

The birth of Narragansett Pier

WILLIAM HENRY TAYLOR couldn't spell worth shucks and he wrote the way he talked, expressively and with an unmistakable South County cadence. As a boy, he saw Narragansett Pier become a summer resort and had a hand in its development. In September, 1911, he sold his holdings at the Pier and went to Florida to raise chickens. He died poor and without issue in the early 1940s. At some point, possibly about 1920, he put down his Memories of Narragansett Pier. Taylor's recollections seem never to have been published but there are several copies around in mimeograph form. Some are privately held, others are in the libraries of the University of Rhode Island and the Pettaquamscutt Historical Society. Herewith are some excerpts from Taylor's 46-page effort. We haven't monkeyed with the spelling but minor alterations have been made — for clarity — in the punctuation. — Ed.

By WILLIAM HENRY TAYLOR

THE WORD pier came from a company formed in the last part of the (eighteen) forties. This company built a pier. The remains can be seen where the life saving station now stands, the outer end being washed down by the sea.

Thy had a planeing mill, lumber yard and store. They had vessels wich ran from New York, Providence and New Port.

The vessels carried the farm crops of Point Judith, Boston Neck and the back country.

This coumpany gave up business in the earley 1860's. The boiler in the mill exploded in 1858. It was never replaced.

The land was sold to difrent parteys. The beach was held by the co. and some of it sold to parties who bought land of them.

They would include a lot on the beach for bathing peorpes.

To the north of the vilage is the beach 1 ¼ mile long. Its noted for its beatey and saftey.

To the south is the clifts or rocks. Thes rocks is the last of the rock bound coast. They run for 2 ½ miles, then sand and pebels shore to Point Judith Light.

The back country has beateyfull drives in verrious landscapes an scenery consisting of hills, woods and ponds full of fine fish, makein it a ideal country for recreation and sport.

The site of the Pier up to 1855 had but a few buildings. Thire was no road along the shore. It was al bog and swamp until you went as far north as the Revier.

I will tel how it became and comenced to become a summer resort. Rowland Hazzard the founder of the Peace Dale Manufacturing Company he made a cloth in his mills wich was used for the slaves in the south. Joshep Dulles of Philadelphia had slaves and came to Peace Dale to buy his cloth. Hazzard used to take him down to the beach.

Mr. Dulles was so much pleased with the place and splendid beach he decided to come thire to spend his summers.

Thire was no hotel. He went to Mr. Hadwins who had a smal house.

After spending his summers thire he was so much pleasd with the place he wanted to bring his friends.

When he left for home he said to Mr. Holley if thire is a hotel started here let me kno at once.

Ezbons Taylor at that time (1855) was in the lumber buisness at the south Pier. He had a pardner. This pardner attended to colecting and books while Taylor attended to the yard work.

This pardner lived in Wakefield, a vilage three miles west.

A PERSON from Wakefield came down earley in the morning to go fishing on the rocks.

He see Taylor in the yard and said to him Ezbon Amos run away last night. Taylor said what do you mean. Why he has gorn, left. Shure enough he had not onley gorn but took all the money he could gether.

This left Taylor penles and ruined in regards to muney.

He desided he would go to North Kingston and work in the factory.

He received a message from Vester Robinson of Wakefield that he wanted to see him. He went to Wakefield not haveing the sighest idear what for. He met Mr. Robinson. He said to him, Carder Hazzard Danel Burdick and myself wants you to build a hotel at the Pier.

Taylor replied I have not enough to build a hen house.

We know that. We are going to build it and you and wife is going into it. If



DEPOT of the Sea View Rail Road. Cars ran to East Greenwich.



HEYDAY of the Pier. Original Casino at left. Hotel is the Rockingham.

there is any loss we will stand it, but if a success you pay as you can.

The house was built. It had about fifty rooms in 1856.

Mr. Holley in the meantime had written to Mr. Dulles. He came on in the winter and engaged about two thirds of the rooms in the house.

These were the people who first came to Narragansett, the first families of Philadelphia. They came as long as they lived and their children and grandchildren.

At this time the Sprague Mfg. Co. was at its high water mark. William Sprague had married that beautiful and talented Kate Chase. He bought two farms, the Boden Hazard and Robinson farm. There was about 400 acres in the two farms.

His wife commenced to build what was the famous Connonchet.

There was at least 100 workmen on the place.

The Pier now seemed to be on sound foundation. Cottages commenced to be built in the village and on the cliffs and in this way the Pier was prosperous and happy.

THE RAILROAD was put through in 1876. This was a very much needed convenience. The people now came more than ever. The hotels were crowded. There were cottages going up in every part of the village, private and others for rental.

