



# PEERMONT

## SELF-GUIDED

### *walking tour*



With thanks to local  
historian Bruce Tell



In October of 1888, Philadelphia entrepreneur George Rummel and the Avalon Beach Improvement Co. (ABICO) purchased from Joseph Wells a 17 block area of Seven Mile Island, from 25<sup>th</sup> St. to 42<sup>nd</sup>. The tract excluded the vast beachfront, but included large areas of boggy meadowlands west of Third Ave. This section of Seven Mile Island became known as the ABICO tract.

Rummel's first priority was to build a hotel, which he named "The Peermont." The Railroad station which went up at the same time also became known as Peermont, and so the ABICO tract followed suit. Peermont was on the map.

Building lots were very quickly offered for sale, so many that those in the Avalon section, began to feel somewhat left behind. Lots were also sold & bought in the meadowlands between Third & Fourth Avenues, on the assumption that they would be drained, filled, graded and curbed. Unfortunately, 25<sup>th</sup> Street to Gravens Thoroughfare was the only roadway made passable. Rummel did, however, tear down the dunes, fill in and grade ponds and marsh areas along the beachfront section of the ABICO tract, in order to build a seawall, then a boardwalk.



33<sup>rd</sup> St. Peermont

215 39<sup>th</sup> Street, Avalon

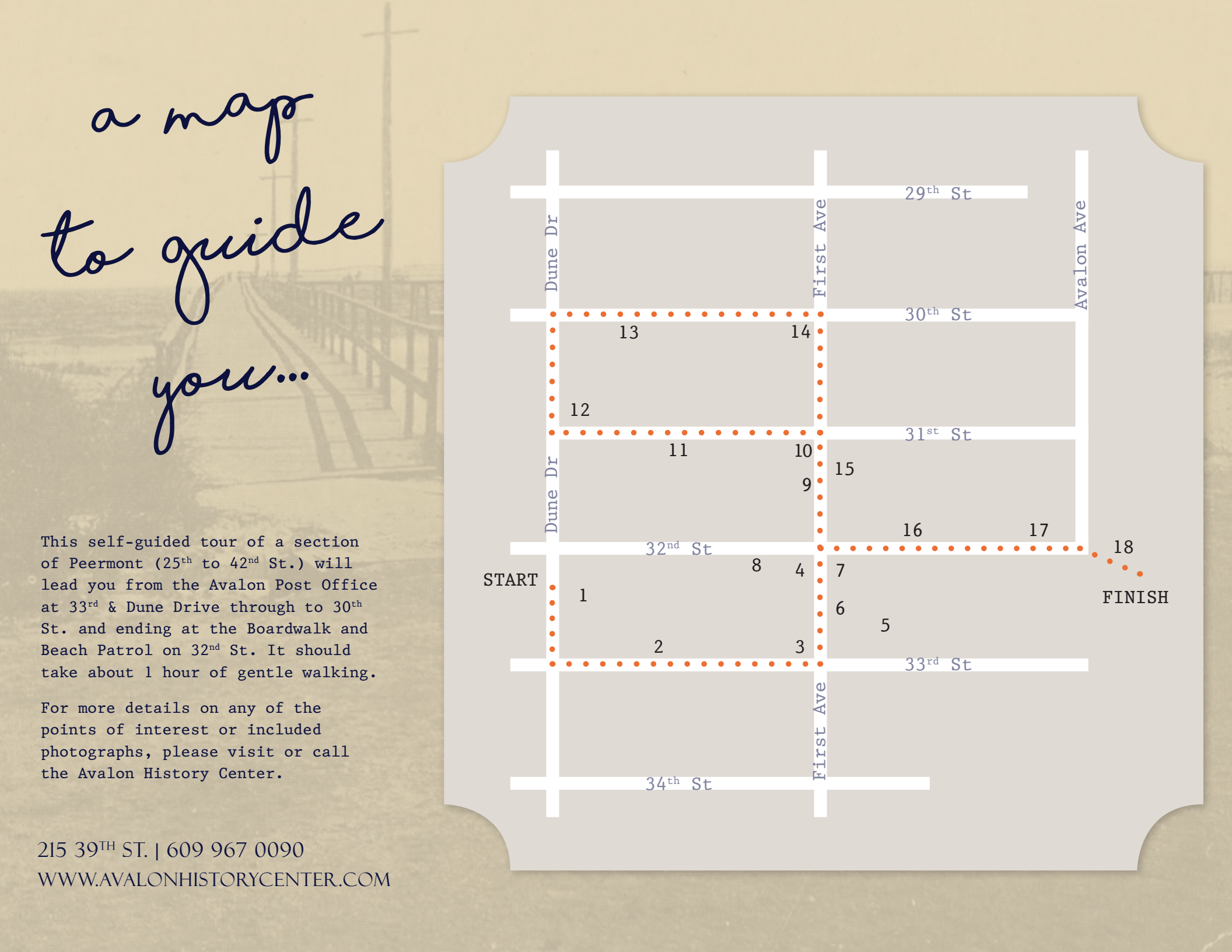
(609) 967-0090

[www.avalonhistorycenter.org](http://www.avalonhistorycenter.org)



