

## Coney Island

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During the latter half of the nineteenth century the United States developed more and larger industries. These urban centers, the characteristic feature of industrial civilization, created a dynamic economic culture, but also produced a sense of social malaise, created slums, and promoted despair among its citizenry. In response to the momentous gravity of these structural changes in America, entertainment centers, such as Coney Island, were created. They sought to help the urban residents temporarily escape the day's chaos and tension. Before Disneyland, Coney Island was undisputedly our nation's first successful entertainment resort and its legacy has left a lasting influence on today's multibillion dollar amusement industries.

Coney Island, one of America's first exemplary theme parks, is located on the Atlantic shore of Brooklyn, New York's largest borough. Several summer traditions in America were born there, including the hot-dog, outdoor amusement parks, roller coasters, carnivals, Ferris wheel rides, bumper cars, vaudeville theaters, storefront nickelodeons, bathing facilities, circuses, and burlesque. In addition to the amusement park, there were several hotels, most notably the Elephant Colossus. There were also racetracks, beer gardens, gambling dens, concert saloons, and dance halls. These were designed to attract a variety of visitors. Hence, it became the people's playground. As America's renowned aviator, Charles Lindbergh noted, "The only thing about America that interests me is Coney Island."<sup>1</sup> Even a chorus at Coney Island announced that: "Uncle Sam is once again a boy at play"<sup>2</sup>, meaning people should become a child again and relearn "how to play."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Immerso, *Coney Island: The People's Playground* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 3-6; John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Millions: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), 4-7; Coney Island (Accessed 1 December 2004); available from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coney\\_Island](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coney_Island).

<sup>2</sup> William Woody Register, *The Kid of Coney Island: Fred Thompson and the Rise of American Amusements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Coney Island has always had an element of entertainment. The name "Coney Island" derives from the obsolete English word "coney", meaning rabbit, dating back to the 1640s, when rabbit hunting was routine. The Dutch who settled there, renamed the region New Amsterdam and named the area of Coney Island, *Conye Eylant*, after the "conies" that lived along the dunes. After the Civil War, the area was converted to a resort, which eliminated open space for rabbits.<sup>4</sup>

During the 1870s, there were signs Coney Island was rapidly becoming a unique, out-of-this world experience. Activities there, such as donkey rides, fireworks, and hot-air balloons were not experienced elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> As one observer noted, "Coney Island seemed to be a World's Fair in continuous operation."<sup>6</sup>

As Coney Island's attractiveness was noticed during the 19th Century's last 25 years, its marketing was diversified. This was financed by railroad men and entrepreneurs who desired to capitalize on the interests of New Yorkers. In an attempt to satisfy each social class's entertainment needs, it was split into four separate zones from east to west. The wealthy selected Manhattan Beach, the middle class chose Brighton Beach, the working/poor classes were granted West Brighton, and the underclass was left with Norton Point. Entrepreneur Austin Corbin yearned for an elegant resort for a diversity of amusements at or near New York and at the same time wanted to rival Newport, Rhode Island for the upper class market. Brighton Beach, the creation of Brooklyn's merchants and entrepreneurs, was patronized by the middle class because of the variety of shows there. West Brighton was popular with the working class daily excursionists because of theater performances. Norton Point, located at the West end of Coney Island held its seedy reputation for the underclass since the incidence of lawlessness and prostitution was prevalent. Because of the diversity of tastes at Coney Island, it became "an air of a perpetual feast."<sup>7</sup> This ushered in an era of leisure time in addition to cheap amusements.<sup>8</sup>

From about 1880 to 1950, Coney Island was the number one tourist attraction in America, drawing several million visitors a year,

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<sup>4</sup> Immerso, *Coney Island*, 4-6; 12.

<sup>5</sup> Jon Sterngass, *First Resorts: Pursuing Pleasure at Saratoga Springs, Newport & Coney Island* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 75.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Immerso, *Coney Island*, 3-6; 30-31.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

until it was finally eclipsed in popularity by Disneyland. Because of its popularity, many people called it “The People’s Watering Place.”<sup>9</sup> During its peak in popularity, the park boasted three major parks: Luna Park, Steeplechase Park, and Dreamland, until destructive fires and legal issues hastened their demise.<sup>10</sup>

