

Fort Monmouth: Home to the Jersey Derby?

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Improvements in steamship and railroad transportation during the second half of the nineteenth century made the Jersey Shore a popular summer vacation retreat for harried New Yorkers, according to historian Howard Green, Research Director of the New Jersey Historical Commission.

Railroad tracks connected a 5,000 foot pier at Port Monmouth with Eatontown and Long Branch, facilitating travel from New York City to those towns.

Popular hotels such as the West End, the Continental, the Clarendon, the United States, the Mansion House, the Pavilion, and the Metropolitan advertised in the *New York Times* that a week's stay could cost anywhere from \$20-\$35 per person.

The abundantly wealthy rented extravagant summer "cottages" at "the Branch," as they affectionately called the city.

The city of Long Branch was also the favored seaside resort of seven U. S. Presidents: Ulysses Grant (1869-1877), Rutherford B. Hayes (1877-1881), James A. Garfield (1881), Chester A. Arthur (1881-1885), Benjamin Harrison (1889-1893), William McKinley (1897-1901), and Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921). The *New York Times* even dubbed it the "summer capital" due to the frequency of Grant's visits to his five acre cottage in 1873.

Some of the city's wealthier visitors campaigned to bring horse racing to the area. Leading the charge were New York businessman and avid gambler John Chamberlain, New Jersey Senate President Amos Robbins, and Adams Express Company President John Hoey.

J. McB. Davison and J.F. Chamberlain conceived of the Monmouth Park racetrack and purchased 128 acres of the Corlies Estate in 1869. The land was located three miles from Long Branch in Eatontown. It was a two and a half hour trip from New York or a three hour trip from Philadelphia.

Davison and Chamberlain fenced the grounds and laid out an oval, eighty foot wide, one-mile racetrack that opened on 30 July 1870. This park was in what is now the southern portion of Fort Monmouth, in the vicinity of Patterson Army Health Clinic. The entrance was located on today's Broad Street, near Park Avenue. In season, two steamboats made daily runs from New York to Sandy Hook, where patrons could make a connection to the park by rail. The round trip price advertised in the *Times* was under two dollars.

The *Times* reported that every foot of the course could be seen from the 400 foot long, 7,000 seat grandstand, a trait that other famous tracks lacked.

The park changed ownership in 1878 when a company headed by George L. Lorillard, D.D. Withers, G.P. Wetmore, and James Gordon Bennett purchased it. Records from that year show that a race would easily sell as many as 13,500 tickets for a total gross of at least \$69,880.

In 1882, the longest racing season to date took place. Gamblers avoided Saratoga, Sheepshead Bay, and Jerome Park in favor of Monmouth. New Jersey historians report that not even Coney Island threatened the track's popularity.

The New Jersey Central and Pennsylvania Railroads reorganized themselves to accommodate racetrack-goers, running trains over the same track between their terminal at North River and Long Branch. The *New York Times* reported that a round trip steamboat ride from New York to Long Branch cost sixty cents; the round trip ferry ride from Coney Island, thirty cents; and the round trip railroad ride one dollar and fifty cents (with that price expected to drop in order to remain competitive).

1885 saw crowds larger than ever reported at any U.S. racetrack. By 1888, purses had jumped from \$12,600 to \$210, 850. The track became so popular that expansion was a necessity.



Monmouth Park

A larger, more ornate Monmouth Park was built just north of the original track. Designed by David D. Withers, it opened on 4 July 1890 and featured a one and one half mile oval track, centered on what later became Fort Monmouth's Greely Field; a one-mile straight-of-way; a 700 by 210 foot steel grandstand for 10,000 spectators (reputedly, the largest in the world); and a luxury hotel, fronting Parker Creek. The new park was three times the size of the original, and encompassed 640 acres – almost all of Fort Monmouth's Main Post.

