

# FROM SAILOR TRAPS TO TOURIST TRAPS

## Mermaid-Themed Tourism Destinations in the United States of America

[Received February 8th 2021; accepted May 28th 2021 – 10.21463/shima.144]

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**ABSTRACT:** Beginning in the mid-19th Century, American boosters, business owners, and city planners fostered various mermaid-themed/named destinations. In doing so, these men and women contributed to the modern American tourism complex, which relied upon Americans' efforts to commodify the natural world for market purposes and, in turn, distinguish their locales among a burgeoning network of tourist destinations. This article details 19th Century attempts to mermaid brand particular locations and, subsequently, the development of mermaid themed tourist attractions in the 20th and early 21st centuries.

**KEYWORDS:** mermaid, tourism, 19th Century, 20th Century, natural world, drinking establishments, United States of America

### Introduction

From medieval church carvings, to early modern map drawings, 19th Century 'specimens', and modern coffeehouse namesakes, mermaids have long been ubiquitous in the West (Scribner, 2020: 7-27). Yet, as this article demonstrates, mermaid-themed and named tourist destinations embody a rather novel form of ubiquity in the modern United States of America. Beginning in the mid-19th Century, Americans deployed mermaid imagery and wordplay in several locations to assert their growing mastery over – and connection with – the natural world. Mermaids became manifestations of the evolution of the modern American tourism complex, which relied upon Americans' efforts to commodify the natural world for market purposes, and, in turn, distinguish their own locations among a growing web of American tourist destinations. Boosters, business owners, and city planners consequently engaged in a flurry of mermaid-branded promotion, selling experiences like nature walks, scenic vistas, exhibitions, and performances while promising more ways to travel to far-flung American locales than ever before (Mackintosh, 2019: 4).

Various historians have traced the development of the modern American tourism complex (Zuelow, 2016; Bloom and Souther, 2012). So too have they linked this complex to spectacle, class, nature, and capitalism (Smith, Macleod, Robertson, 2010; MacCannell, 2013; Macnaghten and Urry, 1998; Wilson, 1991). As historian Will Mackintosh recently noted:

*as an emerging national market economy began to reshape the availability of geographical knowledge, the material conditions of travel, and the number and variety of destinations that sought to profit from money... [Americans] began to transform the critical steps of travel...into commodities that could be produced in volume and sold. (2019: 4).*

Despite such advancements in our understanding of the rise of the tourism complex, however, “historians are only beginning to understand how early national markets began to commodify less tangible but still saleable goods,” such as environmental features and commercial experiences (ibid: 14). This is where mermaids come in.

Thus far, no scholar has linked mermaid-themed destinations to late-19th and 20th Century Americans’ efforts at drawing visitors to a burgeoning array of capitalistic tourist settings. By the late 19th Century, most Americans very probably did not believe in the existence of merpeople (Scribner, 2020: 152-171). But this did not mean that their fascination with the creatures had ended, especially in terms of myth, fantasy, and entertainment surrounding merpeople. A bevy of artists, performers, and capitalists were more than ready to embrace an opportunity to exploit the public’s lingering – if not growing – interest in mermaids, thus demonstrating yet another way in which “market-oriented Americans consumed *commodified* experiences as well as commodified goods” in the 19th and 20th centuries (Mackintosh, 2019: 6). In this case, they simply did so through more whimsical means than was the norm.

Perhaps the two most important moments in modern Americans’ fascination with mermaids – and, in turn, mermaids’ integration into the tourism complex – arrived with the publication of Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid* in English and the American showman, P.T. Barnum’s, ‘Feejee mermaid’ exhibition. Originally published in Andersen’s native Denmark in 1837, by the mid-to-late 19th Century this fable of a mermaid who gave up her voice to gain human form became commonplace in British and American news outlets (such as London’s *Reynolds’s* newspaper in June 1852 - Scribner, 2020: 164). Barnum’s supposed mermaid specimen only further ignited a flurry of interest regarding the lore (and supposed legitimacy of) mermaids. At least at first.

When P.T. Barnum released 10,000 pamphlets to the American public in 1842 which featured images of his mermaid and guaranteed its authenticity, he created a prime tourist draw at his New York City museum. Yet, scientists soon uncovered the little half-monkey, half-fish as a Japanese-made fraud, and the public became sceptical about such exhibits. By 1843, Barnum’s mermaid was little more than a farce, and general belief in the existence of mermaids dwindled (Scribner, 2020: 148-52). But the American public did not lose interest in mermaids. On the contrary, over the next fifty years, boosters and capitalists exploited the lore and whimsy which still surrounded mermaids to bring customers to a variety of locales.

