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# The Wild Lands of Gotham: City and Nature in Jamaica Bay, New York, 1880-1994

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# The Wild Lands of Gotham: City and Nature in Jamaica Bay, New York, 1880-1994

Eric James Fauss, PhD

University of Connecticut, 2014

This dissertation examines conflicts over Jamaica Bay, a 25,000-acre estuarine lagoon bordering southern Brooklyn and Queens that at the end of the nineteenth century was one of the largest undeveloped areas in New York City. Determining the relationship between city and nature was the central conflict in the bay's history. While activists, developers, and officials sought to transform the bay into parks, suburbs, and a port, local residents fought to maintain their homes in what they envisioned as the Venice of New York—an unconventional hybrid space of city and nature.

By examining the interplay of competing conceptions of Jamaica Bay over its history, this study will show how both elite and working class New Yorkers were able to exercise power over the bay's development and the complex ways in which its spaces were understood. Tensions peaked in 1969 with the creation of Gateway National Recreation Area, one of the first urban sites run by the National Park Service dedicated to preservation and mass recreation. As they had done before, elites invoked class-based arguments against residents' use and care of the bay but the changing politics of the 1960s reversed the dynamic, leading to the bay's inhabitants winning the right to continue living within its spaces. The victory of Jamaica Bay's residents codified their vision of a hybrid space, forcing Gateway's administrators to approach the conceptualization of their park in novel ways.

The Wild Lands of Gotham: City and Nature in Jamaica Bay, New York, 1880-1994

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B.A., State University of New York at Potsdam, 2005

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A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

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at the

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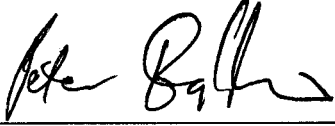
APPROVAL PAGE

Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation

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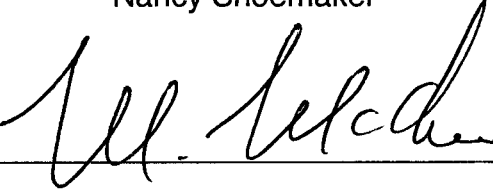
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## Introduction

The first time I visited Jamaica Bay I arrived by subway. I still vividly remember the journey, which gave me a unique perspective on the bay and its place in New York City. I boarded the A train in Harlem, Manhattan—one of the most densely populated urban areas in the United States. The key moment came when the tracks met the bay’s shore, where they connected with a trestle suspended above the water: I was suddenly surrounded by nature, no longer able to see the ground or the city, only the bay, the sky, marshes, and birds. When I left the subway at my destination, Broad Channel, the only remaining settlement within the bay, the paved streets and densely built homes once more reminded me that I hadn’t left the city, but my journey told me otherwise, along with the smell of salt and decay that met me as soon as I stepped off the car.

The conceptual tension I felt, emerging from the ways in which American culture taught me to think about the relationship between cities and nature, doesn’t seem to bother Broad Channelites. While they relish the urban amenities of their community—its connection to the subway, public library branch, school, and neighborhood park—the bay continues to play an important part in their daily lives. This can be seen in the pages of the guestbooks for events held by the Broad Channel Historical Society, where visitors are asked to record a fond memory of the time in their community. Virtually every resident mentions the bay. For instance Margaret Wagner, a lifetime Broad Channelite, recounted how she remembered “waiting for mom to say it was warm enough to jump in the canal... crabbing, fishing waterskiing + just walking in the mud!” Thomas Brody, who moved to the community in 1993, greatly valued the “breathtaking

view.” Peggy Knagel, a resident since 1929—told of “days in boats, at the beach” and how the community was “a beautiful place to grow up” and grow old.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1. Airplane and the New York skyline from the shore of Ruffle Bar island, Jamaica Bay, NY. 2012 photo by the author.

Others find the current relationship between city and nature in Jamaica Bay unsettling. Surrounding Broad Channel is Gateway National Recreation Area (NRA), which along with Golden Gate NRA was the first major foray of the National Park Service into an urban area since the organization took over administration of sites in Washington DC. From Gateway’s creation in 1972, many have found the very idea of an urban national park to be paradoxical. A 2007 competition called “Envisioning Gateway,” sponsored by the Van Allen Institute, a nonprofit organization dedicated to architectural

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<sup>1</sup> “Guest Book, Broad Channel Historical Day, November 3rd, 1996,” Folder: Historical Days, 1996-2008, Papers of the Broad Channel Historical Society, Queens Public Library, Broad Channel Branch, Broad Channel, NY; “Guest Book, Broad Channel Historical Day, October 11, 1998,” Folder: Historical Days, 1996-2008, Papers of the Broad Channel Historical Society, Queens Public Library, Broad Channel Branch.

design, demonstrates how these concerns continue into present day. The organizers challenged entrants to completely reimagine Gateway; winners were chosen based on their ability to create “powerful, transforming proposals that inspire new ways of thinking about not only the role of national parks relative to an increasingly urbanized national landscape, but the ways in which thriving cities and complex ecosystems can co-exist and enrich each other.” Although the competition produced new designs for Gateway’s sites, the goals chosen by organizers were little different from those outlined in the 1979 General Management Plan, which has been the key policy document shaping the park’s development to date. As well intentioned as this sort of competition may be, the fundamental tension within Gateway’s spaces remains.<sup>2</sup>

The space of Jamaica Bay as it is today is the result of its unusual history. Unlike so many places in which developers and officials managed to dictate the terms of development, in Jamaica Bay, the original inhabitants—the ancestors of the Broad Channel Community—successfully defended their claims to its space. Elite visions of the bay that followed familiar cultural scripts, from those of the bay as a park to a port to a suburban neighborhood, have had to coexist with the unconventional conception of the bay possessed by its residents, forcing the tensions between city and nature to be reconciled in novel ways.

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<sup>2</sup> “Competition Logistics: Programme Requirements,” Van Allen Institute, [http://www.vanalen.org/gateway/logistics\\_prog\\_req.php](http://www.vanalen.org/gateway/logistics_prog_req.php); “Envisioning Gateway: Online Exhibition: First Prize,” Van Allen Institute, [http://www.vanalen.org/gateway/exhibition\\_firstprize.php](http://www.vanalen.org/gateway/exhibition_firstprize.php); National Park Service, “Gateway National Recreation Area General Management Plan,” August 1979, Gateway National Recreation Area Cultural Resources Library, Staten Island, NY.

Jamaica Bay is a 25,000-acre estuarine lagoon, where drainage from 85,000 acres of Long Island's Harbor Hill moraine meets Lower New York Bay. Though most of the bay consists of open water with a mean depth of thirteen feet, it is also home to 350 acres of mudflats, 1,451 acres of salt marsh, and smaller areas of upland. The bay is ecologically diverse, with an abundance of plant and animal species—terrestrial and aquatic. As the meeting point between the New England and Long Island coastlines and the mid-Atlantic shore, it hosts numerous migrating species of animals that stop to feed.<sup>3</sup>

Human action has substantially transformed Jamaica Bay and damaged its ecological richness. Dredging throughout the twentieth century has increased the bay's mean depth from three to thirteen feet, resulting in substantial alterations in water flow—namely a thirty-three day residence time versus eleven before the dredging.<sup>4</sup> Much of the sand pumped during these operations was used as fill: the Army Corps of Engineers estimates that 1,400 acres of marsh have been destroyed since 1924.<sup>5</sup> A variety of sources continue to pollute the bay: sewage treatment plants, Kennedy Airport's runways, three capped landfills, and storm drains contribute organic matter,

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<sup>3</sup> US Fish and Wildlife Service, "Jamaica Bay and Breezy Point," in *Significant Habitats and Habitat Complexes of the New York Bight Watershed* (Charlestown, RI: US Fish and Wildlife Service, 1996), [http://nctc.fws.gov/resources/knowledge-resources/pubs5/web\\_link/text/jb\\_form.htm](http://nctc.fws.gov/resources/knowledge-resources/pubs5/web_link/text/jb_form.htm).

<sup>4</sup> Residence is the average amount of time a particular collection of water molecules spends within a space before going elsewhere: see David Bice, "Residence Time," *Exploring the Dynamics of earth Systems*, <http://www3.geosc.psu.edu/~dmb53/DaveSTELLA/modeling/ch2.4.html>.

<sup>5</sup> "Jamaica Bay Marsh Islands," US Army Corps of Engineers, <http://www.nan.usace.army.mil/Missions/CivilWorks/ProjectsInNewYork/EldersPointJamaicaBaySaltMarshIslands.aspx>.



hydrocarbons, and heavy metals. Diminished water circulation has concentrated this pollution and resulted in toxic levels of chemicals and reduced oxygen content in the bay's depths, hurting wildlife. Finally, urban development continues to threaten the remaining open uplands and marshes along the bay's shore.<sup>6</sup>



Figure 2. Map of Jamaica Bay. From Edward M. Grout, *Improvement and Development of Jamaica Bay and the Water Front of the City of New York Other than that of Manhattan Island: Being a Communication Addressed to the Commissioners of the Sinking Fund of the City of New York* (New York: Martin B. Brown Press, 1905).

The bay's physical spaces are a palimpsest of its history, a visual record of the efforts of developers, officials, activists, and local residents to shape it to their wills.

Starting in the far southwest, there were once many islands and marshes, most infamously Barren Island—home to noxious rendering plants—but they were

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<sup>6</sup> US Fish and Wildlife Service, "Jamaica Bay and Breezy Point."

consolidated to build the City's first municipal airport, Floyd Bennett Field. Now part of Gateway, Floyd Bennett hosts a variety of environmental education programs and its runways still see limited use. Just to its west on the northern shore of the bay's inlet is Marine Park, once a stretch of marsh, now a residential neighborhood and park. Next to Marine Park is the famous Coney Island, which was never considered part of the bay but nonetheless influenced its development. Proceeding clockwise from Floyd Bennett along the shore, one comes to Mill Basin, now a residential neighborhood, its bulkheaded shores one of the few parts of the bay successfully transformed by a project to turn the bay into a gigantic harbor. Once, one would have found a small resort and scattered industry on two small islands: Mill Island and Bergen Island—home of Bergen Beach.

Next, Paerdegat Basin, yet another remnant of the port project, home to a sewer outlet that for years dumped untreated effluent into the bay. Then, the neighborhood of Canarsie, once a resort that had designs to rival Coney Island. Abutting Canarsie is Howard Beach, a neighborhood of small single-family homes; in the past it was a collection of vacation enclaves, including the famous settlement of Ramblersville, whose houses built on pilings were the beginning of what was known as the Venice of New York. Between Canarsie and Howard Beach is a landfill, Spring Creek—named after the basin it abuts—an unfortunate relic of the City's efforts to build parkland along the bay's northern shore.

Continuing round, one reaches Kennedy Airport, once known as Idlewild: here was yet another resort that had a golf course and grand hotel, as well as a small

collection of settlements. Finally, the Rockaway Peninsula: known now for its housing projects and the insular Breezy Point Cooperative, the Rockaways was once a favorite summer getaway for New Yorkers of all stripes, its sandy beaches renowned. The Marine Parkway Bridge then comes full circle.

This dissertation examines conflicts over the shaping of Jamaica Bay from 1880-1994. At the end of the nineteenth century, Jamaica Bay offered something that rapid urbanization was making dear: an open space of nature. The bay was unique in that after 1898 it was one of the largest undeveloped spaces within the nation's most populous city. Determining the proper relationship between the city and nature in Jamaica Bay has been the central conflict in its history. Four main actors fought for control of the bay's spaces: officials at all levels of government, developers, activists, and the bay's working-class residents. While officials, developers, and activists sought to reconcile city and nature by transforming the bay into familiar forms like parks, ports, and suburban neighborhoods, local residents struggled to maintain their homes and codify Jamaica Bay as an unconventional hybrid space—the Venice of New York, a vision born of their experiences living and working within it. For decades elites invoked class in order to delegitimize residents' use of the bay, but the changing politics of the 1960s reversed the dynamic, allowing inhabitants to question elite claims to stewardship and ultimately keep their homes, solidifying their vision of the bay as both city and nature.

Nature in Jamaica Bay was valued in two ways: as natural resources that could be exploited for profit, and as a resource in and of itself. Until the bay became polluted,

commercial and recreational fishers harvested fin and shellfish in its waters, which officials in turn envisioned as shipping channels and an outlet for sewage. Developers saw the potential for building atop the bay's uplands and marshes, which could be filled and constructed with factories, as well as suburban homes that offered their inhabitants a natural setting. Finally, the bay's natural spaces were seen as ideal sites for parkland where nature could be enjoyed through recreation.

Changes in American culture influenced the way nature was understood and valued within Jamaica Bay. Although developers and many officials viewed the bay's resources to be granted by providence, that to not exploit them would leave it a wasteland—literally wasted land—this view would be challenged by the rise of the conservation movement in the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Conservationists portrayed the natural world as fragile and in need of preservation by humans through careful management; this conception gained prominence in the 1930s when Robert Moses sought to develop the bay into a park, arguing that the area's open spaces needed to be preserved, and would also be important during the creation of Gateway National Recreation Area.<sup>8</sup> The ethos of conservation gave officials and activists an important

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the desire to dominate nature, see Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959) is considered the classic text on the conservation movement. Early historiography emphasized the idea of conservation as promoting "wise use" in contrast with preservationism—setting spaces aside for their beauty. The classic text on preservationism is Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001). Recent interpretations deemphasize this distinction, like Christopher Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible: Suburban Nature and the Rise*

weapon in the struggle over the bay's spaces, allowing them to depict certain uses as harmful and ignorant; these assumptions had an element of class bias within them due to the elite status of most conservationists and officials.<sup>9</sup> Being in an urban area intensified these conflicts due to the number of and diversity of groups making claims and having claims made on their behalf to the bay's spaces.

In the post-World War Two era, environmentalism emerged in the United States, producing important changes in the way the bay was valued and viewed.

Environmentalism differed from conservationism in three main ways: first, it was a mass movement, not primarily confined to elites; second, it acted on behalf of a wider variety of spaces and environments than wilderness-focused conservationism; third, it encompassed a wide variety of concerns, from pollution, to sprawl, to environmental justice. Although some conservationists adapted their ethos, the older ideology of conservation continued to exist.<sup>10</sup> Environmentalism was a key force behind the push to

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*of Environmentalism in Twentieth Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), which considers conservationism to be more defined by elite concerns over wilderness which. This study is greatly influenced by Sellers' understanding of conservationism and environmentalism.

<sup>9</sup> For class and conservation, see Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001); and Louis S Warren, *The Hunter's Game: Poachers and Conservationists in Twentieth-Century America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Environmentalism has an extensive historiography. On the differences between environmentalism and conservationism, see Samuel Hays, *Beauty, Health and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989). While Hays considered environmentalism to be motivated by consumption, Hal Rothman, *The Greening of a Nation?: Environmentalism in the United States Since 1945* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998) and Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2005) emphasize the role of

create Gateway National Recreation Area, particularly among those who sought to make the park a space of mass recreation. Gateway's 1979 General Management Plan was also strongly influenced by environmental thinking, in particular its conceptualization of the park as a hybrid space of city and nature defined by its ecological connections.

While conflicts over Jamaica Bay played out as conventional legal and political battles, one of the most important ways that actors exercised power over development was through shaping how the bay's spaces were conceptualized; this included defining the space as it was, and how it would be. To support the utilization of the bay's resources, developers and officials portrayed the bay as virgin wasteland. To create a sense of place, the bay's residents imagined their community as the Venice of New York. To delegitimize inhabitants' use of the bay, activists and officials depicted it as polluted. Finally, developers and officials released descriptions and graphics of the bay transformed according to their wishes.

This dissertation will draw upon the ideas of theorist Henri Lefebvre because they provide a unique way for understanding the power of, interaction between, and contestation of conceptions of space. According to Lefebvre, space is not mere dimensionality or a container where action takes place but a lived reality within the social sphere. Lefebvre argues that space is created in three ways; all three methods can be at play within a single place, leading to multiple meanings that compete for

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changing modes of production. Recent literature has attempted to get beyond this debate: see Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible*.

influence. First, space is created through use—everyday activities like work and residence; this way of shaping space was particularly important to the inhabitants of Jamaica Bay. Second, space is made through representation, like the visual images on maps, charts, and legal documents; this was an important tool of developers and officials, an example being when the New York City Department of Docks created plans to turn the bay into a port and included the image of the transformed bay on official city maps. Third, space is produced through imagination: as opposed to visual representations, imagination dwells primarily in the realm of the symbolic and associational. An example would be depicting the bay as polluted: as opposed to offering an objective measure of levels of pollutants, this conception is loaded with associations of unsavoriness and decay; all actors were able to exercise power in this manner.<sup>11</sup>

While the concept of nature and its relationship with humanity has been extensively studied and unpacked in a variety of ways and contexts, nature in cities has received significantly less attention. Recently, environmental historians have been more willing to consider complex formulations of the interface of nature and culture, although significant controversy remains on the wisdom of embracing relativistic concepts like hybrid environments.<sup>12</sup> Groundbreaking works by Matthew Klinge, Ari Kelman, Michael

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<sup>11</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1991), 26–33. Lefebvre uses different terminology: spatial practice, representations of space and representational space versus use, representation, and imagination.

<sup>12</sup> Raymond Williams, “Ideas of Nature,” in *Problems of Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), 67–85 is considered a classic work on the dichotomy of nature and humanity. For the hesitation of environmental historians to study urban environments, see Martin Melosi, “The Place of the City in Environmental History,” *The*

Rawson, and Christopher Sellers are representative of this new type of inquiry, studying the complex interactions of natural systems, human action, and culture within urban areas.<sup>13</sup> The case study of Jamaica Bay contributes to this growing field by illuminating the diversity of ways in which historical actors approached the relationship between city and nature, with the hybrid conception of Venice demonstrating that people in the past were willing to think outside of conventional formulations like city, country, and suburb.

Jamaica Bay's history illuminates the role of working people in shaping natural space—a topic that has received short shrift within environmental history due to methodological difficulties and the availability of sources. For example, although *A River and Its City* shows the disproportionate impacts of disease and hydrological engineering on members of racial minorities and the working class, Kelman's exploration of how these groups influenced conceptions of space in New Orleans could be better developed. In *Crimes Against Nature*, Karl Jacoby provides a useful model through his demonstration of the ways in which working people resisted attempts by “experts” to

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*Environmental History Review* 17, no. 1 (1993): 1–23. William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: Norton, 1995), 69–90 is considered one of the breakthrough works problematizing nature. Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996) is an early influential work that approaches nature as a hybrid space. For the turn to hybridity, see Paul Sutter, “The World with Us: The State of Environmental History,” *The Journal of American History* 100, no. 1 (2013): 94–119.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Klinge, *Emerald City: An Environmental History of Seattle* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007); Ari Kelman, *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006); Michael Rawson, *Eden on the Charles: The Making of Boston* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible*.



manage natural spaces—actions based on knowledge gained from work.<sup>14</sup> Living and working within Jamaica Bay gave its working class residents a unique understanding of the relationship between city and nature, allowing them to create conceptions of space in order to resist competing claims to the bay.

As the site of one of the first urban national parks in the United States, Gateway National Recreation Area, Jamaica Bay's history sheds light on the changing ways the National Park Service approached conceptual dilemmas emerging as a result of the organization's changing role in society. Although political and administrative histories of the Park Service have dominated its historiography, works by Linda Flint McClelland and Richard West Sellars have begun to explore how park officials conceptualized nature within national parks. Because of political controversy and the relative newness of the parks themselves, scholars have only recently taken the development of urban parks seriously. This dissertation will show that the Park Service's choice to conceptualize Gateway National Recreation Area as a hybrid space of city and nature was a radical change for the organization due to its departure from traditional conceptions of national parks as spectacular wilderness.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Kelman, *A River and Its City*; Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature*. Richard White, "Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?: Work and Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: Norton, 1995), 171-185, is a classic piece on the importance of work in generating knowledge about nature.

<sup>15</sup> Linda Flint McClelland, *Building the National Parks: Historic Landscape Design and Construction* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Richard West Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997). Alfred Runte, *National Parks: The American Experience*, 4th Edition (New York: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2010) is considered the canonical work on the National Park Service. For the controversy over urban parks, see Ronald Foresta, *America's*

After many years of neglect, Jamaica Bay itself is now starting to receive serious attention by scholars. Sociologist Kristen Van Hooreweghe's work is the most recent, taking a primarily ethnographic approach to studying the bay's communities and their relationship to its spaces. Prior to Van Hooreweghe's, the most comprehensive work done on the bay dated from 1981: historian Frederick Black's *Jamaica Bay: A History*. Although New York City's environmental history has been a burgeoning field, the most recent environmental history of New York City, Matthew Gandy's *Concrete and Clay*, fails to consider Jamaica Bay at all. The history of Jamaica Bay is an important part of New York City's overall history because it sheds light on conflicts over nature in the city's relatively unexamined borderlands. As climate change threatens New York City in new ways and precipitates events such as 2012's Hurricane Sandy, understanding the complexity of the relationship between nature and the city throughout New York's history will be particularly valuable.<sup>16</sup>

Each chapter of this dissertation will focus on a key conception of the bay's space during its history, considering how it was created, how it was challenged, its

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*National Parks and Their Keepers* (Washington, DC: Resources for the Future, 1984). Hal Rothman, *The New Urban Park: Golden Gate National Recreation Area and Civic Environmentalism* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2007) is one of the few major administrative histories of an urban national park.

<sup>16</sup> William Kornblum and Kristen Van Hooreweghe, *Jamaica Bay Ethnographic Overview and Assessment* (Boston, MA: National Park Service Northeast Region Ethnography Program, 2010), <http://macaulay.cuny.edu/eportfolios/adams2013/files/2013/08/Complete-NPS-report.pdf>; Frederick Black, *Jamaica Bay: A History* (Washington, DC: Department of the Interior, 1981); Matthew Gandy, *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003). Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible* is an example of a work that considers urban borders in new ways, going beyond traditional depictions of suburbanization.

implications for the bay's development, and how it attempted to reconcile the relationship between city and nature. Chapter one, "A Picturesque Venice," begins in 1880, when the building of a railroad trestle across the bay made access to its interior spaces and shoreline easier than ever before. The trestle allowed a resort area focused on recreational activities such as fishing and boating and a limited amount of residential use to develop. People from every walk of life used these spaces, from rich to poor. Houses and hotels on pilings driven into the marsh along the trestle captured the imagination of New Yorkers: the conception of the bay as "Venice" was appropriated by residents, serving as a creative way to reconcile the liminality of the bay's settlements—being between city and nature, land and water. This era lasted until the early 1920s, when pollution led officials to issue dire warnings about the bay's safety, but the idea of Venice would persist as a key understanding of the relationship between city and nature in the bay.

Chapter two, "The Wonder Harbor of the World," highlights the most important early challenges to the conception of the bay as Venice. With the addition of Brooklyn and the Long Island towns now comprising Queens to New York City in 1898, powerful officials eager to profit from these acquisitions gained jurisdiction over the bay. City Comptroller Edward Grout put forth a plan to develop the bay into a commercial and industrial port in 1905. Officials and businessmen assiduously worked over the next three decades to bring about Grout's vision, but these efforts largely failed. Coupled with the representation of the bay's future as a port was an imagining of the existing space as a wasteland: a set of resources just waiting to be exploited; conceiving of the bay in

this fashion served to delegitimize the space's existing users, depicting their activities as wasting the bay's potential.

Chapter three, An "Expanse of Forbidden Water Dotted with Dreary Marshes and Lonely Islands," highlights the emergence of the conception of the bay as polluted. With officials issuing dire warnings about the bay after 1920, the use of its spaces significantly changed: illicit drinking replaced fishing as the most prominent recreational activity. The settlements would also change, becoming more residential as individuals stricken by the Great Depression took advantage of the bay's cheap rents. These developments gave the conception of pollution a moral resonance: officials and contemporary observers conflated the bay's people with its insalubriousness and seedy reputation, imagining them as depraved and irresponsible individuals.

Chapter four highlights the actions of the powerful New York City official Robert Moses in Jamaica Bay. Though polluted and damaged, the bay was still considered by Moses to be "a strange corner of primitive romance"; this conception once more imagined the bay as a wasteland that could be exploited, but in a different way than before. The bay was polluted with sewage and squalor, but Moses argued that it could be reclaimed from its fallen state—its waters treated, its residents removed. The largest remaining community, Broad Channel, fiercely resisted these associations, beginning a multi-decade legal battle with the City. Moses set the stage for the final administrative regime controlling the bay: that of the National Park Service.

Chapters five and six detail the creation and administration of Gateway National Recreation Area. Conservationists, who imagined the bay as "an ecological Fort Knox,"

sought to preserve nature within the spaces of Jamaica Bay by including it in Gateway, eliminating its residential communities, and limiting recreational activities. Broad Channel resisted and survived, forcing Park Service planners to conceive of the bay as not merely nature or city, but as both; its spaces would become a model for how to deal with “The Leavings of a Throw Away Society”—a metaphor that powerfully captured the unique history of Jamaica Bay and the multitude of changes it has been subject to throughout its history.

The dissertation concludes by highlighting the impact of 2012’s Hurricane Sandy on Jamaica Bay. Causing massive damage, Sandy has prompted a reexamination of the relationship between New York City and nature. The history of Gateway National Recreation Area and communities like Broad Channel suggest that familiar cultural forms can often obscure the complex relationships between cities and the natural world. Thinking in unconventional ways, being able to transcend simple binaries like city and nature, will be crucial in an era of climate change.

## **Chapter One**

### **“A Picturesque Venice”: Recreational and Residential Development, 1880-1920**

Before 1880, Jamaica Bay was used by few save for fishers and farmers. That year, the completion of a railroad trestle across its waters opened its spaces to New York City's masses, beginning the bay's integration into the larger fabric of the City. Over the next four decades, thousands of New Yorkers from every walk of life took advantage of a series of fishing stations built by entrepreneurs along the trestle and the bay's shore—settlements that possessed amenities such as summer homes, hotels, and boat rentals. When recreational fishers perceived a decline in their catch in the late 1880s, conservationists urged the New York State Legislature to restrict the actions of commercial fishers, initiating a short but intense battle over the bay's future. The conservationists succeeded, securing Jamaica Bay as a site of public recreation.

As the bay grew into a popular resort, officials and developers attempted to harness its spaces for profit. In 1892, the Town Supervisor of Jamaica, Long Island, F.W. Dunton, began a scheme to gain possession of the bay's interior in order to develop it for various purposes. Six years later, the consolidation of New York City brought new attention to the bay from officials such as City Comptroller Edward Grout. Grout argued that the bay was an ideal site for a commercial and industrial port, though he did not rule out recreational and residential use as adjuncts. These ambitions led

Dunton into conflict with the City, initiating yet another battle over the bay's future. The City won, resulting in the transfer of the administration of the bay to the City's Department of Docks and Ferries.

A key aspect of these conflicts was the creation of competing conceptions of Jamaica Bay's space. Dunton conceived of the bay as becoming a "Venice": the use of the European city as a metaphor reflected his ambition to impose a grand suburban form upon the bay's islands. The City's plans conceived of Jamaica Bay as an urban space dedicated primarily to commerce and industry. Both parties declared the existing bay to be a vacant wasteland in order to facilitate their plans, yet recreational use continued.

As Dunton and the City faced off, the concept of the bay as Venice took on a life of its own among Jamaica Bay's residents. As opposed to being something imposed upon the bay, this conception was an attempt to reconcile the ambiguities of the space's existing form. The communities along the railroad trestle, built on piles driven into the marsh, had urban characteristics, yet were within a space of nature: describing them as a Venice captured the space's liminality, being between city and nature, water and shore.

### **Work vs. Play: To 1905**

Before 1880, Jamaica Bay was primarily a place of work. Farmers cut hay in its meadows, and local fishers caught finfish and gathered shellfish. Commercial oyster farming began in 1868, when the State of New York granted one of the Long Island

towns abutting the bay, Flatlands (in what would become Brooklyn), authority to lease underwater plots to oyster farmers. Similar authority was granted to Jamaica (in what would become Queens) and Hempstead (in what would become Nassau County) in 1871. By 1885, the New York State Commissioner of Fisheries reported that Jamaica Bay's oyster farms were the best in the state due to the space's unique ecology that allowed for the rapid growth and maturation of oysters. The local variety, known as "Rockaways," were particularly prized for their "exceedingly fine flavor."<sup>1</sup> By 1917, one report estimated that the bay's oyster industry employed 1,500 individuals and that close to one million bushels of the mollusks were harvested per year; with each bushel worth five dollars, the five million dollar yield made Jamaica Bay's oyster industry the third most valuable in the nation.<sup>2</sup> Canarsie was the oyster farmers' base of operations, helping to explain its status in 1880 as the largest settlement on the bay's shore.<sup>3</sup>

Jamaica Bay's remoteness and easy access to the ocean led to the development of a small processing industry. In the decades after the Civil War, entrepreneurs opened a number of factories on Barren Island in the bay's southwest: by 1880, three fish oil and four fertilizer works were in operation. The majority of the fish the factories processed came from the Atlantic Ocean, yet a small but significant amount came from

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Blackford, *Report of the Commissioner of Fisheries of the State of New York in Charge of the Oyster Investigation* (Albany, NY: The Argus Company Printers, 1885), 26–28.

<sup>2</sup> New York City Bureau of Public Improvements, *Report on the Main Drainage and Sewage Disposal of the Area Tributary to Jamaica Bay* (New York: SL Parsons and Company, 1917), 14–15; "Death in Jamaica Bay: Clam Bootleggers Peddle Typhoid," *Long Island Daily Press*, November 14, 1954.

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Black, *Jamaica Bay: A History* (Washington, DC: Department of the Interior, 1981), 19–24, 43–45.



Jamaica Bay itself—constituting the majority of the commercial finishing in the bay. When the menhaden fishery collapsed in the 1890s, eliminating the factories' chief source of raw materials, Barren Island's industrialists switched to the processing of dead animals and other urban refuse.<sup>4</sup> As Brooklyn and Queens grew, noxious smells and emanations from the island's factories began to produce complaints from residents and sanitarians, culminating in a failed effort by the New York State Legislature to shut down the industry in 1900.<sup>5</sup>

Barren Island's odious industries and the class and race of its inhabitants became conflated in the minds of New Yorkers, creating a conception of its space as being polluted—morally and physically. The connotations of the word “barren” added to this understanding: the word denotes sterility and unproductiveness when applied to landscapes and mental dullness when applied to people.<sup>6</sup> A 1904 *Brooklyn Eagle* article begins by noting how “Barren Island has a queer interest of its own for the Brooklynite.” It describes the island's 1400 inhabitants—the workers and their families—as being primarily “Germans, Italians, negroes and Polacks”; however, it reports with surprise that “there may be truth in the remark of a native, ‘Barren Island is not so bad as people think she is.’”<sup>7</sup> A similar article from 1912 flippantly reports how Barren Island was

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 25–33.

<sup>5</sup> “The Barren Island Nuisance,” *New York Times*, October 19, 1890; “Barren Island Bill Vetoed by Van Wyck,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 29, 1900.

<sup>6</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “Barren,” <http://www.oed.com>.

<sup>7</sup> “Horse Factories,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 1904.

apparently “not an ‘abode of ‘terrors,’” implying that most New Yorkers considered its inhabitants to be lawless ruffians.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of the smells, Barren Island’s industrial development did not impede the recreational development of Jamaica Bay. In 1865, the Brooklyn and Rockaway Beach Railroad constructed a railway line to the bay’s shore at Canarsie, connecting with steam ferries that transported passengers to the Rockaway peninsula—which was becoming a popular recreational destination. With the increased traffic, Canarsie grew from a quiet fishing and farming village to a small resort itself by 1881. That year, at least forty yachts and fifty rowboats were available for hire. Hotels and the opportunity to bathe in the calm waters of Jamaica Bay offered additional inducements for visitors to skip the trip to the more-distant Rockaways.<sup>9</sup> The eastern part of the bay was also home to a small resort centered on a hotel at a site called Idlewild—the current location of Kennedy Airport.<sup>10</sup>

The biggest boost to Jamaica Bay’s recreational development came in 1880, when the New York, Woodhaven, and Rockaway Railroad built a railroad trestle across the bay from Glendale Junction to Hammels on the Rockaways in order to draw passengers away from the less direct train-to-ferry route.<sup>11</sup> Though it was originally intended to bypass the bay, the railroad trestle also granted access to the bay’s interior

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<sup>8</sup> “Barren Island Not ‘Abode of Terrors,’” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 3, 1912.

<sup>9</sup> William Fausser, “The Brooklyn and Rockaway Beach Railroad” (unpublished manuscript with no pagination, Archive at Queens Library, Queens Public Library, Central Branch, Jamaica, NY, 1976).

<sup>10</sup> “Roar of Planes May Revive Idlewood, Society’s Orphan,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, September 9, 1941.

<sup>11</sup> Fausser, “Railroad.”

in a way that had never been possible save for boats. By 1891, entrepreneurs had constructed four fishing stations along the trestle, built on pilings driven into marshes within the bay at Broad Channel, The Raunt, Goose Creek, and Beach Channel.<sup>12</sup> Although they started out as crude structures, they eventually included hotels and residences. That year, the *New York Times* noted that thousands of recreational fishers traveled to Jamaica Bay, conceiving of it as a “popular resort” due to its amenities and the natural features such as the “peculiar formation of sand bars, drains, and small channels” that aided recreational fishing.<sup>13</sup>

With Jamaica Bay becoming a major resort destination, Robert Roosevelt—a former state fish commissioner and uncle of Theodore Roosevelt—and other conservationists began to believe that the health of the bay’s fish stock was approaching a point of crisis after noticing that their fishing expeditions had become less successful in the late 1880s.<sup>14</sup> In the first of many instances, conservationists painted working class users of the bay as improper stewards of its spaces: rather than blame the explosion in recreational fishing, they instead pointed the finger at the bay’s commercial net fishermen, whom they believed to be monopolizing the catch. To combat the perceived overfishing, New York State Senator Charles Stadler prepared

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<sup>12</sup> These names come from the bay’s geographic features as they were understood by locals.

<sup>13</sup> “Where to Go A-Fishing: A Directory Likely to Be of Service to Anglers,” *New York Times*, June 21, 1891.

<sup>14</sup> *Biographical Dictionary of the United States Congress*, s.v. “Roosevelt, Robert Barnwell (1829-1906),” <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=R000428>.

what came to be an eponymous bill outlawing net fishing in the bay in early 1890. The first legislative hearings were held on March 11, 1890.<sup>15</sup>

Class tensions suffused public discourse over the Stadler Bill. Supporters of the bill starkly juxtaposed commercial and recreational fishers and their supporting interests: to them, on the one side was a tiny group of approximately nine fishers, able to devastate the bay's entire fishery with their nets due to its peculiar topography—the shallow channels being perfect traps for fish; on the other, thousands of men of moderate means in need of recreation and food. They pointed out that the net fishers were averaging less than a dollar a day in profits—a “miserable business”—and that the only persons benefitting from their activity were the operators of Barren Island's fertilizer factories, who bought the catch. Opponents of the bill argued that it was being advanced at the behest of wealthy recreational fishers who wanted to take away the livelihood of the humble net fishers. The supporters quickly won out, with the bill being signed by Governor David Hill on June 7, 1890.<sup>16</sup>

The state's intervention destroyed the possibility of Jamaica Bay being a place of work for commercial fin fishing.<sup>17</sup> In spite of the Stadler Bill, Barren Island's industry persisted, although it remained an aberration in a bay that was increasingly becoming a

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<sup>15</sup> “Anglers Go to Albany,” *New York Times*, March 11, 1890. For more on the conflict between commercial and recreational fishing in instances like the Stadler Bill, see Elizabeth Pillsbury, “An American Bouillabaisse: The Ecology, Politics, and Economics of Fishing Around New York City, 1870-Present” (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> “Anglers Go to Albany”; Henry Stanley, “It Is Not Class Legislation,” *New York Times*, May 18, 1890; “Jamaica Bay for Anglers,” *New York Times*, June 8, 1890.

<sup>17</sup> Some commercial fishers continued to use Jamaica Bay as a base of operations for trips to the Atlantic, but commercial hook-and-line fin fishing never supplanted commercial net fishing: Black, *Jamaica Bay*, 61-62.

recreational destination for New Yorkers. The shellfish industry also continued, but did not interfere with recreational fishing, actually bolstering its development through oyster farmers providing services to recreational fishers to supplement their incomes.

Additionally, enjoying fresh shellfish added to the pleasure of an outing at places such as Canarsie: local historian William Fausser notes that visitors were “very partial to the Jamaica Bay clams” they “consumed in large quantities along with copious amounts of lager beer.”<sup>18</sup> One year after the Stadler Bill was passed, the *New York Times* noted that the fish were “increasing rapidly” in Jamaica Bay, a development that “has done much to better the fishing for the hook-and-line men.”<sup>19</sup>

The Stadler Bill reinforced the developing conception of Jamaica Bay as a recreational space. Supporters would say that the bill had made Jamaica Bay into a “fish park,” a metaphor they had used in describing the bill’s potential benefits: it implies a managed, public space of nature, akin to a game preserve.<sup>20</sup> It is likely that if the commercial net fishing continued, the bay would have become associated with Barren Island, creating a conception of the bay as polluted and spoiled, devoid of fish and dominated by unsavory types.

With recreational fishing secured, development supporting this activity continued along the bay’s shores. Two years after the Stadler Bill was passed a real estate company began developing a resort on the western shore of the bay between Barren Island and Canarsie at Bergen Island—a peninsula of land north of Mill Island (presently

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<sup>18</sup> Fausser, “Railroad.”

<sup>19</sup> “Where to Go A-Fishing.”

<sup>20</sup> “Anglers Go to Albany.”

Mill Basin). By 1905, visitors to what had become known as Bergen Beach could enjoy commercial bathing, boat liveries, a casino, and a theater. Canarsie possessed similar amenities, including Boegel's Oriental Bar and Dance Hall, a casino, fourteen hotels, and recreational fishing.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, in 1895 and 1896, the City of Brooklyn purchased land for a small park at Canarsie, known as Canarsie Beach Park.<sup>22</sup>

Development of the bay's interior would prove far more controversial. To developers, the communities that had grown along the trestle must have offered tantalizing glimpses of the possibilities offered by the bay's marshy islands and hummocks. Over the next decade, businesspersons moved as quickly as they could to exploit these lands, yet would be challenged by the existing residents and officials eager to take advantage of New York City's new acquisitions.

### **Residential Development: To 1905**

The consolidation of New York City in 1898, which created the boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens out of the former City of Brooklyn and other Long Island municipalities, brought Jamaica Bay under the control of zealously development-oriented officials. Standing in their way were private developers who had been given control of Jamaica Bay's lands by former Long Island towns six years earlier. Individuals such as Frederick W. Dunton, businessman and former President of the Town Board of Jamaica, sought to transform the bay into a space of private recreational and residential

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<sup>21</sup> Black, *Jamaica Bay*, 38, 47.

