CONEY ISLAND: THE LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES OF LEISURE IN TURN OF THE CENTURY AMERICAN CULTURE

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of
The School of Continuing Studies
and of
The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

By

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April 11, 2011
CONEY ISLAND: THE LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES OF LEISURE IN TURN OF
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ABSTRACT

Coney Island’s location near Manhattan, its wide beaches, and its unique mix of high- and low-brow leisure amusements made it a popular destination for New York City’s wealthy and poor throughout the 1880s. Crooked politics and iniquitous attractions—brothels, gambling dens, and saloons—alienated the middle class and degraded Coney’s reputation in these years. As a result, Coney Island (“Coney”) became the target of spirited “anti-vice” sentiment and early progressive reform movements that swelled locally among middle class citizens and limited their participation in leisure there. In 1895, in pursuit of middle class patrons, developers created an entirely new brand of attraction at Coney’s core: the enclosed amusement park. These parks represent a concerted effort to lure New York City’s middle class, which consisted of ordinary, educated, Protestant men and women, to Coney Island. By targeting middle class patrons, these private, gated parks extended the possibilities of leisure to them in new ways. Between 1895 and 1911, a series of these enclosed amusement parks became increasingly popular among middle class patrons, who came in throngs every week, in spite of a solid anti-vice reform movement that persisted there. It is the purpose of this study to closely examine leisure culture and the middle class as reformers and patrons of Coney Island’s development, to show that these seemingly contradictory roles were
emblematic of changing middle class values. While reform efforts were part of a growing desire for moral transformation and change, the enclosed amusement parks offered a similar feeling of transcendence. Most explicitly, this study shows how commercial enterprise, through the enclosed amusement parks, evolved middle class values, trumped the influence of reformers, and laid the foundation for the rise of the twentieth century’s culture of middle class consumerism.
DEDICATION

To my parents, for showing me the circus.
EPIGRAPH

We are young, and being young we want to be made to laugh, no matter how foolish
is the method by which you do it; we are young and we believe everything,
therefore do the most impossible things and we will pretend to believe them and applaud;
we are poor...make us forget that there are luxuries and perhaps necessities beyond our
means—stir us so that we will remember the hours that we are spending with you for
months to come; we are tired and weary and overworked—don’t add to our burdens,
lighten them by your most fantastic and foolish endeavors.

Frederick Thompson, *Fooling the Public*
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ......................................................................................................................................... ii

DEDICATION ................................................................................................................................... iv

EPIGRAPH ....................................................................................................................................... v

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS ........................................................................................................ vii

INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................................. 1

CHAPTER 1: EARLY DEVELOPMENT YEARS .................................................................................. 13

CHAPTER 2: NEW LEISURE OPPORTUNITIES AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY ................................................................. 42

CHAPTER 3: LEISURE AND PLEASURE PREVAIL ........................................................................ 67

CHAPTER 4: LEISURE MEETS NEW LIMITS .................................................................................. 93

CONCLUSION .................................................................................................................................. 123

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY ........................................................................................................ 127
# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Copy of Original Map of Coney Island, from the 1860s</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Map of Coney Island and Surrounding Areas</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. John Y. McKane</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The Elephant Hotel</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Shoot-the-Chutes at Sea Lion Park</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. George C. Tilyou</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Drawing of Steeplechase Park</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Seaside Park, 1904</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Map of Coney Island’s Bowery, 1907</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Original postcard from Luna Park’s “Trip to the Moon”</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Fred Thompson</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Luna Park at Night</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. “Fire and Flames” at Luna Park, 1904</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Bowery after fire of 1903</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Luna Park, 1905</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Dreamland’s Beacon Tower</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Map of Coney Island Amusement Parks</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. “Creation” at Dreamland</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Postcard from Steeplechase Park</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Fighting the Dreamland Fire, 1911</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
21. Aftermath of the Dreamland Fire, 1911

...............................................................120
INTRODUCTION

Coney Island began as a quiet, sandy strip on the southwestern end of Long Island. Its earliest known inhabitants were the Native American Canarsie tribe, who roamed there when Henry Hudson arrived in 1609, just one day before he discovered Manhattan. Despite its name, Coney Island was never an actual island, but rather separated from the rest of Brooklyn by a thin creek to its north. Its coastline is protected from harsh waves by a nearby barrier reef in the Atlantic Ocean which also served to change its size and shape between 1600 and 1800. Its shifting topography, crippling winter storms, and limited access from nearby Brooklyn and Manhattan hindered its early development. While most of Long Island developed with the rest of urban New York City and the British Colonies, Coney Island would not flourish until after the Civil War.

Coney Island’s orientation, stretching from east to west, provides for full sun all day along its five-mile coastline. This fortuitous geography led to Coney’s only development prior to the Civil War: small resorts and restaurants along the coastline. Early developers created these retreats for America’s “upper class” who sought temporary escape from Manhattan and northern parts of Brooklyn, and had both the time and money to vacation. As Jon Sterngass describes in his text, First Resorts, Coney Island was virtually unvisited before the Civil War, except by poets, artists, and the

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1 Charles Denson, Coney Island Lost and Found (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2002), 2-5. As Denson describes, pre-Civil War Coney Island still looked very much like it had when the first English settlers, led by Lady Deborah Moody, fled “Puritan religious homogeneity” in Massachusetts. The group settled Coney’s neighboring town of Gravesend in 1643, just nine miles from Manhattan. The town of Gravesend, the original name for the Coney Island settlement, was the only colony in America founded by a woman.

“veritable who’s who of antebellum politics and culture,” including P.T. Barnum, Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, Washington Irving, Herman Melville, Sam Houston, Lyman Beecher, Edgar Allan Poe, and Walt Whitman. 3  Perhaps Whitman, who spent summers there, recalls Coney’s vestigial past best:

> There is a dream, a picture that for years has come noiselessly up before me. It is nothing more or less than a stretch of interminable white-brown sand, hard and smooth and broad, with the ocean perpetually, grandly, rolling in upon it, with the slow measured sweep with rustle and hiss and foam, and many a thump as of low bass drums.4

Whitman’s Coney Island was a pre-Civil War leisure destination enjoyed primarily by New York’s elite.5  For them, Coney Island boasted seaside resorts, bathing attractions, and fine dining. Antebellum withdrawal to Coney Island echoed the same purpose of earlier ages in Europe: it was a retreat from urban life and a luxury of aristocratic birth.

Coney’s seclusion and beauty offered these patrons both a psychological and physical separation from urban Manhattan and the restorative qualities of the ocean. As early resorts took shape in the 1860s to attract Manhattan’s elite, Coney’s more exclusive areas came to be known as Manhattan Beach at the far eastern end and Brighton Beach further west. These beaches continued to be the destination of upper class Americans, characterized as “wealthy capitalists, manufacturers, merchants, landowners, executives,

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professionals and their families. These wealthy families comprised an estimated one or two percent of America’s total population. This upper class was particularly concentrated in New York State, shared English lineage, and belonged to Protestant denominations. Most were millionaires, born to middle or upper class families, and attended college or professional school in an era when higher education was uncommon in America. These men and women represented a small portion of New York City’s estimated 1.3 million inhabitants in 1870, but leisure at Coney Island had been exclusively theirs for years.

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6 Ibid.


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Figure 1. Copy of original map of Coney Island, from the 1860s. Source: Charles Denson, *Coney Island Lost and Found* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2002), 18.
Following the Civil War, a period of dramatic change began to occur at Coney Island due to the rise of an urban industrial mass in Manhattan. Coney’s proximity to Manhattan, a growing urban population, and improved transportation began to increase its popularity in the 1870s and 1880s. These changes enabled a corrupt element to seize the booming beach town and to install iniquitous attractions. As a result, saloons, brothels, prizefighting, horseracing, and gambling dens all found their place along the Island, west of Coney’s exclusive ocean resorts. These developing areas, known as West Brighton Beach and the Bowery, attracted a poor, uneducated, “working class” crowd from nearby Manhattan and Brooklyn.

In 1880, many of this working class were among the estimated 2.4 million people employed by America’s factory system, the center of which was Manhattan and Brooklyn. Historians characterize this working class as manual laborers lacking upper mobility and education, and who were beholden to the low-wage labor system. Many of the men and women included in this class were immigrants or had immigrant parents. Their wages were often too low to support a family comfortably.

Despite horrible poverty in those years, historians note that the working class shared with the wealthy compulsions toward consumer pleasures. At Coney Island in the 1880s, New York City’s working class began to find reprieve from their urban conditions—poverty, crowding, and public neglect. As their leisure time increased,

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8 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 19.
investors saw an opportunity to profit from this working class and built more of what Coney’s elite resorts did not offer—bars, brothels, dance halls, games, prizefighting, and gambling. 11 This “roug her crowd” brought great profit to the aforementioned establishments.12 As a result, Coney Island’s Bowery area became a bustling haven for commercialization, unrefined by Victorian standards.

As the Bowery’s popularity grew, Coney Island was criticized for harboring “vice,” the contemporary term for immorality, crime, and corruption. Coney Island also became the focus of early “anti-vice” reform movements. Leading these early reform movements were ordinary, educated, Protestant “middle class” men and women who sought social change to correct the urban condition. In New York City, reform movements were fueled by men and women who came of age in the 1890s, predominantly young Americans in their twenties, thirties, and forties.13 This New York middle class was comprised of clerks, professionals, managers, officials, and proprietors who “glorified hard work, limited leisure, and warily eyed consumption.”14

These men and women identified strongly with what Richard Hofstadter, perhaps the most prolific historian on the Progressive Era, characterizes as the “indigenous Yankee-Protestant political tradition.”15 This was the dominant code of middle class

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11 Sternass, First Resorts, 234-58.
12 Kasson, Amusing the Million, 29.
14 McGerr, A Fierce Discontent, 41-43.
15 Hofstadter, Age of Reform, 4.
which valued morality, tradition, and discipline. It “assumed and demanded” participation in the political sphere. In New York City, this middle class was comprised of educated, white, Protestant, men and women who identified strongly with this Yankee-Protestant political tradition. Their governing philosophy questioned leisure to its core and held disdain for life styles of excess and extravagance. They believed that even leisure should reflect traditional Victorian values of self-restraint and frugality.

As the industrialization of New York City gave rise to “dismaying extremes of wealth and poverty,” the middle class witnessed first-hand a juxtaposition of unbounded corporate wealth and excess as well as the horrors of child labor, sweatshops, and slums. Likewise, this middle class found Coney Island’s own excess of pleasure—among its wealthy and poor patrons—appalling. Newspaper coverage of Coney Island made them fear that change was outpacing morality and indulgence outpacing discipline. These anxieties found expression in their calls for reform of Coney Island in the 1880s and 1890s.

During the late 1800s, the middle class subsequently began to embrace “progressivism,” which is the term coined to describe the response to the major social and economic changes of America’s new industrial order. This reform ideology enjoyed

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considerable appeal at the close of the 19th century, as the conscience of middle class Americans had already been awakened to both the fruits and horrors of urban change. Hofstadter describes the impetus for the progressive movement with the following:

It has been the function of the liberal tradition in American politics, from the time of Jeffersonian and Jacksonian democracy down through Populism, Progressivism, and the New Deal, at first to broaden the numbers of those who could benefit from the great American bonanza and then to humanize its workings and help heal its casualties.

Progressive reform first swelled locally in New York City, where unprecedented population growth and concentration of industry made life unsanitary and uncomfortable in the late 1800s. While progressive reform movements in New York City addressed the negative outcomes of these conditions through social and political reforms, at Coney Island, progressive reforms focused specifically on immorality and vice.

