

ATLANTIC HERITAGE

Newsletter of the Atlantic County Historical Society

SUMMER 2025

Myths & Lessons from Salt Water Taffy

by Megan Palos & Wayne Ernst

When we tell our history, we always rely on our understanding from those who came before us. Their stories become ours, just as our own stories will join in the shared knowledge we pass on to the next generations. But how do we discern truth from untruth; convenient omissions from fabrications or exaggerations? For an example, we can look no further than our local confectioners' stores.

The common telling of salt water taffy's origin story is that many confectioners on the Atlantic City boardwalk sold a treat made of molasses and sugar, and that its name originated from an unfortunate yet serendipitous storm which caused seawater to wash over a vendor's stand. The next morning, the vendor tried to sell his sullied treats anyway, calling them "salt water taffy." The name stuck, business boomed, and intense competition arose as rivals up and down the boardwalk vied to be considered *the exclusive* originator of the Genuine Article. One competitor named Edmiston even tried to drive the rest out of business through a trademark suit, going so far as the highest court in the United States before being rejected. Now, only a couple of companies—Fralinger and James among them—can lay claim to some of the "original" recipes and methods for making this treat, and still sell their taffy daily on the boardwalk and online.

But did any of this really happen? Let us begin—as Ms. Andrews might say—at the very beginning.

Myth vs. Fact: Saltwater Taffy's Origins

Salt water taffy is one of Atlantic County's most popular seaside souvenirs. It was first developed in the early 19th century, and a popular social event evolved around pulling taffy. The host would prepare a mixture of molasses, sugar, and water, and partners—with butter-coated hands—would take turns pulling the mixture to aerate it, resulting in a softer, chewy texture. By the late 19th century, David Bradley, the Ritchie Brothers, Windle Hollis, and others had set up a number of confectioner's stands along the Atlantic City boardwalk, honing their process and competing for customers. Some called it "ocean wave taffy;" others, "seafoam taffy;" others stuck with the rather plain "taffy." The prevailing theory for the name goes that in 1883, Bradley mistakenly left his display out overnight, and a strong storm blew seawater and spray over his stand, potentially ruining the treats. The next morning, dismayed but undeterred, he decided to sell his treats as they were. A young girl asked to buy some, and he sarcastically replied, "of course, here is your salt water taffy," referring to the salty ocean water mishap. She seemed rather pleased with them, and returned the next day to ask for some more "salt water taffy." Bradley was struck by this accidental naming innovation, and had signs made to market his "unique" confection. (One other popular retelling says that it was actually the happy accident of a lazy assistant who used seawater instead of fresh water and salt when preparing the treat.) Whatever the cause, despite the new name, it would be another few years until the phrase "salt water taffy" appeared anywhere in an "official" sense: the Atlantic City Directory's first mention of a confectioner using this phrase in the name of their business would be in 1889 for "Hollis Windle W., Original Salt Water Taffy."

From the first taffy stands set up in 1880 to the turn of the 20th century, no less than 40 different confectioners competed with one another along the same few miles of the Atlantic City boardwalk. In addition to the fierce clawing at tourist dollars, there was personal intrigue—and even enmity—among the proprietors.

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Events and Happenings

Program Logistics

RISLEY HOMESTEAD

8 Virginia Avenue
(near 400 block of Shore Rd)
Northfield, NJ



Saturdays & Sundays, 11am – 4pm

Program Description

The [Risley Homestead](#) is one of two 18th century houses in Atlantic County individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places and was home to many generations of Risley oystermen. The ACHS received the Homestead and its furnishings by bequest from Virginia Risley Stout in 1989. The Homestead is open Saturday & Sunday for individual and small group guided tours. Contact ACHS for details about large groups.

Yard Sale

Saturday, June 7th - 8:00am – 2:00pm

(Rain date, June 8th)

and

Saturday, September 27th - 8:00am – 2:00pm

(Rain date, September 28th)

Many items for sale,
including extra Library books.

