

**The Mid-Atlantic Center for the Arts & Humanities
and the Rebirth of Cape May, 1970 – 2010
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Cape May's spectacular rebirth as a Victorian theme destination has followed a highly unusual course. No wealthy philanthropist came to its rescue, showering millions of dollars to transform the town (as did a John D. Rockefeller, Jr. at Colonial Williamsburg). No government super-agency stepped in and waved its magic wand (as did a National Park Service at Philadelphia's Independence National Park).

Rather, Cape May's revival has been a classic example of community "bootstrapping," involving three major partners. The first is the City of Cape May, which has provided the necessary regulatory controls and resort infrastructure. The second is the Cape May business community, whose members have poured their life savings and sweat equity into restoring hundreds of historic buildings. The third is a cultural not-for-profit organization, the Mid-Atlantic Center for the Arts and Humanities (MAC).

Since its founding in 1970, MAC has forged alliances with both other partners to further Cape May's rebirth. In its early years, MAC focused largely on the city government, fighting to shift it towards a pro-preservation stance. With this struggle won, MAC's partnership with Cape May's business community then rose to the fore. Through its sponsorship of *cultural and heritage tourism*, MAC has become a principal agency for Cape May's economic revival. By aggressively marketing an ever-growing roster of tours and special events, MAC has helped lure mass audiences to Cape May on a year around basis. These visitors, in turn, provide the solid customer base that the business community needs to sustain scores upon scores of preservation success stories.

MAC's history to date falls into four distinct phases: the Pioneer Phase (1970-80), when MAC waged its battle with City Hall and laid the foundation for its cultural and heritage tourism mission; the Adolescent Phase (1981-87), when MAC experimented with different approaches before reaching its present trajectory; the Growth to Maturity Phase (1988 – 2002), in which MAC fulfilled much of its early promise as the leader in Cape May's economic and cultural rebirth; and A Challenging Decade (2003 - present), in which MAC has re-engineered itself in the face of economic, cultural and demographic upheavals.

PIONEER PHASE (1970-1980)

MAC was formed in September 1970 at a critical juncture in Cape May's history. In the course of the 1960s, Cape May had become a magnet for growing numbers of historic preservationists and artists, attracted by its unparalleled (albeit dilapidated) collection of Victorian seaside architecture. Their vision was increasingly at odds with the city government, which saw modern motel construction as Cape May's panacea. When the historic Hotel Lafayette was torn down in the summer of 1970 to make way for the Marquis de Lafayette, the preservationists vowed that they would band together and fight any future demolitions.

They did not have long to wait. In September, the developer-owners of the Emlen Physick Estate (with its 1879 mansion and outbuildings, vacant and vandalized, on eight overgrown acres) announced plans to bulldoze this landmark to make way for tract housing. To forestall this disaster, MAC's founders (Fred Kuhner, Bruce and Corinne Minnix, and Carolyn Pitts) took the lead in incorporating the Mid-Atlantic Center for the Arts. By the very name they chose, they signaled that saving the Physick Estate was but a first step to achieving a very broad mission.

Their efforts to raise the \$90,000 purchase price for the Physick Estate inadvertently led MAC's founders into a pitched battle with City Hall. Federal funding was the likeliest source, but the HUD grants written by MAC's founders had to be funneled through the municipal government. To the shock and fury of the new organization, the city administration turned down the federal grant, citing its opposition to the loss of tax ratables.

Not to be denied, MAC's leaders mounted a political revolution to achieve their goals. Running on a platform of quality of life and historic preservation, Bruce Minnix led a reform ticket to victory in the November 1972 elections. His first actions as mayor in 1973 were to accept the HUD grant, purchase the Physick Estate for the City of Cape May and immediately lease it to MAC for its restoration and operation as a public cultural facility.

Minnix's four years in office, crowned by the entire city's being declared a National Historic landmark in 1976, proved to be a turning point in Cape May's history. During his tenure, the slogan "our future is in our past" became the official policy of city government. Although Minnix was defeated for re-

election in 1976, this commitment to historic preservation has been carried on by every successive administration.

At the same time that they were waging these political battles, MAC's founders were busy laying the organization's foundations. Their first priority, naturally, was to restore the Physick Estate. They rallied an army of volunteers, who repaired leaking roofs, sanded and painted, reglazed missing windows, cleared jungle growth from the grounds, and carried out the myriad other labors needed to bring the Estate back from the brink. A fierce internal debate ensued over how the facility would be used, with one faction urging that the main house be converted into artists' studios and apartments and another advocating a more historic use. The latter view prevailed, leading to a thorough restoration of the main house, and its operation as a Victorian house museum (a mission which has continued down to the present). This project has benefited from a succession of professional consultants, including restoration architects Hugh McCauley and Hyman Myers, historic paint analyst Frank Welch, textile conservator Helene von Rosensteil, and restoration architects Watson & Henry Associates and (currently) Holt Morgan Russell.

