



**New York State Office of Parks,
Recreation and Historic Preservation**

Historic Preservation Field Services Bureau • Peebles Island, PO Box 189, Waterford, New York 12188-0189
518-237-8643
www.nysparks.com

David A. Paterson
Governor

Carol Ash
Commissioner

August 12, 2010

Coney Island USA
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Save Coney Island
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The Coney Island History Project
824 Surf Avenue
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Contact: Charles Denson
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Historic Districts Council
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Contact: Simeon Bankoff
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The New York City Landmarks Conservancy
One Whitehall Street
New York, NY 10004
Contact: Andrea Goldwyn
andreagoldwyn@nylandmarks.org

RE: **State and National Registers of Historic Places Application**
Coney Island Historic District
Brooklyn, Kings County, NY

Dear Nomination Sponsors:

Thank you for the documentation you submitted as part of the State and National Registers of Historic Places Application for Coney Island. Based on our site visit and the information submitted, it is the opinion of the State Historic Preservation Office staff that the historic core of Coney Island appears to meet the criteria for listing to the Registers as a historic district. I encourage you to proceed with the completion of a draft National Register nomination for the district that we can formally present to the New York State Board for Historic Preservation. Attached is the Resource Evaluation for the district which sets forth the National Register Criteria that the Coney Island Historic District meets as well as the boundaries of the district which, you will note, are larger than the ones initially proposed.

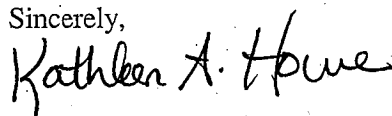
As the nomination sponsors, I encourage you to seek the support of the property owners, elected officials, the Community Board, and other interested parties. As you know, a district cannot be listed on the National Register if the majority of the owners object to listing so it is important to work with the owners early in the process to explain the potential benefits of listing include rehabilitation tax credits for commercial properties and grants for non-profit and city-owned properties.

As the sponsors of the nomination, you will be responsible for working together to provide the draft nomination, maps, and photographic documentation (two sets of numbered color photographs and two CD-R's with the color digital images). The images must comply with the standards for photographic documentation as specified by the National Park Service. You can email the draft text to me and I will then edit it and enter it onto the actual National Register registration form. Please let us know who will be the primary contact person for the project.

Please be sure to provide current names and mailing addresses of all property owners within the district. I will email to you the spreadsheet template that we require you to use for the owners' contact information. It is from this list that we will generate notification letters to all property owners letting them know of the proposed district. You will also be in charge of securing a venue for a public informational meeting for the property owners and others interested parties. I will coordinate the date of the meeting with you.

I will be responsible for continuing to assist you in developing the nomination, presenting the proposal to the State Board, and processing the submission to the National Park Service. Please call me at (518) 237-8643 ext. 3266 if you have any questions. I look forward to working with you in developing the nomination materials.

Sincerely,



Kathleen A. Howe
Historic Preservation Program Analyst

cc: Gina Santucci, NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission

enc.



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RESOURCE EVALUATION

DATE: August 12, 2010

STAFF: Kathy Howe

PROPERTY: **Coney Island Historic District**

MCD: Brooklyn

(See attached district map for boundaries)

COUNTY: Kings

USN: 04701.016732

- I. Property is individually listed on SR/NR:
name of listing:
- Property is a contributing component of a SR/NR district:
name of district:
- II. Property meets eligibility criteria.
 Property contributes to a district which appears to meet eligibility criteria.
Pre SRB: Post SRB: SRB date

Criteria for Inclusion in the National Register:

- A. Associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history;
- B. Associated with the lives of persons significant in our past;
- C. Embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction; or represents the work of a master; or possess high artistic values; or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction;
- D. Have yielded, or may be likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

*Summary Statement*¹

Located at the entrance to the New York Harbor at the southwest corner of Long Island in the borough of Brooklyn, Coney Island grew from a communal garden and pasture into a world renowned seaside entertainment destination for all classes of Americans. The name alone conjures up images of waterfront amusements and entertainment. It is a place apart from the working world where people go in search of entertainment, relaxation and excitement.