That boosters and tourists alike associated mermaid-named locales with caves, pools, and other aquatic areas was no coincidence, for mermaids had long been associated with such spaces in Western art, poetry, and literature. Art was critical in this popularising process, with the American symbolist painter, Elihu Vedder, producing various well-received mermaid artworks in the United States upon his return from Europe in the late 1870s and 1880s. In 1879, Vedder completed ‘The Fisherman and the Mermaid’ (Figure 1), which depicts a brawny fisherman carrying a mermaid onto the shore. Despite her place on land, the mermaid – and the painting, for that matter – is still strongly directed toward the sea: the mermaid boasts shells for jewellery, while the blue ocean pops against the otherwise muted landscape. Three years later, Vedder created a stained-glass window design for the A.H. Barney residence in New York City which left little to the viewers’ imagination according to a mermaid’s true residence. The ‘Mermaid Window’ (Figure 2), portrays a rather forlorn mermaid gazing into a looking glass while lounging in her underwater cave. Fish dart around her, while serpentine strands of seaweed sway in her abode.

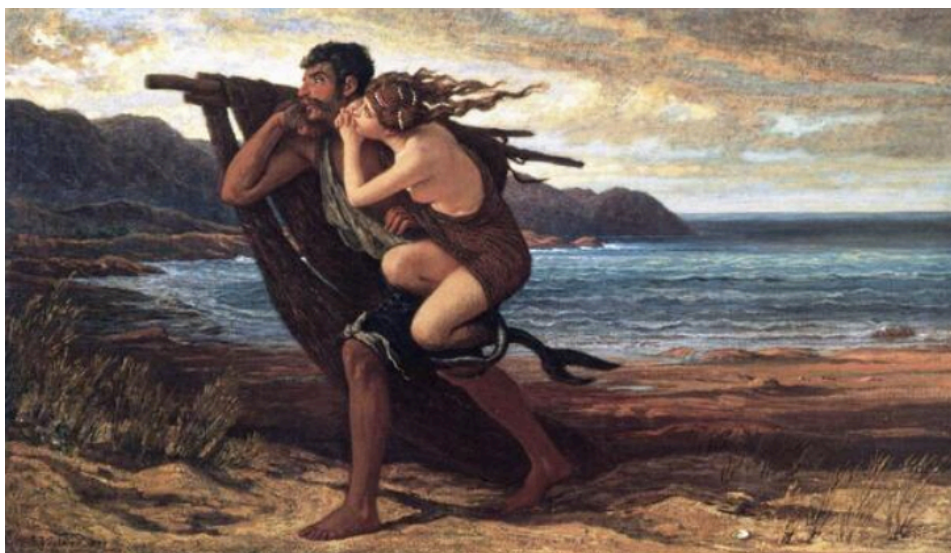


Figure 1- Elihu Vedder, 'The Fisherman and the Mermaid', (1879), oil on Canvas.



Figure 2 - Elihu Vedder, detail from 'Design for "The Mermaid Window"' (1882), colour crayon, brush and gold paint on off-white paper.

Both artworks were largely influenced by earlier mermaid poems and songs by artists such as the Englishman, Alfred Tennyson (c. 1830), and Massachusetts native, H.F. Gould (c. 1824). While Tennyson described a mermaid “singing alone, combing her hair,” (1907: 81) Gould’s opening stanza went into greater detail in demonstrating her attachment to place:

*Come, mariner, down in the deep with me,  
And hide thee under the wave;  
For I have a bed of coral for thee,  
And quiet and sound shall thy slumber be,  
In a cell of the mermaid’s cave* (Buckingham, 1824: 250)

As demonstrated by their wide distribution in newspapers, periodicals, and books, these works became popular in America by the late 19th Century, and their success was only bolstered by the growing relevance of Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid* and the media catastrophe of P.T. Barnum’s ‘Feejee mermaid’. Most importantly, most Americans possessed a generalised vision of what mermaids looked like, and where they resided. All revolved around wonder, beauty, and, as alluded to in Gould’s piece, a dash of danger (which was a lingering ode to the “sirens” of ancient and medieval times, who were known to use their beauty to drag men to watery deaths).