Risley Homestead
8 Virginia Avenue
(near 400 block-Shore Rd)
Northfield, NJ

Monday, June 16, 2025, 6:30pm

Atlantic County Historical Society

CHICKEN BONE BEACH Co-authors, Henrietta Shelton – an Atlantic City native & President of the Chicken Bone Beach Historical Foundation and Heather Perez, Stockton University Special Collections Librarian & ACHS Board Member, will present their book, co-written with Ronald J. Stephens, which covers Atlantic City's *Chicken Bone Beach*, the Northside neighborhood and more.

Saturday, October 18, 2025, 11:30am

Crab Trap Restaurant
2 Broadway, Somers Point
Cost: \$32.00/per person

ACHS ANNUAL LUNCHEON Members and the general public are invited. Following the installation of the nominees to the governing Board, "The "Bringing History to Life Award" will be presented. Members will vote on nominees to the 2026-2027 Governing Board at this time. Contact ACHS to purchase tickets. Check Facebook or the ACHS website for more info.

Alan Mounier, from Vineland, gave a power point presentation on Archaeology on March 17th as part of the Atlantic County Historical Society speaker series. His talk covered his findings of skeletal remains, tools, pottery and fossils from ancient native Americans in Newfoundland and also along the Maurice River in South Jersey.



BOOK SALE

ATLANTIC
COUNTY
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

907 Shore Road
Somers Point

Saturdays:

JULY 19th &
AUGUST 16th

Inside & outside
ACHS.

SAVE THE DATE!!



HOLIDAY SWEET SALE

Saturday
December 20th
12:00pm – 3:00pm

The Atlantic County
Historical Society
will be closed on the following days:

June 7th, July 4th,

September 27th & October 18th

OUR REGULAR HOURS ARE:

Thursday – Saturday: 10:00 – 3:30pm

Need to Contact Us?

Phone: (609) 927-5218 or

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www.AtlanticCountyHistoricalSocietynj.org

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The Atlantic County Historical Society
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County Office of Cultural & Heritage Affairs.

Member News

A Different Annual Appeal

This year we're doing something different—we're NOT asking you for a donation. We're in pretty decent financial condition, with no major capital projects even in the distant future and only the usual concerns with keeping a large building properly heated, air-conditioned and dehumidified which are all pricey items although not quite piggy bank-busting. Utilities and supplies, computers and upgrades and software, hefty insurance premiums, some minor repairs and painting, plus landscaping care to make us appealing to visitors—these we can pretty much cover with only minimal mental anguish.

What we REALLY need are **people**. We have more volunteers (who are also board members) *over* age 80 than we have volunteers *under* age 60 so obviously we would like to add young(er) folks to our volunteer corps. **BUT** we will gladly welcome all ages to join us. Most of us became volunteers after spending some time in the building out of curiosity, a tour of the museum or family research. None of us had any special training but everyone has some special interest or skill set which is valuable.

For our local members, consider offering a day or two each month, even if you don't know how you might help; you either have an interest in history, artifacts or genealogy and that means you are perfect for us. Or maybe you know someone who is recently retired or might be a perfect fit for us. If you're a distant member of the Society, as many are, and you cannot join *our* volunteer group, at least consider serving your local society which undoubtedly needs help also.

PS. We'll never rival the Harvard University Endowment Fund, but if you'd like to help us save for future projects, please use the enclosed envelope, with our thanks.

Welcome

New Members

Carol N. Goloff, Esq., *Northfield, NJ*
Dan Histon, *Egg Harbor, NJ*
Fred & Susan Reitmeyer, Jr., *Galloway, NJ*



A very successful "Author's Night" at the ACHS on Monday May 19th, with 12 local authors participating.



IN MEMORIAM



Sue Koiro, *long time member*
Elizabeth Garwood,
long time member & contributing artist
Frank J Ferry, Esq.,
member, trustee, author, advocate

Myths & Lessons from Salt Water Taffy continued...

One of the central figures in the drama of the time was John R. Edmiston, who went into business with John Cassady (although some sources record him as John Cassidy). Edmiston ran a card writing stand at the Victoria Skating Rink along New York Avenue while Cassady became his business partner, adding a taffy concession to attract business to the stand. Within a year, Cassady found that he could not get along with Edmiston, was soon fired, and went to work with Bradley.