<sup>22</sup> "Jamaica Bay and the Rockaways Highlights: Canarsie Park, New York City Parks," New York City Department of Parks, <http://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/jamaica-bay-and-the-rockaways/highlights/148>.

developments serving an exclusive clientele. Both the City and the bay's insular residents would challenge Dunton's vision of a grand residential "Venice."

The leases to oyster farmers were only the beginning of attempts by Long Island towns to exploit Jamaica Bay. Although the underwater lands belonged to New York State, the bay's marshes and islands belonged to the towns. Reclamation was a particularly attractive project to towns because it allowed the creation of valuable developments on lands that were hitherto of little worth. Prior to consolidation, Flatlands had sold off twenty-four lots on an island known as Ruffle Bar to private parties. Jamaica, in what would become Queens, sold the entirety of its bay lands. The first major sale occurred in 1877 with a thirty-foot right of way for the railroad trestle, extended to 150 feet in 1880. The remainder was sold in 1892 under suspicious circumstances. Dunton arranged a fifty-year lease of the bay's lands to business associate Alonzo E. Smith. Eventually, the lands were transferred directly to companies controlled by Dunton. He justified his actions in an 1896 interview with the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* by noting that the arrangements were carried out with the intention of "securing... a larger income to the town of Jamaica."<sup>23</sup>

Dunton publicized his intentions for Jamaica Bay in 1896, proposing the development of a variety of sites in and around the bay. The lynchpin of the proposals was a shore-to-shore turnpike complete with roadway, bike path, and trolley line, providing significantly greater ease of access to the bay's interior and the Rockaway Peninsula from Brooklyn. To build the road, a company was created in 1897, headed by

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<sup>23</sup> Black, *Jamaica Bay*, 56–57; "A New Venice in Jamaica Bay," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 26, 1896.

developer P.H. Flynn. Dunton organized a variety of other companies to handle the developments: first the United States Land and Improvement Company, which received the lands leased to Smith in 1893, then the Co-operative Society of New York and New Jersey.<sup>24</sup>

For the northern shore, the plans called for the building of a “summer city” at Old Mill Creek near modern-day Howard Beach. At the time, the site—located near the northern terminus of the turnpike project—was sparsely populated. Dunton directly contrasted his development with Canarsie: instead of working class amusements, the resort was to consist of cottages, hotels, and boating facilities in a picturesque setting, expanding an existing cluster of vacation homes owned by prominent men such as the President of the Bank of the Metropolis Theodore Rogers and County Clerk John H. Sutphin.<sup>25</sup>

Dunton had grander ideas for the bay’s interior. The scheme called for the central islands to be filled in and connected, then improved with standard urban features like “flagged sidewalks, curbed streets, loamed, graveled and shaded by trees, as well as parks and playgrounds,” in addition to a “water and lighting system.” Upon the islands would be erected residences, and grants were to be made to developers to construct hotels that met with the company’s “idea of high class property.” The development was to be made private, with “but one carriage entrance from the mainland for the whole

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<sup>24</sup> “Road Across Jamaica Bay: This Enterprise Is Contemplated,” *New York Times*, November 13, 1897; “City Comes into the Case,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 15, 1901.

<sup>25</sup> “City on Jamaica Bay: Attractive Plans for a Big Summer Resort,” *New York Times*, March 15, 1896.



system of islands,” with a “gate keeper” to collect tolls and restrict “disorderly persons.” Reflecting the project’s lofty aspirations, Broad Channel was to be renamed Monarch Island.<sup>26</sup>

Dunton also sought to develop industry in the bay. In 1901, in collaboration with other investors, he incorporated a company called the Industrial Federation of America. The Federation sought investors for a scheme to establish “woolen, cotton, and textile mills of all kinds” as well as associated industries and residential developments on Jamaica Bay marshlands—presumably those held by Dunton’s other companies. They were to sell stock at fifty dollars per share, with future rental income on the new lands promising a “handsome return.”<sup>27</sup>

Dunton’s schemes offered a very different conception of Jamaica Bay than the existing idea of it being a “fish park,” in essence calling for transforming it into urban and suburban spaces linked to the larger fabric of New York City. It possessed recreational facilities, but was also heavily residential and even industrial in places. As opposed to a public space, it was to be mostly private and exclusive. Urban metaphors dominated, as seen with the “summer city” and island development. It is with these schemes that the idea of the bay as Venice first emerged: a reporter described them as creating a “veritable Venice by the sea.” As seen by Dunton’s plans for Monarch Island, this was meant quite literally: the space was to have the character and features of a suburban

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<sup>26</sup> “A New Venice in Jamaica Bay.”

<sup>27</sup> “To Reclaim Jamaica Bay,” *New York Times*, March 14, 1901.

neighborhood, albeit a slightly unusual one due to being built on islands like the European city.<sup>28</sup>

The creation of this new space hinged upon the destruction of the existing space—both literally and metaphorically. The articles reporting Dunton’s plans, while presenting representations of the future space, imagined the existing space using terms like “barren,” “useless,” “worthless,” and “waste meadows.”<sup>29</sup> They downplayed the bay’s current use, noting that “even in its present crude condition the bay is visited by thousands, but after the reclamation of these islands its attractions will be vastly enhanced,” revealing Dunton’s desire to exploit the bay’s resources.<sup>30</sup> For those living and working at the fishing stations, this conception was far from that which must have emerged from their experience: the bay provided their livelihoods, being far from useless. It was a space filled with fish and other forms of life, the opposite of barren. As groundless as it may have been, in the future, the conception of Jamaica Bay as a “wasteland” would nonetheless become an important device for those who sought to radically transform the bay.

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<sup>28</sup> “A New Venice in Jamaica Bay.” Historians’ thinking about suburbs has been dominated by Kenneth Jackson’s seminal work *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). Although Jackson’s definition of suburbia as a place where “affluent and middle-class Americans live... that are far from their work places, in homes that they own, and in the center of yards that by urban standards elsewhere are enormous” continues to remain influential, historians like Christopher Sellers have complicated this picture significantly. Working class Americans brought different meanings to suburban space, particularly in regards to the way nature was used: see Christopher Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible: Suburban Nature and the Rise of Environmentalism in Twentieth Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> “A New Venice in Jamaica Bay”; “City on Jamaica Bay”; “To Reclaim Jamaica Bay.”

<sup>30</sup> “A New Venice in Jamaica Bay.”

When Dunton began legal maneuvers to secure Jamaica Bay for his schemes, a complex battle ensued among his companies, the residents of Jamaica Bay, the City of New York, and the railroads. On February 21, 1901, lawyer Rawdon Kellogg, representing Dunton, served eviction notices to over one hundred “fishermen, hotel keepers and others residing on the islands and meadows of Jamaica.” The residents were described as having “erected large boat houses, hotels” and “other extensive improvements of considerable value.” Many of them made “a good living for themselves and families at fishing and letting out boats to visitors,” reflecting the continuing growth and development of the bay’s interior.<sup>31</sup>

In the first instance of many over the twentieth century, Jamaica Bay’s residents resisted the attempt to remove them from their island homes. On June 5, 1901, lawyers representing Theodore Wenk—a wire manufacturer who owned a summer home in Broad Channel—convinced a judge to halt the dispossession proceedings.<sup>32</sup> Though Wenk was a part-time resident, the other residents of the bay had a clear interest in the success of his actions. Wenk’s lawyers argued that Dunton’s actions were illegal because his company’s leases were invalid: leases were supposed to be made in a competitive bidding process, yet Dunton was accused of failing to properly publicize the proceedings in order to ensure that few or no competing bids were received. The judge, William J. Gaynor—a man who would eventually become the City’s mayor—put the

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<sup>31</sup> “Suits Brought to Eject Hundreds from Homes,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 2, 1901.

<sup>32</sup> George Upington, *Upington’s General Directory of Brooklyn, New York City, for the Year Ending May 1st 1902* (Brooklyn, NY: George Upington, 1902), 971.

burden of proof on Dunton, demanding he show cause for his actions. Wenk's lawyers subsequently filed suit to invalidate the leases.<sup>33</sup>

With the future of Jamaica Bay in the balance, officials of the City of New York had a vested interest in the success of Wenk's suit. If it failed, the majority of Jamaica Bay would be developed according to Dunton's wishes, greatly restricting the future possibilities for the City to utilize the space. Considering these facts, five months later, the Corporation Counsel of the City of New York became involved with the litigation, joining Wenk's legal team in the action to invalidate the leases.<sup>34</sup>

Suits against turnpike developer Flynn occurred contemporaneously. Two years earlier, in 1899, William Kelly, a lawyer who also represented the Long Island Railroad, took legal action against Flynn on behalf of Jamaica Bay property owners. Kelly claimed that the project would destroy the eastern half of the bay, arguing that the turnpike would disrupt the bay's currents and destroy shore property; it is likely that this knowledge emerged from the residents' experiences living and working in the bay.<sup>35</sup> The matter was not resolved until December 1902, when the New York Court of Appeals ruled Flynn's actions to have been legal. Moreover, the court considered the suit to have been brought solely for the purpose of ensuring that the Long Island Railroad's Jamaica Bay line would have no competition.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> "Suit to Set Aside Jamaica Bay Leases," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 5, 1901.

<sup>34</sup> "City Comes into the Case."

<sup>35</sup> "Want to Enjoin Mr. Flynn," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 24, 1899.

<sup>36</sup> "Road May Now Be Built Across Jamaica Bay," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 22, 1902.

Flynn's victory was temporary, for the proceedings against Dunton succeeded, opening the door for the City to undertake similar action against Flynn. Although lower courts ruled against Wenk, the New York Court of Appeals reversed the decision, handing down a ruling to set aside the lease of the lands made to Smith in June of 1902. They ruled that Dunton had acted in collusion with Smith, and that the Town Board of Jamaica had lacked the authority to make the lease.<sup>37</sup> Corporation Counsel George Rives would then sue for control of the remaining lands leased by the Town of Jamaica for speculative interests. By 1905, all of the contested leases had been captured by the City.<sup>38</sup> The people of Jamaica Bay had won, their conception of a publically oriented recreational space allowed to continue, yet their allies would soon have other ideas.

With the City's possession of Jamaica Bay ensured, observers feverishly speculated as to its potential. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* declared on the eve of the City's victory that the bay's lands would "become immensely valuable for wharves and piers for business purposes and for pleasure resorts." The bay also offered "the finest territory for a seashore and lake and island park system of any city in the world."<sup>39</sup> Within two years, New York City Comptroller Edward Grout would call for the creation of a massive commercial and industrial port in Jamaica Bay: a development that would soon overshadow all other uses. The conception of Jamaica Bay as a publically oriented

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<sup>37</sup> "Lease Set Aside," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 28, 1902.

<sup>38</sup> "Jamaica Bay Leases Revert to the City," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 21, 1903; New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Thirty-Fourth Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1905), 144–149.

<sup>39</sup> "Jamaica Bay Leases Revert to the City."

recreational space would nonetheless continue to fascinate New Yorkers in the years to come—even as its commercial potential began to be realized.

### **The Venice of New York**

Dunton's scheme failed, yet the metaphor of Venice remained in use, albeit becoming something altogether different from the exclusive home and hotel-studded Monarch Island that echoed the baroque grandeur of Italy. Starting in the first decade of the twentieth century, the residents of Jamaica Bay adopted the idea of Venice to imagine the bay as it was, although the exact extent of the metaphor's use cannot be ascertained.<sup>40</sup> As opposed to an abstraction imposed from without, this conception of Venice was an organic development grounded in knowledge gained from the use of bay, serving to better define its space outside of the urban/nature binary—which failed to adequately capture its essence. It would be understood as a hybrid space, defined by its liminality—between nature and city, land and water.

Jamaica Bay's Venice encompassed five separate communities in 1905, all along the trestle: Ramblersville and Howard Station (also known as Howard's Landing) on the North shore, and Broad Channel, Goose Creek, and The Raunt in the bay. A

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<sup>40</sup> Usage of the term in this particular way first appears in newspaper articles covering the bay's development into a resort: "The Venice of Long Island," *Scientific American*, May 17, 1902; "Like a Venice on Stilts," *The New York Sun*, April 26, 1903; "New York Has a Picturesque Venice All Her Own," *New York Tribune*, August 2, 1903; "Here Is a Little Venice at the Door of Brooklyn," Unknown Periodical, June 9, 1905, Folder: Jamaica Bay Settlements, Vertical Files, Archive at Queens Library, Queens Public Library, Central Branch.

sixth, Beach Channel, was destroyed in a 1903 fire.<sup>41</sup> All of the settlements comprising this “Venice” would share distinctive physical features: their most striking attribute was that they were “villages on stilts... built on piles and trestles” driven into the marshy islands completely submerged at high tide. Most of the buildings were constructed by the residents themselves. Instead of streets, “board walks or floats” formed the thoroughfares, and boats took the place of cars.<sup>42</sup> A photograph from the era (figure 3) refers to a boat as a “gondola,” demonstrating the tenacity and logic of the metaphor.

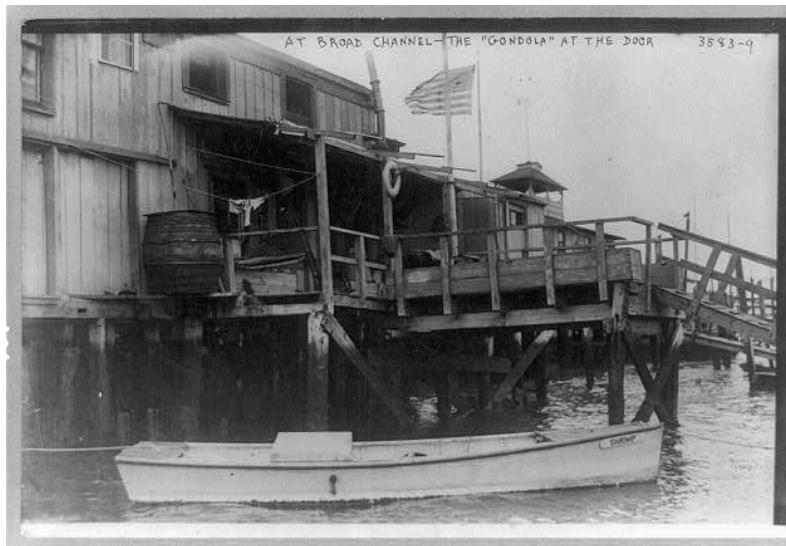


Figure 3. *At Broad Channel—The “Gondola” at the Door*. Photograph, 1915. The George Grantham Bain Collection. Reproduced from The Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/90706208/>.

Though each site shared similar features, each offered different services. Where Ramblersbille was mainly home to fishers, Goose Creek (figure 4) was the place to go to simply rent a boat. The Raunt (figure 5) was home to fishing and hunting clubs.

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<sup>41</sup> “Here Is a Little Venice at the Door of Brooklyn”; Black, *Jamaica Bay*, 59.

<sup>42</sup> “Here Is a Little Venice at the Door of Brooklyn.”

Howard's Landing had the largest hotel, and Broad Channel and Beach Channel both had a wide range of services and accommodations available for fishers.<sup>43</sup>



Figure 4. *Goose Creek, Houses on the Water, Jamaica Bay, NY*. Photograph, ca. 1915. The George Grantham Bain Collection. Reproduced from The Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ggb2004001989/>.



Figure 5. *The Raunt, On the Water*. Photograph, ca. 1915. The George Grantham Bain Collection. Reproduced from The Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ggb2004001988/>.

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<sup>43</sup> "New York Has a Picturesque Venice All Her Own."



Special attention was paid the residents of this Venice, who were described with a mixture of bewilderment and curiosity yet at the same time a certain admiration. One article describes them as people who “spend much of their time out in the bay.” They are described as “pioneers,” which would make sense considering the spontaneous nature of the bay’s settlement. Being right on the water enabled them to “sit comfortably on their front porches, fishline in hand, and pull their dinners from the water into the fryingpan,” highlighting the supposed ease in which the residents eked a living out of the bay.<sup>44</sup> The experience of fishing from one’s house may seem somewhat fantastical, but photographic evidence (figure 6) shows otherwise. Although the photo was likely staged, the activity depicted was nonetheless entirely possible.



Figure 6. *At Broad Channel—Fishing at your Front Door*. Photograph, ca. 1915. The George Grantham Bain Collection. Reproduced from The Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ggb2005019846/>.

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<sup>44</sup> “Here Is a Little Venice at the Door of Brooklyn.”

Although most articles on Jamaica Bay's Venice depict the space positively, there is at least one exception. A 1904 account of a yachting outing to the bay in *Forest and Stream* magazine begins with the author, George E. Crater Jr., meeting at a yacht club on the bay's shore on July fourth to make arrangements for the upcoming trip. After securing a pilot for his yacht, the *Americus*, he and his friend were left with some free time. Apart from "the usual refreshment and cigars," he engaged in a bit of what he described as "slumming" and watching people "who seemed to find amusement in sitting at tables and eating all sorts of horrors, and drinking the queerest mixtures," showing the precariousness of the space's respectability and potential for class-based criticism.<sup>45</sup>

In spite of its romanticism, the metaphor of Jamaica Bay as Venice reflected the power of experience in shaping conceptions of space. As opposed to Dunton, who conceived of the bay as a resource to exploit through urbanization, the Venice of the bay's residents attempted to reconcile a space that did not fit well within existing metaphors. As the City Department of Docks and Ferries took control of the bay in 1904 and began to develop it both into a port and a residential resort, the era of Venice would gradually fade, but the idea of the bay's communities as being hybrid spaces of city and nature remained well into the twentieth century, forming a key part of their identities.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> George E. Crater, "A Long Island Cruise: A Power Boat Trip from Jamaica Bay to Peconic Bay," *Forest and Stream*, March 26, 1904.

<sup>46</sup> Sarah Wilford, "Jamaica Bay Has More Islands Than Venice," *Long Island Daily Press*, December 20, 1935; Meyer Berger, "About New York: City Has Its Own Venice (in Jamaica Bay)," *New York Times*, December 18, 1957. Donatella Lorch, "Broad

## Recreational and Residential Development, 1905-1920

With the issue of control over the bay's islands finally settled, the City found itself the landlord to the people of New York's Venice. Even though plans to completely remake Jamaica Bay as a port were soon developed by a commission, the difficulty of the endeavor meant that the status quo would prevail for the time being. Seeing greater opportunity for profit, the City would eventually grant significant portions of the bay to private developers, leading to a gradual shift towards a less publically oriented residential space more in line with Dunton's proposals.

In a 1905 speech, New York City Comptroller Edward Grout declared his intention to turn the bay into a commercial and industrial port.<sup>47</sup> With the process to secure the port a decades-long affair (detailed in chapter two), officials decided to make the most of their new lands in the interim by acting as landlord to the bay's residents. Although their projects had failed, Dunton and Flynn's actions produced the most significant alterations of Jamaica Bay's topography seen to date. Utilizing modern dredges, work on the turnpike project had commenced from 1899 until stopped by the legal proceedings in 1901. Meadows were filled in the vicinity of Broad Channel as well as on the northern shore of the bay, providing a number of new spaces to rent out.<sup>48</sup>

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Channel Battles on for Its Identity and Wins," *New York Times*, August 23, 1991 is the latest instance of the term used in the press I have found.

<sup>47</sup> Edward M. Grout, *Improvement and Development of Jamaica Bay and the Water Front of the City of New York Other than that of Manhattan Island: Being a Communication Addressed to the Commissioners of the Sinking Fund of the City of New York* (New York: Martin B. Brown Press, 1905).

<sup>48</sup> Black, *Jamaica Bay*, 74.

The City's involvement with the bay increased over time. The duty of administering the space was given to its Department of Docks and Ferries. Surveying the lands the City had acquired was an important component of the Department's activities, giving it greater knowledge of the potentials and pitfalls of its spaces: this process began in 1906. The first leases were granted that year, with 250 permits for occupation issued.<sup>49</sup>

In 1910, the communities in the bay remained strongly oriented towards recreation. That year 435 lots in the bay were under lease, with 343 at Broad Channel, sixty five at the Raunt, twenty at Goose Creek, and the remainder on smaller creeks, marshes, and meadows. Rents ranged from ten dollars per year to more than one hundred dollars, with most falling between thirty and forty dollars. The rent rolls list thirty-one clubs, with organizations ranging from gun clubs to fishing and yachting clubs.<sup>50</sup> Census data reveals 239 people living in these communities year-round, many in families. The majority of residents worked as commercial fishers, for the railroad, and in the local recreation industry as bartenders, servants, hotel proprietors, and fishing guides.<sup>51</sup>

The shore of Jamaica Bay would continue to see recreational development at sites old and new. In 1907, a Coney Island-like amusement park named "Golden City"

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<sup>49</sup> New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Thirty-Fifth Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1906), 235.

<sup>50</sup> New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Thirty-Ninth Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries of the City of New York* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1910), 143–170.

<sup>51</sup> US Census Bureau, *1910 US Census*, Queens County, New York, population schedule, digital image, <http://www.heritagequest.com>.

opened at Canarsie, bolstering the recreational opportunities of this already popular resort. It offered a variety of amusements, from a “Ride Down the Niagara” to a “Robinson Crusoe” show. An article from that year noted that “a little village of hotels and restaurants has already sprung up to meet the demands of the expected visitors” and that “yachts and rowboats seemed to be doing a good business.”<sup>52</sup> In 1912, a scenic railroad opened in Bergen Beach, adding to the amusements already there.<sup>53</sup>

Sites around the bay saw similar developments. Barren Island would remain an aberration during this period, continuing to serve as a site for refuse disposal, though by the end of the 1910s the factories started to decline as automobile traffic replaced equine transportation.<sup>54</sup> A newly developed site was Flatlands Bay, located north of Bergen Beach: beginning in 1909, when the Docks Department granted five permits for boathouses, the space would gradually develop into a residential resort, with the city issuing 244 permits to companies and individuals for bungalows by 1921.<sup>55</sup>

Starting in 1915, the Docks Department began granting leases to development companies. The first was to a land developer named Pierre Noel, a front man for a company known as the Broad Channel Corporation. The City agreed to a ten-year lease—with two possible extensions—of most of the bay’s interior. Noel was to pay \$15,000 per year for the first three years, gradually increasing to \$20,000 per year for

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<sup>52</sup> “‘Golden City’ Opens to a Great Crowd,” *New York Times*, May 31, 1907.

<sup>53</sup> Black, *Jamaica Bay*, 38.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 25–33.

<sup>55</sup> New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Thirty-Eighth Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1909), 176; New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Fiftieth Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1921), 81–82.

Broad Channel, and \$9,000 for Goose Creek and the Raunt. The company took over the existing leases but would also develop new lots to rent. This action was likely taken due to the greater amount of income that could be wrought from the companies.<sup>56</sup> Once more, reporters described the project as a “Venice,” although the meaning of this was gradually shifting back towards Dunton’s suburban resort—albeit a more modest one.<sup>57</sup>

The trend of consolidating leases continued. The City made a similar agreement with the lessees of Ruffle Bar—the inhabited island on the Brooklyn side of Jamaica Bay—in 1915. Residents formed the Ruffle Bar Association and entered into a ten-year lease with the city. In 1916, the City granted a lease to another developer, the Howard Estates Development Company; the Company acquired the lands in order to build bungalows near the site of the former Howard’s Landing on the north shore, an earlier project of the developer that had burned down in 1907.<sup>58</sup>

The Broad Channel Corporation worked hard to impose order upon the islands of Jamaica Bay and turn them into a more conventional suburban form. A 1915 memo to residents reveals the Broad Channel Corporation’s aim, which was to create a permanent community out in the middle of the bay. The memo begins by noting how the Corporation was happy that ninety-nine percent of the residents were cooperating with the company in making “a well ordered community of good people living in a livable

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<sup>56</sup> New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Forty-Fourth Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1915), 94.

<sup>57</sup> “A Loss to City Seen in Lease of Islands,” *New York Times*, September 18, 1916.

<sup>58</sup> Department of Docks and Ferries, *Forty-Fourth Annual Report*, 94; New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Forty-Fifth Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries of the City of New York* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1916), 94; Black, *Jamaica Bay*, 52.

place,” though it chided a small group who had launched a failed attempt to invalidate the lease; they noted that “we will still give the disturbers a brief period to become our friends like the rest of the good people residing... if our overtures are rejected, they will be eliminated.”<sup>59</sup> As they had done before, the fiercely independent residents of the bay were resisting change, though this time they would not be successful.

The Corporation took numerous steps to make Broad Channel a permanent community. The company installed a well, streetlights, and started trash pickup. For entertainment, they acquired a “moving picture show.” They also resumed filling in the marshes, a process begun by Dunton and Flynn. A 1916 letter to tenants noted how the company was pumping sand to “an average height of seven feet above low water-mark.” The letter noted that “this will make a vast improvement in the appearance, usefulness and healthfulness of the Island,” permitting roads to be constructed and pipes to be laid. All of these steps were making Jamaica Bay’s island communities more suburban and ordered, yet eliminating what made them unique.<sup>60</sup>

In 1917, the Corporation continued their project of transforming the island communities, asking for the residents’ cooperation. A letter from that year begins by calling to mind the “things to be done to our homes to make them cosy [*sic*] and comfortable for the season of 1917. In one case it may be the building of a porch or an extension to the house, a coat of paint or repairing the old rain barrel.” The company

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<sup>59</sup> Broad Channel Corporation to Tenants, August 5, 1915, Folder: The Struggle to Buy Our Land, Papers of the Broad Channel Historical Society, Queens Public Library, Broad Channel Branch, Broad Channel, NY.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.; Broad Channel Corporation to J. Schoeller, Esq., March 13, 1916, Folder: The Struggle to Buy Our Land, Papers of the Broad Channel Historical Society, Queens Public Library, Broad Channel Branch.

noted that they had made great progress on water mains, so that “if you decide no longer to be depending on the ‘old rain barrel’ let us hear from you.”<sup>61</sup> With many of the houses already existing before the granting of the lease, residents were to be responsible for their houses, so persuasion was the best tool of the company in furthering their goals.

As seen from these memos, the process of changing the communities was slow, the residents resistant. In the eyes of the company, eliminating the uneven edges and contours of the land, rain barrels, and tenants with independent streaks helped to create community, but it was just these features that made Broad Channel distinctive and contributed to the conception of it being like Venice. The Venice of the Broad Channel Corporation may have been built on islands, but it was a suburban Venice; most importantly, it was a conception to be imposed upon the Bay based on an existing cultural ideal, not one that developed from use and everyday experiences.

## **Conclusion**

The changing understandings of Jamaica Bay from 1880 to 1920 reveal the importance of the use and regulation in shaping conceptions of space. F.W. Dunton may have thought that he could draw up plans to willfully transform the bay, yet as long as thousands made use of the space their experiences would be the dominant factor determining how it was conceived of. Experience also led the residents of the bay to the

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<sup>61</sup> Broad Channel Corporation to Tenants, February 15, 1917, Folder: The Struggle to Buy Our Land, Papers of the Broad Channel Historical Society, Queens Public Library, Broad Channel Branch.



metaphor of Venice in order to capture the space's liminality and reconcile the tension between city and nature within it.

By 1920, Jamaica Bay was still strongly oriented towards recreation, yet the actions of developers were taking its spaces in a very different direction, towards a permanent residential space. Permanent residents required services, features that would slowly make Broad Channel more conventionally suburban. As they became more developed, the bay's communities would slowly lose their distinctiveness, leading to different conceptions of their space. The era of New York's Venice was ending, yet the ideal of a public frontier in the City accessible to all—whether entrepreneurs hoping to make it in business or a person simply looking to fish or rent a cottage for a vacation—would remain an appealing idea and continue to exist in the hearts and minds of New Yorkers well into the twentieth century.

## **Chapter Two**

### **The “Wonder Harbor of the World”: The Jamaica Bay Port Scheme, 1905-1938**

With the legal issues surrounding New York City’s claim to Jamaica Bay settled by 1905, businesspersons and officials eager to exploit the City’s new acquisitions began to develop grandiose plans for the bay’s future. A scheme to transform the bay into a commercial and industrial port quickly rose to prominence, overshadowing all other proposed uses for the space among City officials. For over three decades the City, in conjunction with New York State and federal authorities, stubbornly worked in the face of numerous difficulties to make the project a reality.

The port scheme ultimately failed. Intergovernmental cooperation proved difficult: mistrust between the federal and City governments led to a perpetual shortage of funding due to each side constantly demanding assurances and proof from the other that they were fully committed to the success of the project. This state of affairs dragged the process of physically transforming the bay’s space out over decades, during which the initial luster of the project faded and key requirements like transportation connections failed to materialize. In 1938, New York City Park Commissioner Robert Moses took advantage of the delays to successfully argue for a new direction for the bay, officially ending the City’s commitment to building the harbor.

Creating the port was as much about creating and altering conceptions of space as it was modifying physical expanses. Existing conceptions were negated through

imagining the bay as virgin wasteland, editing out the Venice of New York. Boosters and City officials contrasted this “wilderness” with created representations of the space as it would be, disseminating bird’s eye views of geometric islands and shores dotted with wharves, warehouses and factories on maps and artistic depictions of the future harbor. Although these plans failed to come to fruition, the limited work done on the project resulted in the most dramatic topographical changes that the bay had seen to date.

### **An Idea Develops, 1905-1910**

As appealing as Jamaica Bay was to City officials, the process of developing it into a site suitable for commerce and industry was complicated and expensive. Plans and studies needed to be created. The magnitude of the changes required to make the bay suitable for ocean-going ships necessitated assistance and cooperation from state and federal officials, both for funding and for securing development rights. Officials also feared that the project would spark a speculative bonanza in the area, leading them to proceed cautiously in a way that would discourage damaging price bubbles.

Developers recognized Jamaica Bay’s commercial potential as early as the antebellum period. A local history of New Lots, a former Long Island municipality abutting the bay between Flatlands and Jamaica, notes that in 1835 businessman John Pitkin envisioned Jamaica Bay as a “transportation center” that would assist his plans to build a rival city to Brooklyn called East New York. Though he ended up purchasing land for his scheme and heavily promoted it, it came to naught due to minimal development along the shores of Jamaica Bay throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The next serious attempt

to develop the bay for commerce and industry would not be seen until F.W. Dunton's failed schemes starting in the 1890s.<sup>1</sup>

City Comptroller Edward Grout first introduced the policy of actively developing Jamaica Bay on November 17, 1905, in a speech before the Commissioners of the New York City Sinking Fund. Describing the bay as "a vast territory of unimproved land," he argued that the City should immediately "execute a comprehensive scheme for the full development of this property" to "furnish here a centering point for great manufacturing interests, which will subsequently produce a large and ever increasing revenue to the City of New York." This first involved settling the remaining legal issues, then altering the space in order to make it suitable for development and traffic by filling and bulkheading shore lands and dredging deeper channels. Securing railroad linkages was the final part of the plan, completing the link between ocean and mainland. Grout claimed that railroads were already scheming to build connections to the bay's shore, meaning that the space was ripe for exploitation.<sup>2</sup>

Commercial and industrial development was Grout's main concern, yet this did not limit his vision. Using examples of European cities like Amsterdam and Hamburg, he hinted that port development could further catalyze the transformations underway in

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<sup>1</sup> Alter F. Landesman, *A History of New Lots, Brooklyn to 1877 Including the Villages of East New York, Cyprus Hills, and Brownsville* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1977), 92.

<sup>2</sup> Edward M. Grout, *Improvement and Development of Jamaica Bay and the Water Front of the City of New York Other than that of Manhattan Island: Being a Communication Addressed to the Commissioners of the Sinking Fund of the City of New York* (New York: Martin B. Brown Press, 1905), 3, 10. Beginning in 1895, officials in numerous communities throughout the United States viewed waterway improvements as an economic panacea: see Samuel Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 91-95.

East Brooklyn, which was finally growing as a result of recently built transportation connections to Manhattan. In the bay itself, he noted that developing its islands would enable “a commercial and manufacturing Venice, or a Venice of homes, or both.” Grout’s use of the “Venice” metaphor seems to reflect his familiarity with Dunton’s schemes as opposed to the contemporary usage of the term, for like Dunton, Grout sought to create an urban Jamaica Bay integrated into the larger fabric of the metropolis.<sup>3</sup>

Grout also sought to transform the way people understood the bay as it was. Pointing out that “little or nothing has been done to reclaim what is practically waste land and water,” he described it as “virgin territory, where the ideal development may be secured without hindrance.” These descriptions ignored the changes the bay was experiencing in order to provide contrast with his urbanized proposal, and demonstrate his understanding of the bay as a resource to exploit. Depicting the bay as empty also downplayed the potential difficulty of removing the bay’s inhabitants—people who had successfully resisted Dunton’s eviction notices.<sup>4</sup>

In response to Grout’s call, the New York City Board of Estimate created the Jamaica Bay Improvement Commission. From May 1906 to May 1907 the group worked, exhaustively considering the benefits and costs of developing Jamaica Bay. They also devoted significant time analyzing the necessity of the project in light of future economic growth. In 1907, the group reported its findings. Although the commissioners ended up agreeing on the importance of having additional harbor space and the

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<sup>3</sup> Group, *Improvement and Development of Jamaica Bay*, 9–10, 15–16.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 5, 10.

suitability of Jamaica Bay for such a site, they split on what form the port would actually take, releasing majority and minority reports with different plans.

All of the commissioners agreed on the necessity of expanding New York's available wharfage. They predicted that by 1915, commerce handled by the Port of New York would increase to over one and one-half times that at the beginning of the twentieth century. In arriving at this figure, they considered factors such as the forthcoming completion of the Barge Canal—a major reconstruction of New York State's canal system authorized in 1903 linking the Hudson River to Lakes Ontario, Erie, and Champlain—as well as expected increases in foreign trade. As to the current status of New York's ports, the report notes that Manhattan's wharves—where most of the City's waterborne commerce was taking place—were already crowded, and transportation of goods from the waterfront to railroads and factories was difficult; with Manhattan as developed as it was, solving this bottleneck would be very expensive. In light of these factors, the authors encouraged officials to look to the outer boroughs. Jamaica Bay was elevated above all other possible sites due to it being the largest and possessing numerous advantages that would aid development.<sup>5</sup>

One of Jamaica Bay's advantages was its supposed emptiness. The report noted that although some entrepreneurs had made “bold” efforts to develop portions of the bay—most notably the Rockaways, Barren Island, Canarsie, and Bergen Beach—its “vastness” dwarfed these sites, leading to the impression that it was in the “same

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<sup>5</sup> Jamaica Bay Improvement Commission, *Report of the Jamaica Bay Improvement Commission* (New York: Martin B. Brown Press, 1907), 7–15; Noble Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State* (Albany, NY: JB Lyon Company, 1922), <http://www.eriecanal.org/texts/Whitford/1906/contents.html>.

primitive condition as when Jasper Denkins and his companions visited this region in the last years of the seventeenth century.” The commissioners acknowledged that the bay was a popular fishing resort and that the islands had a “comparatively large number of inhabitants, especially during the summer months,” yet nothing else is said about the Venice described by contemporary writers. Like Grout and Dunton, they imagined the bay a space of wild nature, just waiting to be developed. Emptiness implied that harnessing the space for commerce and industry could be done easily, without the difficulties involved with transforming a developed area.<sup>6</sup>

The bay also possessed a number of natural features conducive to a port. The Rockaway peninsula protected its waters from the full brunt of the Atlantic Ocean, providing shelter from storms: the commissioners described it as a “perfect natural harbor.” Water flowed slowly within the bay, meaning that interior channels could be easily maintained. The islands and shoreline, when properly bulkheaded and filled, would offer extensive area for wharves: up to 100 miles, more than the sum total of that already in existence in the City. Shore areas were also flat, making them ideal sites for factories due to the ease of building railroad connections. All of these factors made the bay an ideal place for development.<sup>7</sup>

The site was not without its challenges. The bay’s mouth was a constantly shifting environment, meaning that creating and maintaining an entrance channel sufficiently deep for ship traffic would be difficult and costly, requiring regular dredging and the construction of a complicated jetty system. Legal difficulties also remained: the

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<sup>6</sup> Jamaica Bay Improvement Commission, *Report*, 3, 16–17, 21.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 41–42.

commissioners learned that the Attorney General of the State of New York considered all of the Jamaica Bay lands under water up to the high water mark to be State property, a contention with which the City disagreed. Finally, the commissioners determined that eminent domain, the compensated expropriation of private property in support of a greater public need, would have to be used carefully if it were to succeed. The City needed to demonstrate the necessity of its seizures: the commissioners reasoned that it would not be possible to prove the immediate need for the entirety of the marshlands around the bay's shore, so such acquisitions would need to be done piecemeal and be backed by definite plans. None of these difficulties were viewed as insurmountable, so the commissioners included recommendations for overcoming them.<sup>8</sup>

The two actual proposals that emerged from all of these considerations were strikingly different. The committee's majority planned for a variety of potential uses: they envisioned that while "certain sections could be best developed for the purposes of trade [and] manufacture," others could be developed for "sanitariums and city institutions... suburban settlements and villa sites... parks and waterside resorts." The plan placed the commercial and industrial sites on the western and northern shores, where railroad connections would be most easily made. It also called for enlarging an existing park at Canarsie. On the islands, echoing Dunton's earlier scheme, it prescribed filling and bulkheading to create salable land that was to be connected to the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 41–42, 46–52.



mainland by a causeway road. Certain islands could be left isolated for institutions like “a seaside home for poor children, a hospital or a penal colony.”<sup>9</sup>

The minority report called for Jamaica Bay to be more radically transformed. As opposed to the plan of the majority report, which modified the existing features of the bay to make it suitable for development, the minority plan completely erased them: it called for combining the existing island and hummocks into three large ones, one in the west, the other two in the center. The rationale was that a simpler design would cost less in the long run, and facilitate the flow of ship traffic. The massive dredging required for this process would also enable the reclamation of marshlands around the shore for homes and businesses. Apart from this brief mention of residential use, the plan focused entirely upon developing the bay for commerce and industry, in particular the western island, which would be easily accessible by railroads and deep-ocean vessels.<sup>10</sup>

The majority report’s plan served as the basis for the City’s actions going forward over the next decade. Commissioner of the Department of Docks and Ferries, Calvin Tomkins—the chief official initially in charge of the project—committed the City to developing a multi-use space appropriate for commerce, industry, and recreation. In addition to highlighting the improvements needed to support these developments, the report also provided a set of suggestions as to how to proceed. It strongly advised caution, asking the City to proceed deliberately in conjunction with other governmental

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 52–96.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 118–144.

entities in order to not overextend its finances.<sup>11</sup> The Dock Commissioner would pay close attention to these recommendations going forward: scholar Keith Revell notes that Tomkins was devoted to the Progressive Era ideal of expertise and planning, that he was attempting to consider Jamaica Bay's development in conjunction with that of the wider region. This fact would infuriate boosters, who believed that completing the port was ultimately more beneficial than regional planning.<sup>12</sup>

Cooperation with New York State and the federal government was secured over the next three years. In 1909, the last major legal impediment to the project was overcome when the New York State Legislature granted the City possession of the bay's underwater lands for the purpose of developing a harbor; this grant required the City or federal government to appropriate funds for the project before the lands could be transferred, with the City's allotment being at least one million dollars. Taking advantage of the 1907 Rivers and Harbors Act passed by Congress, which included a provision mandating the Secretary of War to survey Jamaica Bay, the commissioners worked with the War Department to create a plan. The resulting scheme called for a 1500-foot wide entrance channel thirty feet deep, as well as 1000-foot wide main channels thirty feet deep on the western and northern shores of the bay. The City was given the responsibility of dredging, though the federal government would provide reimbursement at the discretion of the Secretary of War, who needed to be convinced that the project

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 93–96; New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Report on Jamaica Bay Improvement* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1910), 18–20.