The social life of the Pier at this time was the most congenial. Every one seemed to know each other and tried to make it agreeable for each other.

You could dress as you say fit. They

would all meet on the beach at 11 o'clock and would seem as one great family. They then would go after bathing to the hotel or cottage homes.

A great part of them would stop at the Studio so called or Billingtons. There they would have a lunch of little neck clams and other refreshments. In the afternoon they would go for a ride in the back country or take a walk to the rocks, or fishing parties to the river.

In the evening there would be something going on at some hotel almost every night in the week.

The older people would stay at home, play whist or form groups on the porches and enjoy themselves.

In this way they passed their time away for years.

The Casino was built in 1884 by a Co., Mr. R. G. Dunn and George V.

*'It done one
good to stand and
see them eat'*

Creson being the largest stockholders.

It was designed by McKim Mead and White, a fine building and a great attraction, and became very popular and fashionable. With this condition it changed the whole social life of the Pier.

You must go to the Casino after bath or before. The evenings must be spent there and this meant a large expense.

You had to be dressed in the highest of fashion, in fact it was a very expensive pastime with a very little comfort.

There was now a new boom in building. A pier was built in the center of the beach 1250 feet long, a restaurant, bath

houses, a building for a merry go round, a trolley line to East Greenwich which connected to Providence.

This was the condition of the Pier at its best days. There had been no great disaster at the Pier up to 1900. This I will call the high water mark of prosperity.

I WILL first tell about the Narragansett hotel. The house was built by the parties in Wakefield and my father went in. It was open in 1856 and kept by him until 1888. At the time it was built it was considered a great undertaking.

There were no summer resorts at that time in the country. There were a few places where you could go for the summer.

The house was kept in a very plain manner. The dining room was a long room, the table going down the center, everything was put upon the table except the meats. They were carved outside. The people surely liked this. It done one good to stand and see them eat.

The food was the best that could be obtained and cooked in the best of manner.

The board was 7.00 per week although any one could not make much at that price. But it gave all a good living and therefore was satisfied.

It can be called a success. There was not much made but never had a bad season, always came out ahead.

I could not close this memory of this dear old home unless I gave the credit to my mother, it was through her good management and hard work that the house was such a success. In those days

there were no sewing machines. She made every sheet, pillow cases, napkins, table cloths. There were woolen carpets on the bedrooms, all this she made with her needle.

I will now take up the bathing. I was no doubt the first person in the country who took care of a bath house.

It came about in this way. When I was ten years of age I commenced to help my father around the house.

At four in the morning I was up. My first job was to clean the out building and put in new sand and lime.

Then I went around and gathered the shoes and cleaned them.

The next was to take a basket and go to the south pier for fish and lobsters, this was a walk of half mile.

When I came back my breakfast was ready. After this I went in the garden and gathered truck. We had 1 1/2 acre of garden.

At 11 o'clock I went to the beach with wheelbarrow to bring up the wet suits. The suits were thrown over the picket fence to dry; at night they were taken dry or not and thrown in a pile in one corner of porch on the house. These suits remained there until they were taken by their owners when wanted, for they carried them to the beach themselves. When they arrived to the bath houses they would go in bathing and leave the wet suits for me to carry to the house on my wheelbarrow.

The bath suits were made of heavy blue flannel. They were made with pants which came down to the feet. The skirt came down within six inches of the feet, the sleeves came to the wrist. At the bottom of skirt there was a hem and in this hem they put shot. Some used the old fashion copper cent but the boys ►16

BIRTH OF THE PIER

Never missed a day in 51 years

would cut them out and they gave away to shot.

The mens suits was shirt and pants coming to the feet and wrist.

IHAD BIN TALKING with my farther about the bath houses and belived thire could be made a good buisness with them.

He thought so to and said if you will onley get this sea going out of your hed you can take them and do just as you pleas and you can have all you can make.

I took him up at once and went to work getting ready for the coming season.

The lot had a 40 ft. front. Thire was 35 rooms scaterd and build with the doors opening outside.

I took thes down and built two houses with hall. The rooms opend in the hall.

I made a tight roof. I put a porch in front with seats. This was a great improvemet.

The bath suits I kept at the beach and dried them and put them in thire rooms haveing them ready for the next day. I put in a towel and a clean pail of see watter for thire feet after bath. I kept them swept out.

I put a board walk over the dry sand going to the watter.

I charged \$1.00 per week. The peopel was delighted and besides payeing for thire rooms they all gave me hansom presants when going home.