[facebook.com/AvalonHistoryCenter](https://facebook.com/AvalonHistoryCenter)







Peermont RR station



1. Just behind today's Avalon PO, opened in 1959, is Railroad Ave, where The Peermont Train Station was built by Enos Williams in 1889, the same year and design as the Avalon passenger and freight RR Station on 8<sup>th</sup> St. The 8<sup>th</sup> St. station was moved to 11<sup>th</sup> St. in 1910, then in 1926, it and Peermont's 33<sup>rd</sup> St. station were replaced by the 21<sup>st</sup> St. RR station.

2. Walking east along 33<sup>rd</sup> St. #141: This early 1900's building has often been called "the cinder block house" due to its construction from cinder blocks from Pittsburg, PA, where the potential of mixing coal cinders and cement to make lightweight but strong, insulating building blocks was discovered.



3. Continuing east on 33<sup>rd</sup>, on the right, just past #128 with its 1920s original front, glance to your right and you will see a small red building, the remains of the 33<sup>rd</sup> St. RR Station.



It is behind #3308 First Ave. Built in the 1890s by John Berner and designed by Jules DesOndes, it was known as the Ridley house, originally beachfront on 32<sup>nd</sup> St. but moved due to tidal encroachment.



Ridley house

Reichert cottage



4. Across 33<sup>rd</sup> St. at #3208 First Ave is the Reichert Cottage, also built in the 1890s. John F. Reichert was a Director of ABICO (Avalon Beach Improvement Co.)

5. Peermont Hotel



Across First Avenue, on the block between 33<sup>rd</sup> & 34<sup>th</sup> streets, was where George Rummel built The Peermont Hotel. After just 3 months under construction & costing \$12,453, Avalon's second grand hotel opened in July 1889, several months after the Hotel Avalon. The Peermont rivaled the former by having twin turrets, a bathing pavilion and opening for business year round. Its success was short-lived, however, as it burned to the ground in February 1896.

During the Civil War, local Cape May resident Henry Sawyer, was wounded in the Battle of Brady Station in Virginia, captured and sent to the notorious Confederate Libby Prison in Richmond, VA. The year was 1863. While there he and another officer, Captain Flynn, were sentenced to death in retaliation for the earlier Union execution of two Confederate officers. He wrote a farewell letter to his wife Harriet, who went all the way to Washington to meet with President Lincoln, who wrote to Gen. Lee and informed him that if Col. Sawyer was executed, then so would Gen. Robert E. Lee's son, who was held captive by Union forces, be executed in retaliation. Negotiations continued for nine long months but Sawyer & Flynn were released in March of 1864. Flynn died several months later but Sawyer returned to battle until the end of the war.

June 1890 Round Table of Avalon newspaper ad



In 1867 Col. Sawyer became proprietor of the Ocean House, Cape May City and in 1876 built the Chalfonte Hotel which he managed and owned for several years. He was also a building contractor.

In May 1889, Sawyer's wife Harriet died leaving behind two children.

On July 16, 1889 the Peermont Hotel opened in Avalon's Peermont section, & perhaps needing a change of scenery, Col. Henry Sawyer went there to become manager. While there he met young Mary Emma McKissick who was working for her Mother, assisting in running the hotel. They were married in 1889 and returned to his farm in West Cape May.

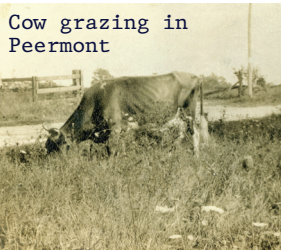


From 1876 until 1887 Col. Sawyer was a member of Cape May City Council and at one point the superintendent of the United States Life Saving Service for the coast of New Jersey and a member of the New Jersey State Sinking Fund Commission from 1888 to 1891. He died of a heart attack Oct. 16, 1893, aged 64.

He is buried in Cold Spring Presbyterian Cemetery, Cape May Co.



6. Heading North on First Ave. on the pavement outside of #3265, there used to be a hoofprint from one of later Mayor, Gilbert Smith's (Mayor from 1902-1925) cows, but the sidewalk has since been replaced.



7. #3249 on the right is The Belfry House, an award winning private home which in 1971 won recognition from the American Institute of Interior Designers. Built in 1892 as an interdenominational Union Church, it became the Peermont Methodist Episcopal Church in 1893, changing in early 1960s to First Methodist Episcopal Church of Avalon and then to First United Methodist Church of Avalon, before closing as a Church in 1965.



