

**Beach Theater, Cape May City, Cape May Co., NJ**

**BASE FORM**

**Historic Sites #:**

**Property Name:** Beach Theater

**Street Address:** Street #: 711 Apartment #: \_\_\_\_\_  
(Low) (High) (Low) (High)

Prefix: \_\_\_\_\_ Street Name: Beach Suffix: Ave. Type: Road

**County(s):** Cape May **Zip Code:** 08204

**Municipality(s):** Cape May City **Block(s):** 1062

**Local Place Name(s):** West Cape May **Lot(s):** 7

**Ownership:** Private **USGS Quad(s)** Cape May

**Description:** Built in 1950 by movie theater and entertainment magnate William Hunt (1872-aft. 1950) and designed by noted theater architect, William H. Lee (1884-1971), the Beach Theater is notable for its well-preserved Neo-classical Revival exterior and for its design, which featured a centrally-located movie house flanked by rows of stores on each side in a foreshadowing of the strip malls that came to dot the American suburban landscape in the 1960s.

**Registration and Status Dates:** National Historic Landmark: \_\_\_\_\_ SHPO Opinion: \_\_\_\_\_  
National Register: \_\_\_\_\_ Local Designation: \_\_\_\_\_  
New Jersey Register: \_\_\_\_\_ Other Designation: \_\_\_\_\_  
Determination of Eligibility: \_\_\_\_\_ Other Designation Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Photograph, façade (south elevation), view northwest:**

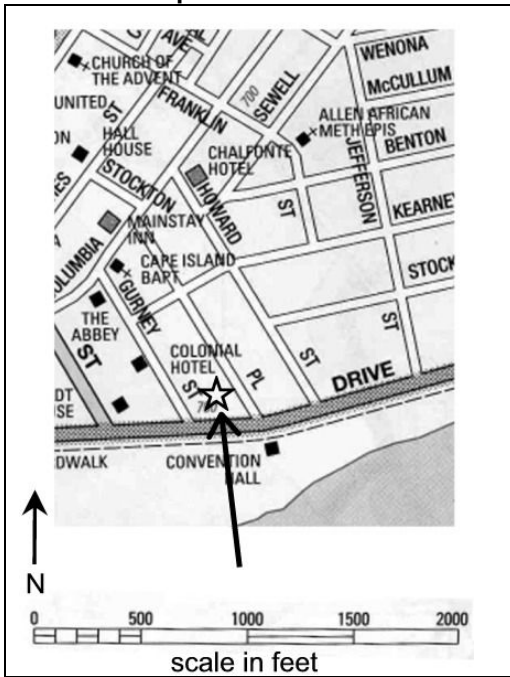


Survey Name: City of Cape May Historic District Date: December 15, 2008  
Surveyor: Joan Berkey – Architectural Historian  
Organization: \_\_\_\_\_

# BASE FORM

Historic Sites #:

Location Map:



Site Map:



**Bibliography/Sources:** (see footnotes on eligibility worksheet)

**Additional Information:**

**More Research Needed?**  Yes  No

**INTENSIVE LEVEL USE ONLY**

**Attachments Included:**  Building  Structure  Object  Bridge  
 Landscape  Industry

**Within Historic District?**  Yes  No

**Status:**  Key-Contributing  Contributing  Non-Contributing

**Associated Archaeological Site/Deposit?**  Yes  
(Known or potential Sites – if yes, please describe briefly)

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**Common Name:** Beach Theater

**Historic Name:** same

**Present Use:** Commercial Activity: shopping (retail)

**Historic Use:** Mass Assembly: Movies and Commercial Activity: shopping

**Construction Date:** 1950 **Source:** Star and Wave (Cape May City), 6-29-1950  
Mid- to late 20<sup>th</sup>

**Alteration Date(s):** century **Source:** Physical evidence

**Designer:** William H. Lee **Physical Condition:** excellent

**Builder:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Remaining Historic Fabric:** High

**Style:** Colonial Revival

**Form:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Stories:** 1

**Type:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Bays:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Roof Finish Materials:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Exterior Finish Materials** Brick and stucco

*Exterior Description and Integrity:* Approximately 180' wide, the theater complex fills the entire width of the city block between Stockton Place and Gurney Street. The stores and theater face south onto Beach Avenue, overlooking the beach and the 1907 ocean-front convention center. The entrance to the theater, marked by an 80' wide crescent-shaped porticoed opening in the middle of the building, is centrally placed amid rows of several 1-story stores located on each side. The theater hall with its domed roof is placed to the rear of the retail complex and has a rectangular footprint of approximately 60' wide by 130' deep along Stockton Place.