<sup>12</sup> Keith D. Revell, *Building Gotham: Civic Culture and Public Policy in New York City, 1898-1938* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 58-59.

was proceeding apace.<sup>13</sup> The federal government was given the option of proceeding with the dredging in piecemeal fashion, only funding it to a depth of eighteen feet and width of 500 feet until significant progress was made on the overall project. In 1910, Congress allocated an initial \$250,500, to be disbursed under the stated conditions.<sup>14</sup>

Dock Commissioner Tomkins coordinated a variety of actions designed to meet the requirements mandated by the federal and state actions, proceeding cautiously in order to ensure that the City would be reimbursed. He coordinated with the Board of Estimate to appropriate one million dollars to satisfy the State's requirements to transfer its underwater lands to the City, and prepared a map detailing plans for dredging and bulkheading. To ensure that the City would not get ahead of the federal government's appropriations of reimbursements, he mandated that only \$250,000 (essentially the amount hitherto allotted by Congress) worth of dredging and bulkheading be done for the time being, and only at sites the Secretary of War considered appropriate. The rest of the funds were to be spent acquiring land, but Tomkins demanded that appropriations be done in a manner that hindered speculators from profiting from the City's actions.<sup>15</sup>

The desire for caution also permeated Tomkins' discussion of the specifics of the plan. Overall, Tomkins wanted to develop the project "without undue hardship to the

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<sup>13</sup> Congressman Theodore E. Burton, Chairman of the Congressional Rivers and Harbors Committee, mandated the cautious approach seen here in order to blunt overly enthusiastic boosters of waterway improvements: see Hays, *Conservation*, 91-95.

<sup>14</sup> New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Forty-Eighth Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries of the City of New York* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1919), 24–28; Department of Docks and Ferries, *Report on Jamaica Bay Improvement*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Department of Docks and Ferries, *Forty-Eighth Annual Report*, 24–28; Department of Docks and Ferries, *Report on Jamaica Bay Improvement*, 1–14.

present generation of citizens... which shall tend to retard other needed improvements,” leading him to adopt a gradualist approach. In a 1910 progress report he declared:

There is real danger that the very magnitude of the project and the remoteness of its ulterior consequences may engender shallow criticism on the ground of impracticability and absence of immediate results. The enterprise is at present in more danger from the enthusiastic claims of its advocates, however well founded, than from any definite opposition.

Though Tomkins was committed to the scheme and believed it necessary and feasible, he envisioned it developing gradually over many years in conjunction with other regional sites, which explains his fears. To support his assertion he quoted a New York City Board of Trade and Transportation report that regarded the bay as “a possible alternative or auxiliary harbor for the Port of New York one or two generations hence.”<sup>16</sup>

Tomkins’s cautions were justified, for boosters were concurrently pushing for the improvement scheme in the most enthusiastic manner possible. The most important group was the Jamaica Bay Improvement Association, a private group of businesspersons and local officials. In late 1907, the Association appointed the prominent and well-connected Brooklyn land developer Henry Adolf Meyer as its president. Under Meyer, the group undertook activities like publishing a newsletter dedicated to reporting on the project’s progress, coordinating meetings with civic groups, and arranging speeches by prominent officials such as New York Congressman Charles Law. Eventually, Meyer would work his way into the Docks Department, allowing the group to directly shape policy.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Department of Docks and Ferries, *Report on Jamaica Bay Improvement*, 7–10.

<sup>17</sup> Handbill by The 32nd Ward Taxpayers Association, “Jamaica Bay Improvement Mass Meeting,” March 27, 1909, Box 2, Papers of Henry Adolf Meyer, Brooklyn Historical

The Association's goal was the immediate transformation of Jamaica Bay into the envisioned harbor. Their attitude is best encapsulated in a quote from Meyer, found on a plaque affixed to Canarsie Pier, one of the project's successes: it states that "Jamaica Bay awaits the touch of the magic wand that will transform it into the Wonder Harbor of the World."<sup>18</sup> For Meyer and the boosters, the project was a question of will. To this end, instead of embracing the City's gradualist approach, they heavily promoted the minority report's plan to construct giant islands on the bay's surface. The group disseminated representations of a transformed Jamaica Bay in the form of maps and drawings of the port in newsletters and other communications. As representations of space, the images were like the magic wand, possibilities to be imposed upon the bay and made real.<sup>19</sup> These actions captured the attention of journalists: on July 2, 1910, *Scientific American* published an artist's rendering of the bay developed according to the minority report's scheme, depicting it encircled with wharves and factories spewing smoke (figure 7).

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Association, Brooklyn, NY; Handbill, "Official Notice: United Retail Grocers Association," February 9, 1909, Box 2, Papers of Henry Adolf Meyer, Brooklyn Historical Association; Henry A. Meyer, *Looking Through Life's Window: Personal Reminiscences* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1930), 158–163.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Waite, "Ripples of Change Flutter on Jamaica Bay," *New York Times*, August 30, 1987.

<sup>19</sup> Henry A. Meyer, "Jamaica Bay: Its Advantages and Opportunities," *Jamaica Jinger*, May 1921, Folder: Jamaica Bay Pamphlets, Vertical Files, Archive at Queens Library, Queens Public Library, Central Branch, Jamaica, NY.



Figure 7. “Plans For Jamaica Bay,” *Scientific American*, July 2, 1910.

The port scheme captured the imagination of journalists in other ways, intersecting with the conception of the bay as New York’s Venice. A day after *Scientific American* published its story on the port, the *New York Tribune* released a feature imagining the bay developed into a “novel amusement park” (figure 8). The *Tribune*’s future bay was loosely based on the majority report’s plan, which provided room for other uses beyond commercial and industrial development. The image was somewhat like the Venice of Italy with its baroque towers, grand bridges, and gondolas, though it also featured Ferris wheels alongside wharves and warehouses. Though fantastical, it nonetheless demonstrates the continuing popularity and allure of the idea of Jamaica Bay as the Venice of New York.

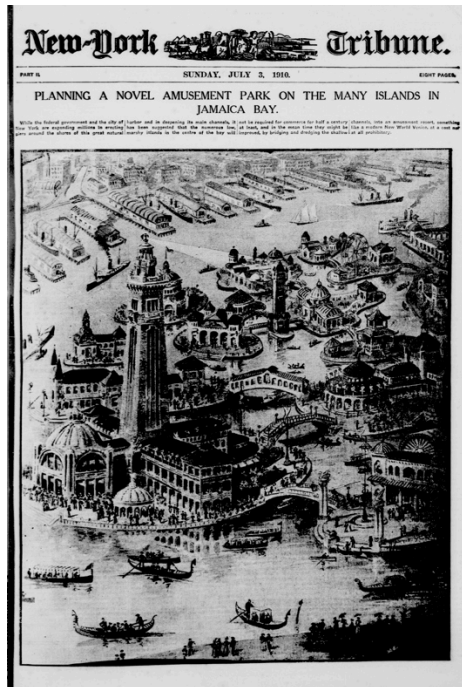


Figure 8. “Planning a Novel Amusement Park on the Many Islands in Jamaica Bay,” *New York Tribune*, July 3, 1910.

In 1910, the Jamaica Bay Improvement Association was ready to declare victory, celebrating the recent developments with a dinner honoring Congressman Charles Law on May 24. In addition to Law and Meyer, Commissioner Tomkins spoke before the group on the progress and promise of the project. The Association presented Law with a plaque declaring him the “father of Jamaica Bay harbor,” upon which was pictured the minority report’s plan—a fact that probably rankled Tomkins, but was nonetheless in typical form for the group. Much had been accomplished in five years, with plans and conceptions of the future bay created, yet the celebration would quickly prove premature.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *Hon. Charles B. Law: The Champion of Jamaica Bay Harbor*, Photograph, May 24, 1910, Box 2, Papers of Henry Adolf Meyer, Brooklyn Historical Association; “Jamaica Bay Plan Considered Assured.”

From 1905 to 1910, officials of the City of New York moved quickly and efficiently to develop the newly acquired Jamaica Bay into a space of commerce and industry. Before they remade the bay physically, boosters and bureaucrats attempted to effect the transformation of conceptions of its space. In their plans the bay's current uses were all but erased, the space reduced to a tract of wild nature. Upon this "blank" canvas was painted fantastical designs of a completely transformed bay harnessed to the cause of economic growth. Over the next decade the champions of Jamaica Bay harbor would find that sheer will and magic would not be enough to make the project move forward, as the cautious approach taken by all sides became a liability.

### **The Project Stalls, 1910-1920**

During the 1910s, the project to develop Jamaica Bay into a commercial and industrial port slowed. The City and federal government took important steps towards dredging channels, but little progress was made on facilities like basins and docks. Work was only done in areas immediately accessible to the new waterways, creating the impression among federal officials that the City was unwilling to meet its obligations for the project. The City contended that it was the federal government failing to hold up its end of the bargain by improperly constructing the channels. Boosters expressed frustration with the slow pace of development, arguing that city officials were defying the will of providence with their actions.

Despite the celebrations of 1910, no actual physical work transforming the bay happened until late 1912. The cause of this delay was an extended back-and-forth



between the City and federal government over the plan's specifics. The negotiations nonetheless produced an additional \$300,000 of federal funding in 1912, allowing the dredging of a 500-foot wide, eighteen-foot deep main channel from Barren Island to Mill Basin to finally begin on December 17, 1912. The project was completed in 1913, prompting an additional grant of \$300,000 by Congress.<sup>21</sup>

Caution dominated the City's actions in the first half of the 1910s. At the end of 1912, in spite of the start on the main channel and new funding, Commissioner Tomkins reported that Mill Basin "is as far as the Jamaica Bay Improvement can go for the present, as the New Plan has not been approved north of the entrance... and the filled-in area cannot be connected with the main land until a channel is provided," indicating his unwillingness to get ahead of the federal government. To mollify critics, he noted that "in the meantime the City will doubtless receive some revenue from summer cottages, tent privileges, etc., along the filled-in area adjoining the main channel," continuing the Department's policy of recreational development.<sup>22</sup>

Cottages and tents failed to satisfy the Jamaica Bay Improvement Association. In a 1912 speech before the Flatlands Property Association, Meyer expressed frustration with the City's progress. He argued that "had Jamaica Bay been owned by a syndicate or controlled by a coterie [sic] of private men, we would long ago have seen it developed into what nature has intended it for... but being owned by the City and State, such is not

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<sup>21</sup> New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Forty-First Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1912), 216–17; New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Forty-Fourth Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1915), 10.

<sup>22</sup> Department of Docks and Ferries, *Forty-First Annual Report*, 216–17.

possible,” indicating his displeasure with the gradualist approach.<sup>23</sup> Meyer’s language once more indicates the desire to dominate nature in the bay for material gain. In response, over the next decade Meyer “became more vigilant than ever,” attending “scores of hearings,” and brought the matter before “numerous Civic Associations in this city.” In 1918, he secured appointment as a Deputy Commissioner in the City Docks Department. Meyer would immediately use his influence to take the department in a different direction, but in the meantime his impact upon the Department was minimal.<sup>24</sup>

The uproar over the slow progress appears to have had an effect. In 1913, Mayor William Gaynor sacked Commissioner Tomkins, appointing businessman Robert A.C. Smith as the new Docks Commissioner. In a letter to Smith, Gaynor declared “the time has arrived when I find it necessary for the full co-operation and help of the Dock Commissioner.” Tomkins described his firing as emerging from a “difference of policy regarding the port conditions of the city, a radical difference between the members of the Board of Estimate, the Mayor, and myself.” The specific issue that precipitated the action did not involve Jamaica Bay (it was over port issues in Manhattan), but the slow progress there nonetheless must have contributed to Gaynor’s dissatisfaction with Tomkins.<sup>25</sup>

In spite of the new Commissioner, there was little physical transformation of the bay in the remainder of the decade, though the City continued to plan for the future harbor. The only major progress in altering the bay was along its western shore: in

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<sup>23</sup> Henry A. Meyer, “Remarks before the Flatlands Property Owners Association,” May 15, 1912, Papers of Henry Adolf Meyer, Brooklyn Historical Association.

<sup>24</sup> Meyer, *Looking Through Life’s Window*, 158, 163–65.

<sup>25</sup> “Tomkins Put Out; Smith in His Place,” *New York Times*, April 3, 1913.

1915, the City constructed a 100-foot wide, fifteen-foot deep channel from the main channel to the shore at Mill Basin, finally allowing the development of definite plans for harbor facilities.<sup>26</sup> The new project, which was tentatively approved in 1919, called for six piers extending southward to Barren Island, but in order to ensure that the piers would be utilized, it required a thirty-foot deep main channel to accommodate deep ocean vessels. This stipulation quickly became a sticking point.<sup>27</sup>

As it had earlier in the decade, the federal government's discretion over funding conspired with the City's desire for caution to bring the project to a halt. Though the final agreed-upon depth of the channels was to be thirty feet, the provision allowing the federal government to withhold reimbursement beyond eighteen feet during construction led City officials to fear that dredging for the piers would not be compensated. Consequently, the Commissioners of the Sinking Fund passed a resolution in 1919 that stated they would only recommend that the Board of Estimate fund the piers when appropriate authorization was received from Congress. The resolution was then transmitted to the War Department. By the dawn of the 1920s, officials in the City and federal governments still had not resolved the matter, with neither side expecting a settlement for at least another two years.<sup>28</sup> Dock Commissioner Murray Hulbert (who replaced Smith in 1918) expressed frustration over the process, noting in a newspaper

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<sup>26</sup> Department of Docks and Ferries, *Forty-Fourth Annual Report*, 10.

<sup>27</sup> Department of Docks and Ferries, *Forty-Eighth Annual Report*, 24–28; “Expect Congress to Act Favorably on Jamaica Plans,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 15, 1920.

<sup>28</sup> Department of Docks and Ferries, *Forty-Eighth Annual Report*, 24–28.

article that he believed that Congress misunderstood the City's position; it was only asking for the original agreement to be met, not beginning a new project.<sup>29</sup>

After five years of rapid progress, the 1910s were a great disappointment to the champions of Jamaica Bay harbor. The agreement between the City and federal government created significant uncertainty, leading to years of back-and-forth as the two sides sought assurances from each other in order to proceed. Moreover, as discussed in chapter one, the Docks Department was acting at what must have seemed cross-purposes by continuing to rent out and allow businesses to develop spaces for recreational and increasingly residential use. Throughout the 1920s, Henry Meyer's influence on the Docks Department would be seen as the agency attempted to revive the beleaguered project.

### **Waving the Magic Wand: 1920-1931**

As soon as he was given authority as Deputy Dock Commissioner, Henry Meyer used his position to push the Department towards bold action, even if it meant deviating from existing policy. After a decade of avoiding "enthusiastic claims," Meyer's influence led the Department to embrace the minority report's plan to consolidate the bay's central islands, abandoning its piecemeal approach. In spite of Meyer and other passionate boosters like Cyrus Potts, a Queens lawyer who strongly pushed for Jamaica Bay as a free-trade zone, the project would still see only incremental progress over the next decade.

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<sup>29</sup> "Murray Hulbert, Jurist, 65, Dead," *New York Times*, April 27, 1950; "Expect Congress to Act Favorably on Jamaica Plans."

Meyer was furious with the City's previous course of action. In the *Jamaica Jinger*, a 1921 booster publication put out by the Jamaica Board of Trade, he excoriated the City, noting that while "legal technicalities" could be blamed for the initial delay, it was "inexcusable that the City... has not found some way in the past eight years of continuing the main channel." Even as late as the 1920s, the conception of the bay as a wasteland continued to be used: Meyer continued to trumpet its numerous advantages for industrial development like easy access to railroads, its proximity to Brooklyn's vast pool of labor, the advantage of water transport for receiving raw materials, and the fact that the bay was "virgin territory" that enabled its development "to be of such a character as to suit the convenience of any business."<sup>30</sup>

Meyer attempted to use his connections to the private sector to jumpstart the languishing project. In 1920, he and other prominent Brooklynites endorsed a plan hatched by businessman Alton Greeley for the area from Mill Basin to Barren Island. With the existing scheme held up by uncertainty, Greeley proposed to transfer much of the responsibility of developing the area away from the City. He would lease the space from the City in ten-year increments with ever increasing rents, developing commercial infrastructure like piers and industrial buildings. After fifty years, the property would be transferred back to the City "clear of all encumbrances." The proposal came to naught thanks to a breakthrough between the City and federal government, yet Meyer's involvement demonstrates his willingness to break with existing policy.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Meyer, "Jamaica Bay: Its Advantages and Opportunities," 6, 12–13.

<sup>31</sup> "Greekey Plan Inspected," *New York Times*, September 9, 1920.

Meyer also attached his name and office to depictions of the future Jamaica Bay port that differed from those officially sanctioned by the City. In 1918, he hired a private company to create a large graphic that depicted a bay developed roughly according to the plans of the minority report (figure 9). The bay's interior was consolidated into four islands: these were covered with warehouses, port facilities, and a "municipal colony" as suggested in the Report of the Jamaica Bay Improvement Association. The shorelines were dotted with factories and terminal facilities. The depiction was found in booster publications like the *Jamaica Jinger*.<sup>32</sup>

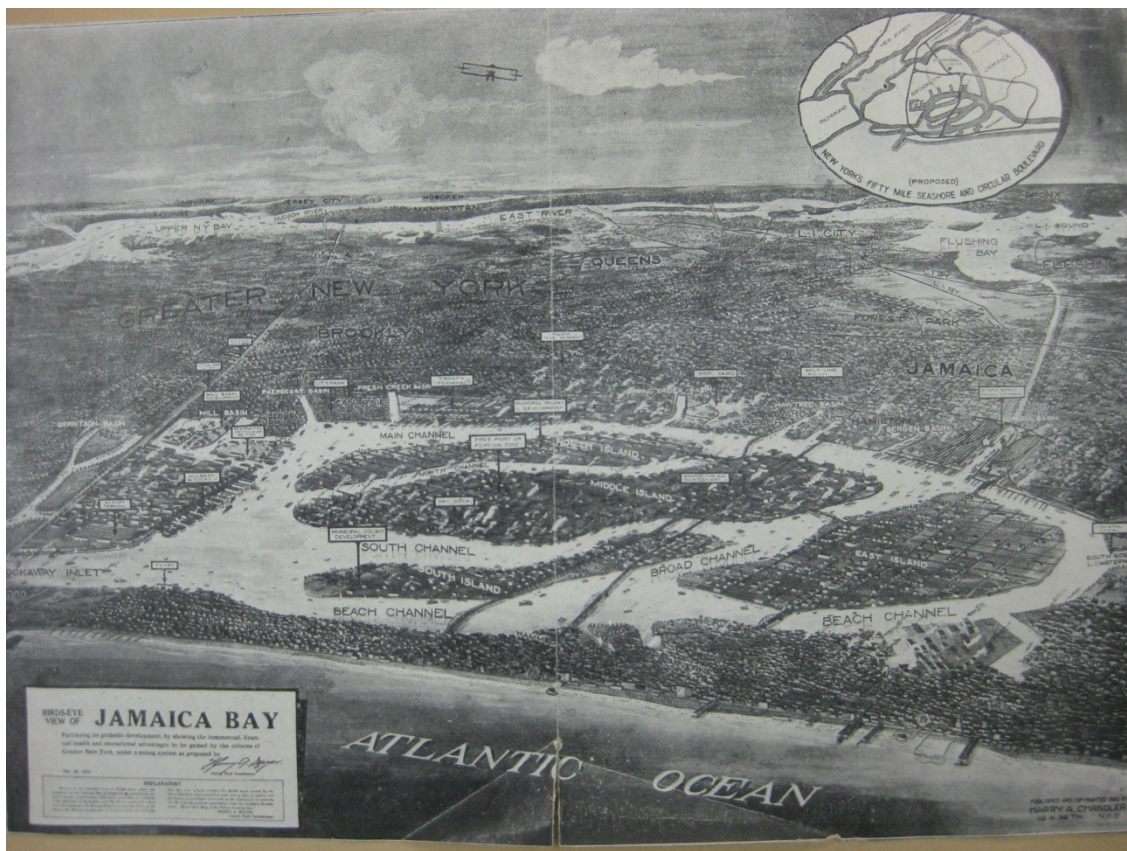


Figure 9. Harry A. Chandler, "Bird's Eye View of Jamaica Bay," February 25, 1918, Folder: Jamaica Bay Proposed Harbor, Vertical Files, Archive at Queens Library, Queens Public Library, Central Branch.

<sup>32</sup> Meyer, "Jamaica Bay: Its Advantages and Opportunities."

The representation of space seen in such graphics reveals Meyer's desire to completely remake Jamaica Bay for commerce and industry. Little about the image reflected the bay as it was for a majority of New Yorkers in 1918: a recreational and residential space inhabited by thousands of people during the summer, dotted with marshes and hummocks. The map's bird's eye perspective instead emphasizes the geometric precision of the sculpted islands and basins: nature completely harnessed to humanity's purposes, regular and planned, an essentially urban space. Every square inch of land in and around the bay, save for the park, is dotted with buildings, and the bay itself is peppered with ships. Like many boosters, Meyer seemed to believe that if the port were built, it would automatically draw the commerce of the world towards it like a magnet.<sup>33</sup>

During the 1920s, the City began to reverse its former policy of caution, leading to a cascade of events that finally broke the impasse with the federal government. In 1921, in a marked reversal of previous policy, the City Board of Estimate appropriated \$685,000 for dredging and construction at Mill Basin and ordered the Commissioner of Docks to resume work in the bay.<sup>34</sup> The action was spurred by a 1920 recommendation from Commissioner Hulbert that "for only by so doing will the City ever regain the confidence of the Federal authorities that we mean to progress the Jamaica bay

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<sup>33</sup> For reflections upon boosterism, see William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: Norton, 1991), 23-54.

<sup>34</sup> Philip P. Farley, "Progress of the Jamaica Bay Improvement," *Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce Bulletin*, November 19, 1921.

Development as was originally intended.”<sup>35</sup> The tactic worked, for a year later, Congress agreed to fund dredging of the channels to the originally agreed-upon depth of thirty feet and appropriate widths, placing stipulations to this effect in the 1922 River and Harbor Bill.<sup>36</sup>

With progress finally being made, in December 1922, the New Commissioner of Docks, John Delaney, who replaced Hulbert upon the reelection of Mayor John Hylan in 1921, argued that the City needed to finally adopt a comprehensive plan for developing Jamaica Bay. In a memo to the Commissioners of the Sinking Fund, Delaney argued that the recent developments necessitated a greater degree of coordination than had been previously required. To this end, he proposed that the City adopt a plan akin to that in the minority report—long favored by Meyer. The scheme called for consolidating all of the smaller islands into two large ones: West Island, a 5,369-acre island with three two-mile long basins; and East Island, a smaller islet 1,115 acres in area. The measure was quickly approved the next year.<sup>37</sup> With the City officially adopting a form of Meyer’s two-island scheme, City maps were changed to reflect the plan. Instead of depicting Jamaica Bay as it was, they reflected the hopes of the Docks Department by showing

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<sup>35</sup> New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Forth-Ninth Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries of the City of New York* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1920), 40.

<sup>36</sup> “Jamaica Bay Deepened to 30 Feet,” *The Port of New York Harbor and Marine Review*, October 1922.

<sup>37</sup> “Murray Hulbert, Jurist, 65, Dead”; “New Plan for Jamaica Bay Development,” *The Port of New York Harbor and Marine Review*, December 1922.



the consolidated islands, not yet constructed. This was the magic wand in action, using the power of representations of space to realize the Department's plans.<sup>38</sup>

From 1923 to 27, progress on the harbor scheme accelerated at a number of places. The federal government dredged the entrance channel to a depth of thirty feet.<sup>39</sup> With the bay's entrance secured, the City undertook extensive work on the interior channels: the main channel was first extended to Fresh Creek Basin at the existing depth of eighteen feet, and then deepened to thirty feet from Mill Basin to Paerdegat Basin.<sup>40</sup> To stimulate commercial development, the Docks Department constructed a 600-foot long, 400-foot wide pier at Canarsie.<sup>41</sup> The Department also completed a causeway road, Cross Bay Boulevard, finishing what Flynn had started decades earlier. The road's construction enabled significant filling in the vicinity of Broad Channel, starting construction on what the City hoped would become West Island.<sup>42</sup> Finally, the Docks Department undertook extensive surveys of the hinterlands, planning facilities

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<sup>38</sup> "Proposed Improvements in Jamaica Bay," November 1923, Folder: Jamaica Bay Proposed Harbor, Vertical Files, Archive at Queens Library, Queens Public Library, Central Branch.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Fifty-Fifth Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1926), 81; New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Fifty-Sixth Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1927), 87, 90.

<sup>41</sup> Department of Docks and Ferries, *Fifty-Sixth Annual Report*, 87–88.

<sup>42</sup> New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Fifty-Fourth Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1925), 72.

and infrastructure like roads and railroad connections—one of the most crucial elements of the whole scheme.<sup>43</sup>

An adjunct to the port scheme began in 1928 when work commenced on Floyd Bennett Field, the City's first municipal airport.<sup>44</sup> Constructed on Barren Island, the site was selected by the Mayor of New York after a commission reported on a variety of sites. Construction took three years, entailing significant amounts of filling: 387 acres total, though with the dredging already underway, this amount was easily fulfilled.<sup>45</sup>

The 1920s was a promising time for the advocates of Jamaica Bay harbor. After a decade of caution, the City had committed itself to a bold scheme, going to great lengths to publicize its intentions, making “enthusiastic claims” about the bay's greatness. Disseminating images of a transformed bay was akin to waving a magic wand in the hope of effecting change, drawing upon the power of representations of space backed by the authority of the City. As powerful as it was, the spell failed to hold up in the face of economic catastrophe.

### **A Window Closes: 1931-38**

With the dawning of the Great Depression, concrete progress on the Jamaica Bay projects significantly slowed. With commerce diminishing, particularly foreign trade,

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<sup>43</sup> Department of Docks and Ferries, *Fifty-Sixth Annual Report*, 103.

<sup>44</sup> New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Fifty-Seventh Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1928), 97–99.

<sup>45</sup> “Floyd Bennett Field Grows from Sand Waste,” *New York Times*, July 20, 1930; New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Sixtieth Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1931), 18–19.

the need for a port in the bay became harder to justify. Advocates turned to creative methods to create inducements for business and industry, yet by the end of the 1930s it seemed to most observers, in particular Robert Moses, that contemporary events had passed over Jamaica Bay and that a new plan for its future was needed.

From 1931 to 32, the City resolved keep working towards the port. In spite of the Board of Estimate approving yet another plan for developing a comprehensive plan for Jamaica Bay in early 1931, which the *New York Times* described as the framework for “a vast extension of the City’s harbor,” the actual work done in the bay amounted to very little.<sup>46</sup> Later that year, dredging mandated by the new plans commenced at Paerdegat Basin, being completed in 1932, and bulkheading at Mill Basin continued for the remainder of the year. The Department continued to survey its facilities and plan for a great expansion of commerce, but this must have contained some element of wishful thinking, for the City’s attempts to secure critical railroad connections continued to fail due to its dire financial situation.<sup>47</sup>

With significant funds expended and little to show for it, the Department of Docks started to become defensive. Beginning in 1931, the Docks Commissioner included in his annual reports a section with such titles as “Propaganda Against the Port,” decrying phenomena like a “strenuous advertising campaign” by other Atlantic ports to siphon off ship traffic. That year’s report noted that imports and exports at New York were only

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<sup>46</sup> “Jamaica Bay Seaport as City Envisions It,” *New York Times*, May 3, 1931.

<sup>47</sup> Department of Docks and Ferries, *Sixtieth Annual Report*, 10–12; New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Sixty-First Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1932), 8, 22–23.

valued at \$1.9 billion, a significant decline from \$5.5 billion in 1919, and blamed this decrease on cities such as Baltimore and Philadelphia which were seeing significant increases in recent years. It noted that the “publicity given to the endless discussion of alleged congested conditions in our harbor” had created the impression that “New York has reached the ultimate in construction.”<sup>48</sup>

The 1932 report shows a similar defensiveness. In its discussion of the project, in spite of noting how “the almost limitless possibilities of Jamaica Bay continue to challenge the imagination of port planners and to inspire the schemes of waterfront dreamers,” it concedes that “little of practical accomplishment may be had” as long as the all-important railroad connections remained elusive. The rest of the section attempts to justify the vast sums spent thus far: \$11 million, with only \$1.8 million in reimbursements granted by the federal government. Arguing that if one included the reimbursements and left out the \$1.4 million spent on the causeway road and the \$269,000 spent dredging Paerdegat Basin because they were only indirectly related to the port scheme, the City had only spent \$7.5 million. Reclamation had created lands at Floyd Bennett Field, Bushes Meadows, Canarsie, and along Cross Bay Boulevard totaling 1,100 acres: spaces worth \$15 million—double the amount spent by City. Although these figures might have looked good on paper, the Department did little with these lands save for renting them out to vacationers for paltry sums.<sup>49</sup>

The severity of the economic decline was illustrated by conditions at other sites within the Port of New York. While the Jamaica Bay project was underway, the Docks

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<sup>48</sup> Department of Docks and Ferries, *Sixtieth Annual Report*, 16–17.

<sup>49</sup> Department of Docks and Ferries, *Sixty-First Annual Report*, 8–9, 71.

Department had also constructed a port facility at Stapleton, Staten Island, which opened in 1927. The Department's Annual Report from 1931 notes that although the project seemed like a good idea when it was approved, the Staten Island Piers had become the "perennial problem of the department.... If in time of comparative prosperity the piers were not attractive to shippers, it is correspondingly difficult to rouse commercial interest in them in these days of utter depression." To alleviate this problem, the report suggested Stapleton for an experimental "free port" in which commerce duties and red tape would be greatly diminished.<sup>50</sup>

With a completed facility in such dire straits, officials began to reconsider the wisdom of continuing the Jamaica Bay improvement, forcing boosters to adapt their strategies. In a 1931 letter to Cyrus Potts, a businessman, lawyer, and president of the Jamaica Bay Improvement Association during the 1930s, A.C. Welsh of the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce noted that a motion was made during a recent Board of Estimate meeting to postpone the Jamaica Bay project indefinitely; although he noted that it was defeated, Welsh conceded that the motion made him think:

Port developments are made [in] a gradual process of evolutionary development based upon the demands of commerce.... There seems little doubt that industry would be unable to absorb all of Jamaica Bay at once. The government could hardly be expected to spend more money on channel improvements until the present development has been put to use.<sup>51</sup>

Potts seems to have taken Welsh's words to heart, for until 1938, when Robert Moses secured the bay for the Parks Department, Potts tirelessly lobbied for the

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<sup>50</sup> Department of Docks and Ferries, *Sixtieth Annual Report*, 19–21.

<sup>51</sup> A.C. Welsh to Cyrus Potts, June 17, 1931, Folder: Misc. Documents, 1931, Papers of Cyrus Potts, Archive at Queens Library, Queens Public Library, Central Branch.

creation of a free port in Jamaica Bay, writing numerous newspaper editorials and letters to public officials extolling the virtues that made it an ideal site for such a development.<sup>52</sup>

The remainder of the 1930s saw little additional progress in spite of repeated attempts by boosters to revive the moribund project. The final actions taken by the Docks Department in support of the improvement was another survey of lands in 1933 with an eye toward future facilities.<sup>53</sup> In addition to pushing for a free port, boosters attempted to use the occasion of the 1939 World's Fair to revive development, arguing that the bay's north shore would be an ideal site for the event, but these efforts were unsuccessful.<sup>54</sup> In 1936, Staten Island's Stapleton site was chosen as an experimental free port over other sites in the City, putting the final nail in the coffin for the project, though boosters and officials refused to give up hope.<sup>55</sup>

After largely disappearing for over two decades, conceptions of Jamaica Bay that envisioned multiple uses began to reappear in the press and public speeches of boosters and officials. In a 1936 interview, president of the Atlantic Avenue

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<sup>52</sup> Congressman Emanuel Celler to Cyrus Potts, March 14, 1934, Folder: Misc. Documents, 1934, Papers of Cyrus Potts, Archive at Queens Library, Queens Public Library, Central Branch; Cyrus Potts to Congressman Robert L. Bacon, March 14, 1934, Folder: Misc. Documents, 1934, Papers of Cyrus Potts, Archive at Queens Library, Queens Public Library, Central Branch; Cyrus A. Potts, "Free Ports in the United States" Clipping from Unknown Newspaper, n.d., Folder: Newspaper Clippings, Papers of Cyrus Potts, Archive at Queens Library, Queens Public Library, Central Branch.

<sup>53</sup> New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Sixty-Second Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1933), Division of Surveys and Dredging.

<sup>54</sup> "Jamaica Bay Harbor Urged by Hockert," *Long Island Daily Press*, October 9, 1935.

<sup>55</sup> New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Sixty-Fifth Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1936), 7–8.

Improvement Committee and Highland Park Civic Association, James McCue, continued to argue for expanded harbor facilities in the bay, though he also noted its potential for becoming a “seaside resort whose popularity might outstrip Jones Beach and Coney Island.”<sup>56</sup> A year later, in 1937, in a speech before the Canarsie Board of Trade, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia offered a similar assessment, hailing the bay’s potential for commercial and recreational use.<sup>57</sup>

Robert Moses would ultimately bring the era of Jamaica Bay port development to an end in 1938. That year, in a publication titled *The Future of Jamaica Bay*, Moses put forth a convincing case for creating a park in the bay. Within a year, control of the bay would be transferred to the Parks Department, but not without significant internecine wrangling. Signaling the end of the era, Henry Meyer, long considered the “father of Jamaica Bay harbor,” gave Moses his blessing in a July 22, 1938 letter to the editors of the *Brooklyn Eagle*.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

A number of factors conspired to doom the port scheme. The agreement between the City and federal government led to mistrust between the two sides, producing multi-year delays at critical points. Much progress had been made after 1923

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<sup>56</sup> “Jamaica Bay Hailed as Port of the Future,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 22, 1936.

<sup>57</sup> “Mayor’s Picture of Jamaica Bay as Ocean Port Cheers Realtors,” *Queens Press News*, May 1, 1937.

<sup>58</sup> New York City Department of Parks, *The Future of Jamaica Bay* (New York: New York City Department of Parks, 1938); Henry A. Meyer, “Indorses Moses’ Jamaica Bay Plan,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 22, 1938.

when the stumbling block of channel specifications was overcome, but the onset of the Great Depression put the City in a position of financial peril. With the City unable to make full use of existing port facilities at Mill Basin and Stapleton, Staten Island, continuing the project made less and less sense. The Department of Docks also failed to articulate a consistent vision of Jamaica Bay harbor out of a desire to avoid getting ahead of the project's actual progress. Boosters like Meyer and newspapers eagerly embraced radically transformed representations of space in the bay, yet the dissonance between these depictions and the official plans hindered their transformative power.

The port scheme ultimately failed, yet it resulted in significant topographical changes to the bay. Filling took place along the completed Cross Bay Boulevard—itsself a major new feature of the bay—expanding Broad Channel. Floyd Bennett field, a geometrically precise peninsula, took up nearly 500 acres that was once water and marshland. Basins and bulkheading now extended from Floyd Bennett Field to Howard Beach. Finally, as will be discussed in chapter three, pollution was becoming a major problem, leading to a decrease in recreational use and different types of residence patterns. With these dramatic changes, it would be difficult to imagine the bay as virgin territory. New conceptions started to emerge of the bay as a “remote, abandoned, far-away” part of the City. It is these images that officials hoping to effect change would be forced to deal with going forward.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> “Jamaica Bay Hailed as Port of the Future.”



## **Chapter Three**

### **An “Expanse of Forbidden Water Dotted with Dreary Marshes and Lonely Islands”: Jamaica Bay Becomes Polluted, 1880-1938**

From 1880-1920, the conception of Jamaica Bay as New York’s Venice dominated public consciousness. Recreational use by thousands of New Yorkers and depictions in media all contributed to this conception. Individuals such as F.W. Dunton, Henry Meyer, and Edward Grout, all of whom wished to use the space for commerce and industry, created competing representations of an urbanized bay. In addition to offering visions of the bay’s future, they imagined it as a wasteland of virgin territory ripe for exploitation by the City.

From 1920 to 1938, the use and regulation of Jamaica Bay began to dramatically change, leading to new conceptions of its space. Pollution, which had been a growing problem in the first two decades of the twentieth century, reached levels deemed dangerous by authorities, forcing the City to take drastic steps to protect its citizens. Although depicting a space as polluted based upon scientific measurements is technically an objective assessment of physical conditions, the idea of Jamaica Bay being polluted became loaded with social meaning. With warnings from officials leading to a decline in fishing, Prohibition allowed the bay’s entrepreneurs to increasingly focus upon peddling illicit alcohol, taking advantage of the bay’s relative isolation. The bay

also became more residential as the Broad Channel Corporation continued to develop its island community and the City rented out its bay lands to those seeking cheap rents in the wake of the Great Depression. All of these factors contributed to the idea of the bay being a polluted space, abandoned by all save for the desperate, unsavory people who clung to its shores and islands.

### **The Growing Scourge of Pollution: 1880-1920**

Public officials became concerned with pollution in the Jamaica Bay area as early as the late nineteenth century. Although it was not yet a problem, sanitarians recognized that the area's growing population and popularity as a summer resort would eventually overtax the ability of its waters to absorb and carry away sewage. These fears prompted a series of studies that found conditions to be deteriorating rapidly, yet it took the City decades to develop comprehensive solutions to its sanitation problems, necessitating a number of stopgap measures to avoid contagion. Worsening conditions started to take their toll on public perceptions of the bay, with depictions drawing attention to pollution beginning to appear in media as early as the 1910s.

