

**Highland Beach, New Jersey:
A Jersey Shore Destination
1881-1962**

**SANDY HOOK
GATEWAY NATIONAL RECREATION AREA
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE**

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Introduction

Hundreds of beachgoers, bicyclists and historically inclined tourists travel onto Sandy Hook each day in search of a relaxing, invigorating or informative adventure. The entrance to Sandy Hook Peninsula is a mere 100 yards in width and visitors to the Sandy Hook Unit of Gateway National Recreation Area must pass through this area along their journey. Yet, despite the fact that the southern portion of Sandy Hook is heavily trafficked on a daily basis, little is known about the rich, vibrant history that has shaped this area since the late 19th century. Besides a white cedar shake house in need of a paint job that is veiled in the darkness of the ramp for the Highlands Bridge and an obscure concrete pathway once heavily traveled by visitors, sand dunes and dune grass are all that remain to tell of this site's energetic past.

Early History

On February 28, 1881 Anthony and Mary S. Reckless sold Wardell Beach to The Highland Beach Association for \$10,000. Wardell Beach was subdivided by the Highland Beach Association into 74 building lots and was renamed Highland Beach.¹ This transference of ownership set a precedent for the profound changes that would shape this area over the next 82 years. With the development of easily accessible transportation, residents of northern New Jersey and New York eagerly swarmed to Highland Beach. "The nearest available ocean beach on the New Jersey coast..."² On November 1, 1882 Lot number 1 was sold by the Highland Beach Association to the Atlantic Highland Association for \$1,500.³ Less than 10 years later, on July 29, 1892, the Atlantic Highlands Association sold Lot number 1 to the United States of America with riparian rights for \$1,500.⁴ On July 27, 1892 the Highland Beach Association sold Lots 2 through 22 to the United States of America for \$19,000. This established a permanent boundary line between the private property of Highland Beach and government owned property boundary of Fort Hancock.⁵

On November 1, 1887 The Highland Beach Association leased Lots 23 through 28 and lots 30 through 33 to The Highland Beach Improvement Company at yearly fixed rates for 10 years.⁶ A December 14, 1887 article in the Red Bank Register commented on the pending plans for construction. "The name has been changed to Highland Beach. Plans of the buildings to be erected by the association are nearly finished. There will be a new depot, bathing, music, and dancing pavilions, stores, pagodas of unique styles of architecture, hotels and other fine buildings."⁷ Thus began the development of an area that would eventually become renowned for its pleasant and enjoyable atmosphere. "By 1889 several cottages had been built on the northern most plots of land and offered for sale."⁸ Cabanas were constructed earlier as a private beach club around 1887 and by 1888, the Highland Beach Gravity Railroad (an early roller coaster) had been built. The area was teeming with activity as beach goers flocked from all over. "Highland Beach is an excursion resort, especially designed for family parties, though larger excursions can obtain ample accommodations on notice. The bathing is especially fine and varied, the ocean and the river being but 50 yards apart."⁹ The Monmouth Press commented on the vast improvements made to Highland Beach in an article published on September 15, 1894. "Altogether the place is booming. So much so that the management have ordered

the erection of 200 new bath houses, extending the group northward considerably. The houses are of large size like the others. A new gate house on a more pretentious scale has been erected with a capacity equal for the hundreds more keys and towels needful to the handled with enlarged facilities.”¹⁰

Transportation

The first bridge spanning the Navesink River between Highlands and Sea Bright was constructed and opened on December 5, 1872 by the Highlands Bridge Company. The Navesink Bridge Company eventually purchased this bridge, repaired it and reopened it on June 27, 1878.¹¹ On January 31, 1884 The Highland Beach Association sold to the Navesink Bridge Company part of Lot 29 for a bridge landing for \$1.00.¹²

The railroad was actively involved in the construction of a railway bridge and a train station that satiated transportation needs of attendees from distant locations. On February 1, 1892 The Highland Beach Association sold to the Navesink Railroad Company a tract of land between Lots 33 and 37 for \$1.00. With the railroad company building a new railroad and pedestrian bridge over the Shrewsbury River in 1892, the company was apparently buying this tract to build a railroad right-of-way and a new railroad station.¹³