Thire was not much transit bathers. If any came they would have a freind and they would lend them thire suit.

I belived suits would let. I than had some suits made. The ladies I cut the skirt of just below the knee. (Thy at that time wore shoes and the pants was left long). They commence to were stockins, than I cut the pants off to the knee. It was quite a long time before

they would all use the short suits.

The men was greatly pleased with thire suits, sleeves to the elbow and pants to the knee. Thes was no doubt the first short suit made in the country.

I kept the bath houses in this form for sevreal years.

I finley tore down the old ones and built entireley new.

They was built with pine boards plained. I made a good size room, the floors part open and part tight. I put a rack on the tight part and on this a piece of carpet.

Also a small shelf with a draw under neath and a looking glass on the shelf.

This was the best bath house that had ben built up to this time.

I started in on the beach when ten years of age and for fifty-one years I never mised a day through the season from the beach.

Captin Whaley was one of the oldist inhavitent. He was born in the old house owend by his farther wich set

just north of South Pier near Greens Inn.

In his yong days he followerd the sea. He also had fish traps and done a good and profitable buisness. He built a good size cottage on the corner of South Pier Roead and Ocean Road. He comenced to take borders first in 1860.

The Captin had ben through life a hard working and industras man.

He was a very bright and intelegent man and interesting to talk to on most any subject.

In his latter days he was cripeled with the rheumaticks.

It seames that a man who had ben such a useful and industres citerson should not have ben put on the state poor farm to end his last days.

Its hard to tell the reason for this but any one can have thire thoughts.

But you have sometime to follow the advise of Lorenzo Dow. He was a preacher in the first part of 1800. My farther said when a small lad he went to hear him preach. His sermon was on your thoughts. He said you could not prevent the birds flying over your heds but you could prevent them from building nest in your hair.

So you have to shew the birds away and do the best you can.

Although the Captin was humiliated he never lost his pride and spiret.

The keeper of the poor farm said he went to the Captin a few days after he came and said Captin the rules of the institution was that the inmates shold have something to do.

He said now Captin you can go in the kitchen and help around some light work pealing potatoes and such work.

He said the Captin strightend up and his eys flashed and said, pealing potatoes, pealing potatoes. A man that walked the quarter deck and sailed in every clime pealing potatoers in this institution. The Captin after this done just about as he pleased. He was thire until his death.

THE MOST SUCCESSFUL proprietor was J. G. Burns. He kept the Rockingham for several years with good success. He was a good hotel maneger and the house had a fine reputation.

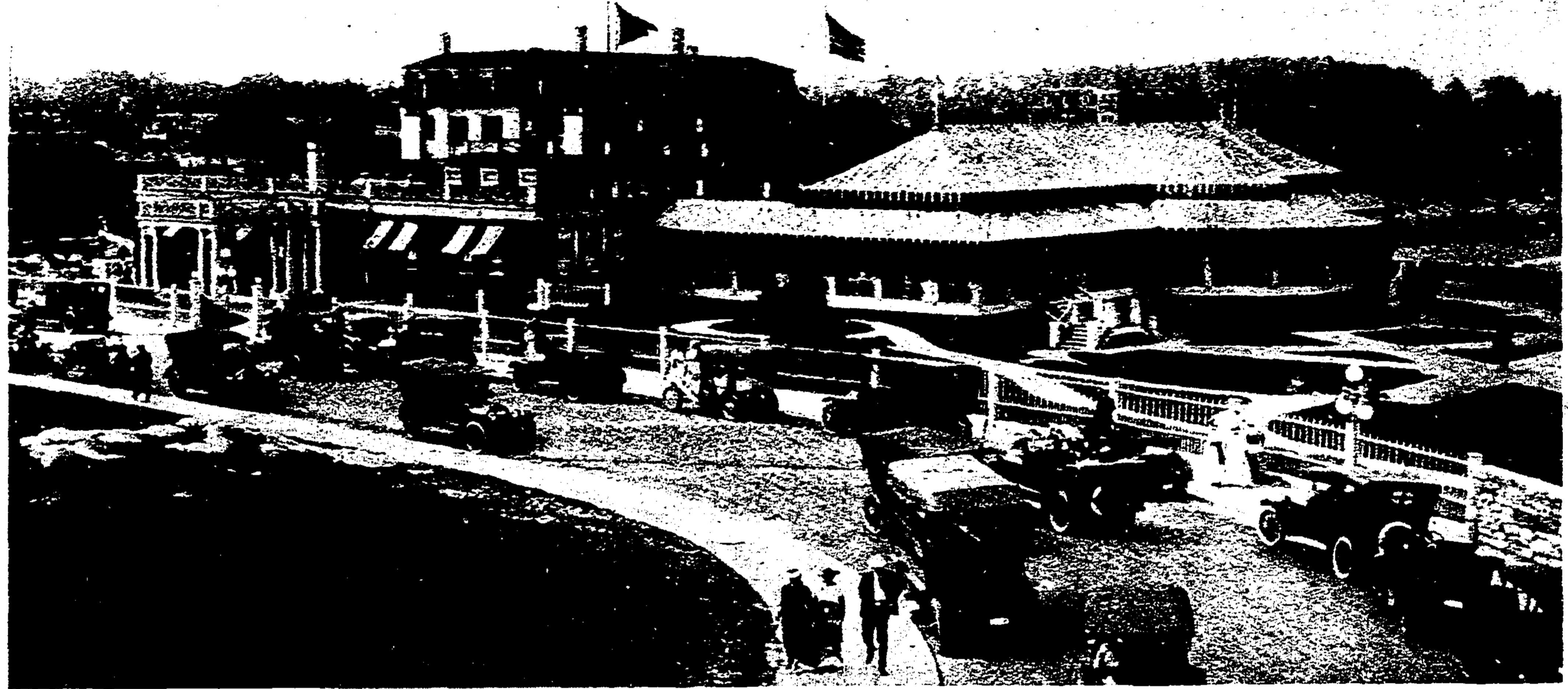
He kept the house until the darkest and sadiest day the Pier had ever experience, the day of the great fire. Betwin