The exterior of the building retains many original features, including the semi-circular transom windows over the theater entrance doors, bas-relief swags, the original sign, the Chippendale-style balustrade, and the columned portico across the façade. The original shop window openings and rectangular transoms over the shop doorways appear to be intact, although the shop doors have been modernized. Exterior "Colonial lanterns" mentioned in the opening day newspaper accounts seem not to have survived. On the whole, the theater and shops still convey and embody the original design in which they were built and thus retain a high degree of integrity.

*Interior Description and Integrity:* The interior of the theater, barely lit when this researcher inspected it, seems to have fared less favorably. Original murals, one a photo mural depicting an 1880s Victorian beach scene and another a painted mural of the much-celebrated steamer *Republic* with President McKinley, Buffalo Bill, and John Wannamaker on its decks, were not visible but may be extant under later finishes. Newspaper articles describe custom-made carpets, "Tang red" water fountains, crystal chandeliers in the lobby, and pastel colors throughout the building, but none of these are extant. However, paneled walls with paneled wood wainscot in the lobby appear to be original and could easily be restored.

**Setting:**

The stores and theater face south onto Beach Avenue, overlooking the beach and the 1907 convention center. Neighboring buildings include a casual mix of retail, restaurant, hotel/motel, and residential uses, with structures that range in date from the mid- to late 1800s to the mid-1900s. The building is within the National Historic Landmark and National Register district.

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Survey Name: City of Cape May Historic District Date: December 15, 2008

Surveyor: Joan Berkey, architectural historian

Organization: \_\_\_\_\_

*Beach Theater, Cape May City, Cape May Co., NJ*

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Historic Sites #:



Left: ca. 1950 postcard showing the beach theater and its adjoining shops.

[cardcow.com]



Left: ca. 1960 photograph

[<http://www.flickr.com/photos/44124307623@N01/411507417/>]

*Beach Theater, Cape May City, Cape May Co., NJ*

**BASE FORM**

Historic Sites #:



Left: entrance and ticket office, March 2007



Left: detail of swag over the tick office, March 2007

[<http://www.beachtheater.org/>]

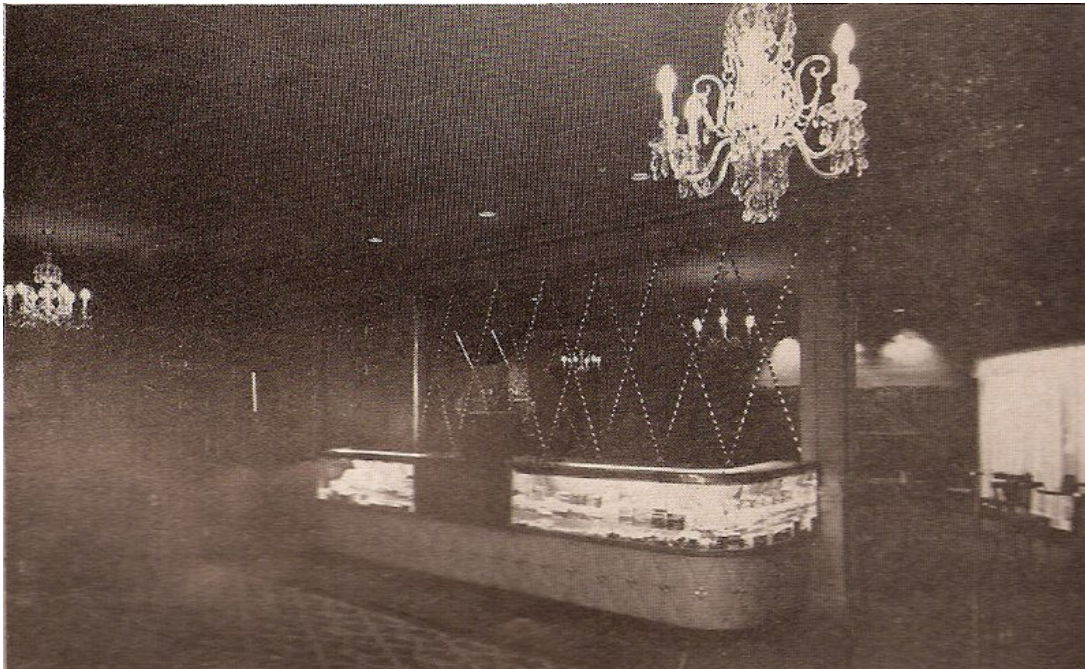
Right: detail of arch over theater entrance doors  
[<http://www.beachtheater.org/>]



