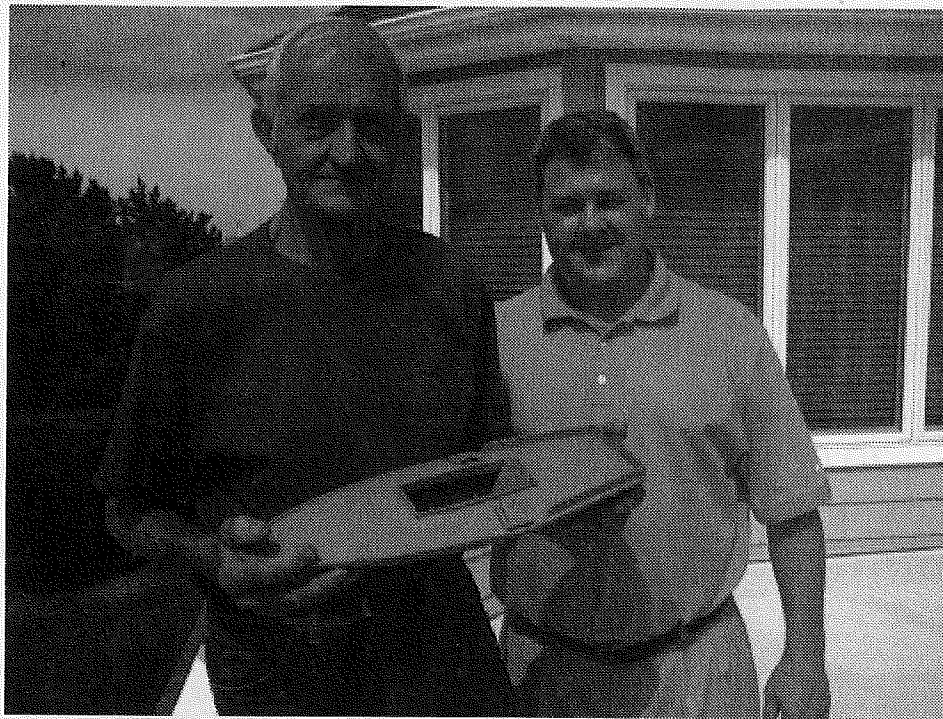


# LITTLE BEACH ISLAND

By Gretchen F. Coyle



Bill Hart III, and son-in-law Garret Bucceri (r), have compiled a history of Little Beach family memories and pictures from the 1930's to the government take-over in January 1975. (Photo courtesy of Gretchen F. Coyle.)

## LITTLE BEACH ISLAND

Stories about living on Little Beach in the 1940's easily spill forth from Bill Hart III of Bedminster, NJ. "When my father first started going to Little Beach we primarily fished. We ended up duck hunting more than fishing."

"Black ducks clouded the sky, but geese were scarce and would fly over. There were only a few mallards and I only shot one snow goose. Terns would nestle in elder trees. I think the limit was twenty black ducks a day."

Thanksgivings were spent on Little Beach with propane lights and a coal stove. "Our shotguns were Browning automatics painted marsh grass green. I learned to clean a gun that had rust from the salt." His father would spend four weeks hunting on the island each fall; his mother an understanding lady.

"I was lucky enough to be turned loose on Little Beach for summers at age twelve. I was a little Huckleberry Finn. Little Beach was a well kept secret because the hunting was so good. Our friends seemed to come out of the woodwork. We had a 1936 truck. Everyone had a Sneakbox or shooting box. Black ducks flew out of the meadows."

Bill preferred duck hunting. Starting in 1946 with his father, he continued through the 1951 season when

he joined the Marine Corps. Clams, oysters, and fish (stripers and shad) were plentiful. A neighbor raised chickens for tasty dinners.

## LAST UNINHABITED BARRIER ISLAND IN NEW JERSEY

Part of the Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge, Little Beach is off limits. The last uninhabited barrier island in New Jersey, and one of few along the Atlantic Coast, Little Beach was named by explorers who took their sightings literally.

Little Beach was shorter than Long Beach (now LBI), among the mishmash of names such as Two Mile Beach, Six Mile Beach, and Short Beach. Luckily, all exist only on historic charts. Sometimes referred to as a lost island, Little

Beach has never been lost in any sense of the word, or eroded away like Tucker's Island to the north.

## LIFE SAVERS AND OPPORTUNISTS

*The US Life Saving Service* by Ralph Shanks and Wick York lists the first life saving station being built on Little Beach in 1871 on the "south side of Little Egg Inlet, north of Brigantine." Dedicated volunteers staffed the site. An 1888 *New York Times* article referred to a "body of the mate of the steamship 'Tonawanda,' who with a seaman drowned yesterday, was found on the beach. No mention was found of the steamship, and it is believed she proceeded to New York under sail."

A second life saving station in 1896 – both Quonochontaug types – lasted until government take-over in 1975, though it may have been moved. "The crew of the two masted schooner "L. B. Elsie" and the coast guards of the Little Beach Life Saving Station had a lively chase this afternoon after a runaway vessel," according to another *New York Times* article in 1909. "They won because the wind was light, but they had to row for all they were worth to capture the speeding vessel."