The 1892 bridge had its pedestrian and automobile function, but not the railroad portion, discontinued, with the construction of a new drawbridge. On June 5, 1931 the Board of Chosen Freeholders of Monmouth County resolved to close the west and east sides of the old vehicle bridge to public traffic once the new State Highway bridge was constructed on Route 36.¹⁴ By September 6, 1933 the new State Highway Number 36 Vehicle Bridge was completed and the west and east sides of the old vehicle bridge were discontinued as a county road.¹⁵ By 1960 the bridge had all but disappeared except for the remains of pilings which jutted from the strong river current.¹⁶

A ferry service also provided public transportation along the river. “The excitement of steamboat travel at the Highlands began around 1832 with the *Saratoga*. By 1932, a century later, the fun had stopped and the *Little Silver* made her last journey-to the scrap yard. Economics killed this romantic form of travel. Trains, trucks, buses, and the mighty automobile came in vast numbers, and the old wooden docks and piers began to rot away.”¹⁷

The Sandlass Family

On January 5, 1893 The Highland Beach Improvement Company leased Lots 23-26 for 5 years, beginning on March 1, 1893, to William Sandlass, Jr. at an annual rent of \$500.00.¹⁸ It wouldn't be until March 18, 1920 that William Sandlass purchased Lots 23-33.¹⁹ When the lease began the Sandlass' influence over the area was profound. The Monmouth Press wrote on May 22, 1897, “William Sandlass, Jr. proprietor of Highland Beach, is making extensive improvements in readiness for the coming season. The current in the river has altered making the steamboat pier of last year unavailable and Mr. Sandlass has extended it riverward about 75 feet. The building containing the confectionary and variety stand which stood in between the Surf House and the seas has been removed to the north side of the bridge.”²⁰

Highland Beach comprised many different attractions that were built in the Victorian style of architecture. Using photographic evidence, the Bamboo Gardens, the Basket Pavilion (a dance hall), a Merry Go Round, bar and storefronts existed c. 1910. William Sandlass had traveled to Cuba and brought back a considerable amount of bamboo. This bamboo was used to construct the Bamboo Gardens, an outdoor theater called an Airdrome that were popular around World War I, as well as the Bamboo Bar. Also on the property were private cottages. Sandlass leased the land to families who built cottages that were used each summer. Cabanas were constructed on the river side of the peninsula. The Sandlass family lived above the Bamboo Bar which was originally located between the railroad track and the roadway. This is known as NPS building 600. It remained there until the Hurricane on September 21, 1938 caused considerable damage. The Sandlass family moved the house the following year to a safer location to the south and closer to the river.²¹

Storms were a continual issue for the entire time Highland Beach served as a resort. This is an account of a storm from 1896 that shows typical damage.

“...at Highland Beach the damage was quite extensive. A broad inlet, five or six feet deep, was cut through the beach from the ocean to the river. This inlet is opposite the head of Island Beach. The ocean was rushing through this inlet at a great rate last night, but as soon as the wind shifts to the west it will begin to fill up again with sand. The north end of the row of bath houses at Highland Beach was carried away. Some damage was done to the other buildings there, but the damage was not so great as has been reported. The great rocks which had been piled along the ocean side of the beach as a protection to the coast were tossed about by the waves like playthings.”²²

The character of this area was by no means stagnant. In its early years Highland Beach, with the resort area later referred to as Sandlass Beach, was utilized as a family retreat open in the summer and patronized by residents of northern New Jersey and New York. However, by the 1930's, profound changes in the United States economic conditions as well as the rising war abroad would beckon towards a dramatic shift in focus.

Transportation for residents of northern New Jersey and New York to the New Jersey shore was mainly by boat and train. Once train service was discontinued in the late 1940s and the automobile became the preferred method of travel with the opening of the New Jersey Turnpike and Garden State Parkway in the 1950s attention was drawn away from Highlands Beach as beach-goers were filtered farther and farther south along the shore. The Sandlass family changed the focus of the resort from one for day trippers from the city to becoming Sandlass Beach Club and patronized primarily by those families living in the northern Monmouth County area. This club continued to have cabanas for its patrons. The Victorian buildings were either torn down or converted to smaller, more useful buildings. The private cottages continued to exist on the northern edge of the Sandlass property.²³

