

# ATLANTIC HERITAGE

Newsletter of the Atlantic County Historical Society

SUMMER 2022

## THE WRECK OF THE POWHATTAN AND ABSECON LIGHT

By Michael Connor

“Never waste a good disaster” is a maxim utilized by lobbyists seeking to motivate political action. Visionary founder of Atlantic City, Jonathan Pitney, wanted a lighthouse for the city. The 1854 wreck of the Schooner Powhattan on the stormy coast of Long Beach Island provided Pitney with a highly useful disaster.

The packet vessel Powhattan was on a voyage from Le Havre, France to New York City carrying German immigrants. Different accounts describe the ship as either a sloop or a square rigger. If a sloop, it would have looked very much like the Dutch vessel Oosterschelde, pictured at left, under full sail.



On April 15, 1854 a fierce snowstorm drove it aground near Harvey Cedars. The strength of the storm prevented rescue efforts attempted by the staff of the Harvey Cedars Lifesaving Station. On the following day the ship broke apart - there were no survivors. Some 350 persons were lost.

While most of the bodies washed ashore in Peahala (a section of what is now Long Beach Twp. where the Acme Market is located) hundreds were washed south to Brigantine Beach and Absecon Island. Bodies were buried in Manahawkin and Smithville cemeteries. A monument, pictured below, honoring those lost was erected by the State of New Jersey.

Powhatan is usually spelled with one “t” unlike the two “t’s” used in the name of the wrecked sloop. The name correctly refers to the Algonquian people of eastern Virginia although it has also been used to refer to their chief. Captain John Smith’s memoir of dubious accuracy detailing his adventures in the founding of Jamestown describes his capture by Indians and planned execution. In his tale he is saved from execution by the timely intervention of Chief Powhatan’s daughter, Pocahontas.

“Powhatan” has been a popular name for many ships including a vessel of the U.S. Navy. If you are in the least superstitious you may wish to avoid sailing on any vessel christened “Powhatan.” In each century following this disaster, there has been another Powhatan shipwreck. In 1916 the steamship Powhatan was involved in a collision and sank in the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. In 2017 the tugboat Powhatan sank near Sitka, Alaska.

Efforts to convince the United States Lighthouse Service to construct a light on Absecon Island began at least as early as 1837 at the urging of Jonathan Pitney. A study by Commander E.A.F. Vallette then concluded there was no need. In 1846 the New Jersey Legislature passed a resolution urging such construction. It was ignored. The need was there. This stretch of the coast was known as “the graveyard of the Atlantic.” Between 1847 and 1856 sixty four shipwrecks were reported.

The Powhattan disaster prompted an intense lobbying effort to construct Absecon Lighthouse. Led by Jonathan Pitney and others, a flood of letters and petitions were sent to the federal government. The disaster was not wasted. In 1854 Congress appropriated \$35,000 for construction. A property near Absecon Inlet was purchased for \$520 from the Camden and Atlantic Land Company and the construction process began.



*continued on page 6*

# Events and Happenings

## Program Logistics

## Program Description

### RISLEY HOMESTEAD

8 Virginia Avenue  
(near 400 block of Shore Rd)  
Northfield, NJ



Saturdays & Sundays, 11am – 4pm

The [Risley Homestead](#) is one of two 18th century houses in Atlantic County individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places and was home to many generations of Risley oystermen. The ACHS received the Homestead and its furnishings by bequest from Virginia Risley Stout in 1989. The Homestead is open for individual and small group guided tours. Contact Vernon Brown @ (609)645-0315 for details.

### ATLANTIC COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

907 Shore Road, Somers Point

June 13th, 6:30pm

### COMING TO AMERICA THROUGH ELLIS ISLAND

Norm Goos and Lynn Wood will introduce this short film.

### ATLANTIC COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

907 Shore Road, Somers Point

July 11th, 6:30pm

### “BOXING IN ATLANTIC CITY”

Co-Authors Matthew H. Ward, a historian and journalist specializing in boxing and the Jersey Shore, and John Di Santo, founder of PhillyBoxingHistory.com and the chairman of the Pennsylvania Boxing Hall of Fame will present.

