

The Garden State Parkway

Crossing the Great Egg Harbor Bay

When the Garden State Parkway bridge over Great Egg Harbor Bay opened on May 26, 1956, it was the longest bridge to be constructed as a part of the new highway. The Parkway connected the population centers of northern New Jersey with the resort communities of the Atlantic coast. The bridge over Great Egg Harbor Bay connects the

City of Somers Point in Atlantic County with the community of Beesley's Point in Cape May County. Though the bridge was constructed in the middle of the twentieth century, these two communities have a shared history that extends back through time into the seventeenth century. Connected by a succession of ferries and bridges,

the two communities have served as an essential point of connection for centuries. This pamphlet explores the development of the connections between these two points and the many historical events that occurred within these settlements on the Great Egg Harbor Bay.



Native Americans

The Great Egg Harbor Bay formed about 5,000 years ago when rising sea levels slowed and stabilized. The process resulted in the formation of many new bodies of water, including the bays and salt marshes along the Atlantic Coast of New Jersey. The new bodies of water supported a growing variety of marine life, and the existence of these new food sources attracted various small groups of indigenous people to the coast of southern New Jersey. These early inhabitants left evidence of their existence behind. After catching

and eating the abundant shellfish located in the newly formed bays, the Native Americans would collect the emptied shells in a large pile. These piles are referred to as shell middens by archaeologists. The shell middens found along the shores of the Great Egg Harbor Bay are between 3,000 and 5,000 years old and generally contain fragments of tools and other waste. These shell middens have helped archaeologists to better understand where and when different Native American groups lived and fished in

this part of New Jersey. Artifacts found at Beesley's Point include shell middens, stone tools, and shards of pottery.

The first official ferry across the Great Egg Harbor Bay was established 1695, but it is likely that Native Americans traversed the Bay, as well as providing transportation across to European travelers, at an earlier date. The size and depth of New Jersey's rivers and bays often required European travelers to seek assistance from Native Americans in crossing on small boats and canoes.

John Somers and the Ferry

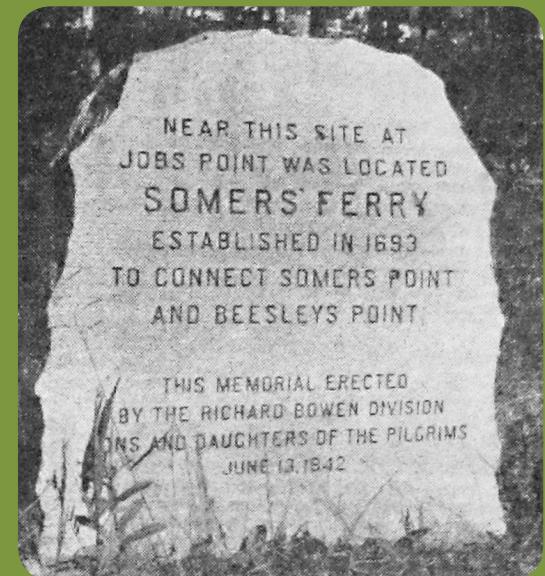
John Somers settled Somers Point in 1693 following his purchase of 3,000 acres of land on the Great Egg Harbor Bay. Like many of the early settlers around Great Egg Harbor, Somers was an English Quaker who moved to Atlantic County from Pennsylvania. Immediately after settling on the Bay, Somers was named supervisor of roads and constable for Great Egg Harbor; his large land holdings were known as the Somers Plantation. In 1695, Somers established the first ferry to cross Great Egg Harbor Bay, made official by an act of the Provincial Legislature. The act set standardized prices for the passage of people as well as horses, cattle, sheep, hogs, and bushels of grain. The ferry connected present-day Somers Point



with present-day Beesley's Point, which was known as Goldin's Point after the Goldin family settled on the south side of the Bay. In the eighteenth century, Somers Plantation became known as Job's Point. It was named for Job Somers, a son of John Somers, who ran the ferry at that time.