That would not be the end of the troubles for Edmiston. Captain John L. Young—owner of Young’s Ocean Pier and Young’s Hotel—bickered with Edmiston over rent, and eventually forced Edmiston out. Young then personally asked Joseph Fralinger to take over Edmiston’s location. Fralinger would do more than take over, adding his own innovations: first, while Fralinger originally only had molasses, chocolate, and vanilla flavors, he soon formulated over 20 different flavors. While others were wrapping their taffy, the summer heat would cause it to melt slightly and stick to the packaging. To combat this issue, Fralinger ordered a set of 200 small boxes in which to package and sell his treats over one weekend. He sold out of boxes by noon that Sunday, and resorted to buying extra boxes from a nearby seafood market that were originally intended to package and sell oysters. This is the reason for Fralinger’s signature packaging that still flies off of store shelves, today.

Soon salt water taffy would be sold across the nation. By 1905, Enoch James and his sons would travel with their products to the midwest, selling their treats at state fairs and other festivals while helping to promote tourism to Atlantic City. It was common for travelers on the train to hear Fralinger’s custom pitch for his “Atlantic City Souvenir:” “Don’t go home and say, ‘I wish I hadda gotta box.’” Fralinger even commissioned original sheet music to be included with the box so that those who could play would entertain their guests with a jingle for Fralinger’s taffy. Fralinger’s even shipped packages overseas to troops fighting during both World Wars, and switched his recipe back to include one of its original ingredients, molasses, when sugar and other supplies were being rationed to support the war effort.

Myth vs. Fact: Saltwater Taffy Goes to Court

With so much competition, Edmiston tried to find another way of carving out his own success: the law. On August 23, 1923, Edmiston filed application number 172,016 to trademark the phrase “salt water taffy.” If he was successful, he could claim the profits of his competitors (chiefly James and Fralinger) for using the phrase to market their products. James counter-sued, claiming that the phrase “salt water taffy” was in such popular use that no one person could lay singular claim to having *the* salt water taffy. On April 12, 1925, the *New York Times* reported that the United States Patent Office agreed with James and canceled the trademark. Edmiston appealed this decision, and on July 2, 1925, the Commissioner of Patents sided with James, writing in part: “[Edmiston] has failed to sustain the burden of proof” that the notation of salt water taffy was exclusive to his business, and that “It seems quite well established that the public merely considered the notation descriptive of a grade of candy.”

Closing: Why Care So Much?

So, we come back to where we started. What was fact? What was stretched from the truth? What was fabricated—if anything—and why?

As we can see, the broad strokes of the story are right, but some things are unverifiable. As far as we know, there is no record in a diary somewhere of Bradley’s poor day and either an accidental stroke of business acumen or sarcastic hucksterism in branding his treats as “salt water taffy,” but then, why would anyone make up such a story? There was certainly fierce competition on the boardwalk, and it is easy to envision Edmiston as an embittered, insufferable person—he was involved in rent disputes, fired his own business partner, had rivals who were doing better business, and tried to use the machinery of the law to put competitors out of business with a commonly-used name for his wares. But how much of that characterization is us projecting our own experiences onto individual events? And what of the supposed Supreme Court case? If you search on the internet for the history of salt water taffy, any number of food blogs and editorial pages will say that the case “made it all the way to the Supreme Court.” But the Supreme Court never heard any case involving James, Edmiston, or even mentioned the phrase “salt water taffy” until 1932, in a completely unrelated matter. If that case never happened, how did it become a part of the tale? What seems most likely is that Edmiston appealed the Commissioner’s decision to the Supreme Court and they declined to hear the case. Still, it strikes our sense of humor to say “he

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Myths & Lessons from Salt Water Taffy continued...

went to the Supreme Court over this!” and the presumption of such an appeal—if it happened—itself becomes part of our common retelling, even if it glosses over the facts.

And what does it all matter, anyway—why can’t we just enjoy our taffy?