In 1895, Captain Paul Boyton chose Coney Island as the site for what is now considered to be the first true amusement park. Boyton, who had a reputation globally for performing publicity stunts, opened his large water circus, Sea Lion Park, directly behind the Elephant Hotel at Coney Island. Two years later, George Tilyou, who created Steeplechase Park, featured a Ferris wheel decorated with incandescent lights as well as a horseracing center. In 1903, Frederic Thompson and Elmer Dundy opened Luna Park, with its astral attraction, a ride called *Trip to the Moon*. Dreamland followed the following year, culminating with a 375-foot central tower as well as white faux Beaux Arts buildings. These amusement park owners invested heavily in land, buildings, and machinery, giving them unparalleled control over the content and type of leisure within the park.<sup>11</sup> As a result, Coney Island managed to draw an estimated twenty million people during the summer of 1909, as well as more revenue than Disneyland drew during its opening in 1955.<sup>12</sup> At Coney Island, with the admission set at ten cents, millions of dollars were made each summer, with the money going to each partner and investors.<sup>13</sup>

Another man who was undeniably responsible for the growth of Coney Island was John Y. McKane, an elected town commissioner of nearby Gravesend, New York. He began his career as Coney Island politician from 1869-1893. Under McKane’s watch, Coney Island became a vanguard of American seaside resorts. He initiated this possibility by preventing the privatization of the beach by sponsoring leaseholders that generally subdivided the land. When visitors came to Coney Island, they found a variety of amusements crowding the island, each owned as a private concession. Consequently, it produced concentrated competition, low prices, and new forms of entertainment.<sup>14</sup> In addition, McKane’s town

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<sup>9</sup> Immerso, *Coney Island*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 229-30.

<sup>12</sup> Immerso, *Coney Island*, 7-8.

<sup>13</sup> Register, *The Kid of Coney Island*, 93.

<sup>14</sup> Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 235-38.

government provided basic services such as water and electricity to residents. During the 1870s, McKane instigated an updated sewage system that separated Coney Island from the Atlantic Ocean and Sheepshead Bay. McKane exacted towards pickpockets and counterfeiters whom he felt ruined business profits by having one of his bodyguards go after the alleged perpetrators and have them legally expelled from the area. On the flip side however, he tolerated prostitution, claiming: “houses of prostitution are a necessity on Coney Island.... I do not think it is my duty altogether to stop any people enjoying themselves that come down there in the summer season.”<sup>15</sup> After he was defeated in 1893 in a run for reelection, he paved the way for other vices, such as rowdiness and prostitution, to exist despite efforts from the local police and politicians to clean up the area.<sup>16</sup>

One reason Coney Island was so popular was its construction. It was constructed to attract different cultures in order to bring together social change, entertainment, and order, meaning that because there was an abundance of activities for everyone there remained little possibility of violence. Existing institutions, such as libraries, museums, art galleries, symphonies, etc., failed to attract diverse groups of visitors due to the fact that many new immigrant groups, as well as the urban working class, continued to hold on to their own culture and chose not to frequent them. Additionally, many of the immigrants and working class thought these institutions did not appeal to their desires.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, what made Coney Island significant was that audience and activity frequently took place simultaneously. Coney Island was the first amusement park to inspire heterogeneous groups to discover new things. It pioneered a new cultural institution challenging the notion of public conduct and social order, meaning nearly everyone involved tested and sometimes violated societal norms by interacting with individuals in a different social class. Furthermore, it shed light on the cultural transition of America and the struggle for the moral, social, and aesthetic changes that transpired in the United States at the turn of the century. This was when Coney Island became not only a fun place, but also a place of major changes in American manners and morals.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 254-57.

<sup>17</sup> Kasson, *Amusing the Millions*, 4-7.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

Coney Island became a place where all social classes could intermingle. It mocked the established order of social roles and values by the creation of a carnival atmosphere. During seasonal feasts and festivals, members of each social community felt free to express their emotions, which they deemed appropriate. In effect, it became a moral holiday for the attendees who entered its gates.<sup>19</sup> Coney Island's influence of an alternative environment expressing a condemnation of urban conditions and culture spread to the 1893 Columbian Exposition Fair in Chicago. The Columbian Exposition provided architects and artists the opportunity to redecorate the landscape absent from the urban environment. The Fair aimed to showcase what an industrial city would look like in the near future and seek to create to have America join in 'a new cultural Renaissance.'<sup>20</sup> It also represented groups of different classes and races uniting for a common cause. This provided a case for creativity and an escape from societal norms. Many visitors were delighted by the fair's superlative display. As one put it, the fair "revealed to the people, possibilities of social beauty, utility, and harmony of which they had not been able to dream."<sup>21</sup> Many visitors, however, observed that "the strenuous cultural demands of the fair could prove oppressive."<sup>22</sup> According to Frederick Law Olmsted, many of the visitors had a tired, uninterested look similar to the city streets and attempted to counteract this experience with large, more natural parks.<sup>23</sup>

