

NORTH BEACH: HISTORY OF CHANGE
The Jewel of the Chesapeake Bay
Prepared by the North Beach Historic Commission

Native American Indians lived in this area along the Chesapeake Bay for 10,000 years; but, their occupation came to an end by 1500 AD under pressure from raids into the area by Indian Tribes from the north. In the summer of 1608, John Smith noted the absence of Indian settlements from the Calvert Cliffs north to the Gunpowder River. Indian nations may have gathered here during the spring and summer months to take advantage of the Chesapeake Bay's abundant fish and shell fish and to gather wild plant foods such as corn, hickory, walnuts, and chestnuts.

Calvert County was established in 1654. A map drawn by cartographer Augustine Hermann in 1673 shows farms along the shoreline in the area we know as North Beach. The people who settled there probably produced tobacco for the European market. The location along the shore would have afforded front row views to the war time activities on the Bay during the War of 1812, and the Civil War. After the Civil War, the total population of Calvert County declined and farming continued to be the principal means of making a living.

The development of North Beach has been dependent on four factors: location on a water front; proximity to urban areas; inter-modal accesses; and entrepreneurship. Until the 1890s what is now the Town of North Beach was undeveloped. Although the land was located strategically on the Chesapeake Bay and in close proximity to both Washington, D.C. and Baltimore, it was nearly inaccessible. The community shares a border to the south with land which had been developed a few years earlier by the Chesapeake Beach Railway Company which by 1899 ran a rail line between Seat Pleasant, Maryland at the District of Columbia line and the town of Chesapeake Beach. It was promoted as being a high class seashore resort within sixty minutes ride from Washington. Hotels, rooming houses and restaurants were built for vacationers. Many summer cottages were constructed in North Beach by people responding to the quality of life of seashore living.

North Chesapeake Beach, as North Beach was originally known, was platted in 1900 and developed by the North Chesapeake Beach Land and Improvement Company of Calvert County to buy, sell, and mortgage land. Many of the surviving dwellings in North Beach were built between 1920 and 1940.

In 1910, North Beach had grown and prospered sufficiently to be granted a corporate charter by the State to be a self governing municipality and remains today as one of only **two** municipalities in Calvert County. In the 1930s, along with the onset of economic depression, two events occurred that impacted the future of the Town; the hurricane of 1933 and the Chesapeake Beach Railway closing in 1935. The storm destroyed the pier at the end of Fifth Street and Captain Oscar's Crab House located on the beach. The pier and restaurant were rebuilt as Uncle Billie's but business was never as brisk as it had been previously. In the winter of 1945, fire destroyed all of the businesses in one block of the commercial area on Chesapeake Avenue between Second and Third streets which included a hardware store, lumber yard, restaurant, dry goods store, drug store, several apartments, and doctors and lawyers offices.

Following World War II, legalized slot machines and other gambling attractions in Southern Maryland brought a resurgence of tourism to the beaches. This brought a change in the nature of the Town as a resort attraction from family facilities to gambling devices. Automobile day trips replaced the extended stay characterized by tourists brought by common carrier. Family oriented establishments were replaced by taverns and bars.

Easy access by automobile to the Eastern Shore by the opening of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge in 1952 occurred just as North Beach was becoming more and more dependent upon slot machines as its main attraction. Repeal of legalized gambling in 1968 dealt a sharp blow to the prosperity of not only North Beach but Southern Maryland. In October 1954, Hurricane Hazel destroyed the once popular dance pavilion and seriously damaged the pier. A second major fire in 1975 destroyed "The Reef" restaurant which was at the end of the pier.

Despite past economic fluctuations, North Beach continued to grow at a slow and steady pace. Fishing and the demand for water related facilities have maintained the traditional importance of North Beach's proximity to the Bay as its most significant asset and income resource. Cottages, built for summer homes, have been converted to year round residences. Commuters and retirees have settled as permanent residents, not just summer visitors. New construction of homes, ranging from single family to townhouses, condominiums, and apartments has flourished increasing the population base. People from surrounding communities, as well as, residents have "rediscovered" the Town's greatest asset: the Chesapeake Bay.

In the early years of the 21st century, North Beach was experiencing renewed interest and popularity. The economy was booming. Home ownership was on the rise, both for primary residents and second home residents. Home renovations and new home construction was evident throughout the Town. New retail and dining establishments began to dot the landscape. However, on September 19, 2003, Hurricane Isabel dealt North Beach a devastating blow. This category five hurricane made land fall off of the Carolina coast; but, the storm surge moved up the Chesapeake Bay in a direct path towards North Beach. Four and five foot waves landed on the shores of the Town: flooding Bay and Atlantic Avenues, eroding most of the beach, demolishing much of the boardwalk, and destroying virtually all waterfront homes on the north end of Town. The rebuilding effort came swiftly; but, current building codes and the booming economy forever altered the scale of residences along the North Beach waterfront. Only a few original cottages remain visible today.

Interest in Twin Beaches continued; however, a plan was set forth to develop a mixed use, upscale residential and retail village center on the vacant lots surrounding the intersection of Fifth Street between Chesapeake and Bay Avenues. In the southwest corner of Town, the San Francisco town home project broke ground.

North Beach seemed poised for a major economic resurgence. However, the effects of the September 11, 2001 tragedy were still being felt. The country invaded Iraq in March, 2003. As the effort continued the economy began to wane. Deficits grew. Oil prices skyrocketed. Mortgage interest rates, despite virtual all time lows, could not compete with the uncertainty of the times. Home renovations slowed; new construction and existing home sales virtually ceased. The North Beach Resort Center project was cancelled. Many of the new businesses that had opened were forced to close. Once again, North Beach looked like it was to become a victim of unfortunate circumstance. **However**, the residents' spirit was not dampened.

An apartment building for senior citizens was built on Third Street; the Bayside History Museum was established in August of 2003. New structures for the Twin Beach Community Health Center and the North Beach Senior Center were built. The San Francisco project continued to build. The Town constructed a building dedicated in October 2008 for use by the Boys and Girls Club.

The boardwalk and pier were rebuilt. Benches, a bike path, and flower beds complemented the fishing pier. A Welcome Center was built on Bay Avenue and Fifth Street and the Beach Patrol was established. The Beach Trolley Association began service to allow residents and visitors to conveniently travel to and from surrounding Chesapeake Bay areas. Popular North Beach events, including a Friday Farmers' market, Classic Car Cruise In, and beach events have been established. A House and Garden Tour is held annually, as is the Bay fest celebration in August. Festive events are held on various holidays: a "Haunted Boardwalk" in October, Christmas at the Beach, and a Polar Bear Swim on New Year's Day. Parades, concerts, campfires, and movies on the beach are just some of the other activities provided in North Beach.

A special thanks to the North Beach Historic Commission for providing the preface. The Town of North Beach has a determined, enthusiastic, and supportive citizenry that will not let their spirits be dampened. This 2009 Comprehensive Plan, when adopted, will provide the guidance to continue the Town's growth and development during the next twenty years. An active, involved citizenry will help fuel that effort.