The stories we tell to ourselves about our past matter because they tell us a little bit about who we are and where we come from, and can help us figure out where we go next. The details will sometimes matter more than others: surely, whether or not Edmiston actually staked his claim and got to argue before the highest court in the land is inconsequential to our lives, today. But could we say the same about all the other stories we hear and re-tell when browsing our museum’s artifacts, or digging through our archives? What do we owe to the people who came before us, whose stories we are now entrusted with passing on—and what do we owe to the people who come after us, who rely on us to tell them about their past?

Let us not go home and say, “I wish we hadda gotten it right.”

REFERENCES

1. “DENIES SOLE RIGHT TO ‘SALT WATER TAFFY’; Patent Office Rules John R. Edmiston Cannot Claim Trademark as His Alone.” *The New York Times*, April 12, 1925.
2. “Decisions of Commissioner of Patents and U.S. courts in patent and trademark and copyright cases 1926.” p. 49-51. *Gazette of the United States Patent Office*, United States Government Printing Office, 1927.
3. Kemp, Charlotte. “In Memory of Franklin Kemp.” 1985. (Fralinger family history.)



Then & Now!

By Lynn Wood

Then & Now is a regular feature in our Newsletter, featuring photos from the ACHS collection.

Photo (left) shows the front of Adventure Village taken around 1960. This amusement park, open summers from 1959-1969, was located on the corner of Ivins Ave. and the Black Horse Pike in the McKee City section of Egg Harbor Township. Owner Fred Warner, carpenter by trade, turned the buildings into apartments and had them for another ten years before selling the property to Marvin Hume in 1979. Property was converted by Auto Lenders in 2008.



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Schwartz, Dana Shupp & Lynn Wood

Looking Back through the Files.....

Transcribed by Diane J. Miller

Editor's Note: Abstracted here from a 15-page typescript are the stories of two New Jersey women who exhibited heroic action during the American Revolution. The manuscript from which they were extracted is undated and its author not named, but it is likely the work of Georgiana Collins Blake (1872-1953) as it is filed in a folder called "History Talks by Georgiana C. Blake" found in Collection Box 20A, folder 13, Blake-Smick Collection.

The first story is about Ann Cooper Whitall, a 61-year-old Quaker lady who remained at her spinning wheel to keep her eyes averted from the cannon fire which roared around her home during the Battle of Red Bank. Though the action took place along the shores of the Delaware River in Gloucester County, we include it here because Atlantic County was a part of Gloucester County at that time.

Also, the heroism of Rebecca Stillwell Willets on the northern tip of Cape May County, could have equally benefited those who lived in Somers Point on the opposite shore of the Great Egg Harbor River.

Brackets were added by this transcriber.

We read very little of what women did in the Revolutionary War. It is difficult for present day women, especially those who helped in the World War, to visualize the life of a woman of that period...Cooking was done over the open fire with wood or charcoal as fuel. Candles or "tallow dips" made in the home gave the artificial light. Every home had spinning wheels and loom. Linens, bedding and much of the family clothing were made from material spun and woven in the home – usually from wool and flax raised on the farm. Not a canned vegetable could be bought. Water was drawn from wells outside the house. The only heat was from fire places. Plumbing and modern sanitation were undreamed of. How did Great-great-grandmother do it?....

However, the women of New Jersey never had the severe hardships of those in the colonies farther north. This is particularly true of Southern New Jersey where the climate is comparatively mild and where nature was most generous in supplying the necessities of life....

To the women of this period came the problems of the Revolution. The multiplicity of duties left no time for being members of governing bodies. But that did not mean they were not familiar with the issues involved, nor that they did not influence the decisions of their men...They helped their men to arm and watched them march away. Then they quietly turned to the burden of running the farm, feeding and clothing the family, as well as supplying the army in the field.