Thus, from the early 19th Century, American mermaid-branded tourist spots were attached to aquatic, “natural” spaces (i.e. areas *supposedly* untouched, or minimally altered by, humankind) (Cronon, 1996: 20). Owing to the above-mentioned popular connotations; it seemed that most of these attractions needed little more than a mermaid namesake to signal the wonder which awaited guests, for Americans already shared general ideas of where mermaids resided: idyllic, adjacent aquatic caves, pools, and rocks. Guidebooks, magazines, and pamphlets were key to these efforts. In August 1878, for instance, *Potter’s American Monthly* magazine published an illustrated article by J. Bonsall which covered “picturesque central New York,” namely Watkins Glen at the head of Seneca Lake. In flowery prose, Bonsall led readers through a beautiful landscape of cliffs, streams, and caverns, before arriving at “what is termed the Poet’s Dream, and a most beautiful work of Nature.” He continued, “before us is another rustic bridge, below which is Mermaid’s Pool, and looking up we have what has been appropriately termed, the Matchless Scene, which view seems to combine within itself all the manifold beauties of the Glen” (Bonsall, 1878: 86). That same year, six members of the Watkins Freethinkers’ Association visited the Mermaid’s Pool “that we might have time to view some of the natural beauties in the vicinity of Watkins previous to the holding of the [yearly] Convention” (*Proceedings*, 1878: 7-8).

By 1901, furthermore, Frank Taylor converted past descriptions of Watkins Glen into the tourism-focused *Guide Book of the Watkins Glen and Its Romantic Surroundings*. Although Taylor copied Bonsall’s prose word-for-word, his inclusion of a photograph of the Mermaid’s Pool (Figure 3) only added to his descriptions of “the extreme beauty of the water... the sunlight shimmering down through the foliage strikes into the pools, waking their crystal depths into life; while new phases of magical beauty surprise us at every step, like the ever-varying changes in a kaleidoscope” (1901: 20). Between 1912 and 1922, postcards circulated throughout America that featured an image of the famed Mermaid’s Pool (Figure 4). Because of such promotion, the Mermaid’s Pool (occasionally pluralised) at Watkins Glen became a regional – if not national – attraction by the mid-20th Century, especially after New York converted Watkins Glen into a state park in 1911 (Unattributed, 1912: 30). Critically, no mermaid statues or imagery accompanied the Mermaid’s Pool. Rather, guests



were expected to associate the name with their own long-held ideas of mermaids' picturesque homes, and thus accept the fantasy that accompanied their visit.

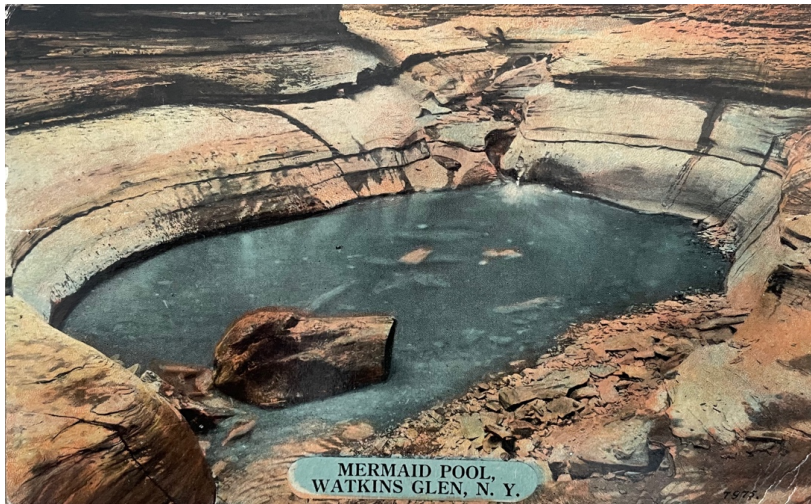


Figure 3 - The Mermaid's Pool (Taylor, 1901: 21)

