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NEW YORK CITY BEACHES: CONEY ISLAND & ROCKAWAY AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

Online Exhibition | Fall 2020

Manhattan Beach Hotel, Brighton Beach Hotel & Oriental Hotel

Brighton Beach & Manhattan Beach, Coney Island | c1877 – 1924

The development of Brighton and Manhattan Beaches as luxury hotel resorts was propelled by two men: William Engeman and Austin Corbin. Engeman, who had built a fortune as a contractor for the Union Army during the Civil War, recognized the value of the Island’s undeveloped east end and began the tedious process of consolidating over 200 separate parcels that comprised what was then known as Middle Division. After successfully combining several hundred acres into a single tract of dunes and marshland, Engeman named the property Brighton Beach. His initial developments were modest: in 1869 he built a steamboat pier, followed in 1871 by the Ocean Hotel, a small inn.

In 1873 Coney Island was already receiving up to 30,000 visitors on weekends, though it lacked sufficient overnight accommodations and was served by a single rail line. That year Austin Corbin, a banking and railroad magnate known for his unsavory business tactics and virulent anti-semitism, first visited the east end and, like Engeman, immediately recognized its commercial potential. Corbin had amassed considerable wealth by profitably managing and expanding the Long Island Railroad (LIRR). In 1876 he incorporated the New York and Manhattan Beach Railway (NY&MB) which he used to acquire over 500 acres east of Engeman’s property through series of corrupt but technically legal transactions. He renamed the property Manhattan Beach, extended the LIRR network to service it, and opened the new NY&MB line and the Manhattan Beach Resort together in 1877.

Corbin’s success spurred further development by Engeman. He sold part of his Brighton tract to the Brooklyn, Flatbush and Coney Island Railroad consortium, which opened the Brighton Beach Hotel in 1878 (within a decade, the entire 5,000 ton, 465-foot-long structure was moved by locomotives—in a remarkable feat of engineering—nearly 250 feet back from the shoreline to save it from rapid beach erosion). In 1878 Engeman also created the Brighton Bathing Pavilion featuring a novel footbridge that allowed bathers to access the ocean directly from changing rooms, and light bulbs at the end of the bridge that permitted increasingly popular night swimming, known as “electric bathing.” The following year Engeman built the Brighton Beach Race Course near Ocean Parkway. As the first of the

Island's three race tracks, the project was an immediate success that drew wealthy patrons from Manhattan. This was the community Corbin sought for his Manhattan Beach Resort, from which he repugnantly excluded Jewish individuals. Though successful, the Manhattan Beach Hotel attracted predominantly upper middle class excursionists for short-term visits. Corbin, seeking profit from the ultra-rich, built the opulent Oriental Hotel in 1880, east of the Manhattan Beach Hotel, where the wealthy could reside for the full summer season.

In *Coney Island: The People's Playground*, Michael Immerso describes each of the hotels in detail¹:

Manhattan Beach Hotel (1877 – 1911)

Designed by the architect J. Pickering Putnam in the Queen Anne style, the hotel had a length of 660 feet with 360 guestrooms, and was alternately three and four stories high, crowned with towers, turrets, and dormers. Painted a pleasant shade of ocher, it was surrounded by a spacious verandah eighteen feet wide. Meals were served in a grand dining hall in the west wing that seated over one thousand. There were additional dining areas throughout the hotel, as well as a piazza that served four thousand guests at one time. The hotel was surrounded on all sides by a broad esplanade with manicured lawns extending to the sea, lined with floral stands of heliotrope, lobelia, coleus, and geranium. The grounds included a large picnic pavilion, housed in a structure that formerly served as the Brazilian building at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition, and a bathing pavilion. The bathing pavilion stood two stories high and was 520 feet in length with space for twenty-two hundred bathers. It held an amphitheater with a bandstand shaped like a scallop shell where bands played in the afternoons and evenings. The amphitheater was enclosed on three sides and afforded guests "a sheltered and luxurious resting-place from which to watch the amusing antics or petty mishaps of the bathers." The entire grounds were protected by a sea-wall extending a half-mile, atop which was a boardwalk. Former president Ulysses S. Grant was present at the opening of the hotel and an enormous fireworks display marked the occasion.

Brighton Beach Hotel (1878 – 1924)

Built in the Gothic cottage style, and comparable in size to the Manhattan Beach Hotel, the Brighton rose alternately from three to five stories high. Its length was 525 feet with a wide verandah on the first floor and a piazza on the second extending the entire length of the building. Like those of its rival at Manhattan Beach, its rooms had Axminster carpets and Eastlake furnishings. Its exterior grounds, which included a music pavilion, were laid out in greensward, with serpentine paths and flower parterres. The hotel, said one admirer, "rises out of the sea all quaint corners and gables and hooded sun-shades and piazzas... a fairy-like piece of architecture."

Oriental Hotel (1880 – 1916)

Standing a little more than a quarter mile east of the Manhattan Beach Hotel, the Oriental abandoned the Queen Anne style in favor of Eastern and Moorish flourishes. Its length was 477 feet and it rose six stories to a height of 100 feet. It had eight round towers, 12 feet in diameter, capped with minarets that rose to a height of 118 feet. There were also forty-three

¹ Immerso, Michael. *Coney Island: The People's Playground* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 24-28.

smaller minarets, making a total of fifty-one. Its sixth floor had a promenade at a height of 72 feet surrounding a central pavilion with views in every direction. The exterior was painted green. The hotel had 346 rooms of various sizes furnished in the Eastlake style and could entertain nine hundred guests. The Oriental opened its doors in 1880 with President Rutherford B. Hayes in attendance.