From the outset, however, MAC's founders started programs that went far beyond restoring the Physick Estate. One of their major initiatives was to extend MAC's interpretative net over the entire community. In 1971, they started offering guided walking tours of Cape May's Historic District. The following year, they purchased the trolley tour franchise of the defunct Victorian Village Development Corporation (a for-profit entity started in the mid-1960s, whose assets also included an inventory of Victorian furniture that was placed in the empty Physick Estate). And in 1973, they began major historic house tours that opened large numbers of Cape May's Victorian gems to the public.

Equally important, MAC's founders launched special events that served a variety of purposes. They first focused on fund-raisers at the Physick Estate, starting with a Halloween "Haunted House" in October 1970 and a Victorian Fair on the grounds in the spring of 1971. They broke truly new ground in 1973, when they held the first Victorian Weekend over the Columbus Day holiday. As it grew in popularity, this October event became a powerful magnet stretching the Cape May tourism season beyond the traditional ten weeks of summer. They continued this trend the following year, when MAC's first Christmas Candlelight House Tour put Cape May on the path of becoming a major Christmas destination.

That same year (1974), MAC's founders added a crucial marketing tool to their budding organizational structure. Filling a void, they launched the publication of "This Week In Cape May" (TWICM). Supported in full by advertisers and distributed free throughout the community, TWICM has become the "bible" for a generation of Cape May visitors. TWICM's success helped propel MAC into its role as the principal marketer of Cape May's many attractions and happenings.

ADOLESCENT PHASE (1981-87)

After a decade of spectacular growth and creativity, MAC found itself at a crossroads as it entered the 1980s. Like a typical teenager, it faced some confusion as it experimented with options and experienced a variety of growing pains. Ultimately, MAC emerged from these trials stronger than ever, with a sharpened sense of mission and a greatly enhanced infrastructure.

The overriding issues of this phase involved volunteer "burn out" and the beginnings of a professional staff. After carrying MAC through all of the triumphs of its early years, volunteer labor began to flag in the face of an ever-growing public tour schedule. By the late 1970s, MAC reluctantly turned to hired staff to lead trolley and Physick Estate tours, drive the trolleys, handle clerical chores and mow the grass.

The further decision to create a professional staff truly set off a storm of controversy. As volunteer burn out began to invade MAC's Board leadership, President Herb Beitel (1981-83) led the move to replace the Office Manager with its first full-time Director (this writer) at the end of 1982. The following summer, the organization added a full-time Tour Director. After several years of "creeping professionalization," a predictable backlash occurred, and it took all of President Tom Carroll's (1985-87) strategic skills to steer MAC through this crisis. Efforts to turn back the clock to a more "pure" volunteer state were defeated, and the organization was committed firmly to its present growth trajectory.

Nothing cemented this course more than the explosive increase in MAC's public programming throughout this period. As Cape May's fortunes rose in the 1980s in response to a national craze for Victoriana, so did the range and complexity of MAC's tours and activities. From the single trolley tour route of the 1970s, a second was added in 1983 and a third in 1985. In 1984, the four-day Victorian Weekend in October was expanded to a 10-day Victorian Week. Christmas trolley tours were introduced to flesh out the holiday season, and special events were launched for February, April and May.

This phase also saw the start of MAC's participation in joint ventures with for-profit partners. In 1981, the owners of three of Cape May's leading Victorian landmarks approached MAC with a proposal to join with the Physick Estate in a MAC-sponsored Mansions By Gaslight tour. Offered weekly throughout the peak season, this tour proved so successful that it was joined by a second group of houses (Cottages at Twilight) in 1983 and by numerous other combinations in the years since. These ventures have greatly enhanced MAC's ability to interpret the interiors of large numbers of Cape May's restored Victorians for the public, while forging closer links between MAC and the business community and providing an important additional source of earned income. Other kinds of partnerships also took root in this period: starting in 1983, MAC brought in Don Coffman, a major promoter of antiques and crafts shows, to co-sponsor shows throughout the year; and in 1986, MAC joined with a local sightseeing boat to offer guided boat tours around Cape Island.

While the sum of these experiences was positive and pointed to a bright future, it took one particular event to catapult MAC to its next phase of growth—the “acquisition” of the Cape May Lighthouse. The Lighthouse project was conceived by Tom Carroll, who started working on it in 1983. It took three years of intensive negotiations, involving the residents of Cape May Point, the U.S. Coast Guard and the New Jersey Division of Parks and Forestry, before MAC received a long-term lease for this 1859-vintage structure. Under the lease, MAC assumed responsibility for the restoration and operation of the Lighthouse as a museum. In 1987, the ground floor was opened to the public and planning was completed for the public safety improvements needed for climbing the tower.