In every colony women "played well their part," but none better than in New Jersey. New Jersey has been rightly called the "Battleground of the Revolution." The best highway...was the post road running from Philadelphia to New York, through Trenton, New Brunswick and Elizabethtown. This road has been called "the war path of the Revolution." From 1776 to 1782 this region on either side of the highway was the arena of constant raids, ninety of which have been recorded, led by British, Tories and Hessians. In the wake of these raids were burned homes, and outbuildings, devastated fields, murdered farmers and their servants, outraged women and general disorder.

Margaret Herbert Mathersⁱ writes of the women of these trying times, "As a fact they were generally more true to the cause than the men. They endured without complaint the loss of fathers, husbands, sons, and property. They freely contributed from their slender stores and savings to the needs of officers and men without asking security."

Every section of the state has its stories and traditions that illustrate the loyalty and devotion of women....

On the banks of the Delaware at Red Bank, stood the home of the quiet Quaker lady Ann Whitall.ⁱⁱ When at the Battle of Red Bankⁱⁱⁱ, she was urged to leave her home for safety,^{iv} she calmly refused saying, "God's arm is strong and will protect me. I may do some good by staying." She calmly sat spinning through the battle in a second story room, while bullets struck the brick walls like hail. When a twelve pound ball from the British ship in the river, grazed the American flag staff (a walnut tree) at the fort, passed through the brick wall in the north gable, crashed through the partition at the head of the stairs, and lodged in another partition near where she was sitting, she took her spinning wheel to the cellar, where she industriously continued to spin until the wounded and dying were brought in her home to be cared for. Then was when she could "do some good by staying." She did all possible to relieve the suffering of both friend and foe. She is said to have scolded the Hessians roundly for coming to America to murder the people, at the same time binding up their wounds and giving them food and

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Looking Back through the Files.....continued

water.^v (Ann Whitall Chapter D.A.R. of Woodbury is named in her honor)...[Today, the Whitall house and the remains of Fort Mercer are part of Gloucester County's historic Red Bank Battlefield Park on Hessian Ave. in National Park, NJ.]

From the diary of one Reuben Willets^{vi} we learn the pleasing story of Rebecca Stillwell Willets, daughter of Nicholas Stillwell and the young wife of James Willets. They kept the tavern at Beesley's Point [then called Golden Point] in Cape May County. At the tavern were stored ammunition and supplies for the Continental Army.^{vii} One day when all the men in the neighborhood were away on some business,^{viii} Rebecca ever on the alert, saw through the spy glass, a long-boat enter the river [Great Egg Harbor River].^{ix} As they drew nearer, she saw the boat was filled with red-coats. She ran up the stars and stripes, then set a small slave boy to beating lustily on the bell used to call the men from the fields, - even though no men were within call. Then she sent another small slave boy for a fire brand, while she trained the cannon that was mounted on the Point, and kept charged, on the approaching boat.^x She waited until they were within firing distance, then she fired. The men fell flat in the bottom of the boat, the boat put about and left the river. Whether any were hit was not known. Reuben Willets adds that she was regarded as a great heroine in the community ever after...[A signboard marks the site as part of the Women's Heritage Trail, www.hmdb.org.]

ⁱ Margaret Herbert Mathers, "Historical Paper," *The New Jersey Scrap Book of Women Writers, Vol. 2*, published by the Board of Lady Managers for New Jersey at the World's Columbian Exposition, 1893, p. 96, www.babel.hathitrust.org.

ⁱⁱ James Whitall, a wealthy Quaker farmer and merchant, and his wife, Ann, built the main brick section of the house in 1748. On April 16, 1777, the Pennsylvania militia commandeered the farm and built Fort Mercer in their northern apple orchard, www.hmdb.org, The Historical Marker Database.

ⁱⁱⁱ On Oct. 22, 1777, the British and their mercenary Hessian battalions attacked Fort Mercer hoping to open the Delaware River to the British Navy and allow needed supplies, reinforcements and equipment to reach Crown forces in Philadelphia. The 40-minute engagement was a "decisive defeat for the attacking forces." - *Report of an Archeological Survey at Red Bank Battlefield Park (Fort Mercer), National Park, Gloucester County, New Jersey*, prepared by Commonwealth Heritage Group, Inc., West Chester, PA, June 2017, p 2-3, www.gloucestercountynj.gov. However, news of a second siege caused the Americans to destroy the fort and abandon the property on Nov. 24, 1777, www.hmdb.org.

