and managed by Caucasians, the number of hotels was few and guest services were virtually nonexistent. Those who could afford to travel and to stay at a hotel often brought their own servants with them, limiting the career opportunities for people as servants in the hotel business. But the resort's growing popularity changed everything.

Atlantic City created a whole new array of opportunities for black people eager to escape the "Jim Crow" South. For nearly three generations after the Civil War, as America was shifting from an agriculture-based economy to a manufacturing economy, racial

prejudice excluded black people from industrial employment. During the years between the Civil War and World War I, the only occupations realistically available to the American Negro were either as a farm laborer or domestic worker. Domestic work was thought to be peculiarly "Negro work," and the attitude of most whites was that "Negros are servants; servants are Negros." If Atlantic City's hotel industry was to flourish, "servants" were needed.

Service was critical to making visitors feel like royalty. Resort hoteliers understood that to make their guests happy, many hands were needed to do the pampering, and the more helpers, the better. This was true not just in the large hotels and busy restaurants but especially so for boardinghouse operators. Most boardinghouses were owned by sole proprietors, some were the classic "mom and pop," and others were investor-owned and operated by a hired manager. Some lived at their properties year-round; others left in the fall and returned each spring. Getting ready for the season was no small task. The entire property had to be cleaned and repairs made before the influx of visitors began.

Once the season started, rooms had to be "turned" for each guest. Given the class of clientele that stayed at most boardinghouses, some left behind headaches for the cleaning staff. Sheets had to be changed and washed and sometimes mended, as were rugs and furniture. Most boardinghouses served breakfast and dinner—it was part of their attraction. Meals had to be planned, food purchased and prepared, and everything washed and dried and made ready for the next meal. Some properties provided livery service from the train station, and carriages and horses needed tending. Then as now, the hospitality business was very hands-on. The problem for Atlantic City's businesspeople was where to find so many hands and strong backs.

Atlantic City's solution was unique for its time. The hotel industry reached out to the Upper South and recruited people who had been marred by slavery. The many service positions necessary to keep the resort running smoothly were filled mostly by former slaves and their descendents, coaxed to the North during the three generations following the Civil War. With an inner strength forged in adversity, these migrants quickly became a major asset to the resort economy.

Black hotel workers added to the town's mystique among the tourists streaming out of Philadelphia. There was no better means by which to reinforce the illusion of being part of the upper crust than

to be doted over by obliging "colored servants" dressed in uniforms. While the money required to transform a quiet beach village into a bustling city based on tourism was supplied by eager out-of-town investors, the muscle and sweat needed to create a full-fledged resort were provided by African Americans. Black workers were the indispensable ingredient in making Jonathan Pitney's and Samuel Richards's experiments a success. The black experience in Atlantic City, and the contribution African Americans made there, stand apart in American history.