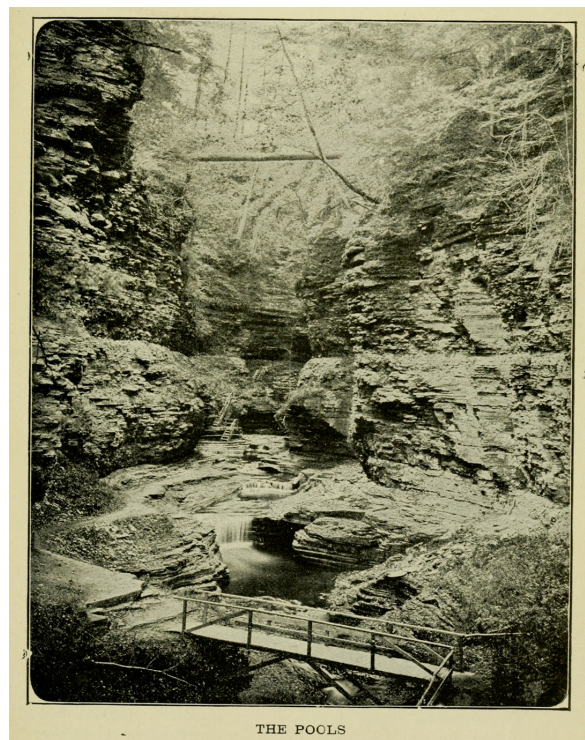


Figure 4 - Mermaid's Pools Post Card (c. 1912-1922)

The Mermaid's Pool at Watkin's Glen was not the only "natural" mermaid-named attraction which popped up in the Northeastern United States during the 19th Century. About six hundred miles to the northeast existed the "Mermaid's Cave" on Mount Desert Island, Maine. As with the Mermaid's Pool, local boosters began to promote the Mermaid's Cave in the late-19th Century as a key destination on Mount Desert Island. And, like the Mermaid's Pool, these boosters relied upon the reputation of mermaids rather than clear imagery to draw crowds. In 1873, the famous travel writer, Moses Foster Sweetser, published the first edition of *New England, A Handbook for Travellers*, in which he located Mermaid's Cave and described its environs. Positioned "S. of the (Schooner) Head," Mermaid's Cave was a key feature of Mount Desert Island, so "distinguished for its wild and romantic scenery of mountain, lake, and shore, and for its curious and poetic history." Sweetser was also sure to list nearby hotels, along with cost of lodging and food options (Sweetser, 1873: 303-304). And Sweetser was only one of the first of many visitors and tourism operators on Mount Desert Island. Today, the cave is part of the popular Acadia National Park.

Farther afield, in the 'old northwest' state of Ohio, a group of investors constructed the Hotel Victory at Stone's Cove on South Bass Island (Lake Erie) in 1878. But such a grand hotel was not enough. They needed to cultivate a series of natural attractions on this, "the largest summer hostelry in America," and they also chose a "Mermaid's Cave" (Thorndale, 1898: 94). By 1898, travel guide writers like Theresa Thorndale embraced the opportunity to profit from the grand hotel ("a ramble through the big hotel is almost equal to that taken through a small town") and its twenty-one-acre park ("the greatest charm of the park is its freedom, for the shore upon which it opens is as picturesque as ever conspired to woo the lover of Nature"). Yet, beyond general platitudes, boosters and guidebook writers needed *specific* points of interest, thus the creation of "Mermaid's Cave." Not only did Thorndale describe the cave as a rustic-but-romantic spot, she also provided readers with a photograph of the cave (Thorndale, 1898: 94, 96, 97-98). That same year, the Hotel Victory released a grand brochure in which they listed the Mermaid's Cave among "Points of Interest, and Attractions." They also informed potential guests that "a modern and up-to-date electric railroad, one-half miles in length" could take them from the hotel to the caves in less than five minutes: "Where else in the world can such a luxury be found? An electric car line on an island in midlake" (Hotel Victory brochure, 1898: n.p.).

Other business owners in America also relied upon mermaid branding to bring in customers to different types of establishment. Proprietors of British drinking establishments, for example, had long utilised mermaid symbology to draw in customers (see Scribner, 2021, elsewhere issue). Beginning as early as the 17th Century, North American tavern keepers followed their British brethren's naming habits. By the early 19th Century, as colonial-era taverns gave way to "modern" American hotels, saloons, and music venues, these same business owners continued the tradition of mermaid nomenclature (Sandoval-Straus, 2008: 13-136). In 1830, the retired New England ship captain, Lyman Adams, constructed his "Mermaid House Hotel" in Lebanon, Illinois (Figure 3). Though Adams could not have gotten much farther from the ocean than in Lebanon, the old tar nevertheless named his establishment for the mermaids he had allegedly seen at sea. Such a name automatically distinguished Adams, and his hotel, as a unique maritime-themed establishment in an otherwise land-locked locale. It also probably came with some tongue-in-cheek humour, as naming a hotel after a sea-going, mythical creature was hardly the 'norm' in the area. No matter – Adams' efforts were successful. Visitors lauded the hotel for its cleanliness, and Charles Dickens' stay in 1842 only heightened its reputation. In 1975 the

hotel earned a place on America's National Register of Historic Places (Dixon, 1901: 292-293).



