

Bergen Point
By
Henry R. Schnitzer
Secretary, Bayonne Historical Society

The development pattern of American cities in the course of time has become relatively conventionalized. In almost all cases we have the virgin forest of prairie country with settlers coming in and establishing themselves amid the usual hardships of pioneers. Slowly homes and industries are established. Residential districts materialize and then as a result of industrial encroachment, fine homes and their vicinities degenerate and eventually we have the emergence of an industrial community. Frequently there follows regeneration so that a new type of residential community is superimposed over the run-down homes and factories. The East River section of Manhattan is characteristic of this formula and that part of Bayonne which is known, as Bergen Point is typical of this development and change.

Bergen Point was first seen by Europeans who sailed with Verrazzanne when his ship ascended New York Bay in the early 1500's. Almost 100 years later Henry Hudson made his exploration with the resulting loss of one of his men at the hands of Indians in Kill Van Kull. He described the shore as "pleasant with Grasse, and Flowers and goodly Trees, as ever they had scene and very sweet smells came from them." In an old book entitled "An Englishman's Travels Around the World," a reference was made to Bergen Point and Nagasaki, Japan, as two of the most beautiful places the writer has ever seen. Evidence of this beauty is persisted until relatively recent years.

This part of Bayonne originally was very slow in its development. The first Dutch settlements here were on Constable Hook. The Point itself served merely as a means of reaching Staten Island to permit travel on to Philadelphia and intermediate

towns and villages. By the time the Revolutionary War had materialized, there were perhaps ten families in the vicinity of the Point and their homes were backed by heavily wooded country.

During the Revolution, most of the people living here were Royalists, and a Tory fighting unit was commanded by a Colonel Van Bus Kirk, who was described by the English as living at Bergen Point. There was much excitement here during this period; attempts were made by patriots to seize Van Bus Kirk, but without success. Washington also sent foraging expeditions to gather badly needed supplies. Repeatedly, the people of the vicinity were exposed to excesses from warring element of both sides. An explanation for the predominant Royalists sympathies of this section is that the Patriots were driven out early and the vicinity was dominated by the British to the extent that the American concept was submerged by the sheer lack of acquaintanceship with it. By the end of the Revolution, Tory and British sympathizers wither fled or were subdued and the Point settled back into a quiet, bucolic existence which was disturbed only when Washington made his way from Elizabethport to New York. On that occasion, the shores on both sides of the Kill were crowded with people anxious to view the scene. For the next half century Bergen Point presented a quiet backcountry atmosphere with but a few interludes. Such as they were, however, they were important.

During the French Revolution, a noble French family by the name of Du Ponts ran into difficulties with the Revolutionists. In an effort to escape the fate common to members of the French nobility, the Du Ponts decided to immigrate to America and in 1800 they established their first home in America at Bergen Point. They thought so highly of the place that they called it Bon Sejours, or Good Stay. Wilmington, Delaware

was eventually decided upon as their permanent home, but not before Samuel Francis Du Pont was born here in the year of 1803. This man subsequently became an Admiral in the United States Navy and played a conspicuous part as an officer in the Civil War. Their home, however, was to play an important and interesting part in the story of Bergen Point. It went through several changes of ownership until it was sold to David LaTourette in 1845. He added wings and later he replaced the original Bon Sejours with a new center structure and subsequently built still further additions. This was the La Tourette House, which old residents of Bayonne knew in their youth.

For the first half of the nineteenth century, Bergen Point remained a quiet, wooded country place. Retiring sea captains established homes in various localities. Relatively, these could not have been many, since it must be borne in mind that the total population of Bayonne in 1830 was 600, in 1855, 1700, and 1869, when the city was given its charter, in the neighborhood of 2,000. Since Bergen Point was only a small part of the entire city, the number of people living here could readily be surmised. With the acquisition of the City Charter in 1869, the tempo of life in Bayonne in general, and Bergen Point in particular, became accelerated. In addition to the La Tourette, famous eating-places, the Shore House, had been established in 1850. Of the two, the La Tourette was by far the more popular and its guests registered not only from every part of the United States but foreign countries as well. Its visitors enjoyed every pleasure facility of the day; boating, swimming, dancing, bowling, and outdoor sports were at disposal of its patrons.

