

## Transforming the Gilded Age Beach

Wells, Jamin. *Shipwrecked: Coastal Disasters and the Making of the American Beach*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020. 258 pp. \$29.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1469660905.

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For hundreds of years, Europeans and European Americans typically saw the oceanfront beach as an isolated eastern frontier, an inhospitable place best avoided. Congregating in the calmer environs of natural bays and harbors, they often left the coastline to scattered Native American communities. Prior to the American Revolution, for instance, coastal tourism was largely limited to colonial gentry who summered in the fashionable resort town of Newport, Rhode Island, or hunted and fished on the remote Jersey Shore. But that all changed, Jamin Wells's *Shipwrecked* shows, when, over the course of the nineteenth century, the American beach shed its frontier reputation and became the domesticated tourist destination we know today.

As the book's title suggests, shipwrecks and disasters were catalysts in the transformation of the American beach. Coastal wrecks cost lives and destroyed property. Commodities that ended up as flotsam and jetsam meant lost profits for businesses and less tariff revenue for governments. The greatest risks to commercial shipping, Wells argues, lay in the "Long Island-New Jersey pocket," the area between Montauk, on the eastern tip of Long Island, New York, and Cape May, in southern New Jersey (112). Actors ranging from state and federal authorities to local residents and large corporations all had a vested interest in taming this 200-mile shoreline.

To secure the coastline, the new national government took control of lighthouses up and down the East Coast—"literally bringing light and order to a dark and dynamic frontier"—and began compiling statistics to make the beach "legible" (20). Federal customhouses from fifty-nine separate districts kept track of ships, cargos, and duties owed. When a ship wrecked, a federal agent was dispatched to determine what could still be salvaged and appraised. These actions, undertaken during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, marked the nation's first formal attempt to regulate its beaches. But Wells is careful not to overstate the extent of such early federal intervention: the government still depended on local citizens to man lighthouses and customhouses and carry out other basic functions.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Congress allocated tens of thousands of dollars to create federal lifeboat stations. Most lined the Long Island–New Jersey pocket. Each of these buildings was outfitted with "a boat, a life-car, signal rockets, and hundreds of fathoms of line, as well as a stove and fuel" (90). But only in 1878 did Congress

centralize and professionalize this system through the establishment of the United States Life-Saving Service (USLSS), a precursor to the United States Coast Guard. The press reported sensational stories of rescues, and lured by such adulatory accounts, Americans flocked to the shore to watch the USLSS in action.

During a winter storm in January 1896, the transatlantic liner *St. Paul* ran aground near the resort town of Long Branch, New Jersey. It took less than six hours for spectators to begin crowding the beach, eager for a look at the rescue and salvage efforts. Over the next ten days, extra trains ran from New York City and Philadelphia, taking tourists to the disaster site. All told, tens of thousands of people descended on the beach, drumming up significant off-season business for carriage drivers, peanut vendors, and restaurant and hotel workers. Some of the USLSS lifesavers even capitalized on this newfound tourism. William Saunders, for instance, the keeper of the Quonnie, Rhode Island, lifeboat station, retired in 1900 and promptly opened a summer resort there.

While the USLSS was busy winning headlines for its rescues, professional “wreckers” worked to salvage damaged ships and their cargo. Captain T. A. Scott of New London, Connecticut, the era’s most famous wrecker, patrolled the Long Island Sound and, using state-of-the-art industrial tools, attempted to save everything he could from the foundering schooners he encountered (127), routinely refloating entire vessels. His daring work earned him national acclaim. Depicted as a strong, masculine hero, he, like the men of the USLSS, was counterposed against the Gilded Age’s faceless corporations. Yet Scott was very much a man of his time: he espoused the hallmarks of industrialization (“steam, steel, and engineering”) and ran his own large firm, the Scott Wrecking Company (126). Wells describes him as a liminal figure who helped make industrialization and corporatization palatable to anxious Americans. At the same time, when wreckers such as Scott cleared the beach of detritus, they created a “pristine shoreline” suitable for mass tourism (107).

The impromptu spectacles surrounding wrecks and their salvage repeated at many other Gilded Age beaches, not to mention the institutionalized tourism that followed, resembled the permanent leisure scene at nearby Coney Island and the amusement zones found at world’s fairs. Scholars of anti-vice movements may find potential avenues for research in these episodes. Reformers, for instance, expressed concerns for the safety of women at such events, and the carnivalesque atmosphere would have aroused fear of coerced prostitution. Shipwrecks and the modern beach could thus be studied much as amusement parks and world’s fairs have been.

Wells’s *Shipwrecked* arrives on the heels of Kara Murphy Schlichting’s *New York Recentered: Building the Metropolis from the Shore* (2019).<sup>3</sup> Looking inland from the coast, Schlichting studied the municipal politics surrounding greater New York City’s harbor, rivers, and marshlands. Like Schlichting, Wells makes the compelling argument that comprehensive understandings of industrialization, city- and nation-building, commercialization, and the development of mass tourism must consider diverse coastal environments and the new cultural landscapes of Gilded Age America.

<sup>3</sup> Kara Murphy Schlichting, *New York Recentered: Building the Metropolis from the Shore* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).