

Carroll Yesteryears
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1875 Letters Extol Fad of Bathing Beaches
By Mary Ann Ashcraft

During the late 19th century, a few families in Carroll County began to explore the possibilities of travel for a summer vacation. Extended trips to the beach, mountains, other states, and foreign countries were novel affairs and frequently the local newspapers printed letters from the travelers.

In July 1875, letters from a local family visiting Cape May, New Jersey, were published in the *American Sentinel*. The letters were signed by “R” and most likely written by James Rippard whose family owned the paper. His correspondence described highlights of the trip as well as the daily routine of beachgoers in that era. Many local residents were curious about the new fad of bathing beaches and probably read these descriptions with great interest. ‘R’ explained inconveniences of 19th-century travel, not unlike problems encountered today:

We left Westminster yesterday morning on the seven o’clock train. Arriving at Union depot we were compelled to wait an hour for the through train to Cape May. After purchasing tickets we went to the station baggage master to check our baggage through, but he declined as he was not aware of any such arrangements having been made. Upon appealing to the ticket agent he blandly informed us that he sold tickets and that the baggage was not in his department. When the train arrived the baggage-master informed us that our baggage would be put out at the depot in Philadelphia and we would have to see to the transfer. All this entirely useless trouble to passengers was for the purpose of gouging them out of forty cents, which we would have cheerfully paid if they would have relieved us of the annoyance of making the transfer. I would advise passengers to demand that their baggage be checked through, before buying their tickets, as the Company advertises a through train.

‘R’ stayed at the National Hall hotel and his letters dated July 13, 14, 20, and 23 were published during four consecutive editions of the paper. He described the physical features of Cape May including Congress Hall, the wooden pier and bath houses “in which Gentlemen and Ladies may at all hours indulge in the luxury of hot and cold salt water baths.” A major activity was shopping at “the really splendid stores with which Washington street, the principal thoroughfare, abounds; and where, if you have money to spare, you can provide yourself with every curiosity or luxury you may desire.”

On one day, a “buff bath” was held on the beach at 4:00 a.m. and thoroughly enjoyed by ‘R.’ The typical beach scene was described as follows:

The principal bath of the day commences at 11 A.M. At this time, from the various hotels and cottages of the island may be seen the inmates and guests hurrying down to the beach. Those from the hotels bordering the beach walk down and those from the houses further inland come down in omnibuses belonging to the respective hotels and kept for the accommodation of the guests. Imagine the beach stretching from the great ‘Stockton House’ north to ‘Congress Hall’ south, covered and crowded with a mass of humanity of all ages, sizes, shapes and conditions; some singly, some in crowds and

more in family groups. Some, you see, running in their bathing dresses along the sand, some going very timidly into the water as if afraid of getting wet, others rolling and tumbling in the shallows, others again, who have gone further out to meet the surf, forming family groups hand in hand waiting for the wave as it advances and, when just about to form into a mighty braker, all jump and thus, buoyed upon the top of the wave, escape the merciless ducking they would be sure otherwise to catch. Some luckless wight, with his back to the advancing billow, is laughing at some frolic or mishap just being enacted before him when suddenly he is struck from behind with a resistless force, precipitated on the sand, and for a moment buried out of sight under a mass of foam. It is then some one else's turn to laugh. Others more daring strikeout beyond the brakers as far as the life boat, which is always stationed near by, and engage in sports and contests in which only the strong limbs of the swimmer can indulge. Thus it goes all along the beach. All Cape May appears gathered there in dishabille and reckless abandon determined, within the bounds of decorum, to enjoy themselves to the full extent and bent of their inclinations.

Highlights described by 'R' included eating salt-water oysters and other ocean fare, gazing at valuable schooners and a steam yacht along the coast, and going on driving excursions to nearby communities. He also devoted portions of each letter to descriptions of the ocean, sunset vistas and rambles along the beach:

After supper the customary evening stroll is in order. Investing ourselves with warm clothing we strike for the beach and walking close to the water inhale the salt air with a gusto as though we feel we were adding years and health to our life at every inspiration. As we stroll along, admiring the crests of the waves as they break on the beach we drink in the steady music of old ocean's roar which is the same to day as at creations dawn. Occasionally we are diverted with some freaks of juveniles or others as they ramble on the beach. After about a mile of this we go to 'Congress Hall' pavilion, sit down inhaling the ocean breeze, listen again to its roar, watch the various vessels in the distance and admire the effect of an all but full moon upon the scene.

The week that 'R' visited Cape May, President Ulysses S. Grant was also vacationing there at the "Buff Cottage" attached to Congress Hall. Buildings were decorated with flags and bunting, and a regatta, reception, and ball were being held in honor of the President. The regatta was cancelled for lack of wind and 'R' concluded one letter by describing an unfortunate incident that occurred on the steamer "Plymouth Rock" off-shore of Cape May:

She [the steamer] was advertised to sail from Philadelphia to Cape May in time to witness the second day's regatta and return the same day. Well, of course, as there was no second day's regatta the excursionists numbering some two or three thousand were considerably disappointed to add to which the vessel did not effect a landing but turned round immediately and steamed back to Philadelphia. The supply of water failed and there being an abundant supply of other and less innocent fluids the result was a general fight in which stools, clubs and knives were freely used, to the intense terror of the women and children and the more serious damage to some of the participants. The fracas raged for half an hour when the officers of the boat succeeded in arresting the ring leaders, peace was restored and on arrival at Philadelphia the arrested men would have been handed over to the police had not all but one escaped.

Mary Ann Ashcraft is a volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County.



Caption: The Gorsuch family (Mr. & Mrs. Thomas Gorsuch, Nora Gorsuch, and Jane Pole) posed for this image in their 19th-century bathing attire.

Credit: Historical Society of Carroll County



Caption: Congress Hall was one of the earliest grand hotels built in Cape May, NJ. It burned shortly after 'R' and his family visited, but was rebuilt immediately in brick. Bandmaster and composer John Philip Sousa often played there. It was recently restored and welcomes guests once again.

Credit: Library of Congress