Aside from participation in anti-vice reform movements, the middle class was entirely absent from Coney Island until the late 1890s. In those years, upper class and working class patrons enjoyed these leisure pursuits exclusively. The story of how the upper class and working class came to share leisure space has been well documented by scholars and writers, and celebrators of Coney Island. Others have described the role of

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20 Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 5. For the purposes of this study, “Progressivism” is considered broadly, using Hofstadter’s definition as an “impulse toward criticism and change that was everywhere so conspicuous after 1900.”

21 Ibid., 18.

middle class reform movements against vice at Coney Island. What is often undistinguished is the role of amusement developers in targeting the middle class and how it contributed to Coney’s growing popularity in the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{23}

In 1894, Coney Island’s businessmen recognized the profit potential of the middle class and decided to try something new. Faced with reform fervor, these entrepreneurs cleverly created a novel leisure attraction—the enclosed amusement park. They developed a series of private, gated amusement parks between 1895 and 1904. These parks better resembled Victorian notions of discipline, restraint, and refinement but \textit{did not} exemplify them. Rather, these developers or “amusement entrepreneurs” transformed Coney Island for the middle class.

This study will show how the middle class came to \textit{enjoy} Coney Island between 1895 and 1911. It is about the social and technological changes that gave way to their participation in leisure there. It addresses the reform ethos that swelled within the middle class, examines the challenges developers faced at Coney Island, and will analyze the effectiveness of reformers between 1880 and 1911. Thanks to newspaper archives, particularly \textit{The New York Times} and the \textit{Brooklyn Daily Eagle}, there is an intriguing sample of articles describing first-hand these activities and changes. Primary accounts of anti-vice movements help paint a picture of competing notions of morality and leisure among New York City’s middle class.

\textsuperscript{23} Perhaps the best known source of information on this subject is offered by William Register in his text, \textit{The Kid of Coney Island} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
Whereas traditional notions of *morality* were characterized by discipline, control, and refinement, leisure had several component parts—temptation, seduction, consumption, and pleasure. One aspect of these prevailing tensions is offered by Michael Immerso in describing Coney Island: “The debate sought to determine whether the emerging mass culture would be defined in terms of cultural improvement driven by social intervention, or mass consumption driven by commercial enterprise.” Reform victories were certainly critical moments for the middle class, but Immerso’s fundamental question was better answered by the success of the enclosed amusement parks.

This study will examine how Coney Island became an example of these competing values and home to a changing middle class that emerged from the tensions that existed there. The dynamics of change at Coney Island and their lasting impact on middle class leisure are to be explored. As several historians have described, Coney Island demonstrates the ultimate power and victory of mass consumerism driven by commercial enterprise. The dynamics of these changes mark an indelible transformation of middle class leisure. It is the thesis of this paper that the seemingly contradictory roles of the middle class in Coney’s development, as patrons and reformers, actually show the same impulse towards change and are emblematic of evolving middle class values. To grasp the significance of these changes, this thesis examines the incremental progression of leisure and reform movements at Coney Island.

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Chapter 1 describes Coney Island’s history in the late 1800s, when it was transforming from a pastoral beach to a scene of crime, immorality, and corruption. It will discuss early attempts to reform Coney’s vice and the successes and failures of those movements. Chapter 2 describes how two men, Paul Boyton and George Tilyou, capitalized on Victorian values of decency, control, and refinement and created the world’s first enclosed amusement parks. The chapter will explore the growing popularity of these parks among a middle class patronage who previously was unwilling to spend money there. It will also discuss continued reform fervor at Coney Island between 1895 and 1902.

These early attempts toward amusement park perfection culminated in Fred Thompson and Skip Dundy’s Luna Park in 1903. Chapter 3 will explore how Luna Park shirked traditional Victorian norms of civility and frugality, turning towards increasingly extravagant and bizarre attractions. It will show how, despite this shift, Luna Park became immediately popular among middle class patrons. In particular, the chapter will explore the role of “novelty” in the success of the emerging amusement parks.

Inside Coney’s enclosed parks, the middle class found attractions that were increasingly extravagant—larger, more expensive, more ornate, and more bizarre. Chapter 4 describes the 1904 development of Dreamland, Coney’s largest and most costly enclosed amusement park. At the height of Coney’s amusement park era, a destructive fire served to diminish the Bowery area, giving rise to what newspapers called “The New Coney Island” in 1904. Chapter Four will analyze what this rebirth meant for Coney Island and for reformers between 1904 and 1911, the end of this inquiry.
Something unique happened at Coney Island in these years. Despite the growing progressive movement of the early 1900s and a middle class that clung to values of tradition, morality, and discipline, the enclosed amusement parks lured and dazzled this same class of people, proving the powerful influence of the amusement entrepreneurs and of novelty. The conclusion is that the seductive nature of Coney Island’s enclosed amusement parks trumped the reform influence over the middle class between 1895 and 1911.
CHAPTER 1

EARLY DEVELOPMENT YEARS

In June of 1879, the Brooklyn Daily Eagle published the editorial of an anonymous author, pen name “Richelieu,” who writes of his visit to Coney Island that summer. His editorial begins with the following observation: “What a magnificent place Coney Island will be when it gets finished! When that may be I shall not venture to predict. If we judge its future by its past it will be a considerable time.” Richelieu reflects a sense of anticipation about Coney’s unknown future.

At the time of Richelieu’s writing, Coney Island was transitioning from an uninhabited resort area to a popular recreation destination. It was attracting increasing numbers of upper class and working class patrons. During summer months, the crowds numbered in the tens of thousands a day. The infrastructure that Coney lacked in the years following the Civil War was rapidly being built, including paved roads, large piers, additional hotels, restaurants, pavilions, and the elevated Coney Island Railroad.

Richelieu described the changes he witnessed that June day with the following:

Now everything is unsettled; railroads are running to and fro, and knowledge is increased. Hotels are springing up as by enchantment, and stores, newspaper offices, circuses and theatres are opening in all directions.

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1 "‘Richelieu’ at the Island,” Brooklyn Daily Eagle, June 9, 1875.

2 Denson, Lost and Found, 2-15. As Denson describes, “Gravesend” was the town immediately adjacent and to the north of Coney Island. After settlers acquired the land from native tribes, all of Coney Island was considered common land, owned by the town of Gravesend until 1677. The town of Gravesend played a large role in determining the fate of Coney Island when it divided the Island into 5 distinct sections in 1677. In 1879, Coney Island was still the controlling political body of Coney Island. It was also the location of Town Hall.

3 "‘Richelieu’ at the Island,” Brooklyn Daily Eagle, June 9, 1875.
At its eastern end, Coney Island was booming. The nine miles that separated Coney from Manhattan were becoming more easily traversed.

The eastern end was already a destination for Brooklyn and Manhattan’s finest crowds. Richelieu points to numerous political figures who were there that day: “Here are nearly all the Board of Brooklyn Alderman…There are ex-Alderman…and many other prominent people of Brooklyn.” Travelling east towards Manhattan Beach, Richelieu reports, “among its throng are many prominent New Yorkers,” including B.H. Brietow, former Secretary of the Treasury; Judge Gunning S. Bedford; Senator William B. Woodin and wife; Father William Quinn, Vicar General of New York; Ulysses S. Grant, Jr.; and Jerome B. Chaffer, Senator from Colorado. He observes that General John H. Ketcham, member of Congress from New York, and his wife were guests of the exclusive Brighton Hotel that day. Nearby at the Manhattan Hotel, General John O. Freemont—military hero, Republican Party Presidential nominee, and Governor of the Arizona Territory—was reportedly on business with President Rutherford B. Hayes. It was truly an impressive crowd: “The bold Pioneer, the United States Senator, the Major General, the twice nominated candidate for President…with a life all history, and that history all romance, sits here to-day, enjoying the cool breezes of Coney Island.”

The beaches were reportedly crowded that day in 1879. As Richelieu walked further west along the shores he reflected, “I shall not attempt to state how many tens of thousands of people have been down here to-day….” The large piazzas at Brighton

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4 Ibid.
Beach, which measured 650 feet in length, were so crowded that “promenading was impossible.”

Coney’s most prominent landowners, proprietors, and businessmen were among the vast crowds that day. Their investment in Coney’s development was visible. As Richelieu describes, “The Island is covered with lumber, and miniature narrow gauge railroads run in all directions, under and over sand and water, carrying materials for the completion of the Sea Beach Depot, iron-pier and other structures.” His report affirms that change was happening. “And so the work of reconstruction, reformation and renaissance goes on at Coney Island. It will be a proud day on land and water when it is finished,” he says.

**Coney Island’s Underbelly: The Bowery**

Curiously, Richelieu’s Editorial does not mention Coney’s growing Bowery area. The Bowery was located approximately two miles west of Coney’s exclusive resorts, and slightly inland. The area was full of working class patrons who, like the upper class, desperately sought to escape Manhattan and northern Brooklyn during the summer months. Like Coney’s eastern end, the Bowery was developing quickly. New investments there aimed to profit from New York’s working class, whose leisure time was increasing. Investors constructed better roads and rail lines to carry patrons to

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5 Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 100-105. Indeed, promenading was a traditional weekend pastime at places like New York’s Central Park. As Sterngass describes, it was part of the “see and be seen culture” that was so prolific in the late nineteenth century.

6 “Richelieu’ at the Island,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 9, 1875.
Coney’s beaches.\textsuperscript{7} They built additional bathhouses and saloons that looked very different from Coney’s exclusive resorts, but were popular among working class patrons. As a result, this area was growing in popularity in the late 1870s, but its development was haphazard. \textit{The New York Times} described the Bowery with the following:

\begin{quote}
The western end of Coney Island is naturally the finest section of that watering place, but it has always been disfigured by small houses, booths, and so-called hotels. The beach is obstructed by bathing-houses irregularly placed; there are no roads or paths, and a view of the sea is almost unattainable from behind the beach.\textsuperscript{8}
\end{quote}

The disapproving tone of the article underscores the class divide that existed at Coney Island in these years. Unlike the expensive hotels at Coney’s east end, the west end was known for its saloons, brothels, circuses, prizefighting, horseracing, and gambling dens. These businesses were not organized or capitalized like those of the eastern end, but they were affordable for the working class. Author Rem Koolhaas describes what these attractions meant to working class people in those years, calling Coney Island an escape for “a reservoir of people existing under conditions that require them to escape occasionally to recover their equilibrium.”\textsuperscript{9} Those conditions are almost impossible to imagine today. \textit{The Times} offers a good description of what summer was like in Manhattan:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{7} According to Koolhaas, the creation of the Brooklyn Bridge in 1883 removed “the last obstacle that kept the new massed on Manhattan” (\textit{Delirious New York}, 33).
\textsuperscript{8} “An Effort to Improve Coney Island,” \textit{The New York Times}, March 14, 1878.
\textsuperscript{9} Koolhaas, \textit{Delirious New York}, 32.
\end{quote}
The close rooms of the tenement-houses become unbearable, parents and children sleep on roofs and stairways, the heat and bad food soon bring on intestinal diseases, and thousands of the infants die of that disease which has become here a terrible summer pestilence, the cholera infantum.\(^{10}\)

For working class patrons who could afford the train fare, Coney’s beaches were a great retreat from these abysmal conditions. However, there was not much mingling between upper class and working class visitors at Coney Island. They found their respective versions of leisure at opposite ends of the Island throughout the 1870s and early 1880s.

Coney’s geography was divided by class, but one major group was conspicuously missing from both the eastern end and the western end of the Island: the middle class.

The reasons for their absence relate to the conditions of Coney Island in the 1870s and 1880s. An examination of what Coney Island was like in these years is crucial to understanding the subsequent development that took place in the 1890s.