In part, Somers may have established the ferry to connect Quaker settlers on the separated sides of the Bay. Although the majority of people living in seventeenth-century Cape May County were not Quaker, a few Quaker families did settle in the vicinity of Beesley's Point, in the northern portion of the county. These families joined with Somers and others in Atlantic County to form a small Quaker meeting. Meetings were alternately held in worshipers' homes on the north and south sides of the Bay. Worshipers utilized various forms of transportation to cross the bay, including the ferry and canoes. One worshiper reportedly even swam across the Bay. By the early eighteenth century, the Quaker community had

grown and separate meetings were established on either side of the Bay. On the Atlantic County side, the Somers family offered up their own home for continual worship. This home, built by John Somers' son, Richard, (pictured left) remains standing on Somers Point and is a historic site owned and operated by the State of New Jersey. Though the congregations separated, the communities on either side of the Great Egg Harbor Bay held this shared religious connection through the centuries.



The Goldin Family

In the chain of whaler yeoman settlements that ran along Cape May County's Atlantic coast, William Goldin owned the northernmost tract of land, the terminus for Great Egg Harbor Bay crossings. He and his family settled in Beesley's Point around 1693. The Goldin family had much in common with the majority of late seventeenth century

settlers in Cape May County. William Goldin was a whaler and the eldest son of a Long Island family. The Goldin family also gave Beesley's Point its first name, Goldin's Point, emphasizing the importance of the family's presence there. Goldin owned 600 acres of land, which he began dividing among his sons in 1708. In 1714, an outbreak of

the plague in Cape May County killed 10 percent of the area's population, including William Goldin. Goldin's children and grandchildren remained in the area for many years, farming family plots and marrying amongst other early Cape May County families, maintaining a tightknit circle on the south side of Great Egg Harbor Bay.

Whaling

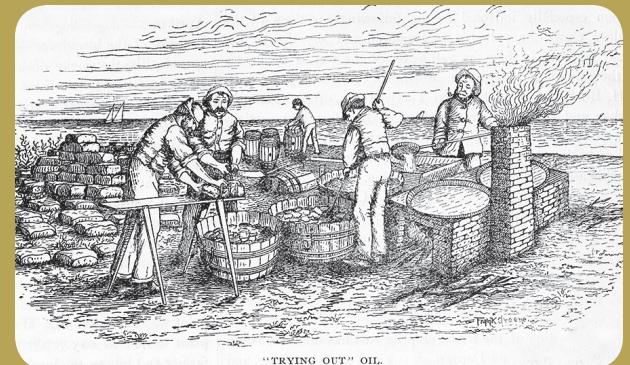
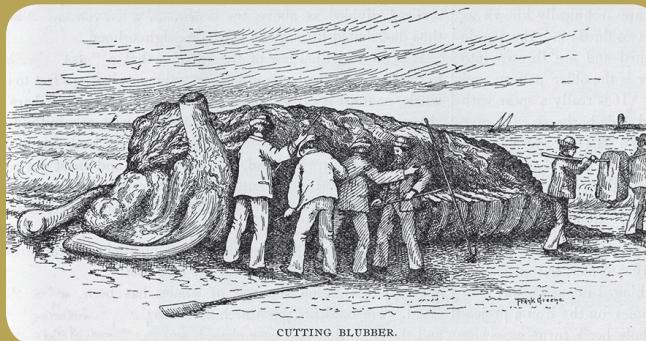
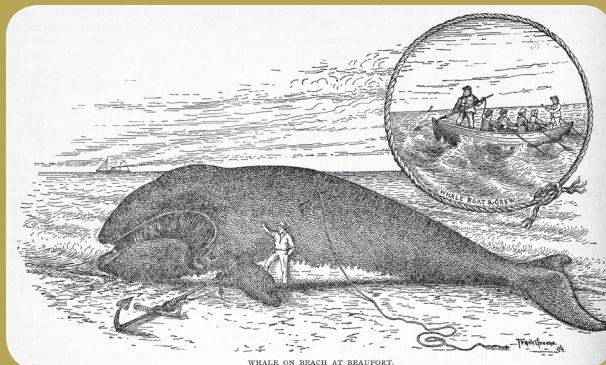
Seventeenth century whalers played an essential role in the development of Cape May County, including the settlements on the Great Egg Harbor Bay. During the late seventeenth century many whaling families migrated from Long Island to Cape May County. Drawn by affordable land, these settlers started small plantations along the coast stretching from the Great Egg Harbor Bay to the Cape May peninsula. They were primarily identified as yeomen, owners of small estates who generally worked their own land and had a social standing above a tradesman but below a gentleman. These whaler yeoman

families dominated this small, rural society and economy throughout the eighteenth century, owning the majority of land and livestock in Cape May County and holding almost all public offices.