^{iv} Job Whitall, son of James and Ann Whitall, recounts in his diary his family's activities on the day of the battle. "Ye Boys and myself hung a gate in ye meadow and John [probably Job's brother] and I went to finish ye stacks (hay) and our women blowed ye horn and we went home and got our horses and wagon and loaded it with goods. Ye reason was because ye English troops were close by. We ate some dinner and my wife, children and myself went off in our wagon. Father, mother and ye boys stayed. We got to Uncle David Coopers [in Woodbury]...I went back again on horse back...drove away 21 head [of cattle]...to Uncle David Cooper and stayed all night. This same day ye people in ye Fort drove from Father and me 47 sheep into ye fort." Frank H. Stewart, "Job Whitall's Diary," *Notes on Old Gloucester County, NJ, Vol. 1, 1917, p.258-259*, ACHS Call No. A145 V. 1-2. [This passage confirmed for Stewart that Ann Whitall did not leave the farm after dinner on the day of the battle.]

^v "Ann was on hand with bandages that evening when the injured were brought in; the house was filled, even the attic was crowded. That night she was an angel of mercy to the wounded and dying, but when some of them fretted because of the noise, she reminded them that they 'must not complain, who had brought it on themselves.' She administered to their needs...to care for the ill and dying and direct their minds to a solemn commemoration of the approaching period of life." - Isabella C. McGeorge, "The Heroine of Red Bank," as read before the Gloucester County Historical Society, Jan. 11, 1904, p. 6; ACHS call no. A 502.2. [Mrs. McGeorge quotes from Ann Whitall's diary which she refers to on p. 2.]

^{vi} Reuben Willets' Journal is found in Frank H. Stewart, *Stewart's Genealogical and Historical Miscellany No. 2, 1918, p. 35-43*, ACHS Call No. A145.14 Ste. The earliest written account of this legend is from this mid-19th century journal of New Jersey Senator Dr. Reuben Willets, who was the nephew of James and Rebecca Willets, www.hmdb.org.

^{vii} "There was a quantity of stores left there that had been captured by the lookout boats fitted out by the people of Cape May." - Stewart, note 6, p. 36.

^{viii} The women [Rebecca and her sister, Sarah] were alone since their father was away buying supplies and Rebecca's husband, Captain James Willets, had marched with 50 recruits to answer the call of Governor Livingston's plea to help defend Philadelphia." - www.hmdb.org.

^{ix} The British were most likely piloted by a refugee acquainted with the absence of the men, Stewart, note 6, p. 36.

^x The cannon had been supplied by the Legislature at the inhabitant's request to protect their stores, www.hmdb.org.



A 1927 photo of the Whitall House on the banks of the Delaware River, ACHS photo #1435.

Editor's note – We would be remiss not to mention the New Jersey women's relief society which was formed in 1780 to provide financial assistance to the men of the Continental army. Women from every county in the state launched this campaign, and its roster included some of the most prominent ladies in the state. Those from Gloucester County were: Mrs. (Col.) Elijah Clark, Mrs. (Col.) Richard Westcott, Mrs. (Col.) Joseph Ellis, Mrs. (Col.) Joseph Hugg and Mrs. Joseph Bloomfield. Mrs. Westcott was from Great Egg Harbor; Mrs. Clark resided at "the Forks" until 1779, but was evidently living within the limits of Gloucester County in 1780.

ACHS Collection Box 20A, folder 13

Larry R. Gerlach, New Jersey in the American Revolution, 1763-1783, NJ Historical Commission, 1975, p. 348-49,

ACHS Call No. B 1334.

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**ATLANTIC COUNTY
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Where Atlantic County History Comes to Life



Our Mission:

- To collect and preserve historical materials exemplifying the events, places, and lifestyles of the people of Atlantic County and southern New Jersey.
- To encourage the study of history and genealogy.
- To provide historical and genealogical information to our membership and the general public.