Water pollution was a growing concern in late-nineteenth century American cities, leading to increased interventions by authorities. The first part of the Jamaica Bay area to be scrutinized by officials was Coney Island, which was becoming a popular seaside resort. In an 1879 interview with the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, sanitary engineer John Culyer noted his concerns with the current state of Coney Island's infrastructure: "even the best arrangements now existing are comparatively but temporary expedients,

devised in haste and not too wisely developed.” Most buildings like hotels directly ejected their waste into the nearby water, an arrangement that would threaten the health of bathers when the population grew. Culyer argued for the installation of sewers, which could collect all of the area’s effluent and reroute it somewhere less harmful. One possible outlet was Coney Island point, where the water was deep and tide strong. He also suggested Jamaica Bay, which would be made possible by constructing a canal through southern Brooklyn, though he noted that this was sure to produce opposition from interested parties. The suggestion indicates the extent to which the bay was considered a backwater before the railroad trestle enabled greater access as well as a resource that could be exploited; however, this would not be the last time that officials contemplated using the bay as an oversized cesspool.<sup>1</sup>

Long Island’s municipalities and the newly consolidated City of New York responded to the growing need for sewage treatment by constructing a number of wastewater treatment plants around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1892, a plant was opened at Coney Island.<sup>2</sup> By 1905, three plants treated waste flowing into Jamaica Bay, at Flatlands (constructed in 1896, it would be referred to as the Twenty-Sixth Ward plant), Far Rockaway (1896), and Jamaica (1903). Another plant would be added at Neponsit on the Rockaway Peninsula in 1911, and an outlet was built at Paerdegat Creek (which would eventually become Paerdegat Basin), though it lacked a treatment

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<sup>1</sup> “A Great Need: The Necessity of a Sewerage System for Coney Island,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, August 5, 1879. See Joel A. Tarr, *The Search for the Ultimate Sink: Urban Pollution in Historical Perspective* (Akron, Ohio: The University of Akron Press, 1996) for the development of municipal sewer systems.

<sup>2</sup> Wellington Donaldson, “Preliminary Operations of the Coney Island Sewage Treatment Plant,” *Sewage Works Journal* 9, no. 2 (March 1937): 243–55.

plant and ejected raw sewage into the bay.<sup>3</sup> The main mechanisms used by these plants were screening and chemical precipitation—a process that used lime and ferric chloride to effect the separation of dissolved solids.<sup>4</sup> In spite of these efforts, the greatly expanding population of Brooklyn and Queens quickly overtaxed the plants, leading to concentrated flows of minimally treated sewage into Jamaica Bay and Lower New York Bay.

In 1903, the New York State Legislature created the New York Bay Pollution Commission, the first comprehensive study of water pollution in the City. The commission was charged with assessing the current condition of the City's waters, and to make recommendations based on their findings. Reporting in 1906, the Commission found that although New York Bay was "unmistakably" polluted, it was nevertheless "not as yet badly, polluted," reaching this conclusion via bacteriological and observational analysis at hundreds of points throughout the City. The Commission did not specifically investigate conditions in Jamaica Bay, but estimated that the local population, which numbered 53,000 in 1904, produced on average five million gallons per day (GPD) of

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<sup>3</sup> New York City Department of Sanitation, *Annual Report of the New York City Department of Sanitation* (New York: New York City Department of Sanitation, 1936), 3–4, 18–19; New York City Department of Public Works, *Annual Report of the New York City Department of Public Works* (New York: New York City Department of Public Works, 1939), 123.

<sup>4</sup> Metropolitan Sewerage Commission of New York, *Report of the Metropolitan Sewerage Commission of New York* (New York: Wynkoop Hallenbeck Crawford Co., 1914), 54; Donaldson, "Preliminary Operations."

sewage. No major recommendations were made, but they argued that further study was needed.<sup>5</sup>

The muted response of the report stems from the results of its investigations. The Commission found that measurable instances of pollution tended to be highly localized, that there was not yet a “general nuisance.” They believed that most of the sewage ejected in to the waters was “disposed of... by animals and plants, chiefly the bacteria.” In spite of this, population growth greatly concerned the commissioners: they expected total sewage output to increase at least 65% by 1930. Not knowing how much more waste the water could safely absorb, they recommended further investigation. The Legislature obliged by creating yet another study group, the New York Metropolitan Sewerage Commission; this group worked nearly a decade, issuing its final report in 1914. Unlike the Bay Pollution Commission, the Sewerage Commission studied Jamaica Bay in depth, issuing a supplementary report on it in 1917.<sup>6</sup>

As opposed to the muted tone of the Bay Pollution Commission, the Sewerage Commission issued dire warnings, finding alarmingly bad conditions at numerous points throughout the city—Jamaica Bay among them. They reasoned that the deteriorating conditions of New York’s waters were largely a matter of numbers: more than six million people in the general area were discharging sewage through “several hundred outlets... without purification, regulation or control of any kind.” They expected the population to double in the next thirty years, leading to an enormous 1.33 billion GPD of sewage

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<sup>5</sup> New York Bay Pollution Commission, *Report of the New York Bay Pollution Commission* (Albany: Brandow Printing Company, 1906), 3–5, 11–12, 45, map plate.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 9–11, 46.

produced by 1940, enough to fill a ten-foot deep reservoir one square mile in area.

Conditions had deteriorated to the point that the Commissioners believed bathing and shellfish gathering were ill-advised north of the Verrazano Narrows, implicating the vast majority of New York City's waters.<sup>7</sup>

In the Jamaica Bay area, the population and the waste they produced had expanded significantly since 1904, when the Bay Commission reported. The 1917 report found 436,000 residents discharging approximately fifty million GPD into the Bay, up significantly from the five million GPD discharged from 53,000 persons in 1904.<sup>8</sup> The area's population was expected to rise to 909,000 persons in 1940 and 1,415,700 persons in 1960, ejecting 163 million and 204 million GDP, respectively.<sup>9</sup>

The commissioners considered the inadequacy of the treatment plants to be the primary cause of Jamaica Bay's pollution, but they also implicated the negligence of the bay's residents. The main problem with the existing sewage works was that the precipitation process was inefficient: the continually expanding volume of waste was overwhelming the plants.<sup>10</sup> Surveyors also discovered hundreds of "overhanging privies" at Broad Channel, The Raunt, Goose Channel and Ramblersville, in addition to cottages at Sand Bay, Bergen Creek, Cornell Creek, Old Mill Creek, and other sites discharging waste directly into the bay's waters and marshes. As Culyer's recommendations for

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<sup>7</sup> Metropolitan Sewerage Commission, *Report*, 27, 33.

<sup>8</sup> New York City Bureau of Public Improvements, *Report on the Main Drainage and Sewage Disposal of the Area Tributary to Jamaica Bay* (New York: SL Parsons and Company, 1917), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Metropolitan Sewerage Commission, *Report*, 46.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 54; Bureau of Public Improvements, *Report on the Main Drainage and Sewage Disposal*, 27.

Coney Island show, this method of disposal was once considered acceptable, but changing conditions were decreasing its effectiveness. This would not be the first time that Jamaica Bay's residents would be implicated as a source of pollution, but for the time being the magnitude of the problem at other areas diminished the attention given to them.<sup>11</sup>

Investigations in the bay produced a number of disturbing findings. Checking for bacterial contamination, the officials took 20 samples at sites near Arverne, Second Creek, Fresh Creek, and Canarsie, finding nine "polluted" and five "doubtful," indicating a great degree of pollution. In addition to checking for bacteria, the investigators recorded visual conditions throughout Jamaica Bay, particularly at sites near sewage outlets. In 1909, the officials found yachts moored in raw sewage at Paerdegat Creek. At Second Creek, the outlet of the Twenty-Sixth Ward plant, they found sewage "extending in a narrowing belt a mile away... the southern edge... bounded by a line of reddish scum... odor was noticed as soon as one rowed inside." At Bergen Creek, site of the Jamaica plant's outlet, they found eelgrass "covered with whitish deposit", and at Far Rockaway water that was "turbid and whitish in color."<sup>12</sup>

The commissioners also investigated the effects of the growing pollution upon Jamaica Bay's shellfish, finding that they were increasingly becoming a vector for infection. Jamaica Bay oysters were linked to outbreaks of illness as early as 1904, when twenty-one cases of typhoid were traced back to Jamaica Bay oysters sold at

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<sup>11</sup> Bureau of Public Improvements, *Report on the Main Drainage and Sewage Disposal*, 18.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 17–19.

Inwood. Seven years later, “Rockaway” oysters sold at Canarsie caused twenty-seven cases of typhoid and ninety-nine cases of diarrhea. Finally, in 1915, federal inspectors sampling Jamaica Bay oysters found them to have had ten times more bacteria than allowed under existing standards.<sup>13</sup>

A 1912 poem found in a local magazine indicates that awareness of the problem went beyond the health department. Written from the perspective of an oyster, it laments:

Then down to old Jamaica Bay I hied {sic}, my weary soul to lay, so  
smooth and peaceful was my bed my bitterness of spirit fled... But now,  
again I’m forced to speak! ...who, in muck, a pearl could make Or wait the  
groping oyster-rake? From sewage, filth and city slime I go to seek a  
healthier clime.

Accompanying the poem was a cartoon, depicting an anthropomorphic oyster fleeing raw sewage pouring from a pipe, garbage such as bottles and cans, and a dead cat (figure 10). The poem indicates that perceptions of Jamaica Bay, once overwhelmingly positive, were beginning to change in light of growing pollution.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 18–19.

<sup>14</sup> Lyon, “The Oyster Speaks,” *The Queen’s Magazine*, November 1912, Folder: Jamaica Bay Pollution, Vertical Files, Archive at Queens Library, Queens Public Library, Central Branch, Jamaica, NY.



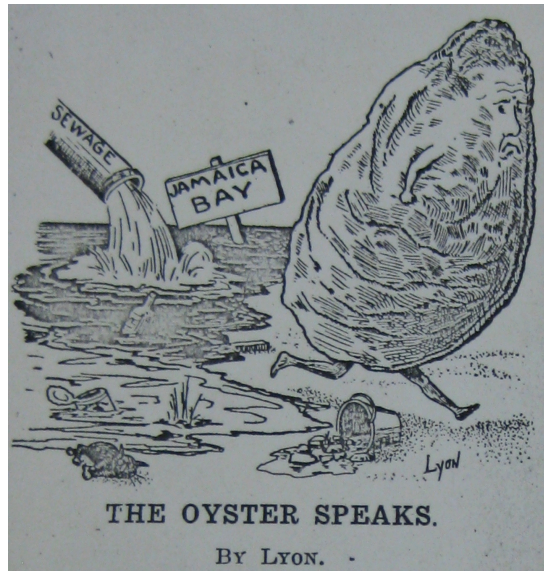


Figure 10. Lyon, “The Oyster Speaks.”

The commissioners found that a number of steps had already been taken to address the problem of contaminated shellfish, but were skeptical as to their efficacy. In response to investigations, beginning in 1915, the federal government forbade the shipment of oysters from the bay from April 16<sup>th</sup> to November 30<sup>th</sup> save for those transported to pure waters for at least a week and found to be safe upon inspection. The same year, the New York City Department of Health began requiring shellfish from problem spots like Bergen Beach and Fresh Channel to be inspected before sale. These intermediary steps lasted less than a decade before more drastic steps were taken.<sup>15</sup>

From 1880 to 1920, the rapid growth of Brooklyn and Queens was taking its toll upon Jamaica Bay, along with its increasing popularity as a resort destination. Pollution was reaching dangerous levels, threatening the health of those who worked and played

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<sup>15</sup> Bureau of Public Improvements, *Report on the Main Drainage and Sewage Disposal*, 21.

in its waters. Conceptions of the bay as a quaint Venice were also threatened, as pollution began to impinge upon the activities that made the area unique and its residents were implicated as a source of contagion.

### **The City Responds: 1920-1938**

Along with the Commission's unequivocal warnings about the deteriorating state of New York City's waters, they offered a number of solutions for mitigating the problems. These guidelines provided the framework for the City's actions moving forward. In addition to updating its treatment system—the ultimate solution to the problem, albeit one that would take many years and millions of dollars to enact—the City imposed new regulations upon the use of Jamaica Bay to protect the health of its citizens.

The recommendations of the commissioners were strongly influenced by the desire to save money—an understandable perspective considering any treatment project's massive cost. The general principle of the plan was that all of an area's sewage should be routed to a central point, allowing treatment plants to take advantage of economies of scale. To cut costs, they recommended that the City take advantage of natural features like “the absorptive capacity of the harbor waters” which would allow treatment “no more completely than was necessary to satisfy a reasonable standard of cleanness.” Outlets could also be placed deep underwater in areas possessing strong currents, allowing the dispersal of effluent before it surfaced and became a nuisance. The “utmost degree of purification” would only be employed in “exceptional cases” and

treatment capacity could be built up in stages. Using these guidelines, the City produced outlines for plans for different areas, grouped according to the region's hydrology.<sup>16</sup>

The suggestions for Jamaica Bay were strongly influenced by the overall guiding principles. The report recommended that the level of treatment for effluent be determined by how the bay was going to be used in the future. Since commercial use would "necessarily... exclude its use for pleasure," with the harbor plan seeming like the most likely future for the bay, the overall level of treatment could be less than in recreationally oriented areas, saving considerable money. The commissioners also possessed great faith in the ability of the bay to absorb sewage, highlighting features that enhanced water quality like a strong tidal flow that enabled significant amounts of water to cycle in and out of the bay at its mouth and the bay's shallowness and large surface area which aided in the layers of water mixing and absorbing oxygen.<sup>17</sup>

Even though the group felt that Jamaica Bay's future only necessitated minimal treatment of effluent, they nonetheless provided a number of options. The commissioners briefly entertained the possibility of routing all sewage from Brooklyn and Queens to Jamaica Bay, where it could be released with minimal treatment, but ultimately rejected the scheme due to the possibility of "unpleasant odors and the presence of flies" menacing residents should future development draw near the bay's shore. In an effort to adapt to different possibilities for future uses, the schemes divided the bay into different zones, allowing different levels of treatment.<sup>18</sup> The 1917 report

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<sup>16</sup> Metropolitan Sewerage Commission, *Report*, 19, 48–49.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 53, 90.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 32–44, 92–93.

provided four options, with plans A and B envisioning two treatment plants, C three, and D six. Plan C was the suggested course of action for its thoroughness in important areas of the bay and reasonable cost.<sup>19</sup>

The Commission's recommendations for Jamaica Bay reflect the changing conceptions of its space due to the growing problem of pollution. The fact that the commissioners entertained the possibility of turning Jamaica Bay into a septic tank for Brooklyn and Queens demonstrates the potency of the idea that the bay was becoming spoiled by pollution. As with other plans from this era, it views the bay as a resource to be exploited, albeit in a very different way than through building hotels and houses in its spaces.

In spite of the dire warnings from the Commissioners, the City would take more than a decade to develop a comprehensive plan for dealing with the sanitation problems highlighted in the reports. In the interim, it took incremental, stopgap measures towards improving capacity. During the 1920s, the City opened a new plant at Hammels on the Rockaway peninsula, a facility that used fine screens.<sup>20</sup> The existing Twenty-Sixth Ward and Jamaica plants were upgraded with similar features in 1925 and 1926, respectively.<sup>21</sup>

The City finally launched a coordinated effort to deal with the sanitation problems in the 1930s. An important step taken by the City was the formation of a citywide Department of Sanitation in 1930. This new department brought together what were

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<sup>19</sup> Bureau of Public Improvements, *Report on the Main Drainage and Sewage Disposal*, 49.

<sup>20</sup> Department of Public Works, *1939 Annual Report*, 123.

<sup>21</sup> Department of Sanitation, *1936 Annual Report*, 3–4.

once separate operations in the five boroughs, with a commissioner heading the department as well as serving as the chairman of a special Sanitary Commission that sought to address problems and make policy. The department would quickly act to deal with the existing problems, producing a comprehensive plan for the City only one year later.<sup>22</sup>

The plan introduced in 1931 by the Sanitation Department sought to define the different levels of water treatment desired by the city, and to provide a blueprint for achieving these standards. The treatment system constructed would, with modifications, constitute today's sanitation system. The basic goals of the system were to ensure that "no solid matter should be recognizable as sewage" with no "discoloration or turbidity" except in locations close to sewer outlets, that sewage should never "impede navigation," that oxygen should not fall below three cubic centimeters (ccs) per liter of water, and finally, that bacterial levels should be at levels appropriate for drinking water at bathing and aquaculture sites. The standards chosen by the department were the most specific yet, providing a clear set of guidelines for the construction of treatment plants.<sup>23</sup>

The proposed system would make use of the latest treatment technology. Overall, the plan called for thirty-three plants, with four in the Jamaica Bay area (including one on Coney Island). Three different treatment options were provided, some

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<sup>22</sup> New York City Department of Sanitation, *Annual Report of the New York City Department of Sanitation* (New York: New York City Department of Sanitation, 1930), 14–15.

<sup>23</sup> William Schroeder, Jr., *Preliminary Report on the General Plans for Sewage Disposal for the City of New York* (New York: New York City Department of Sanitation, 1931), 5.

being more expensive than others. The middle plan, favored by the commissioners for its thoroughness and cost efficiency, called for eighty percent removal of bacteria and other contaminants versus ninety to ninety-five percent for the costliest and fifty-six percent for the least expensive. The Coney Island, Jamaica, and Twenty-Sixth Ward plants were to be rebuilt, and the Rockaway plants consolidated to a single unit. All of the plants save for the one at the Rockaways were to utilize a fully activated sludge process, the most expensive but best treatment option.<sup>24</sup>

Progress on the plan proceeded very slowly. It took until 1934 for the City to provide funding for the first of the Jamaica Bay area plants, at Coney Island—presumably selected due to its importance as a recreational site.<sup>25</sup> Construction started in 1935 and finished in 1936, providing thirty-five million GPD treatment—although the City would quickly seek to double its capacity. In 1935 and 1936, the City began studies for improving the Jamaica and Twenty-Sixth Ward plants, respectively.<sup>26</sup> The outbreak of World War Two severely limited progress: upgrades were not completed until 1943 at Jamaica and 1951 at the Twenty-Sixth Ward plant.<sup>27</sup> The final facility, on the Rockaway Peninsula, was completed in 1952.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 8–10, 14, 16–21.

<sup>25</sup> New York City Department of Sanitation, *Annual Report of the New York City Department of Sanitation* (New York: New York City Department of Sanitation, 1934), 6–7.

<sup>26</sup> New York City Department of Sanitation, *Annual Report of the New York City Department of Sanitation* (New York: New York City Department of Sanitation, 1935), 91; Department of Sanitation, *1936 Annual Report*, 1, 14.

<sup>27</sup> New York City Department of Sanitation, *Annual Report of the New York City Department of Public Works* (New York: New York City Department of Sanitation, 1943), 4; New York City Department of Sanitation, *Annual Report of the New York City*

With the slow progress designing and building extra treatment capacity, the City imposed a number of restrictions upon the permissible uses of the bay based upon the commissioners' recommendations. The commissioners offered pointed warnings about the dangers of continuing to use the bay for aquaculture: the 1917 report noted that "no point of a bay of moderate area into which sewage is discharged is free from intermittent contamination... as a corollary any oysters located at any point in the bay will receive the accumulated sewage deposits from the sewage thus intermittently carried to them." Consequently, they recommended that aquaculture be discontinued in the bay.<sup>29</sup> In 1921, the City and federal government launched a coordinated effort to end the sale of Jamaica Bay oysters. The effects were dramatic: with the bay providing 300,000 bushels of oysters per year—estimated to be between twenty-five and thirty-three percent of the City's supply—vendors scrambled to deal with the disruptions.<sup>30</sup>

Authorities took additional steps to restrict the use of Jamaica Bay's waters. In 1926, Commissioner of Health Louis Harris issued a general warning against bathing in the bay, noting that it "creates the danger of sinus and mastoid troubles, of skin diseases, typhoid and other sickness. There is no doubt that it is highly unsafe to bathe

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*Department of Public Works* (New York: New York City Department of Sanitation, 1951), 15.

<sup>28</sup> New York City Department of Sanitation, *Annual Report of the New York City Department of Public Works* (New York: New York City Department of Sanitation, 1952), 50–51.

<sup>29</sup> Bureau of Public Improvements, *Report on the Main Drainage and Sewage Disposal*, 19–21.

<sup>30</sup> "Jamaica Bay, Foul With Sewage, Closed to Oyster Beds; 300,000 Bushels Gone," *New York Times*, January 30, 1921.

in these waters.”<sup>31</sup> A year later, the Commissioner created a “black list” of trouble spots, with Jamaica Bay again on the list; it would remain there for decades.<sup>32</sup>

Despite of the warnings, bathers continued to use Jamaica Bay, prompting additional action by authorities. In 1931, the Sanitation Department dumped \$50,000 worth of chlorinated lime and sodium nitrate into Jamaica experimentally in order to “destroy poison gases and noxious odors.”<sup>33</sup> Finding the efforts a success, the department appropriated funds for the construction of five chlorination plants at various locations around Jamaica Bay in 1936. Opening a year later, the plants operated during the recreational season, dumping five tons of chemicals a day into the bay to provide relief to bathers. The department hailed the effort as the largest ever attempted yet such quantities of chemicals presumably contributed to rather than diminished the noxious state of Jamaica Bay in the long run. The new sewage treatment plants eventually made the chlorination plants obsolete, but in the interim it was yet another stopgap measure.<sup>34</sup>

With pollution becoming an increasing problem, some began to conflate the character of the bay’s inhabitants with the unhealthy environment. The *New York Times* article detailing the ending of the bay’s oyster industry included a number of sensational claims: Dr. Royal Copeland, Commissioner of the Department of Health, alleged that

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<sup>31</sup> “Bathers Warned Against Three Bays,” *New York Times*, July 21, 1926.

<sup>32</sup> Waldo Walker, “Polluted City Beaches a Danger to Bathers,” *New York Times*, July 17, 1927.

<sup>33</sup> New York City Department of Sanitation, *Annual Report of the New York City Department of Sanitation* (New York: New York City Department of Sanitation, 1931), 34; “Start Purification of City’s Waters,” *New York Times*, August 7, 1931.

<sup>34</sup> Department of Sanitation, *1936 Annual Report*, 18–19; New York City Department of Sanitation, *Annual Report of the New York City Department of Sanitation* (New York: New York City Department of Sanitation, 1937), 7; “Germs Doomed at Jamaica Bay,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 13, 1937.



“several known typhoid carriers” lived “near the confines of the bay.” He pointed to the case of Typhoid Mary and the sixty infections and twenty deaths she caused as an example of the danger. Copeland’s juxtaposition reveals a changing conception of the bay as a space of disease and moral degradation as opposed to a space of healthful recreation. As the recreational and residential use of the bay continued to change in the 1920s, these conceptions became more solidified. Although Copeland’s allegation against the bay’s residents was a minor detail, they would receive increasing blame for the pollution, particularly as the classes of people within the bay’s spaces began to change.<sup>35</sup>

Due to an expanding population and inadequate measures to address the growing amount of sewage entering Jamaica Bay, by 1920, pollution had become a noticeable part of its space. It took the City decades to respond in a systematic fashion, with treatment schemes still largely in the planning stages by the end of the 1930s. As the bay’s environment changed and new regulations restricted the types of activities permissible, conceptions of its space took a turn for the worse, with the bay’s people and environment being increasingly regarded as dangerous and unsavory.

### **Changing Recreational and Residential Use: 1920-1938**

With the dawn of the 1920s, officials began cracking down on what they viewed as another type of liquid pollution flowing into Jamaica Bay: alcohol. Recreational activities changed as the bay became a popular site for rum running and speakeasies,

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<sup>35</sup> “Jamaica Bay, Foul With Sewage, Closed to Oyster Beds.”

its marshes and hummocks serving as a natural shield from the prying eyes of law enforcement. The dawn of the Great Depression also transformed existing uses of the spaces, driving desperate individuals to the low rents of the lands administered by the Department of Docks and Ferries. All of these changes conspired to solidify the developing conception of the bay as polluted, its citizens conflated with the area's fallen state.

Since 1880, although the bay was used by people from all walks of life—from the humble fisherman renting a catboat to elites visiting their yacht clubs— it had teetered on the edge of respectability. As discussed earlier, Barren Island, home to noxious industries and many non-white workers, was regarded as a dangerous and immoral place. The bay's "Venice" could also be regarded as more ramshackle than rustic.

Numerous incidents of rum running took place in Jamaica Bay during Prohibition, boosting its unsavory reputation. One 1924 incident began with Prohibition agents chasing a speedboat early in the morning; they failed to catch the craft, but stumbled upon another vessel, discovering seventy-two cases of scotch whisky in its hold that the crew admitted had been transferred from the speedboat.<sup>36</sup> A similar incident in 1933 at the end of prohibition involved 420 cases of liquor being seized in the bay.<sup>37</sup> Rum running would produce associated crimes as well, such as the theft of watercraft. A 1922 incident saw a twenty-six foot speedboat named the *Sea Wolf* stolen from its owner, a Captain Irwin. Police were alerted after the craft was spotted on Jamaica Bay,

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<sup>36</sup> "Police Get Liquor, But Boat Escapes," *New York Times*, January 17, 1924.

<sup>37</sup> "Coast Guard Upheld in Liquor Seizures," *New York Times*, December 19, 1933.

presumably transporting liquor between rumrunners further out at sea and points in the bay.<sup>38</sup>

One of the destinations of the alcohol smuggled via the bay's waters was Broad Channel. With the construction of Cross Bay Boulevard in 1923, the community had become significantly more accessible, with train, water, and roadways all enabling New Yorkers to travel to Broad Channel, though it presumably remained distant enough to avoid major attention by the police. Consequently, entrepreneurs opened a number of cabarets and nightclubs. Broad Channel gained the nickname "Little Cuba" during this time, reflecting its new status as a destination for swilling rum.<sup>39</sup> A local history notes that train conductors announced the Broad Channel station using this moniker, prompting complaints from local residents unhappy with being associated with illicit activity.<sup>40</sup> Another nickname mentioned in a local history was "The Island of Free Love."<sup>41</sup>

Broad Channel's hotels were able to take advantage of their location during the Prohibition Era by continuing to dispense alcohol. The Enterprise Hotel, one of the famous structures on stilts, had a bar that "dispensed the prevailing alcoholic

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<sup>38</sup> "Agents Out to Nab Hip-Flask Drinkers," *New York Times*, August 19, 1922.

<sup>39</sup> Federal Writers' Project, *The WPA Guide to New York City: The Federal Writers' Project Guide to 1930s New York* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 590.

<sup>40</sup> Joe Carey, "Broad Channel, The 1920s Era," n.d., Folder: Histories of Broad Channel, Papers of the Broad Channel Historical Society, Queens Public Library, Broad Channel Branch.

<sup>41</sup> Virginia Balogh, "A History of Broad Channel as Told to Virginia Balogh by Residents of West 10th Road," n.d., Folder: Histories of Broad Channel, Papers of the Broad Channel Historical Society, Queens Public Library, Broad Channel Branch. No other sources contain this nickname, but considering 1920s nightlife, it seems plausible: see Lynn Dumenil, *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).

beverages” and served as a boarding house for fishers. Another hotel was the Atlantic, which also served family dinners on the weekend. Sporck’s Hotel, located west along an elevated boardwalk that ran from the station, featured dances. The community also had a successive series of cabarets and dance halls called Hermit’s Cafe that allegedly featured entertainers such as Jimmy Durante and Mae West.<sup>42</sup>

Broad Channel was also becoming significantly more residential and suburban during the 1920s, with its permanent population increasing thanks to improvements put in place by the Broad Channel Corporation. In addition to filling and leveling, these included buried water pipes that enabled water to be pumped during the winters and electric service, though in the early years the electricity would be turned off at midnight.<sup>43</sup> Population greatly expanded: in 1920, there were only 189 full-time residents in Broad Channel, but the total climbed to 583 in 1930. By 1940, the population had nearly doubled to 1069.<sup>44</sup>

The growing residential population of the area supported less clandestine recreational businesses than the hotels that catered to outsiders. The largest was an extensive bathing park with treated swimming pools that opened in 1925, presumably

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<sup>42</sup> Carey, “The 1920s Era”; Balogh, “A History of Broad Channel.” Only Carey’s source mentions Mae West, but Durante is mentioned in this source as well as Balogh’s history, though there he was recalled to have been drawn to a fine restaurant called Colmel’s not mentioned in the other source.

<sup>43</sup> Gertrude McAleese, “Broad Channel: A Condensed Version of the Past Sixty Years,” n.d., Folder: Histories of Broad Channel, Papers of the Broad Channel Historical Society, Queens Public Library, Broad Channel Branch.

<sup>44</sup> US Census Bureau, *1920 US Census*, Queens County, New York, population schedule, digital image, <http://www.heritagequest.com>; US Census Bureau, *1930 US Census*, Queens County, New York, population schedule, digital image, <http://www.heritagequest.com>; US Census Bureau, *1940 US Census*, Queens County, New York, population schedule, digital image, <http://www.heritagequest.com>.

taking advantage of the fact that swimming in the bay was no longer recommended by city authorities. The park had numerous recreational facilities including a ball field, tennis courts, handball courts, and bathhouses. To encourage visits, the operators ran a free jitney service to the mainland throughout the 1920s.<sup>45</sup> Other recreational facilities that opened during the decade included a movie house and an ice cream parlor.<sup>46</sup>

In spite of the growth, Broad Channel was perceived as a low-class community. The *WPA Guide to New York*, a product of the New Deal Federal Writers Project, noted that although the community had a section of “whitewashed and trim” cottages, the remainder consisted of “ramshackle buildings” that “lean over the water on their uncertain stilts”; “poverty and decay” marked “the dirt streets and battered houses.” As opposed to invoking curiosity, the features that once made Broad Channel part of New York’s Venice now inspired disdain.<sup>47</sup>

The Raunt continued to hang on during Prohibition, with at least one of its establishments taking advantage of its remoteness. Abe Stransky wrote a recollection of his fishing trips with his father to the Raunt in the late 1920s when he was still a child, highlighting many details. While seeking a boat to go fishing in, the pair stumbled upon a hotel operated by John Peschke. The hotel’s saloon was fully decked out, equipped with a “long mahogany bar” behind which were “mirrors and shelves, stocked with all

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<sup>45</sup> “The Broad Channel Parker: Newsletter of the Broad Channel Bathing Park, Volume One, No. 1,” July 13, 1935, Folder: Histories of Broad Channel, Papers of the Broad Channel Historical Society, Queens Public Library, Broad Channel Branch; “The Broad Channel Parker: Newsletter of the Broad Channel Bathing Park, Volume One, No. 2,” July 27, 1935, Folder: Histories of Broad Channel, Papers of the Broad Channel Historical Society, Queens Public Library, Broad Channel Branch.

<sup>46</sup> Balogh, “A History of Broad Channel”

<sup>47</sup> Federal Writers’ Project, *The WPA Guide to New York City*, 590–91.

kinds of liquor,” and a honky-tonk piano. Peschke’s mother cooked food for the guests, and a second, unnamed man operated a boat primarily used for transporting contraband. After he got to know the two better, Peschke was given samples of “special liquors” as a boon. The isolation of the Raunt didn’t manage to shelter Peschke from the law, however, for Stransky recalls that the man spent time in prison for violating the Volstead Act.<sup>48</sup>

Competition with Broad Channel must have taken a toll on proprietors like Peschke, for by the end of the 1930s the Raunt was little more than a residential community perceived as low class. The *WPA Guide* described The Raunt as a “desolate island,” with “a few dozen jerry-built shacks” connected by “crazy catwalks,” mentioning no hotels. It notes the lack of gas and water, with only rain barrels serving the “colonists.” The residents tried “feeble attempts at gardening” as evidence by raised platforms filled with “pale gray soil.”<sup>49</sup> A WPA project to connect the Raunt to Broad Channel with a bridge was completed in 1936, but failed to spur significant growth.<sup>50</sup> Even though the Raunt’s population had gradually expanded to seventy-five full-time residents in 1940 from fourteen in 1920, the allure of the space was fading.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Abe Stransky, “The Raunt on Jamaica Bay: A Recollection,” January 18, 1984, Folder: The Raunt, Vertical Files, Archive at Queens Library, Queens Public Library, Central Branch. Paschke is found in the 1920 Census.

<sup>49</sup> Federal Writers’ Project, *The WPA Guide to New York City: The Federal Writers’ Project Guide to 1930s New York*, 591.

<sup>50</sup> Sarah Wilford, “Lack of Bridge Prolonged Exile of ‘Raunt,’” *Long Island Daily Press*, March 24, 1936.

<sup>51</sup> US Census Bureau, *1920 US Census*; US Census Bureau, *1930 US Census*; US Census Bureau, *1940 US Census*.

Goose Creek, the other remaining island settlement in the bay, experienced decline. A *Long Island Daily Press* article from the beginning of the 1930s notes that all of Goose Creek's hotels and cabarets had closed; the lack of traffic prompted the Long Island Railroad to cease regular stops at the site. The article attributes the decline to Prohibition, although competition with Broad Channel must have played a role as well.<sup>52</sup> With the nightlife gone, Goose Creek's proprietors began selling their buildings to Broad Channel: in one example, a dance hall was moved and repurposed as a school.<sup>53</sup> By 1940, the City demolished the remaining structures.<sup>54</sup>

The Department of Docks continued to rent space for bungalows and tents in order to earn a return on its investments in the Bay. In 1921, 244 individuals and organizations rented bungalows at various unspecified sites described as "Flatlands Bay" and "Jamaica Bay."<sup>55</sup> By 1925, though these particular enumerations disappear from the rent rolls, recreational areas with a number of lots for rent appeared at Sand Bay, Canarsie—a site created by the port project—and Hamilton Beach, near Howard Estates. The Sand Bay leases were for one and two years, most costing \$100 annually. The majority of renters were individuals but a few groups like the Canarsie Yacht Club leased space as well. In 1925, the site earned the City \$8,874 from eighty lots. The

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<sup>52</sup> "Once a Noted Playground, Goose Creek, in Jamaica Bay, Is Now Almost Demolished," *Long Island Daily Press*, circa 1930, Folder: Jamaica Bay Settlements, Vertical Files, Archive at Queens Library, Queens Public Library, Central Branch.

<sup>53</sup> McAleese, "Broad Channel."

<sup>54</sup> Frederick Black, *Jamaica Bay: A History* (Washington, DC: Department of the Interior, 1981), 58.

<sup>55</sup> New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Fiftieth Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1921), 81–82.

Hamilton Beach lots were only rented by individuals, with seventy-three lots rented in 1925, netting the City \$7,752.50. Most rents were between \$150 and \$200 annually.<sup>56</sup> In 1927, the City began renting out lots at Bergen Beach, yet another site created by dredging.<sup>57</sup> By 1929, Sand Bay earned the City \$11,803 from forty-one lots, and Hamilton Beach brought in \$38,492 from 117.5 lots.<sup>58</sup>

The 1930s saw a different trend. Income from most lucrative sites of the 1920s declined. In 1931, Sand Bay disappeared from the rent rolls (although it would reappear the next year bringing in only \$1,150) and revenue from Hamilton Beach greatly declined, with only \$12,662 being earned from sixty-five lots. That year, the City started renting out lots at a number of new sites in Jamaica Bay in the vicinity of Flatlands Bay and Bergen Beach in Brooklyn, leasing 101 lots. Though the number varied, the most common rent paid was twenty-five dollars annually, significantly less than that at Hamilton Beach.<sup>59</sup> This number expanded to 139 in 1933, a year when revenue from

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<sup>56</sup> New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Fifty-Fourth Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1925), 60–64.

<sup>57</sup> New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Fifty-Sixth Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1927), 69–70.

<sup>58</sup> New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Fifty-Eighth Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1929), 32, 73–79.

<sup>59</sup> New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Sixtieth Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1931), 92–101; New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Sixty-First Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1932), 71, 104–117.



Hamilton Beach had dropped to \$3,581, but would shrink to only twelve sites in 1938, a year in which Hamilton Beach only brought in \$382.<sup>60</sup>

In sum, the statistics from the Docks Department show a gradual decline from the beginning of the 1920s, when 250 sites were rented. The total number of recreational sites would remain around 150 through the end of the decade and even slightly rise through the early 1930s, but by the end of that decade the total had precipitously dropped. The amount paid for rental sites had significantly declined as well. The onset of the Great Depression may account for the shift to less expensive lots, but the continuing popularity as measured by lots rented out is nonetheless surprising considering the dire warnings of City officials in regards to sanitation in 1925. A likely explanation is that individuals looking for cheap housing relied upon what were formerly vacation sites, in spite of inferior facilities—a trend which was occurring on the Rockaway Peninsula as well. The failure of the City's efforts with higher-rent spaces like Hamilton Beach and the popularity of cheaper spots around Flatlands Bay possibly shows a shifting of their clientele towards those with less financial means, which could also explain increasingly negative portrayals of Jamaica Bay at the end of the 1930s.<sup>61</sup>

From 1920 to 1940, Canarsie's recreational industry experienced a trajectory similar to many of the other sites highlighted, enjoying sustained popularity then decline.

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<sup>60</sup> New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Sixty-Second Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1933), rent roll; New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Sixty-Seventh Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries* (New York: New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, 1938), 86, 119.

<sup>61</sup> For changes in recreation and residence on the Rockaway Peninsula, see Lawrence Kaplan and Carol P. Kaplan, *Between Ocean and City: The Transformation of Rockaway, New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

In the 1930s, a few concession stands appear on the Department of Docks' rent rolls at Canarsie Pier, indicating that some were using the space for recreation, but little growth is evident.<sup>62</sup> Golden City continued to be the community's main draw, yet in spite of its popularity over the 1920s Canarsie acquired an unsavory reputation as a rough and rowdy place.<sup>63</sup>

Canarsie's residents launched a series of stunts to rehabilitate the image of their community. In the late 1920s, local business leaders attempted to rename the community Lindport in honor of Charles Lindbergh in order to evoke positive associations, but were ultimately unsuccessful.<sup>64</sup> Another stunt occurred in 1934 when a delegation of eleven people, including the executive secretary of the Canarsie Chamber of Commerce, crashed a swim in the waters off Coney Island held by New York City health officials attempting to demonstrate the positive changes wrought by the newly opened sewage treatment plant. Dressed in swimming suits and gas masks, they declared that "if the water of Jamaica Bay is polluted, the water of Coney Island must be polluted too" in a vain protest of the state of Jamaica Bay's waters, or at the very least the unequal treatment paid Coney Island. The stunt probably did more harm than good for New Yorkers' impressions of the bay, but it nonetheless demonstrates that pollution was having an effect on Canarsie's businesses.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Department of Docks and Ferries, *Sixty-Second Annual Report*, 95; New York City Department of Docks and Ferries, *Sixty-Seventh Annual Report of the Department of Docks and Ferries*, 116–17.

<sup>63</sup> Craig Radow, "The Coney Island of Canarsie," *New York Times*, July 1, 2007.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> "10 Officials Swim, Find Coney Clean," *New York Times*, August 6, 1934.