Whales were valued for their fat (called "blubber"). Whale blubber contained extremely valuable oil, which was extracted from the blubber through a cooking process. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, whaling was a relatively simple process. Early whale boats were small and held approximately six whalers, rarely traveling out of sight of the shoreline. Some whalers never even left the shore,

laying claim to whales that had simply washed up on the beach.

The waters closest to the shore were quickly over-fished, and by the mid-eighteenth century, whalers were forced to travel further out to sea. These longer trips required larger boats, more equipment, and more whalers per vessel. This new level of investment resulted in larger-scale and more organized whaling operations. As whales became scarce along the shore in the middle of the eighteenth century, whaling became less common in Cape May County. The onset of the Revolutionary War marked the end of whaling off the Cape May County coast altogether.



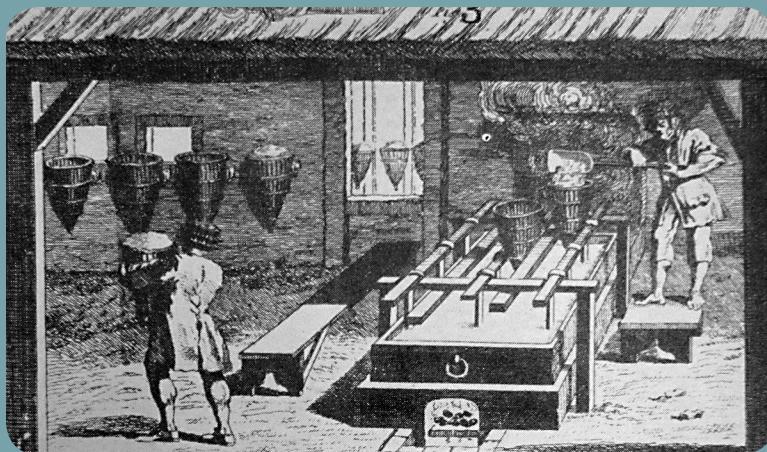
Revolutionary Saltworks

During the Revolutionary War, salt production became an important industry on the beaches of Great Egg Harbor Bay. Salt was an essential resource in the eighteenth century. It was used as a preservative and was heavily relied upon by the fishing and fur industries. Before the Revolutionary War, a large percentage of salt needed in the Colonies was imported from Europe. During the War, the resource was in high demand by the Continental Army for its use as a food preservative and for the production of gun powder. British blockages resulted in immediate

salt shortages that forced the Colonies to find new ways of getting salt. This led to a dramatic increase in salt production on the New Jersey shore, utilizing the abundance of readily available salt water.

Great Egg Harbor Bay saltworks included the Frazer Kinsley Saltworks, the Kennedy and McCulloh Saltworks, and the Friendship Salt Company. A 1778 newspaper advertisement for the sale of the Frazer Kinsley Saltworks gave a detailed description of the works. The sale included several kettles

and four pans, holding between 3,000 and 4,000 gallons of salt water, as well as a salt-house, a drying-house, a dwelling, and stables. Salt pans were shallow, rectangular boxes made of iron. Furnaces in the salt-house boiled the salt water in the pans to remove the water and leave only salt. The 24-hour process was complex, involving multiple boiling stages and the mixing of egg whites with the boiling water. Though labor intensive, the process was fast and efficient relative to other options, such as using the heat from the sun.



TO be SOLD, a complete set of SALT WORKS at Great Egg harbour, consisting of four large PANS and several KETTLES, supposed to contain three or four thousand gallons, together with the buildings, salt-house, drying-house, dwelling house, and stables; a team of horses, an ox ditto, and two milch cows. The whole will be sold together or separate, as will best suit the purchaser. Any person inclining to purchase, may apply to FRAZER KIN-SLEY, at Great Egg-Harbour, or to PETER JANUARY in Philadelphia.
July 21.