Coney Island had influence on other places such as New York City's Central Park, Newport, Rhode Island and Saratoga, New York. Central Park provided areas where people could congregate. The emphasis was the arrangement of natural landscape elements so visitors would not be overwhelmed by the city.<sup>24</sup> Newport, like Manhattan, attempted to attract the upper class only. Because many people from the upper class considered commonplace activities, such as bathing at the beach, to be a social flaw in their surroundings, Newport's main attraction was its luxurious hotels.<sup>25</sup> Saratoga, on the other hand, attempted to attract visitors from

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 17-23.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 192-94.

various parts of life by bringing a diverse section of commercialized entertainment. These include minstrels, theatricals, live music performances, ventriloquists, and Siamese twins. One visitor declared Saratoga to be "the most picturesque feature of the region"<sup>26</sup> based on the beautiful scenery of the parks and their great lake. A great majority of the people did not leave Saratoga without souvenirs. However, the citizens there viewed the visitors as no more than "potential profitable commodities."<sup>27</sup>

Coney Island also represented a switch to a service-oriented economy. The park was marketed to be a place of fantasy where people could revive their childhood memories and enjoy an escape from reality where really nothing but entertainment is produced. Entertainment was designed to mock the ho-hum experience of everyday life.<sup>28</sup> However, corruption proved to be Fred Thompson's undoing in the face of the possibilities for pleasure and profit in manufacturing amusement.

Coney Island was connected to the railroad provided by the city, instead of the visitors being bused into Coney Island or different railroads terminating near Coney Island. Many of the different railroads were being bankrupt, enabling New York's public transit to gain control of the railways leading to Coney Island. The city transit system wanted to capitalize on the success of Coney Island by drawing in more visitors to take the trains there at a low price. According to Transit Construction Commissioner, John H. Delaney, the five-cent fare on all rail routes would begin on May 1, 1920.<sup>29</sup>

Sea Lion Park opened in the spring of 1895. It became the world's first enclosed amusement park. It featured Shoot-the-Chutes water slide, Old Mill ride, and a Sea Lion show. Boyton demonstrated at Sea Lion Park his floating rubber suit, which would enable him to paddle across the English Channel as well as down the major rivers in Europe and North America.<sup>30</sup> In 1897, George Tilyou opened Steeplechase Park along the fifteen acres of beach in Coney Island. He obtained the right of a horseracing ride from the British inventor, improving the structure. It became his leading attraction. Other rides and attractions surrounded the horse race

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 168-72.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Register, *The Kid of Coney Island*, 6-7.

<sup>29</sup> *New York Times*, 21 March 1920.

<sup>30</sup> Coney Island Timeline, (accessed 2 December 2004); available from <http://naid.spsr.ucla.edu/coneyisland/articles/1880.htm>.

track within the park's walls. In order to attract more visitors to his area, Tilyou charged one price to ride all of the rides as many times as the customer wanted.<sup>31</sup>

Luna Park, a 22-acre park on Coney Island, was constructed by Frederic Thompson and Elmer Dundy. It featured several amusement attractions, including *A Midway to Nations* and *A Trip to the Moon*. It was on the site of the old Sea Lion Park. The debut of Luna Park on the evening of May 16, 1903, brought 45,000 people. To commence the event, there were live bands and circuses. The entrance of Luna Park featured five Roman chariots, each containing a beautiful young woman of evening attire along with a red picture hat. It also featured a forest of one hundred towers and spires. To beautify the park, they used 122,000 electric lights at night, which could be seen for miles, to attract additional visitors. It immediately became a success.<sup>32</sup>

One hotel that was unique in Coney Island was the Elephant Colossus, also known as the Elephant Hotel. It opened in May 1885 after two years of construction. It was, essentially, a wooden carcass that was shaped similar to an elephant. Its length from the hind legs to the tip of its trunk was one hundred fifty feet. Its legs alone were eighteen feet high and its tusks were forty feet in diameter. The forelegs contained a cigar store and the hind legs held circular stairways, also known as the diorama, leading to the rooms on the next floor. The entire body was covered in a coating of blue tin. Inside the body were thirty-one rooms that varied in shape and size, including a grand hall, a gallery, various amusement and novelty stalls, and a museum, that was located near its left lung. The Stomach Room was 60 x 35 feet and triangular shaped. The Cheek Room was where the visitors would enjoy a fantastic view of the Atlantic Ocean and down the trunk.<sup>33</sup> Tragically, the Elephant Hotel collapsed as a result of a fire in 1896, after being unoccupied for several years. After its initial success, it eventually became vacant.<sup>34</sup> During the fire, it took nearly an hour for the structure to collapse since it was made from wood and water was scarce. The fire attracted hundreds of people and many of them looted through

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> "Luna Park First Night: Coney Island visitors dazzled by Electric City," *New York Times*, 17 May 1903.