By the end of the 1930s, Canarsie's reputation had not improved, and its status as a recreational site was in severe decline. A severe fire nearly destroyed Golden City in 1934, leading to the Park's demolition later in the decade.<sup>66</sup> With this centerpiece gone and its oysters and beaches implicated in the spread of disease, the *WPA Guide* offered a stark description of the community, describing it as:

A sparsely settled community laid out on dispiriting flat lands, smoked over by the perpetual reek of fires in the vast refuse dump at its western end. Its residential section of one- and two-family houses and shacks (most of which resemble those in Charles Burchfield's paintings) is broken by weedy lots and small truck farms cultivated by Italians. Along the uninviting waters of the bay is a forlorn beach resort--an amusement park called Golden City, a fishing boat center, a beach backed by a dump and beery dance halls--with an outlandish quality that made Canarsie the butt of many vaudeville jokes.<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusion

From 1920 to 1938, the recreational and residential use of Jamaica Bay shifted dramatically. Dire warnings from officials about pollution significantly impacted aquatic recreation, leading many of the Bay's entrepreneurs to reorient their business towards the illicit. The bay's former recreational spaces became significantly more residential, in particular Broad Channel, which became a permanent community. With this change, the residents and users of the bay became increasingly working class, as opposed to the mix of classes in prior eras. With Broad Channel becoming more integrated into the fabric of the City, the Raunt and Goose Creek declining, recreational use of the bay's waters diminishing, and its topography dramatically transformed by the port project, the

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<sup>66</sup> "2 Brooklyn Fires Sweep Wide Areas," *New York Times*, January 30, 1934; Radow, "The Coney Island of Canarsie."

<sup>67</sup> Federal Writers' Project, *The WPA Guide to New York City*, 501.

bay's space was losing its territoriality, its sense of place and uniqueness. As fewer New Yorkers actually went out into the bay for recreation, the knowledge from these experiences that reinforced the conception of it being "Venice" was increasingly not being created, although it nonetheless continued to exist among certain of the bay's residents.

The conception of the bay as a recreational Venice was mostly gone, replaced with the image of a fallen, polluted space. Beyond The Raunt and Broad Channel, the *WPA Guide* described the bay as home to "lonely and forbidding islands, some spotted with frail shacks" where lived characters like Old Doc, a peg-legged veteran of the Boer War who kept a pack of "wolfish dogs" to protect his isolation.<sup>68</sup> A 1941 *New York Times* article contemplating the next steps for the bay uses similar language, describing the bay as an "expanse of forbidden water dotted with dreary marshes and lonely islands," as well as "just something the Rockaways' visitors see on their way to the beach."<sup>69</sup> A 1936 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* article similarly depicts it a "remote, abandoned, far-away section of the city."<sup>70</sup> The future of Jamaica Bay was no longer bright, leading to very different possibilities for its spaces in the minds of New Yorkers.

Not all observers gave up on the bay. A 1938 editorial in the *New York Herald Tribune* described it as:

The one great remaining body of water within the city limits still capable of being reclaimed for bathing, fishing and boating. The very wildness and sense of waste and isolation which led to its being zoned for industrial uses are, now... among its greatest assets as a recreational ground... its

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 590–91.

<sup>69</sup> Charles G. Bennett, "Jamaica Bay to Be Play Area," *New York Times*, June 29, 1941.

<sup>70</sup> "Jamaica Bay Hailed as Port of the Future."

wide skies, its long water reaches and low, grassy and mysterious-seeming islands make Cross Bay Boulevard (despite the shacks and hot-dog stands which already too much disfigure it) an avenue into a strange corner of primitive romance of a kind one would hardly expect to come upon between Ozone Park and the Rockaways.<sup>71</sup>

Although this depiction was over the top, it nonetheless shows a reclaiming of the earlier sense of the bay as a wasteland of unexploited resources, yet environmental change demanded a new relationship between city and nature in order for those resources to be properly utilized.

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<sup>71</sup> "Sanitation and Yellow Bar Hassock," *New York Herald Tribune*, June 6, 1938.

## **Chapter Four**

### **“A Strange Corner of Primitive Romance”: Robert Moses and Jamaica Bay, 1930-1960**

After nearly four decades of attempts by the Department of Docks and Ferries to transform Jamaica Bay into a commercial and industrial seaport, Robert Moses, commissioner of the New York City Parks Department, moved in 1938 to scrap the existing plans and transform the majority of the bay into a park. Like developers and officials in the past, Moses conceived of the current Jamaica Bay as a vacant wasteland in order to accentuate its suitability for his scheme. His plans told a story of devastation and renewal: though polluted, the bay could be reclaimed as a natural space for recreational use. Cleaning up the bay meant removing its residents, who as before were conflated with the space's fallen state.

The chief competition to Moses' plans came from New York City Sanitation Commissioner William Carey and the bay's remaining residents, who each had their own views of what Jamaica Bay should be. Carey wished to dump garbage into the bay—a use that Moses argued would spoil the bay for other activities. The residents of the bay, who desired to keep living in their island and shoreline homes, resisted the City's efforts with varying degrees of success: Broad Channel's residents banded together and earned a reprieve from condemnation, yet every other settlement that was once part of the “Venice of New York” would be demolished. In spite of these early

victories, the difficulty of ameliorating the bay's condition held up key portions of Moses' plans. By 1960, his main achievement in the bay was the construction of a bird sanctuary: the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. Moses may have been able to successfully manipulate people, but the natural world would prove far more difficult to change.

### **The Master Builder**

Robert Moses is remembered, even by his detractors, as a man of big ideas, able to conceive of dramatic transformations of space. He was a master of manipulating the mechanisms of public power, ruthlessly harnessing funding and other resources, unafraid—and often disdainful—of those who stood in his way. As a public official holding various offices throughout his career, he was able to realize his vision for New York City on a massive scale, making him an extremely controversial figure.

Moses rose to prominence in the administration of New York Governor Alfred E. Smith in the early 1920s as head of the Long Island State Park Commission, impressing many with the success of his Jones Beach State Park project. In 1933, he was put in charge of the newly created Triborough Bridge Authority, a position he exploited to tremendous effect to fund a variety of projects. When Fiorello LaGuardia became mayor of New York in 1934, he appointed Moses as commissioner of a newly consolidated City Parks Department, giving him authority over all of the City's parks and parkway roads. Moses' shrewdness earned New York a greater share of federal funding during the New Deal era than any other city, helping to finance the multitude of projects he initiated. In

1946, his power grew when Mayor William O'Dwyer appointed him City Construction Coordinator, granting authority over all public projects in the City.<sup>1</sup>

As the creator of New York's contemporary park system, Moses was extremely influential. The year he became Park Commissioner, he laid out his ideas in a talk entitled "What New York Can Expect of its Park Department." Stating that the City's park system "should be a coordinated one, combining beauty, utility and recreational facilities," he argued:

Those who believe that city parks are intended to be fenced off spaces where green trees, vari-colored flowers and soft sward are grown for their exclusive visual enjoyment, must change their ideas. By the same token those who believe that these precious spaces are set aside for bare play spaces also must change their ideas. A compromise must be reached by each of these two elements. A third element, representing a small minority of rowdies, vandals and litter throwers, can expect no quarter. The parks are for the greatest good of the greatest number and must be respected as such.<sup>2</sup>

Moses' philosophy reflects a complex mélange of ideas, some rooted in the past, some reflecting contemporary trends, some ahead of their time. Nineteenth-century park designers had approached parks as picturesque pleasure-gardens—spaces of nature that allowed for recreation in a healthy and beautiful environment. Moses did not completely abandon traditional aesthetic forms like those pioneered by Frederick Law Olmsted, but unlike Olmsted he approached parks primarily from a functional point of

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Vintage, 1975) remains the definitive take on Moses' life and work, though Caro's sharply critical judgments have since been reevaluated. Hilary Ballon and Kenneth Jackson, eds., *Robert Moses and the Modern City* (New York: Norton, 2007) is a recent work attempting to place Moses' work in a broader context.

<sup>2</sup> "What New York Can Expect of Its Park Department," *Better Times*, March 12, 1934, 5–6, Folder: Department of Parks, 1936, Box 97, Papers of Robert Moses, New York Public Library Milstein Division, New York, NY.



view, regarding them as necessary for a population that possessed increasing amounts of leisure time.<sup>3</sup> Historian Michelle Kleehammer argues that Moses' conception of parks are best understood within the framework of conservationism as defined by Samuel Hays, that "public recreational space was a commodity to be used and conserved much like timber, water, and other resources recognized by the Progressives." In order for the public to utilize park spaces in the most efficient way possible, they needed to be altered to include recreational facilities and carefully managed: to leave park land in its purest natural state would be wasting its potential; like Olmsted, Moses did not see a tension between these modifications and the end result of a space of nature.<sup>4</sup> Moses' projects in Jamaica Bay mostly affirm Kleehammer's assertion that Moses was a "wise use" conservationist, but the Master Builder's work with the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge complicates the picture somewhat.

### **Changing Course, 1930-1938**

With the only development of the port scheme confined to Mill Basin, the Jamaica Bay region still possessed significant amounts of undeveloped land ripe for exploitation

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<sup>3</sup> Galen Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design, A History of Urban Parks in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), 3–7, 61–63, 101–106.

<sup>4</sup> Michelle Kleehammer, "Robert Moses, Jones Beach, and the Legacy of Progressive-Era Conservationism," *Long Island Historical Journal* 14, nos. 1-2 (2001-2002): 29. For the constructed nature of Central Park, see Anne Whiston Spirn, "Constructing Nature: The Legacy of Frederick Law Olmsted," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: Norton, 1995), 91–113. Christopher Sellers points out that perceptions of the "naturalness" of Moses' parks varied depending on the observer's own experiences: see Christopher Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible: Suburban Nature and the Rise of Environmentalism in Twentieth Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 95-96.

when Robert Moses ascended to his positions of authority in the City. Within a decade, he had created schemes purposing most of these lands for highways and parks, methodically proceeding area by area. His plans did not go unopposed, for the existing project's course of action—filling in marshes to consolidate the islands—offered a convenient outlet for dealing with the growing problem of the City's garbage. Moses created a narrative of renewal, portraying his efforts as saving the City's last remaining wild treasures from pollution and exploitation.

The Master Builder articulated his plans for the Jamaica Bay region as early as 1930. Speaking before the New York City Park Association on February 25, he laid out a grand scheme for the City's transportation system. The centerpiece was a series of parkways encircling the City to provide express motor transport between boroughs. One of these highways, which would eventually become the Belt Parkway, was to encircle Jamaica Bay on the southwestern shore in Brooklyn, then break north in Queens. Moses' parkways were also literally "park" ways, possessing areas of natural space. Along Jamaica Bay's north shore, Moses envisioned the road's "ribbon park" as a way of preserving lands from development, securing their future as recreational spaces.<sup>5</sup> The project was approved in 1938, and the first section of road opened two years later.<sup>6</sup>

With the new roads enabling greatly increased accessibility to outlying areas of the City like the Jamaica Bay region, the rehabilitation of this once widely used summer resort was a logical adjunct. Moses first turned his eye to the Rockaway Peninsula.

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<sup>5</sup> Caro, *The Power Broker*, 343–45.

<sup>6</sup> "City Votes \$16,000,000 to Build Brooklyn-Queens Belt Parkway," *New York Times*, October 14, 1938; "Belt Road to Open to Traffic Today," *New York Times*, June 29, 1940.

Similar to Jamaica Bay itself, the Rockaways—once a thriving summer resort—had fallen upon hard times during the depression.<sup>7</sup> Under a new agency created by the New York State legislature in 1934, the Marine Parkway Authority, he created the Marine Parkway Bridge to connect Brooklyn with Breezy Point on the Rockaway peninsula—an improvement long desired by the City. The project was completed in 1937.<sup>8</sup>

One of the benefits of the new bridge was the easy access it provided to an old ocean-fronting park: Jacob Riis Park. Similar to the way he exploited the Triborough Bridge Authority, Moses used the ability of the Marine Parkway Authority to raise bonds without significant public oversight to finance the improvement of the park. The new Riis Park conformed to Moses' ideals of park design, featuring modern recreational facilities like concessions, bathhouses, a pitch-and-putt golf course, playgrounds, and a boardwalk in a beautiful natural setting. Contemporary observers contrasted the park with nearby Coney Island, noting its lack of plebian attractions and amusements. The park opened with the bridge in 1937, but Moses was not yet done exploiting the Marine Parkway Authority.<sup>9</sup>

The same year that Riis Park and the Marine Parkway Bridge opened, Moses devised a scheme to utilize existing balances from both the Marine Parkway Authority and Henry Hudson Authority (which had built the eponymous bridge) to finance a massive \$12 million improvement of public beaches on the eastern Rockaway

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<sup>7</sup> Lawrence Kaplan and Carol P. Kaplan, *Between Ocean and City: The Transformation of Rockaway, New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 8–21.

<sup>8</sup> “Governor Signs Bill for Marine Parkway,” *New York Times*, April 9, 1934; “Beach at Riis Park to Open on June 19,” *New York Times*, June 7, 1937.

<sup>9</sup> “Beach at Riis Park to Open on June 19.”

Peninsula. The project took two years to complete, opening in 1939. The sculpted beaches featured bathhouses, concessions, and recreational facilities such as tennis courts. Moses argued:

The Rockaway Improvement may not be a model to be followed in the development of unspoiled natural beaches. I believe however, that it will be a guide to those who seek to reclaim beaches which man has spoiled, and to restore them at least measurably for the purposes to which they were intended by nature.

The quote demonstrates Moses' conservationist ethos, demonstrating the importance he accorded the proper management of natural spaces: it is the facilities and alterations of the space that enabled its proper use by the public as "intended by nature."<sup>10</sup>

With virtually the entirety of Jamaica Bay save for its eastern shore either developed or incorporated into schemes, Moses introduced his plans for the bay itself in 1938, in a carefully prepared publication entitled *The Future of Jamaica Bay*. In typical Moses fashion, it was an impressive piece of marketing, including extensive photographs and illustrations along with its prescriptions for the space. Moses called for the bay to become a massive park. He pointed out that the alternative was the port scheme, described as a plan that would "never be successful, but will ruin Jamaica Bay for housing and play." He insisted that the choice not be left to "land speculators and crackpot industrial theorists," pointing out that the City had more than enough port facilities in Staten Island to expand into as it was.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> New York City Parkway Authority, *Rockaway Improvement* (New York: New York City Parkway Authority, 1939).

<sup>11</sup> New York City Department of Parks, *The Future of Jamaica Bay* (New York: New York City Department of Parks, 1938).

Moses drew upon the older conception of Jamaica Bay as a wasteland in order to sell his scheme. He argued that “Jamaica Bay is the last remaining area in New York City whose character is undetermined,” going on to quote the recent *New York Herald Tribune* editorial (discussed in chapter three) describing the bay as a “strange corner of primitive romance” possessing “low, grassy and mysterious-seeming islands”.<sup>12</sup> Moses would use similar language in a 1948 letter to the Board of Estimate asking it to further the project, describing the bay as possessing the “sole remaining primitive areas within the city which have not changed since the first European landed on our shores” and as “the most unique and unusual park area within the boundaries of any city in the country.”<sup>13</sup>

The scheme presented a number of actionable steps and general guidelines for the final shape of the park. First, Moses asked the City to scrap the 1922 port plans. He then requested that all lands in and around the bay be rezoned and transferred to the Parks Department for development into park spaces save for small industrial zones at Mill Basin and Idlewild. The islands were to be cleared for public use, including Broad Channel, described as the product of an “outrageous lease to a real estate speculator.” After pollution was abated, the bay would be used for swimming, fishing, boating, and the preservation of wildlife. Additionally, Moses noted the bay’s possibilities for housing, presumably the shoreline spaces not dedicated to parks or industry.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Moses to The New York City Board of Estimate, June 10, 1948, Folder: Department of Parks, 1948, Box 99, Papers of Robert Moses, New York Public Library Milstein Division.

<sup>14</sup> New York City Department of Parks, *The Future of Jamaica Bay*.

Although Moses acknowledged the existing conception of the bay as polluted, he implied that it was something that could be removed. As before, the residents of the bay were conflated with the pollution. In *The Future of Jamaica Bay*, Moses described Broad Channel as a type of “mushroom development,” chastising the carelessness of the planners who allowed its development but also associating the community with decay like fungus upon a log. He included a number of pictures showing muddy flats strewn with trash behind rickety looking houses, images consistent with contemporary descriptions of Broad Channel as a low class, decrepit community. The images implied that the residents of Broad Channel were unable to properly manage their space, and that Moses’ expertise would be the only way to bring about the proper utilization of the bay.<sup>15</sup>

The chief opposition to Moses’ plan within New York City government came from Sanitation Commissioner William Carey. When one of the City’s main garbage dumps, Riker’s Island, was slated to be closed because of the rapidly approaching 1939 World’s Fair (the mounds of garbage were visible from the Fair site), Carey needed a new place to put the trash.<sup>16</sup> The Sanitation Commissioner eyed Jamaica Bay as the solution for his garbage disposal problem: with the harbor scheme still on the books, the move was justified as a way to help create the port’s central islands, with the trash serving as landfill.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Stuart Miller and Sharon Seitz, *The Other Islands of New York*, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 2011), 199–203.

<sup>17</sup> “100 Groups United to Fight Bay Dump,” *New York Times*, June 5, 1938. The City failed to deal with Riker’s Island in time for the Fair. To mask the unsightly piles of trash,

Moses deployed a variety of tactics to stymie Carey. *The Future of Jamaica Bay* contained an illustration labeled “Civic Nightmare” (figure 11) depicting what Jamaica Bay would look like if Carey got his way, showing flaming towers of refuse that echoed contemporary depictions of Riker’s Island. After firing this initial volley, Moses wrote Carey, insisting that public opinion was on his side. He suggested that the Sanitation Commissioner eliminate his plan in order to save face, which would make the issue “a scrap between the residential and recreational interests and the industrial boys and the speculators.” Carey shot right back, noting that “there is, I am sure, precedent to support the statement that many times a worthy procedure must be abandoned because well directed though somewhat exaggerated opposition is brought to bear on the question.”<sup>18</sup>



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Carey and Moses worked together to plant hundreds of trees around the island, giving it the appearance of a forest: see Miller and Seitz, *The Other Islands*, 199-203.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Moses to The Honorable William F. Carey, Commissioner of Sanitation, July 20, 1938, Folder: Department of Parks, 1936-37, Box 97, Papers of Robert Moses, New York Public Library Milstein Division; William F. Carey to Robert Moses, July 22, 1938, Folder: Department of Parks, 1938, Box 97, Papers of Robert Moses, New York Public Library Milstein Division.

Figure 11. New York City Department of Parks, *The Future of Jamaica Bay*.

Moses also enlisted the help of friends at the *New York Times*. Two months before the *Future of Jamaica Bay* was released, he wrote Iphigene Sulzberger, wife of the owner and publisher of the *Times*, requesting that the paper investigate the Sanitation Department's stoppage of burning trash in incinerators; Moses believed that resuming this practice would obviate the need for dumping.<sup>19</sup> An article doing that very thing with a title unflattering to Carey's position, "100 Groups United to Fight Bay Dump," soon appeared, lending credence to Moses' case that the public supported his position.<sup>20</sup> The intensity of the onslaught led Carey to drop his bid for the bay in September 1938.<sup>21</sup>

From 1930 to 1938, Robert Moses dramatically altered the course of Jamaica Bay's development. Over the past half-century a variety of actors within government had exercised agency over the space—often acting at odds to one another—but now a single individual was responsible for its future path. As powerful as he was, Moses still had to contend with existing conceptions of the bay's space, yet he was able to harness them to his cause with great effectiveness, creating the promise of a veritable Garden of Eden out of a spoiled wasteland. With Moses calling all of the shots, it must have seemed to contemporary observers that a single, coherent vision was going to finally emerge for the bay, yet the Master Builder would quickly discover that there were forces

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Moses to Mrs. Arthur Kays Sulzberger, May 25, 1938, Folder: Department of Parks, 1938, Box 97, Papers of Robert Moses, New York Public Library Milstein Division.

<sup>20</sup> "100 Groups United to Fight Bay Dump."

<sup>21</sup> "Carey Bows to Protest On Jamaica Bay Dump," *New York Times*, September 25, 1938.



at work beyond even his control, and as before, the bay's residents would not hesitate to shape the space as they saw fit.

### **Securing the Bay, 1938-1950**

With most opposition to his plans quashed, Moses proceeded to acquire the bay for the Parks Department. Although *The Future of Jamaica Bay* implied that only pollution hindered the creation of a paradise within the bay, a variety of factors emerging out of the space's complex history complicated its development. The Master Builder was forced to make a number of compromises with the legal regimes regulating the use of the bay and the Broad Channel community.

The process of acquiring the bay for the Parks Department took more than a decade thanks to the number of parties having jurisdiction over the space; these complexities would portend future difficulties faced by Moses. The first step was to acquire clean title to the bay from New York State: this was necessary because the 1909 law transferring ownership of the bay's underwater lands to the City mandated that the space be used for a harbor. With his usual effectiveness, Moses was able to secure passage of a bill by the New York State Legislature transferring the lands to the City in 1939.<sup>22</sup>

The issue of Broad Channel, which Moses targeted for demolition, proved to be significantly more complicated. Moses suggested in the *Future of Jamaica Bay* that the

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Moses to The New York City Board of Estimate, June 13, 1944, Folder: Department of Parks, 1944, Box 98, Papers of Robert Moses, New York Public Library Milstein Division.

City discontinue its lease to the Broad Channel Corporation when it was up for renewal in 1945, and then evict the residents. In 1939, the Corporation went bankrupt, reverting control of its lands back to the City. Instead of ending the matter, an unexpected difficulty emerged: the residents of Broad Channel rented land from the Corporation, not their houses, which they owned. Condemning Broad Channel would entail a significant expense for the City due to the cost of reimbursements.<sup>23</sup>

The residents of Broad Channel, which had developed into a tight-knit residential community, united in protest, launching an effective public relations campaign against Moses' plans. In their past dealings with the Broad Channel Corporation, which were often tense, the residents had banded together to form the Broad Channel Home Owners' Association in order to coordinate their activities; this organization spearheaded the current campaign. Thanks to their efforts to contact local officials and spread the word about the imminent destruction of their community, sympathetic articles appeared in local newspapers. One article depicted the residents as a group of conscientious homeowners, quoting a local resident discussing how his life savings was invested in the improvements he had made; he also pointed out that though Moses depicted his community as a "slum," the pictures in his pamphlet were taken immediately after a "typhoon" had struck the community, creating a false impression.<sup>24</sup> Another article quoted a Broad Channel resident asking why the City was contemplating destroying the community when they were spending millions to build new homes for

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<sup>23</sup> "Home Owners Fight Moses Plan to Make Park of Broad Channel," *Long Island Star-Journal*, December 15, 1938; "Jamaica Bay Home Owners Are Jittery," *Long Island Daily Press*, August 24, 1938.

<sup>24</sup> "Jamaica Bay Home Owners Are Jittery."

“destitute families,” implying that the residents were responsible and upstanding citizens.<sup>25</sup> In sum, the residents sought to create the impression of a well-ordered community and that they were proper stewards of Jamaica Bay, pushing back against the dominant conceptions in media and those advanced by Moses.

Moses soon changed course when an opportunity to solve a related problem presented itself. Although it may seem out of character, Moses came to believe that the Broad Channel issue threatened to become a political liability. In response to a 1944 memo from City Planning Commissioner Cleveland Rodgers suggesting that the City go ahead and demolish Broad Channel, Moses declared that Rodgers showed no “common sense” and that “only an irresponsible perfectionist who ignores the political aspects of the situation will support your recommendation.”<sup>26</sup> Moses must have quickly come to this conclusion, because in 1939, he devised a scheme to sell Broad Channel’s lands to its residents in order to finance the reconstruction of Cross Bay Boulevard—slated to be done as part of his Rockaway Improvement project. The matter was referred to the City Planning Commission in 1940 for study.<sup>27</sup>

Solving the Broad Channel issue would prove to be more complicated than Moses had hoped. In 1944, the Planning Commission determined that in order to sell the lands, they needed to possess certain features to meet code, of greatest import roads that met a certain width and grade and sanitary sewers. Moreover, it found that

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<sup>25</sup> “Home Owners Fight Moses Plan.”

<sup>26</sup> Robert Moses to Cleveland Rodgers, Commissioner, City Planning Commission, April 14, 1944, Folder: Department of Parks, 1944, Box 98, Papers of Robert Moses, New York Public Library Milstein Division.

<sup>27</sup> “Sale of Broad Channel Land Results in Unique Problem,” *Rockaway Review*, February 1944.

the needed improvements would be very expensive, costing at least two million dollars, yet they were nonetheless feasible.<sup>28</sup> In light of the report, the City Board of Estimate voted in 1945 to approve the basic guidelines of the plan. In the meantime, Broad Channel's residents were granted a three-year extension of their leases while the City worked out the plan's implementation out to a desire to avoid "injury and hardship" to the community. By 1948, when the leases were once again up for renewal, the City had still not carried out the scheme, claiming a shortage of funding. An uneasy status quo developed: the Board of Estimate voted once more to extend Broad Channel's leases temporarily; the process would be repeated numerous times over the upcoming decades, prompting anxiety among Broad Channelites whenever the issue came up for a vote.<sup>29</sup>

With the Broad Channel issue somewhat resolved, acquisition of the remaining lands could proceed. The process took five years, beginning in 1945. That year, the Board of Estimate transferred a large number of City-owned lands to the Parks Department, officially ending the City's commitment to the port scheme.<sup>30</sup> Four years later, the Department gained authority over the northern shore, and finally, in 1950, the City provided funding to condemn the remaining lands still occupied by individuals.<sup>31</sup>

While Moses was orchestrating his schemes for Jamaica Bay, in 1941, Mayor LaGuardia put into motion a plan to build a new airport on the bay's northeastern shore.

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<sup>28</sup> "The Rebuilding of Broad Channel," *Rockaway Review*, June 1944.

<sup>29</sup> Gene Ruffini, "The Forgotten Island," *Long Island Daily Press*, May 27, 1957.

<sup>30</sup> "Jamaica Bay Super-Park Plan Gets Green Light from City," *New York Daily News*, March 2, 1945.

<sup>31</sup> "Jamaica Bay Land Set Aside for Park," *New York Times*, June 17, 1949; Charles G. Bennett, "City Acts to Seize Jamaica Bay Land," *New York Times*, July 5, 1950.

Anticipating a boom in air travel after World War Two that was projected to overwhelm the recently opened LaGuardia Field, City officials selected the Jamaica Bay site because of its proximity to the modern parkways developed by Moses and the clear approach it offered planes—among other reasons.<sup>32</sup> Most of the 1,200-acre site, at Idlewild, was occupied by a golf course, and had less than 200 homes—most of them summer houses. That year, with the assistance of federal money, the City began the process of acquiring the property, gaining title on December 30.<sup>33</sup> The project took seven years, with the airport opening for service on July 1, 1948. By the time it had opened, the project had been expanded to a total of 3,150 acres, making it the largest airport in the world.<sup>34</sup>

At the time of the airport's construction, the community of Idlewild seemed particularly behind the times to contemporary observers. Although it had been home to a small resort, the site experienced the same decline as the rest of the bay's recreational sites. A 1935 article described Idlewild's main feature as a boarded-up hotel, a remnant from the bay's resort era.<sup>35</sup> Another, from 1941, described the hotel and other remaining relics as part of a former "dilapidated Venice-on-Jamaica Bay," revealing the conflation of this conception of space with pollution and decline.<sup>36</sup> A 1942 article reported on a man named Charles Sylvester, an 80-year old fisherman who was

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<sup>32</sup> "Mayor Asks Fund for New Airport," *New York Times*, August 15, 1941; "Idlewild Airport Wins Council Test," *New York Times*, December 6, 1941.

<sup>33</sup> "New Airport Site Acquired by City," *New York Times*, December 31, 1941.

<sup>34</sup> "Idlewild Airport Officially Opened," *New York Times*, July 1, 1948.

<sup>35</sup> Sarah Wilford, "Idlewild Park Hotel Waiting for Renaissance," *Long Island Daily Press*, September 17, 1935.

<sup>36</sup> "Roar of Planes May Revive Idlewood, Society's Orphan," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, September 9, 1941.

the sole resident of a small parcel of land called Thurston Island. Described as a “character out of ‘Tobacco Road,’” Sylvester was attempting to negotiate with the City for a larger sum of money to be paid for his condemned property. The reporter observed that he brought an “old potato sack” with “three tin boxes” to court with him, one containing the deed to his island and other legal documents, the other two food which “he feared to leave in his shack because the island had voracious rodents.” The bemused tone of the article reflects the understanding of the bay as a fallen space, yet also hints at its “primitive romance”—excluding the rats. The juxtaposition is even more striking considering the plans to build an airport: a symbol of modernity and technological progress.<sup>37</sup>

Even after the condemnations, thousands of residents remained in the vicinity of Idlewild as “squatters,” but observers saw nothing romantic about them. Many of the homes had somehow escaped demolition due to technicalities involving their removal. Papers reported on the residents with a mixture of revulsion and pity suffused with class bias. One article described them as “swamp-dwellers” living perilously close to Jamaica Bay, whose “polluted waters... washed over cesspools, garbage cans and dumps, and left germ-laden deposits in their wake.” The collection of “shacks” was contrasted with nearby Howard Beach and Broad Channel, which had developed into “vigorous communities... predominantly made up of properly maintained one-family homes,

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<sup>37</sup> “Hermit Balks City on Idlewild Deal,” *New York Times*, January 9, 1942. See David Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1994) for cultural attitudes towards technology.

gardens vieing {sic} with each other for color and neatness.”<sup>38</sup> Ironically, Jamaica Bay’s waters were probably the cleanest they had been in decades considering the new sewage treatment plants, yet the conception of the bay and its residents as being tainted by pollution continued. By 1972, only a handful of people remained in Idlewild, but the hamlet’s time would soon be over because the City was slated to build a highway onramp through the remaining houses; the residents were reported to be “eager” to lose their homes thanks to the decrepit condition of their community and the reimbursements they were slated to receive for their property.<sup>39</sup>

By 1955, most of the remaining aspects of the bay’s Venice era were destroyed. In 1954, the remaining residents of the Raunt were evicted. Although only a handful still lived in the community, residents like Paul Kuhn, a commercial artist, mourned its passing: “The water is what drew most of us to the Raunt in the first place... where else can be find {sic} another place like this? There is no other Raunt.”<sup>40</sup> The quote from Kuhn reveals the continuation of the ideal of Jamaica Bay’s settlements as hybrid spaces of city and water, even as they were becoming more conventionally suburban. A year later, the residents of Ruffle Bar—one of the few islands privately owned until Moses’ condemnation proceedings—occupying 15 houses, were forced to leave. With

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<sup>38</sup> Seymour Marks, “Disease and Death Stalk Swamps Where 3,000 Make Their Homes,” *Long Island Daily Press*, April 26, 1950. The positive spin on Broad Channel reveals how the community was able to rehabilitate itself in the eyes of the public against Moses’ onslaught.

<sup>39</sup> Glenn Singer, “They WANT to Lose Their Homes,” *New York Times*, January 23, 1972.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Petrow, “The Raunt Goes Back to the Birds,” *Long Island Daily Press*, October 10, 1954.

the bay secured, Moses was finally able to start the transformation of its spaces into the park he envisioned.<sup>41</sup>

From the introduction of his plans in 1938 through 1950, Robert Moses deftly manipulated the mechanisms of public power to secure Jamaica Bay for the Parks Department. The old plans and regulations surrounding the port scheme were gone, erased from public laws and City maps. With this changing of representations of the bay came changes to its topography—the last vestiges of the past knocked down to make way for renewal. Moses' narrative largely reigned, tarring the bay's remaining residents as depraved and diseased, yet the Master Builder had underestimated the strength of the Broad Channel Community, who were among the few that successfully challenged his will.

### **Implementing his Vision, 1950-60**

With the necessary steps taken to secure the bay, Moses created and put in motion a number of schemes to develop it for recreation. Despite his best efforts, as with the process of acquiring the bay a number of problems emerged, most importantly the frustratingly tenacious water pollution. A new round of alterations to the bay nonetheless commenced, beginning the task of reclaiming the bay for nature through human action.

Moses' plans called for recreational facilities at a variety of sites, many of them hugging the Ribbon Parkway. On the northern shore, Canarsie and Spring Creek were

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<sup>41</sup> "Playground for the Birds," *New York Daily News*, September 4, 1955.



to have bathing, boating, and picnic facilities. In the southwest, Marine Park and Plumb Beach were to have beaches and golf courses. In the east, at sites south of Idlewild Airport, Jamaica Bay Park was to feature bathing, and Idlewild Park was to feature a golf course. Additionally, a beach was planned for Broad Channel Island, as well as boating facilities.<sup>42</sup>

The City made little substantive progress on the project during the 1950s. Many of the sites, particularly Marine Park and Spring Creek, consisted of marshes unsuitable for park use in their current form, necessitating extensive filling.<sup>43</sup> Ironically, Moses supported the use of garbage for landfill, a move that would come back to haunt the City decades later when they discovered that PCBs had been included among the trash dumped at landfills along the bay's northern shore.<sup>44</sup> Although numerous acres of solid land were created, the City was unable to use it: in spite of the opening of the bay's final sewage treatment plant in 1952, completing the program put forth in the 1930s, a City-financed study from the late 1950s discovered that raw sewage was still being ejected into the bay. The problem lay with the combined sewer system, where sanitary sewage and stormwater flowed together to treatment plants: the City estimated that during periods of heavy rain, up to ninety percent of the sanitary flow could escape treatment

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<sup>42</sup> New York City Department of Parks, *Twenty-Six Years of Park Progress* (New York: New York City Department of Parks, 1960), 11–12. The document is the bi-annual report of the Parks Department. The creative naming reflects the intensity of Moses' self-marketing.

<sup>43</sup> William A. Raidy, "Long Island's Wonderland of Tomorrow," *Long Island Sunday Press*, October 13, 1957.

<sup>44</sup> "Moses Would Keep Garbage Fill Plan," *New York Times*, May 21, 1951; Onishi Norimitsu, "Neighborhood Report: Jamaica Bay; Plans in Works for Restoring Jamaica Bay," *New York Times*, October 16, 1994.

due to plants becoming overwhelmed, making the bay unsafe for swimming. As long as the bay remained dangerously polluted, the City did not proceed with building facilities that would be unsafe to use.<sup>45</sup>

The main accomplishment of the Parks Department and Robert Moses in the Jamaica Bay area resulted from an unexpected disaster. In 1950, a fire on the Long Island Railroad's cross-bay trestle put the Rockaway line out of commission, placing the company in a difficult position.<sup>46</sup> The high cost of rebuilding the trestle led the trustees of the railroad—which was experiencing financial problems—to decide to abandon the line. City officials condemned the move because of the hardship it inflicted on Rockaway residents dependent upon public transportation for commuting to jobs across the bay. For this reason, officials decided to purchase the line from the Long Island Railroad in 1951 and incorporate it into the existing mass transit system. The trestle reopened in 1956 after extensive improvements.<sup>47</sup>

The reconstruction of the Rockaway line entailed significant dredging, much of it in the vicinity of Broad Channel. Never missing an opportunity, Moses had the construction teams create two artificial ponds—one nearly 200 acres, the other fifty—on northern Broad Channel island. They were to serve as avian habitat, becoming the Jamaica Bay Bird Sanctuary (part of the larger Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, which encompassed the islands). Moses had envisioned wildlife preservation in *The Future of Jamaica Bay*, yet with the continuing existence of Broad Channel and other settlements,

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<sup>45</sup> Department of Parks, *Twenty-Six Years of Park Progress*, 33–34, 64–65.

<sup>46</sup> “LIRR May Abandon Burned Beach Line,” *New York Times*, May 9, 1950.

<sup>47</sup> “Rockaway Line to Open on Time,” *New York Times*, February 10, 1956.

these plans had largely been unrealized. He arranged for grasses and trees to be planted around the ponds to support the birds, and hired a superintendent to supervise the site.<sup>48</sup>

The Refuge quickly became a popular site for both people and birds when it opened in 1953. Numerous avian species utilized the space because it was located on major migration routes.<sup>49</sup> In 1960, the first year attendance figures show up in Parks Department reports, 15,000 people visited, but the number grew to 40,000 by 1962; officials attributed the increase to the continued development of the site's nesting grounds. They also reached out to public schools, delivering lectures on the preservation efforts to students. The Parks Department coordinated with agencies like the Audubon Society, the United States Department of the Interior, and the New York State Conservation Department to ensure the project's success.<sup>50</sup>

The Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge reflects Moses' conservationist ethos because it was a carefully managed space of nature, in his own words a "game refuge," but certain features of the space complicate the traditional "wise use" understanding of conservation.<sup>51</sup> Because hunting was not allowed in Jamaica Bay, it was not a game

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<sup>48</sup> John O'Reilly, "Wildlife on the Subway," *New York Herald Tribune*, ca 1950, Folder: Jamaica Bay Park Development, Vertical Files, Archive at Queens Library, Queens Public Library, Central Branch, Jamaica, NY.

<sup>49</sup> "Bird Life Revives on Jamaica Bay," *New York Times*, May 7, 1955.

<sup>50</sup> Department of Parks, *Twenty-Six Years of Park Progress*, 11–12; New York City Department of Parks, *Twenty-Eight Years of Park Progress* (New York: New York City Department of Parks, 1962), 11–12.

<sup>51</sup> Robert Moses to Harry Levy, December 28, 1956, Folder: Department of Parks, 1956, Box 100, Papers of Robert Moses, New York Public Library Milstein Division.

refuge in the traditional sense.<sup>52</sup> Although the refuge was designed to accommodate human use, as seen by its programs for visitors, it greatly benefitted migrating birds in a preservationist sense. If one is willing to go beyond the older historiographical debate between conservation and preservation, the space reflects many of aspects of conservationism as defined by Christopher Sellers: it was a space focused on preserving what was understood as a remaining wilderness, it was done on the behalf of a more elite constituency of society (middle class birdwatchers), and it was a space that was to be managed by experts.<sup>53</sup>

Newspapers generally reported on the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge and similar developments in the bay with glee, but not all observers were impressed.<sup>54</sup> A 1951 article featuring former fishermen revealed that there were still individuals within the Jamaica Bay area capable of looking beyond simple concepts like city and nature: Bill Hitschler, described as a “Canarsie old-timer” described how “filling-in drives off the wild life... that’s where the fish feed hibernates—on the meadowland. When they started dredging many years ago, they shut off our mainland creeks.” Hitschler, informed by his work in the bay, was one of the few to notice the irony that the filling, done to make the area more “natural” in the eyes of officials like Robert Moses, was destroying local

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<sup>52</sup> “Ban on Queens Hunting,” *New York Times*, November 5, 1958.

<sup>53</sup> Sellers, “Crabgrass Crucible,” 1-9. Kleehammer considers the Refuge to be an aberration and not representative of Moses’ overall conservationist ethos: Kleehammer, “Robert Moses,” 34.

<sup>54</sup> William A. Raidy, “From Garbage Dump to Paradise Park,” *Long Island Daily Press*, March 21, 1954, is representative of the hopeful tone taken by the media during this period.

ecosystems.<sup>55</sup> With fewer New Yorkers possessing Hitschler's knowledge due to the many changes taking place, it would be decades until wetland destruction in Jamaica Bay received significant attention from officials and experts.<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

In 1960, Robert Moses retired from the Parks Department. From 1938 until his retirement, he had pursued the development of Jamaica Bay into a recreational park with laser focus, ending the City's commitment to building a commercial and industrial port. Virtually all of the remaining undeveloped spaces of Jamaica Bay were incorporated into plans, creating the rough outlines for what Jamaica Bay is today. Moses told a story of devastation and renewal, imagining the bay as both a spoiled wasteland and an urban Eden.