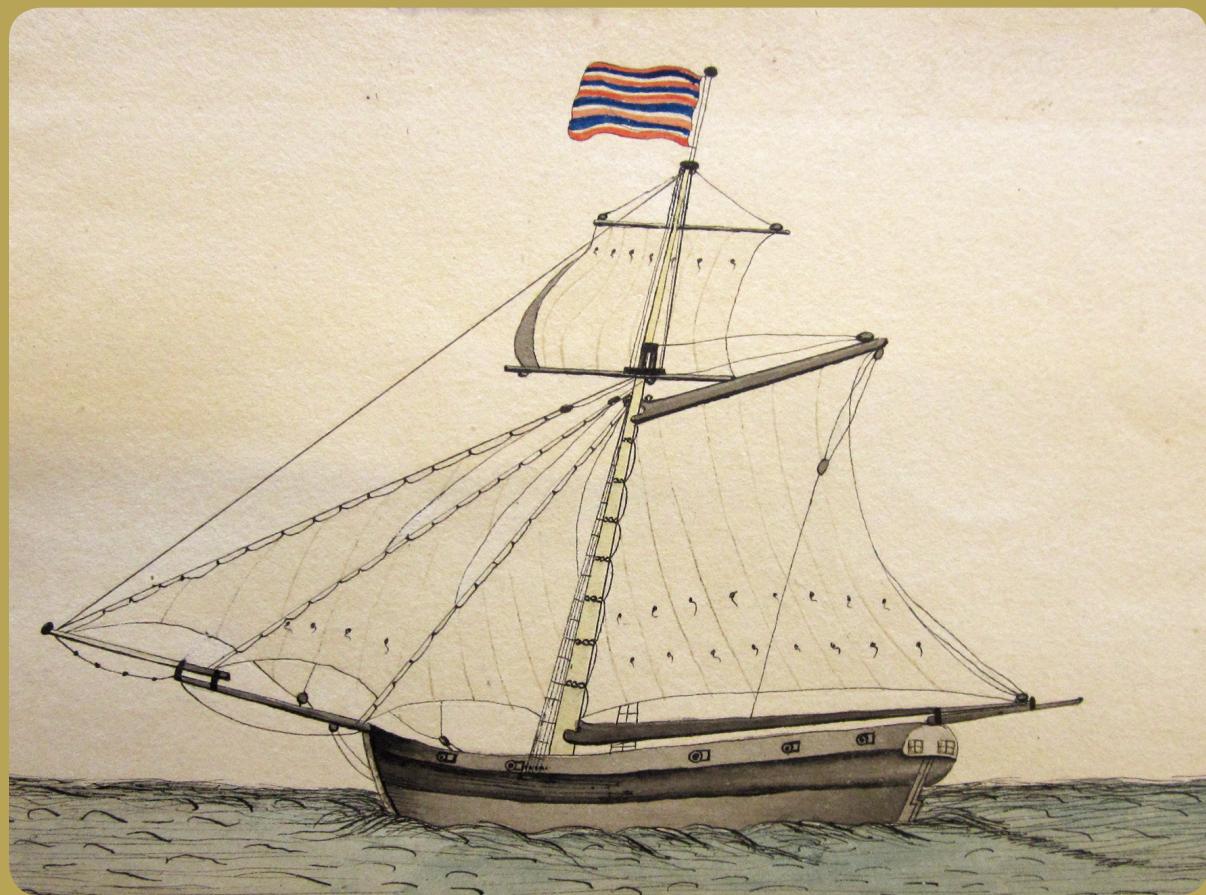
Privateering

As the Revolutionary War progressed, Cape May County's coast, including the Great Egg Harbor Bay, became an important location for privateering in New Jersey. Privateers had permission from the government to use their personal ships to attack and plunder British trade vessels at sea. The highly skilled Cape May County sailors were well-equipped to raid British ships, and the many bays and inlets around the peninsula provided cover. Privateers were essential to the war effort and to the economy, taking much-needed supplies out of the hands of the British. These supplies were both provided to Washington's army and sold at auction, boosting the wartime economy.

Enoch Stillwell, the younger son of Nicholas Stillwell, was a privateer operating out of Beesley's Point and Great Egg Harbor Bay during the Revolutionary War. In 1779, his ship, the Eagle, captured the schooner Henry, with a cargo of 20 hogsheads each of sugar and molasses and 2000 pounds

of cotton, as well as some coffee. The cargo was auctioned off at the tavern on Beesley's Point. As a privateer, Enoch

Stillwell captured multiple vessels with holdings worth many thousands of British pounds.



A Ferry, a Road, a Tavern

In 1706, more than 10 years after Somers first established his ferry, a road was laid out through present-day Somers Point. Through travel beyond Somers Point required crossing the Great Egg Harbor Bay. For this reason, the construction of the road increased the amount of traffic crossing the Bay at Somers ferry, but the growth took place gradually. It was another 30 years before travel on the road and ferry generated enough traffic to warrant the opening of a tavern or hotel at either ferry landing. Taverns were often built near ferries to accommodate travelers, many of whom were forced to stay overnight to await the next crossing. The schedule was set at the whim of the ferry operator, and as such, taverns opened near ferries to serve the needs of travelers. Nicholas Stillwell opened the first tavern adjacent to the Great Egg Harbor ferry crossing in Beesley's Point in 1736.