¹ Much of the text for the Resource Evaluation is from "Coney Island New York State Heritage Area Proposal," prepared by the Coney Island Development Corporation, 2006 (on file at NY SHPO).

Since the early 1800s, Coney Island, "playground of the world," has performed many roles in the lives and imagination of New Yorkers and people around the world. From its beginnings as a quaint seaside town, Coney Island went on to boom years in the 1880s, as entrepreneurs competed for visitors with attractions and resort accommodations. Fanciful amusement parks with state of art technology transformed Coney Island into a unique seaside resort. The twentieth century ushered in a new affordable mass entertainment period, the "Nickel Empire," when a nickel paid for just about everything from the fare on the subway line to a hot dog. Following World War II, as pastimes and tastes began to change the amusement parks struggled to stay afloat and Coney Island began to decline.

While much of historic Coney Island has been lost through the years due to neglect, fire, or urban renewal beginning in the Moses era, the core of surviving buildings, structures, objects, and landscape features that have remained are valuable cultural assets worthy of recognition and consideration in preservation planning.

The proposed Coney Island Historic District is nationally significant under Criterion A in the areas of entertainment/recreation and social history as the birthplace of the modern American amusement industry. The district also meets Criterion C in the area of design for its collection of several stellar twentieth century amusement rides including Deno's Wonder Wheel, the Cyclone Roller Coaster, the Parachute Jump, and the Astroland Tower.

The proposed historic district consists of blocks that are tightly coupled with the history of the beachfront amusement resort. Important features of the Coney Island landscape include Coney Island Beach, Reigelman Boardwalk, Jones Walk, Henderson's Walk, Schweikert's Walk, and the Bowery. Key buildings in the district include the Grashorn Building, Nathan's Famous, the Shore Theater, Henderson's Music Hall, the Shore Hotel, the Herman Popper & Brothers Building, Child's Restaurant on the Boardwalk, Child's Restaurant on Surf Avenue (now Coney Island USA), and the Bank of Coney Island building. In addition to these, the historic character is further enhanced by the survival of commercial buildings along Surf Avenue and the low-scale concession stalls lining Jones Walk and portions of the Bowery and the Boardwalk.

The district boundaries follow key visual and historical features. The elevated subway, north of Surf Avenue, marks the northern boundary. The Cyclone is the key landmark in the east side of the district with the Moses-era pedestrian overpass on West Eighth Street marking the eastern boundary. The New York Aquarium is excluded from the historic district. The southern boundary extends beyond the Boardwalk to the Atlantic Ocean shoreline and includes the Steeplechase Pier. The western boundary follows along West 15th Street, crossing Surf Avenue, where it picks up the Playland building (southwest corner of West 15th Street and Surf Ave.) and then continues south along West 15th Street to the Boardwalk. (KeySpan Park is excluded from the district.) The boundary then runs westerly along the north side of the Boardwalk and includes the Parachute Jump, then extending to Childs Restaurant at the northwest corner of the Boardwalk and West 21st Street. From Childs, the western boundary runs due south past the Boardwalk to the shoreline.

The period of significance for the district is ca. 1885 to 1964. It begins ca. 1885 as represented by the Grashorn Building at Surf Avenue and Jones Walk which may be the oldest surviving building in Coney Island.² Though significantly altered, it is one of the last surviving structures from the era when Coney

² Originally home to Henry Grashorn's hardware store, the building serviced the amusement industry and all its mechanical rides for nearly 60 years.

