

FROM THE BEGINNING

Fun Facts about Early Cape May County Government



Dedication of County Clerk and Surrogate Office, 1865

Rita Marie Fulginiti
Cape May County Clerk,
County Historian and Adjuster

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Vision Statement of the Office of the Cape May County Clerk

To efficiently manage records as a precious resource and asset of our government; to preserve and protect our historical and vital records while leveraging technology to bring increased efficiency to our organization and access to information for our citizens.

The County Clerk is the elected Constitutional Officer responsible for recording and filing real property transactions in Cape May County. The County Clerk maintains an archive of vital land and civil records dating back to 1692.

As the County's Election Official, the Clerk oversees preparation of ballots and voting by mail and is responsible for certifying countywide election results.

Additional responsibilities include serving as the county's Passport Agent, providing veteran identification cards and vendor licenses to veterans and exempt firemen, administering oaths to Notaries Public, and performing marriage ceremonies.

The County Clerk also serves as Cape May County Historian and County Adjuster performing a human services role on behalf of county residents admitted to psychiatric hospitals.



*A.C Hildreth, County Clerk
Priscilla Godfrey Blake, Deputy County Clerk
July 29, 1914*

Formation of County Government

The first records of settlement and government here in Cape May County appear in Burlington Court records in 1685. In 1681 Burlington became the administrative and judicial center for West Jersey. The political division of the Provinces of West Jersey and East Jersey existed for 28 years between 1674 and 1702.

Dr. Daniel Coxe (1640-1730) was credited with shaping the earliest socioeconomic and political life in Cape May County. Coxe was an Anglican physician in the court of Charles II of England, a Governor of West Jersey (1687-1688), and a real estate developer who never set foot in North America but acted on his vision of creating a model mercantile and agricultural community here.

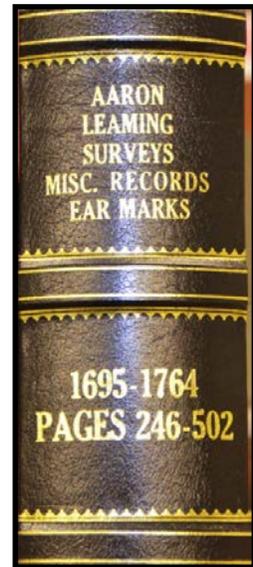
Coxe accumulated 22 shares of West Jersey proprietorship in 1687. Coxe, through his land agent, secured 95,000 acres of the Cape May peninsula from the Lenape Indians for which he paid 16 gallons of rum, 32 knives, tobacco boxes, looking glasses, flints, combs, clothing and “six Jews harps”

The famed Coxe Hall, a two story manor house, was constructed on the bay side of Lower Township on the northern bank above New England Creek later called Coxe Hall Creek. A part of Coxe Hall still exists at Historic Cold Spring Village.

Coxe brought many families to the Jersey Cape; probably at least 200 British, Dutch, French, Swedish and African-American people lived on the Jersey Cape from 1688 to 1692, it is reported 47 of these became landowners or called freeholders of land. In the end, Coxe’s business plans for the Cape May peninsula were not realized. Political factors in Britain and a myriad of other factors here such as food shortages caused Coxe to sell his Cape May properties in 1692 to 48 London proprietors known as the West New Jersey Society. The West New Jersey Society divided its lands into 1600 shares.

Coxe’s interest in the Cape May peninsula was more than simple land speculation. A member of the Royal society, Coxe fit the mold of John Locke and other late-seventeenth century British social and constitutional architects who sought to rationalize their world, create an orderly society and experiment with their environment... He held ideas about community planning, including the protection of the Cornwall Cape in Britain against beach erosion. He sought to blend the remnants of feudal organization with that of a vigorous landowning, merchant society free from feudal restrictions as part of what he called a ‘New Empire in America.’

Dr. Jeffrey Dorwart



Cape May County was formally created on November 12, 1692 by an Act of the General Assembly of the Province of West New Jersey. It was among the four counties formally created with their initial boundaries defined by that legislative act: Burlington, Gloucester, Salem and Cape May.

The first county boundary in 1692 encompassed the entire peninsula into parts of now Cumberland (previously Salem) and Atlantic (previously Gloucester). There was a boundary revision in 1694. In 1710 the Cape May County boundary had its essential definition but there were changes documented in 1822, 1844, 1845, 1878 and 1891.

The first recorded court session was held in Coxe Hall in May 1692. The County Clerk's records show the earliest deeds granted land from the West New Jersey Society.