In 1879, Richelieu asked some insightful questions which begin to illuminate what was occurring there. He observes how Coney Island in 1879 was already in a struggle with Christian morals: “How different a Coney Island Sunday from a Plymouth Sunday!” he exclaims. At Coney Island, “Lager is Religion” says Richelieu. “What can the pulpit do? Throw itself in front of the locomotive to stop Sunday travel? …Great men have written to disprove the conflict between science and religion. What divine shall reconcile the pulpit and Coney Island?” he asks. His questions imply that a conflict—of a yet indeterminate nature—was mounting at Coney Island.

\(^{10}\) “Summer Charities,” The New York Times, May 30, 1880. As The Times describes, each summer, charities engaged in “Fresh Air Missions” to bring sick children to Coney’s beaches.
Richelieu points to specific attractions and pastimes that were in conflict with religion. For example, ocean bathing was Coney’s most popular attraction in these years. Richelieu asks, “Cleanliness is akin to godliness. Will this justify Sunday bathing?” He mocks, but his question drives at a growing criticism of Coney Island in these years—that the traditional Christian day of worship was being corrupted into a day of leisure and enjoyment.

Richelieu even goes so far as to compare Coney Island to a religion calling its popular steel observation tower “a Coney Island pulpit” and the sand “a Coney Island Church.” He describes the developing parcels of beach property:

Its pews advertised for sale; one, a hundred and twenty feet square, for a restaurant; another, one hundred and forty by a hundred, at sea end, for lager; another, twenty-five feet square on promenade deck, for barroom; another, thirty by thirty-five, on lower deck, for barroom, with others for lunch room, oyster saloon, ice cream saloon and cigar room; with twelve hundred bathing houses, ample convenience for washing the outer and inner man.  

Contemporaries may have thought that Richelieu blasphemed or exaggerated with such statements, but his questions provide a starting point for understanding the growing conflict there. He pits Coney Island against Protestantism. The connection between Coney’s leisure attractions, immorality, and religion is worth exploring.

Religion, Vice, and the Limits of Leisure

To examine the role that religion played at Coney Island, a convenient starting point is the big-picture view. What exactly was vice during the period in question? How did vice exist in leisure? At its most basic level, vice was the contemporary term used to

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describe depraved behavior such as crime or corruption. More generally, it was a common term for immorality.

Immorality and morality are often defined along religious lines—right and wrong, justice and injustice.\textsuperscript{12} For Christian men and women raised in the “intense and demanding evangelical Protestant religious culture” of the 1800s, morality was the fundamental governing principle of civil society.\textsuperscript{13} A life rooted in Christian morality demanded responsibility and accountability to God and the principles of Christian Church. This is what Eldon Eisenach calls “a religious sensibility.”\textsuperscript{14} It is informed by the life of Jesus Christ and the Biblical Gospels. For Christian men and women of the middle class, there existed a sense of duty to “secure the dominance of moral principles in civil affairs.”\textsuperscript{15}

This notion of morality was demanding. These Christian men and women believed strongly that “a healthy society could not survive without the control of instincts.”\textsuperscript{16} Control of instincts required a person to exercise considerable self-restraint, a demanding task for human beings. Thus, middle class Victorians came to glorify

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Samuel Zane Batten, “The Christian State,” in \textit{The Social and Political Thought of American Progressivism}, ed. Eldon Eisenach (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, Inc., 2006), 179. As Progressive thinker Batten describes, “Right and wrong, it can not be too strongly emphasized, are not the creations of the ballot-box…the believer in God must do what lies in his power to secure the dominance of moral principles in civil affairs.”
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 176.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 179.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Kevin White, \textit{Sexual Liberation or Sexual License? The American Revolt Against Victorianism} (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 2000), 4.
\end{itemize}
various forms of self-restraint, including “thrift, self-sacrifice, self-help, hard work, responsibility, honesty, and persistence” in every facet of their lives, says Kevin White. These traits, self-restraint and a religious sensibility, were more than just ideals, they were virtues. This strict standard or code of civil behavior was “the linchpin of rigorous public morality” and adherence was expected. The failure to control one’s instincts endangers morality and that which is “right” and “just.” Thus, morality was deeply intertwined with citizen conduct and the law.

The link between these Christian standards of behavior and leisure is the subject of many modern thinkers and writers from various disciplines. Perhaps the best writings are those of Simon N. Patten, a contemporary economist. Patten’s analyses of labor, wages, profits, and the burgeoning idea of “leisure” are critical to understanding the relationship between vice and leisure during the era in question. He contends that in the late 1800s, there was disunity among the various classes about the value and necessity of leisure. The forces of industrialization and mechanization brought great profits to corporations in these years. These profits, argues Patten, did not belong exclusively to the owner or the corporation: the laborer is entitled to his piece as well. Thus, recreation or time off emerged as a way of sharing the profits with laborers. Patten argued for the incorporation of leisure time as a right or entitlement. It was an economic right, but a

17 Ibid., 5.

new one: its terms were inconsistent in the 1800s. Patten contends that in a growing industrial nation, substantial time off was a necessity: “Leisure means more than time to eat and sleep. The full revival of mental and physical powers demands a period of rest in which the loss of surplus energy can be restored.”\textsuperscript{19} In part because of Patten’s work, this \textit{right to leisure} was increasingly accepted by corporations during the late 1800s. Other progressive voices echoed Patten’s call. Florence Kelley, a prominent progressive leader and labor activist said, “the establishment of universal leisure is increasingly recognized as a social aim, and effort to be participated in by all those who care for the social welfare.”\textsuperscript{20}

Even if leisure time was becoming increasingly common in these years, the “low-brow” leisure pursuits of Coney Island’s Bowery could not be reconciled with the aforementioned Yankee Protestant code. Similarly, the “high brow” leisure pursuits, enjoyed exclusively by the upper class were, by definition, lavish and excessive. Both working class and upper class versions of leisure echoed a lack of self-restraint. Thus, for the middle class, a sharp divide emerged in these years between acceptable and unacceptable modes of leisure. More acceptable among the middle class Victorians was anything that echoed productivity or education—painting, crafting, reading, and musical pursuits. Gambling and imbibing were unacceptable. Brothels were strictly forbidden


since they tempted men with sexual relations outside of marriage.\textsuperscript{21} Thus, many Christian middle class citizens deemed these and related activities “vices.” Calling them vices was an acknowledgement that certain leisure activities were rooted in immorality, and were inappropriate pastimes for Christians striving to be virtuous. Participation in vice exposed an inability to control one’s impulses. Vice became the descriptor of choice for Coney’s Bowery in these years, since it was teeming with attractions that encouraged brash behavior and irresponsibility.

\textbf{Coney’s Own “Boss” John Y. McKane}

In the early 1880s, Coney Island received an estimated 100,000 daily visitors on summer days.\textsuperscript{22} To understand why Coney Island could not attract middle class patrons in these years, it is important to examine more closely the types of leisure attractions the Bowery area offered in those years, and the man who made it all possible.

At the center of these early boom years was a young Irish carpenter, John Y. McKane, born in 1841 and raised in nearby Gravesend. McKane was ambitious and a well-known businessman in the area. He owned a contracting firm that leased land to many of Coney’s most popular proprietors. In business, he developed a reputation for dirty dealing. By granting favors to wealthy investors engaged in public auctions and land sales, he ensured his own construction company would benefit directly from any

\textsuperscript{21} John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman \textit{Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America}, (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 4. As D’Emilio and Freedman describe, Protestantism “distinguished more clearly between proper sexual expression—that which led to reproduction—and sexual transgressions—acts that occurred outside of marriage and for purposes other than reproduction.”

\textsuperscript{22} Sterngass, \textit{First Resorts}, 75-98.
new development. During Coney’s early development, McKane personally profited from the sale of undervalued land. Crafting illegal leases and real estate deals became his specialty. One particularly egregious example is described by Charles Denson in his text, *Coney Island Lost and Found*. Denson describes how McKane selected an investor and helped him purchase Breezy Point, Gravesend’s last remaining public oceanfront property, for a measly $1,500 when it was worth over $100,000. As development took off at Coney Island in these boom years, McKane even encouraged the sale of lands under water, guaranteeing “that the public would never have free access to the ocean.”

McKane took an early interest in politics. The reputation he built in business combined with the favors he had granted to Coney’s most powerful businessmen helped him launch his political career. His timing for an entry into politics was great: Gravesend, Coney Island’s controlling jurisdiction, was a political vacuum up until this point. His political career began with appointments as constable and commissioner of common lands. Already, these positions were a blatant conflict of interest, since McKane profited personally from the sale of public lands. His corruption did not go unnoticed: the newspapers reported often on the underhanded land deals that transpired, and soon the

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23 Harold Coffin Syrett, *The City of Brooklyn: 1865-1898* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), 185. As Syrett describes, at Coney Island, the common lands were typically “rented rather than sold to various concessionaires.

24 For detailed information on these deals, see Syrett, *City of Brooklyn*, 180-189.


26 Ibid., 20-25.
large readerships of *The New York Times* and the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* knew McKane’s name.27

Figure 3. John Y. McKane. *Source: Charles Denson, Coney Island Lost and Found* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2002), 8.

McKane quickly gained other political titles at Gravesend and Coney Island and by the 1880s, much of Coney Island’s political authority was in his hands. He was corrupting the government from within, holding “numerous positions simultaneously,” as Sterngass describes:

As health commissioner, McKane could decide on a certain policy, as chairman of the town board he could order it implemented, as chief contractor of

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27 See “Kept for Their Friends,” *The New York Times*, April 19, 1887; and “Voting Fifty-Two Ballots: A Bitter Contest in Gravesend over the Sale of Coney Island Lands,” *The New York Times*, February 27, 1884. As *The Times* reported, when voters first showed up to cast their ballots either for or against the contested land sales (52 ballots required of each voter), it was discovered that no negative ballots had even been provided. Proprietors like Peter Tilyou, also complained they had no chance of purchasing the land they rented when it was put up for sale, despite having made thousands of dollars of improvements. For these claims, Peter Tilyou was even arrested on false charges of criminal libel.
the town he might profit from the construction, as chief of police he prevented any interference with his work, as town auditor he approved his own invoices, and as chairman pro tem of the Kings County Board of Supervisors he carefully paid those bills in full.\textsuperscript{28}

As the town Supervisor of Gravesend, McKane was the head of every board and nominated all the remaining members.\textsuperscript{29} Such a concentration of power meant that the small town of Gravesend had birthed its own version of what every large American city had: the urban machine “boss.”\textsuperscript{30}

John McKane threw his weight behind an even larger boss, New York City’s Tammany Hall Democratic political machine. Tammany Hall’s backing helped McKane eliminate local political threats. As Supervisor of Gravesend, he further consolidated power in 1881 by creating a Coney Island police department and appointing himself as Chief of Police. The new position gave him a final say over Coney Island’s vice and illegal activity. He donned a gold and diamond badge for the role.\textsuperscript{31} In fact, a large share of McKane’s political power can be traced to his ability to appoint and select every local

\textsuperscript{28} Sterngass, \textit{First Resorts}, 235-237. Interestingly, as Sterngass describes, McKane’s government also “excelled in delivering basic services such as water and electricity to residents and businesses.” McKane improved Coney’s sewage and sanitation systems, making them a model for other jurisdictions struggling with civic neglect and disorganization. If nothing else, the machine McKane created at Coney Island was \textit{efficient}. Thus, Coney’s growing reputation for chaos is really a reflection of the democratic values he ignored there, rather than a reference to the daily operations of the government, a nuance that is lost in most criticisms.

\textsuperscript{29} Syrett, \textit{City of Brooklyn}, 184.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 70. As Syrett describes the classic urban boss politician: “Supported by the taxpayers, but rarely holding office, the machine leader was as much a part of the municipal scene as city hall or the Civil War monument. No American city escaped his influence.”