*Beach Theater, Cape May City, Cape May Co., NJ*

**BASE FORM**

Historic Sites #:



Left: lobby and concession stand, ca. 1950

[<http://www.beachtheater.org/>]



Left: lobby and concession stand today (March 2007)

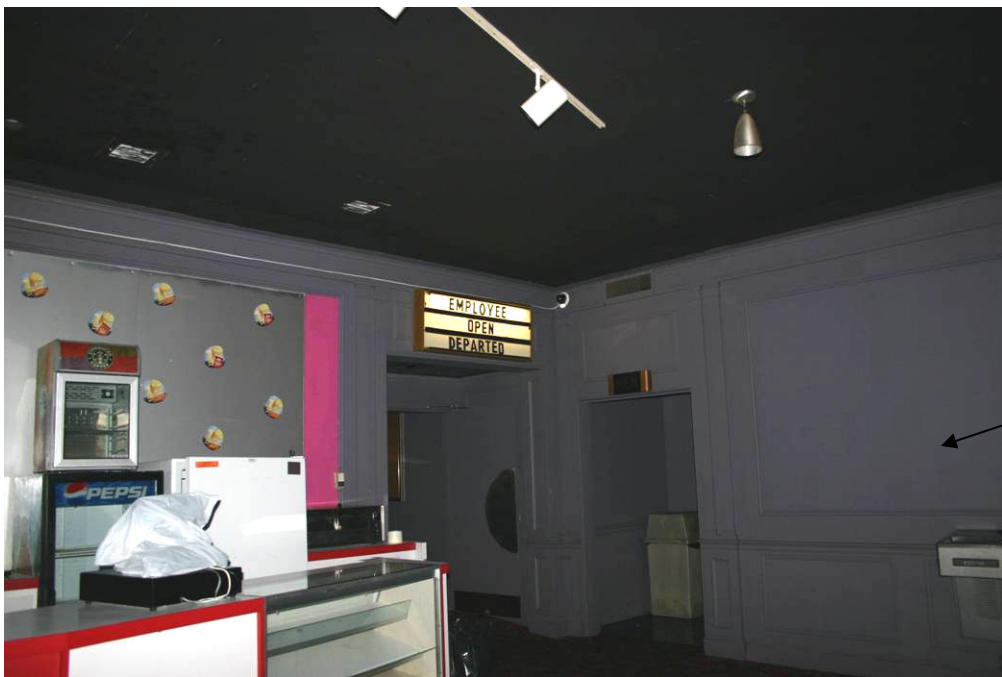
[<http://www.beachtheater.org/>]

## BASE FORM

Historic Sites #:



Left: another view of the lobby (March 2007)  
[<http://www.beachtheater.org/>]



Lobby showing the  
entrance to the seating,  
March 2007

Mural behind here?