The flag of Cape May County, NJ depicting our strong maritime and farming heritage.

Early Legislative Acts

1693 The Cape May County Court for the trial of small causes erected



1694 Cape May County empowered to elect five representatives. George Taylor, Jacob Dayton, John Shaw, Timothy Brandereth and John Crawford represented the County in 1697

1697 Cape May County's powers enlarged

1697 A road from Cape May to Burlington laid out to permit county representatives "to attend publick service."



George Taylor and John Crawford laid out the old Cape Road (sometimes known as King's Road or Queen's Road) through the Cedar Swamp

1699 The number of representatives reduced to three

1701 The number of representatives enlarged to five again

The first Court House, located near to the site of the Old Court House, was completed in 1765 with the first court session held there on May 21 that year. Quarterly Court Sessions were times of public gathering.



1713 - 1714 the County Boards of Justices and Freeholders were organized. In 1798 the New Jersey Legislature formed the more formal centralized structure of Boards of Chosen Freeholders "a body politic and corporate in law."

Because cattle wandered freely in grazing areas, a distinctive earmark aided owners in identifying their cattle and were registered by the County Clerk.

Earmark samples from the County Clerk's Archives.

Division of Local Governments

In April 1723 at a Quarterly Session of the County Court Cape May County was divided into three precincts which coincided along religious lines:

Upper Precinct – Quaker

Middle Precinct – Baptist

Lower Precinct – Presbyterian

On February 21, 1798 the New Jersey Legislative act formally created the Townships of Upper, Middle and Lower.

1826 Dennis Township was formed out of Upper Township.

1848 Cape Island Borough was formed out of Lower Township. In 1851 Cape Island City was incorporated. In 1869 Cape May City was incorporated.

1875 the Sea Grove Association, a Presbyterian temperance retreat, was formed in the community which became Cape May Point.

1878 Cape May Point Borough was formed out of Lower Township; for financial reasons it was extinguished back to Lower Township. Cape May Point Borough came back in 1908.

1884 West Cape May Borough was formed out of Lower Township. It was reincorporated in 1897 and 1900.

1880 the Ocean City Association, a Methodist retreat, was formed in the Upper Township community which became Ocean City. In 1884 Ocean City Borough was incorporated and reincorporated in 1890. In 1897 Ocean City incorporated as a city.

1882 the Anglesea Improvement Company began developing the Middle Township area which became North Wildwood. In 1902 the North Wildwood Land Company was formed. In 1885 Anglesea Borough was incorporated and reincorporated in 1896 and 1897. In 1906 North Wildwood Borough was incorporated and in 1917 North Wildwood was incorporated as a city.

1882 Sea Isle City Borough was formed out Dennis Township. In 1907 Sea Isle City was incorporated as a city.

1882 the Holly Beach City Improvement Company began developing the Lower Township area which became Wildwood.

In 1886 the Wildwood Beach Improvement Company began developing in the Middle Township area which became Wildwood. In 1885 Holly Beach Borough was incorporated. In 1895 Wildwood Borough was incorporated. In 1912 both

boroughs were consolidated into Wildwood City.

1889 Beach Improvement Company began developing the Middle Township area which became Avalon. In 1892 Avalon Borough was incorporated. In 1896 Avalon Borough was reincorporated.

1894 South Cape May Borough was formed out of Lower Township. Following a devastating hurricane it dissolved back into Lower Township.

1903 Woodbine Borough was formed out of Dennis Township.

1906 the Wildwood Crest Company began developing the Lower Township area which became Wildwood Crest. In 1910 the Wildwood Crest Borough was incorporated.

1907 South Jersey Realty Company began developing the Middle Township area which became Stone Harbor. In 1914 the Stone Harbor Borough was incorporated.

1920 the West Wildwood Borough was formed out of Middle Township.



Visit the Cape May County Clerk's Archives

The Cape May County Clerk's Office Archives maintains vast collections of Cape May County real property, court and civil records as well as newspapers in hard copy and microfilm. The collections include:

- Census Records 1850, 1860, 1865, 1870
- Court Records from 1797-1948
- Deeds and Indexes from 1692
- Justice of the Peace Dockets 1786-1948
- Maps
- Marriages 1795-1878
- Mortgages and Indexes from 1692
- Naturalization Records 1896-1964

Visit us on the web www.capemaycountyarchives.com or in person. Our hours are Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Need help with a research question? Call/Contact our public records staff:

- **Diana Hevener** Deputy County Clerk and Archivist
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