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Around 1890 enterprising gentlemen formed the Island Beach Company, hoping Little Beach would become a seashore resort. Lots were sold (40' x 100' parcels); a few cabins were built with a small number of summer inhabitants, and a handful year round. Plans of developers and politicians never came to fruition. Whether it was a grand scam, wishful thinking, or a result of the stock market crash, and subsequent Great Depression, is still debated.

### A ROAD NEVER CONSTRUCTED

A sandy road from Trenton (Route #539) to Tuckerton was plotted to continue to Atlantic City with bridges over marshy islands, including Little Beach. Connecting to the Ocean Highway (Seaside Park south through Island Beach, crossing over Barnegat Inlet, and bisecting Long Beach Island), the two would merge on Little Beach/Pullen Island.

Political problems between the Phipp's Estate (against the long road over sensitive lands) and Senator Thomas Mathis (in agreement with Ocean County Freeholders in its favor) stalled construction. Between 1932 and 1937, attempts were made to cross the bay with pilings and supports sunk deep into bay mud. The plan was finally abandoned.

The section from Tuckerton to the bay is now an extraordinarily beautiful, natural drive known locally as Seven Bridges Road.

### LITTLE BEACH COAST GUARD STATION #120

In addition to homes on Little Beach for Life Saving/Coast Guard families, Atlantic City Electric Company employees soon "found" Little Beach after construction and continued inspection of high poles.

Reports of the US Life Saving Service in 1910 include diverse duties of the men at the Life Saving Station. With ships that ran aground, the rescuers first checked the condition of captain and crew. They often off-loaded cargos like wood or oysters; helped patch leaks; and hopefully freed the vessel. There were six regular life savers at the station: ten more added during fall and winter high danger times.

Life savers trained on a "Breeches Buoy" or sat on the porch in regulation wooden chairs. Ramps led to large barn doors, life boats housed inside. *Guarding New Jersey's Shore* by David Veasey includes a list of Life Saving Keepers with names that read like a who's who of knowledgeable baymen and ocean going skippers: Shourds, Gaskill, Ireland, Horner, Rider, Falkinburg, Riley and Endicott.

In the early days of World War II, a watch tower was

completed for surveillance along with a beach tower. There was a water cistern behind the Station and a kennel for dogs. A story of using 700 gallons of paint to cover the large shingled roof has been passed down through the years.

"120" was painted on the roof of a building next to the Coast Guard Station, standard overhead numbering. On a Station wall was an "Uncle Sam Wants You" poster, the one with the finger pointing.

### CAST OF CHARACTERS

Little Beach memories have become legend. A day of fishing might be followed by cooking some of the catch. Fishing parties liked to dock for lunch, sandwiches folded in waxed paper, beer in a metal cooler.

Surf fisherman Earl Simpson motored out in a character double ender, supposedly once a lifeboat for one of the Russian Tsar's yachts. Atlantic County Freeholders met at county-owned "Cherio" for a day of cards, fishing, and female company during the 1930's. Visiting young ladies posed on the dock, maybe a dog on a leash, at the same time period in dark wool bathing costumes.

Hunting shanties and small homes were owned by characters such as Leon Headley (once a Coast Guard Captain), a relative who owned a small houseboat, and Fred Statler. Each dwelling was a bit different. Roofs were made of Atlantic white cedar shingles or tin, water collected by gutters leading to small cedar water cisterns.



Helen and Alby Alberson in their houseboat on Little Beach in the 1940's. (Photo courtesy of the Hart Family)

A converted houseboat, owned by Helen and Alby Alberson, was pulled up on land with an outhouse. Work was done by owners, washed up wreckage used for homes and dock. Screened porches were a necessity for summer residents to keep mosquitoes at bay.

A group of shark fishermen kept an Army ambulance at their home which they would drive to the beach. In

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the late 1940's Ed Muir was the only year-round Little Beach resident. With his dog, he kept track of homes used seasonally. Phil Levy was lucky enough to have a generator, a Model "A" Ford with wooden wheels, and an inside toilet.

The Berry family lived full time on the island in the abandoned Coast Guard Station for a year in the late 1940's, hooking up a generator for electricity. Lou Berry, a retired University of Pittsburgh professor, plans to write a book about Little Beach history and his experiences. In September 2007 he told the *Press of Atlantic City* that selling lots on Little Beach was "one of the original swampland swindles. Out of 5,000 to 6,000 lots, there weren't more than 40 or 50 that were in any way buildable."

### 120 ROD AND GUN CLUB

Owned by Bill Hart, Jr., the "120 Rod and Gun Club" was the scene of much camaraderie be-

tween the 1930's and mid 1970's when the island was declared off limits. It was named after the Little Beach Life Saving/Coast Guard Station #120, which was decommissioned in June 1946.

