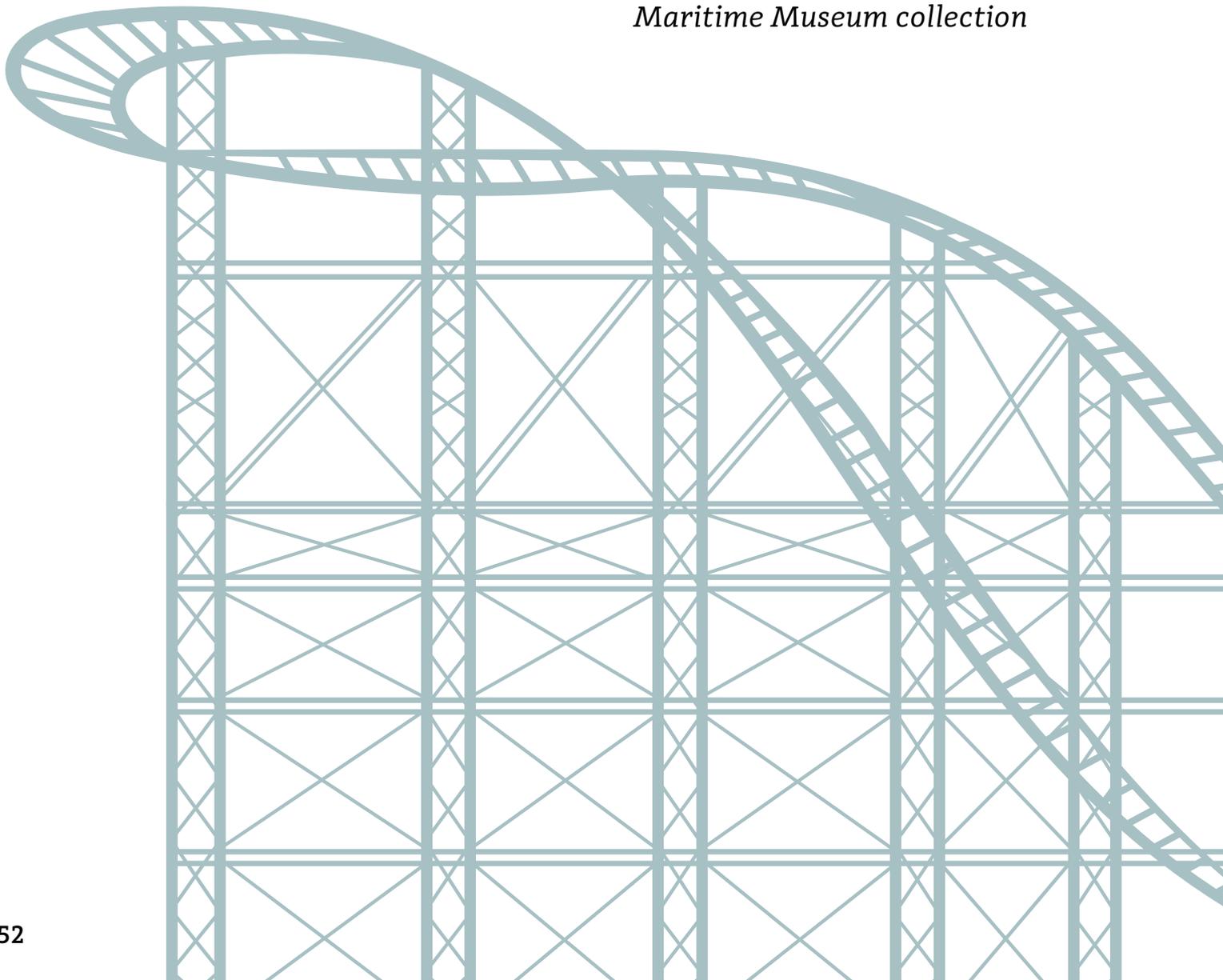


# TOLCH

*by Kate Livie*  
*photos from the Chesapeake Bay*  
*Maritime Museum collection*



# ESTER BEACH

## *Coney Island of the Chesapeake*

It's a warm July evening at Tolchester Marina's Shanty Bar. As a Rod Stewart cover band arranges sound equipment and prepares several satiny wardrobe changes, a gathering crowd of boaters and locals belly up to the bar. Cold cocktails acquired, Shanty patrons settle in to watch the sun plunge towards the horizon. It's a magnificent setting of water, beach and sky, enhanced by the civilized comforts Tolchester provides for its 265-slip marina. But it is a shadow of what was once here. On this location, directed at sunsets very like this, there was once a true wonderland.

