

A Brief History of Tybee's Community, Commerce & Culture

Tybee Island has stayed true to its past while progressing with the times...

At the time of the first European exploration of Tybee by the Spanish in the 16th century, the island was home to the Euchee Indians. The name "Tybee" is derived from the Euchee word for "salt." In 1733, James Oglethorpe and 113 men, women and children settled the City of Savannah and the Colony of Georgia 17 miles upriver. The island was important to defense and commerce due to its strategic location at the mouth of the Savannah River. In 1736, a 90 ft. tall "daymark," a precursor to the light house, was erected on Tybee under the direction of Noble Jones. This signature landmark was replaced three times due to storms and tides. The last was constructed in 1773 and continues to shine brightly today. In 1873, the Tybee Improvement Company established what would become the City of Tybee with the first partial survey of lots. The federal government acquired land to establish a military reservation on the north end of the island in 1875 which became Fort Screven. The following year brought the first resort hotel, Ocean House, on the south end of the island. By 1891, Hotel Tybee, on the southernmost end of the island, was completed and oceanfront lots were sold and developed.

Two neighborhoods on Tybee, the Strand and Back River, represent the oldest and most substantial concentration of historic cottages remaining. These developed between 1895 and 1920 as a result of the construction of the Savannah-Tybee Railroad in 1887 and Hotel Tybee. The original Strand District was one of the first areas to build up due to the oceanfront location, proximity to two main resort centers and the accessibility to the five railroad stops along Main Street (now known as Butler Avenue). The oldest buildings remaining in the Strand district are private cottages built in the center of a full oceanfront lot extending from Butler to the beach with common architectural details unique to Georgia coastal resorts. This district is recognized as "the only intact historic cottages remaining on the island associated with the American coastal resort movement along the Atlantic Ocean and with the development of Hotel Tybee." The Back River District is a concentration of cottages with identifiable architecture and landscaped characteristics representing the oldest and best examples of summer cottages associated with the American coastal resort movement in Georgia. This district developed along the length of the Back River on the South End of the island as a secluded alternative to the beachfront resort bustle.

By 1890, when the Savannah-Tybee Railroad became a unit of the Central of Georgia Railroad, Tybee became a regional resort. The train cut travel time in half from the mainland and made the entire island accessible with eight stops between the North End and the South End. In the early 1920's, Tybee began its golden era as a resort with the completion of the Tybee Road connecting with the mainland via Victory Drive. As a result, Tybee experienced an unparalleled building boom with boarding houses and hotels. Many of these were established in the main resort area within two blocks of "the Front" (commonly referred to as "Down Front" and Downtown). As automobile use rose, streets were hard surfaced. By 1925, Tybee had four miles of asphalt streets, four miles of graded (unpaved) streets, and a new two mile boulevard named Butler Avenue (formerly Main Street) under construction.

Tybee's reputation as a popular summer beach resort on the south Atlantic grew during this time. Advertisements encouraged people to make Tybee their home, boasting of the convenience of traveling to nearby Savannah for work by automobile or train, living economically on Tybee beach, and being part of the community built around a home atmosphere. The health benefits of fresh salt water breezes added to the allure of island living, resonating with Tybee's Euchee name of salt.

With the popularity of the automobile, the railroad ceased operating in 1933. The roadbed is now the Old Tybee Railroad Scenic Trail. By the mid-1930s, Tybee had a permanent population of 350 with a swell to 6,000 during the summer resort season. The establishment of a permanent population served to stabilize the community and the economy. During this time the intersection of Tybrisa Street (formerly 16th Street) at Butler Avenue began to develop as the main commercial area for the town. After two major fires destroyed many boarding homes and a major hotel in 1931, developers came in and rebuilt before the next resort season giving rise to a commercial center consisting of concrete block and frame construction. New establishments included the Carbo House, Wilson Hotel, May's Apartments, and Strand Hotel. Several boarding houses were also established at this time, including the Beach View Hotel and Cobb Apartments. A post office and bus station were also established in the commercial business district to serve the growing local population, as well as the resort crowd. One of the first year-round businesses in the district was Chu's Department Store which marked the beginning of Tybee's transition into a true year-round community.

This renewal ushered in a new decade of celebration. The 1940's are said to have been the most important years in the island's history. This decade marked the firm establishment of Tybee as a year-round community with its largest permanent population, homes built for year-round dwelling, a year-round commercial center, a new town hall building, a public library, and regular bus service. By the end of WWII, an unprecedented building boom with small homes and remodeling of those existing took place due in part to the drastic growth of Savannah's population and lack of housing in the city. A public school in 1943 and St. Michael's private Catholic Day School in 1948 were established to accommodate the growth. Other signs of development included the establishment of a second church, Trinity Methodist Church, dedication of a new recreation park (Memorial Park), and the opening of the Beach Theater in the old Post Theater building. By the end of the 1940's Tybee year-round population was over 1,000.

A Classic Main Street Community



One of the most noticeable changes in the mid-1950's was that the resort center at the island's south end at the intersection of Butler Avenue and 16th Street took on the appearance of a traditional small town commercial district, becoming Tybee's Main Street. By 1955, one-story concrete block storefronts had been established between the bus station and the Carbo House and the area was fully redeveloped from the loss it sustained from the fire in 1931. The Beach Drug Company completed a new stucco building opposite the bus station. Christy's Department Store was established in the remodeled first floor of the old two-story Haar Building (c. 1900s). T. S. Chu's Department Store remained the anchor with its one story concrete block presence.

Influenced by the urban renewal movement in the late 1950's and early 1960's, Tybee went through dramatic changes. With the population at 1,300 by the end of the 1950's and an increase of visitors, City and County officials worked together to improve the existing Tybee Road and access to the island. The route, now known as the Islands Expressway, provided an alternate connection between downtown Savannah and Tybee to alleviate traffic. Boardwalks and various accommodations were neglected and rebellious acts similar to the days of prohibition led to negative public perceptions which impacted the island's reputation. However, the new expressway opened by the mid 1960's and civic leaders led the way to reviving the experience of Tybee with revitalization plans. Plans were delayed by demolition of grand landmarks that represented Tybee's heritage and a fire that destroyed the Tybrisa Pavilion. Although aspects of coastal living remained untouched between the 1970's into much of the 1990's, Tybee continued to be "Georgia's Playground" each season with its miles of beaches as other beach towns endured the flux of travelers and lost identity.

By 1990, the population of Tybee Island was 2,800. During this decade, especially with Tybee being selected as a host site for the 1996 Olympics, Tybee experienced more loss of its historic buildings through demolition for redevelopment. After the loss of the Desoto Beach Hotel, publicity spurred public awareness and interest in restoring and appreciating "Tybee's classic coastal resort architecture" and the Tybee community's "state of mind". Thanks to the Tybee Island Historical Society's work and local leaders, several preservation projects have been and continue to be completed, including the rescue of the Post Theater.

Today, Tybee Island is just as popular as it was before the 1950's with a year-round population of 2,900 and a swell to 30,000 in the summer season. In addition to the miles of beaches, acts of preservation, and sense of community, Tybee offers a variety of accommodations, restaurants, shops, and entertainment for all ages. The island is humbly eclectic and inviting as far as the eye can see.

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