Island emerged as a recreational destination, with the construction of Surf Avenue in 1881. Other buildings in the district such as Henderson's Music Hall and the Herman Popper and Brothers Building, for example, represent a later period: the era between 1899 and 1904, when Coney Island was rapidly expanding as an amusement destination. At that time, Luna Park, Steeplechase Park and Dreamland were thriving, and these entertainment venues served the visitors to the larger amusement parks. Nathan's, the Shore Theater, and the Bank of Coney Island building, among others, represent yet another epoch period for Coney Island: the "Nickel Empire" of the 1920's, when the opening of the subway brought more visitors than ever to Coney Island. The opening of the space-age Astroland in 1963 represents the 1960s era of Coney Island. The end date for the period of significance – 1964 – marks the closure of Steeplechase Park and the beginning of several turbulent decades of rapid decline.

Historic Overview

In 1654 the land now occupied by Coney Island was purchased from the local Nyack Indian tribe for the equivalent of fifteen dollars.³ During early settlement years, the land was scarcely used with the exception of the grazing of livestock in the winters. But by 1800 Americans with leisure time began to discover the beach. Coney Island's first visitors came by boat from Manhattan and New Jersey to escape the crowded cities. In 1823 with the opening of the mile-long shell road and wooden bridge, Coney Island became accessible by carriage and a greater number of visitors quickly followed. In response to the increasing number of visitors, land owners quickly constructed hotels. The following year, the addition of ferry service made Coney Island a main resort destination for wealthy people who had leisure time and could afford the multi-day excursion.

As accessibility improved and became cheaper, the visitor population of Coney Island grew and changed. Access improvements mirrored changes in middle class wealth and leisure. In 1862, with the opening of the first horse car direct rail line to the island, middle class visitors finally could afford the trip.⁴ As the middle class began regularly visiting Coney Island, hotel developers began adding amusements and attractions to differentiate their businesses and attract more visitors. In one such example, a 300-foot-tall Iron Tower Observatory opened in 1876 to mark the end of the rail line and attract visitors to the site of one of the largest hotels on the island. In subsequent years, rapid expansion took over the area with developers adding more features and gimmicks including an unusual hotel in the shape of an elephant.⁵

By 1890 steam ship arrival brought a stream of visitors at twenty minute intervals and weekend visitor populations reached as high as 200,000 a single day.⁶ It is in this period that Coney Island was forever transformed into an amusement park, with the opening of the first enclosed amusement park, Sea Lion Park. While Sea Lion Park was short lived, the enclosed park became a defining element of the Coney Island beachfront. By 1904, Coney Island had three fully enclosed parks (Luna Park, Dreamland, and Steeplechase Park) and was drawing over 500,000 visitors a day on weekends.⁷ Helping to facilitate the rapid influx of visitors was the consolidation of four main railways into a single entity, the Brooklyn Rapid Transit Company. This consolidation made it possible for visitors to easily and cheaply make a day trip to Coney Island from any of New York City's boroughs.

³ Charles Denson, *Coney Island Lost and Found* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2002), 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵ <http://naid.spsr.ucla.edu/coneyisland/articles/earlyhistory.htm>

⁶ Stephen F. Weinstein, "The Nickel Empire: Coney Island and the Creation of Urban Seaside Resorts in the United States" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1984), 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

In the early twentieth century, as New York City's population grew, Coney Island became a cultural melting pot, where everyone including new immigrants could escape the overcrowded city and enjoy a day of leisure. As the number of visitors continued to grow, competition among Coney Island amusements and restaurants continued to drive down prices, keeping Coney Island affordable to the masses.

By 1910 local government and politically motivated organizations began to disapprove of the hedonistic aspects of Coney Island. To drive improvements in sanitation, the City proposed the creation of a beach boardwalk with parks and city run bathhouses. By 1917 plans were in place for developing a complete beach boardwalk.⁸

In the 1920s weekend visitors began exceeding one million.⁹ Lower-income visitors who arrived on the newly-completed subway lines for a mere nickel flooded Coney Island. The roaring 1920s ushered in many other changes in Coney Island including the opening of a number of the landmarks that are still present today, including the Childs Restaurants, the Shore Theater, the Wonder Wheel, and the Cyclone. By the late 1920s Coney Island had been transformed from a seaside resort into a thriving beach city. Theaters lined the north side of Surf Avenue, streets were widened and some of the dirtier sections of Coney Island were cleaned up.¹⁰ Many elegant eating places had suffered with the beginning of Prohibition; the democratization of Coney facilitated their replacement by stands offering cheaper fare. The best known example is Nathan's Famous which, in 1916, began selling hot dogs for a nickel.