As compelling as Moses' narrative was, it also entailed risk: with Jamaica Bay still largely undeveloped as a recreation area, Broad Channel still in limbo, and pollution still flowing into its waters, the fate of New York's final frontier was still indeterminate. Sewage plants and the wildlife refuge reinforced the narrative of restoration, but slow progress would soon endanger the scheme: the conception of Jamaica Bay as a polluted and abandoned section of the City would continue to invite uses akin to Carey's plan to turn the bay into a dump. Although environmentalist sentiment would be on the

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<sup>55</sup> David Gordon, "Old Jamaica Baymen Rue Lost Marshes," *New York Daily News*, March 1, 1951.

<sup>56</sup> Although Gateway National Recreation Area sought to preserve wetlands, serious concern over these spaces did not emerge until 2000: "Panel to Study Wetland Loss," *Rockaway Wave*, February 24, 2001.

rise, adding fire to Moses' dreams for the bay, continuing pressures for land in the nation's largest city would make Jamaica Bay an attractive target for developers well into the 1960s. The battle for the bay was far from over.

## **Chapter Five**

### **“An Ecological Fort Knox”: The Struggle For Gateway**

#### **National Recreation Area, 1960-1972**

Through 1960, the best efforts of land developers and government officials had failed to transform the space of Jamaica Bay into a coherent form. The bay was still depicted on New York City maps as parkland, yet halting progress on Robert Moses' plans meant that these representations of space did not conform to reality, weakening their power to effect change. Depending on what one chose to emphasize, the bay could either be horribly polluted, or one of the last remaining wild spaces in the City. From 1960 to 1972, various parties used these conceptions of space to argue for different schemes. New York City officials continued to push for Moses' park project, yet much of the 1960s would see a lack of progress similar to prior decades. Business interests would be emboldened by this state of affairs and attempt to change course back towards a commercial and industrial bay, yet a new actor with the power and resources to effect profound change would soon emerge on the scene: the federal government, specifically the Department of the Interior.

Spurred by a resurgent environmental movement, a nationwide clamor by experts for new recreational spaces, the demand for new solutions to urban problems, and Richard Nixon's desire for political gain, in 1968, Secretary of the Interior Walter Hickel put forth a bold new vision for Jamaica Bay. Hickel proposed to incorporate the

bay and a variety of other spaces in the area into an urban national park: Gateway National Recreation Area, which along with Golden Gate National Recreation Area in San Francisco would be the first such parks of their kind in the United States. The fight for Gateway National Recreation Area pitted officials, conservationists, and representatives from New York's minority communities against the Port of New York Authority, who wanted to expand Kennedy Airport into the bay to alleviate perceived overcrowding. Local residents were caught in the middle: both projects called for Broad Channel's removal, and Gateway's planners wanted the beachfront spaces of the Breezy Point Cooperative—a white working class community located on the western end of the Rockaway Peninsula. To resist, Breezy Point invoked Richard Nixon's politics of backlash, injecting race and class into the conflict, ultimately winning themselves and Broad Channel a reprieve. Although the supporters of Gateway presented a united front, tensions over the proper balance between preservation and recreation in the park simmered beneath the surface.

### **The Need for Recreation**

In order to understand why the federal government became involved with Jamaica Bay and the dynamics of the battle that ensued, one must consider an earlier episode in the vicinity of the bay, at Breezy Point, on the western end of the Rockaway Peninsula. Responding to planners who argued that the nation faced a serious shortage of recreational spaces, officials eyed Breezy Point as an ideal spot for mitigating the perceived crisis. The site's near-pristine beaches were viewed as some of the best



remaining recreational spaces in the area, yet the peninsula's residents would be loath to give up their homes.<sup>1</sup>

Providing for the country's recreational needs acquired a new urgency in the postwar period. Aided by expanded leisure time, widespread automobile ownership, and massive public investment in roads, Americans were engaging in outdoor recreation at a higher rate than ever before. Officials at all levels of government and a variety of independent advocacy groups argued that existing parks facilities were being overused, threatening their long-term potential to provide for Americans' recreational needs.<sup>2</sup> The Regional Plan Association was an important voice in this rising clamor.<sup>3</sup> In a series of reports released in 1960, the Association painted a stark picture of the need for more recreational lands. Based on current trends, they calculated that over the next twenty-five years total park acreage nationwide needed to double to keep up with demand. They argued that older cities like New York would have trouble meeting this need due to

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Kelleher, "The Changing Standard of National Significance: How the New Environmentalism of the 1960s Redefined National Significance and Led to the Creation of Gateway National Recreation Area, the First Urban National Park," 1995, Gateway National Recreation Area Cultural Resources Library, Staten Island, NY deals with this issue in depth, and provided a start for my investigations.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Hays, *Beauty, Health and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 115–17, 288.

<sup>3</sup> The Regional Plan Association, an independent policy research and advocacy group, dates from 1922. The Association embodies the Progressive Era ethos of applying technical solutions like regional planning to urban problems, gaining notoriety with the release of their 1929 "Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs." For more on the development of regional planning in New York City, see Keith D. Revell, *Building Gotham: Civic Culture and Public Policy in New York City, 1898-1938* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

land pressures.<sup>4</sup> In recognition of this fact, they identified 140,000 acres of available land at 200 sites in the region and urged officials to acquire it as quickly as possible before it was put to other use.<sup>5</sup>

On the state level, in 1960 New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller made a large push to finance the acquisition of lands for recreational use. Responding to recommendations made by the State Conservation Department in concert with Robert Moses acting in his capacity as chairman of the State Council of Parks, Rockefeller asked the legislature to approve a ballot measure authorizing a \$75 million bond issue to finance the immediate acquisition of lands statewide. Rockefeller cited concerns similar to those raised by the Regional Plan Association, namely that the demand for recreational areas was exploding and that development pressures necessitated an immediate response by public officials.<sup>6</sup> The issue was approved, and was eventually increased to \$100 million.<sup>7</sup>

In August 1962, the Regional Plan Association released detailed plans for the development of the western end of the Rockaway Peninsula—Breezy Point—following in the footsteps of their earlier recommendations. The area was considered to have

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<sup>4</sup> Mario Clawson, *Park, Recreation and Open Space Project of the Tri-State New York Metropolitan Region by the Metropolitan Regional Council of the Regional Plan Association. Vol 2: The Dynamics of Park Demand* (New York: Regional Plan Association, 1960), 30.

<sup>5</sup> William Niering, *Park, Recreation and Open Space Project of the Tri-State New York Metropolitan Region by the Metropolitan Regional Council of the Regional Plan Association. Vol 3: Nature in the Metropolis: Conservation in the Tri-State New York Metropolitan Region* (New York: Regional Plan Association, 1960), 61.

<sup>6</sup> “Text of Governor’s Message on Park Bond Issue,” *New York Times*, March 13, 1960.

<sup>7</sup> Laymond Robinson, “Governor Vetoes Breezy Point Bill,” *New York Times*, April 20, 1963.

some of the finest oceanfront beaches in New York City. Apart from Riis Park, which separated Breezy Point from more developed areas on the peninsula to the east, and Fort Tilden, a small military installation abutting Riis Park, the only existing development was a white working class community of 2500 homes, the Breezy Point Cooperative. The Cooperative started out as a collection of vacation homes built on sites leased from a developer—the Atlantic Improvement Corporation; despite consisting of small bungalows, the community’s homes were increasingly becoming occupied year-round. By the 60s Breezy Point had 900 permanent residents. After Atlantic Improvement attempted to evict the residents in order to build high-rise apartment buildings, they banded together into the Breezy Point Cooperative, pooling their resources in order to buy the land beneath their houses. The Cooperative was successful in carrying out their scheme, winning a reprieve from their landlord.<sup>8</sup>

Using the plans developed by the Regional Plan Association, in October 1962, Mayor Robert Wagner declared his intention to purpose Breezy Point for recreation.<sup>9</sup> An important factor driving Wagner to action was assurances he had received from Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall that the federal government would be providing financial support to the project, with the Secretary going so far as to note that it would receive the “first priority of anything in the country I’ve looked at”; this reflects the growing involvement of the federal government with recreation. The two appeared

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<sup>8</sup> Joe Janoff, “Park Plan Angers Breezy Point,” *New York World-Telegram*, October 8, 1962.

<sup>9</sup> Charles G. Bennett, “Site in Rockaway Is Urged as Park,” *New York Times*, August 15, 1962.

together a number of times, taking a helicopter tour of the area and giving press conferences to make the effort publicly visible.<sup>10</sup>

Though Wagner won an early victory, his efforts were quickly stymied. The New York City Planning Commission condemned the entirety of Breezy Point's lands for \$12 million, but Atlantic Improvement was able to quickly obtain a ruling that deemed that number to be too low, ordering the City to pay nearly \$40 million dollars for the lands. While the City contemplated its next move, residents of the Breezy Point Cooperative protested en masse at City Hall, winning a reprieve from the condemnation. The high price required for obtaining Atlantic Improvement's lands would necessitate the cooperation with the federal government promised by Udall, but it would take a new Secretary of the Interior to ultimately come through. In the meantime, the City continued to attempt to develop spaces it already possessed, like Jamaica Bay.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Persistence of Water Pollution, 1960-1969**

During Robert Moses' tenure at the Parks Department, the City poured millions of dollars into new sewage treatment plants as part of its efforts to create Jamaica Bay parkland, yet by 1960 important gaps still remained in the City's treatment regimen. With plans for park development still underway, officials resolved to keep working towards a fix. In spite of the greatly increased level of treatment from the new sewage works, the

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Arnold, "Mayor Gives Hope For Breezy Point," *New York Times*, October 5, 1962.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Stern, "Public Use of Breezy Point Rises Despite Local Opposition," *New York Times*, July 4, 1968.

prevailing conception of the space continued to be dominated by the fact that it was polluted.

Despite calls for action by the Parks Department to solve the problem of the combined sewer, progress proved very slow. A special commission appointed by Mayor Wagner presented a plan in 1959 to upgrade existing facilities and construct additional capacity to treat stormwater, yet little would be done in the early 1960s save for drawing up plans.<sup>12</sup> Presumably, costs played a factor, with the plan's \$1.3 billion price tag forcing the City to seek state and federal help. Thanks to grant money, construction of the first auxiliary treatment plan started at Spring Creek in 1968 yet was not completed until 1971.<sup>13</sup>

With the bay still not clean and amelioration moving at a glacial pace, colorfully revolting descriptions of its space started to appear in newspapers. One article featured a scientist describing the bottom of the bay around Kennedy Airport as being coated with "black mayonnaise" due to a filthy combination of poor drainage, sewage, and pollution from the airport.<sup>14</sup> Another article opened with a disgusting scene: "the pea soup-green water, broken by pools of oil and debris, gave off little reflection. Low-flying jetliners roared overhead, emitting long streams of black exhaust. And all around was

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<sup>12</sup> Seymour Marks, "Wasteland or Wonderland?: Jamaica Bay: The Filth Just Keeps Pouring In," *Long Island Daily Press*, December 16, 1968; New York City Department of Parks, *Twenty-Six Years of Park Progress* (New York: New York City Department of Parks, 1960), 63–65.

<sup>13</sup> "A Clean Jamaica Bay Envisioned in Decade," *Long Island Sunday Press*, March 21, 1971.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Harwood, "The 'Black Mayonnaise' at the Bottom of Jamaica Bay," *New York Times*, February 7, 1971.

the smell of rotting eggs.”<sup>15</sup> These descriptions are decidedly more graphic than those that appeared during the Moses years, which acknowledged the fact that the bay was polluted but did not go into gory detail about greasy films and rancid smells, instead focusing on the progress that was supposedly being made.<sup>16</sup>

The extra attention paid to bay pollution seems to have led officials to once more scrutinize Broad Channel. The community still lacked a permanent arrangement with New York City over its legal status: Broad Channelites wanted to buy the land beneath their homes, which was currently leased from the City, but to do this the community needed to meet City code by having a sewer system installed; who would pay for this was the root of the problem. By the 1960s, the estimated cost of the system had nearly doubled from the figure originally quoted by the City in 1945, exacerbating the already difficult situation.<sup>17</sup>

When the Broad Channel community yet again faced the expiration of their short-term leases in 1967, City officials moved to end the status quo and expel the residents on the grounds that their community posed a health hazard. Health Department officials relied upon statistics to legitimate their depiction of Broad Channel as a polluted space and the residents as irresponsible stewards of the bay: they described finding numerous violations in a recent sanitary inspection, from ninety-five cesspools leaking sewage into

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Dyer, “Jamaica Bay Lays a Rotten Egg,” unknown periodical, May 22, 1970, Folder: Jamaica Bay Pollution, Vertical Files, Archive at Queens Library, Queens Public Library, Central Branch, Jamaica, NY.

<sup>16</sup> William A. Raidy, “From Garbage Dump to Paradise Park,” *Long Island Daily Press*, March 21, 1954; “Bird Life Revives on Jamaica Bay,” *New York Times*, May 7, 1955.

<sup>17</sup> Hal Shapiro, “Broad Channel Seeks Solution to Its Dilemma,” *Long Island Daily Press*, April 1, 1962.

the streets, to 400 homes discharging sewage directly into the water.<sup>18</sup> Noting that the hepatitis infection rate was sixty times higher in Broad Channel than the city average, officials contended that the potential for a wider contagion was dire: Deputy Mayor Timothy Costello declared that “we can ignore [the problem] now only at our peril—yours in the community and ours in the city.”<sup>19</sup> Costello declared that “infants have already died because of the conditions here,” even though he acknowledged his statement was framed in the “most dramatic way possible.”<sup>20</sup> All of these efforts had an effect: Broad Channel would once more temporarily lose its respectability. Even sympathetic articles focused on negatives that implied a low-class space, one noting the community as having an “old, rundown, shabby look,” another calling attention to “crumbling summer cottages on stilts” that “jettison their wastes directly into the bay.”<sup>21</sup>

Broad Channelites responded with skepticism, disagreeing with the City’s characterization of their space. Residents acknowledged problems with sewage disposal, but considered them to be isolated cases rather than a systemic problem. With little progress made on the City’s plans for Jamaica Bay, other schemes were starting to fill the void created by inaction, such as a 1967 recreational study conducted for the City that recommended tearing down Broad Channel and building golf courses in its place;

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<sup>18</sup> New York City Department of Health, *Evaluative Report Relative to Sewage Disposal Practices and Needs, Broad Channel Community, Borough of Queens, New York, NY* (New York: New York City Department of Health, 1967), 2.

<sup>19</sup> “Fear of Epidemic May Seal the Doom of Broad Channel,” *Long Island Daily Press*, May 2, 1967.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Shapiro, “Broad Channel Seeks Solution.”

residents pointed to these proposals as evidence of the City's true intentions. The tense status quo between the two sides must have added to the mistrust as well.<sup>22</sup>

As they had done many times before, the residents of Broad Channel banded together against the City and the negative characterizations of their community in the press. They continued to use the bay for activities such as swimming, with one resident describing the inlets surrounding the island as "extensions of their backyards": this type of use can be seen as an everyday form of resistance to Costello's efforts to define the space of Broad Channel as polluted; it also reflects the hybrid conception of space possessed by its residents.<sup>23</sup> Broad Channelites organized a widely publicized cleanup of their community in the summer of 1967 assisted by the Borough President of Queens, Mario Cariello—an activity that sought to demonstrate how the community was a responsible caretaker of the bay.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, residents wrote countless letters to newspapers, coordinated by the Civic and United Organizations of Broad Channel; form letters encouraged the writer to emphasize the salubriousness of his/her community, one declaring that "Broad Channel is a good *clean* average American Community in which we wish to raise our children to become good American Citizens" [emphasis mine]. These efforts can be seen as the Broad Channel community attempting to attach

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<sup>22</sup> Frank McLoughlin, "For Birds or People? War Aboil on Use of Jamaica Bay," *New York Daily News*, April 30, 1967; Steven V. Roberts, "Eviction Fears Lash an Island in the Bay," *New York Times*, May 5, 1967.

<sup>23</sup> Roberts, "Eviction Fears."

<sup>24</sup> Richard Seelmeyer, "Shopkeepers, Housewives, Nuns Begin Broad Channel Cleanup," *Long Island Daily Press*, May 7, 1967.



positive meanings to their space, depicting it as a place of tight-knit community and moral integrity as opposed to pollution and depravity.<sup>25</sup>

The campaign succeeded in stopping immediate action by the City. The publicity surrounding the cleanup must have helped, as evidenced by sympathetic media coverage: instead of focusing on the unsightly portions of the community, a *New York Times* article appearing after the announcement of the cleanup noted how “the tidy houses frequently show signs of weekend puttering—a closed-in porch, a bit of bright shrubbery and new shingles.”<sup>26</sup> Other articles offered contrary takes on the statistics cited by the Health Department, concluding that the threat of disease was being vastly blown out of proportion.<sup>27</sup> These efforts gained Broad Channel additional time; the City agreed to conduct yet another study of upgrading the Community.<sup>28</sup>

Broad Channel residents would be given hope by the results, though the fight was far from over. The study, released in December 1967 found the costs to have increased yet again to almost \$6 million for storm and sanitary sewers and associated street upgrades; most importantly, it found that the project was still feasible, giving ammunition to those pushing for the preservation of the community.<sup>29</sup> In 1968, Queens Borough President Mario Cariello successfully shepherded a measure to extend Broad

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<sup>25</sup> Broad Channel Civic Association, “Sample Letters,” March 8, 1968, Folder: The Struggle to Buy Our Land, Papers of the Broad Channel Historical Society, Queens Public Library, Broad Channel Branch.

<sup>26</sup> Roberts, “Eviction Fears.”

<sup>27</sup> Taylor Frances, “Statistics on Hepatitis, TB Disputed,” *Long Island Daily Press*, May 3, 1967.

<sup>28</sup> “Sewers May Save Broad Channel,” *Long Island Daily Press*, May 9, 1967.

<sup>29</sup> City of New York, Office of the Mayor, *An Analysis of the Broad Channel Issue* (New York: City of New York, Office of the Mayor, 1967), ii–iii.

Channel's lease for five years through the Board of Estimate. The effort encountered shoals when the Corporation Counsel of the City declared the measure illegal on the basis that the City could only enter into one-year leases, but finally, in 1969 Mayor John Lindsay signed legislation authorizing the longer lease term, putting the matter to rest. Residents expressed elation, yet the future of Broad Channel still remained in jeopardy as new threats had materialized in the interim.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Perils of Slow Progress: Others Eye Jamaica Bay**

Although significant amounts of the remaining Jamaica Bay lands had been transferred to the city's Parks Department during the Moses years, the fate of Jamaica Bay as an area set aside for recreation was by no means assured. The only significant progress on the park scheme originally proposed in 1938 had been the creation of the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge and the implementation of pollution controls that were proving to be inadequate. Moses succeeded in clearing all human settlements in the bay save for Broad Channel, advancing the conception of the bay as being one of the last remaining natural spaces in the City, yet with Jamaica Bay still conceived of as polluted conditions were right to foil the Parks Department's plans.

Early calls for change came in the mid-1960s. In addition to those proposing new plans for recreational space such as golf courses, others called for the commercial development of spaces in the bay. Richard L. Geist, Vice President of the Rockaways Chamber of Commerce, made a determined push for industrial development in 1965,

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<sup>30</sup> "Broad Channel Is Elated; 5-Year Leases Approved," *Rockaway Wave*, May 2, 1968; "New Lease on Broad Channel Life," *New York Daily News*, May 28, 1969.

generating significant publicity. Declaring the cost of developing parkland to be “astronomical,” most likely a reference to the extremely high cost of continuing the pollution abatement program, Geist argued that the undeveloped north shore of Jamaica Bay was an ideal spot for businesses because it offered easy access to numerous modes of transportation. A Parks Department spokesperson pushed back against the plans by pointing out that recreational facilities were almost ready near Spring Creek Basin and that giving up lands which could potentially be used for open space would be foolish in an era when such lands were growing scarce. The plans would go nowhere, yet the episode reveals the vulnerability created by decades of slow progress.<sup>31</sup>

The most serious threat to Moses’ plans came from the Port of New York Authority, one of the few agencies that had defeated him in the past. Unlike New York City government agencies, the Authority was an interstate quasi-public entity that operated with significantly fewer restraints on its power; Robert Moses himself had utilized similar entities to great effect in implementing his plans. The Authority had dealt Moses one his most significant setbacks in 1947, when the City agreed to turn operation and development of its airports, notably the soon-to-opened Idlewild Airport, to the interstate agency instead of a New York City body.<sup>32</sup>

On September 8, 1966, the Port of New York Authority announced its intention to expand Kennedy Airport into Jamaica Bay by twenty-five percent, citing a variety of

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<sup>31</sup> “Geist Urges Industrial Sites on Jamaica Bay Parklands,” *Long Island Daily Press*, August 11, 1965.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Vintage, 1975), 766–67.

reasons. Above all, Authority officials believed that Kennedy Airport, one of the busiest in the nation, was hopelessly too small. Aviation experts asserted that things would only get worse as larger jets such as the Boeing 747 came into service. Additionally, they anticipated that the use of air transportation would double over the coming decade, putting even more stress on the already-swamped airport. As the most serious threat yet to the recreational development of Jamaica Bay, the actions of the Authority precipitated a showdown between the numerous interested parties over the Bay's future.<sup>33</sup>

Conservationists immediately condemned the project, demanding new action by the City. The Sierra Club harshly denounced the plan, noting that it would hurt not only natural resources but also people like fishermen, duck hunters and charter boat captains.<sup>34</sup> In 1968, the Park Association of New York City and the Citizens' Housing and Planning Council released a report urging Mayor Lindsay to address the delays in Jamaica Bay by appointing an official to coordinate development. The report also blasted the Port Authority's plans. Contemporaneously, Queens Assemblyman Herbert Posner called for a special commission to be appointed at the state level to oversee the bay's development because "the city has done nothing but let the bay go downhill." These efforts reveal a cognizance among officials of the threat posed by the constant

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<sup>33</sup> Joseph Ingraham, "Kennedy Airport Will Expand 25%," *New York Times*, September 9, 1966.

<sup>34</sup> "Nature Groups Rap More Runways," *Long Island Daily Press*, February 1968.

delays. The recommendations would ultimately be taken up, albeit in a different way than the Park Association or Posner intended.<sup>35</sup>

Mayor Lindsay met with the new Secretary of the Interior, Walter Hickel, on March 20, 1969 to discuss City-federal coordination in developing Jamaica Bay and Breezy Point. The Regional Plan Association was involved yet again: prior to the meeting, the group had submitted a plan to a number of lawmakers in Congress to develop Jamaica Bay, Floyd Bennett Field, Breezy Point, Sandy Hook (in New Jersey), and sites in and near Staten Island into a massive recreation area to be administered by the federal government. Lindsay would bring a similar plan to his meetings with the Interior Department.<sup>36</sup>

The project, described as “Gateway National Recreation Area” because its sites surrounded the entrance to New York Harbor, was very attractive to the new administration. President Nixon, presumably unaware of the prior meetings between Hickel and Lindsay, had asked Hickel in a May 5, 1969 memo to study the creation of a “national park on Long Island” for mass recreation; Hickel responded by informing Nixon about Gateway.<sup>37</sup> A few weeks later, a memo from Hickel to the President noted how he

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<sup>35</sup> Joseph Fried, “City Urged to Aid Jamaica Bay Area,” *New York Times*, December 8, 1968.

<sup>36</sup> Peter Kihss, “Recreation Area in Harbor Urged,” *New York Times*, May 12, 1969.

<sup>37</sup> Walter Hickel, Secretary of the Interior to The Counsel To The President, Memorandum, May 12, 1969, Folder: Parks and Sites, Gateway, Part 1, Mar. 28, 1969 to Jan. 17, 1972, Box 181, Parks and Sites: Fire Island - Gila Cliff Dwellings, Central Classified Files, 1969-1972, Record Group 48, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, National Archives, College Park, MD.

was “encouraged by your enthusiasm for... the Gateway National Recreation Association.”<sup>38</sup>

Historians characterize Nixon’s environmental policies as being born from political expediency. Samuel Hays describes Nixon’s environmentalism as an attempt to distract Americans from his Vietnam War policies.<sup>39</sup> J. Brooks Flippen argues that while Nixon himself was “consumed” by the desire for partisan advantage, members of his staff like Hickel—who barely survived his confirmation hearings due to skepticism from conservation groups—saw the political reality of a resurgent environmentalism as a great opportunity to get things done.<sup>40</sup> Communications from within the administration confirm these perspectives, such as a memo from Hickel to the Secretary of the Army that notes how the Gateway project would be a way of delivering on campaign promises, namely a plank in the 1968 Republican Party platform to establish recreation areas in urban areas.<sup>41</sup> Whether done for immediate political gain or not, the focus also reflects the continuing importance of recreation on the federal level.

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<sup>38</sup> Walter Hickel, Secretary of the Interior to The President of the United States, Memorandum, May 20, 1969, Folder: Parks and Sites, Gateway, Part 1, Mar. 28, 1969 to Jan. 17, 1972, Box 181, Parks and Sites: Fire Island - Gila Cliff Dwellings, Central Classified Files, 1969-1972, Record Group 48, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, National Archives.

<sup>39</sup> Samuel Hays, *Beauty, Health and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 57–58.

<sup>40</sup> J. Brooks Flippen, *Nixon and the Environment* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2000), 16, 23, 38.

<sup>41</sup> Walter Hickel, Secretary of the Interior to Stanley Resor, Secretary of the Army, August 12, 1969, Folder: Parks and Sites, Gateway, Part 1, Mar. 28, 1969 to Jan. 17, 1972, Box 181, Parks and Sites: Fire Island - Gila Cliff Dwellings, Central Classified Files, 1969-1972, Record Group 48, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, National Archives.

Gateway can also be seen as emerging from a renewed attention to urban problems at all levels of government, in particular an awareness of what was referred to as the “urban crisis.” Federal intervention in cities had greatly increased under President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society programs, yet urban riots and other chaos continued. New York City was seen as the epicenter of the crisis by figures such as Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who warned Nixon about the potential for social disintegration in its communities.<sup>42</sup>

On the local level, the project must have also been important to Lindsay, who was running for re-election after a difficult first term. With a Republican party primary for mayor looming in June, an achievement like Gateway would have helped him. Additionally, the mayor was attempting to enlist the help of a reluctant Nixon Administration for his primary run, and the visible cooperation with Hickel fit in with these efforts.<sup>43</sup>

After a helicopter tour of the site, Hickel and Lindsay jointly announced the Gateway project on May 13, 1969. The press release from the Department of the Interior, which would manage the project, argued that the 15,600 acre site would be of “significance to millions of visitors from not only the crowded New York City area, but to much of the mid-Atlantic and Northeastern Seaboard.” It would be the first time the federal government had ever set out to develop a major recreation area within a city. Although specifics needed to be worked out, with Hickel promising a report in ninety

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<sup>42</sup> Vincent Cannato, *The Ungovernable City: John Lindsay and His Struggle to Save New York* (New York: Basic, 2001), 400, 550.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 399–401, 409.

days, Lindsay offered assurances that “nobody would be thrown out,” referring to the communities of Breezy Point and Broad Channel.<sup>44</sup>

With the City and federal government moving rapidly, the Port of New York Authority responded in kind. On the same day Gateway was announced, the Authority announced new plans for the expansion of Kennedy Airport. The plan called for the immediate addition of two runways, with the possibility of three more being built in the future.<sup>45</sup> To assuage concerns over the destruction of the environment, the Authority commissioned the National Academy of Sciences to study the project’s impact. An airline executive asked about the study noted how “it was clear that we didn’t have a chance in hell of getting this approved unless we worked in advance with the ecology groups and conservationists,” providing “bird refuges and other things that would satisfy them.”<sup>46</sup>

From the perspective of 1969, the stage must have seemed set for the final battle over Jamaica Bay’s future. The Port of New York Authority and the federal government, unlike the agencies that had attempted to transform Jamaica Bay in the past, possessed the power and resources to effect massive change of the space. Would it be an extension of Kennedy Airport, or the nation’s first urban national recreation area?

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<sup>44</sup> Edward Burks, “Hickel Announces Start Now on US Park in the Harbor Area Here,” *New York Times*, May 14, 1969; “Secretary Hickel Announces Proposed ‘Gateway National Recreation Area,’” May 13, 1969, Folder: Parks and Sites, Gateway, Part 1, Mar. 28, 1969 to Jan. 17, 1972, Box 181, Parks and Sites: Fire Island - Gila Cliff Dwellings, Central Classified Files, 1969-1972, Record Group 48, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, National Archives.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Witkin, “Airlines Seek to Expand Kennedy Airport,” *New York Times*, May 13, 1969.

<sup>46</sup> Robert Lindsey, “Kennedy Expansion into Bay Studied,” *New York Times*, March 14, 1970.



Numerous groups would attempt to provide their own answers to this question as the planning and legislative process unfolded.

### **Gateway: Preservation vs. Recreation**

Gateway was being created out of an environmentalist desire to provide nature to urban residents, yet well-established conservation groups would also see value in its spaces for preservation, presenting a dilemma for planners. The Interior Department's plans for the site, which came out in December 1969, attempted to balance these concerns. The primary focus was to provide diverse recreational opportunities for "fun and relaxation," while the secondary focus was on preservation and environmental education, with the planners hoping that visitors would be inspired to "cleanse the air and waters and to plan healthy and attractive communities."<sup>47</sup>

Gateway as it was framed contained an important conceptual dilemma: recreation—particularly active recreation—could be observed to be in conflict with preservation, a tension that lay at the heart of national parks (see chapter six). Planners dealt with this problem by dedicating the different sites within the park exclusively to recreation or preservation, yet this would fail to satisfy groups wanting more of one or the other; this conflict would be particularly intense in Jamaica Bay, which was greatly

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<sup>47</sup> "Gateway National Recreation Area Press Release and Report," December 12, 1969, Box 107, Gateway National Recreation Area to Gateway National Recreation Area, Records of Public Input Documenting Interpretive Planning Activities, 1955-1999, Division of Interpretive Planning, Record Group 79, Records of the National Park Service, National Archives, College Park, MD.

valued for its wildlife but also the site closest to minority communities in Brooklyn and Queens that the park was intended for.

Reflecting the planners' strategy, the Jamaica Bay Unit was to be focused on environmental education and preservation. The authors noted that in spite of being "polluted, invaded, ravaged, neglected, bisected, despoiled and littered," Jamaica Bay was "an ecological Fort Knox" due to the richness of its fish and wildlife. They called for "most existing structures" to be demolished and the residents of Broad Channel to be relocated at the end of their current lease. An "urban environmental research center" would be the only major structure, providing a center for study and public education. It recommended that the northern shore of the bay be devoted to "community and neighborhood recreation needs," though no specifics were offered.<sup>48</sup>

The planners' descriptions of Jamaica Bay reflect and attempt to reconcile the conflicting conceptions of its space existing at the time. The conception of the bay as "Fort Knox" plays upon the dueling conceptions of it being an unexploited wasteland and polluted: the plans argued that even though virgin nature had been "ravished," an essential wildness remained, locked away like gold in "Fort Knox." Similar to Robert Moses' plans three decades earlier, it assumed that if the pollution—which includes the bay's residents—were to be cleared, the bay could again be a space of pristine nature.<sup>49</sup>

To balance out Jamaica Bay's preservationist focus, Breezy Point was designated as a recreational space. The plan envisioned people engaging in a "wide

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

variety of overnight and year-round educational and cultural uses” like going to “bike, fish, listen to music, see exhibits, view performing arts, gaze at the stars, picnic, and learn about their environment.” Numerous facilities like “game courts, playing fields” as well as “pavilions, cafes, rest areas, and places for the performing arts” would be built. Because of the value of the beaches it abutted, the report called for the Breezy Point Cooperative to be “purchased outright.” Cognizant of the location’s remoteness, the authors called for establishment of ferry service from major rail and subway hubs to better meet the needs of inner-city residents who did not own cars.<sup>50</sup>

In recognition of the social utility of Gateway, the definition of recreation within the park was deliberately left vague. Planners noted that it would be “preposterous” to let a specific meaning of this concept guide development, arguing for “community needs... to dictate [its] nature and character.” This aim reflects contemporary ideals of parks as spaces that served to heal the social fabric of cities frayed by the urban crisis. By mixing in park space, different groups would be able to come together and reach common understandings of urban problems.<sup>51</sup>

Although the project was widely supported by prominent politicians, it would also have its detractors, most notably Robert Moses. He made the argument that the park would take up valuable lands that could be better utilized to address housing problems, especially for minorities. Moses mocked the idea of a “National Gateway park guarded by Smoky Bears imported from Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon and Glacier Park,”

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid. The proposal also included Sandy Hook, New Jersey, as well as sites on Staten Island.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.; Galen Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design, A History of Urban Parks in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), 135–42.

declaring “the notion that some federal park and other officials happened on it and rescued it” to be “one of the most ridiculous pieces of fiction in recent times.” When viewed through the lens of Moses as a conservationist in the Progressive-Era sense, the disdain he expresses toward the National Park Service would seem to affirm his ideal that parks need to be carefully managed in order to be properly utilized by urban residents. His language also reveals the intense pride he felt over his accomplishments in Jamaica Bay, viewing Gateway as a usurpation of his achievements.<sup>52</sup> In spite of Moses’ efforts, his line of opposition failed to gain traction.

The proposal was only the start of a long and tortuous process, providing a starting point for the crafting of legislation and efforts to coordinate the many involved parties. A number of unresolved issues would delay progress for nearly two years. A variety of governmental entities had jurisdiction and ownership of the sites targeted for inclusion, requiring unprecedented cooperation between the City, New York State, and different branches of the federal government. The latter proved especially problematic: the plan called for the Army to turn over the underutilized facilities of Fort Tilden on the Rockaways and Fort Hancock on Sandy Hook to the Interior Department, but officials in the Department of Agriculture wanted to use Fort Tilden as an animal quarantine

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<sup>52</sup> Robert Moses, “New York: City of Contrasts, Crisis,” *New York Amsterdam News*, September 30, 1972; Michelle Kleehammer, “Robert Moses, Jones Beach, and the Legacy of Progressive-Era Conservationism,” *Long Island Historical Journal* 14, nos. 1-2 (2001-2002): 29.

station; Army officials would also be extremely hesitant to relinquish their property, leading to dragged-out lobbying efforts by Interior officials.<sup>53</sup>

The unresolved issue of the expansion of Kennedy Airport also played a significant role in delaying the project. The National Academy of Sciences study group, originally commissioned by the Port Authority to study the impact of expanding Kennedy Airport, would also analyze the Gateway plans, giving it significant influence. Wise to the weight of the forthcoming report, representatives from interest groups like the National Audubon Society sought to influence the proceedings: the Society's President asked to "compare notes" with the study group before their report was released in order to avoid "future conflicts of opinion."<sup>54</sup>

In the interim, varying groups worked to influence the process of shaping Gateway. Like the federal government, City officials had to strike a balance between the many interests who had designs on Jamaica Bay. Apart from Mayor Lindsay, the most important figure involved in shaping the process was the head of the City Parks Department, August Heckscher. Testifying before the National Academy of Sciences study group in 1970 in favor of Gateway and against the Port of New York Authority's airport expansion plan, Heckscher laid out the City's priorities for the park. He largely

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<sup>53</sup> John Quarles, Jr., Assistant to the Secretary for Program Planning and Coordination to Darrell Trent, Deputy Assistant to the President, April 1, 1970, Folder: Parks and Sites, Gateway, Part 1, Mar. 28, 1969 to Jan. 17, 1972, Box 181, Parks and Sites: Fire Island - Gila Cliff Dwellings, Central Classified Files, 1969-1972, Record Group 48, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, National Archives.

<sup>54</sup> Elvis J Stahr to The National Academy of Sciences, July 20, 1970, Folder: Jamaica Bay, Box B-364, Papers of the National Audubon Society, New York Public Library Milstein Division, New York, NY.

endorsed the project, but argued that Jamaica Bay in particular would be underutilized under the current plans:

We see our primary goal as serving the needs of City residents, many of whom have neither the means nor the opportunity to leave the City.... Jamaica Bay is within easy reach of millions of people who have limited access to the natural world or to recreational opportunities... while the magnitude and grandeur of Jamaica Bay might suggest to some a special and limited experience, we believe the Bay can receive multiple use by those who live within a half hour's distance. Its suitability for boating, swimming, sailing, fishing, picnicing [sic], camping, skating, observing, and simply being alone make the Bay attractive most of the year.... Active recreation... [is] not inconsistent with the preservation of the interior.<sup>55</sup>

Heckscher's position reflects his adherence to the ideals of the emerging environmental movement: at one point he notes that the bay offered "active discovery and direct participation.... consistent with the 'new conservation' which disparages strictly vicarious participation outside a fenced area in favor of full, managed utilization." Yet Heckscher was careful to emphasize the bay as a space of nature to appeal to conservationists: he argued that "the Bay represents life and the potential for living... it is New York City's last frontier... [offering] unparalleled lessons to teach, especially for a people whose urban heritage has almost eliminated their ties with the natural environment."<sup>56</sup>

Heckscher worked closely with conservationists to ensure the success of Gateway, in particular the National Audubon Society. The Society's members were some of the key players in the fight for Gateway, acting behind the scenes in various

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<sup>55</sup> New York City Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs Administration, August Heckscher, Administrator, "Jamaica Bay: Present and Future, Presentation to the National Academy of Sciences Environmental Study Group on Jamaica Bay," August 14, 1970, City Hall Library, New York City Department of Records, New York, NY.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

important ways. They worked hard to gain the support of different groups in order to show a united front behind the project, organizing a Gateway Citizens Committee as a pressure group. Society members also worked closely with experts testifying at hearings to craft the most politically advantageous testimony as part of an organized effort to coordinate messaging.<sup>57</sup>

Although they recognized the need for Gateway to be a multiple use area, the primary concern of Audubon Society members was wildlife and the bird refuge in the center of Jamaica Bay, reflecting their conservationist ethos. In 1969, reacting to a confidential briefing on the Gateway proposal held for Audubon and other supporters by Heckscher, Audubon Society President Elvis Stahr revealed the group's priorities by noting the project's "'surprising' sensitivity towards protection of the environment," its "emphasis on keeping [the] area in its 'natural state'" and "considerable attention to preserving the unique ecology of the Jamaica Bay section." Audubon would remain laser-focused throughout the legislative process and beyond, weighing decisions based upon how they would impact wildlife preservation. The fact that Heckscher would hold a confidential briefing for conservationists indicates his closeness with this particular constituency and the fact that he must have regarded them as a key for ensuring Gateway's success.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Sheldon Pollack, Gateway Citizens Committee to Committee Members, "Re: Broad Outline of Effort to Secure Gateway," Memorandum, March 29, 1971, Folder: Gateway National Recreation Area, 1969-71, Box 356, Papers of the National Audubon Society, New York Public Library Milstein Division.