On January 1, 1962 a lease agreement between the Department of the Army and the State of New Jersey, Department of Conservation and Economic Development was established dictating that the property on the south end of the Fort Hancock Military Reservation would be used as a state park.²⁴ By using eminent domain, the state took the property owned by the Sandlass family that consisted of Lots 23 through 36 for better access to the newly formed park. The Sandlass family was given a sum of money that they did not agree was sufficient for the value of the land and filed a lawsuit. On December 28, 1962 Henry J. and Helen J. Sandlass were awarded \$350,000 in condemnation proceedings by the State of New Jersey Superior Court for Lots 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, and 30, and parts of Lots 31, 32, and 33.²⁵

Conclusion

On December 31, 1974 the U.S. Army closed down Fort Hancock and turned the land including the leased land that was Sandy Hook State Park over to the Department of the Interior as part of Gateway National Recreation Area. A new highway ramp was built off the bridge and the front lawn of the Sandlass family house was no more. The only remaining structure from this area is building 600. Its presence is a reminder of the long history of Jersey Shore resort towns.



Figure 1

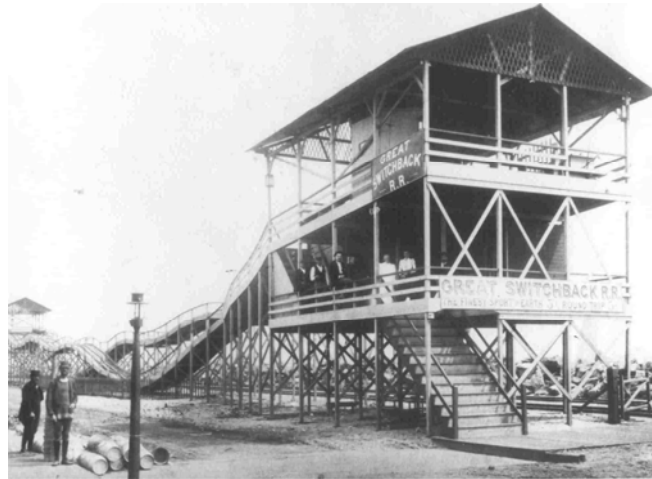


Figure 2



Figure 3



MERRY - GO - ROUND HIGHLAND BEACH N J

Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11

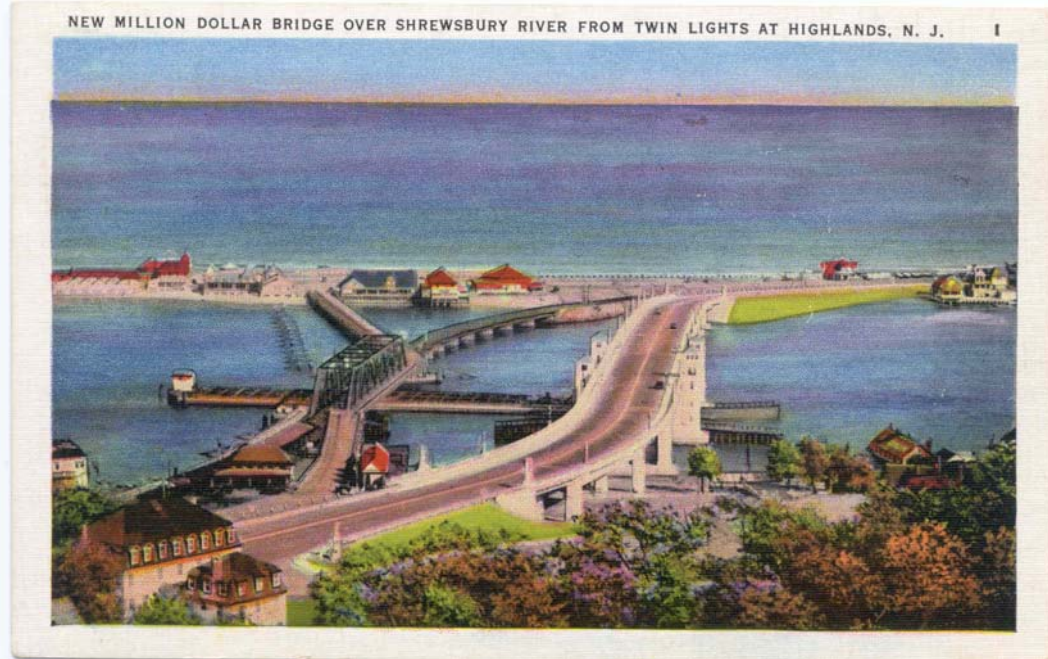


Figure 12

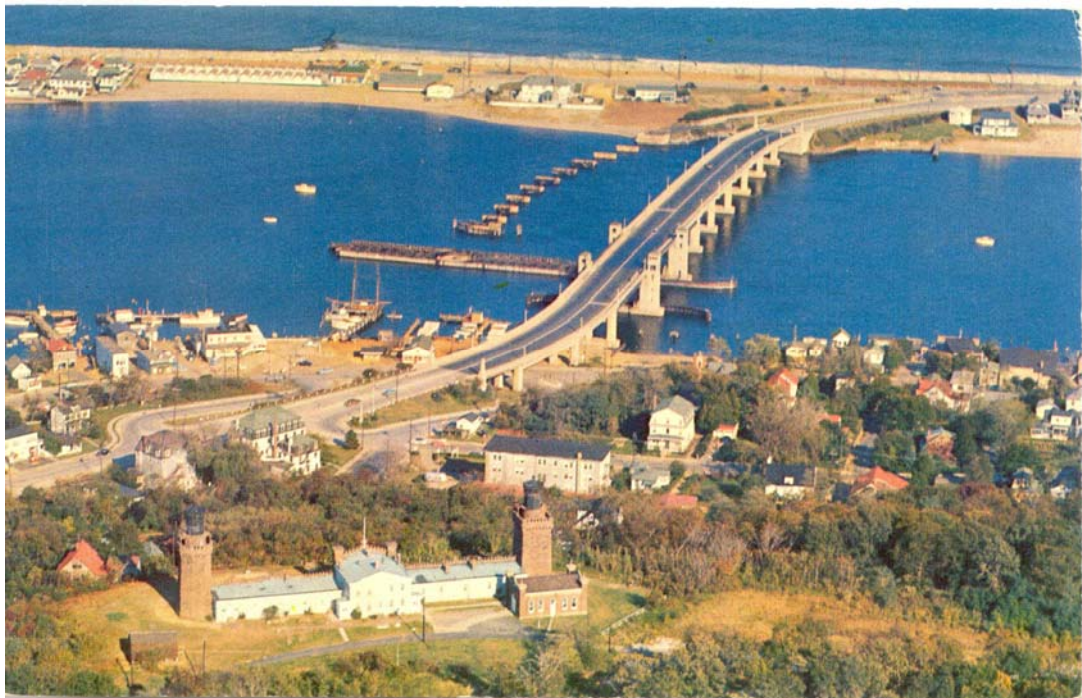


Figure 13

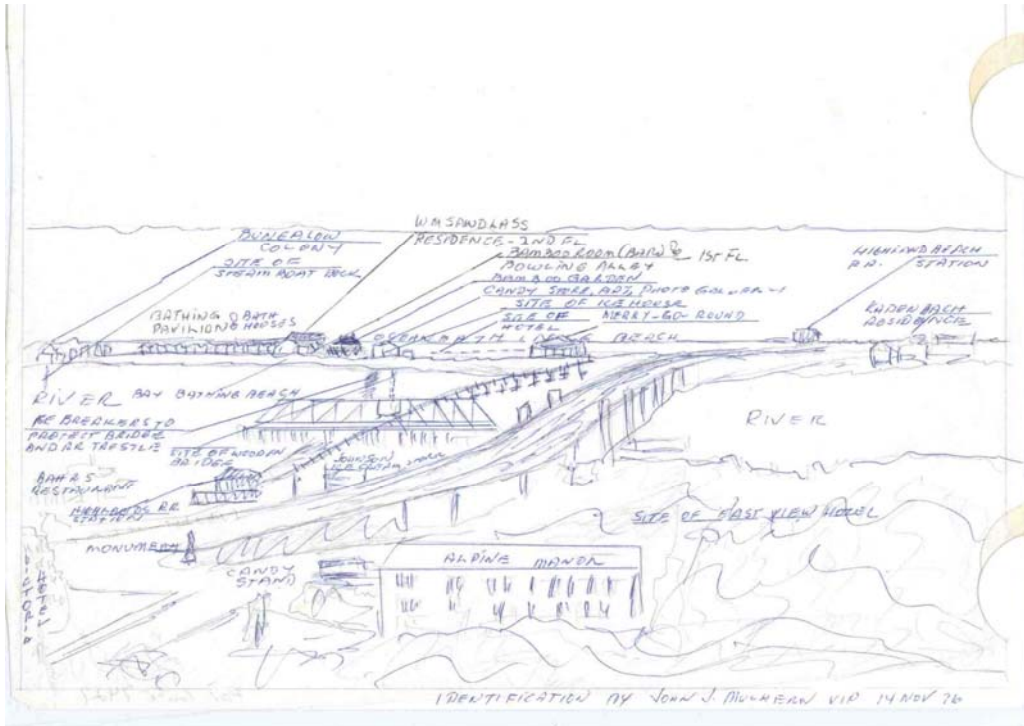


Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19

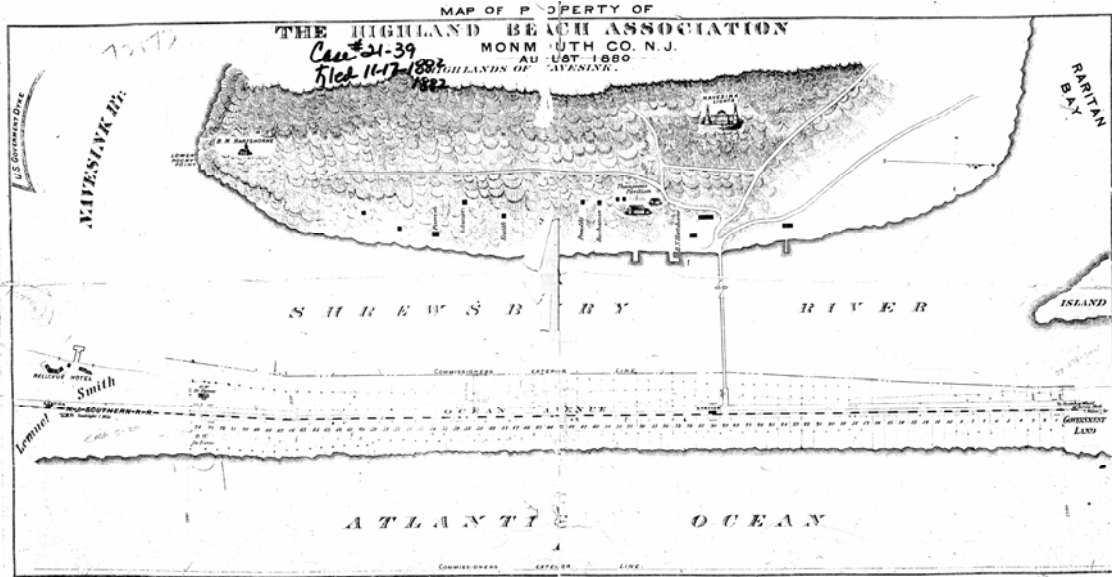


Figure 20

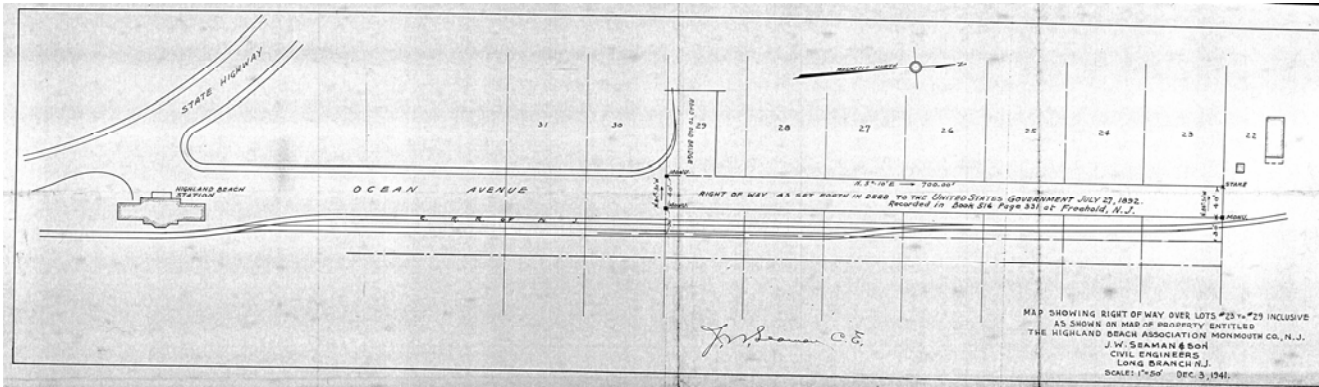


Figure 21

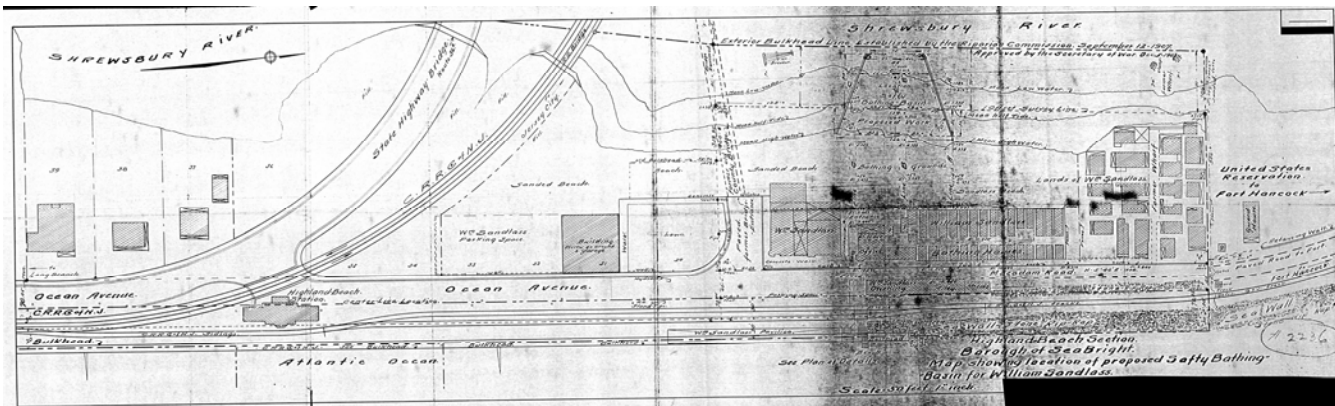


Figure 22

ENDNOTES

1. DEED: February 28, 1881: Anthony and Mary S. Reckless sell Wardell Beach to The Highland Beach Association for \$10,000. Wardell Beach was subdivided by The Highland Beach Association into 74 building lots and was renamed Highland Beach.