Third in from the dock, the cabin had cedar shakes, a tin roof, and a two-hole outhouse. "Duck Dusters" was one sign on the front, a nickname used by friends. "120 Rod and Gun Club" was the other with the names Hart, Devine, Hingher, Leuddeck and Ireland listed underneath. Bill III remembers "using the crank up phone at the Coast Guard Station after the power went out."

The Hart family first motored to Little Beach from Rand's Dock in Tuckerton or Allen's in New Gretna; later from Milton Heinzer's dock at Leeds Point on Oyster Creek. Later they used the newer Little Egg Coast Guard Station, courtesy of Joe Fulcher, as their mainland base.

Imagine routine trips out to Little Beach Island, many of which were anything but ordinary. Command-

ing the helm of a World War II surplus boat, powered by a 22.5 Evinrude, canvas-topped cooler and manila rope on the floor. Or young Bill Hart's excitement shooting his first black duck of the season from a marsh grass green wooden Sneakbox camouflaged with reeds and salt hay.

Picture fox hunting in the dunes, Joe Fulcher, of the Coast Guard, leaning against a Coast Guard Jeep, and Bill Hart, Jr. in checked jacket with large smile. Bill remembers fox hunting for sport. "My Uncle Bud Hingher did a lot of fox hunting near Princeton, so he would bring his dogs to Little Beach with friends. He also fox hunted Brigantine and other islands in the area. Duck hunting was the favored pastime, fox hunting was an every once in a while thing."

After World War II, Bill Hart, Sr. and his friends "were just back from the Armed Forces and doing a lot of fishing in Great Bay. They were looking for leisure activities, and started explor-

ing the area, finding many of the cabins in Little Beach abandoned." Going to Galloway Township to inquire about a cabin, "they ended up with either a 99 year lease or purchase. My father paid township taxes until 1974."

Bill Hart, Jr. passed hunting and fishing traditions to son Bill III and nephew Bud Hingher. Thanks to Bill and his son-in-law Garret Bucceri, old photos have been copied and a video made of family and friends like Helen and Alby Alberson, Jack Ireland (a friend who owned a charter fishing business out of Brielle), Ray Leuddek (owned Ray's Sport Shop in North Plainfield until recently), and Jimmy Devine.

The trip from North Jersey was automatic according to Bill III: "We stopped at Margo's in Manahawkin for fishing equipment, and the Staffordville Diner." As a teenager on Little Beach, Bill "hung out on the dock at night, and climbed the poles. We would keep company with the Coast Guard guys in the tower."



Nature taking over Little Beach by early 1970's 120 Rod & Gun Club was third in from the dock (top of picture). (Photo courtesy of the Hart Family)

# LITTLE BEACH ISLAND

Occasionally he and a friend would venture to the movies in Tuckerton. One summer he worked for Joe Fulcher netting bait. Joe was one of the first to start seed clamming in the area.

## FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TAKEOVER

By the early 1970's an aerial photo from Ray Leuddek's plane shows an island reverting to its natural state. An abandoned Coast Guard Station remains, located more inland than before northern sand accumulation. Buildings were missing roofs; the road was just a path through the grasses; and the main dock broken in spots.

Recognized as an important island for migratory birds and native foliage among a blossoming Jersey Shore, the Audubon Society bought parts of Little Beach Island. Then it was taken over by the federal government, leaving owners powerless.

In 1974 a Special Use Permit, #LB5-7406, was issued to Bill Hart of Bedminster, NJ by the Brigantine National Wildlife Refuge of the Department of the Interior. It allowed the homeowner to have "access ... on Little Beach Island to building and land site occupied by permittees, including those periods when the Refuge may be closed."

Limited to "the normal travel route between your building site and the boat landing dock ... overnight out-

door camping on Bureau-owned land is prohibited." Hunting and carrying of loaded firearms on Refuge land was banned and "motor vehicle may be operated only on marked travel route between the permittee's building and the boat landing."

The permit was to be legal "until the time that Federal acquisition takes place," approximately December 31, 1974. Gaylord L. Inman was the Refuge Manager and issuing officer. Bill Hart, Jr. received \$1,600.00 for the 120 Rod and Gun Club.

Good times on Little Beach Island had come to a swift end for the Hart family and others. At some point in the late 1970's fire consumed what buildings had not vanished or been torn down. The story persists that the government was responsible.

## LITTLE BEACH TODAY

Signs inform curious boaters that no one is allowed onshore. Thirty-five years later, Little Beach Island is a model for a true barrier island with no bridge. It is of ecological importance with migratory birds, sea life, and native vegetation.

William Hart III and his family play a significant part in the history of Little Beach Island. Lifelong friendships and close family members are brought to the forefront, remembering the joys of a tiny community, and preserving a way of life never to be duplicated.



**When:**

**Sunday, October 3, 2010  
7:00 AM - 4:00 PM**

**Where:**

**Cattus Island County Park,  
Toms River**

**Cost: Free**

**For Further Information:**

**732-270-6960**

**or Visit:**

**[www.oceancountyparks.org](http://www.oceancountyparks.org)**