

Film Review- *Destinations Past: Highland Beach***Directed by Chris Brenner****44 minutes****Released: 2016****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v3i2.99>**

Destinations Past: Highland Beach was voted the Best Home Grown Documentary for New Jersey History at the 2017 Garden State Film Festival. Produced by first-time film maker Chris Brenner, it played before enthusiastic Atlantic City crowds in April this year. Brenner's movie tells the story of William Sandlass Jr. and the Highland Beach Excursion Resort he operated on a mostly remote Sandy Hook peninsula in 1888. The producer makes a convincing case that this day-trippers getaway was the north Jersey Shore's contribution to the changing recreational patterns of the late 19th century Americans. It was the place that helped launch the Jersey Shore tourism business.

Brenner employs century-old color postcards, home movies clips, and family vacation snapshots, as well as remarkably crisp hundred-year old black and white photographs. While these are common enough elements in historical documentaries, this thoughtful offering makes compelling use of them as it revisits an important time and an influential place overlooked by New Jersey historians.

The 42-minute production by the Fair Haven New Jersey native reveals William Sandlass as one of the first to understand and exploit the trend for short term vacations the fin de siècle middle class was starting to enjoy. Before Highland Beach's Victorian styled buildings were built, the more famous Shore resorts of Long Branch and Atlantic City catered largely to upper class folks who would spend a week or so enjoying the amenities at those legendary resorts.

To entice working class folks with more limited means, Sandlass filled his resort with inexpensive amusements like a merry-go-round, an ice cream and soda parlor, two music clubs,

an Airdrome outdoor movie theater, a photo studio, bathing pavilions, bath houses, a waterfront hotel and restaurant, and an outdoor food and drink emporium. The Highland Beach Resort was a natural draw for city dwellers, nestled on a sandy 50-yard strip between the Atlantic Ocean and the Shrewsbury River. Huge crowds flocked to both the coastal and river beaches Sandlass filled with boardwalks and pavilions. He built it and come they did, sometimes 20,000 in a day.

The opening film clip of a Jersey Central Rail Road train chugging through Highland Beach – “All aboard!” – starts us on our journey. Photographs, maps, and contemporary advertisements are presented in the familiar Ken Burns pan and scan effect showing the people, places, and parties of a lively eight-decade scene.

Highland Beach's establishing shots position the resort as part of the changing American culture of the post-Civil War Industrial Revolution. Historical and contemporary aerial photographs of Sandy Hook immediately make clear why Sandlass's resort was advertised to Manhattanites as “the nearest available beach on the New Jersey Coast.” Brenner uses a remarkable little film clip to illustrate Coney Island's influence on what Sandlass built at the Jersey Shore. Delightful frames from the famed Brooklyn amusement area show well-dressed riders on a “Gravity Rail Road,” the same kind that propelled adventurous vacationers at “the reckless speed of 6 mph” at Highland Beach a few years later. LaMarcus Thompson, the father of the modern roller coaster, designed both thrill rides. The Highland Beach version opened in 1889, just five years after the Coney Island's.

Absent from *Highland Beach* are the ubiquitous talking heads explaining the obvious, a frequently overused documentary technique. Brenner wisely chose to omit “experts” and simply allows contemporary images to guide us through the resort's history. This narrative flow acknowledges viewers' intelligence.

Highland Beach makes ample use of German lithography postcards, prints from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated* (the 1899 America's Cup race was held just off Highland Beach), glass plate photographs, and old home movies and snapshots taken by Brenner's father's during the time he worked as a "Beach Patrol" boy and a bartender at the resort. The late Ted Brenner was the source for stories about the grand resort, and the inspiration for his son's yearlong film project portraying it.

A brief clip from *The Unchanging Sea*, a 1910 Mary Pickford vehicle, is a nice surprise. The noted director D. W. Griffith shot at least four films in and around Highland Beach. Pickford has multiple scenes near what looks like Sandlass's bath houses, though some film historians suggest it was shot on California's coast. The fledgling film industry had roots in Fort Lee, New Jersey. The Highland Beach Resort was used more than once for location shots.

Brenner's understated voiceover helps us understand the unique story of a carefree retreat which has but a single remnant left, William Sandlass's House. Speaking with the ease of someone who knows his subject well, Brenner employs the conversational style of one old friend talking to another about the good old days.

The film's soundtrack features period-correct old-timey music (the perfect, 1902 "In the Good Old Summer Time"), jazz and ragtime standards (Scott Joplin), and 1940s hits (Duke Ellington, the Andrew Sisters). The viewer is sweetly seduced by the gaiety of Highland Beach, and mesmerized by the tumultuous times through which it endured – the Great War, the Jazz Age, Prohibition, the Depression, World War II, the Eisenhower post-War years, and finally, the early 1960s. The evocative soundtrack enhances rarely seen images, providing vital context to the 75-year run of the Highland Beach Resort.

Highland Beach was more than a popular diversion from summer heat and humidity for city dwellers. New Jersey's public officials had to rethink transportation infrastructure to accommodate the thousands of visitors. The Central Railroad of New Jersey, in response to the overwhelming number of people heading south from New York to the Shore, abandoned its long-used ferry terminals on Sandy Hook and built a new pier in Atlantic Highlands. The 1892 "criss-cross" bridge connected those rail lines to Highland Beach as it crossed the Shrewsbury River. New Jersey State Highway 36 was constructed to help funnel new-fangled automobile traffic over the 1932 "Million Dollar Bridge."

Brenner's wonderful little film is on line at www.destinationspast.com; or via YouTube, by searching for "Highland Beach." Brenner may be a novice film-maker, but this debut is as good as many professional documentaries.

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