

Rhode Island's resort economy

CENTURIES OF TOURISM TRANSFORM COASTAL TOWNS

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Historical photographs courtesy of Rhode Island State Archives

THE OCEAN HAS ALWAYS DRIVEN THE RHODE ISLAND ECONOMY, WHETHER it be for fishing, commerce, recreation, or simply escaping the heat of summer. An economy strongly dependent on tourism is nothing new to Rhode Island. Summer people have fed it since the mid-19th century, lured by the sea, cooling winds, beguiling landscapes, and the pleasures to be found in different parts of the state. In the 19th century, city dwellers flocked to the shore seeking relief from the stifling heat of urban landscapes, while southerners fled not only their summer climate but the dreaded onset of fever season.

Transportation, or the lack of it, was the major factor in determining who went where when and for how long. The wealthy always had options for travel by land or sea. People of modest means could not venture very far from home, if they could go anywhere at all. At first, the sea offered the only convenient access to coastal or

The Watch Hill Lighthouse was a tourist attraction for 19th-century summer visitors to the area's hotels and cottages.





Postcards of the Ocean House, Westerly

island locations that evolved into resort towns. Later, train service combined with coastal steamers to reach some watering holes, and early in the 20th century, the automobile not only improved access but changed the basic rhythms of many Rhode Island resorts.

As islands, Newport, Jamestown, and Block Island could only be reached by boat. Early in its history, Newport ranked behind only Boston and Philadelphia as a port, but an island with no hinterland could not compete with fast-growing mainland cities as a shipping and trade center. However, in 1784, a small band of Carolina planters sailed to Newport seeking refuge from the summer heat and fever season. They rented farmhouses or stayed at boardinghouses. As more southerners flocked there, hotels went up: the Bellevue, Perry, Fillmore, and, in 1845, the most

impressive of the lot, the Ocean House. Its opening, crowed one enthusiast, “reduced Saratoga to being a hotel, while Newport was a realm.”

The rise of hotel society signaled an influx of northern visitors as well, especially from New York. It did not take the elite long to embrace the refreshing sea breezes and charming vistas of an island so near at hand. Some preferred not to rely on hotels but instead built their own “cottages,” a quaint term given summer places of all sizes. Land was cheap enough at first. In 1845, farmland on Bellevue Avenue sold for 7 cents a foot; by 1874, the price had risen to \$1 a foot. One parcel sold for \$2,000 in 1846 and fetched \$60,000 in 1880. This spectacular rise in value was but one sign of Newport’s emergence as the social and fashion capital of America. As early as 1870, Henry James observed



what made Newport superior. “The difference, in a word,” he declared, “is the difference between a group of indiscriminating hotels and a series of organized homes.”

Narragansett Pier underwent a similar pattern of growth. In 1848, Joseph Dulles of Philadelphia, grandfather of John Foster Dulles, U.S. Secretary of State under President Dwight Eisenhower, went there on business, liked what he saw, and engaged all the rooms of a local farmer for the coming season. He spread the word and was soon joined by a coterie of Philadelphia friends. The Pier offered not only charming scenery but the finest beach in the Northeast: a mile-long, curving shoreline with sparkling sand, a firm bottom, and a gentle undertow. By 1873, no fewer than 17 hotels had opened, followed by a cluster of bathhouses, restaurants, shops, stables, saloons, and other establishments. New Yorkers discovered the Pier, as

Hotel life in Narragansett boomed in the late 19th century, but the advent of the automobile transformed the resort economy.

did southerners, and families from Chicago, Cincinnati, St. Louis, and other Midwestern cities.

Throughout these decades, an increasing number of locals in every resort town came to depend on the summer people for their livelihood. Crops grown on Jamestown helped feed not only its residents but Newport visitors as well. While Newport emerged as the ultimate playground of the nouveau riche, Jamestown and Watch Hill catered to the quieter and less pretentious lifestyles of many wealthy families. Narragansett’s atmosphere was spicier but divided, ranging from the sedate hotel crowd to a faster set that thrived on such pleasures as drinking, partying, and gambling. A certain class of business types gained

notoriety for spending Friday nights with their mistresses at the Pier before joining their families in Newport the next day.

Where cottage society came to dominate Newport, hotel life prevailed in Narragansett, even as more summer people began erecting cottages there. So, too, with Watch Hill and Jamestown. Watch Hill had eight hotels by 1887, but that year some Cincinnati investors bought an estate of 130 acres and turned it into lots for summer places. Jamestown had five hotels clustered near each other on the waterfront but also saw the rise of cottages. In all these resorts, it was common for families to pack up their trunks and move to their hotel or cottage for the entire summer.

Improved transportation eased their travels but eventually transformed the resorts as well. Some people reached the resorts by their own yacht; others relied on a growing fleet of steamers that ran regular excursions. The Narragansett Pier Railroad opened in 1876 from Kingston Station to the Pier, making it possible to reach that resort by rail. It ran six trains daily and eight on Sunday. Watch Hill could be reached by the Stonington or Norwich steamer line. One could take a morning train from New York, reach Stonington by noon, and get to Watch Hill by steamer in time for dinner.

As early as the 1840s, excursion steamers brought hundreds of visitors to the resorts, especially Newport. On one memorable day in August 1901, steamers from Providence swamped Newport with nearly 4,000 visitors; in August 1883 one steamer, the *City of Worcester*, unloaded 2,500 excursionists in Newport, the largest number of any single ship. Most of these visitors were daytrippers who contributed little to the resort's economy. A reporter watching the 1901 throng come ashore noted sourly that "it seemed as if 3,999 came with their lunches."

The Sea View Railroad accelerated the arrival of daytrippers to Narragansett Pier. Completed in September 1900, it ran from the Pier to East Greenwich, where a connecting line moved passengers and freight to Providence. The railroad lasted only until 1920, when it was scrapped and sold for junk. By then the automobile had all but completed the transformation of the resorts by allowing daytrippers to flood the resorts, crippling the hotel industry and dooming the shops and restaurants dependent upon more liberal spenders. In every resort, cottagers gradually prevailed and created their own private enclaves of clubs and social institutions. Hotel life lingered longest in Narragansett but faded even there after the disastrous September 1900 fire that destroyed the Casino and the massive Rockingham Hotel.

Gradually, however, a new form of tourism geared to the automobile evolved to fill at least part of



Top: **Watch Hill, Westerly**

Bottom: **Summer colony, Watch Hill**

the economic gap and persists to this day with all its vagaries and uncertainties. At first a plaything of the rich, the motorcar enabled its owners to move about different locations rather than hunker down in one place for the summer. Once people of more modest means could afford cars, the flow of daytrippers increased sharply, changing not only the economy but the character of every resort. The golden age of resort life, geared almost entirely to the upper class, gave way to an economy that serviced crowds of people who came for the day or, at most, the week.