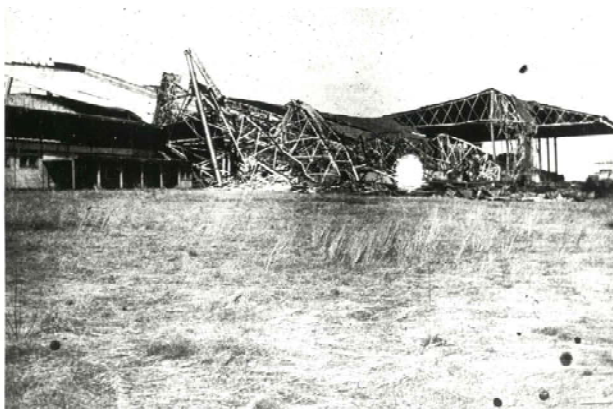
The rich and famous people of the era, such as Diamond Jim Brady, Lily Langtry, Jubilee Jim Fisk, and Lillian Russell, frequented the races and the Monmouth Park Hotel. Other notable attendees included "Bet a Million" Gates, tobacco millionaire Pierre Lorillard, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, society playboy Freddie Bebhart, boxer James Corbett, and Jessie Lewisohn of the banking family.

Lavish suppers were hosted by Mike and Charlie Dwyer, owners of the world's finest thoroughbreds. The Drexel family of Philadelphia gave exclusive soirees. Even politicians like Grover Cleveland, Governor Bowie of Maryland and Senator Stockton of New Jersey tried their luck at the races.

One of the amusing anecdotes of the era, later reported in the *Signal Corps Message*, is that of Lillian Russell riding to the track on a bicycle studded with diamonds. The bicycle was a gift from Diamond Jim Brady. According to historians Robert Russell and Richard Youmans, the duo also drove about in a custom electric automobile. Reporters and artists from the popular periodicals of the day followed these celebrities in order to capture such exploits.



Monmouth Park Hotel looking north, c. 1890



Grandstand ruins

The Monmouth Park Hotel mentioned earlier was built on Parker's Creek in 1891 to accommodate attendees of the races. The massive building had 153 rooms. Amenities included an electric elevator, a smoking room, and a billiard room.

The Monmouth Park track was forced to close in 1893 when a "moralist movement" led by James A. Bradley pressured the New Jersey legislature to outlaw gambling. While the legislature tried to protect the tracks, they were heartily opposed and ultimately defeated by ministers, priests, lawyers, and others. An official Signal Corps history of Fort Monmouth dated 1946 reports that "the 'Jersey Derby,' prime stake of the season, was moved to Louisville, where it eventually became the famous 'Kentucky Derby.' "

Deserted, the grandstand, track, and hotel fell into ruin. A storm decimated the grandstand in 1899, and the hotel burned to the ground in 1915.

By the time the Signal Corps obtained the land, ownership of the plot had changed several times. Notwithstanding the desolation of the site in 1917 – overgrown and

infested with poison ivy – it afforded the Army significant advantages: six hundred feet of siding on a rail line of Hoboken, proximity to the passenger terminal in Little Silver, good stone roads, and access by water.

With the authorization of the Adjutant General of the Army, LTC Carl F. Hartmann leased 468 acres of the tract from Melvin Van Keuren of Eatontown on 16 May 1917 with an option to buy. The Army considered the land, which was a potato farm at the time, ideal as it was close to both river and rail transportation.



Fort Monmouth's main gate,
c. 1929- former ticket booth
of Monmouth Park

The first 32 Signal soldiers arrived at Fort Monmouth in June 1917.

The installation was originally named Camp Little Silver, based merely on its location. General Orders dated 17 June 1917 named LTC Hartmann the first commander. Corporal Carl L. Whitehurst was among the first men to arrive at Camp Little Silver. He later recalled in a 1967 *Monmouth Message* article that the site appeared to be a “jungle of weeds, poison ivy, briars, and underbrush.”

While remnants of the old Monmouth Park Racetrack seemed to be everywhere, only one building remained habitable. It was there, in that former ticket booth, that CPL Whitehurst and his comrades awaited the delivery of their tents.