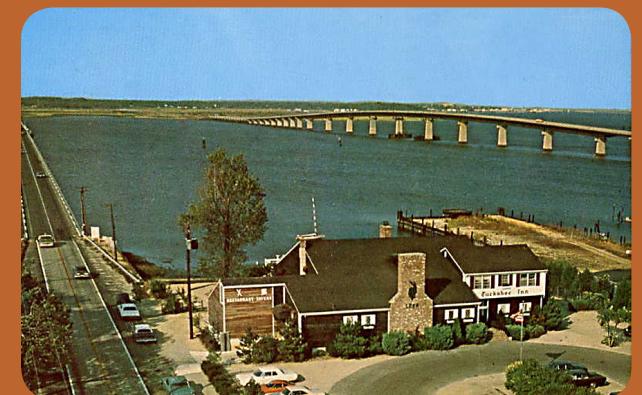
After the death of John Somers' son, Job, in 1744, Nicholas Stillwell also took over operation of the Great Egg Harbor ferry, basing the operation near his tavern on the south side of the Great Egg Harbor Bay. It was not unusual for ferry owners to operate taverns at ferry landings. In this way, the ferry owner could greatly augment

his profit by offering food and shelter to his customers. Issues arose with these joint ferry-tavern owners, who were known to delay the ferry on purpose, forcing travelers to spend extra money on food, drink, and a night's stay at their establishment. In 1769, in an effort to deal with this growing problem, an Act of the Legislature was passed which allowed the New Jersey government to fine ferrymen who purposefully delayed ferries and travelers.

The number of ferries in New Jersey increased steadily until around the time of the Revolutionary War, when bridges became more common. Some historians have suggested that the construction of a bridge at Mays Landing put the ferry at Somers Point out of business in the nineteenth century. Still, multiple taverns and hotels at Beesley's Point remained in successful operation into the early twentieth century, and it appears that some travelers utilized a ferry to access these taverns well after the opening of the May's Landing bridge. Thomas Beesley, the namesake of Beesley's Point, purchased Stillwell's tavern in 1803. Around the time of Beesley's death in 1849, Richard Stites constructed a new hotel across the street from the tavern. The older tavern was used

primarily as a residence after this point, with the exception of a short stint as the Beesley's Point Fishing Club in the first decade of the twentieth century.

Richard Stites' hotel was quite popular in the early twentieth century. Travelers came to Beesley's Point to enjoy the beach, a favored location for swimming, fishing, and sailing. The hotel was also known for its elaborate Fourth of July celebrations, which included fireworks and ice cream, both rare treats at the time. The hotel continued in operation until the Great Depression, when financial constraints forced it to close its doors. The hotel reopened and closed multiple times after that. Today the tavern is known as the Tuckahoe Inn and remains a popular establishment for local residents.