*Copies of their book will be available for purchase - \$24.*

### THE CRAB TRAP

2 Broadway, Somers Point

October 15th, 11:30am

Cost: \$32.00

Contact ACHS to purchase tickets

### 2022 ACHS ANNUAL LUNCHEON

Members and the general public are invited. Following the installation of the nominees to the 2023-2024 governing Board, “The “Bringing History to Life Award” will be presented. Members will vote on nominees to the Governing Board at this time.

### BOSCOV'S DEPT. STORE

6725 Black Horse Pike  
Egg Harbor Twp., NJ

Wednesday, October 20th 8am -11pm

Contact ACHS for Tickets

### BOSCOV'S FRIENDS & FAMILY DAY

Tickets sell for \$5 each. Boscov's will give 25% off each store purchase to the buyer; even on sale prices. Tickets may be purchased from any Program Committee Member ahead of time or from their table set up in Boscov's that day. The ACHS is the recipient of the purchase price of each ticket.

## Yard Sale

Saturday, September 24<sup>th</sup>  
8:00am – 2:00pm

Many items for sale,  
including extra Library books.  
All proceeds benefit  
the ACHS

Risley Homestead  
8 Virginia Avenue  
(near 400 block-Shore Rd)  
Northfield, NJ

## BOOK SALE

Saturday, July 16<sup>th</sup>  
10:00am – 3:30pm

Inside & Outside  
@ ACHS  
907 Shore Road  
Somers Point



## HOLIDAY SWEET SALE!

Monday, December 19<sup>th</sup>  
3:00pm – 6:00pm

@ACHS  
907 Shore Road  
Somers Point

## SHORE DINER

Present this bulletin on a Sat or Sun  
and Shore Diner will donate 20% to  
the Atlantic County Historic Society. Present this  
on any other day, and we will donate 10%.

6710 TILTON ROAD,  
EGG HARBOR TOWNSHIP, NJ  
609-641-3669

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609-641-3669

Eat well and support the  
Atlantic County Historical Society  
at the same time!

Cut these out and turn them in when you  
pay your bill.

Thanking you, in advance!



## Member News



### DONATIONS

#### **FRIEND \$1 - \$49**

Doug Carter, Paul Raetsch

#### **PATRON \$50 - \$249**

Dana Shupp & Sid Parker  
(Refrigerator for the Kitchen)

#### **BENEFACTOR \$1000 +**

Estate of Joyce Pullan

## ANNUAL APPEAL

We are, of course, still setting aside your generous donations for the replacement of our not-quite-deceased boiler. It survived a fairly tough winter with its vital-part repair last year and maybe it's just not quite ready to give up the ghost, but your donations will help us handle its eventual demise.

Thanks, in advance, for your help.

# Welcome

### New Members

Ralph Townsend, *Windsor, Co*  
Benjamin T. Connor, *Millburn, NJ*  
Doug Carter, *Beavercreek, Oh*  
Laura McArdle, *Egg Harbor Township, NJ*  
Paul Raetsch, *Mays Landing, NJ*

### Newest Volunteer

Carol Zepfel

### In Memoriam

*The Atlantic County  
Historical Society  
honors the passing of  
member:*

Evelyn "Beryl"  
Neumann  
&  
Winnie Squires



The Society  
opened its doors to  
the public on  
**March 2, 2022.**

**Regular  
days/hours are:  
Wed.-Sat.  
10am- 3:30pm.**

After a two year pause due to the pandemic, The Atlantic County ACUA hosted a successful Earth Day full of festivities for the whole family. The Atlantic County Historical Society and Veterans History Project were pleased to participate once again to introduce themselves to the public. Veterans signed up to be interviewed for the Library of Congress and tote bags, seed packets and pens were given out as Lynn Wood and Babs Perry-Silva put tattoos on several happy children.



*Left:* ACHS Trustee Mike O'Brien and VHP Chairman Tom Born man the VHP table.

*Middle:* Charlene Canale, Babs Perry-Silva and Lynn Wood give out goodies at the ACHS table.

*Right:* a happily tattoo-ed young lady, courtesy of ACHS.