<sup>58</sup> Dr. Stahr to Richard L. Plunkett, "Subject: Park Department Briefing on Gateway National Recreation Area," Memorandum, July 11, 1969, Folder: Gateway National

The Audubon Society and their allies fought hard to eliminate Broad Channel and Breezy Point by testifying against them at hearings, viewing the communities as major impediments to the project. Audubon Society members decided that it would be politically expedient to support the recreational development of the northern shore of Jamaica Bay in addition to Breezy Point: these sites would provide facilities to underserved New Yorkers. Memos reveal that a key reason for Audubon's support of active recreation at these sites was that it would keep recreational development out of the center of the bay, which Audubon wanted to keep as a natural space: one notes that they were going to attempt to have a provision inserted into the legislation mandating that the bay's interior's be preserved from future development. With pollution from Broad Channel impeding the recreational development of Jamaica Bay's north shore and harming the ecology of the bay, the neighborhood's removal would be a double win.<sup>59</sup>

The strategy of the Audubon Society reveals the extent to which conceptions of natural space influenced their thinking. Similar to the Gateway planners, Audubon members segregated areas of Gateway based upon use, separating recreational sections from those focused on preservation. The push to remove Broad Channel can be seen as emerging from a conception of natural space that only allows for a minimal human presence. Broad Channel community members expressed a very different view: thirty-year resident Henry Waichaitis argued that "we've lived with the bird sanctuary for

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Recreation Area, 1969-71, Box 356, Papers of the National Audubon Society, New York Public Library Milstein Division.

<sup>59</sup> Richard L. Plunkett to Mssrs. Callison, Clement, Barnes, Boardman, Miller, "Re: Current Status of Gateway Proposal," Memorandum, June 21, 1971, Folder: Gateway National Recreation Area, Box 258, Papers of the National Audubon Society, New York Public Library Milstein Division.



years, and the Bay is part of us... why, now, does the city come along and say we would be detrimental to the park?" Through his language Waichaitis demonstrates that he thought of his space in a manner similar to his ancestors: as a hybrid space of city and nature, a position informed by his years of living and working in Jamaica Bay.<sup>60</sup>

The inclusion of Broad Channel and Breezy Point became the most contentious issues facing the Gateway project. As in the past, these communities banded together and mounted an organized opposition, attempting to influence officials and sway public opinion. The intensity of the opposition led Hickel to describe Broad Channel as posing the "most difficult problem confronting us" in a 1970 letter to Mayor Lindsay, hinting that its destruction might be politically unfeasible.<sup>61</sup>

Mayor Lindsay was put in a difficult spot by these controversies. Lindsay's response to the racial conflicts of the 1960s had created the perception that he favored minorities at the expense of working-class whites, with one of the most controversial examples being his support of citizen involvement on a police oversight board.<sup>62</sup> His Administration's actions in 1967 regarding Broad Channel's sanitation problems must have reinforced these views. In spite of desiring to reach out to this particular constituency after his reelection in 1969 and his initial assurances, Lindsay decided to

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<sup>60</sup> Hank Roden, "A Community Lives on Borrowed Time," *Long Island Daily Press*, September 5, 1971.

<sup>61</sup> Walter Hickel to John Lindsay, April 21, 1970, Folder: Parks and Sites, Gateway, Part 1, Mar. 28, 1969 to Jan. 17, 1972, Box 181, Parks and Sites: Fire Island - Gila Cliff Dwellings, Central Classified Files, 1969-1972, Record Group 48, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, National Archives.

<sup>62</sup> Cannato, *The Ungovernable City: John Lindsay and His Struggle to Save New York*, 443-46; Palash Ghost, "New York City's Camelot: The Legacy of Mayor John V. Lindsay," *International Business Times*, December 3, 2013.

fully back the Gateway plans, arguing that Broad Channel needed to be eliminated in order to maintain the “integrity” of the park.<sup>63</sup>

With groups like the Audubon Society pushing for the removal of Broad Channel based on the fact that it polluted the bay, the fight would play out similarly to that in the late 1960s over sewers. Broad Channel had acquired powerful allies in their earlier struggles, and these relationships would continue to help them.<sup>64</sup> They would also continue to use the power of the pen, for example writing the Sierra Club to demand that they correct facts appearing in a pamphlet they published about Jamaica Bay: the pamphlet depicted Broad Channel as a summer community whose residents leaked sewage into the bay’s waters, depicting them as irresponsible. Broad Channel’s letter emphasized the fact that it was a permanent community that wanted sewers and was taking responsible steps like utilizing cesspools and septic tanks in the interim.<sup>65</sup>

With questions of public versus interests dominating the debate over their lands instead of environmental issues, Breezy Point and its supporters employed the politics of backlash, injecting race into the Gateway proceedings and reversing the dynamics of class at play. They portrayed Gateway as an unfair imposition on the middle class, exploiting Richard Nixon’s strategy of appealing to white voters supposedly ignored by

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<sup>63</sup> Roden, “A Community Lives on Borrowed Time.”

<sup>64</sup> Jane Salodof, “Broad Channel’s Future Appears Uncertain,” *Long Island Daily Press*, November 26, 1972.

<sup>65</sup> Lucille Murray, Secretary of the Civic and United Organizations of Broad Channel to The Sierra Club, Atlantic Chapter, March 5, 1970, Folder: The Struggle to Buy Our Land, Papers of the Broad Channel Historical Society, Queens Public Library, Broad Channel Branch.

the federal government in an era of Civil Rights.<sup>66</sup> One letter to the president himself from the daughter of a Breezy Point resident declared “why must you spend all that money on a Park when there is so much more you could do with it. People on welfare in New York are spoiled, the more they get the more they want at our expense... why must the Middle Class always suffer the loss!”<sup>67</sup> In essence, this insinuates that Gateway was a project primarily intended to benefit minorities, in spite of the fact that the Gateway plans and proposals were careful to speak in broadly inclusive language. These efforts seem to have been successful. After initially voicing his support for the project, President Nixon withdrew into the background for nearly two years, removing some of the wind from Gateway’s sails; perhaps he did not want to risk alienating his “silent majority.” It was only when the project appeared moribund that Nixon would become directly involved again.

Conservationists were wise to the racial politics of the day as well. In a March 1971 strategy session conducted before hearings held by the Senatorial and House subcommittees on Parks and Recreation, Gateway Citizens Committee members emphasized the importance of getting “community organizations—primarily ethnic—of low income areas, who have most to gain from the establishment of Gateway” to testify, as well as groups like the NAACP and Urban League.<sup>68</sup> The efforts must have been

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<sup>66</sup> For Nixon’s attempts to sway white voters, see Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>67</sup> Margaret Rybarczyk to President Nixon, June 2, 1971, Folder: Gateway, Pt. 1, 1-1-1970 to 6-30-1971, Box 2745, Administrative Files, 1949-1971, General Records, Record Group 79, Records of the National Park Service, National Archives.

<sup>68</sup> “Re: Broad Outline of Effort to Secure Gateway.”

successful, because the Committee held a reception in June 1971 to brief representatives from these groups who would be testifying at the hearings. Audubon Society staff ecologist Richard Plunkett noted that the proceedings “nearly got out of hand” when some of the representatives from “Puerto Rican and Black groups made fiery statements about how often similar projects had been turned against them.” Plunkett indicated that the experience reiterated the importance of including these groups in the process.<sup>69</sup>

Audubon also contemplated directly invoking race in the fight over Gateway. In the same June 1971 memo that mentioned the incident with Puerto Rican and Black groups, Audubon Society members noted that because Breezy Point was “almost completely white, largely Irish and Italian; [the] cooperative could be challenged (not by us) on grounds of systematic exclusion of Blacks [and] Puerto Ricans.” Although this did not happen, the fact that Audubon Society members were willing to consider it reveals the extent to which they were willing to play hardball politics to achieve their goals of preserving the environment.<sup>70</sup>

Theoretically, those in favor of preserving Jamaica Bay had common goals with Broad Channel and Breezy Point. Both communities lived in sensitive environments; as indicated by the Broad Channel resident who described himself as being of the Bay, they had a stake in maintaining their integrity. The stature of the Gateway project, the first effort by the federal government to create an area dedicated to preservation and

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<sup>69</sup> "Re: Current Status of Gateway Proposal." Although I have been characterizing the Audubon Society as conservationist, this episode demonstrates that the organization was undergoing a transition towards more environmentalist thinking

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

recreation in the biggest city in the country, meant that perhaps a precedent for cooperation between the many interested parties could have been reached, yet the politics of race and class were exposing the divides among them in nearly insurmountable ways. While historians of environmentalism have typically attributed the absence of the white working class within the movement to their lack of education in subjects like ecology, the case of Jamaica Bay demonstrates that environmentalism's willingness to embrace a broader variety of causes such as urban issues sometimes intersected with the politics of backlash, driving the white working class away from the cause.<sup>71</sup>

### **From Proposal to Park**

Against the backdrop of the various groups articulating their own visions of Gateway, the legislative process moved along at a snail's pace. Little progress would be achieved in 1969 and 1970 due to the many outstanding issues. No legislation for the project was submitted by the administration during this time, a fact that was strongly criticized by the congressional delegations of New York and New Jersey.<sup>72</sup> Complicating matters further, Walter Hickel was fired by Richard Nixon in November 1970 after criticizing the administration's Vietnam policies in the wake of the Kent State

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<sup>71</sup> Both Elizabeth Blum, *Love Canal Revisited: Race, Class, and Gender in Environmental Activism* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008) and Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995) make this argument.

<sup>72</sup> Richard L. Madden, "4 Senators Score Gateway Delays," *New York Times*, August 21, 1970.

shootings.<sup>73</sup> His successor, Rogers Morton, voiced support for the project in early February 1971 during a meeting with Mayor Lindsay, assuring him of the administration's continuing support in spite of the difficulties, but this change surely did not help matters.<sup>74</sup>

Almost a week after Morton gave his reassurances to Lindsay, on February 17 the National Academy of Sciences environmental study group issued their report on the Kennedy Airport expansion project and Gateway, shaking up the proceedings in an unexpected way. The group offered a strong condemnation of the runway project, systematically dismantling the arguments made in favor of airport expansion. They determined that capacity could be greatly increased with better management and the adoption of new technologies, noting that if their recommendations were followed Kennedy would be able to meet increased demand well into the future. In response, the Port of New York Authority quickly dropped their plans for expansion.<sup>75</sup>

To the consternation of Gateway supporters, the report argued that the federal government was ill equipped to provide for the recreational needs of inner city New Yorkers. In particular, the group noted that Gateway was too oriented towards preservation and passive recreational activities that only "upper class" New Yorkers would enjoy: this reflects a cognizance of the elite status of conservationists and the

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<sup>73</sup> Dennis Hevesi, "Walter J. Hickel, Former Alaska Governor and Nixon Official, Is Dead at 90," *New York Times*, May 8, 2010.

<sup>74</sup> "Gateway Project Affirmed by US," *New York Times*, February 9, 1971.

<sup>75</sup> Richard Witkin, "Kennedy Expansion into Bay Assailed in Federal Report," *New York Times*, February 17, 1971; National Research Council, *Jamaica Bay and Kennedy Airport: A Multidisciplinary Environmental Study, Volume II* (Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Engineering, 1971), 5–6; Robert Lindsey, "Port Authority Drops Bay Plan," *New York Times*, February 18, 1971.

narrow goals they had for Jamaica Bay. They also maintained that the federal government would not be flexible enough towards altering the orientation of the park in the future as needs changed and evolved, that the lands would become “locked up.” To remedy this, they called for the City to develop more traditional parks with financial support from the federal government.<sup>76</sup>

Sensing the danger from this line of attack, the *New York Times* published an editorial on February 27 praising the NAS saving Jamaica Bay from the Port of New York Authority but also condemning them for reading “into the Gateway project a conflict between mass recreation and wildlife preservation that does not necessarily exist.” It noted that the idea that “upper-class people” would be the only ones served at sites like the bird refuge was a “gratuitous slur” because of the fact that numerous “school excursions from the inner city” utilized the facility. They also claimed that the group misunderstood what national parks do, that the lands would not be “locked up.” The defensiveness of the editorial reveals that the study group had struck a nerve: conservationists were indeed trying to lock up a significant part of Jamaica Bay’s lands for the sake of preservation.<sup>77</sup>

Likely recognizing the threat posed by the NAS report, President Nixon broke his multi-year quiescence on Gateway in May 1971 by offering a bill that addressed many of the existing controversies. Nixon then traveled to New York with Secretary Morton to take a helicopter tour of the Gateway sites with Mayor Lindsay as well as the governors of New York and New Jersey in a visible show of support for the project. To the

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<sup>76</sup> National Research Council, *Jamaica Bay and Kennedy Airport*, 89–90.

<sup>77</sup> “Jamaica Bay Half Saved,” *New York Times*, February 27, 1971.

consternation of the Audubon Society, the bill removed Broad Channel and the Breezy Point Cooperative from the project, as well as the Staten Island sites to reduce costs—and presumably to avoid the controversy involved with destroying these white working class communities. To make up for some of the reduced recreational capacity, Nixon included the then-unutilized Floyd Bennett Field in the bill. In addition to responding to the National Academy of Sciences report, Nixon timed his maneuver to occur just before the first hearings on Gateway scheduled before the Senate, which were to be held on May 12. Although these had been scheduled before the administration's announcement, Nixon's influence would weigh heavily on the proceedings, sweeping aside the efforts of groups like Audubon to influence the process.<sup>78</sup>

At the hearings in the Senate and House of Representatives (held in July), the creation of Gateway almost seemed like a foregone conclusion, with no serious objections being raised to the project. Instead, the hearings focused primarily upon how it would best serve the needs of urban residents. The lawmakers considered the issue of including the northern shore of Jamaica Bay in the project, generally agreeing that it would provide useful recreational spaces. Transportation would be another important consideration. Most lawmakers agreed that mass transportation was needed for the project to reach its potential, yet many disagreed on whether or not it was not the federal government's responsibility to provide this. Representative James McClure of

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<sup>78</sup> Richard L. Madden, "Nixon Backs Gateway Recreation Area," *New York Times*, May 9, 1971; Richard L. Plunkett to Dr. Stahr; Mssrs. Callison, Clement, Barnes, Boardman, "Re: Gateway National Recreation Area Proposal," Memorandum, May 19, 1971, Folder: Gateway National Recreation Area, Box 258, Papers of the National Audubon Society, New York Public Library Milstein Division.



Idaho declared: “Every city in the country has the same right to demand equal treatment... I think New York must solve its own transportation problem.”<sup>79</sup>

The issue of Breezy Point received considerable attention. As expected, Audubon Society member Richard Plunkett focused on the necessity of these areas in testimony before the Senate Subcommittee on Parks and Recreation, pursuing the strategy discussed in the meetings, but because the administration had excluded Breezy Point from their bill, much of the hearing focused instead on what lands would be needed to ensure access to park visitors. In general, most lawmakers agreed that beachfront was necessary for the park to properly function, reaching the conclusion that acquiring an eighty-nine-acre stretch of beach as proposed in one of the bills would be a feasible alternative to completely removing the Breezy Point Cooperative. As to Broad Channel, Nixon’s maneuvering resulted in the issue being only briefly addressed during the House hearings, with most mentions simply recalling the fact that acquiring the community would be too expensive.<sup>80</sup>

Seeing that the process had been completely hijacked by Nixon, Audubon Society members reacted in a manner that strikingly reflected the concerns of the National Academy of Sciences study group. A memo reacting to the developments in July, after the hearings notes:

We can certainly live with the Gateway project that seems likely to be reported by the House Subcommittee... what we will get... are open,

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<sup>79</sup> *Gateway National Recreation Area: Hearings before the Subcommittee on Parks and Recreation on S. 1193 and S. 1852, 97<sup>th</sup> Cong. (1971); Gateway Area Proposals: Hearings before the Subcommittee on National Parks and Recreation on H.R. 1370, H.R. 1121 and Related Bills, 97<sup>th</sup> Cong. (1971).*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

relatively natural areas, which can remain that way under the present National Park Service planning for the development of the various units.

Although the Breezy Point Cooperative would be still there, the “limitation of capacity at Breezy Point may be helpful in the long run if we can convert this failing into effective pressure for the development of... the northern and western shores of Jamaica Bay,” which would ultimately “aid in the preservation of the marshland and natural areas in the center of Jamaica Bay by providing a reason for continued efforts to improve water quality within Jamaica Bay.” In sum, the project was going to be of limited use to people, but the birds would do well.<sup>81</sup>

The process would continue for another year, but in the end the project succeeded, with Richard Nixon signing the bill authorizing Gateway National Recreation area into law on October 28, 1972. The final bill was very similar to the administration’s proposal: it included Breezy Point but provided provisions to protect the Cooperative; all of Jamaica Bay was included minus Broad Channel, but a last-minute loophole had been included allowing the City to turn over the property within a five-year window if it so chose; finally, Floyd Bennett Field also made it in, as well as the sites in Staten Island and New Jersey.<sup>82</sup>

The bill, however, did not directly provide increased transportation to Gateway. Reacting to the project, Senator Jacob K. Javits noted that “the task now was to move

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<sup>81</sup> Richard L. Plunkett to Dr. Stahr; Mssrs. Callison, Clement, Boardman, Miller, “Re: Hearing on Gateway National Recreation Area before Subcommittee on Parks and Recreation, Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives,” July 20, 1971, Folder: Gateway National Recreation Area, Box 258, Papers of the National Audubon Society, New York Public Library Milstein Division.

<sup>82</sup> An Act to Establish the Gateway National Recreation Area in the States of New York and New Jersey, and for Other Purposes.

the project along quickly and to make sure that there is adequate provision for transportation,” a prospect that would not be easy seeing the resistance at the hearings. Additionally, although the bill called for the transfer of military sites like Fort Tilden, Wadsworth and Hancock to the Park Service, the details of how this would happen still needed to be resolved. The federal government would have their hands full in developing the motley collection of lands in order to reach the desired outcome of providing recreational opportunities to the urban masses.<sup>83</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The establishment of Gateway National Recreation area marked the beginning of a new era for Jamaica Bay. The hand of the federal government offered new hope to those who wished to turn Jamaica Bay into the world’s finest open-space park within an urban area, but the project faced numerous difficulties. Despite being considered “non-urban in character,” many of Gateway’s lands were heavily polluted, and had all been heavily altered by human action. Officials would quickly learn that representing spaces on a map as “natural” did not erase the past. Some wished to maintain the fictions of simple binaries, but others recognized a radical potential going forward: like Henry Waichaitis, they dared to conceptualize New York City as being “of the bay” instead of separate, existing in a complex web of human and natural processes.

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<sup>83</sup> Richard L. Madden, “Four-Year Gateway Effort Ends As Nixon Signs the Bill Into Law,” *New York Times*, October 29, 1972.

## **Chapter Six**

### **“The Leavings of a Throw-Away Society”: Jamaica Bay and Gateway National Recreation Area, 1972-1994**

The federal government’s creation of Gateway National Recreation Area in 1972 was the most important step taken towards codifying a vision of Jamaica Bay and surrounding areas since the City Parks Department took control of the space after 1938, but the final form of the park was far from settled. Planning Gateway would require significant compromises between the National Park Service and all the other interested parties: Broad Channel, Breezy Point, other surrounding communities, and government at all levels. Furthermore, Jamaica Bay’s space, a messy amalgam of the human and the natural—a physical record of the schemes both completed and unfulfilled since 1880—posed significant conceptual difficulties.

Instead of forcing Gateway to fit the mold of traditional national parks, planners in the Park Service put forth a radical redefinition of how its space was to be conceived of. Rather than taking pains to separate humanity and nature as in traditional national parks, planners argued that the conceptual divide between them was irrelevant. Drawing upon environmentalist thought, Gateway was to offer a new model for national parks where natural systems and masses of urbanites could exist as part of a harmonious whole, nurturing each other to greater standards of health. For the first time

in the bay's history, officials were basing its development upon a conception of space that attempted to reconcile the bay's unique history and relationship with New York City.

### **Gateway and the Evolution of the National Park Idea, 1916-1974**

In order to understand the conceptual difficulties Gateway posed to National Park Service planners, one needs to consider the organization's history. From its very beginning, the Service's mission contained a fundamental tension. The 1916 Organic Act, which established the Park Service, defines the organization's purpose as such:

The service thus established shall promote and regulate the use of the Federal areas known as national parks, monuments and reservations, which purpose is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.<sup>1</sup>

Use and preservation were generally seen to be at odds: the more people used national parks, the greater the chance that their naturalness would be degraded. Throughout its history, the Service has struggled to find the proper balance between these two functions.<sup>2</sup>

Because it is a public organization, the Park Service has been subject to outside pressures concerning its mission. At numerous times, policy makers have intervened in response to demands to provide greater public access or stricter standards for preservation, mandating changes to the organization's practices and holdings. One of the most important groups helping the Service adapt to its evolving mission was the

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<sup>1</sup> An Act to Establish a Park Service and For Other Purposes, 16 U.S.C §1 (1916).

<sup>2</sup> John C. Miles, *Wilderness in National Parks: Playground or Preserve* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 30–33. Miles' work is an extensive study of this struggle.

Advisory Board on Parks, Monuments and Historic Sites, a body of eleven members appointed by and serving at the pleasure of Secretary of the Interior. The Board, created and given authority to advise on policy by the 1935 Preservation of Historic Sites Act, consisted of citizen experts in a variety of fields. Although its recommendations could be ignored, it nonetheless provides a useful window into the politics of the Park Service.<sup>3</sup>

One of the key pressures facing the Park Service in the Post-World War Two period was the demand that it become more involved with meeting the nation's recreational needs. As previously noted, this issue gained a sense of urgency as widespread prosperity provided Americans ever-greater amounts of leisure time. The Service had already been given the responsibility to assist state and local governments with planning recreation areas thanks to the 1936 Park, Parkway and Recreational Area Study Act, yet lawmakers increasingly sought for it take a more direct role. Although on the one hand this change made sense due to the organization's expertise in administering parks—something no other federal agency had a hand in—on the other, the types of spaces managed by the Service—with their strong emphasis on preservation—made it an uncomfortable fit.<sup>4</sup>

The proposals to involve the National Park Service with recreation prompted a strongly conservative reaction from Advisory Board members. From the beginning of the Service, the general standard among the organization had been that apart from historic

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<sup>3</sup> "Preservation of Historic Sites Act," in Lary Dilsaver, ed., *America's National Park System: The Critical Documents* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> "An Act to Authorize a Study of the Park, Parkway, and Recreational Area Programs in the United States, and for Other Purposes," in Lary Dilsaver, ed., *America's National Park System: The Critical Documents* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994).

sites, national parks needed to be nationally significant spaces of nature. A 1950 Advisory Board meeting reveals what this terminology has most frequently meant: a member declared that national parks were “an exhibit of the great landscape of the country... nowhere duplicated and... not replaceable.” The word “landscape” reflects the fact that aesthetics have played a key role in helping to define what a national park is and what makes it significant, with spectacular areas like the Grand Canyon and Yosemite Valley forming the archetypes of nationally significant areas.<sup>5</sup> Arguing that “undeviating adherence” to traditional standards was “the only way to protect the National Park System,” Advisory Board members were unwilling to dilute the existing standards of the national park system in order to accommodate its expansion into recreation, fearing that to do so would lead to an overall decline in the system’s prestige.<sup>6</sup> Board members were similarly anxious about allowing quotidian forms of recreation to take place in national parks. They argued that national parks were “not the nation’s playgrounds,” instead being spaces of “spiritual refreshment and inspiration,” recognizing that the usage of spaces contributes to the way they are conceived of.<sup>7</sup>

During the tenure of Interior Secretary Stewart Udall, who served from 1961-69 under Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, the Park Service would be given the responsibilities dreaded by the Board. Udall’s views reflected those of the emerging postwar environmental movement far more than those of the earlier

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<sup>5</sup> “Minutes of the 22nd Meeting of the Advisory Board on Parks, Monuments and Historic Sites,” April 17, 1950, 11, Box 1: 1936-54, National Park System Advisory Board Minutes, 1936-83, Record Group 79, Records of the National Park Service, National Archives, College Park, MD.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 10–11.

conservation and preservation movements. He saw the need for a societal shift in regards to the United States' relationship with nature, believing that environmental problems were affecting society on a scale never before seen and therefore demanded a commensurate response.<sup>8</sup> Udall was willing to take dramatic steps to implement his agenda, such as in 1964, when he fired Conrad Wirth—Director of the Park Service—over disagreements concerning the Park Service's future. Wirth was replaced with George Hartzog, a man more amenable to the organization's changing role.<sup>9</sup>

Beginning in the early 1960s, at the urging of the Recreational Advisory Council—a body of six Cabinet-level officials created by the president in 1963—Congress began creating National Recreation Areas to be administered by the National Park Service.<sup>10</sup> They were designed to be “well above the ordinary in quality and recreation appeal, being of lesser significance than the unique scenic and historic elements of the National Park System, but affording a quality of recreation experience which transcends that normally associated with areas provided by State and local

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<sup>8</sup> Ronald Foresta, *America's National Parks and Their Keepers* (Washington, DC: Resources for the Future, 1984), 65–68. Udall is considered one of the first administrators on the national level to be acting from an environmentalist standpoint, versus conservationist. Christopher Sellers notes that Udall's concern with cities and suburbs was a key distinction: Christopher Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible: Suburban Nature and the Rise of Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 248. For more, see Stewart L. Udall, *The Quiet Crisis* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963).

<sup>9</sup> Miles, *Wilderness in National Parks*, 160–65. For more on Hartzog's tenure, see Kathy Mengak, *Reshaping Our National Parks and Their Guardians: The Legacy of George B. Hartzog Jr.* (Santa Fe NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Barry Mackintosh, *The National Parks: Shaping the System* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 1991), 72–79, 88.



governments.” This language reflects a cognizance of the concerns raised by the Advisory Board about expanding the Park Service into recreation.<sup>11</sup>

Under Udall and Hartzog, the Park Service adopted an innovative administrative scheme to accommodate its expansion and assuage concerns like those expressed by the Advisory Board. In 1964, Hartzog prepared a memo, blessed by Udall, that proposed creating three separate management categories for areas administered by the Service: natural areas, historical sites, and recreation areas. Each category would be managed differently, and even though all sites within the designations needed to possess nationally significant features, there was an underlying understanding that recreation areas were different than traditional parks, which fell under the “natural area” designation. The policy was officially adopted in 1968.<sup>12</sup>

The tripartite designation would go a long way towards solving the conceptual dilemmas facing the Park Service, yet it would not be a complete solution. In addition to expanding its role with recreation, Congress forced the Service to adopt stricter standards of preservation with the 1964 Wilderness Act. The Act mandated the Park Service to label specific lands within all of its holdings—recreation areas as well as national areas—as wilderness after a comprehensive review.<sup>13</sup> Wilderness areas were

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<sup>11</sup> “Federal Executive Branch Policy Governing the Selection, Establishment, and Administration of National Recreation Areas by the Recreation Advisory Council, Circular No. 1, March 26, 1963,” in Lary Dilsaver, ed., *America’s National Park System: The Critical Documents* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Mackintosh, *The National Parks*, 72–79, 88; Miles, *Wilderness in National Parks*, 160–65.

<sup>13</sup> Miles, *Wilderness in National Parks*, 161, 165.

to be managed with high standards that sought to preserve the ecological qualities that made them unique, drawing upon the work of scientists.<sup>14</sup>

The demands being placed upon the National Park Service to both expand access and more strictly preserve nature was taking the organization in conflicting directions. How could the organization provide mass recreation without degrading wilderness areas it was supposed to strictly protect? Although Udall's scheme provided flexibility, it failed to solve the essential tension within national park space that was being stretched to the breaking point.

After briefly embracing the changes facing the organization, the Advisory Board quickly reverted to its former position. Board members were initially optimistic about Gateway, with one member noting in 1969 that "it was only through proposals of this kind that we could truly meet the needs of our growing population and yet retain other areas in a primitive condition," but they would quickly change their tune.<sup>15</sup> After the influential Conservation Foundation offered a sharply critical assessment of Gateway on the eve of its creation, the Board resumed its conservative stance.<sup>16</sup> Criticism of the park appeared among the Advisory Board as early as October 1974, six months after the Park Service took over administration of its sites. The scale of the remaining work to

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<sup>14</sup> Foresta, *America's National Parks and Their Keepers*, 127.

<sup>15</sup> "Minutes of the 61st Meeting of the Advisory Board on Parks, Monuments and Historic Sites," October 6, 1969, 60, Box 5: 1969-72, National Park System Advisory Board Minutes, 1936-83, Record Group 79, Records of the National Park Service, National Archives.

<sup>16</sup> Conservation Foundation, *National Parks for the Future: An Appraisal of National Parks as They Begin Their Second Century in a Changing America* (Washington, DC: The Conservation Foundation, September, 1972), 15, 48-49. The group was created to report and reflect upon the direction of the Service on the 100-year anniversary of the creation of Yellowstone, giving it significant clout.

be done cast a long shadow: one member noted that it would probably take fifteen to twenty years to fully develop Gateway because of pollution. Fearing that similar projects would overtax the Service, the Board returned to its position that the Park Service had no business providing mass recreation. They did not suggest that the Service give up Gateway, but instead argued that administering the park would give the Service the expertise to speak out against further efforts by lawmakers to expand their responsibilities or holdings.<sup>17</sup>

The abandonment of Gateway by important policy makers appears to have resulted in an ironic twist: with the recreation area treated as an aberration, planners would ironically be better able to produce innovative ideas for solving the dilemmas faced by the National Park Service. Although the impulse expressed by the Advisory Board was understandable given the strains being placed on the organization, trying to return to traditional conceptions of national parks was increasingly untenable—particularly at a site like Gateway National Recreation Area, which possessed little resemblance to archetypes such as Yosemite and Yellowstone.

### **Planning Gateway: 1972-1979**

Conceptual difficulties aside, Park Service personnel faced significant political and logistical challenges with planning Gateway. The status of Broad Channel and Breezy Point remained unsettled. Planners needed to take a thorough accounting of the

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<sup>17</sup> “Minutes of the 71st Meeting of the Advisory Board on Parks, Monuments and Historic Sites,” October 7, 1974, 52–53, Box 6: 1973-77, National Park System Advisory Board Minutes, 1936-83, Record Group 79, Records of the National Park Service, National Archives.

park's cultural resources—human-made artifacts such as historic buildings and sites—and natural resources in order to decide what to preserve and how these resources would be managed. Determining the needs of visitors was another key consideration, requiring a clear understanding of demographics and input from surrounding communities. The ultimate goal was a General Management Plan (GMP): this was completed in 1979, and outlined the basic procedures as to the park's operation. Prior to the GMP, a number of preliminary reports and plans were issued to allow for public comment: in these documents, planners took pains to summarize the nature of the feedback they received and the ways in which they were responding.<sup>18</sup>

The first outstanding issue to be successfully settled was the status of Broad Channel. Although it is not clear who opted for it, language allowing for the transfer of Broad Channel to the federal government for inclusion in Gateway had been inserted into the final bill during the conference committee resolving differences between the House and Senate versions of the law. At the behest of Congressmen Joseph Addabbo and Frank Brasco of New York, conference committee member Rep. Nicholas Bedich of Alaska wrote the law to place the entire responsibility of acquiring Broad Channel on the City, essentially maintaining the status quo. It only allowed transfer of the property if the City acquired clean title, cleared “all improvements,” and then donated the lands to the federal government. Additionally, a five-year deadline was set. The Congressmen,

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<sup>18</sup> National Park Service, “Gateway National Recreation Area General Management Plan,” August 1979, 5–6, 40–44, Gateway National Recreation Area Cultural Resources Library, Staten Island, NY.

aware of the City's track record with Broad Channel, felt confident that these provisions would protect the community.<sup>19</sup>

Resolution of the conflict between Broad Channel and the City occurred surprisingly fast, obviating the need for the protections incorporated into the Gateway bill. Thanks to the continual efforts to lobby officials, the incoming chairman of the City Planning Commission, John Zuccotti, used his position and influence to help end Mayor John Lindsay's efforts to raze Broad Channel in 1973.<sup>20</sup> Contemporary observers speculated that Lindsay was contemplating running for governor, so with primaries only a year away it was not surprising that he changed his policy.<sup>21</sup> Simultaneously, Assemblyman Herbert Posner and Senator John Satucci—both from Queens—introduced bills in both houses of the New York State Legislature authorizing the direct sale of the City-owned lands at Broad Channel to its homeowners. The bill made it through the Legislature in about three months, being signed by Governor Nelson Rockefeller on June 19.<sup>22</sup>

The deal reached between Broad Channel and the City was the most important step seen towards ending their decades-long conflict, but final resolution would drag on for more than two decades, with the final lots bought by Broad Channel homeowners in

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<sup>19</sup> An Act to Establish the Gateway National Recreation Area in the States of New York and New Jersey, and for Other Purposes, Pub. L. No. 92-592, 86 Stat. 1309 (October 27, 1972); Jane Salodof, "Broad Channel's Future Appears Uncertain," *Long Island Daily Press*, November 26, 1972.

<sup>20</sup> "Joy on Broad Channel Island," *New York Times*, March 18, 1973.

<sup>21</sup> Salodof, "Broad Channel's Future Appears Uncertain."

<sup>22</sup> Gene Spagnoli, "Rocky Signs Bill to Clear Broad Channel Land Buys," *New York Daily News*, June 20, 1973.

1995.<sup>23</sup> Broad Channelites and their ancestors had successfully fought off the efforts of FW Dunton and Robert Moses to erase their community and remake the bay, yet their victory went beyond mere survival: it was the codification of a vision of space; Jamaica Bay was to be a hybrid space of city and nature. Broad Channel was finally integrated into the City, but the bay would remain an integral part of the community.

After the deal, Broad Channel offered little resistance to the plans being developed by the Service. Most of the community's interactions with planners consisted of requests for more information on issues such as borders and environmental impacts. In another sign of the community's intimate knowledge of the bay, they offered a corrective to tidal flow patterns found on one of the Park Service's maps. When residents inquired about recreational facilities—something the City had not provided due to the uncertainty surrounding the community's survival—the Service responded by nothing that they were “committed to developing facilities that will serve local as well as regional residents,” but could not “legally develop any facilities outside the park boundaries.” This is likely referring to the fact that the only part of Broad Channel Island included in Gateway was the bird refuge, which was already dedicated to preservation. The statement is indicative of the difficulties planners faced in balancing the wants of local communities with the larger aims of the Gateway project.<sup>24</sup>

As with Broad Channel, the creation of Gateway in 1972 did not settle the outstanding controversies with the Breezy Point Cooperative. Although most of the

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<sup>23</sup> Pam Belluck, “A Marsh to Call Their Own, at Last,” *New York Times*, August 29, 1995.

<sup>24</sup> “Gateway National Recreation Area Final Environmental Statement,” August 1979, 236, Gateway National Recreation Area Cultural Resources Library.

community had been spared, its oceanfront beach was to be included within the park's borders. Planners viewed this property as essential to the success of the Breezy Point unit because it linked together Riis Park and the western tip of the Rockaways (the community essentially bisected the Rockaway peninsula). Breezy Point itself was considered to be the lynchpin of the park's recreational spaces because of its proximity to minority neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Queens. Despite this, the Gateway bill represented a compromise between the Breezy Point Cooperative and the federal government. The bill only allowed the Secretary of the Interior to acquire an "adequate interest" for the purposes of establishing the park in the vicinity of Breezy Point as opposed to seizing lands: this weakness would be exploited by the Cooperative as part of a strategy of massive resistance. To protect Gateway, the bill granted the Secretary the authority to limit new commercial construction and alterations to residential properties within the Cooperative.<sup>25</sup>

Negotiations over the issue of buffer zones between the Breezy Point Cooperative and Gateway proved to be extremely contentious, ultimately ending in failure. In October of 1971, the Assistant Secretary of the Interior, Nathaniel Reed, sent a letter to the Cooperative proposing that the government acquire 200-foot buffers on all sides save for the east, which was to have a 100-foot buffer to allow for the development of a bathing area.<sup>26</sup> The Cooperative replied by noting that they wished to

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<sup>25</sup> An Act to Establish Gateway National Recreation Area.

<sup>26</sup> Nathaniel P. Reed to James Heller, October 13, 1971, Folder: Parks and Sites, Gateway, Part 1, Mar. 28, 1969 to Jan. 17, 1972, Box 181, Parks and Sites: Fire Island - Gila Cliff Dwellings, Central Classified Files, 1969-1972, Record Group 48, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, National Archives, College Park, MD.

retain ownership of the lands, but would be willing to “covenant non arbitrary restrictions as to its use and control.” Furthermore, they took issue with the size of the eastern buffer zone.<sup>27</sup> Interior wrote back suggesting that instead of selling or donating the lands the Cooperative could simply surrender development rights. They also reiterated the necessity of 100-foot boundaries in the east.<sup>28</sup> The Cooperative’s reply declared the last letter to be a “disappointment,” noting they would still have to pay taxes on the buffer lands even if they gave up development rights. They reiterated their proposal for a “covenant... that any future development in the buffer zone will be with the approval of the Secretary of the Interior if not unreasonably withheld.”<sup>29</sup> The final letter in the series, from Interior, revealed that an impasse had been reached: Deputy Assistant Secretary Curtis Bohlen stated that Interior would remain firm on the matter, and accused the Cooperative of acting in bad faith out of a desire to “continue development into the buffer zone” based upon the language of the Cooperative’s letter.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> John J. Carroll to Nathaniel P. Reed, Folder: Parks and Sites, Gateway, Part 1, Mar. 28, 1969 to Jan. 17, 1972, Box 181, Parks and Sites: Fire Island - Gila Cliff Dwellings, Central Classified Files, 1969-1972, Record Group 48, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, National Archives.

<sup>28</sup> Nathaniel P. Reed to John J. Carroll, February 2, 1972, Folder: Parks and Sites, Gateway, Part 2, Box 181, Parks and Sites: Fire Island - Gila Cliff Dwellings, Central Classified Files, 1969-1972, Record Group 48, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, National Archives.

<sup>29</sup> Walter Pozen to Nathaniel P. Reed, February 28, Folder: Parks and Sites, Gateway, Part 2, Box 181, Parks and Sites: Fire Island - Gila Cliff Dwellings, Central Classified Files, 1969-1972, Record Group 48, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, National Archives.

<sup>30</sup> Curtis Bohlen to Walter Pozen, May 23, 1972, Folder: Parks and Sites, Gateway, Part 2, Box 181, Parks and Sites: Fire Island - Gila Cliff Dwellings, Central Classified Files, 1969-1972, Record Group 48, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, National Archives.