With the crash of the stock market in 1929, development in Coney Island quickly stopped. Owners of many of the properties built in the 1920s went bankrupt and closed. In 1932 a large fire wiped out most of the Boardwalk buildings west of Childs Restaurant.¹¹ It was during this same period that Robert Moses, then Commissioner of City Parks, took control of the Boardwalk and Beach. Moses, having completed the expansive Jones Beach project, was interested in building a similar public beach in Coney Island. Moses had no love for the beachfront amusements and set his sights on eliminating them. One of his first projects was a move of the Coney Island Boardwalk inland to expand the size of the beach and reduce the size of the amusement areas adjacent to the Boardwalk. Many historians point to the condemnation of properties associated with the movement of the Boardwalk as the starting point of Coney Island's decline. Following the move of the Boardwalk, many land owners became reluctant to invest deeply in any improvements fearing the City would take additional lands to further its park plans.¹² As a result, development in Coney Island continued to stall.

A bright spot for Coney Island came in the early 1940s with the installation of the Parachute Jump at Steeplechase Park in 1941. The amusement, which had been moved from its original site at the 1939-40 New York World's Fairs, took riders up 250 feet and released them to float to the ground with the aid of silk parachutes.¹³

⁸ Denson, 50.

⁹ <http://naid.spsr.ucla.edu/coneyisland/articles/nickelempire.htm>

¹⁰ Denson, 57.

¹¹ Denson, 65.

¹² Ibid., 73.

¹³ <http://naid.spsr.ucla.edu/coneyisland/articles/steeplechase2.htm>

In spite of the nighttime blackout imposed on Coney's lights during World War II, the amusement parks flourished, due to entertainment-seeking servicemen on leave and to the rationing of gasoline. Luna Park, however, closed in 1946 following a major fire. But Coney's heyday came to an end after the war. Although Coney Island survived attempts by Parks Commissioner Robert Moses to obliterate the animated jumble of buildings, rides, and attractions, it did not fare as well with fire damage and the growing mobility provided by the automobile.¹⁴

Steeplechase Park remained as the sole amusement park in Coney Island until 1964 when it closed and was sold for development.¹⁵ By the 1960s mass entertainment tastes had changed and the public interest in Coney Island had withered away. At the same time urban renewal movements pushed for the demolition of small summer beach houses and the development of large scale apartment complexes and housing projects nearby.

