



History of Burlington Island

(Courtesy of the Friends of Burlington Island)

In 1624 the ship, *New Netherland* sailed to America with 30 Walloon families to start a colony. Colonists were Walloons, French speaking peoples from the Belgium area. Most of the Walloons disembarked in the New York area but the rest went to Matinicum Island on the Delaware River. Matinicum island became the first European settlement in New Jersey.

Prior to their arrival, the Swedish had set up a trading post on the island to trade furs with the Lenape.

The Dutch stayed only long enough to establish a fort for trading and the families then removed to New York area leaving the island to be re-inhabited by the Swedes who were there until 1655 when the Dutch returned. In 1664 the Dutch left when the English came to the much-improved island that now had a number of nice homes, cultivated fields, livestock, and servants.

The first recorded murders in the State of New Jersey took place in 1671 when an Indian had just lost his sister and he blamed her death on the colonists. He took a friend to the island intending to kill the colonists, but they found only the two servants. Authorities from Delaware to New York feared an Indian uprising from what they had thought were friendly Indians, but the local Chief dispatched the responsible parties.

The Dutch recaptured the island in 1673 but in 1674 the English were granted title in the Treaty of Westminster.

A few years before in 1668, Frenchman Peter Jegou was granted land by the first Proprietary Governor of New Jersey to build a tavern at Leasy Point which is where the Burlington City boat ramp is now located. The tavern, called the Point House, was the only public lodging place in the area. His nearest neighbor, a half mile up the mainland, was a German named Henry Jacobse. By this time there was no one living on Matinicum Island, so Jegou and Jacobse began farming the land with the permission of the English Governor, Edmund Andros.

In 1677 the Quakers arrived from England on two ships: the *Shield* and the *Kent*. Although they bought land from the Lenape and settled on the mainland, they were given permission to use the island as “a place of resort in fair weather and on holidays.”

Robert Stacy, a prominent Quaker in the new settlement, asked Governor Andros for a lease and in 1679 a 7-year lease was granted with the full understanding that Jegou and Jacobse were in partnership farming the island. One of the first things Stacy did was to evict the farmers and the Quaker settlement was very unhappy with Stacy’s duplicitous actions.

In 1680 the Quakers circulated the first petition ever to be signed in Burlington and in 1682, half-way through his lease, Stacy gave it up and assigned the island to school purposes, thereby regaining his status in the Quaker settlement.

In 1683, William Penn decided that he wanted the island. He had founded the City of Philadelphia just one year earlier. He asked the Burlington settlers to give up the island peacefully but if they refused, he warned them “let what follows lye at their door.” In 1710 legal title of Matinicum Island was granted by the Crown to the town of Burlington and made a part of the Province of New Jersey.

In 1720 then Governor William Burnet took the island and “spared no pains or cost to make it a pleasant resort for the people of Burlington.” He made the island an attractive pleasure ground and often spent whole days there himself for recreation from the cares of government.

In 1727 the town appointed a board of overseers, or managers, of seven people to inspect, inquire, and manage the island. The island income from farming, fishing, and rents was used to fund the Burlington Free School which included children who were either orphans or of the poor. Burlington had the first free school in America and the earliest foundation for a free school system in America.

From the time the Island Managers built the first school in 1805 until 1888 they gave more than \$100,000 towards the construction or development of seven schools within the City. For more than 150 years, the Board of Island Managers was the only financial support of the public school system in Burlington.

In 1824 the State Legislature acted to incorporate the Managers of the Island School Fund for Education of Youth. In March of 1852, the Legislature reincorporated the Island Managers under the title “Managers and Treasurer of the Fund for the Education of the Youth in the City of Burlington.”

One of the first acts of the Managers was to sell the lower 100 acres of the island to the Burlington Island Land Association for \$20,100. Elias Boudinot headed up this group, and their plan was to put a bridge to the island and sell lots for homes. They tried for more than 35 years, from 1852 to 1870 before finally giving up.

In the 1890s Charles Conrad Abbott, New Jersey’s first archaeologist, rowed to the island and found tiles, beads, pipes, and glass fragments from the Swedish, Dutch, and English occupations – all of which are stored at both Harvard’s Peabody Museum and at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

The 100 acres was sold for a family picnic resort that was active from 1900 to 1917. During this time, four farms were in operation. The island had very fertile soil – it was excellent farmland. And in 1914, 50 acres of land was sold to the Burlington Island Park Company for an elaborate amusement park, one of the largest on the East coast. In 1917 the new park owners built the Greyhound, one of – if not the – largest wooden roller coasters in the world. This new park attracted thousands. At times, the river pier would



have six and seven steamers waiting to unload passengers. Ferry lines delivered visitors to the island hourly. The park was so popular that the Burlington Island Park Company bought more land to expand their operations. The park was in operation for 11 years.

In 1917–1918, the Delaware River was extensively dredged to enable ships being built for service in World War I just North of Bristol to pass through the channel. The dredge was deposited on the North end – of the island closest to the shipyard.

In 1928, a fire destroyed much of the amusement park and six years later a second fire took out everything else. The park's beautiful merry-go-round is now at Seaside Heights. After the fires, the land was bought by a sand and gravel excavation company that removed 97-acres of material which is now Burlington Island Lake.

Beginning in the 1960s, people were given permission to build summer homes on leased lots. More than 50 families took advantage of the opportunity. In 1977 the leases were terminated and all the summer residents were evicted. Whatever they did not take with them was bulldozed into several large piles which remained there for more than 50 years. At the same time, the Army Corps of Engineers placed hundreds of thousands of yards of river dredge spoils on the island, using it for a second time as their dumping ground.

The island is now able to be used for recreation, education, preservation, and cultural purposes. The Southern half of the island, closest to the Burlington Bristol Bridge, is owned by the City of Burlington but is under the jurisdiction of the State of New Jersey Green Acres program. The Northern half of the island is owned by the Board of Island Managers.

In 2019 a small but mighty company called United By Blue based in Philadelphia proved to be a key player in cleaning up the debris from the summer homes. United By Blue coordinated efforts to remove 96,100 pounds of metal and debris from the island in a clean-up that lasted a week in the pouring rain with multiple volunteers from various agencies including the DEP, the City of Burlington, the Board of Island Managers, and a host of volunteers.



Burlington Island is once again on the Army Corps of Engineers radar as a great dumping site for the Delaware River dredge spoils and the City is in a lawsuit trying to stop it. With citizen participation, it can be stopped, but it's up to the people to stand up for the island. Please sign our petition on this website.

And note that there are four miles of hiking trails on the island marked by color and numbers which correspond to GPS locations so that any hiker or visitor who needs assistance can call 911 and their location will be identified. The lake is spring fed, separate from the Delaware River, and is said to be the largest lake within an island within a river in the world. It features fishing, rowing, kayaking, swimming, and beautiful vistas.