Known as Tolchester Beach, it was a dreamscape of every summer pleasure the Victorians could conjure.

For 85 years, serviced by regular steamboats from Baltimore, Tolchester Beach delighted guests with the Chesapeake's version of Coney Island.

**THE TOLCHESTER CO.**  
**Excursions**  
 START FROM PIER 16 LIGHT STREET  
 BALTIMORE, MD.  
 (Schedule Subject to Change Without Notice)  
 Operating on Standard Time

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**TOLCHESTER BEACH**  
 Season Opens June 8th, 1935  
 THE IDEAL FAMILY RESORT  
 HOTEL, FAMOUS MEALS, AMUSEMENTS  
 SALT WATER BATHING  
 TWO-HOUR SAIL ACROSS THE BAY  
 Strs. "TOLCHESTER" and "ANNAPOLIS"  
 LEAVE BALTIMORE, (Pier 16 Light St.)  
 Daily and Sundays  
 \*6:00, 8.45 and \*11:30 a. m. 2.15 and \*4.30 p. m.  
 Steamers marked \* thus, carry Automobiles and Trucks  
 Round Trip Fara Adult 50c  
 Children 5 to 12 Years 25c

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**LEAVE TOLCHESTER**  
 Daily and Sundays  
 \*8:15 and 11.00 a. m. \*2.00, 5.30 and \*7.30 p. m.  
 No 5.30 p. m. boat Saturday and Sunday  
 Steamers marked \* thus, carry Automobiles and Trucks  
**SPECIAL MOONLIGHT TRIPS**  
 Daily 8.30 p. m. except Saturday and Sunday  
 Tickets - Adults 50c - Children 25c

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**DIRECT AUTOMOBILE ROUTE TO THE EASTERN SHORE**  
 Rates for Automobiles \$2.00 Including Driver  
 Round Trip \$3.50  
 Beautiful drives on fine State Roads. The place where you can spend a most delightful day. Beautiful Scenery.  
 Shortest Route to Ocean City, Md., and Rehoboth Beach and Lewes, Del.  
 LANDS RIGHT IN THE HEART OF BALTIMORE



It took tremendous vision to see the potential in the acres of isolated Bay-side farmland. In 1876 the spot was purchased by investors from steamboat companies who planned to connect an existing steamboat route with

a Kent County railroad spur. The rail company, however, went bust while the rail line was still well shy of Tolchester, leaving the speculators in a pickle. Partners John Armbruster and E.B. Taggart, along with employee William Eliason, now had to get creative with 1,000 unimproved waterfront acres in rural Kent County.

