

# GRETCHEN COYLE: LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT IN HISTORY

By Maria Scandale

Interested in history since she was a child, Gretchen F. Coyle's younger days were spent exploring Long Beach Island, and her adventures around the state and beyond have led to extensive research shared with others in books, magazine articles and museums.

She is honored to be the 2023 recipient of the Pauline S. Miller Lifetime Achievement Award for Ocean County History. "You have earned this honor by enriching the cultural fabric of Ocean County through your dedication to maritime history and the people of Ocean County," stated Timothy G. Hart, Division Director of the Ocean County Cultural & Heritage Commission.

"I was a child down here in the 1950s when you could leave on your bicycle or sneakbox and not have to come back until dark," she began. "It was an ideal way to spend summers, and I was able to explore some of the old buildings (I'm sure illegally) as a child," she said.

Old buildings held a key to the past. Gretchen can remember running through Beach Haven's Baldwin Hotel, footsteps echoing on floors that were sagging from age and use - "I just wanted to see the history." By the 1950s, the 1883-vintage Baldwin, spanning between Pearl and Marine Streets, had passed its heyday of accommodating up to 400 guests. It burned to the ground in 1960.

Reaching the vintage 1912 Ostendorf's Garage by Raleigh bicycle, she wandered inside around metal remnants on the floor where another generation's cars and boats had been stored and restored. "Now I know

where I got so many flat tires," she said of her bicycle's loyal partnership. "I knew it was historical. That started me on New Jersey history."

Over later days, she and her husband of 42 years, the late John Coyle, shared a passion to discover historic horizons by vehicle or boat when they took a day off as owners of the Sink 'R Swim shops complex in



Gretchen Coyle on the water.  
Photo Credit Gretchen Coyle.

Beach Haven. They delved into old ports and boat works, which proved valuable in their guidance as the Tuckerton Seaport historic attraction expanded.

"We became very familiar with the New Jersey towns; I love the off-the-beaten-path places," Gretchen said. "There are some fascinating towns around Ocean County and all around New Jersey. I think that's what I'm getting honored for."

## GRETCHEN COYLE CONTINUED...

Her curiosity about maritime history beyond Long Beach Island reached farther and farther, from up the “crick” in Tuckerton, as the locals called a creek, to co-authoring a book about the Morro Castle shipwreck, which led to visits to Cuba.

“When I was a kid a couple of us would sail up the crick to get ice cream and hope we had enough wind to get us back down the crick to Little Egg Harbor and get us home. Parents didn’t worry about their kids in those days; there were no reasons to worry. It made for a lot of independence to go and explore.” In fact, by sailboat, at the mercy of the wind, was the way that colonists from Tuckerton and Barnegat first arrived on Long Beach Island. Before them were Native Americans back and forth by watercraft, and, Gretchen added, “the mosquitos have been there longer than anybody.”

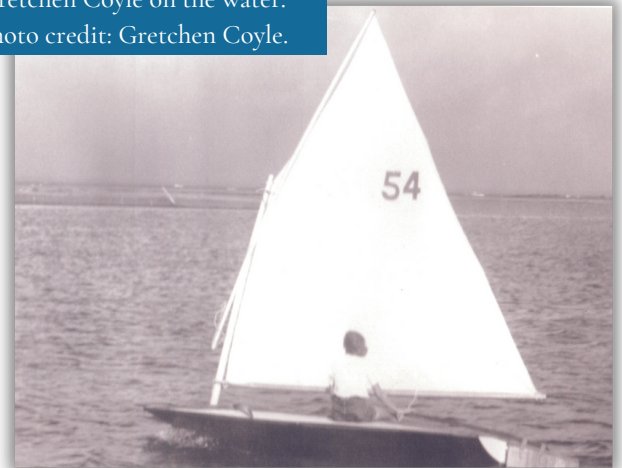
Gretchen Coyle's Sunday column in the Asbury Park Press tells true stories of shipwrecks, boat builders, hidden history of the Pine Barrens, and so much more. The graduate of The Baldwin School and Hollins University has co-authored four books, three with Deborah C. Whitcraft, who is a two-term Beach Haven mayor and President of the New Jersey Maritime Museum, where Gretchen volunteers. The co-authored books are: [Inferno at Sea: Stories of Death and Survival Aboard the Morro Castle](#); and two books for Arcadia Publishing's Images of America series: [Beach Haven](#) and [Tucker's Island](#).

Gretchen Coyle also wrote [100 Summers, the History of the Little Egg Harbor Yacht Club in Beach Haven](#), and a booklet on Beaton's Boatyard in Mantoloking with artist Katie Cutler, who was honored with this award several years ago.

All around Ocean County, the lure is strong into the lore of the past. Hiking with a friend is her recent close-up pace to follow historic pathways. Good signage and brochures are provided by Ocean County Parks and Recreation. From there, a person’s interest can lead deeper and deeper into history, and Gretchen enjoys inspiring others to take their own literary or experiential trek.

Walks past saltwater marshes progress inland to where old foundations or remains of an icehouse stand as proof of past habitation. “The more you walk, you get up into the freshwater area where there was once a dam there.” A wooded area in the current Freedom Fields County Park in Little Egg Harbor once had a car racetrack. Enos Pond in Forked River once had a hotel and freshwater springs; Gretchen’s hikes have led to the ruins. Cloverdale County Park is known for a past farm and cranberry bogs, in addition to its forever natural beauty.

Gretchen Coyle on the water.  
Photo credit: Gretchen Coyle.



“I enjoy what I do, talking to people about local history. It is fascinating, and people are interested in it. I truly believe when people come to a new place, they should learn about what happened in the past.”