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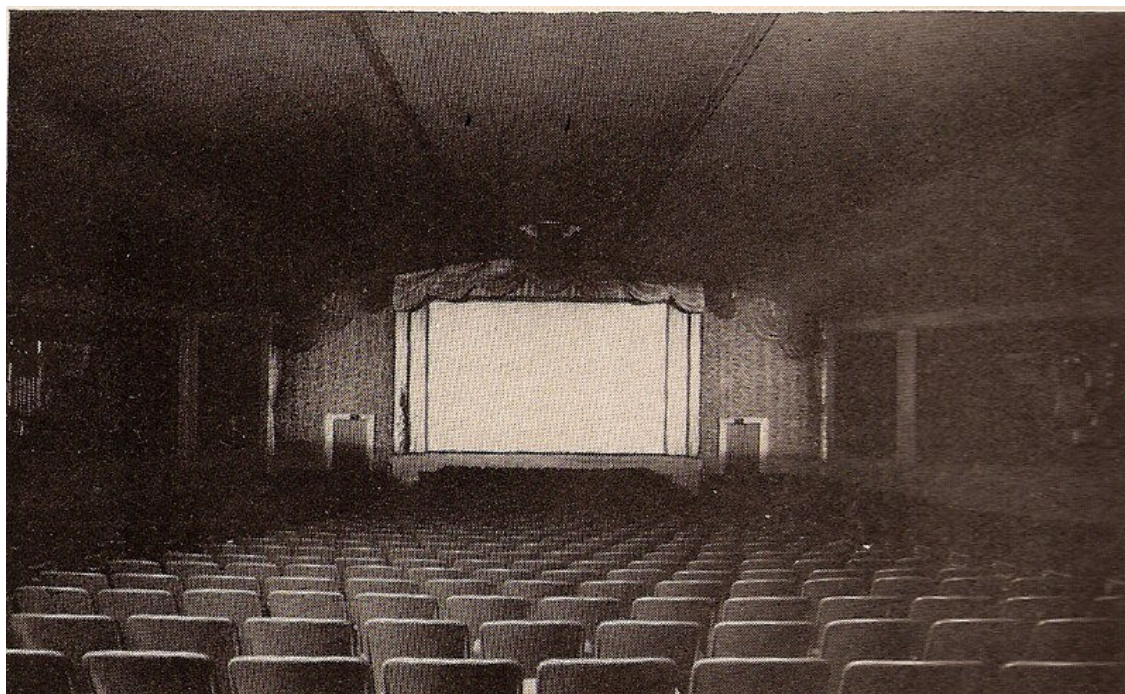
Historic Sites #:

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left: night time view of the façade, ca. 1960?

[<http://www.beachtheater.org/>]



Left, screen and seating, ca. 1960?

[<http://www.beachtheater.org/>]

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Historic Sites #:



Left: aerial view showing the theater and its surroundings

[local.live.com]

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***Historical Background:***

The Beach Theater was built in 1950 at a time when the City of Cape May was no longer considered the “queen of the seaside resorts.” The entire Jersey shore, with its great hotels, once active boardwalks, modest cottages, and elegant mansions, had gone out of fashion. The resort lifestyle of the mid- and late-19<sup>th</sup> century, which depended on trains to bring vacationers for week-long stays, had succumbed to tourists who arrived by automobile and departed the same day. Consequently, most shore towns were in decline by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Saddled with out-of-date hotels, little or no parking near the beaches, and vacant commercial centers, shore towns—Cape May included—struggled with ways to combat the deterioration of both the tourist trade and their building stock.

The troubled period from 1929 to 1949 was eventually relieved by a new optimism in modernity, economic expansion and family automobile touring. Affordable weekend excursions to New Jersey resorts picked up and encouraged new film venues like the Beach Theatre, strategically located on the landside of Beach Ave. across the way from the 1907 Convention Hall. The Washington St. commercial blocks had two older theatres that served the permanent residents of Cape May; the 1950 Beach Theatre was modern and catered more to vacationers and drew local residents away from the older venues. Television had an impact on movie house attendance, but just before the Korean War and for long after, Hollywood struck back with productions for wider screens and better sound systems and a new generation of color films including the briefly interesting 3D.<sup>1</sup>

Against this backdrop of visitor apathy and commercial decline, movie theater magnate, William C. Hunt, decided to invest in the Cape May’s future by building a state-of-the-art theater in 1950. Hunt chose the block-wide tract between Gurney and Stockton Place, formerly the site of the Victorian-era Stockton Hotel, with its choice position facing the ocean on the opposite side of Beach Avenue.