The addition of the Cape May Lighthouse to MAC's roster proved momentous in a number of ways. It offered a new area of interpretation, involving lighthouse and maritime history and technology. It brought major new audiences to MAC's doorstep (e.g., lighthouse buffs, families with children), with the 60,000 visitors in 1988 increasing to over 110,000 by 1997. Reflecting the Lighthouse's importance as a heritage tourism attraction, these numbers significantly enhanced MAC's contribution to the local economy. The Lighthouse also housed MAC's first Museum Shop. Finally, the Lighthouse had a huge impact on MAC's organizational structure, more than doubling its budget between 1986 and 1988.

GROWTH TO MATURITY PHASE (1988-2002)

Once through its Adolescent Phase, MAC embarked on a period of continuous success as the cultural and heritage tourism engine pulling the Cape May economy. In the process, it again more than doubled its organizational scale and budget, while offering an ever-wider array of cultural and educational programming.

Central to this mature accomplishment was continuation of the internal “era of good feeling” that was forged during Tom Carroll’s first presidency in the mid-1980s. It was achieved by the transformation of the MAC Board of Trustees from a “working board” to a “policy board,” and the prevalence of a spirit of mutual respect and partnership between the Board and staff. Much credit for this ongoing harmony belonged to the successive presidencies of Marianne Schatz (1989-1991), John Bailey (1992-94), Elan Zingman-Leith (1995-97), Tom Carroll’s second term (1998-2000) and Ed Henry (2001-03).

A mature professional staff made it possible to manage existing programs while allowing MAC to strike out in new directions. A crucial infrastructure was created, involving the gradual introduction of professional standards to a host of areas, including: accounting, ADA accessibility, collections management, communications, computer networks, database management, educational outreach, employee management, emergency planning, interpretation, long-range planning, maintenance, marketing, publications, restoration, retail, special events, staff training, and volunteer management. With this strong organizational capacity, MAC was able to build vigorously on the foundations laid during its first two decades.

A key factor behind MAC’s growing professionalism was the emergence in 2000 of truly massive General Operating Support grants from the New Jersey Historical Commission. This injection of State funding contributed to a 50% increase in MAC’s operating budget in the first three years of the decade, which, in turn, accelerated many advances in the infrastructure needed to deliver MAC’s wide range of public programs.

Throughout this phase, MAC continued to make great strides in its efforts to extend the tourism season. In 1990, MAC launched the Cape May Music Festival as a strategy to attract visitors to the area during the “soft” weeks before the peak summer season. With significant grant support from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts and unprecedented contributions from scores of area businesses and

individuals, the Music Festival has grown into MAC's flagship cultural offering. This phase also saw a continual expansion of Christmas programming, with the number of Candlelight House Tours increased from one to three, a wide variety of offerings added to the calendar, and the holiday season stretched from the weekend before Thanksgiving (Holiday Preview Weekend) to the weekend after New Year's. In 1990, MAC introduced successful Sherlock Holmes Weekends in March and November. In 1996, MAC transplanted the best of October's Victorian Week to a Spring Victorian Weekend, which grew into a 10-day Spring Festival (in partnership with the Chamber of Commerce of Greater Cape May).

Part of this "season-stretching" was accomplished with an expanding roster of partners. For nearly a decade, Cape May's innkeepers lent their expertise to the INN Deep workshop on how to acquire, restore and operate a bed-and-breakfast inn. In 1997, Cape May's restaurant community joined forces with MAC to launch the Cape May Food and Wine Festival, scheduled for the third week in September. Since 1995, another key partner has been the Cape May Whale Watcher, with whom MAC co-sponsors daily Around Cape Island boat cruises and Delaware Bay Lighthouse Adventures.

Nor have MAC's partnerships been limited to the for-profit sector. Throughout this phase, MAC developed important joint ventures with the City of Cape May, including administering the Washington Street Mall Information Booth (in return for selling City Beach Tags) and co-sponsoring a series of children's cultural programs and crafts shows at Cape May Convention Hall. MAC also joined forces with a number of area nonprofits, cosponsoring nature walks with the Nature Center of Cape May; cross-marketing the Cape May Lighthouse with Historic Cold Spring Village, Naval Air Station Wildwood and Hereford Inlet Lighthouse; offering exhibits and programs that celebrate Cape May's African-American heritage with the Center for Community Arts; running the Doo Wop 50s Trolley Tour of the Wildwoods with the Doo Wop Preservation League; packaging Naval Air Station Wildwood with the World War II Trolley Tour; and providing marketing outreach and ticket sales for area theater companies. With the Delaware River and Bay Authority, MAC offered packages that encourage visitors to leave their cars on the Delaware side and take the Cape May-Lewes Ferry and a shuttle bus to a MAC trolley tour.

