

AS SEEN IN The JOURNAL *Publications*

SANDLASS HOUSE UPDATE

By Lori Draz

In October, The Journal's Historic Havens column highlighted the Sandlass House. The article drew a lot of attention and helped to bolster the preservation efforts of the newly formed Jersey Coast Heritage Museum at Sandlass House organization. We are pleased to share this hopeful update on the status of this historic treasure.

Historic Refresher

In the summer of 1888, William Sandlass, Jr. put up the "Great Switchback Rail Road" on Sandy Hook, just a little north of where the Highlands to Sea Bright Bridge is today. It was an immediate success, attracting crowds to the fairly desolate Jersey Shore peninsula. And it changed Monmouth County and the local resort industry forever.

The prototype roller coaster was very like the one constructed on Coney Island by LaMarcus Thompson. Mr. Sandlass knew that the thrill-seeking crowds would want something to eat and drink during fun days swimming in the Shrewsbury River and Atlantic Ocean. Just five years after he built it, he took down the Switchback Rail Road and used its timbers to build a grocery and fruit store, with residential space on the second floor, where his family lived. The store morphed into the "Bamboo Bar," with a bowling alley and billiards room added in the back, as well as bathing pavilions and bath houses all over the four-acre property he was leasing. The new day-trip resort grew quickly, adding piers, railroads, restaurants, a merry-go-round, and many more attractions. For the next 75 years, hundreds of thousands of ordinary working Americans visited this unique resort in the mystical town of Highland Beach.

Today, the sole remnant of Highland Beach's merry-go-rounds, restaurants, music clubs, open-air theater, outdoor gardens, and steamboat dock is the 123-year-old William Sandlass House, which sits forlornly on the Shrewsbury River side, at the entrance into Sandy Hook's Gateway National Park. It has been vacant since the last National Park Service (NPS) left in 2012. The NPS has applied for demolition funds to tear down this last reminder of a golden era of the Jersey Shore.

The Preservation

A group of prominent Monmouth County citizens, united to save this historic structure, has incorporated as the Jersey Coast Heritage Museum at Sandlass House (JCHM), a non-profit New Jersey corporation awaiting 501 (c) (3) designation. Hundreds of supporters are bound and determined to save the last remnant of the fabulous Highland Beach Excursion Resort.

Rick Geffken, president of the JCHM, notes, "We've lost so much of what made our Shore known the world over, we can't afford to lose another historic building. With all due respect to Asbury Park and Atlantic City, the Highland Beach Excursion Resort was the first day-trip fun destination for everyday people looking to escape the heat



(LEFT) William Sandlass, Jr. (circa 1900) (RIGHT) Sandlass House in the 1950s (Photos from Susan Sandlass Gardiner)

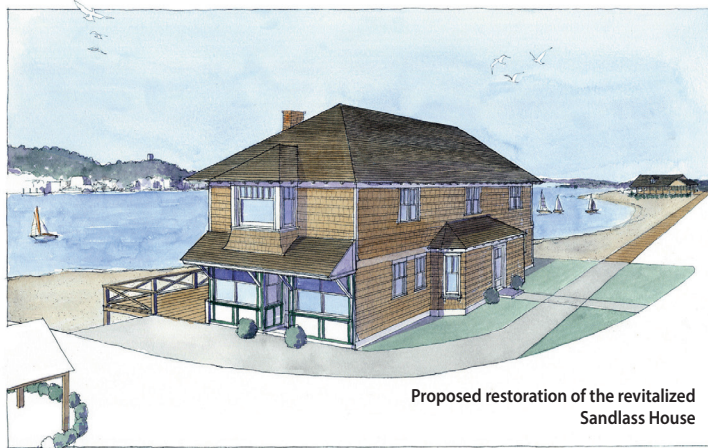
and crowds of New York City and northern New Jersey."

Other JCHM members include Susan Sandlass Gardiner, the granddaughter of the man who owned and operated the resort until the State of New Jersey exercised its Eminent Domain rights and took the property from her family in 1962. "I grew up in the house when the resort was called Sandlass Baths. After my grandfather died in 1938, my father Henry Sandlass took over and this magical place continued to flourish. I'm constantly surprised by the number of people who remember their good times there to this day." Legendary local high school football coach Richard "Dick" Kleva even calls it the "Cherished Sandlass House."

Chris Brenner of Fair Haven, a trustee of the JCHM, created an evocative documentary film that you can see at www.destinationspast.com, or via YouTube by searching for Highland Beach.

The Update

JCHM representatives met with Congressman Frank Pallone, Jr. (D, 6th District NJ) in early November to ask his assistance in preventing the demolition. Congressman Pallone felt the preservation was so important that he is intervening with the Department of the Interior to halt plans for the demolition of the Sandlass House. This is the first key step toward the success of the JCHM project.



Proposed restoration of the revitalized Sandlass House

The JCHM has preliminary site plans for a revitalized Sandlass House, which include an open-air event space, walking paths along an extension of the Henry Hudson Trail, docks on the Shrewsbury River, and multiple public parking spaces. Sea Bright Mayor Dina Hall has encouraged the creation of this new cultural center as an anchor for the north end of Sea Bright.

The JCHM is actively seeking donations and volunteers to help with developing an educational center, a "Beacon of Welcome," at the Sandlass House. If you would like to learn more or get involved, contact Rick Geffken at JCHM.sandlass@gmail.com.