

Staten Island

Waterfront History

By Carlotta DeFillo

Staten Island has 35 miles of waterfront. It is bordered by Newark Bay and the Kill van Kull on the north, Upper New York Bay, the Narrows, Lower New York Bay and the Atlantic Ocean on the east, Raritan Bay on the south and the Arthur Kill or Staten Island Sound on the west. Several smaller islands sit offshore. Shooters Island near Mariners Harbor was home to Standard Shipbuilding Corp. and Prall's Island is a bird sanctuary. Off South Beach lie the man-made Hoffman and Swinburne Islands. These two islands were built for use as the quarantine station in 1872, and abandoned in 1933. During World War II they were used for military training, only to be abandoned again at war's end.

The earliest inhabitants of Staten Island were Algonkian-speaking Native Americans who set up camps along the shores in the areas of Tottenville, Prince's Bay, Great Kills, Arrochar, Stapleton, West New Brighton, Mariners Harbor and Fresh Kills. They harvested berries, fish, oysters and clams, and even ran the Island's earliest ferries. The first Europeans set foot on Staten Island in Tompkinsville at the Watering Place, a spring of fresh water near the shore, before 1623.

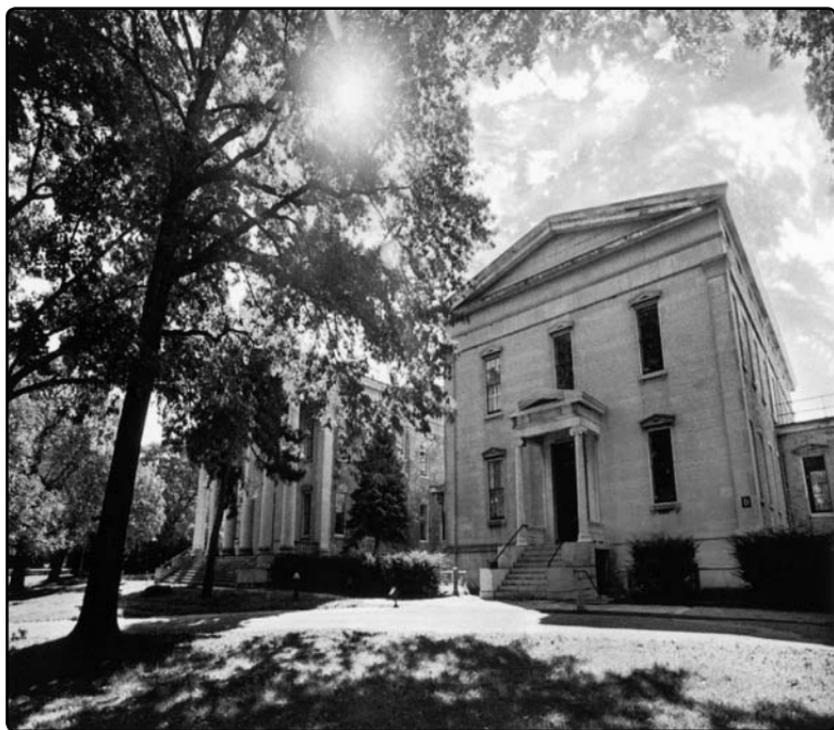
The earliest public ferry was in operation in Stapleton by 1708, and by the 1770s ten ferry lines connected Staten Island to New Jersey, Manhattan and Brooklyn. The best-known Island ferryman was Cornelius Vanderbilt, who started an empire from his single sailboat ferry, starting in 1810. Staten Island became part of New York City in 1898 and a new fleet of ferryboats arrived in 1905. The fare had been a nickel since 1897, and that fare remained in effect until 1975, when it was raised to 25 cents. Currently the world-famous ferry ride is free!

As early as the 1670's the excellent fishing, clamming and oystering possible in the waters around Staten Island encouraged new settlers. Oystering was second only to farming as the Island's largest occupation until the 1920s. Some of the areas historically known for the oystering trade, as well as for magnifi-

cent homes of local sea captains, were Mariners Harbor, Rossville, Prince's Bay, Tottenville and Howland Hook.

Shipbuilding and ship repairs were important industries on the Island's shores since Colonial times. In the early 1900s existing shipyards expanded and new yards like Brewer Drydock, Downey's Shipyard, and Staten Island Shipbuilding, all in Mariners Harbor, came into existence. Caddell Drydock in West New Brighton dates to the early 1900s and is still active today. On the South Shore many smaller boatyards built and repaired boats for oystermen around Tottenville during the 1800s and into the early 20th century: Ellis', Brown's, Butler's and Latourette's, to name a few. Piers lined the east shore starting at St. George by 1872. Pouch Terminal in Clifton was founded in 1916 and in Tompkinsville and Stapleton the City of New York built deep-water piers in 1921. In 1937 the New York Foreign Trade Zone was established in Stapleton.

In addition to industry, the waterfront has provided ample opportunities for recreation. Staten Island Athletic Club, the first on the Island, was



Snug Harbor

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founded in 1877 in a boat club building in New Brighton. Several cricket and tennis clubs also developed on the North Shore waterfront. Over the years Rosebank, Stapleton and New Brighton have all housed many seaside sports and athletic clubs. In the late 1800s huge resort hotels flourished in St. George, New Brighton and Huguenot, on the south shore. Summer resort areas arose in South Beach and Midland Beach in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Many small camps were founded, each including such amenities as bungalows or tent camps, hotels, bathing pavilions, fishing piers, bandshells, casinos, rollercoasters and carousels. Although most of the amusements are gone and the bungalows have been converted to year-round homes, the boardwalk and beaches are now parkland and have been recently renovated.

South shore recreation areas thriving today include Lemon Creek, Wolfe's Pond Park and Gateway National Recreation Area, which includes Miller Field in New Dorp, Great Kills Park and Fort Wadsworth, now both a national park and the nation's oldest continuously manned military installation. The Island takes pride in its shoreline parks that preserve many open spaces for public use, from Tottenville's Conference House, to the Alice Austen House overlooking the shores of New York Harbor and the Narrows.§

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Sources: Staten Island: a Resource Manual for School and Community New York City Board of Education, 1964. Leng, C. W. and Davis, W.T.D., Staten Island and its People vols I-II, History Publication Co., New York, N.Y., 1929. Sachs, Charles, Made on Staten Island The Staten Island Historical Society, Staten Island, N.Y., 1988. "Staten Island Sites and Scenes," The Staten Island Tourism Council, Pamphlet, n.d. Unprocessed Archival Collection on Oystering Industry