2. Another Look At Nauvoo to the Hook. George H. Moss Jr. Ploughshare Press, 1990. Pg . 89.
3. DEED: November 1, 1882: The Highland Beach Association sells to The Atlantic Highlands Association Lot No. 1 for \$1,500.
4. DEED: July 29, 1892: The Atlantic Highlands Association sells to the United States of America Lot No. 1 with riparian rights for \$1,500.
5. DEED: July 27, 1892: The Highland Beach Association sells to the United States of America Lots 2 through 22 for \$19,000. This establishes a known permanent boundary line between government property on the south end of Sandy Hook, and private property at the north end of Highland Beach. (this is just south of where current Gateway National Park Toll exists)
6. DEED: November 1, 1887: The Highland Beach Association leases to The Highland Beach Improvement Company Lots 23-28 and lots 30-33 at yearly fixed rates for 10 years (1887-1897)
7. Red Bank Register – December 14, 1887 – Highland Beach*
8. Another Look At Nauvoo to the Hook. George H. Moss Jr. Ploughshare Press, 1990. Pg . 89.
9. Another Look At Nauvoo to the Hook. George H. Moss Jr. Ploughshare Press, 1990. Pg. 95.
10. Monmouth Press article – September 15, 1894. Highland Beach Also Flourishing*
11. Images of America – The Highlands. John P. King. Arcadia, 1995. Page 28
12. DEED: January 31, 1884: The Highland Beach Association sells to the Navesink Bridge Company part of Lot 29 for a bridge landing or place for supporting the easterly end and approach of the bridge for \$1.00.
13. DEED: February 1, 1892: The Highland Beach Association sells to the Navesink Railroad Company a tract of land between Lots 33 and 37 (lots 34, 35, 36) for \$1.00. With the railroad company building a new railroad bridge over the Shrewsbury River

in 1892, the company was apparently buying this tract to build a railroad right-of-way and new railroad station (on the east side of Lots 35 and 36)

14. DEED: June 5, 1931: A resolution wherein The Board of Chosen Freeholders of Monmouth County resolve to close the west and east sides of the old vehicle Bridge to public traffic once the new State Highway Bridge over the Shrewbury River is constructed on Route No. 36.