8. Just down West 32<sup>nd</sup> St. (left) ABICO President George Rummel had his own Peermont 'Cottage', which would later become the Luray Hotel, also serving as the Peermont Post Office for a time, as well as a sanatorium.



3188 First Ave. 1912



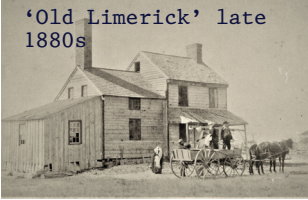
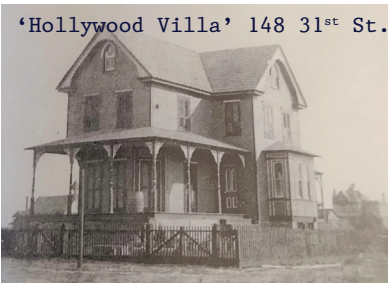
9. #3188 First Ave, one of Avalon's original houses built by John Berner in 1900.

3088 First Ave.



10. #3088 First Ave, a survivor from even earlier, built for Charles Wilkinson of ABICO in 1890.

11. Turning left down 31<sup>st</sup> St., #148 was built for ABICO officer Zacharia Shaw (connected to PA's Wanamaker family), in 1891. Shaw called it the 'Hollywood Villa.'



12. South corner of 31<sup>st</sup> & Dune (where the architects offices are now) is the site where 'Old Limerick' the Leaming Homestead was said to have been built in the 1780s by the sons of Aaron Leaming, 7 Mile Beach's first owner. It was one of the very first buildings on the island. George Rummel renovated it later as temporary lodging for visitors and investors to the island while the Peermont Hotel was under construction.



13. #166 30<sup>th</sup> St., built in early 1900s, in it's original condition.



14. On the corner of 30<sup>th</sup> and First is the 'Sealark.' Built as a classic Victorian home in 1901, it is believed to have first operated as a guest house in the 1940s, under the ownership of William Pancoast who named it The 'Sealark.' Today it is 7 Mile Island's last remaining B&B's.



15. Continuing south on First Ave, notice #s 3148 & 3149, perfect examples of Avalon's remaining 1950s & 1960s homes.

16. Turn left onto 32<sup>nd</sup> St. West, continue to #75, 'Sand Spur', originally owned by the Weintraub sisters. From the photo you can see how the Boardwalk running right along the front of the house!

Dr Sarah Louise was a renowned physician & first female doctor to work in the Pennsylvania prison system. Georgine, Helen & Sarah Louise Weintraub advocated the health benefits of Avalon's outdoor pursuits especially fishing. They were all also active in the women's suffrage movement of the day.



Edna Highfield & Highfield bathhouse 1915



Amos Highfield & dog (Weintraub house in background)

17. In the vicinity of today's #s 25-35, Amos & Emma Highfield opened up a Confectionery & Ice-Cream store in 1910, capitalizing on its prime beachfront location, they also added a bathhouse.



18. Across Avalon Ave is the Avalon Beach Patrol HQ, established on this site in 1972. The first building used by the Beach Patrol was a medical center on the beach between 21<sup>st</sup> & 22<sup>nd</sup> Streets. 4 protected beaches were maintained from here - 11<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup> & 32<sup>nd</sup> St. beaches.



A Central Guard Station was built on 21<sup>st</sup> St. in the 1930s, renovated in 1940 to house the growing squad of lifeguards maintaining 10 protected beaches by 1960.

1969 saw the Beach Patrol operating out of Marine Room above the movie theatre on the Pier before moving to today's site.



19. Alongside the Beach Patrol is today's Boardwalk. Peermont's Boardwalk of 1891 was the town's second, the north end beach level Boardwalk being built in 1888. It was built flush with the beach and originally ran in front of the Peermont Hotel on the 34<sup>th</sup> St. side. By 1903, it had succumbed to the forces of nature, & the north end boardwalk was also in disrepair. So, in 1913 the town's first elevated continuous boardwalk was built from Second Ave at the north end to 37<sup>th</sup> St. in Peermont - a full 2 miles long. In January 1915, a horrendous storm damaged the Boardwalk from Second Ave to 8<sup>th</sup> St and from 32<sup>nd</sup> to 37<sup>th</sup> Streets, plus some sections in between. Repairs were made in the mid-section but up until the early 1950s the Boardwalk ran just over one mile from 8<sup>th</sup> St. to 32<sup>nd</sup>, shortly thereafter being reduced to the Boardwalk we know today - running from 21<sup>st</sup> St. to 32<sup>nd</sup> St.