Figure 5 - Mermaid House Hotel, Lebanon, Illinois (Library of Congress, Catalogue # HABS ILL,82-LEBA,2-)

Coastal locations also developed and exploited associations with mermaids to lend glamour to their establishments and services. Citizens of Avalon on Catalina Island (forty-seven miles off the coast of southern California) used a combination of 'natural' and capitalistic tourism to brand their island township with mermaid imagery. Beginning in the early 20th Century, Avalon's business owners engaged in a concerted effort to produce mermaid iconography. As historian Philip Hayward (2019) has detailed, the island's first glass-bottom boat, used to show tourists the beautiful local reefscape, was named "The Mermaid"; the island's largest and most well-known building, the Casino (c. 1929), is adorned with a striking mermaid mural; and various mermaid-themed movies were filmed in and around Catalina Island in the 1940s through the 1960s (not coincidentally, Catalina Island's first Film Festival, c. 1979, used a mermaid as its logo). Visitors to Avalon are still introduced to a bevy of mermaid-themed imagery, only further extending the siren's song throughout this Pacific Island.

As the United States extended its borders beyond the contiguous states into 'exotic' locales like Hawai'i (annexed in 1898, made a territory in 1900, and a state in 1959), tourists followed. The tourism boom to Hawai'i especially exploded after World War II (1939-1945). For one, American G.I.'s who spent time on the islands during their 'layover' between the states and the Pacific Theater grew familiar with the beauty of Hawai'i (Bailey and Farber, 1992). Combine this with the postwar economic boom, an interest in foreign travel after a multi-year world war, widespread marketing campaigns, military development, and more affordable air travel, and the Hawaiian Islands became one of Americans' top travel destinations in the 1950s-1970s (Gonzalez, 2013).

Waikiki Beach on O'ahu Island was perhaps the most famous tourism spot in Hawai'i after World War II, with hundreds of airplanes and cruise liners circulating yearly, and grand hotels popping up on its turquoise shores. As the end of the decade drew near, boosters

and hotel owners developed new beaches into attractions. Nānākuli Beach, on the southwest side of the island, was one of these beaches and, in predictable fashion, a section of the beach was soon known as the Mermaid Cave and Tunnels. Although potentially treacherous in its approach, the series of caves – replete with crystal clear water, coral reefs, and limestone cut-outs – is still a popular destination on O‘ahu. One Hawai‘i tourism website recently described it as a “potentially dangerous but beautiful water cave near Nanakuli Beach park” (Mermaid Cave/Tunnels, 2021). With millions of children visiting Hawai‘i yearly, the mermaid connotation can only help the cave’s enduring appeal.

In the same island-themed vein, two U.S. Virgin Islands – St. John and St. Thomas – also boast natural destinations that are named Mermaid’s Chair. In the case of St. John, visitors can take a rather difficult hike down to a pristine bay, surrounded by towering cliffs, crystal-blue water, white sand, and green foliage. Yet the area gets its name from a rock formation about fifty yards into the ocean, which harkens back to classical settings where mermaids lounge. St. Thomas’s “Mermaid’s Chair,” meanwhile, identifies a park/trail on the western portion of the island, culminating in a thin strip of double-sided beach which separates the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea (Wade, 2016). Though it is not clear *when* the beaches got their names, it is no stretch of the imagination to link this development to America’s purchase of the islands in the early-20th Century and the concurrent tourism boom after World War II, when wealthy capitalists such as Laurance Rockefeller bought massive amounts of land on the islands where they built grand resorts (Cohen, 2010: 45).

