# Boardwalk Playground

THE MAKING, UNMAKING, & REMAKING OF ATLANTIC CITY
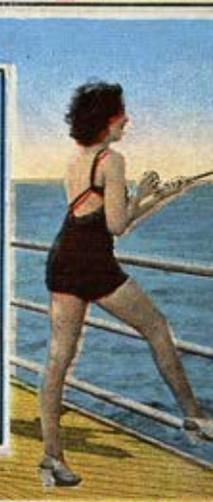
How the people of a New Jersey resort built a seaside paradise, lost it, rebuilt a casino town, mostly lost it, and kept on dreaming

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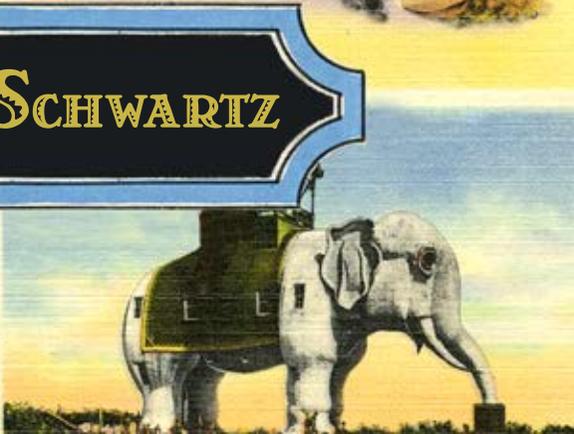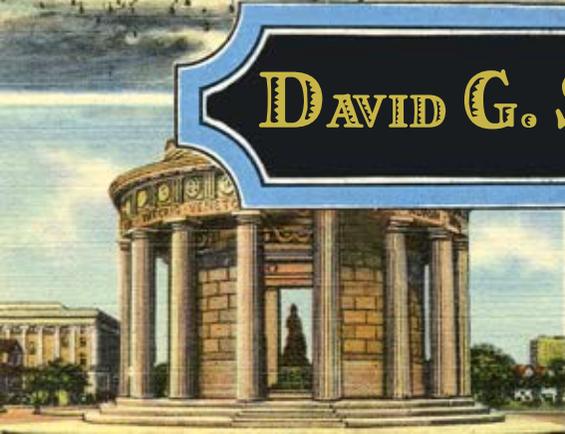
Free and Easy

In 1854, things moved quickly for Atlantic City. In the space of a few months in the spring and early summer, the tiny seaside town was incorporated, elected its first mayor, and, most importantly, was linked to Philadelphia via the Camden and Atlantic railroad. New hotels and a range of new businesses opened to cater to the throngs of visitors that would surely come.

Dr. Jonathan Pitney, who had been fighting for years to establish Atlantic City as a health resort, had been sure that, once the railroad was running, there wouldn't be enough rooms for all of the health-seeking vacationers. But, in the early years, he seemed to have been wrong. Those with the time and money to spend a week or more down the shore preferred the more-established Cape May. The truly well-off didn't think much of the newcomer, and with the cheapest fare on the Camden and Atlantic at $3 for a round trip, the masses of weary working-class Philadelphians couldn't afford the journey.

What's more, the city, despite its picturesque sand dunes and breakers, wasn't all that healthy. The salt marshes that bordered the island and the ponds that still dotted it bred mosquitoes and greenhead flies. The latter were a particular menace. Clouds of female flies darkened the skies, biting tourists and locals alike, and making the summer, at times, miserable for every warm-blooded creature on the island.

The city didn't take the insect problem lying down. In 1856, it embarked on a campaign to fill the ponds, level the hills, and extend the streets of the city, which in addition to expanding the city, would eliminate breeding grounds for summertime pests. This was a definite public good, but, as would be the case in the city's future, someone

had an angle. Reportedly, the city simultaneously hired one man to flatten a hill and a second to fill in a pond. The first man simply got in touch with the second, giving him a ready source for clean fill and pocketing a nice paycheck for his own hard work. This might have been the first hustle in Atlantic City's government, but it certainly wasn't the last, and it set the tone for much of what followed: there was easy money to be made, if you had the right angle.

The process of evening out Absecon Island was slow. The summer of 1858 was particularly bad: horses, bleeding from greenhead bites, lay down in the street and refused to continue; cattle, driven mad by the stings, threw themselves into the surf; and people burned bonfires around and sometimes inside their homes to drive the insects out. Eventually, though, Atlantic City got the upper hand, and greenheads became a nuisance rather than a menace.

The outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 robbed the city of any traction it might have been gaining; the area's resources were diverted to meet the needs of the Union, and the fighting, though it remained far from the shore, didn't exactly stoke tourism. After the war's 1865 end, Atlantic City resumed its modest growth, ready to establish itself as a summertime destination in a newly reunified and growing country.

By the end of the 1860s, the city could boast four "first class" and eleven "second-class" hotels which, together with 15 boarding houses, took in the summer visitors. Business remained seasonal, with not just businesses but even two of the city's three churches closing during the winter months.

Part of what held the city back was what had created it: the railroad. It took more than two hours to get from Philadelphia to Atlantic City, and the cars, which lacked sealed windows, were overwhelmed by dust and soot. Some took to wearing oversized dusters over their clothes to remain somewhat pristine, but in the early years it took a hardy soul to ride the rails.

Yet, by the late 1860s, Atlantic City was catching on. A correspondent for the *New York Tribune*, writing in 1867, described the joy with which locals greeted his train when it arrived at nightfall: bands played, landlords, clerks, and waiters smiled expectantly, and a host of well-dressed men and women welcomed the visitors. "It is worth a trip here," he wrote, "to see how thoroughly happy human beings can be under favorable circumstances…. What a free and easy, devil may care look they all have!"

With that welcoming attitude, Atlantic City slowly emerged as a summer resort, with the beach its major attraction. At this point, the crowds became something of a problem; shopkeepers and hotel owners, annoyed by visitors' tendency to track beach sand inside their businesses, wasted little time in devising a solution: the world's first boardwalk, which debuted in 1870.

By 1871, the city was popular enough that a regatta, pitting thirty boats against each other in three days of racing, was held—the first major special event successfully conducted in the city. Culminating in a "grand masquerade ball," the regatta might have been the moment that Atlantic City finally arrived as a legitimate seaside destination.

The railroad, though, held the key. Improvements from the Camden and Atlantic, chief among them glass windows, made the trip much more comfortable. In 1877, a second line—the Philadelphia and Atlantic City—started operations after a 90-day track-laying blitz. This narrow gauge road had considerably fewer creature comforts than the Camden and Atlantic, but fares were half the cost. The $1 daily excursion fare, well within the reach of working-class Philadelphians, made a trip to the shore a reality for thousands of new tourists. When, in 1880, a direct route to New York City opened courtesy of the West Jersey Division of the Pennsylvania Railroad, Atlantic City was well on its way.

Atlantic City wasn't an overnight success; for its first 15 years, the city barely scraped by. But thanks to the contributions of local businesses and far-sighted railroaders, Atlantic City put itself on the map.