\textsuperscript{31} “Ghost or Alcoholic Spirits,” \textit{The New York Times}, August 29, 1893. \textit{The Times} described McKane, “clothed with all the splendor of his gold and diamond badge” and the “tolerant empire” over which he presided.
official. His police force was a carefully selected group. With this new role, McKane’s power to appoint became virtually the right to control and dominate Coney’s political affairs.

**Vice During the McKane Years**

The methods by which McKane controlled Coney Island varied, but at the heart of his corruption was a certain tolerance for lawlessness and criminal behavior. His police force became known for its tolerance, proliferating some old “vices” at Coney Island, namely, gambling, prostitution, and prizefighting. The rule of McKane also gave rise to some new ones. These particular activities warrant further study, since Coney Island was criticized so harshly by reformers for harboring these vices. For example, at the end of the summer season on September 9th 1883, *The Times* revealed that illegal gambling dens were thriving at Coney Island. John McKane feigned bewilderment and resolved to bust the dens immediately. When his police force raided the dens later that week, they did not arrest a single person. Their inaction did not go unnoticed. *The Times* flatly asserted:

> The hard-headed man of common sense who can waste no time on the sentimental relations existing between Coney Island gamblers and Coney Island policemen, and who advocates a vigorous enforcement of the laws, cannot fail to see that the excuses offered by those who ought to have enforced the law are puerile. He knows that there has been no attempt to prosecute those who have made parts of the island dangerous to honest men, and have carried on their business under the eyes of complacent policemen. He regards the ridiculous ‘raid’ of Friday evening as a farce, and he has a hearty contempt for officers who try to deceive tax-payers by sham at the eleventh hour.32

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Although this raid temporarily put gamblers on the defensive, they were able to again operate with impunity at Coney’s west end and in the Bowery. Numerous other incidents took place throughout the 1880s that reveal McKane’s tolerance for gambling, prostitution, theft, and other illegal activities. The newspapers were in the business of exposure in these years, and they covered John McKane’s empire often throughout the 1880s. McKane quickly became Coney Island’s best-known figure.

McKane tolerated the traditional forms of vice at Coney Island, but he also encouraged novelty among Coney Island’s developing attractions. This gave rise to new, risqué leisure attractions in these years. For example, Coney’s oldest and purest tradition, ocean bathing, took on a new form in the 1880s. “Night bathing” became popular at Coney Island, an activity that transformed Coney’s greatest attraction into a much more daring and erotic exercise. *Scribner’s Magazine* correspondent William Bishop described:

> Whoever has not had enough of bathing in the day-time, may bathe here at night by electric light. One could take many a long journey and never meet elsewhere with so strange, so truly weird a sight as this. The concentrated illumination falls on the formidable breakers plunging in against the foot of the bridge, and gives them spots of sickly green translucence below and sheets of dazzling white foam above.36

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34 Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 186-199. For more information on muckraking journalism, see Hofstadter’s description of how the Progressive movement rested on this type of journalism.

35 Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 237.

Night bathing brought pleasure-seeking men and women together in new ways, defying traditional notions of modesty and self-restraint. To critics, it was the perversion of a once wholesome activity into a wild and erotic act.\footnote{Edo McCullough, grandson of Coney Island pioneer George Tilyou, offers a terrific description of early bathing etiquette, fashions, and apprehensions common in the 1800s in Chapter One of his landmark text, \textit{Good Old Coney Island}. He describes how night bathing must have seemed foreign and bizarre in a time when many people had never been swimming and most could not swim.} The newspapers covered it widely and offered vivid images paintings of night bathing scenes.

\textit{Brothels of the Bowery}

Prostitution also proliferated in the 1880s under Boss John McKane’s rule. In the Bowery, dozens of saloons and hotels were really fronts for profitable brothels that “made the bulk of their money from prostitution.”\footnote{Sterngass, \textit{First Resorts}, 238. As Sterngass describes, prostitution was not illegal, and local juries often refused to “convict proprietors for entertaining outsiders in a way that outsiders wanted to be entertained.”} McKane was quite tolerant of brothels and prostitution at Coney Island reportedly saying, “houses of prostitution are a necessity on Coney Island.”\footnote{Oliver Pilat and Jo Ranson, \textit{Sodom by the Sea} (New York: Doubleday, 1941), 33-34, 71.} His comments were widely touted by the metropolitan press, further degrading Coney’s reputation for the institutionalization of prostitution.

Perhaps the best known of these brothels was The Elephant Hotel, completed in 1885. Called the “Elephantine Colossus” it was a fanciful, 150-foot elephant-shaped building, made from wood and tin, complete with guest rooms, stores, a dance hall, and...
an observatory.40 *The Times* described its location near the Bowery: “This seamy side of Coney Island is entirely hidden behind the colossal elephant, which covers a multitude of sins.”41 Although many visitors came simply for the spectacle, for others, “seeing the elephant” insinuated a more carnal encounter—it was a Victorian euphemism for sex.42 Designed purely for spectacle and profit, its purpose defied Victorian mores of conspicuous consumption, moderation, self-control, and respectable business.

Figure 4. The Elephant Hotel. Courtesy of The Brooklyn Historical Society.


42 For descriptions of the significance and symbolism of The Elephant Hotel and elephants in Victorian culture, respectively, see Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 95; and Immerso, *People’s Playground*, 38-41. As Sterngass describes, “So famous was this massive monument that for a generation, ‘seeing the elephant’ signified a quest for satisfactions in disreputable quarters.” Immerso contends that to “see the elephant” was a popular Victorian euphemism for having sex; the elephant already a symbol for brothels in the United States.
Even the hotel’s architecture defied American traditions. It was an animal of East Asia, adorned in symbols foreign, and representative of a non-Christian culture characterized by many Americans as opulent and indulgent. At the same time, it was made of shoddy materials that did not meet Victorian standards of sturdiness or permanence. Lacking any visible right angles, its curves were removed from prohibitive ideals of classical style. In part because of its eccentric design, the Elephant Hotel became a wildly popular establishment.43

All in all, The Elephant Hotel was a novelty—something unique and new. It was perhaps this characteristic over any other that drew patrons to see the elephant. Much like night bathing, the Elephant Hotel represented something strange, fascinating, and exciting for visitors. It was an emblem of Coney’s burgeoning culture of excess and a massive monument to what Immerso calls “decadent fantasy.”44

**Tolerance for Theft**

To maintain supremacy, McKane had to exercise care in how he handled even the smallest of crimes. Theft was common in the Bowery and it was a reoccurring topic of newspaper stories. That the newspapers covered so many stories of theft at Coney Island is perhaps unfair, since pick-pocketing was common throughout New York City. Thieves often made the headlines and their stories further wrecked Coney’s reputation among readers. For example, an 1888 article of *The Times* describes a man who approached Police Captain John McKane to report the theft of his gold watch. McKane dispatched an

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43 Immerso, *People’s Playground*, 135-137.

44 Ibid.
officer immediately, who despite crowds of thousands, returned the watch within minutes. *The Times* reported that McKane feigned shock and proceeded to ask the officer who had stolen the watch:

“Certainly, Sir, but what do you want them for?” asked the officer.

“For stealing that watch of course,” replied McKane.

The officer responded that in recovering the watch, he had promised immunity to the thief. McKane became angry and arrested the officer on the spot. As he later told *The Times*, “I’m determined to drive all thieves off the island as fast as they are discovered, no matter if stolen property is recovered.”45 Clearly, McKane’s determination was more the product of convenience, not of genuine concern for the law he was charged to uphold.

*Vice and Sport: Prizefighting*

Other illegal activities thrived at Coney Island under John McKane. For example, he sanctioned prizefighting, a controversial pastime that combined bloody, knock-out boxing matches with gambling. Betting on these purse fights was illegal in the State of New York, which is perhaps why the attraction was exclusive to Coney Island. The fights attracted thousands of onlookers to McKane’s own Coney Island Athletic Club and were a great source of personal profit for him. Under McKane’s rule, Coney Island became the “prizefighting mecca” which “projected Coney’s image as a place apart to a national audience.”46 The prizefights were highly lucrative for McKane and the sponsors,

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46 Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 233.
but they further wrecked Coney’s reputation and discouraged respectable visitors from coming.

One outspoken businessman, George C. Tilyou, a well-known proprietor of hotels and baths, blamed the McKane’s prizefights for his own business sufferings. Tilyou knew that sanctioned prizefighting was damaging Coney’s reputation irreparably. His concern was real: his own resorts were losing high-brow customers. When he advocated for an end to the purse fights, he was in direct confrontation with McKane. As a result, McKane revoked George Tilyou’s lease. McKane often succeeded in quieting his discontents, but the episode does suggest that tensions were mounting against him.

Newspaper coverage of vice and McKane’s corrupt hold on Coney Island led to increased criticism from churches and moral-minded citizens. When asked about vice at Coney Island, McKane once retorted:

There is no place in the world where there was less crime in proportion to its transient population than there is in Coney Island. Why gentlemen, we succeeded in keeping this resort free from gamblers and hoodlums last season, and we’ll do it again this year.

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47 McCullough, Good Old Coney, 291. As McCullough describes, George Tilyou was usually a great spokesperson for Coney Island. He once said, “If Paris is France, then Coney Island, between June and September is the world. English dukes and earls, French viscomtes, German barons, senators and even presidents and vice presidents, railroad kings, merchant princes, society queens—every human being of eminence or note in the American Continent can be found promenading the enormous hotel corridors, dining in the vast saloons or wandering on the beach.” Tilyou’s family’s business had suffered under McKane for years.

48 Syrett, City of Brooklyn, 180-187. As Syrett describes, in 1887, George Tilyou testified against McKane to the Bacon Commission, a Commission charged with investigating vice at West Brighton. Despite much political pressure from the City of Brooklyn, the Commission was unable to convict McKane of a single charge.

49 Immerso, People’s Playground, 49-50.

It was classic McKane bluster. To run his machine meant he often had to *make a show*. To extinguish growing anti-vice sentiment, McKane orchestrated dramatic raids on gambling dens and saloons in the Bowery. He was constantly reaffirming his commitment to a vice-free Coney Island: “It is a pleasure ground and I mean it to be a harmless one,” he said to *The Times*, “The ocean’s coming up and we’ll all be swamped soon, but we’ll go down pure, or know the reason why.” In his shrewdness, McKane knew it was easier to make a show of rectitude, occasionally giving in to public opinion.

Within this context, the Bowery was an intense epicenter of vice. A growing immigrant and working class population was fueling the demand for low-brow recreation there. Coney Island in these years was characterized as a “world unto itself,” “Sodom by the Sea,” and an “uninterrupted French fete.” These characterizations capture Coney’s vice well, but they understate McKane’s contribution there. The primary accounts of what occurred under his rule demonstrate that McKane himself was very much responsible for shaping Coney Island in these years. He controlled the chaos only as much as was advantageous to him.

**McKane’s Final Offense**

The most critical method by which John McKane controlled Coney Island was election rigging and voter fraud. His cronies constantly stalked patrons of Coney’s bathhouses and restaurants, gathering names and loading voter registry lists with them.

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52 Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 236.
His police officers took the names of any male visitor old enough to vote and used them to forge the Gravesend’s voter registry. This system relied on threats: seasonal workers were reminded (forcefully) that if they failed to vote on Election Day, they would not have a job at Coney Island the following summer.\textsuperscript{53} Visitors were threatened with arrest if they refused to turn over their names to the police. McKane even paid to import voters by train from nearby jurisdictions each Election Day. He moved the polls to Town Hall where his cronies could exert complete control over every man who walked in to vote. His methods worked, helping him to maintain political control and become a wealthy man. By 1893, he had been the Coney’s ostensible ruler for over twelve years.