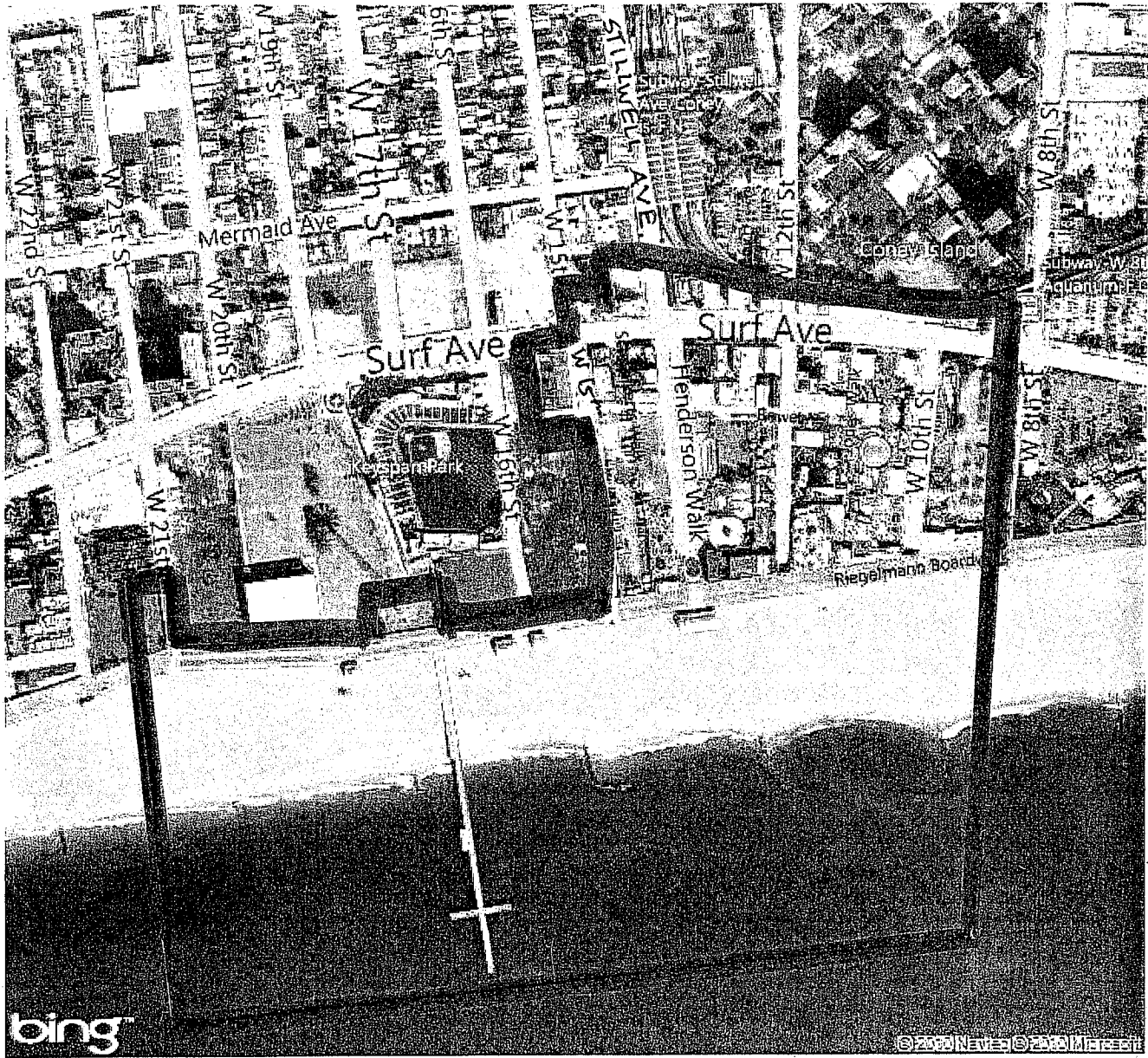
While the Coney Island landscape has changed over the years due to a combination of natural, social, economic, and political forces, several historic resources in and around the amusement area have remained. The Cyclone roller coaster and the Wonder Wheel remained functional and over time other amusement rides and attractions filled in around them at Astroland and Wonder Wheel Park. Some of Coney Island's historic buildings found new uses while others stand vacant. The core group of surviving historic resources that remain represent the history, legends, and memories of one of the world's greatest historic amusement destinations. The Coney Island Historic District reminds us Coney Island's importance as New York's playground and as the inspiration for amusement parks throughout the country, from Playland in Rye, New York, to Abbott Kinney's amusement piers in Venice, California.¹⁶

If you have any questions concerning this Determination of Eligibility, please call Kathy Howe at (518) 237-8643, ext. 3266.

¹⁴ Breiner, David M. "The Parachute Jump" designation report (New York: Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1989), 3

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Gary Kyriazi, *The Great American Amusement Parks: A Pictorial History* (Secaucus, N.J., 1976), 118.



Coney Island Historic District
Brooklyn, Kings County, NY

State/National Registers eligible, August 2010

District Boundary indicated by dark line

Source: Bing Maps

