

John Wanamaker's Summer Camp

From early August through Labor Day weekend, Philadelphians abandon the sweltering city and head for the beaches.

This tradition stretches back to the middle of the 19th century when developers connected Philadelphia to the coastline via rail. Hotel operators marketed the health benefits of escaping the congestion of the city to the region's growing middle class. As beach recreation grew in popularity, more resorts opened. Even church groups followed suit, purchasing plots of land near the shore to serve as retreats for their congregants.

One such plot of land attracted the attention of wealthy Philadelphia businessman John Wanamaker. In 1899, the department store mogul purchased 13 acres at Island Heights in New Jersey, a resort area founded by Methodists. He designated the property as the location of Camp Wanamaker, a summer camp for the boys and girls who worked at his stores.



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John Wanamaker with George W. Stull, Wanamaker's store General Superintendent

The camp was a spinoff of the John Wanamaker Commercial Institute, an educational initiative founded by Wanamaker that trained his employees in a variety of school subjects ranging from writing to arithmetic. According to Wanamaker, the idea for the institute emerged from his reflection on “the full and sacred obligations of employer and employee.”



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Camp attendees swimming

While providing young employees with the opportunity to see the ocean, Camp Wanamaker also served as an extension of Wanamaker's particular social and educational vision. Campers marched in unison, slept in military tents, were expected to keep their quarters spotless, trained in rifle exercises, and attended mandatory religious instruction. The camp was as much a bootcamp as it was a summer getaway.



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Camp attendees playing in a concert band

Wanamaker sympathized with his workers and contributed to their enrichment more than the average Gilded Age tycoon. His motivation for creating the institution and camp, however, was not purely public-spirited. Wanamaker was vehemently anti-union, and the military-style indoctrination of young employees helped preempt labor organizing by providing them with a

group identity and access to recreational activities.



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Competition trophies in front of one of the camp's military style tents

Links

[1] <https://digitallibrary.hsp.org/index.php/Detail/objects/12301>