In early November of 1893, the voter registry for Gravesend numbered 6,218, even though the total population did not exceed 8,418.\textsuperscript{54} The lists were fully loaded with names of non-residents, the deceased, and fake persons in preparation for Election Day. \textit{The Times} had previously tried to expose McKane’s illegal methods and voter fraud but the State of New York had never mounted a successful challenge to his control there.

The Saturday before the election, The New York State Supreme Court sent fourteen representatives—a clerk and thirteen copyists—to Coney Island to inspect the voter registry books for Gravesend, on suspicions that they contained evidence of forgery. McKane heard in advance of the Court’s writ, and consequently hid the voter registry lists, which were indeed quite fraudulent. It was the middle of the night when the officials arrived at Coney Island with the Supreme Court order. Immediately, they were

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.; Syrett, \textit{City of Brooklyn}, 73-75.

\textsuperscript{54} Syrett, \textit{City of Brooklyn}, 222-223.
“seized by a mob of ruffians with clubs and pistols, headed by John McKane himself.”

McKane’s corrupt police force arrested the fourteen men on fabricated charges of vagrancy, disorderly conduct, and intoxication. Having anticipated the events, McKane arranged for Judge Kenneth R. Sutherland to wait at Town Hall in the middle of the night to hold court. Sutherland promptly convicted all fourteen of their false charges, without bail.

The newspapers abhorred the disgraceful events. “Still further the height of arrogance to which this man, used to setting at naught the demands of a decent community, has reached,” said The Times. The dramatic episode was called McKane’s “most insolent defiance of the law.” He had refused to recognize the legal authority of the State’s highest court, humiliating fourteen court representatives and the Justice who sent them. With this event, McKane instigated his own demise. The State of New York charged him with election rigging. Prosecuted and convicted, McKane was sentenced to six years of hard labor at Sing Sing prison in 1894. His appeal reached all the way to the United States Supreme Court, where Justice Harlan delivered the opinion on May 14, 1894. In a triumphant defeat of despotism, the Supreme Court affirmed the Circuit Court’s denial of McKane’s bail request.

McKane had proven himself a lying, cheating politician. His depraved kingdom was on par with the worst political bosses and machines. Newspapers equated his name

55 Ibid., 222.
57 See McKane v. Durston, 153 U.S. 684 (1894).
with moral depravity and corruption, further damaging Coney’s reputation among middle class citizens. If we can assume that he was not the sole cause of the depravity there, but rather exploited and perpetuated it for his own gain, then his legacy as the most corrupt leader Coney Island ever saw would still remain firmly intact. It remains unknown if the gambling, prizefighting, and election rigging would have found their way to Coney Island without him. More certain is that during the McKane years, his power and Coney’s vice grew in stride together. It was a symbiotic relationship: the physical place was warped in McKane’s crooked image.

It is no surprise that the middle class avoided Coney Island in these years. Much gossip and fear surrounded Coney’s vice in these years, and McKane offered a disturbing level of amnesty to corruption and crime. The leisure activity he encouraged bore no appeal to the middle class, whose notions of leisure were rooted in religious sensibilities and productivity. Moreover, McKane’s profits relied on quieting any dissenters through feigned raids; religious sensibilities were never a welcome in the political dialogue. As a result, Coney Island evolved in these years without middle class involvement or approval. The middle class had no physical, political, or economic presence at Coney Island in these years. As we will see, reversing these patterns and changing Coney’s reputation proved difficult.

The Impulse Towards Reform

Why reform Coney Island? What was driving early progressive reform movements there? It is not surprising that the vice that inspired much disdain in the
McKane years would eventually lead to changes there. With McKane gone, the door was open for reformers. However, an examination of the reform movements that began to take shape in the late 1890s reveals a unique and early strain of progressivism was emerging. It was grassroots. It was local. It was not yet organized or powerful. It had no national agenda nor was it focused on larger ideas of equality. In all of these ways, it was different from subsequent progressive movements. While Progressivism in the early 1900s pushed for drastic political and social reforms and radically transformed “the relationship of the national government to the new industrial economy,” the movement was still in its infancy at Coney Island.

What made the Coney Island reforms progressive was a fundamental desire for moral improvement and social change. Questions about who these progressives were lead to the idea of “moral cleansing,” their earliest demand. Nameless citizens emerged, clamoring for the moral cleansing of Coney Island. To reform Coney’s vice and to salvage its morality, these early progressives chose social and political avenues.

These men and women were often inspired by sermons and by Christian writers. “Progress is Christian,” wrote Progressive thinker George Herron in 1894. “It is the evolution and fruit of sacrifice.” Civic participation was critical to this notion of progress. A Christian citizen should, as Progressive writer Samuel Batten described in

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58 Eisenach, Social and Political Thought, vii. For an excellent anthology of articles on this subject, see Eldon J. Eisenach’s The Social and Political Thought of American Progressivism.

1898, “do all in his power to secure the enactment of good laws, and to bring in a better social order.”

The general picture, then, is of a movement towards redemption and change. Coney Island’s vice had awakened a sense of duty among many in the Christian middle class. The search for who these reformers were begins when Coney Island was also in its infancy. Early development dramatically changed its once pastoral landscape in less than two decades. McKane’s departure signaled a new era there.

**Reformers Have Their Day in the Sun at Coney Island**

Middle class reformers faced a big challenge at Coney Island: vice and corruption had wrecked the place for twenty years. Newspaper sources indicate that their reform efforts were already well underway at Coney Island just months after McKane’s sentence. There was good news for reformers when the summer season opened in 1894. Coney Island had been incorporated into Brooklyn by the State of New York and named the 31st Ward. Coney’s politicians would now have to answer to a powerful neighboring jurisdiction. Most of McKane’s cronies had been imprisoned and there was new leadership in law enforcement. Power was decentralized. Even in early May of 1894, changes were happening. *The Times* described:

> Boss McKane would have been the most astonished man of the whole 10,000 if he could have come forth from Sing Sing for a stroll through those old, familiar, thoroughfares, Surf Avenue, Malden Lane, and the Bowery. Some of the old “dives” were open, it is true, and patches of last year’s lurid posters were clinging to the walls, but inside the “dives” all was changed.

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60 Eisenach, *Social and Political Thought*, 179.

Coney Island looked very different that day than in previous summers. The dance halls, saloons, and dives had been closed by the police, their licenses not renewed. Wild concert halls had been overhauled, hosting only “sacred concerts” in the new season. Rowdy theatres that once swelled with drunken patrons were now host to sad, slow gospel music. The performers were reportedly “not less disgusted than their employers at having to don long skirts and put away their ribald songs.”62

Strict new laws were in effect for the new season: there would be no Sunday dancing, no costumes, no variety shows, no fortune telling, no magic or tricks, and no gambling. Moreover, liquor sales were eliminated. Beer was still legal, but licenses were nearly impossible to obtain. The new police chief boasted:

The dives, concert halls, gambling shops, and other disreputable resorts will be shut up as tight as a vise. I shall enforce the excise law just as rigidly as it is enforced in Brooklyn. Special attention will be given to the Bowery and West Brighton. They will be cleaned out. The fakirs who haunt Surf Avenue will have to take to their heels. Many persons who have lived by their wits will be compelled to leave the island.63

These were dramatic changes for the Bowery. For readers of The Times, it represented the return of the rule of law in that notorious area. Already, it looked like a huge victory for reformers. Familiar faces of the Bowery had disappeared: “painted powdered freaks who, in gaudy costumes, have warbled sentimental songs are relegated to oblivion,” said The Times.

62 Ibid.

Inspired by their victories over vice, reformers renewed the fight to end prizefighting. *The Times* joined the battle, too, urging citizens to stay away from the “degrading Coney Island pugilistic contests.” An 1894 mayoral mandate determined to officially end the enterprise at Coney Island. *The Times* said this victory “brought great comfort to many despondent and aggrieved citizens of Brooklyn, reduced to believe that all the hope and prospect of rest and quietude of life for Brooklyn had disappeared never to return.”64 The Mayor’s call to finally end prizefighting was a long-awaited victory for moral-minded citizens. Coney Island was experiencing the moral cleansing that reformers had hoped for.

For the first time in Coney’s history, middle class standards of acceptable leisure were visible there. Moreover, the middle class *themselves* were there that day. Of particular note in *The Times* report is that crowds on inaugural day that year were “of a class seldom seen there before.”65 This suggests that those who consciously stayed away for years ventured to Coney Island that day. Reports suggest they did not stay long, however. They poked their heads in the various establishments and moved on. Perhaps out of sheer curiosity many middle class New Yorkers made the Coney Island day-trip. Having stayed away for many years, the Coney they knew was a product of gossip, church, and the newspapers. Their journey was their own proverbial *cleansing* by the shore; they felt renewed and inspired by the reforms they witnessed. The newspapers seemed proud to report that they had been there. The article was a signal to other middle


class readers that Coney was changing. Of particular interest to this inquiry is why the middle class came that day. It is clear that their purpose was of inspection, not relaxation.

In 1894, there was no “plan” for Coney’s future. Still charged with speculation, fear, and fascination, Coney Island was physically only a dismantled shell of its former self. Arguably, the desire among reformers to keep the old vices out—brothels, saloons, gambling, prizefighting—was driven by fear, not by hope or innovation. Reformers feared that familiar vices would return, yet they failed to contemplate the future of the place in any organized way.

With McKane gone, some proprietors believed that Coney’s reputation for corruption and vice could be further redeemed while leaving the “fun” intact. Thus, the challenge in the new era was to capitalize on Coney’s renewed image and bring back middle class visitors, with their money. Their hearts and minds already evolving, and satisfied with their reform successes, the middle class needed a new reason to visit Coney Island.

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66 Kasson, Amusing the Million, 34.
CHAPTER 2
NEW LEISURE OPPORTUNITIES AT THE TURN
OF THE CENTURY

Even in John McKane’s absence, Coney Island’s leisure attractions still presented major problems for reformers. This conflict is particularly apparent when one compares the Bowery’s attractions to more genteel models of leisure that existed in New York City. A great example of genteel leisure is Manhattan’s Central Park. It was created in 1858 by Frederick Law Olmstead who hoped its design would infuse a “model of social order, cohesion, and tranquility” on the rougher classes.\(^1\) It was to be a haven from commercialism that was everywhere present in New York City. Olmstead called it an institution of “democratic recreation” which offered “indispensable antidotes to urban anomie.”\(^2\) He bragged of his creation with the following:

No one who has closely observed the conduct of the people who visit can doubt that it exercises a distinctly harmonizing and refining influence upon the most unfortunate and most lawless classes of the city—an influence favorable to courtesy, self-control, and temperance.\(^3\)

Olmstead’s design was rooted in a desire to change leisure patterns, and consequently behavior, among Manhattan’s working class. Since its inception, Central Park had served as a vibrant representation of Victorian tradition and standards of leisure. Indeed, public parks were popular places in America’s cities, in part because they were infused

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\(^1\) Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Culture & the City: Cultural Philanthropy in Chicago from the 1880s to 1917* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1976), 74-82.

\(^2\) Ibid.

with a sense of refinement. In light of this ideal, the middle class aversion to the attractions of the Bowery is understandable. Their adamant fight to cleanse it implied that they believed something better was possible—something that resembled Central Park’s respectability.

The concept of a park as a retreat from urban chaos pervaded the nineteenth century. What is interesting to this inquiry is how the idea of the park evolved at Coney Island during these years. Like everything else, the creation of parks at Coney Island was driven more by entertainment and capitalist forces.

In 1895, a man named Paul Boyton arrived at Coney Island. Boyton was a well-known entertainer and businessman. An aquatic entertainer, he had built a successful career amusing international crowds with his swimming prowess and water stunts. He was known to be daring: he swam dangerous rivers, crossed the English Channel without a boat, and volunteered in three foreign wars. He was also inventive, having created an early version of the wetsuit and opened an aquatic circus in Chicago. Mostly, he was a dreamer and eager to make money.