With the advent of spring, summer residents flocked to Bergen Point so that the houses were at a premium. These usually rented at ten to twenty dollars a month,

although there is an advertisement in the old Bayonne Herald to the effect that a John H. Van Boskerck offered a ten room house with all modern improvements fully furnished, for \$65.00 per month.

Tennis enthusiasts who were fortunate enough to belong to the Bergen Point tennis club were eligible to indulge in that activity on the courts of their organization. This club was organized in 1877 as an archery club, and tennis was added several years later. Memberships were restricted to 75 and were chosen from the elite of the Point with many applicants on the waiting list. The club grounds on Avenue A and Humphries Avenue were donated by Mrs. Solon Humphries and were handsomely equipped. For a time, special summer members were admitted, but on account of the limited facilities of the organization, this privilege was withdrawn much to the indignation of those affected. As many of you are aware, Lida Voorhees, runner-up for the Women's National Championship in 1890 was developed in this club.

Of course we must mention the most famous baseball team of the 1880's, the Bergen Point A.C., which won the amateur championship of America in 1886, 1887, and 1888. This was Amos Alonzo Stagg's team. Subsequently, the New Jersey Athletic Club was formed in 1890, and the Bergen Point A.C. merged with it. This club supported not only a baseball team, but also a track team, which was one of the most powerful in its day. Yachting, rowing, shooting, and other sports were included among those offered by this organization. The club was so well known, and its activities so popular that the Central Railroad ran special trains to its grounds and spectators alighted at a station adjacent to the team. Today, perhaps the only thing still remaining to remind us of this club is one of the buildings occupied by Best Foods. The New Jersey athletic Club was

34

followed by the Knickerbockers A.C., which included many noted athletes in its membership.

Water sports were especially popular. The outstanding rowing clubs were banded together in the Kill Van Kull Rowing Association. This was the largest amateur rowing organization of its kind in the country and included clubs from Elizabeth, Staten Island, and three local groups, the Argonauts, the Vikings, and the Bayonne Rowing Association. The Kill Van Kull were organized in 1880 and included over 1,000 members. When their annual regatta was held in the Kull, spectators lined the shores of Bergen Point and Staten Island and filled every kind of boat, canoe, and yacht that was available and went out in steamers that were hired for the purpose. As many as four of the latter were used in 1888.

Industrialization of Bergen Point originally began very slowly. The first step in this direction was the building of the Port Johnston Coal Docks on Kill Van Kull. These docks became one of the principle coal depots in the country. They were named in honor of the president of the Central Railroad at that time. Somewhat later, in the 70's, porcelain teeth were introduced into the United States from France. Doctor Parmley established a factory in Bergen Point at what is now Second Street and Avenue C. His laboratory was a tall silo-like building on the top of a hill, and here for many years he manufactured the enamel used in coating artificial porcelain teeth. Many years later, Dr. Mitchell, a Bayonne dentist, was able to disprove the claims of Philadelphia to having been the first city to manufacture a product of this type, and to show that these materials were first made in this country in Bergen Point.

In the last fifty years, the process of industrialization in this part of the city has gone on steadily. At the turn of the century, Avenue A was a street lined with magnificent homes and estates all the way from the Point to Fuller place at the foot of 37th Street. Slowly, these were taken over by one industry after another, and the last of the Benmoore property was sold, cut into building lots within the past ten years. Evidences of many of these homes are still to be had. The old Brown mansion on the Dodge-Alcott property is used to this day for office purposes. In the room occupied by the purchasing agent, the writer was privileged to see the magnificent fireplace made of marble, which is still to be found there. Further up the bay, in the neighborhood of Tenth Street the old Schuyler mansion still stands and is being used as a clubhouse by the Pavonia Yacht Club. It was in this building that the late Nicholas Murray Butler, president of Columbia University, and Susanna Edwards Schuyler were married. Today, with the section filled with enormous industrial establishments of every type manufacturing wire cable, oil, power-torpedo boats, and almost endless other products, there is little, if anything, to remind us of the alluring section which it once had been. While the products of all these establishments are distributed all over the world, and are known everywhere, those of the Electric Boat Corporation, the power-torpedo boats, perhaps are the most famous and have played the most important part in the history of our country. As you all are undoubtedly aware, it was these P.T. boats during World War II which enabled our navy, weak as it was in the early days of the war, to inflict terrible punishment on the enemy not only in the South Seas and the far Pacific, but in any other part of the world where the enemy may have been met.