DEVASTATION of the Rockingham fire, September 1900, changed the Pier.

BIRTH OF THE PIER

*A great blow,
never to be
overcome*



THE NEW CASINO couldn't compare with the old one.

twelve and one the Rockingham was seen to be a fire in the top of the roof on the west side.

I shal never forget that fealing wich came over me. I was on the beach at the bath house. I realized and knew tht nothing could save it or the serounding buildings

The onley thing to do was to fight and save what we could.

The Wakefield and Peace Dale Fire Co. was caled. They came and done great service in keeping the fire from crosing Beach Street.

Before they could get thire the hotel was burning feaceley. The wind was

blowing a gale and luckley from the s.w. on to the ocean.

The Casino was soon a fire. The Hazard Block shortley after. In one hours time the fire had done its work.

This was a great blow and set back wich could never be overcome.

John Hanan built the presant Casino

on the lot ocipied by the Rockingham but it never filed the place of the old one. It never was so popular. The memory of the old one seamed to be always in thire mind and like the vase of roses —

“The vase might be shatterd, the roses are scaterd but the sent of the



*CAFE GARDEN of the old Casino
was social center in Gay Nineties.*

BIRTH OF THE PIER

Drinks everywhere

rose hang aroun it stil."

The first Casino was popular from the start. It would be crowded after bathing and evenings. It, as I have stated, changed the social life at the Pier compleatly.

Thir was difrant oppinions wather it was a help to the Pier or not, I was whire I could hear the difrent idears.

Thire was a great number said it had ruined the good old happy days when you could dress as you liked. Now thire was two much style and trouble and expence for nothing in return, wich took away that quit and comfort of former days.

THIRE WAS a great number of yong men who came to the Pier who would stay the entire summer. Thire was a large falling of this clas after the Casino was built. They said it was to expensive. You had to pay a entrance fee and than you was expected to take someone to a treat, eather drink or eat.

Why, they would say, it cost more to go to the Casino thn my board and I do not enjoy it near so much as I did before it was built. Its a expensive fash-ion wich you are expect to take in if you come here. This kept a great many away. They would come some of them for a few days, and others would stay away altogether.

The Casino was run the first year by the cottage coloney. They ran it very quitleym They would not let any drinks to be served on the front lawn or on the porch. They wer served onley in the dining room or at the bar.

Under Sherys management the drinks was served in any place on the lawn, the front porch and whire you wished.

Thire was a great many who did not like this. It set a bad example for children too, and they would not take them thire. This was the talk you would here.

Now on the other hand the yong peopel liked it. They liked the excitement and it brought them together and to have a good time.

It brought a great many yachts and this made a great many dinner parties and brought the fashlonable clas together to show thire dresses and to be seen.

Thir is no doubt but the greater part of the peopel was in favor of the Casino and it was a hard blow when the seen of so many pleasure and happy years had bin spent in its social life wich they enjoyed.

And with many regrets they see it go. Happy days hang the longest on mem-orys wall.

Perhaps if it never had bin built the Pier would have kept along in its quite way and in the end bin better off. □