Hunt (1872-aft. 1950) was no stranger to the entertainment industry, having erected one of the country’s first nickelodeons in Camden in 1906. That same year, he introduced the moving picture theater to Cape May City and in 1910 incorporated the United Theaters Company of Holly Beach City to show motion pictures, vaudeville, and dramatic performances in Wildwood.<sup>2</sup>

Over the next 25 years, Hunt built an amusement empire that included seven theaters in Avalon, Wildwood, Court House and Cape May City, amusement piers in Cape May City and Wildwood, and the Starlight Ballroom in Wildwood. He built and operated other theaters in Salem, Moorestown, and Pitman, as well as in Delaware and Pennsylvania. Of these, few remain standing. Hunt also served as a state assemblyman from Cape May County and published three newspapers.<sup>3</sup>

Hunt apparently spared no expense when designing the theater. He used the latest in RCA sound and projection equipment, and the screen was made from “vinyl-plastic,” an innovation at the time which claimed to give more uniform vision and reflection of light. Hunt chose noted architect, W.H. Lee of Philadelphia, to design the building.

William H. Lee, known as a designer of both theatres and academic buildings, was born in Shamokin, PA, the son of Kimber and Clara (Creasy) Lee. He graduated from Shamokin High School in 1905 and attended Trinity College in Hartford, CT, for one year before transferring to the University of Pennsylvania, where he studied architecture until 1908 and then returned to Shamokin and worked in the Shamokin Lumber Co. from 1908 to

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh McCauley, email communication to Joan Berkey, 7-15-2007.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffery Dorwart, Cape May County, New Jersey: The Making of an American Resort Community (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), p. 218; “Opening of Theater Milestone in Saga of Hunt’s Industry,” *Star and Wave*, 6-29-1950, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> “Opening of Theater,” p. 16; Susan Tischler, “Will Beach Theater be Torn Down for Condos?,” *This is Cape May...an Internet Magazine*, March 2007 [as found at <http://www.capemay.com/Editorial/march07/beachtheatre.html>]

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1912. (According to his listing in the American Architects Directory of 1956, he also apprenticed with [Furness & Evans](#) in 1910.) In 1912 he established his own architectural firm in Shamokin and did not return to Philadelphia until 1919, when he opened architectural offices at 32 South 17th Street, according to a notice in the Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders Guide (2 July 1919). In the following year the PRERBG announced that the [Ritcher-Lee Co.](#) had been established as a combination of the firms of [A. A. Ritcher](#) and [H. I. Eiler](#) of Reading and William H. Lee of Philadelphia. The South 17th Street office is noted as the Philadelphia outpost, and the Reading, PA, office at Sixth and Court streets was also continued. Thereafter Lee's career flourished in Philadelphia, but he retained many of his ties to Shamokin and the surrounding towns.<sup>4</sup>

Immediately notable were the number of theatres which he designed, and for which he has received considerable attention. The Philadelphia Architects and Buildings website (<http://www.philadelphiabuildings.org>) lists 40 known theaters designed and built by Lee and cites dozens more throughout the greater Philadelphia area that are mentioned in the *Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builder's Guide*. The Cinema Treasures website ([www.cinematreasures.org](http://www.cinematreasures.org)) lists 50 theaters built by Lee of which 21 have been demolished, 11 are open, and the remainder are closed.

By 1927, Lee was also completing the first of several buildings for Temple University in North Philadelphia. Perhaps these well-publicized commissions led to other academic projects, for Lee was soon involved in work for Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, PA; and ultimately he became the chief architect for Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary and Eastern College, serving them from 1947 until his death. In 1964 Lee and younger architect [Walter Thaete](#) established [Lee & Thaete Associates](#), with whom Lee was working as a consultant when he died.