Yet mermaid-branded tourism locales were hardly limited to the natural world. In the mid-late 20th Century, in fact, America emerged as the epicentre of some of the world’s most famous mermaid-themed attractions: Weeki Wachee Springs Theatre in Florida and Coney Island Mermaid Parade, in New York. Located in what is now a state park, replete with freshwater cave systems and wildlife preserves, Weeki Wachee’s popularity originated because of mermaids. In 1947, the former Hollywood stuntman, Newt Perry, opened the Weeki Wachee theatre. A giant water tank where “mermaid” actresses performed underwater shows, the venue only gained more prominence when the producers of the Hollywood film, *Mr. Peabody and the Mermaid* (1948) filmed underwater scenes in Weeki Wachee’s tank. In 1959, the American Broadcast Company purchased the aquarium and broadened its size so that it could seat five hundred patrons. The theatre drew thousands of visitors over the next decade, hitting its peak popularity before Walt Disney built Disney World in Orlando in 1971 (in an interesting twist, Disney Land, in Anaheim, CA had already employed “live mermaids” as part of a submarine ride during the summers of 1959, 1965, and 1967) (Coffey, 2020). Though funding issues forced the owners to donate Weeki Wachee Theatre to the Weeki Wachee state park in the early 2000s, the theatre continues to thrive, offering spectators various mermaid shows every week, where women in mermaid tails perform underwater feats, in addition to acting out the beloved story of ‘The Little Mermaid’ (Scribner, 2020: 194-195; Kokai, 2017: 1-17; 54-95; *New York Times*, July 5, 2013).

From ‘scandalous’ swimsuits to seedy sideshows, carnivals to casinos, Coney Island (Brooklyn, New York) has a long history of transgressing social and cultural norms. The annual Mermaid Parade continues this tradition. First held in 1983 by the “consciously counter-cultural and inclusivist” non-profit community arts organisation Coney Island USA (Hayward and Milner, 2018: 212, the Mermaid Parade has blossomed into a massive annual event. Thousands of participants and onlookers convene on Coney Island’s streets every June in lavish mermaid and mermen costumes to celebrate sexuality, exhibitionism,



queerness, and supposedly-“freakish” displays of gender and body (ibid: 212, 215). In many ways, then, the Coney Island Parade allows visitors to transgress the more binary, traditional ideas of gender and self through their self-fashioning as mermaids, which reflects long-held notions of hybridity surrounding merpeople. Yet, the parade also offers more traditional representations, as an elected “King Neptune” and “Queen Mermaid” preside over the festivities, offering the colourful, nudity-soaked parade a further air of pomp and circumstance.

Emphasising the manner in which mermaids are enduring popular as tourist attractions, the city of Norfolk (Virginia) launched a series of mermaid themed tourism promotions and destination branding in 1999, which has continued to the present (and merits further research) (City of Norfolk, 2017). The most recent addition to the series of mermaid-themed draws discussed above is the International Mermaid Museum that opened in Washington State (on the coast between Aberdeen and Westport) in April 2021. While it is too soon to assess its effectiveness as a draw to the region, its theme and the collaboration of a group locals with a shared interest in mermaids reflects the continuing national preoccupation with the folkloric entity.

## Conclusion

From Hawai’i to New York State, caves literal and figurative, pools and poems, parades and plays, mermaid place names proved lucrative draws in Americans’ efforts at crafting a modern tourism complex. Boosters and businessowners well understood the importance of crafting their locales into ‘consumable’ spaces that might foster increased foot traffic and, in turn, economic gain. Because mermaids were, at once, ubiquitous-and-fantastical, with ancient roots and modern mysticism, these creatures served as useful brands for various spaces and places. This article has utilised mermaid-themed destinations to investigate the birth and evolution of the modern American tourism complex, which entailed Americans’ commodification of the natural world for capitalist gains. Mermaids are the perfect icons for such endeavours. Not only has their mystical reach into space and time made them ubiquitous symbols of fantasy and wonder, but their very hybrid nature is also convenient for diverse peoples hoping to render various meanings from their popular form. In the case of 19th and early 20th Century Americans, mermaids served as ideal icons of American identity and place in a burgeoning, capitalistic tourism complex. But this was only the beginning. Modern Americans are arguably more obsessed with mermaids than any of their predecessors. From amusement park rides to children’s toys to blockbuster films to swimming classes, mermaid imagery and branding is only gaining steam in America. Much of this popularity is linked to those 19th Century boosters, authors, artists, and business owners who realised the usefulness of mermaids – at least in the abstract – to sell America to eager customers.

## Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Simon Young for assistance in finding initial sources for mermaid name places, and Philip Hayward and the anonymous readers for improving the piece in myriad ways.

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