### Atlantic County Historical Society Governing Board

President: Sid Parker  
Vice-President: Cindy Mason-Purdie  
Recording Secy: Barbara Perry-Silva  
Treasurer: Charlene Canale  
Asst. Treasurer: Pat Parker  
Financial Secretary: Ellen Hyatt

Librarian: Rev. Norman Goos  
Assistant Librarian: Kathy Fritz  
Curator: Joan Frankel  
Asst. Curator: Kevin Little  
Chaplain: Rev. Norman Goos

Trustees: Ben Brenner, Mike Connor,  
Tom Kinsella, James H. Mason, V,  
Mike O'Brien, Heather Perez, Donald  
Perry, Will Rozell, Judith Schwartz,  
Dana Shupp, Lynn Wood



## SHINING LIGHT INTO DARK PLACES

by Kathleen Pullan Watkins

It was a casual comment on Facebook that led to the solving of a 50 year old mystery, one that had haunted a friend for an entire lifetime. When Mark\* was born it was immediately obvious that he was not the son of the man listed on his birth certificate. Born into an African American family, he was a fair-skinned, hazel-eyed little boy with hair texture that did not match that of his parents or siblings. Although there was some distant family ancestry that might account for Mark's characteristics, the sudden appearance of his traits seemed unlikely. Mark's family situation was complicated. His father of record had a career in the military and was frequently absent from their home while the children were growing up. His mother was lovely, free spirited and independent. The tense relationship between the two adults grew more strained and eventually they divorced; although it must be said that Mark was always treated kindly by his surrogate father. Over the ensuing years, his mother was largely close-mouthed about Mark's paternity, although two names were mentioned without details. The mystery remained and in 2007, Mark's mother died without ever having confirmed the identity of his father.

Fast forward to January 9, 2022 when I responded to a post on Mark's Facebook page, and he commented that he wished he knew more about the other side of his family. On that day in January, when my offer to help Mark identify his father was met with enthusiasm, I had no idea what lay ahead.

I love genealogy, but I love a good ancestral mystery even more, and I have been fortunate to have solved a few. I know that creating a family tree without accurate documentation is meaningless. Like many an amateur genealogist, I have stripped out an entire line in a family tree when an educated guess was proven wrong. With the advent of inexpensive DNA testing there are new possibilities for confirming family history and stories.

In Mark's case, I started with the first name his mother had provided, Anthony Ricci\*. Within a few hours I had a family tree going back four generations. When I sent Mark the link to view the tree on Ancestry he asked, "Is this for real?" I explained that although that was the Ricci tree I was not certain that was also Mark's family. Knowing that his DNA was stored on Ancestry I asked to see his results. When I saw that he is 43% Germanic I had to break the news that Ricci was probably not his father. The Ricci family is entirely Italian and Irish, and Mark's DNA does not show a trace of these ethnicities.

When I asked to see Mark's DNA matches I was startled to see a name I did not recognize ranked above those of other close family members. I asked Mark to open the link for the attached public tree. There we saw the second name raised by his mother, Karl Fischer\*. Further examination of the Fischer tree indicated that two of Karl's children had been born in the same hospital as Mark, all three children within an eight year period. We were on to something!

I began building a tree for the Fischer family, without referring to the one already online, but ran into problems. Although the family had lived at various times in two adjacent states, it was only the birth records for Karl's known children that suggested he was in the same area as Mark's mother at the time of his birth. I was also unsure of the relationship of Mark's DNA match, Carla Johnson\*, to Karl Fischer, as most of those who create family trees will mark living persons as "private." While I did not initially share all of my inquiries with Mark, I decided to contact the online tree manager in an effort to get more information. I knew how important these answers were and wanted to avoid unnecessary disappointment.

When you cold message someone through the Ancestry site, the chance of getting a response is not guaranteed. So when I sent a message to the manager of the Fischer tree and Carla Johnson's DNA, I did not know what to expect. I explained that I was helping a friend with family history, and Mark and Carla appeared to be close DNA matches. Is that Carla's DNA\*\*, I wanted to know, and what is her relationship to Karl Fischer? To my delight, I received a speedy response from the tree manager, Luke\* (as it turns out Carla's husband), that the DNA was indeed his wife's, and that Karl Fischer (deceased) was her grandfather on her father's side. My mind began racing through the many possibilities for acquiring more information. If my

*\*All names in this narrative are changed in order to protect individual privacy.*

*\*\*Not everyone who submits DNA for analysis and matching uses his/her own name.*

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## SHINING LIGHT INTO DARK PLACES *continued...*

reasoning was correct, I believed that Carla is Mark's niece, and her father Mark's half-brother. I decided to ask Carla and Luke if I could share with them the reasons for my questions, warning that the information could be difficult. My intention was to try to secure for Mark photos of the man I believed to be his father. For several agonizing days, I heard nothing. When the go ahead was finally given I told the entire story via an Ancestry message, including my initial speculations, now grown to near certainty. I asked only for photos of Karl Fischer. Once the message was sent there, a full week of silence ensued during which I questioned over and over the way I had told the story, fearful I had caused irreparable misunderstanding.