15. DEED: September 6, 1933: A resolution wherein The Board of Chosen Freeholders of Monmouth County resolve that the west and east sides of the old vehicle bridge are now discontinued as a county road, and that the County relinquishes all jurisdiction over and responsibility for the construction, reconstruction, repair and maintenance thereof now that the new State Highway No. 36 Vehicle Bridge is completed.

16. Images of America – The Highlands. John P. King. Arcadia, 1995. Page 27.

17. DEED: January 5, 1893: The Highland Beach Improvement Company leases to William Sandlass, Jr. Lots 23-26 for 5 years beginning March 1, 1893 at an annual rent of \$500.00

18. Monmouth Press article – May 22, 1897.*

19. Highland Beach article – October 14, 1896 Damage by the Storm*

20. DEED: January 1, 1962: Lease agreement between the Department of the Army and the State of New Jersey, Department of Conservation and Economic Development, to use property on the south end of the Fort Hancock Military Reservation as a state park. (from the southern end of the land owned by the United States north until where the current Ranger Station is, the previous site for the gatehouse to Fort Hancock which was deactivated in 1974). This lease will eventually affect ownership of Lots 23 through 36 when Sandy Hook State Park begins operations in 1962.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

DEEDS OF SANDY HOOK 1847-1972: A list of deeds concerning land ownership of Sandy Hook, New Jersey. Compiled by Thomas J. Hoffman, Park Historian, October, 2004. Deed Transcriptions by Mrs. Elaine D. Anderson, Volunteer In Park, T.J. Hoffman, and Mary Ann Kiernan, Archivist, Monmouth County Archives.

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* denotes item is in collection of Monmouth County Historical Association, 70 Court Street, Freehold, New Jersey.

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8. January 5, 1893: The Highland Beach Improvement Company leases to William Sandlass, Jr. Lots 23-26 for 5 years beginning March 1, 1893 at an annual rent of \$500.00
9. March 18, 1920: The Highland Beach Association sells to William Sandlass Lots 23-33, lying between the north line of the property of the Central Railroad Company of New Jersey (Lot 34), and the south line of the property of the United States of America (former Lot 22), for \$1.00.

10. June 5, 1931: A resolution wherein The Board of Chosen Freeholders of Monmouth County resolve to close the west and east sides of the old vehicle Bridge to public traffic once the new State Highway Bridge over the Shrewbury River is constructed on Route No. 36.

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List of Figures

Figures 1 through 19 are located in the Gateway NRA Museum Collection.

1. Catalog # 21891, William Sandlass portrait, c. 1910.
2. Catalog # 21897, of roller coaster c. 1890.
3. Catalog # 21898, of roller coaster c. 1890.
4. Catalog # 20935, Postcard, Merry Go Round, Highland Beach, N.J., c. 1910.
5. Catalog # 21896, Basket Pavilion dance hall c. 1910.
6. Catalog # 21894, View of Highland Beach and Bamboo Garden c. 1920.
7. Catalog # 20926, Postcard, Sandlass Pavillion, Highlands Beach, N.J. View shows Bamboo Garden c. 1915.
8. Catalog # 1781 Postcard, Highlands Beach, Highlands, N.J. View looking north of ocean, train tracks, bldg 600 in original location, and car parking c. 1920.
9. Catalog # 20921 Postcard, Bathing in the River, View of cabanas with Highland Beach sign. Highlands, N.J. c. 1915.
10. Catalog # 21890 Bamboo Garden interior airdrome movie theater, c. 1920.
11. Catalog # 21895 View of Bldg 600 as Bamboo Garden c. 1915.
12. Catalog # 791 Postcard, new Highlands bridge with old bridge, 1933.
13. Catalog # 1782 Postcard of Highlands looking at bridge from Twin Lights, old bridge pilings and swing platform visible c. 1960.
14. Catalog # 7426a Identification of Highland Beach for catalog # 7427, c. 1935.
15. Catalog # 7427 new bridge after old bridge roadway is demolished c. 1935.
16. Catalog # 722.1 Postcard. Bamboo Room, Sandlass Beach, Sea Bright, N.J. c. 1940.
17. Catalog # 21892 Interior of building 600. Sandlass family portrait c. 1950.
18. Catalog # 21900 Sandlass baths, c. 1950.
19. Catalog # 21885 Sandlass Beach aerial, c. 1960.
20. Map of Highland Beach, 1880.
21. Map of Highland Beach, 1941.
22. Map of Highland Beach, c. 1935.