Lee joined the AIA in 1927 and later received emeritus status. He was also one of the founders of the Philadelphia Police Athletic League.<sup>5</sup>

Even in his earliest theater designs of the 1920s, Lee often combined a theater with an adjoining store(s) on the first floor and office space or apartments on the second floor. For example, his 2-story Lindy Theater, built in 1927-28 on Elmwood Avenue in Philadelphia, was built with four ground level stores, two each flanking the theater in the center. An entrance at one end of the building led to second floor apartments. In Cape May, with more space than a narrow downtown lot with which to work, Hunt and Lee placed the theater at the center of a row of one-story shops, a foreshadowing of the strip malls that would come to dominate the suburban commercial landscape beginning in the 1960s. Within the Beach Theater, Lee also incorporated a room which was called the Television Room where patrons could go in and experience the then-new form of media called television between screenings.<sup>6</sup>

Although newspaper articles announcing the theater's opening in September of 1950 lauded the building's design as combining the "advantages of modern architecture and design with the tradition of Cape May, which reached its greatest prominence around the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century," its design is more Colonial Revival than Victorian.<sup>7</sup> The theater's entrance doors are topped with semi-circular leaded glass transoms that are accented with flying bronzed eagles and flanked by bas-relief plaster (?) garlands, all of which appear to be original. Also colonial in inspiration is the Chippendale-style balustrade over the extended portico which shelters the storefronts and theater entrance. This combination of colonial-inspired motifs might have been garish in other applications or settings, but is executed here with flair and restrained elegance.

The 1950 Beach Theatre remains an operable remnant of the modern film era; its architectural style was at once appealing to tradition in some details and modernity in its broad, reaching and inviting shape.

<sup>4</sup> biography from *American Buildings and Architects* as found at:  
[http://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar\\_display.cfm/25624](http://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar_display.cfm/25624)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> "RCA Products used in new Theater Here," *Cape May Star and Wave*, 6-29-1950; Tischler.

<sup>7</sup> "Opening of Theater."

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**Significance:**

The Beach Theater appears to be individually eligible for listing in the State and National Registers of Historic Places under criterion A, probably in the dual categories of Entertainment/Recreation and Commerce, for its association with the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century entertainment and retail industry along the Jersey shore.

For its association with William C. Hunt, noted movie theater magnate, the building is likely individually eligible under criterion B.

As the work of noted architect William Lee, and because the building's well-preserved Colonial Revival exterior clearly reflects the original plan, massing, and design, it may thus also carry significance under criterion C/architecture.

However, final determination of significance under any or all of these criteria can only be made the New Jersey State Historic Preservation Office.

Further research would determine if the building's level of significance goes beyond its obvious local significance to a statewide or nationwide significance.

**Eligibility for New Jersey  
and National Registers:**

Yes

No

**National**

**Register Criteria:**

A

B

C

D

**Level of Significance**

Local

State?

National?

**Justification of Eligibility/Ineligibility:** The exterior of the building retains many original features, including the semi-circular transom windows over the theater entrance doors, bas-relief swags, the original sign, the Chippendale balustrade, and the columned portico across the façade. The original shop window openings and rectangular transoms over the shop doorways appear to be intact, although the shop doors have been modernized. Exterior "Colonial lanterns" mentioned in the opening day newspaper accounts seem not to have survived. On the whole, the theater and shops still convey and embody the original design in which they were built and thus retain a high degree of integrity.

**For Historic Districts Only:**

**Property Count:** Key Contributing: \_\_\_\_\_ Contributing: \_\_\_\_\_ Non Contributing: \_\_\_\_\_

**For Individual Properties Only:**

**List the completed attachments related to the property's significance:**

base form, building attachment, continuation sheets, eligibility worksheet

**Narrative Boundary Description:** Block 1062, lot 7 as it appears on the current tax map for City of Cape May.

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Organization: \_\_\_\_\_