It is here that I confess to another of my frequent sleuthing techniques. I searched and found members of the Johnson and Fischer families on social media to try to determine how they might react to learning of the mixed-race relationship that had occurred more than half a century before. Facebook and other social posts are very telling about us all. This seemed a benevolent and loving family, but there was no assurance that Mark's story would not bring pain or disavowal.

Meanwhile, I still needed to place Karl Fischer in the right place, at the right time, and went to the source that has revealed so much about my own family history, newspaper archives. From records unearthed on Ancestry, I had some idea of Karl Fischer's profession. The moment I began searching for him in the archives of the paper where Mark lived as a child, Karl's name began cropping up. Within a few days, I had a timeframe for his life in the area and even an address and a photo of the home he had owned. A search of the archives for the second area where Karl had lived revealed another trove of news stories.

Then, on January 23, 2022, without objection, without question, there were four photos of Karl Fischer in my email! Mark's resemblance to his father was unmistakable. I was astounded and grateful beyond words! My hands trembled as I dialed Mark's number, "I have them...photos of your father!" Mark was overjoyed, expressing emotions of the peace he has been searching for all of his life, but our journey was not over. A phone call to the high school that Karl Fischer attended in the late 1940s, and the kind assistance of a school staff member, yielded a graduation photo and the caption that accompanied it. Together with the family tree, photos and news articles, Mark knows what his father looked like and something of the scope of his life. Although there are questions that will linger, as both of Mark's parents are gone, some part of this void has been filled.

What of his relationship with this new branch of Mark's family? After offering my profuse thanks, I wrote that should Mark's half-brother ever want contact it would be welcome. I am hopeful that one day there will be some interaction between them. In the meantime, I am grateful to have played a role in constructing for Mark a sense of his identity and heritage.

### **In Memory of My Mother Joyce Hampton Pullan Who ignited the spark...and would have loved this story!**

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"The higher you climb in your family tree, the more you realize that the tree's not really a tree. For as its branches divide again and again, more and more of them reconnect with one another, as well as with the branches of the family trees of everyone else on earth.

The further you look into your own genealogy, then the more you're struck by the fact that we're all related to Dante and Mozart, to Churchill and Hitler – and to one another. To me, that's the ultimate lesson of genealogy: a lesson not in snobbery and self-importance, but in the fact that we're all members of one large family."

*Bruce Bawer, American author, literary, film and cultural critic.*



## THE WRECK OF THE POWHATTAN AND ABSECON LIGHT *continued...*

Army Engineer Lt. George Meade was the architect. Later as a general during the Civil War, he commanded the Army of the Potomac. His troops defeated Lee at Gettysburg. Initially others supervised the construction but Meade supervised the completion of the lighthouse. There were both financial and engineering challenges.

Granite blocks were brought in by railroad for the foundation. When attempting to excavate an eight foot deep hole for the foundation, water flooded in. Those of us who have dug on barrier islands have discovered that the water table is usually three feet or less. To place the foundation it became necessary to purchase a steam powered pump capable of removing 12,000 gallons of water per hour. In what was not the first of government cost overruns, Meade had to request an additional \$17,436.62 to complete the project.

The result was a lighthouse 171 feet high utilizing 598,634 bricks and a 228 step spiral staircase. It is the tallest lighthouse in New Jersey and the third tallest in the United States. Its first order Fresnel lens and tall structure proved very effective. The light was first lit on January 15, 1857. Thereafter the Lighthouse Board proudly bragged “[i]t is a fact worthy of remark that on this part of the coast of hitherto frequent and appalling shipwrecks, since the exhibition of this light, a period of about ten months, there have been no wrecks in its vicinity.”

When constructed, Absecon Light stood some 1300 feet from the ocean. Erosion was quickly noticed. In 1864 measurements began for the purpose of tracking the process. By 1876 ordinary high tides reached the lighthouse lot and storm tides were covering it. A series of jetties were constructed to trap sand. These proved very effective and resulting beach build-up has protected the lighthouse.