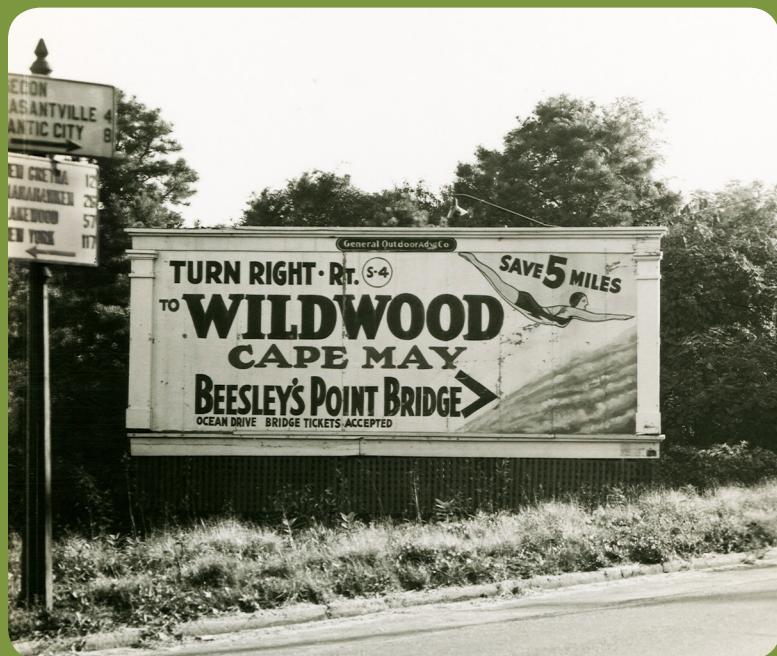


The Beesley's Point Bridge

The first bridge over Great Egg Harbor Bay was constructed in 1927. Before that time, travelers had two options: take a ferry over the Bay or drive west to use existing bridges located further inland, across the Great Egg Harbor and Tuckahoe rivers. The overland detour was lengthy and the ferry was time-consuming. With the construction of

the Beesley's Point Bridge, travelers could for the first time, drive all the way through from New York to Cape May along the Atlantic Coast on U.S. Route 9. The bridge was a privately built and maintained toll bridge, though U.S. Route 9 had been established as a public highway. The construction of the bridge completed an essential

connection between Cape May County and the rest of New Jersey's Atlantic Coast, and it also brought traffic. Monumental traffic jams at the bridge were a common occurrence, especially on weekends, until the Garden State Parkway opened in 1956, alleviating some of the congestion on the Beesley's Point Bridge and U.S. Route 9.



Creating the Parkway

The Garden State Parkway bridge over Great Egg Harbor Bay opened on May 26, 1956. At 1.2 miles long, it was the longest bridge constructed as a part of the original Garden State Parkway design and cost approximately \$4.5 million to build. The bridge is composed of two separate bridge structures, one over Drag Causeway to the north and a second, larger bridge over Great Egg Harbor Bay to the south. The two bridges are connected to one another by a causeway over Drag Island. Though the bridge was initially designed to carry traffic in both directions, a second, parallel bridge was added in 1972, on the east side of the 1956 bridge, to accommodate more vehicles and alleviate traffic jams.

The New Jersey State Legislature initiated planning for the Garden State Parkway in 1945. The new roadway was envisioned to connect northern New Jersey with resort areas on the Jersey Shore, stimulate economic growth,

and reduce highway congestion. Construction of the Parkway began in 1946 by the New Jersey Highway Department, but initial progress was slow. The bulk of construction took place over the four years between 1952 and 1956. One year later, the road was

extended to the New York State border, where it connected to the New York State Thruway. The opening of the Garden State Parkway spurred the commercial and residential development of New Jersey's shore region, a defining aspect of the state to this day.



The Crossing Today

Both the Beesley's Point Bridge and the southbound Garden State Parkway bridge have reached the end of their useful life. The new southbound Garden State Parkway bridge is now open to

traffic and the original bridge will be removed. The Beesley's Point Bridge closed to traffic in 2004 due to safety concerns. Cape May County purchased the bridge from the Beesley's Point

Bridge Company in 2008 for one dollar with the hopes of repairing the bridge, but the necessary repairs were too costly. The Beesley's Point Bridge has been removed.



M A Y S
L A N D I N G
B R I D G E *

SOMERS POINT

SOMERS POINT
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

ATLANTIC
COUNTY
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY



*Denotes resource located outside bounds of map.



THE
TUCKAHOE
INN

BEESELEY'S POINT

THE BRIDGES

**CAPE MAY
COUNTY
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY***



Learn More...

Interested in learning more?

There are many great museums to visit throughout the area, resources to access online, and more in-depth publications available to borrow at your local library.

This pamphlet was completed by RGA, Inc., in consultation with the New Jersey Turnpike Authority and the New Jersey Historic Preservation Office.

Historical Societies:

Somers Point Historical Society (<http://somerspointhistory.org/>)
Website includes self-guided tours of Somers Point, including the life of Richard Somers, among others.

Atlantic County Historical Society (<http://www.atlanticcountyhistoricalsocietynj.org/>)

Cape May County Historical and Genealogical Society (<http://www.ccmcuseum.org/>)

Websites:

The Garden State Parkway: A Historic Journey
<http://www.gsphistory.com/home.htm>

Publications:

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Wheaton J. Lane, *Indian Trail to Iron Horse: Travel and Transportation in New Jersey, 1620-1860*, Princeton University Press, 1939.

Harry B. Weiss, *Whaling in New Jersey*, New Jersey Agricultural Society, 1974.

Harry B. and Grace M. Weiss, *The Revolutionary Saltworks of the New Jersey Coast*, Past Times Press, 1959.