This phase has also saw several giant steps forward in MAC's administration of its historic sites. The Physick Estate underwent a systematic reinterpretation of the interior and grounds, taking into account the latest historical scholarship. The Physick Estate Carriage House was rescued from its languishing

condition and, after a major 1996-1997 overhaul, was converted to a multipurpose facility. Starting with the Twinings Teapot Collection in the fall of 1997, the Carriage House Gallery has hosted an array of changing exhibits that have hugely advanced MAC's museum and educational missions. Then, with corporate sponsorship from Twinings Teas and a grant from the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority, MAC launched a Tearoom in the summer of 1999 out of the Carriage House horsestalls and adjoining garden patio. The Carriage House Gallery Shop also became another source of audience outreach. Finally after a decade of planning, the historic landscape around the main house was recreated in 2002-03, combined with measures to provide wheelchair access to the house museum.

At the Cape May Lighthouse, the 1989-1990 refurbishing of the tower windows and doors and the Oil House was followed by a \$600,000 federally and state funded restoration of the lantern and repainting of the tower in its original colors in 1993-1994. An additional \$750,000 in federal/state grants led to the complete restoration of the Lighthouse structure in 1997-98. With the revamping of the Lighthouse grounds in 2000-01, this 15-year project was brought to substantial completion.

A CHALLENGING DECADE (2003 - Present)

In this past decade, MAC's 32-year growth curve has been significantly challenged by the confluence of three adverse factors: 1) The upsurge of State funding in the early years of the decade has been reversed by the fiscal crises that have wracked New Jersey since 2002. Over this period, MAC has lost nearly \$500,000 in annual operating grants, amounting to more than 10% of its peak budget. 2) After riding the great Victoriana craze of the '70s, '80s and '90s, attendance at MAC's signature historic sites and house tours has been hard hit by an evident decline in public enthusiasm for historic sites, in general, and the Victorian period, in particular. 3) The great real estate bubble of the '00s led to the loss of a substantial number of Cape May's Bed and Breakfast inns (long MAC's most ardent partners); and in the Wildwoods, the rampant demolition of vintage motels and diners led MAC to suspend its 15-year effort to interpret this important historic resource.

MAC's Board and staff have responded to these challenges with admirable fortitude and creativity. Under the successive presidencies of Dave McGonigle (2004-6), Ed Henry (2007) and Diane Hutchinson (2008-10), the MAC Board has provided just the steady "hand on the tiller" that the organization has needed to weather these choppy seas. Without succumbing to panic, the Board has

encouraged the kind of “trial and error” experimentation that has harnessed the creativity and talents of Board and staff members, alike. As a result, MAC has been able to launch at least six major initiatives that have significantly buffered it from adversity: 1) Drawing upon all of MAC’s cultural and educational programming, its involvement with the national Elderhostel (newly named Exploritas) program has grown into a major income source for the organization. By the end of the decade, offering 28 weeks of programming to older learners from around the country provided some 10% of MAC’s operating budget. 2) Building on the research of the “Ghost Writer,” Craig McManus, MAC’s ever-expanding roster of ghost tours and events has grown into a six-figure income source. 3) Halloween has emerged as a three-week extravaganza that now rivals the venerable Victorian Week for prominence in October. 4) Starting in 2005, MAC’s sponsorship of an annual Cape May Designer Show House has become one of its most popular attractions. 5) MAC has continually expanded its array of food, wine and beer offerings, in partnership with many area restaurants and wineries.

Perhaps MAC’s most ambitious undertaking of the ‘00s has been its efforts to interpret Cape May’s important World War II history. The centerpiece of this venture was the successful completion of MAC’s third major restoration project – the World War II Lookout Tower (Fire Control Tower No. 23) on Sunset Boulevard. After leasing the structure from the State Park Service and raising more than \$1.3 million in grant funding, a year of construction led to the opening of the tower to the public in the spring of 2009. A first year visitation of nearly 20,000 confirmed the wisdom of adding this new historical theme to MAC’s roster of attractions. A growing recognition of the central role that history plays in MAC’s missions was signaled by the members voting to change the name of the organization – to the Mid-Atlantic Center for the Arts and Humanities – in November 2009.

In its first 40 years, MAC has been a major force behind Cape May’s dramatic rebirth. As of 2010, with strong Board leadership, a membership base of nearly 4,000, an annual audience of 300,000 and a staff of 160 (25 full-time and 135 part-time employees, making MAC one of Cape May’s largest employers), MAC stands poised to help Cape May sustain its preservation success story for years to come.

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