The images below show the changes. The first shows the situation in 1885 and the aerial photograph from the U.S. Coast Guard was taken in 1931. Today, Absecon Lighthouse still sits well inland.



Absecon Lighthouse was first painted in 1871. It was painted white with a 52 foot red central band. Lighthouse colors and designs are called a day mark. The purpose of the different colors and designs is to allow mariners to distinguish which lighthouse they are observing and thus know where they are. The white tower with a central red band could be confused with the red over white painting of Barnegat Light. Thus various paint schemes were applied including the present yellowish white with a black band.

Nautical charts describe both the appearance and light characteristics of all lighthouses. There is also a published “light list” which does the same. At night various lighthouses can be distinguished by the timing and color of their lights. Absecon Light showed a fixed white light. Barnegat Light flashed white every 10 seconds. Cape May Light flashed white every 15 seconds. The oil lamp burned constantly. The flashing was accomplished by a rotating device which occluded the light except for a fixed period of time. At those lighthouses the keeper had to crank up the weights powering the turntable in addition to fueling the lamp.

**The day mark color schemes can be seen in the photographs below of Absecon, Barnegat, and Cape May Lights.**



Because of their height, lighthouses are vulnerable to lightning strikes. When visiting the Cape Lookout Light on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, I learned that the preservationists there used a special conductive paint to dissipate the charge from lightning strikes. We are the fortunate beneficiaries of motivated preservationists.

Absecon Lighthouse was decommissioned in 1933. It was ignored and neglected for years. Thanks to the efforts of the Inlet Public/Private Association it has been preserved and restored for the public to visit and enjoy.



# OLD NEWS

By Dale Lonkart

This column will appear for the next several issues of the Newsletter. It is a look back at “happenings” from our old newsletters.

What an amazing history we have – thanks to our volunteers and members!

## 1980 - 1981:

### Spring 1980

The Society sponsored a tour of four houses in Germantown. Tony Kutschera presented a program about Egypt. The fourth grade of the Hebrew Academy in Margate toured our building and the Mansion.

### Jan/Winter 1981

A very successful program – *Atlantic City at the Turn of the Century* – was presented. A slide show, mini fashion show, and pictures were shown. Over 200 attended (SRO) and the program was later repeated at the Ocean City Historical Society. Member Franklin Kemp represented the Society at the Tripoli War Memorial ceremony at the US Naval Academy, Annapolis. At the ceremony, it was revealed that Richard Somers’ and others remains may be in the monument. The inscription at the base, translated from Latin reads, “Here are deposited the sacred ashes of men who fell in war.” Sculpted in Italy in 1806, it was brought here aboard the *USS Constitution*. Damaged in 1814 when the British burned Washington, DC, in 1860 it was moved to the Naval Academy.

### Fall 1981

Since May over 500 visitors signed our guest book, from all over the US. We co-sponsored the annual conference of the NJ Historical Society, held at the Flanders Hotel, Ocean City. A monthly history of the *USS Somers* was received. When a new commander takes over in September, he will receive an honorary membership to the Atlantic County Historical Society. Three of our volunteers took part in an informational radio program, describing our facilities and inviting listeners to visit.

## Then & Now!

*Then & Now* is a regular feature in our Newsletter, showcasing some of the incredible photos in the ACHS collection.

Photo from 1910  
The Atlantic City train station.



Today... "The Walk" shopping area.



On April 4th, Suzanne Gibson presented a program to almost 50 ACHS members and guests entitled “*Guerillas, Bandits, Deserters & Defenders at the End of the Civil War*”.

Gibson is the former vice-president of the Cape May County Civil War Round Table and past secretary of the Mid-Atlantic Association of Civil War Round Tables. These are independent organizations that share a common objective expanding interest in the study of the military, political and sociological history of the American Civil War.

### Need to Contact Us?

Phone: (609) 927-5218 or

Email: [ACHSinfo@comcast.net](mailto:ACHSinfo@comcast.net)

Visit our Facebook page or website

[www.AtlanticCountyHistoricalSocietynj.org](http://www.AtlanticCountyHistoricalSocietynj.org)

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*Where Atlantic County History Comes to Life*



#### Our Mission:

- To collect and preserve historical materials exemplifying the events, places, and lifestyles of the people of Atlantic County and southern New Jersey.
- To encourage the study of history and genealogy.
- To provide historical and genealogical information to our membership and the general public.