In 1895, Paul Boyton leased land adjacent to The Elephant Hotel in the Bowery. On that site, he erected a small park which he named “Sea Lion Park.” Its concept was somewhat basic: it was an aquatic amusement center surrounded by a fence. The concept of a themed park seems simple by today’s standards. On the outside, it resembled many of New York City’s traditional parks, but inside it was something wholly different. Boyton clustered attractions that included fountains, pools, aquatic acrobats, simple rides,
a water circus, and trained sea lions. He built a waterslide called “Shoot-the-Chutes” which flung patrons down its slicks. Arguably, Sea Lion Park was primitive: only a slight modification of the traditional park. However, it was a novelty—something entirely new and exciting. Boyton had created the world’s first permanent, enclosed amusement park. Like a traditional park, it was a retreat from city life, but it aimed to entertain. At the time, even Boyton did not realize how groundbreaking this development was for Coney Island and for the amusement industry as a whole.

Figure 5. Shoot-the-Chutes at Sea Lion Park. Courtesy of The Brooklyn Historical Society.

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5 The very popular World’s Fairs were enclosed but Sea Lion Park is credited widely as the first private, permanent, enclosed amusement park. In comparison to the elaborate Columbian Exposition at the Chicago World’s Fair, these amusements would have seemed very simple.
Inside the park’s gates, Boyton’s carefully selected amusements promoted fun and a light-hearted atmosphere. Alcohol was not permitted. This was a sharp juxtaposition to the nearby Bowery, where the familiar forms of vice—brothels, saloons, gambling dens, and concert halls, were again open for business. Sea Lion Park’s enclosure offered patrons privacy and security, unlike the Bowery, which was open and uncontrolled. This was critical since Boyton’s target audience was families. Charging admission gave Boyton more control over who entered than with pay-as-you-go attractions or a public park.\(^6\) If he was concerned about rougher crowds, he could refuse them at the gates or raise prices to preclude them. Charging a single price for multiple attractions proved profitable. For patrons, admission seemed cheap since the rest of the park was free. Boyton’s motives were certainly rooted in profit, but his method made the place seem like a good value, which helped him win over middle class patrons.

Sea Lion Park’s attractions were distinctively “bourgeois”—between high-brow and low-brow, neither rowdy nor lavish. Its aquatic circus was simple enough: water acrobats, small pools, a few trained animals. Even the popular Shoot-the-Chutes was a basic waterslide, unadorned and suitable for all ages. It was all harmless and even trite. That Sea Lion Park had a theme suggested organization and control. Moreover, the ocean theme was familiar and appropriate for Coney’s setting. These were favorable characteristics for middle class patrons. There was nothing excessive, foreign, or suspicious about it. The Park exemplified control. Shows ran on schedule and it lacked

the frenzied, chaotic atmosphere of the Bowery. It was open during daytime hours only, leaving nighttime entertainment for the saloons and dance halls nearby. Outside Sea Lion Park’s gates lurked the familiar vices, but inside, everything was clean, organized, happy, and family-friendly.

Sea Lion Park set a new standard at Coney Island by embracing middle class values and catering to their interests. Interestingly, it was capitalist ingenuity, not reform sentiment, that created it. This marks the beginning of capitalist efforts to attract the middle class, particularly lower-middle class patrons. Sea Lion Park was proof that leisure could be moral, respectable, and inexpensive. Its theatricality defied some traditions but its novelty was appealing. There was a distinct sense of refinement to the place, which helped attract middle class families. Boyton’s profits are evidence that “vice does not pay as well as decency,” as one contemporary, Edward Slosson, characterized it. The park was a tangible symbol of redemption, a physical place that better resembled middle class values than anything else at Coney Island.

New Possibilities for Middle Class Leisure: The Theme Park Evolves

In 1895, local businessman George C. Tilyou returned to Coney Island, having been driven away by John McKane years earlier. Coney Island was home for Tilyou, but he had lost his lease and his business as its reputation suffered. The son of a successful hotel and bathhouse proprietor, Tilyou’s family had owned Coney Island attractions since

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1865. You could say he was born a Coney Island businessman. He knew the place, its patrons, and its history as well as anyone. He leased fourteen acres of land near the Bowery area in West Brighton. He planned to sublet some parcels. It was Tilyou’s simple solution to earn some money and get business going again.

As Ellen Snyder-Grenier describes in her text, *Brooklyn!*, George Tilyou “inherited an urge to attract a paying audience.” Seeing Sea Lion Park inspired him. He was impressed by how Boyton’s park attracted middle class customers and maintained a sense of respectability. It was a reflection of what Tilyou had always wanted for Coney Island: to attract “the more respectable workingman and his family, who had money and time to spend.”

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9 Denson, *Lost and Found*, 14-26. As Denson describes, Peter Tilyou, George’s father, had opened and operated several businesses at Coney Island, including famous bathhouses, in the years following the Civil War.


11 Ibid.
Prior to Sea Lion Park, Coney’s beaches were the only attractions that had appealed to entire families. Like Boyton, Tilyou was determined to change that. Both men believed they could reshape middle class self-consciousness and self-restraint into profit at Coney Island. Boyton’s enclosed amusement park was already turning a profit. Tilyou borrowed Boyton’s concept and stiffened the competition by designing his own park. He called it “Steeplechase Park” and selected a location in the Bowery.

It took Tilyou almost two years to develop the park, which he advertised as “Steeplechase, The Funny Place.” This motto depicted the wholesome, family entertainment he hoped to sell there. As Coney’s newest novelty, it quickly eclipsed the success of Sea Lion Park when it opened in 1897.

Paying visitors found a variety of amusements at Steeplechase, including boat rides designed to mimic the Grand Canals of Venice and a primitive roller coaster. The Park’s most famous attraction and namesake was The Steeplechase Park Race Course. The Race Course was imported from England and consisted of “mechanical horses that visitors mounted and rode around a simulated steeplechase route.”12 Developed by J.W. Cawdrey, this mechanical racetrack was slow by today’s standards, but a true physical thrill for riders in the late 1890s. An advertisement claimed:

A ride on the horses is a healthful stimulant that stirs the heart and clears the brain. It straightens out wrinkles and irons out puckers…The old folks like it because it makes them young again. Everybody likes it because it’s cheap fun, real fun, lively fun.13

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12 Snyder-Grenier, *Brooklyn!,* 187.

Tilyou took the well-known machines of industry—gears, tracks, compression, pulleys—and transformed them into machines of fun. Tilyou himself said, “what attracts the crowd is the wearied mind’s demand for relief in unconsidered muscular action.” It was this principle that guided his vision at Steeplechase. He imposed this belief on his park, placing mechanized leisure at the forefront of his creation. The Park’s rides, slides, devices, and stunts were all about physical participation. For instance, when visitors entered the park, they passed through the “Barrel of Fun,” a rotating cylinder which knocked many off their feet. As Kasson describes, the “Blowhole Theatre” used air-jets which “sent hats flying and skirts shooting upward.” Whether it was you or your neighbor who lost his hat, everyone laughed. Thus, Tilyou’s crowning achievement was the mechanization of leisure: “active, intense amusements that would totally involve its patrons and sweep them away from everyday concerns and restraints.” These rides were symbols of man’s ability to harness science for pleasure.

Moreover, these rides show the evolution of leisure and entertainment into more participatory forms. As one writer describes, “the success of Steeplechase lay in its ability to make the crowd a complicit instrument of its own amusement.” Real people—not actors—became the entertainment, their bodies hurled across devices in new

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14 Snyder-Grenier, *Brooklyn!*, 187-188.
16 Ibid., 59-61.
ways. Spectators became the spectacle. Like any good entertainer, Tilyou successfully charmed his audience into accepting these new roles. It probably was not that difficult, considering how fun it all was.

What really made it all work, however, was that Tilyou tempered the physicality with a sense of refinement and respectability. Admission cost only ten cents, beer was not sold, and the grounds were beautiful. He had deliberately created a private, controlled, and clean environment that was similar to the traditional park setting. Steeplechase offered formal gardens, covered walkways, and lots of vegetation. To satisfy more refined tastes, the Park also featured the largest ballroom in the state of New York. There was ample space for sitting, strolling, and enjoying the ocean air. Maps of Steeplechase Park confirm that, despite many mechanized attractions, its design was geared towards leisurely strolling of the grounds. Steeplechase was, after all, a park. Tilyou designed it to echo the true definition of a park: a protected area of a semi-natural state, designed for recreation.
What is particularly important to this inquiry is how this design reassured conspicuous consumers that they had not exceeded any moral bounds. Tilyou’s park “encouraged participants to shed self-consciousness and surrender to a spirit of reckless, exuberant play.” Tilyou called the place “the most enchanting and magnetic fun-making resort in the world.” So it was. Critical to this enchantment were the gardens, walkways, and pavilions that separated each ride. These were instruments of organization designed to reorient thrill-seekers and ground them. If riders experienced a loss of control on the mechanical rides, they regained it when their feet met the firm walkways and the cleanly-trimmed grass. Steeplechase Park’s natural setting also

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18 Kasson, Amusing the Million, 59.

19 Immerso, People’s Playground, 6.
suggested serenity. It was a balance that the middle class psyche needed in order to accept mechanized leisure. Balance was also achieved in offering patrons an appropriate level of indulgence. The brilliance of the design was its success in harmoniously integrating the physical thrills with the familiar park setting.

Tilyou’s carefully conceived plan worked. For the next several years, middle class patrons flocked to Steeplechase Park for an ever-changing array of amusements that catered to their “cultural style.” As novel as Tilyou’s ideas were, he had done it all without ever losing sight of his target audience. As an entrepreneurial revolutionary, perhaps his most important success was in convincing frugal, self-conscious middle class patrons that they deserved novelty and indulgence.

Moreover, with this design, Tilyou struck equilibrium between modernity and tradition. He created a place where indulgence and self-consciousness—two competing parts of the human psyche—could co-exist. The primary significance of the Park to the history of Coney Island is that it made its visitors feel something. Perhaps it engaged sensations they had previously suppressed, or it satisfied an unexplored urge for speed or adventure. Surely there was a connection between the repression of the age and the temporary cessation of control that proved so popular in these new mechanized forms of leisure.

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21 Kasson, Amusing the Million, 58-61.
Moreover, George Tilyou’s story is that of American entrepreneurial triumph. His influence begins with creative spirit and a willingness to take a risk—building something lasting rather than simply subletting land, as he originally intended to do. Tilyou improved upon another man’s idea, and it all paid off. Turning earlier business failings in the McKane era into success and fortune with Steeplechase Park, he solidified the Tilyou name as a major contributor to Coney Island’s success in the twentieth century.²² He gave middle class patrons something they did not know they wanted or needed: respectable, lively, leisure that aroused the senses. Once they felt it, they clamored for more. He made Coney Island an amusement park destination, but his methods—mechanized sensation—had a transformative impact far beyond Coney Island.²³ Mechanized leisure became the new paradigm.

New Amusements, Same Criticisms

Businessmen like Tilyou and Boyton had created a reason for middle class patrons to come to Coney Island, their goal “to lure the masses to West Brighton in ever greater numbers.”²⁴ At the same time, and not by coincidence, the railroad companies created the means. A modernizing transportation network in New York City helped entrepreneurs like Tilyou and Boyton bring patrons to Coney Island by the thousands. In 1897, the year Steeplechase Park opened, a railroad merger resulted in a new through

²² Denson, Lost and Found, 14-26. Peter Tilyou, George’s father, had opened and operated several businesses at Coney Island, including famous bathhouses, in the years following the Civil War.

