

The Irwin S. Chanin
School of Architecture
Archive

The Cooper Union
for the Advancement
of Science and Art

Cooper Square
New York NY 10003-7120
T 212.353.4232
F 212.353.4219
www.cooper.edu



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

Online Exhibition | Fall 2020

Rockaway Beach

Rockaway, Queens | c1890 – 1920

The conversion of Rockaway Beach from a popular, mid-19th century retreat for the wealthy to a resort for mass entertainment paralleled the urbanization of Coney Island. In 1880 the New York Woodhaven and Rockaway Railroad, later named the New York & Rockaway Beach Railway, was established. It traversed a five mile wooden trestle across Jamaica Bay, stopping at Beach 102nd and 103rd Streets, and significantly improved direct access to the waterfront. Carrying 65,000 passengers on its opening day, the railroad spurred rapid commercial development led initially by William Wainwright. In partnership with James Remsen, an early investor in the peninsula's undeveloped real-estate, Wainwright expanded from his initial construction of the Seaside Hotel in 1874 to a large amusement complex of bath houses and pavilions at Beach 103rd Street erected in the 1890s. Thousands of daily summer visitors, arriving by train and steamship, frequented the beach's iron pier and bath houses at Beach 105th Street, the Steeplechase Baths at Beach 99th Street—an extension of George Tilyou's enterprise—and a Ferris Wheel installed at Beach 103rd Street. In 1901 LaMarcus Thomspon, creator of the first roller coaster on Coney Island, established the L. A. Thompson Amusement Park, later renamed Playland, adjacent to the Steeplechase Baths on Beach 99th Street.

In a noted departure from Coney Island, Rockaway Beach proved unprofitable for large resort hotel developments. In 1880 the Rockaway Park Association invested the equivalent of nearly \$28 million in the construction of the world's largest hotel. Measuring over 1,100 feet long and 250 feet wide, the mammoth, lavishly furnished structure never fully opened to the public and proved ruinous for its investors.

While this catastrophe discouraged similar large-scale resort initiatives, a different and novel approach to accommodating visitors flourished: the creation of densely packed tent and bungalow colonies. Built of wood, often from prefabricated components, bungalows provided seasonal housing accessible to the middle class, and by 1915 over 8,000 had been constructed on the peninsula. Open air tent colonies provided even more casual and affordable accommodations. One of the most well-known, Camp Chaffee, was run by a local

manufacturer of sails, tents and awnings. Located between Beach 106th and 109th Streets, Frank Chaffee opened the colony in 1902 with roughly 50 tents, which rented for the equivalent of \$540 a month. Before Chaffee lost his property lease in 1913, the camp had swelled to over 400 tents serviced by shared sanitation facilities, running water and gas.

In 1917 the historian Alfred H. Bellot compiled a comprehensive history of Rockaway and his introduction, *General Characteristics of the Peninsula*¹, describes it at the time of his writing:

The greatest assets of the Rockaway peninsula are its proximity to the Atlantic Ocean and its easy accessibility. Served by a frequent and fast electric train service connecting with Manhattan, Brooklyn, Long Island City, Jamaica and all Long Island, the entire section affords a haven of rest whose health-giving properties are eagerly taken advantage of by tired city dwellers anxious to escape the city turmoil and summer heat. Bathing, boating, yachting, fishing, tennis, golfing and horse racing are among the principal summer outdoor sports and pastimes...Hotel and home life provide every conceivable branch of social activity participated in by residents in the various sections. Society leaders, princes of finance, politicians, members of the diplomatic service, leading men in the legal, clerical and medical profession: the stockbroker, manufacturer, factory business man, salesman, clerk, stenographer, and laborers...have a recurring or permanent regard for the Rockaways, which they make their summer resort or regular home...

The resident population of the Rockaway Peninsula in the months between October and May is estimated at 36,000 persons. The distribution of nationalities of the inhabitants is typical of a great city. The American-born are everywhere, but mostly live in the Northeasterly, or Nassau County, end of the peninsula. Irish, Jewish and Germans are found in large numbers, and there is a considerable sprinkling of English, Scotch, French, Italians, Swedes and Norwegians. From May to October, which is the season when hotels open and cottages and tents are rented, it is almost impossible to estimate the number of residents. Strictly speaking, the "season" is from July 4th to Labor Day, but these dates are only observed in the Seaside section, where there is a popular amusement colony. It is probable that during a good summer season the population reaches as high as a quarter of a million souls, and to these must be added an enormous number of "day trippers" and week-end visitors.

Many residents of the Rockaways are of the class known as "commuters." The men have their employment or business in other parts of the city, and travel back and forth daily. Every village contains up-to-date stores of all descriptions where food, clothing and merchandise of all kinds, and in any retail quantity, may be purchased at favorable prices. Far Rockaway and Rockaway Beach are very well equipped in this respect.

There are not many factories in the Rockaways, and the small number which exist give employment to very few persons. During the summer months employment generally is plentiful, mostly being in connection with hotels, boarding houses, bathhouses and retail stores. It is the usual practice for owners of cottages to rent them out for the summer months

¹ Bellot, Alfred H. History of the Rockaways from the Year 1675 to 1917 (New York: Bellot's History of the Rockaways). 7-8.

and reside there during the remainder of the year. Considerable quantities of land are under cultivation and mostly produce vegetables, for which there is ever a ready market.

The fishing industry forms by no means an unimportant part in the provision of employment. Blackfish, weakfish and bluefish abound, while the Rockaway and Woodmere oysters and clams have a nation-wide reputation. Oyster beds are numerous and profitable and the number of men who "follow the bay" is considerable.