No further progress was made through 1979, forcing federal authorities to try to settle the matter in court. Filing suit against the Cooperative in August of that year, the government claimed that a past agreement made with Breezy Point residents in 1948 only gave the residents rights to beach lands extending to the low-water mark that existed that year. The dynamic environment of the Rockaway Peninsula had extended the beach significantly beyond this mark by 1979. In 1982, the Cooperative won the suit, giving them clear title to the land and putting an end to the efforts of the federal government to acquire the connecting strip. It was another instance of the courts adapting to ambiguities of space in the highly dynamic Jamaica Bay area, modifying legal frameworks to fit local realities.<sup>31</sup>

The Cooperative, acting in tandem with representatives from Brooklyn communities near Floyd Bennett Field and the Marine Parkway Bridge, worked in other ways to hinder the park's development. By vociferously lobbying the Park Service, they were able to force planners to significantly scale back their ambitions for Breezy Point. Conservation groups, including the Sierra Club, played a part in this as well.<sup>32</sup> The only major conservationists working against these efforts was the National Audubon Society, but this is consistent with their earlier strategy to develop recreational spaces on the bay's northern shore in order to achieve the greater good of preserving its center.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Joseph Fried, "US Is Suing to Take Land at Breezy Point for Part of Gateway," *New York Times*, August 24, 1979; "Breezy Point Co-Op Wins in Court," *New York Times*, November 17, 1982.

<sup>32</sup> "Final Environmental Statement," 228–33.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Plunkett to Eleanor Ament, "Re: Improved Bus Service to Gateway," May 13, 1980, Folder Gateway National Recreation Area, Box B-572, Papers of the National Audubon Society, New York Public Library Milstein Division, New York, NY.

While a 1976 draft of the General Management Plan (GMP) sought to accommodate 200,000 visitors on peak days, seeking a doubling of peak visitation from the current total of 90,000 people during the summer, the final version planned for no significant increase. Practically, this meant that fewer attractions would be created at Breezy Point to draw visitors. Park Service officials cited the concerns of the local communities and environmental groups regarding the overuse and crowding of Breezy Point's beaches, but also cited the failure of government at all levels to provide for better mass transit options. The Cooperative and their allies had a hand in this as well.<sup>34</sup>

At various points during the planning process, Service personnel considered ways of improving transportation to Gateway, but most of these efforts would be defeated. A plan was briefly considered to hire private companies to provide transportation to the park, but protests by Breezy Point and their allies defeated the proposal; the message was clear to an unnamed Bedford Stuyvesant resident: "it is quite evident that they don't want us out there."<sup>35</sup> A brief glimmer of hope for expanded access came in 1979 when New York City considered taking advantage of federal funding provided by the 1978 National Parks Access Act. In spite of public hearings filled with "racial acrimony" as Breezy Point residents dueled with representatives from minority groups, the City provided expanded bus access from neighborhoods deep in

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<sup>34</sup> Michael Sterne, "US Gives Up Plans to Expand Use of Beaches at Breezy Point: Other Areas Involved," *New York Times*, April 13, 1978.

<sup>35</sup> "Rockaway Group Spurns Gateway Park Bus Plan," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 13, 1976.

Queens and Brooklyn to Gateway from Independence Day to Labor Day in 1980, but the busses only ran for one summer season due to low ridership.<sup>36</sup>

Minority groups perceived the actions of Breezy Point and their allies as part of a larger pattern of racial bias underlying the planning of Gateway. In 1976, the *New York Amsterdam News* reported how groups such as the Central Brooklyn Coordinating Council and the Coalition of Concerned Citizens for Human Services felt that park officials were failing to pay minority groups the same amount of attention as white groups at public meetings, for example failing to take notes on or tape record the comments of Black and Hispanic residents. Additionally, they claimed that minorities were not receiving proportional economic benefits of the jobs that were being created by Gateway, citing a recent example of the park firing four out of five members of an all-minority “public involvement team” due to a lack of funding.<sup>37</sup> This led to the perception that “present planning favors residents of communities around the park to the disadvantage of minorities and the poor.”<sup>38</sup>

Wise personnel choices by the Park Service would go a long way towards addressing the concerns of minority groups. In 1978, Herbert S. Cables, Jr.—an African-American employee of the Park Service since 1974—was promoted to superintendent, a post he would hold until 1982, when he was appointed director of the Park Service’s

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<sup>36</sup> Glenn Fowler, “Riis Park Bus Service Is Extended,” *New York Times*, May 27, 1979; Anthony DePalma, “Gateway: Half-Fulfilled Dream,” *New York Times*, November 21, 1982.

<sup>37</sup> Simon Anekwe, “Gateway Park Project Allegedly Submerged in Racial Bias,” *New York Amsterdam News*, November 6, 1976.

<sup>38</sup> “Demand Gateway Planning Input,” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 14, 1976; Anekwe, “Gateway Park Project Allegedly Submerged in Racial Bias.”

North Atlantic Region.<sup>39</sup> As much as the sheer visibility of an African-American man in the top job at Gateway must have created goodwill, Cables' actions on the job were key. By the time the final plans for Gateway had been unveiled in 1979, *New York Amsterdam News* reporter George Todd reported that many of the concerns of minority groups—particularly those involving sharing in the economic benefits of Gateway—had been addressed. Todd in particular praised Cables, who “held several conferences with local minority groups to hear their concerns about full participation in services and programs” as soon as he took over.<sup>40</sup>

As the GMP was finalized, the contours of Gateway became clear. Jamaica Bay was to be a hybrid space of humanity and nature; officials would not be able to keep one and get rid of the other. In spite of its designation as a recreation area, the efforts of Breezy Point and environmentalists forced the Park Service to make significant compromises with regards to Gateway's mission, resulting in the park's emphasis on preservation being even heavier than it had been in the early proposals, privileging the rights of property owners over access.

### **Communicating the Gateway Concept: Interpretive Planning**

Arguably the most difficult component of planning Gateway, considering the type of spaces traditionally managed by the Service and the organization's contemporary dilemmas, was creating a concept that united the park's disparate parts into an ideologically coherent whole. Creating a Gateway concept was central to preparing the

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<sup>39</sup> “Gateway Park Chief Given Regional Post,” *New York Times*, February 7, 1982.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

park's interpretative program. In the parlance of the National Park Service, interpretation refers to the ways in which resources are presented and explained to visitors; for this reason it can be seen as an imagining of space. Interpretation goes beyond mere education, being described by Freeman Tilden, author of the influential study *Interpreting Our Heritage*, as “provocation,” forcing visitors to think deeply about parks and their relationship to them.<sup>41</sup> The Gateway concept was first articulated in the Interpretive Prospectus (IP), approved in 1978. The IP would be central to the initial interpretive planning efforts at Gateway.<sup>42</sup>

The Gateway concept developed by planners offered a radical solution to the conceptual dilemmas of past decades: instead of working with the administrative designations that maintained a sharp bifurcation between humanity and nature, planners completely discarded any pretense of the two being separate. Chief interpretive planner Clifford Soubier, with the blessing of Deputy Regional Director Denis P. Galvin, boldly declared in the IP:

We stand on the threshold of a distinct new era with regard to the national park idea... the national park idea began in response to the needs of the time—preserving American wilderness... Gateway is in response to the needs of 20<sup>th</sup> Century man—providing open space for ‘recreation’ within the boundaries of man’s everyday environment. Gateway hopefully will demonstrate that man is an integral part of the environment.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Barry Mackintosh, *Interpretation in the National Park Service: A Historical Perspective* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 1986), Chapter 4.

<sup>42</sup> “Gateway National Recreation Area Interpretive Prospectus,” 1978, 1, Folder: Gateway National Recreation Area, Box 106, Friendship Hill National Historic Site to Gateway National Recreation Area, Records of Public Input Documenting Interpretive Planning Activities, 1955-1999, Division of Interpretive Planning, Record Group 79, Records of the National Park Service, National Archives.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

With the essential connection between humanity and nature emphasized, Soubier asked visitors to view Gateway's spaces differently than traditional national parks:

[Gateway's sites] offer, not so much an escape from the city, in the larger sense of the world man has built, for better or worse. They offer mainly a perspective. Stand on Sandy Hook or Jamaica Bay. From here, space, water, sky, and morsels of the world that was here before it all began—these dominate. The City, magnificent still, inevitable, but less overpowering, waits in the distance for one to return, renewed.<sup>44</sup>

Even though the plan conceives of humanity and nature—New York City and Jamaica Bay—as distinct things, with the almost mystical power of nature acknowledged, the plan was emphasizing the relationships between them. It was a step towards a different conception of space in Jamaica Bay, one more akin to that of the Broad Channel resident who thought of himself as being “of the bay”—thinking of his community as a hybrid space.

Soubier asserted that the basic project of Gateway—to create a space of healthy natural systems that the urban masses could utilize in a sustainable way—spoke to one of the central dilemmas of contemporary life. The park was to be a model for “new and harmonious expressions of urbanism throughout the greater metropolitan area.” It would help to bring about the “value revolution” urged by the environmental movement: Soubier declared that “we stand at the threshold of a distinctly new era, when it is clear that there is no longer enough to throw out, and no place to throw it.”<sup>45</sup>

The ethical perspective in the IP is a step towards the non-anthropocentric values found within certain strains of modern environmentalism. Earlier environmental

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 5, 12, 18.

movements, conservationism and preservationism, from which the Park Service originally emerged, were primarily oriented toward ensuring future human use of nature—whether for resource gathering or spiritual nourishment. Although human concerns played a central role in post-World War Two environmentalism, concern for the non-human world *for its own sake* has nonetheless been an important though small part of the overall movement.<sup>46</sup> The 1964 Wilderness Act demonstrates the influence of this perspective because the Act forced the Park Service to protect nature at the expense of human use.<sup>47</sup> Soubier's choice of language in describing Gateway's sites hint at this orientation: he describes the "old buildings, deserted bunkers, garbage dumps and... polluted bay" as "the leavings of a throw-away society." Choosing to rehabilitate them as part of the "value revolution" can imply that the discarded remnants have an inherent worth in and of themselves.<sup>48</sup>

As tentative as it was, the interpretive program approved for Gateway was a departure for the park service, though still one firmly grounded in its basic dilemma. Preservation and use were still the paramount concerns, but Soubier's approach discouraged the compartmentalization of the past. After assiduously working to protect the traditional conception of national parks in the face of congressionally mandated change, the Park Service had approved a plan that offered a radical reconsideration of

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<sup>46</sup> Roderick Frazier Nash, *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989) is an important study of the role of non-anthropocentric concerns in modern environmentalism.

<sup>47</sup> Foresta, *America's National Parks and Their Keepers*, 104–107. Foresta and Miles both find that Park Service personnel resisted the Wilderness Act's requirements because of this fact.

<sup>48</sup> "Gateway National Recreation Area Interpretive Prospectus," 12.

what national parks were and the values that justified their existence. Incorporating this perspective into the Gateway plans would prove difficult, yet it nonetheless would acquire a central role in the General Management Plan (GMP).<sup>49</sup>

After decades of trying to base Jamaica Bay's development on created representations of space, whether urban or natural forms, the conception of space animating Gateway was the first instance in Jamaica Bay's history in which planners offered a complex, historically grounded vision that moved away from the human-nature duality towards the hybridity envisioned by its residents. This change emerged because planners were not seeking to erase and remake the bay, but rather to take an honest accounting in order to do justice to the bay's natural and human residents and visitors.

### **Putting the Concept in Action: 1979-1994**

The Gateway concept played a key role in interpretation, but it also shaped the basic operation of the park as outlined in the GMP. The document begins by noting Gateway's significance: planners declared that "Gateway can become a national project to demonstrate the potentials of ecological reclamation in an urban setting..." being "proof that "modern man can work with nature and reclaim what has been impaired."

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<sup>49</sup> Historians have only begun to explore the Park Service's experiences in urban areas in light of the organization's larger history, with canonical works like Alfred Runte, *National Parks: The American Experience*, 4th Edition (New York: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2010) being mostly silent on this development. Ronald Foresta is still one of the few to have extensively considered urban national parks like Gateway, yet as a traditionalist he was extremely critical, describing ideas like Soubier's as essentially window dressing: "Urban national parks which were to be more than merely local facilities demanded far greater creativity than did national parks in spectacular natural areas. In fact, perhaps they demanded too much creativity," being unable to "take their planning cues from the site resources": Foresta, *National Parks and Their Keepers*, 197.



The plan then noted its specific objectives, which fall into three broad categories: first, ensuring the sustainable use of park resources; second, meeting the needs of the diverse populations it served; third, bringing about the “value revolution” urged by the IP, stated less definitively in the GMP as “forg[ing] an effective link between the urban value systems that characterize the New York/New Jersey community and the natural systems at Gateway” and “provid[ing] for visitor appreciation of the important fish, wildlife, and other natural resources of Gateway (with particular emphasis on the Jamaica Bay Unit).”<sup>50</sup>

To balance preservation and use, the plan created a number of different management zones with varying levels of public access. It is here that representations of space manifest and attempt to exert power over its use. The largest zone, constituting thirty-eight percent of the park, was “use-by-reservation,” which allowed “low-impact uses” like “nature study, environmental education, historical interpretation,” and “hiking, jogging, gardening and planting.” Thirty-three percent of the parklands allowed mostly unrestricted access yet the majority of these lands were planned to be used in a particular manner: “beach zone” comprised seven percent of lands, “structured recreation zone” six percent, and the “developed zone”—consisting of museums, program centers, and other such facilities—totaled eight percent; the “unstructured recreation zone,” where visitors had the most free reign over their activities, added up to only twelve percent of the park. The “Protection zone,” where no public access was allowed, comprised thirty percent of the park. In sum, these totals reveal the park’s

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<sup>50</sup> National Park Service, “Gateway National Recreation Area General Management Plan,” vii–x, 1–2.

strong emphasis on preservation and environmental education at the expense of recreation.<sup>51</sup>

The plan's treatment of the park's resources had a similarly intense focus on preservation. Ninety-five percent of the park's wetlands were put into protection zones. With the help of "plant nurseries, fisheries, and areas for mariculture," Service personnel would work to restore these areas back to health; other sensitive environments, such as those with endangered species, would undergo similar restoration. The plan also directed the Service to undertake "specific projects... towards pollution abatement in Jamaica Bay" in order to make its waters safe for swimming. The park's cultural resources, primarily consisting of the historically significant Floyd Bennett Field, Jacob Riis Park, Fort Hancock, Fort Tilden, and Fort Wadsworth received similar treatment. The primary goal was to preserve "significant structures, sites, settings, and areas" to use for interpretation, education, arts, and recreational programming. Less significant structures were to be used for administration and housing staff. Only in rare cases would buildings be demolished.<sup>52</sup>

The key concept devised for interpretation was the "Gateway village." This was to function like a main visitor center, but as the choice of the word "village" indicates, the goal was to create "richer and more lasting relationships between the public and Gateway." Gateway village was to operate on the assumption highlighted in the IP that "it is no longer constructive for those who consider themselves environmentalists to separate their concern for nature from their concern for the man-made environment,

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 53–58.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 60–65.

since the fate of the two are now seen as inseparably related.” Building off of “ecological principles,” the village was to demonstrate that “harmonious and mutually supportive relationships between people and nature are possible, even under conditions of intensive use.”<sup>53</sup>

The main village was to be located at Floyd Bennett Field, serving as one of its chief attractions. It was envisioned as “a working exhibit and testing ground of the efforts of people to live in harmony with nature.” Situated in “restored and replanted natural areas,” there would be exhibits, classrooms, support facilities for training and housing rangers, spaces dedicated to commerce such as restaurants and open-air markets, as well as space for camping. Special efforts were to be made to cater to the diverse populations of the surrounding metropolitan region. In short, it was to be a model for an ecologically sustainable city, inspiring visitors to action within their own communities. Although idealistic, the plan was an excellent example of the ways in which Service personnel were creatively adapting to the challenges and limitations posed by the ultimate incarnation of Gateway.<sup>54</sup>

The plans for the specific units were very similar to those seen in the original proposal. Breezy Point was to be developed as the park’s primary recreational site in spite of the scaled-back visitation goals. Jamaica Bay was to remain a nature preserve, though its northern shore would be developed as a recreation area when pollution was finally abated. Floyd Bennett Field focused on environmental education. Sandy Hook, with its pristine beaches, was to be managed in a manner akin to Breezy Point, with an

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 68–69.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 68–75.

emphasis on sustainable recreation. Staten Island, the least “natural” of all of the units due to being located primarily on areas of fill, was also heavily tilted towards recreation. In sum, the overall composition of the park was in accord with the ideology of the Gateway concept through its particular balancing of preservation and recreation.<sup>55</sup>

As good as the plan may have looked on paper, funding shortfalls made putting it into practice difficult. From the beginning of its existence, Gateway received half as much money as was needed for capital improvements.<sup>56</sup> Growing visitation and desperate pleas from Gateway’s superintendent failed to move lawmakers to allocate more resources.<sup>57</sup> At various points in the 1970s and 80s, scathing reports on the deterioration of Gateway under Park Service management appeared in media, demonstrating that these shortfalls were having a noticeable impact.<sup>58</sup> It was not until 1991 that Congress allocated adequate funds to begin the restoration of structures such as Canarsie Pier and the historic bathhouse at Jacob Riis Park, yet the following year the superintendent was once again complaining about shortfalls.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 80–81, 96–97, 113–14, 132–34, 146, 156.

<sup>56</sup> “1991 Gateway National Recreation Area Superintendents’ Annual Narrative Report,” Box 22, Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site to Gateway National Recreation Area, Superintendents’ Annual Narrative Reports, 1980-2001, General Records, Record Group 79, Records of the National Park Service, National Archives.

<sup>57</sup> “1983 Gateway National Recreation Area Superintendents’ Annual Narrative Report,” Box 22, Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site to Gateway National Recreation Area, Superintendents’ Annual Narrative Reports, 1980-2001, General Records, Record Group 79, Records of the National Park Service, National Archives.

<sup>58</sup> Gerald Gold, “U.S. Assailed on Care of Jamaica Bay Refuge,” *New York Times*, September 13, 1974; DePalma, “Gateway: Half-Fulfilled Dream.”

<sup>59</sup> “1991 Gateway National Recreation Area Superintendents’ Annual Narrative Report”; “1992 Gateway National Recreation Area Superintendents’ Annual Narrative Report,” Box 22, Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site to Gateway National Recreation

In spite of the funding issues, during the first ten years under the GMP, the Service successfully implemented the Gateway Village at Floyd Bennett Field. Although not achieving the ambitious development goals outlined in the GMP, the Village was nonetheless extensively utilized for educational programs. By 1981, it hosted an overnight camping program serving on average 4,000 students a year.<sup>60</sup> Other educational programs included guided walks such as “Moon Prowls,” butterfly walks at migration time, astronomy programs, public lectures by ecologists and other experts, campfire programs, puppet shows, gardening classes, and guided tours of the park’s historic sites. By 1994, the Jamaica Bay unit was offering between six (during the winter) and fifteen (during the summer) programs a month. Other facilities available that year included a sports complex and a riding academy.<sup>61</sup>

Pollution hindered the recreational development of the bay beyond Floyd Bennett Field. Despite the millions of dollars spent on sewage treatment, by 1994 the waters of Jamaica Bay were still not safe for swimming. The Spring Creek Auxiliary treatment plant ultimately proved to be inadequate, with raw sewage still pouring into the bay

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Area, Superintendents’ Annual Narrative Reports, 1980-2001, General Records, Record Group 79, Records of the National Park Service, National Archives.

<sup>60</sup> “1981 Gateway National Recreation Area Superintendents’ Annual Narrative Report,” Box 22, Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site to Gateway National Recreation Area, Superintendents’ Annual Narrative Reports, 1980-2001, General Records, Record Group 79, Records of the National Park Service, National Archives.

<sup>61</sup> “Gateway National Recreation Area 1985 Summer Program Guide,” Gateway National Recreation Area Cultural Resources Library; “Gateway National Recreation Area 1985 Winter Program Guide,” Gateway National Recreation Area Cultural Resources Library; “Gateway National Recreation Area 1994 Summer Program Guide,” Gateway National Recreation Area Cultural Resources Library; “Gateway National Recreation Area 1994 Fall Program Guide,” Gateway National Recreation Area Cultural Resources Library; “Gateway National Recreation Area 1994 Winter-Spring Program Guide,” Gateway National Recreation Area Cultural Resources Library.

during storms.<sup>62</sup> Officials also made the unwelcome discovery that a number of landfills ringing the bay contained dangerous levels of PCB's from years of illegal dumping that had been overlooked by City officials. These chemicals leached into the bay through groundwater.<sup>63</sup> Plans were made in 1994 to begin cleaning up the sites, but the complexity of the problem ensured that it would be a slow process.<sup>64</sup> The only recreational use permitted within the bay in 1994 was boating: a marina at Floyd Bennett Field provided boat rentals to visitors. The bay also continued to host the Wildlife Refuge, which continued to run much as it did before the Service took over, offering hiking and educational programs.<sup>65</sup>

A number of recreational attractions were created at the Breezy Point unit. The most popular feature of the site was its beaches, but it also hosted a diverse variety of programs that focused on activities such as fishing (mandating strict catch limits due to pollution), biking, boating, and kite flying. It also hosted cultural events like concerts and ethnic festivals, and organized sports like volleyball and golf, in addition to races. By 1994, new facilities included a pitch-and-putt golf course at Riis Park and numerous concession stands.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Allan Gold, "Burst Pipe Spills Raw Sewage into Jamaica Bay," *New York Times*, May 9, 1991.

<sup>63</sup> Ralph Ginzburg, "Report Says Landfill Imperils Estuary," *New York Times*, February 14, 1988.

<sup>64</sup> Onishi Norimitsu, "Neighborhood Report: Jamaica Bay; Plans in Works for Restoring Jamaica Bay," *New York Times*, October 16, 1994.

<sup>65</sup> "Gateway National Recreation Area 1994 Winter-Spring Program Guide"; "Gateway National Recreation Area 1994 Summer Program Guide"; "Gateway National Recreation Area 1994 Fall Program Guide."

<sup>66</sup> "Gateway National Recreation Area 1985 Summer Program Guide"; "Gateway National Recreation Area 1985 Winter Program Guide"; "Gateway National Recreation

In spite of its limitations, Gateway quickly became one of the most popular sites in the entire national park system, at least from a statistical point of view. In 1979, 8.3 million people visited: excluding national parkways, it was the second most popular site in the entire system. Attendance peaked in 1983, when 10.3 million people visited, again making it the second most popular site. This number would gradually decline, with 1994 seeing 4.1 million visitors—its lowest levels to date—yet it still remained among the top ten parks visited nationwide.<sup>67</sup>

Although analysis of visitors during the 1990s is not available, recent studies offer some insight into who was using Gateway. Statistics show that the use of Gateway by minorities was significantly less than what planners originally envisioned. William Kornblum and Kristen Van Hooreweghe's 2010 ethnography of the Jamaica Bay watershed revealed over sixty percent of the population to be non-white, primarily of Hispanic and Caribbean origin, yet a 2003 Park Service study of Floyd Bennett Field—one of the few comprehensive use studies available—found a very different profile of the site's users: although the overwhelming majority of visitors came from New York, eighty-two percent of the visitors were white, fifteen percent were black, nine percent were Hispanic, and five percent were Asian. The most revealing statistic is the means of transport: while ninety-five percent of visitors used a private vehicle, only one percent

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Area 1994 Summer Program Guide"; "Gateway National Recreation Area 1994 Fall Program Guide"; "Gateway National Recreation Area 1994 Winter-Spring Program Guide."

<sup>67</sup> "NPS Stats Report," National Park Service, <http://irma.nps.gov/stats>.

took busses or the subway, demonstrating the impact the failure to secure mass transit has had upon the park's use.<sup>68</sup>

The 2003 study also provides insight into the ways visitors used Floyd Bennett Field and what they learned from their time in its space. The most popular activity engaged in was fishing, followed by walking and running, then gardening and model airplanes; seeing aircraft and historical buildings was popular as well, along with nature study. When asked by the study's authors about what drew them to the park, three quarters of visitors cited "open space," followed by "quiet," and "natural views." The study also attempted to find out what visitors learned during their visit: the most common answers were that they learned about history, gardens, and fishing; nature and preservation were low on the list, but when asked about what they would like to learn about on future visits, between one-fifth and one-third of respondents mentioned nature-related topics like wildlife, environmental education, and botany.<sup>69</sup> In sum, while the uses show that this part of Gateway was occupying a niche of providing open recreational space and supporting hobbies, the ambition to transform understandings of nature was probably not being met. One explanation is a lack of programming:

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<sup>68</sup> William Kornblum and Kristen Van Hooreweghe, *Jamaica Bay Ethnographic Overview and Assessment* (Boston, MA: National Park Service Northeast Region Ethnography Program, 2010), iv, 156; "Gateway National Recreation Area—Floyd Bennett Field Visitor Study," National Park Service, [http://www.vanalen.org/gateway/sitebrief\\_downloadables/Primary\\_Sources/14\\_Visitor\\_Use\\_Study\\_NPS\\_2003.pdf](http://www.vanalen.org/gateway/sitebrief_downloadables/Primary_Sources/14_Visitor_Use_Study_NPS_2003.pdf).

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.



Gateway's officials might take heart in the fact that visitors expressed interest in learning more about nature, suggesting the possibilities available from better funding.<sup>70</sup>

This brief survey of Gateway's usage and attempts to accommodate the public reveals a mixed legacy. The park's strongly preservationist stance and limited transportation options has resulted in it not living up to the hopes of planners and politicians who sought to provide a space to serve the diverse populations of New York City. Millions of people nonetheless do make use of Gateway in activities ranging from enjoying its scenery to active recreation to hobbies, reflecting the ambitions of the planners who sought to provide a space that could accommodate a diversity of pursuits. This assessment is similar to that of historian Ronald Foresta in 1984, who noted that even though "it has fallen far short of its original goals... it is not obvious that those goals are unattainable"; Gateway "cannot be written off as [an] unambiguous failure."<sup>71</sup>

Gateway National Recreation Area is potentially on the eve of a new era in which its promise may be met. In 2012, after nearly thirty years of federal control, Mayor Bloomberg announced that the contours of a new partnership between the City and the Park Service to manage Jamaica Bay had been agreed upon. The two entities would henceforth work together to achieve goals of expanded access and restoration while jointly planning and running educational, recreational and research programs.<sup>72</sup> The

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid. Only five percent of respondents reported attending programs, although sixteen percent noted that they had taken advantage of programming in the past; sixty percent believed that ranger-led programs were at least moderately important, and over one-third of respondents requested "special events" for future visits.

<sup>71</sup> Foresta, *America's National Parks and Their Keepers*, 282.

<sup>72</sup> Lisa Foderaro, "City and Federal Officials Will Jointly Manage Jamaica Bay," *New York Times*, July 17, 2012.

Park Service has also been working on a new General Management Plan, releasing a draft in 2013. It presenting three alternatives: “A,” which would be the same management regime as before; “B,” called “Experiencing Gateway,” emphasizing visitation and use, calling for greatly expanded facilities like new recreation centers—many of which would take advantage of the new partnership with the City; and “C,” called “Experiencing Preserved Places,” which was to focus on the restoration of Gateway’s environments, with the visitor experience directed towards passive recreational activities and education. Soubier’s vision continued to influence planners—particularly with option C—yet option B also took pains to demonstrate the park’s commitment to preservation even as it sought greater development of its resources.<sup>73</sup> Whether or not Gateway will meet its potential or not largely depends upon funding, but the partnership with New York City will no doubt offer greater flexibility—an irony considering the fact that the City’s inability to fund recreation projects in the 1960s was a major impetus to seek federal help.

## Conclusion

Park Service officials managing and planning Gateway faced numerous difficulties, from recalcitrant neighbors, to pollution, to a severe lack of resources, yet it was within these limitations that the Gateway concept was found. For the first time in its history, Jamaica Bay’s administrators had committed themselves to an understanding of

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<sup>73</sup> National Park Service, *A New Vision For a Great Urban Park, Gateway National Recreation Area Draft General Management Plan* (New York: National Park Service, July 2013), <http://www.nps.gov/gate/parkmgmt/planning.htm>.

its space that sought to reconcile its unusual history and relationship with New York City. The conception of Gateway as a hybrid of city and nature was an attempt to accommodate the variety of uses and physical forms found within Jamaica Bay, emphasizing relationships over concrete forms in a way akin to the residents who thought of their space as Venice. This concept was a departure for the National Park Service, which had traditionally conceived of its lands as spaces of spectacular wilderness, but one that was necessary due to the increasingly untenable position the organization found itself in due to increasing pressures to provide mass recreation and strict nature preservation. Although Gateway National Recreation Area remains controversial, events like 2012's Hurricane Sandy have demonstrated that the ethics behind Clifford Soubier's vision are more important than ever in an era of climate change.

## **Conclusion: “A Tableau of Damage, Destruction, and Grief,”**

### **Hurricane Sandy and the Future of Jamaica Bay**

From 1994 to 2012, life in the Jamaica Bay area carried on much like it had over the past twenty years. Broad Channel continued to contend with legal controversies. Breezy Point enjoyed its privacy. Gateway National Recreation Area remained a popular yet underfunded site. Just as the shock of 9/11 seemed to usher in a new era, New York City arguably lies on the cusp of a similarly momentous change with regard to its relationship with the natural world. Hurricane Sandy, striking in the final days of October 2012, was the most significant natural disaster to hit modern New York City. Although the bay’s communities had experienced a number of episodes of severe weather over the twentieth century, with the 1938 “Long Island Express” hurricane, the hurricane of 1944, and a particularly intense nor’easter in 1992 being among the most dramatic, Sandy’s effects topped them all, being the second-costliest hurricane in US history.<sup>1</sup>

On October 22, 2012, the tropical storm that would eventually become known as Sandy formed in the Caribbean Sea, intensifying to a hurricane by the 24th. Over the next three days, the storm would tear through the Caribbean before emerging into the open Atlantic. It briefly weakened to a tropical storm on the 27th, yet forecasters’ concerns were mounting. Meteorologists predicted that the storm would not behave like

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<sup>1</sup> Liz Guarino and Dan Guarino, *Images of America: Broad Channel* (Mount Pleasant, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2008), 9; “Report: Sandy Was USA’s Second-Costliest Hurricane,” *USA Today*, February 12, 2013.

most hurricanes, which typically veered into the North Atlantic to disintegrate; Sandy was expected to instead turn sharply westward and directly pass over the New York/New Jersey region due to the influence of an existing weather system. Particularly worrisome was the fact that the storm was slated to hit during a high tide intensified by a full moon.<sup>2</sup>

The worst-case scenario ultimately came to pass. On October 29, Sandy made landfall in New Jersey, beginning two days of destruction. The storm set a number of records: the central pressure was six millibars lower than the previous record, 946 millibars, seen during the 1938 “Long Island Express.” Storm surge measured 13.88 feet at the Battery, topping the previous record of 10.02 feet set by Hurricane Donna in 1960. Finally, waves in New York Harbor reached as high as 32.5 feet, 6.5 feet higher than waves seen during Hurricane Irene in 2011.<sup>3</sup> The storm crippled New York City, leaving, in the words of *New York Times* reporter James Barron, a “tableau of damage, destruction, and grief.” Flooding shut down subways, grounded flights, and left millions without power.<sup>4</sup> Seventy-two people died throughout the United States, and the storm caused \$50 billion worth of damage.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Willie Drye, “A Timeline of Hurricane Sandy’s Path of Destruction,” <http://newswatch.nationalgeographic.com/2012/11/02/a-timeline-of-hurricane-sandys-path-of-destruction>.

<sup>3</sup> “Hurricane Sandy Fast Facts,” CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/07/13/world/americas/hurricane-sandy-fast-facts>.

<sup>4</sup> James Barron, “After The Devastation, A Daunting Recovery,” *New York Times*, October 31, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> “Report: Sandy Was USA’s Second-Costliest Hurricane.”



an electrical problem in an empty house. Wind-driven flames engulfed dozens of homes as firefighters blocked by flooding helplessly watched. By the end of the night, over 100 homes had burned to the ground.<sup>7</sup> Broad Channel was one of the areas most severely flooded by the storm, with one reporter noting that not a single home escaped inundation.<sup>8</sup>

Sandy has prompted a reexamination of the wisdom of subsidizing people who live in flood-prone areas. The City has earmarked \$22 million for building bulkheads and raising streets in Broad Channel, but groups like the National Resources Defense Council have questioned the wisdom of this type of action. Eric Goldstein, a lawyer with the Council, noted, "if sea levels rise and storm-level projections are accurate, this community may be surviving on borrowed time.... How much sense does it make to keep reinvesting taxpayer dollars in a community that is directly in harm's way?" Though many conservation groups have long desired getting rid of Broad Channel, making Goldstein's perspective suspect, his point nonetheless remains an important consideration.<sup>9</sup>

Breezy Point prompted yet another set of dilemmas. Because the Cooperative had agreed to provide services and maintain infrastructure on its own rather than relying upon the City, agencies have had to grapple with the appropriateness of diverting public funds for rebuilding the community. Breezy Point's residents still pay taxes, yet have

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<sup>7</sup> "Fire and Flooding in Breezy Point," *New York Times*, December 24, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Maria Diamond, "Every Home in Broad Channel, Queens Affected by Sandy," *CBS New York Online*, November 1, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Gregory Kia, "Where Streets Flood With the Tide, a Debate Over City Aid," *New York Times*, July 10, 2013.

significantly greater autonomy over their property than most in the City.<sup>10</sup> Being forced to rebuild may be the price of independence, yet the outpouring of sympathy for the community has been difficult to ignore, with numerous stories appearing in media highlighting the “resiliency” of the community, telling inspiring stories of loss, recovery, faith, and patriotism.<sup>11</sup>

Public officials have limited leverage over the inhabitants of flood-prone areas. New York State attempted to institute a buyout program for ravaged communities like Breezy Point, yet residents have been largely hostile towards these types of actions.<sup>12</sup> Considering the history of Breezy Point and Broad Channel, mistrust towards government is not surprising. Changes in the National Flood Insurance Program resulting from the 2012 Biggert-Waters Act requiring flood insurance rates to rise in areas that experience severe flooding have the potential to out price residents in middle-class communities like Breezy Point and Broad Channel, but the measure has met intense hostility in the wake of Sandy.<sup>13</sup> Overall, public officials will have to contend with

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph Berger, “Enclaves, Long Gated, Seek to Let In Storm Aid,” *New York Times*, November 27, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Rick Hampson, “A Year After Sandy, Resilience Defines Breezy Point,” *USA Today*, October 27, 2013 and John Dawsey, “Breezy Point’s Virgin Mary Statue to be Part of Sandy Rememberance,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 20, 2013, are representative.

<sup>12</sup> “Hurricane Sandy Buyouts Cause Storm of Confusion, Worry From Politicians,” *Gotham Gazette*, <http://www.gothamgazette.com/index.php/housing/4233-hurricane-sandy-buyouts-cause-storm-of-confusion-worry-from-politicians>.

<sup>13</sup> Bryan Walsh, “The Hard Math of Flood Insurance in a Warming World,” *Time*, October 1, 2013.



the actions of private individuals whether they hamper efforts to “rebuild deliberately” or not.<sup>14</sup>

Although officials recognize the threat of climate change, planning for it is still in its infancy. A 2009 panel predicted that over the next century New York City would face 100-year floods every thirty-five years, sea level rise of one to two feet—potentially more—and more intense severe weather events.<sup>15</sup> Apart from attempting to stop climate change, which remains politically difficult—there are two major approaches New York City can take to adapt. First, the City can attempt to build its way out of the problem by constructing floodwalls, sea gates, and other types of hydrological engineering. Second, it can better adapt itself to the natural landscape, for example restoring wetlands and marshes to absorb storm surge; one metaphor used to describe these types of activities is “softening” the edges of the city.<sup>16</sup> So far, New York City has committed twenty billion dollars to both types of upgrades, but the process of adapting to changing climate and sea level rise is only just beginning.<sup>17</sup> Transforming the bay’s natural spaces will need to be done carefully: similar attempts in the past have had serious consequences. The filling of the Moses era, done to create more “natural” parkland, played a major role in

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<sup>14</sup> “On Ravaged Coastline, It’s Rebuild Deliberately vs. Rebuild Now,” *New York Times*, December 21, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> New York City Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Risk Information* (New York: New York City Panel on Climate Change, 2009), [http://www.nyc.gov/html/om/pdf/2009/NPCC\\_CRI.pdf](http://www.nyc.gov/html/om/pdf/2009/NPCC_CRI.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> “Vision 2020: New York City Comprehensive Waterfront Plan, Goal 8,” New York City Department of Planning, [http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/pdf/cwp/vision2020/chapter3\\_goal8.pdf](http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/pdf/cwp/vision2020/chapter3_goal8.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Lisa Colangelo, “State Pumps Money into Salt Marsh Restoration at Jamaica Bay,” *New York Daily News*, April 16, 2013; “Bloomberg Outlines \$20 Billion Storm Protection Plan,” *New York Times*, June 11, 2013.

destroying marshland, making flooding worse for the area overall. Though ecologists now understand the importance of wetlands, the episode nonetheless reveals the perils of engineering nature according to cultural archetypes. Finding the proper relationship between city and nature will be a central dilemma going forward, as it was in the past.

The history of Jamaica Bay reveals the diversity of ways in which activists, developers, officials, and residents understood the relationship between city and nature. Conventional conceptions like parks, ports, and suburbs formed the basis of elite approaches to developing the bay, but the residents approached the matter differently. Based on their experiences living and working within its space, they conceptualized the bay as the Venice of New York, a hybrid space of city and nature. Although Broad Channel became more conventionally suburban over time, the idea of the community as Venice continued, forming an important part of its identity as being “of the bay.”

The struggles over Jamaica Bay were suffused with class-based tensions. While the Venice of New York was regarded with curiosity and admiration at first, changing understandings of nature based on conservationism led the bay’s elite managers to decry the stewardship of the bay’s working-class residents, even as New York City refused to provide infrastructure that would ameliorate growing pollution. The changing politics of the 1960s allowed the bay’s residents to reverse the dynamics of class, with Breezy Point invoking Richard Nixon’s politics of backlash against the activists and officials pushing for the creation of Gateway National Recreation Area.

Although Gateway was successfully created, the residents of Jamaica Bay were allowed to keep their homes, requiring the National Park Service to approach the

conceptualization of their park in unconventional ways. As opposed to treating the bay as a space of wilderness, under the direction of Clifford Soubier, the Service committed themselves to a clear accounting of the complexities of the relationships between the City and the natural world in Jamaica Bay, and to manage the space in a way that benefitted both. The development of Gateway was hampered by a lack of funding and divisions among conservationists regarding its unconventional form, yet the park remains one of the most visited sites within the entire system.

Soubier's vision continues to be controversial, but its essential message is more important than ever in an era of climate change: officials and residents will need to be able to clearly conceptualize the relationships between city and nature going forward. They might also need to be willing to adapt to unconventional urban forms: ironically, the Broad Channel of the "Venice" era, though primitive, could probably have withstood Hurricane Sandy to a greater degree than the current community. It was City officials and developers that forced the community to become more conventionally urban, to undo its adaptations to the aquatic environment. Broad Channel's residents understood that although they were part of New York City, nature didn't end at the bulkhead wall.

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