²³ Register, Kid of Coney, 122-126.

²⁴ Immerso, People’s Playground, 6.
route to Coney Island. The new attractions and affordable fares brought patrons in
droves the summer that Steeplechase Park opened. Whereas middle class families were
less likely than their wealthy counterparts to vacation in the mountains or countryside, a
trip to Coney Island or nearby beaches offered an easy, inexpensive, pleasurable
alternative.25

Cheaper fares, affordable amusements, and the enduring lure of Coney’s long
beaches, also made the area susceptible to New York City’s rougher element.26 What
was the effect of these changes on progressive reformers? The new parks were more
wholesome than the Bowery’s saloons but they were still private endeavors, created in
the name of special interests.27 This was problematic for reformers. They feared the
movement away from public recreation and activity and towards privatization. They
were suspicious of any establishment that was “unapproved by the churches and schools,
the critics and professors who served as caretakers and disseminators of the official
American culture.”28 Reformers sensed that a growing audience of these unapproved

25 “Many Fine Trolley Trips,” The New York Times, May 7, 1899. Since 1891, there had been
direct lines by both ferry and rail to Coney Island. Not long after the merger however, the rail companies
also lowered the direct fare to Coney Island to just five cents per passenger. This change greatly increased
accessibility for the frugal middle class. Soon, railroad companies replaced old cars with electric ones.
Patrons traveling from Manhattan could reach Coney Island by any one of three routes which ran almost
constantly.

26 For more detailed accounts of how this rougher element came to Coney Island, see Kasson,
Amusing the Million, 57-61; Robert E. Snow and David E. Wright, “Coney Island: A Case Study in
Popular Culture and Technical Change,” Journal of Popular Culture (Spring 1976): 966-967; and Register,
Kid of Coney, 90.

27 Kasson, Amusing the Million, 101.

28 Robert Sklar, Movie Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies (New York:
attractions increased the opportunity for the working class to fall victim to Coney’s vice. A sense of civic duty demanded that reform-minded citizens protect the desperate classes.

These new forms of amusement were promoting something very unsettling to the Progressive temper. Boyton and Tilyou introduced respectable, middle class citizens to consumption of leisure goods and they bought them. Already in 1897, Coney was swimming with commercialism. As Register describes, the growing “consumer capitalism” and the infrastructure being built in those years to support it, advertised “the marvelous array of consumer goods and technologies produced by the new industrial order.” The amusement parks echoed this consumer capitalism; they were the epitome of private enterprise. Tilyou and Boyton had exercised some restraint in their designs, but their parks “promised only pleasure and pursued only profit.” These corporate creations were acts of creativity, but the experiences were pre-packaged: everybody felt the same thrill as they lost their footing in the Barrel of Fun. They all rode the same rides and laughed at the same sights. With the rise of the amusement parks, Coney Island’s function now reflected purely capitalist motives. Everything was designed to make patrons spend money. Commercialization and mechanization were new brands of escape and they were becoming solidified parts of the American Dream.

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29 Register, Kid of Coney, 12.

30 Kasson, Amusing the Million, 101.

31 Kasson, Amusing the Million, 6-9. As Kasson describes, “the popular resort quickly became a symbol not only of fun and frolic but also of major changes in American manners and morals…the story of the resort illuminates the character of the mass culture that would soon dominate American life.”
In submitting to these new enclosed amusement parks and consumption, middle class citizens were proving the proprietors right: Americans “wished not to care more but to care less, not to work harder or to be richer, but to have more fun.” Coney’s revelry had a new force on its side—those who felt connected, through physical stimulation, to what it offered. This bred optimism, laughter, and enjoyment. Vice was again lurking in the Bowery behind Tilyou’s walls, but at the “Funny Place,” his brilliant design reassured “respectable” citizens that their fun was different from that of the rest of the Bowery; a tonic for what lurked beyond the Steeplechase walls.

Though Steeplechase and Sea Lion Park were designed to isolate patrons from disreputable activity, vice persisted in the Bowery. As a result, the fight to cleanse Coney Island found new strength. The reform efforts that took shape that year are critical evidence of improved organization on the part of reformers. As progressivism took root in New York City, many middle class reform-minded citizens joined groups like the Salvation Army and God’s American Volunteers. These groups called themselves “Salvationists” and were dedicated to improving the moral tone of society through what they called “spiritual warfare.”

The Salvation Army and God’s American Volunteers are great examples of emergent progressive reform efforts at Coney Island. Whereas criticism of Coney’s

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32 Register, Kid of Coney, 87.

33 “Religion on Coney Island,” The New York Times, June 26, 1897. God’s American Volunteers or the American Volunteers was later renamed the Volunteers of America, as they are known today.

34 An examination of The Times archives between 1897 and 1998 shows that these two groups were actually in a heated rivalry. The groups had the same founders and a very similar mission. They
vice had before been confined to the newspapers and the pulpit, these groups went
directly to the source of vice, the streets of the Bowery. As The Times reported in June of
1897, a woman named Ida Davis, representing the American Volunteers, presented
Coney’s Captain of Police with a permit, signed by the Mayor, authorizing open-air
meetings on the streets of Coney Island. Davis reported to the Police Captain that her
American Volunteers were beginning a “crusade against sin on the island.”35 She began
her crusade two days later with an open meeting in front of a popular Coney Island hotel.
What was promoted as a public meeting quickly evolved into Davis’ personal diatribe on
vice and sin. Hundreds stopped to listen. Many witnessed the speech, but as The Times
reported, “Her words seemed to have but little effect, for as soon as the service was over,
the crowd drifted into near-by-saloons and concert halls.”36 That listeners left unaffected
affirms that they had not been shamed by the reform drum beating. The American
Volunteers, in their crusade against sin, were unable to affect behavior, which was their
ultimate goal.

That same month, The Times confirmed the growing influence of Coney Island’s
leisure: 100,000 people visited in a single-day. Proprietors concerned over Coney’s vice

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had help from law enforcement, too. Twenty-five police dressed in civilian clothes that
day, hoping to catch gamblers and swindlers in action. Police arrested thirty-six girls on
vagrancy charges and sent several men to jail for running gambling dens. On that very
busy day, “regular visitors to the Island say that they cannot remember a Sunday on
which there was less noise and confusion.”

Now, it seemed that both Coney’s crowds and reform fervor were swelling. It was a key moment. Coney Island had become home
to both middle class reformers and patrons. While some indulged at Steeplechase and
began to shed their Victorian mores, others went to uphold the same through spiritual
warfare.

The Bowery distilled for the progressive mind that unprecedented population
growth, technological change, and the widening wealth gap were dangerous, corruptive
forces. It animated for their conscience the evils of extravagance, greed, and unfettered
pleasure. Interestingly, the reformers looked the other way when it came to the
enclosed amusement parks. The Bowery’s overt and deliberate mocking of the
established social order distracted them: they kept their sights on the familiar forms of
vice and sin. In doing so, they ignored the new patters of consumption that were evolving
within Coney’s enclosed amusement parks and failed to understand the greater impact of
these new attractions.

37 Ibid.
38 Kasson, Amusing the Million, 6-7, 108-110.
New York City’s “Other” Park

One particularly interesting outcome of the enclosed amusement parks’ success was that traditional leisure venues like Central Park saw a sharp decline in visitors. Various proprietors there blamed Coney Island for the decline. For example, Central Park Spa was a mineral water dispensary. Business was struggling in 1898. Its lure had once been novelty. Many believed mineral water improved health, and the Spa attracted hundreds of patrons to its gates as early as 5:30 in the morning. Waters were served at various temperatures, to suit patrons’ tastes and physicians’ orders. Central Park’s Spa manager complained in August of 1899:

The number of customers has dwindled down enormously... this loss of trade has been caused by the cheap fares, which enable a man to go to Coney Island or some of the beaches by trolley for 5 cents; for it is since low fares for long distances have been established that the trade here has declined.39

He bragged that his Spa had once been a New York destination for patrons from all over New England and blamed cheap fares to Coney Island. Other Central Park businessmen felt the squeeze, as well. Similarly, the manager of the Central Park excursion carriages claimed a 60 percent decline in business in 1898. He described his predicament to the newspapers:

Aside from the city people who patronized the carriages, large numbers of people used to come from New Haven and other New England towns, and even from Boston. How did I know them? By their picnics to the Park, of course. They used to get up parties and come and picnic in the Park. This year we have had only one New England picnic in the Park. The others go to Coney Island to this beach and to that one. And yet Central Park was never so beautiful as it is now.

The walks and drives are perfect, the trees have grown splendidly, and you can see there the most beautiful flowers and plants. Their words reflect a growing sense that middle class patrons—those with the means to buy mineral water and the time to leisurely picnic in the park—were now less interested in that type of pastime. Central Park was quickly becoming the “other” park as the Coney Island day trip was on the rise. The Spa’s novelty wore off when Steeplechase Park opened. This is anecdotal evidence of the lure of novelty and of Coney Island’s impending seduction of the middle class. Public places like Central Park could not offer the same physical exhilaration that Steeplechase did. As a result, Manhattan’s Central Park was beginning to look like a remnant of a past that catered to the desires of an elite, traditional crowd. This perhaps should not be surprising since Central Park was never meant to showcase modernity.

Here we see that middle class values were changing; self-consciousness, control, and self-restraint were less idealized. As a result of these changing values, physical places like Central Park lost their luster. Middle class attractions, like mineral water dispensaries, were becoming obsolete. In their place, the middle class now sought new forms of stimulation at Coney Island’s version of the park—mechanized rides and novelties. There is a clear shift away from the idealistic view held by Olmstead and other traditional thinkers that touted the influence of refined parks. This notion was slowly being inverted at Coney Island. If Central Park was a model of civility and control,

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Coney’s parks in the late 1890s were controlled chaos—wild enough to agitate reformers but refined enough to attract middle class patrons.

**The Crusade for “The People’s Park”**

We have seen how reformers tried to cleanse Coney Island and the evolving progressivism these efforts represent. Out of that fervor evolved a disdain for Coney’s private interests. This became a consistent theme of the progressive movements there—the desire to improve the plight of the people against rampant capitalism and the special interests. The most striking example of this fervor and the climax of reform efforts at Coney Island happened in 1899. That year, the City of Brooklyn formed a plan for a new public park at Coney Island.\(^{41}\) The impetus for this new park was anti-vice sentiment and a growing desire to *change* the physical space at Coney Island. Reformers heard the plans and hoped the new park would serve as a model of respectable leisure. Its setting would be an entirely natural and serene; full of vegetation, and walkways for strolling.\(^{42}\)

Several prominent Protestant churches in Brooklyn joined the crusade. Religious leaders from Plymouth Church and the Church of the Pilgrims engaged eagerly in the park plans, invited local politicians to their churches to gather support, and discussed the plans every Sunday. Change was desperately needed at Coney Island, they believed.