<sup>33</sup> Immerso, *Coney Island*, 38-40; *New York Times*, 30 May 1885.

<sup>34</sup> Edo McCullough, *Good Old Coney Island: A Sentimental Journey into the Past* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), 304.

the structure salvaging souvenirs, despite the best efforts of the police and the fire fighters to keep everyone away. The loss was estimated at that time to be \$16,000 on the elephant and \$2,500 on the property of the lessee, L. D. Shaw.<sup>35</sup> Needless to say there was nary a building built as unique as the Elephant Hotel structure.

Other well-known hotels near Coney Island, besides the Elephant Hotel, were the Manhattan, Brighton and Oriental. The Manhattan Hotel, being 660 feet long, opened at the eastern edge of Coney Island on July 1877. It was designed by architect J. Pickering Putnam in the Queen Anne style. Located adjacent to it was an outdoor amphitheater and bathing pavilion. It housed 360 guestrooms and was alternately three and four stories high. It provided lodgings for travelers and short-term guests.<sup>36</sup> However, to magnetize the wealthy New York families who wanted to encamp at Coney Island for an entire year, Austin Corbin constructed the copious Oriental Hotel, which opened in 1880, with President Rutherford B. Hayes in attendance. It stood a quarter mile east of Manhattan Hotel. Corbin abandoned the Queen Anne style in favor of Eastern and Moorish influences. The structure was 477 feet long and six stories high.<sup>37</sup> The following year, William Engeman assembled the three-story, 174-room Brighton Hotel. Built in Gothic style, it rose alternately from three to five stories high, and was 525 feet long. While it was intended to attract the Brooklyn middle-class, it held the same amenities as the Manhattan Hotel.<sup>38</sup> However, these buildings were eventually demolished by 1920 due to legal issues, such as gambling, prostitution, and alcohol.<sup>39</sup>

According to a February 4, 1904 report, Coney Island had plans with the help of Commissioner Oakley of the Department of Water Supply, Gas and Electricity and Deputy Commissioner Byrne, to protect its property from flames. Byrne proposed the usage of salt water from the Atlantic Ocean to extinguish flames in case of a fire. It would have been located at the pumping station on Coney Island's property. The pump would have a capacity of 80,000 gallons an hour with a pressure of 250 gallons a minute seventy-five feet high. All in all, the pumping station would handled 4,000,000 gallons a

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<sup>35</sup> *New York Times*, 28 September 1896.

<sup>36</sup> Immerso, *Coney Island*, 24-26.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 26-27.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 27-28.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 124.

day.<sup>40</sup> On July 30, 1907, a fire swept through Steeplechase Park. It did not help that Coney Island had a new pumping station because the fire fighting equipment was inadequate. There were plans that this section would be built within a few years with the same type of material that caused its ruin. Many of the attractions, along with the surrounding area of Bowery burned, causing approximately \$1.4 million in damages.<sup>41</sup> Another disastrous fire spelled doom in the same area as well as Dreamland on May 1911. This time the fire began around midnight, and in a span of a few hours became the worst fire in Coney Island history based on monetary structural damage, which was close to \$5 million.<sup>42</sup>

Coney Island was set up to provide entertainment for people. It was the forerunner of amusement park concept. Other amusement parks used Coney Island as a guide to providing entertainment. They also learned from the mistakes of Coney Island and how to be successful. It helped paved the way for an entertainment industry and shaped the legacy of the amusement park. From an economical perspective, Coney Island provided jobs to the local economy, strengthened the tax base, and increased the production potential of the laborers who visited Coney Island. Likewise, from a political angle, Coney Island created special taxing districts that were responsible for controlling the profits and governing the investment activities for the shareholders.

Coney Island's name has become synonymous with a family friendly environment. It was a bridge to close the cultural divide, and the paradigm of excellent entertainment for people from every part of the social and economic spectrum.

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<sup>40</sup> *New York Times*, 4 February 1904.

<sup>41</sup> *New York Times*, 30 July 1907.

<sup>42</sup> *New York Times*, 27 May 1911.