

# Magnolia's *Glamorous Past*

BY JOHN THEO JR.



Magnolia in its glory days  
All photos courtesy of The Magnolia  
Historical Society

**B**y the late 1800s, Lexington Avenue in Magnolia was mentioned in the same breath as Fifth Avenue and Paris. Chic high-end stores such as Tiffany's, Jordan Marsh, Filenes and a myriad of other specialty shops lined the once famous road, which quickly became a top summer destination for the wealthy.

"The super wealthy would purchase their own boxcars and load their china and linens, along with maids and butlers, on the train and head to Magnolia," said Jim Cook, president of the Magnolia Historical Society.

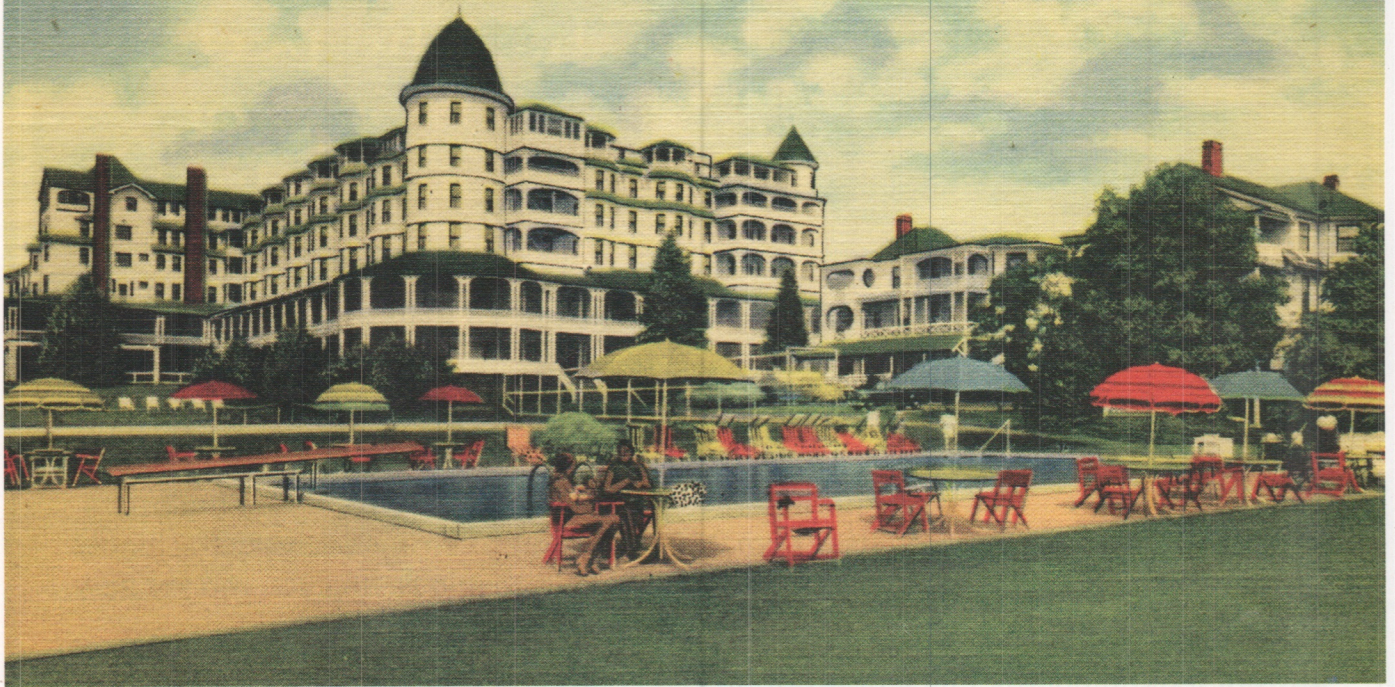
These wealthy vacationers would travel through a summer circuit, starting in the Hamptons, traveling up to Newport and Magnolia, before heading to areas like the White Mountains in New Hampshire.



Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the popular ocean-side village shops were complemented by beautiful hotels, such as the Hesperous, Oak Grove House and the New Magnolia Hotel. The pinnacle of these hotels was the massive Oceanside, which at one point could accommodate up to 3,000 guests per night. The grand hotel generated its own electricity, had a casino and a music ballroom, with big bands playing on a weekly basis.

Magnolia was not only a destination for shopping, sun and sand, it was also a hot spot for music. Conductors the likes of John Philip Sousa and his Marine Corp Band frequented the Oceanside Hotel, and the 400-room New Magnolia Hotel had its own in-house orchestra to entertain its guests.

THE OCEANSIDE HOTEL  
at Magnolia, Mass.  
on the North Shore of Massachusetts



But for nighttime recreation, The Casino Nightclub was the place to see and be seen during the summer. Owned by Big Band moguls Sammy Eisen and Ruby Newman ("Sing Baby Sing" 1936), well-known customers included Lucille Ball and actress/singer Frances Langford of "Yankee Doodle Dandy" fame. The Casino was even the site of an early Miss Massachusetts pageant.

Magnolia's fame grew and mansions sprung up around the village, as wealthy vacationers decided to own a permanent piece of this beautiful summer retreat.

By the late 1920s and '30s, much in America had changed. The First World War, the advent of the automobile and the Great Depression all contributed to the gradual decline of Magnolia's summer business. Stores left the seaside village and migrated to larger cities, as automobile-owning patrons were no longer confined to train routes and schedules.

Fran Hines, founder of the Magnolia Historical Society, confirms that by World War II, Magnolia's reign as a top American summer destination was over. On Dec. 11, 1958, on the coldest night of the year, the massive Oceanside Hotel burned to the ground. "This was the final nail in the coffin," Hines said.

"Magnolia has run a full life cycle. For the past 40 years, people have tried in vain to revitalize Magnolia, but today it just struggles along," Cook said.

Over the decades many of the grand hotels and mansions became victims of fire or being subdivided. Only shadows remain of this once glamorous summer village. Today the only vintage hotel left in Magnolia is The White House. Originally a privately owned mansion, it was converted into a hotel in 1940.

Driving down Lexington Avenue, you have to pay close attention to catch glimpses of architecture from this historic time that since has blended with modern, more cost-sensitive design. Grand pillars that once welcomed guests to the Oceanside now overdress an asphalt parking lot. There are no more tea gardens, Big Band concerts or high-end stores.

No longer are women in long-sleeve dresses carrying umbrellas as they stroll down the sidewalk. Today patrons walk the street sipping Dunkin' Donuts coffee dressed in casual attire. Many of the storefront shops are still occupied but several sit empty, having gone into a hibernation of sorts, simply awaiting a revival.

The question remains whether history will ever repeat itself in this sleepy jewel of Gloucester. ■