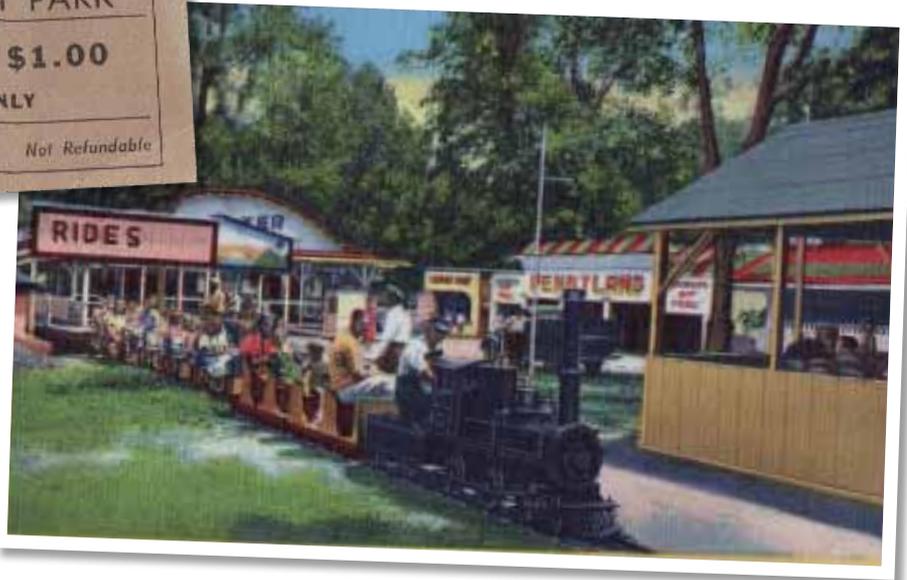
Fortunately for the investors, a new trend was transforming other lovely locales. As the United States' middle-class workforce grew and worker's regulations improved, more people than ever before had a day or two off on the weekends and a little money to spend. Coupled with the increasingly crowded, dirty realities of urban areas and a growing movement to get outside, city dwellers began to seek refuge from their walkups on the weekends. In response, savvy investors began to create "leisure destinations" to attract this first generation of middle-class tourists. Waterfront was popular, thanks to the new 19th century interest in "bathing" (read: swimming), and so began the proliferation of the Victorian resort beach.

In just 20 years, Atlantic City, Coney Island and Cape May all went from sedate to swarming as speculators built fantastic attractions. Boardwalks were common, and carousels and carnival-style games appealed to families and couples. Visitors of all ages suited up in bulky wool "hygienic" costumes to splash in the surf. For longer stays, accommodations from elaborate hotels to inexpensive boarding houses were constructed. But many of these new resort beaches were specifically designed to take advantage of day trippers and the new ease of travel, thanks to expanded rail and steamboat lines.

The vision for Tolchester fell into the latter category. The beach—a two-hour steamboat trip almost directly across the Bay from Baltimore—would be the location of the Eastern Shore's first waterfront resort and amusement park. On May 22, 1878, the Tolchester Steamboat Company excursion line was announced to the public.

Within a few years, the stretch of shoreline had been vastly improved, and for two generations, summertime visitors from Baltimore and Philadelphia enjoyed Tolchester Beach's bluff hotel with wide porches, bath houses with 500 rental bathing suits, rollercoaster, dance halls, row boats, miniature steam locomotive and midway full of games. Serviced by a series of steamboats including the iconic





Louise and Emma Giles, 2,000 passengers a day streamed down the long wharf in their Sunday best towards Tolchester's gentle entertainment.

The downfall of Tolchester, and other beaches like it, was death from many cuts. The rise of the automobile decimated steamboat travel, and the Depression evaporated any disposable income for the Bay's working classes. But the real blow came in 1952 with the construction of the first span of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, as summer revelers were whisked towards the glittering lights and sugar sands of Ocean City. By 1960, Tolchester was shabby and forgotten. It closed for good in 1962, purchased by a local entrepreneur who had plans to replace the sagging rides with a fancy new marina. Before the buildings were razed and burned, however, a local man, Walter Harris, managed to rescue a few iconic structures including the formal white bandstand. In honor of his own treasured days at Tolchester, he and his family lovingly restored the building and donated it to the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, so that a little something of Tolchester would live on.

Today, not much is left from the park's halcyon days. The bandstand now hosts

performances—classic rock, not barbershop—from its new home at the museum. Back in Kent County, despite the absence of the old magical turrets and sparkling enchantment of the midway—Tolchester still clamors on a summer night. Boaters drift from their marina slips to the dock bar, drawn by a powerful thirst and the strains of *Mustang Sally*. It's changed, this lovely place, but a few things remain the same—Tolchester's dazzling sunset, the susurrus of the Bay breaking on the shoreline, and the barefoot people, dancing at the water's edge. ↴



Kate Livie is a professional Chesapeake educator, writer and historian. She is the director of education at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in St. Michaels, Md., and writes for the *Bay Journal* and *beautifulswimmers.tumblr.com*. She lives with her husband in Chestertown, Md.

