

**101 Lehigh Ave. – The Cape May Point Science Center; Bob Mullock, President
Year Built: 1889**



The prominent beachfront white clapboard and red shingle roofed historic structure at the corner of Lincoln and Lehigh Avenues, until most recently referred to as “St. Mary’s”, is unquestionably both the most iconic and largest structure of the Borough of Cape May Point. Originally constructed in 1889 as the Shoreham Hotel, the property has a surprisingly rich and diverse history.

Essentially a three-story “U”, the building forms a landscaped courtyard open to the Atlantic Ocean to the south. The land encompasses approximately 1.45 acres while the building itself provides a floor area of 38,000 sq. ft. having 150 rooms, with 1,200 feet of open porches and decks adding another 12,100 sq. ft.



2023 aerial photo
(courtesy of Flip Caruso)

In 1893 the hotel was purchased to become the “Home for Aged and Infirm Colored People.” Subsequently, the Sisters of Saint Joseph in Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, purchased the property for \$9,000 as a summer retreat for the Sisters in 1909. The building was left pretty much as it was, save for adding crosses to the roof and turning the ballroom into a chapel. During WWII the building functioned as a military headquarters from 1941 to 1945, providing daily meals to 600 soldiers engaged in trying to prevent offshore German submarines from sinking American merchant ships and naval vessels traveling from the Delaware River and along the Atlantic seaboard. After the war, the Sisters of St. Joseph resumed their use of the property and with a tenure of over 100 years altogether.

Specific Challenges Faced:

An historic building of this magnitude is expensive to maintain. This, coupled with a declining membership, led The Sisters of Saint Joseph to announce in 2016 their plans to sell the property. They expressed their conviction that the property should be kept from development, and furthermore, in accord with the ethos of the Order, return the property to nature – meaning that the existing building would be demolished in its entirety. They sought to partner with a nature/land preservation organization to meet their objectives.



Courtyard view

Unquestionably, with Cape May Point being an important point for the seasonal migration for birds of prey and monarch butterflies, the Sisters’ interest in the stewardship of nature was forward-thinking. However, many in the larger Cape May community questioned the demolition of an historic structure and with it, the inevitable loss of cultural legacy. The question was whether a solution could be found to demonstrate both environmental and cultural stewardship.

Specific Actions Taken:



“Pollinator Garden”



Exhibits on history and science

During his tenure as a Commissioner of Cape May Point, Bob Mullock established a relationship with the Sisters of St. Joseph – helping them on a variety of projects at St. Mary’s Retreat, such as adding a fire suppression system. Respecting the motivation behind the Sisters’ wishes, Bob was able to work with them to cultivate an expanded sense of stewardship.

Under Bob’s leadership, the Cape May Point Science Center was created in 2022, now housed in the historic building that has been saved from demolition. The chapel area has become home to the Environmental Museum – highlighting a diverse array of nationally significant science initiatives involving marine, insect, and avian species. The courtyard is being cultivated as a “pollinators garden”, supporting the Mayor’s Monarch pledge. Devoted to environmental protection, restoration, and conservation throughout the region, The Center advances its mission by providing unique opportunities and funding for advocacy, education, and research. The Center is actively cultivating widespread community support while engaging local youth and the leadership of top researchers and scientists -- all as part of its goal to become a world-class resource.

Concurrently, and in parallel, Bob is seeking to uncover and highlight the cultural importance of the building and site, including its part of freedom of escaping enslaved persons. Among other things, the building and site is the last remaining major historical building owned by William Still, the father of the Underground Railroad.

Unlike many historic preservation stories which chronical the fight against physical deterioration, the story of the saving of the “St. Mary’s Retreat” encompassed having the vision to find new opportunities for engagement with research institutions, environmentalists, historians, and the community at large – to achieve a living legacy.