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\(^{41}\) For more information, see “Mr. Coler’s Coney Island Project, *The New York Times*, June 13, 1899. The article describes how two plans were originally presented. The first plan would establish a park between Ocean Boulevard and Sea Gate on the East and West, costing upwards of $8,000,000. The second plan would eliminate the Bowery section of town and build a boardwalk. In the end, the park would occupy a formerly-empty lot at Coney’s eastern end, almost a mile from the Bowery and far from the areas that working class patrons frequented.

impulse towards change that defined progressivism was never so apparent. One particular Sunday, former New York Congressman, S.V. White made the following appeal at Plymouth Church:

We who have grown up alongside Coney Island do not realize what it is. It is a running sore, but it is also a health-giving place, to which every foot should turn. I speak advisedly when I say that it ranks as a health-giving spot above all others on the seacoast. I was for many years a Trustee of the Seaside Home, and I know that it is hard to find a baby so sick that it cannot recover at Coney Island. But nobody knows how bad Coney Island is. It is bad beyond the power of description to any audience, mixed or unmixed. It will continue to be bad so long as it is held to private ownership. Instead of selling the people amusements with bad air, we should give them amusements with good air.\footnote{43 “Coney Island Park Urged,” \textit{The New York Times}, June 12, 1899.}

It probably was not a tough sell at Plymouth Church that day. A public park was exactly the transformation reformers needed to reclaim Coney Island in name of the people against the private interests. The congregation heard other appeals from City officials, calling for a park that would “better the moral and physical condition of mankind…to promote the mental and physical well being of the children.”\footnote{44 As the City Controller described, “When you take care of the American small boy you are guarding the future of the American nation. Let their young lives develop in sunlight, give them plenty of innocent amusement and the safety of our country and our institutions is insured for another generation. Government cannot be better than the citizenship that creates and sustains it, and if it be worse it will not long survive; therefore public power and money should never be spared in work for the moral and physical good of the people.” This sentiment was frequently expressed by progressives. For example, see Florence Kelley, “The Child, The State, and The Nation,” in \textit{The Social and Political Thought of American Progressivism}, ed. Eldon Eisenach (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, Inc., 2006), 164-166.} They believed the stakes were very high. The salvation of innocent lives hung in the balance. If particular environments could be simulated to influence positive behavior changes, Coney Island was the ideal place to start. The City urged reform-minded citizens to help eradicate vice at Coney Island for the good of mankind. This pandering was exactly what reform-
minded citizens wanted to hear. They had been invited to be a part of *progress*; to partake in something bigger than themselves.

The People’s Park would be public, free, and safe. These characteristics were deliberate—a direct castigation of businessmen and capitalists who, reformers believed, overly-privatized the attractions there. The Rev. Dr. Newell Dwight Hillis stated:

> The rich do not need it; the well-to-do do not need it; but there are a million people in our city who do, for they are the children not of vacations, but of incessant toil. And to this million people belongs the glorious beach, its cool breezes, its tides and surf.45

Across Brooklyn, pastors and reverends implored their congregations, “we owe that beach to the poor.” As a result, many churches and congregations joined the crusade.46

Others were not so certain. *Munsey’s Magazine* included a vehement retort of the park proposition from Walter Creedmoor, a well known journalist. To create a public park would do nothing except destroy the character of Coney Island, maintained Creedmoor. “We cannot afford to rid ourselves of one of the few characteristic New York resorts that the march of reform and progress has as yet left untouched,” he argued.47

Against the backdrop of some criticism, it was a crucial moment in the evolution of progressive reform at Coney Island. Their fight for a traditional park was consonant with their ideals. Their actions also extended an increasingly obsolete leisure form that


46 Ibid. As the article describes, New York’s Holy Trinity Church, the Church of the Savior, Emmanuel Baptist Church, Lafayette Avenue Church, St. James Place, Hanson Place Methodist Episcopal Church, Saint Ann’s, Lee Avenue Congregational Church and many others all took up the cause from the pulpit and in meetings.

had no appeal to the working class. As Creedmoor warned, “the masses love Coney Island as it is…and they will certainly turn their backs upon it and its new form and seek their summer recreation elsewhere.” 48 Reformers claimed the park would uplift the working class but they failed to involve that class of people in any conversation. Arguably, this was a mistake. Reformers gave casual credence to the Bowery’s appeal to the working class, but they did not care to examine why raucous leisure was so popular. Although immorality was the alleged target of their cleansing efforts, reformers failed to see why Coney Island was a necessary release from the urban condition and never meant to represent the best of humanity. While they claimed empathy for the strife of the poor, they could not accept their choice of saloons, gambling dens, or dance halls as appropriate modes of leisure. Reformers were imposing their strict sense of morality and religious sensibilities on this class of people. Brooklyn’s Controller Coler affirmed:

> It is a gross libel on the poor of New York to say that they demand vicious amusement or patronize criminal resorts from choice. The workmen, women and children of the city go to Coney Island not for the class of entertainment offered there, but in spite of them, because there is no stretch of sand and sea so near and easy of access.49

The language of the speeches affirms that the reformers viewed the working class as “the other,” in need of redemption. Their efforts to create a park are evidence of a fundamental class divide and misunderstanding of what the working class wanted.

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48 Creedmoor, *Real Coney*, 745.

Reformers accomplished their goal of creating a public Park, which they called “Seaside Park.” Their choice of location was not great. The park was a full mile from the Bowery. This was another mistake. As *The Times* confirmed, “The new park has not transformed Coney Island,” its location “was never a place of vice; it was merely a great waste place.” Reformers created Seaside Park in their own image; in no way did it reflect the values of the people they claimed it would uplift.

Entirely absorbed by their cause and the challenge, their efforts show the impulse towards change. Seaside Park was the physical manifestation of their desire for transformation. Most importantly, the fight for the People’s Park gave middle class reformers license to focus outward. In doing so, they missed the opportunity to discover new forms of leisure for themselves. Reformers did not recognize that these were dangerous developments. As they clung to ideals of tradition, Coney Island challenged their standards. Elsewhere, many middle class citizens had already begun experimenting with the World’s Fairs and traveling attractions that featured new versions of leisure. Others were lured by mechanical thrills and technological innovations that surfaced at these fairs and at Coney Island. Leisure consumption was on the rise. Coney Island’s enclosed amusement parks were blurring old definitions of respectable leisure.

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Figure 8. Seaside Park in 1904. Courtesy of The Brooklyn Historical Society.
CHAPTER 3
LEISURE AND PLEASURE PREVAIL

The Physical Setting in 1901

In 1901, Coney Island was awake with amusements. It was now better integrated with the growing populations of Manhattan and Brooklyn. Its eastern end was home to exclusive beach hotels, new pavilions, and Seaside Park. Coney’s western end continued to feature horse racing tracks, saloons, dance halls, and gambling dens.1 The Island was peppered with individual concessions, too—small rides, games of skill, and circus acts.

In the Bowery, there were fortune-tellers, palmists, and sideshows which showcased “midgets, giants, fat ladies, and ape-men.”2 These sideshows were a glorification of the grotesque and bizarre. While some of Coney’s amusements were novel and full of character, others were low-brow, trite, and even pathetic. The aggregation of them all fueled increasing popularity, but also kept Coney Island divided by class.3 There was certainly plenty to amuse the masses all across the Island.

None of it rivaled what George Tilyou had assembled at Steeplechase Park. It was a showcase of modernity in 1901. Sea Lion Park’s simple aquatic shows could not compete with the mechanized attractions of Steeplechase, and closed. As the only remaining enclosed amusement park, Steeplechase continued to attract a large and diverse crowd of patrons, especially lower-middle class families. Tilyou had made

1 Register, Kid of Coney, 89.
3 Immerso, People’s Playground, 111.
annual improvements, even constructing an enormous boardwalk along the shorefront.\textsuperscript{4}

Located near the Bowery and Coney’s main train depot, Steeplechase Park solidified the Island’s core as the primary amusement area. As Kasson describes, this core was now a testing ground for a burgeoning mass consumer culture.\textsuperscript{5}

Figure 9. Copy of original 1907 map of Coney Island’s Bowery. Courtesy of The Brooklyn Historical Society.

Within this testing ground, the privatization of leisure, as embodied by the enclosed amusement parks, fueled tensions. These tensions are exemplified by reformers’ continued calls for moral transformation of Coney Island. Their aspirations are

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\textsuperscript{4} Denson, \textit{Lost and Found}, 26.

\textsuperscript{5} Kasson, \textit{Amusing the Million}, 29.
summarized well by the Bishop of Long Island, Frederick Burgess, who relayed his dreams of cleansing to the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* in 1902:

> I see myself buying that tract of land known as Coney Island. I see myself tearing down those buildings, as they came into my possession, and transforming the place into a paradise of beauty. I would give the people music and song. I would give them every form of healthful amusement. The influence of the greatest institution in the world, the greatest library, the most magnificent cathedral, would not amount to such a work as that.6

Burgess knew the improbability of this dream. As he lamented to the newspaper, “It is of no use. Our capitalists do not, in these days, engage in that kind of works of charity.”7 Instead, corporations were focused on tempting patrons with more rides, shows, and novelties. Moreover, the Coney Island Police refused to acknowledge rampant vice in their jurisdiction, further confounding the reform cause.8 Reformers had support in numbers, but lacked political power and capital. Their vision was grand while their means remained limited.9 Seaside Park was their most enduring accomplishment and their greatest moment of notoriety, but its impact was decidedly narrow. The physical accomplishment of Seaside Park was real, but curtailing vice or immorality was a far more demanding task.

To attack vice, reformers tried targeting liquor control in 1901 and 1902. These efforts failed. Greater enforcement of the liquor tax laws enraged saloon owners and

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7 Ibid.


9 Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 196. Hofstadter contends that this was a current theme throughout early progressivism. It was certainly apparent at Coney Island.
liquor salesmen and did not give way to any lasting changes. Reformers tried a different approach: they pressured Kings County to commission a Grand Jury report on the state of vice at Coney Island. They hoped the results would be so alarming that politicians would be shamed into doing something. The County agreed to a full Grand Jury investigation. The results were jarring. The report cited blatant violations of many laws, but the Coney Island Police refused to heighten enforcement.

Reformers faced major challenges at the turn of the century, yet change was happening. The clearest example of this change was not moral but economic. It began in the boom years of John McKane and was punctuated by the development of the enclosed amusement parks. This economic transformation was slow. It spanned two decades, but its major success was in bringing more middle class citizens to Coney Island. Reformers had failed to rid the place of vice over these two decades, but the enclosed amusement parks were simultaneously changing middle class leisure patterns.

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10 For accounts of these activities, see “Police Invasion of Little Coney Island,” The New York Times, March 18, 1901 and “Brewers Hard Hit by Coney Island Charges,” The New York Times, November 1, 1902. The articles describe how reformers successfully encouraged the police to shut down dance halls on Sundays and arrest owners, and to change alcohol sales and permits. Greater enforcement of liquor taxes resulted in political upheaval. Businesses were enraged and refused to make their annual contributions to the Republican Campaign Fund. These accounts are strong indications of how liquor was deeply intertwined with politics. It was profitable business and local politicians and officials wanted their cut, adding fodder to the reform cause. Almost two decades before the Eighteenth Amendment was passed, it was a sign of times to come.

11 “What Grand Jurors Saw at Coney Island,” The New York Times, 30 May 1902. The Grand Jury reported, “We find that the excise law is openly and flagrantly violated, and liquors are served on Sunday and during restricted hours without even the pretense of a meal, and that dance and concert halls are carried on in a great many instances as well in open violation of the law. The article describes how, ironically, it was the creation of the Raines Law—a statewide effort intended to control liquor—that was exacerbating the liquor problem at Coney Island and elsewhere. The Raines Law prohibited the sale of alcohol on Sundays with few exceptions. Other requirements included that a meal be sold with every alcohol purchase, which most establishments easily circumvented. Many saloons, bars, and concert halls tried to meet the Raines Law threshold, so they could sell alcohol, by offering at least ten rooms with beds. The Raines Law unintentionally gave rise to many brothels at Coney Island.
The transformation had both moral and corporate components. Whereas Steeplechase echoed more closely traditional patterns of leisure and looked very different from the Bowery, it was derived of capitalist entrepreneurship. Like Sea Lion Park, it was carefully conceived to be palatable for the middle class. The corporate component was always the driving force and consumerism was always the goal. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, usually a Coney Island critic, commended this capitalist spirit with the following:

> Whether the police act or not, there is another agency which is working steadily and persistently for the sloughing off of the worst features of Coney Island as it existed in the McKane days, whose good work is not commonly recognized. That is the money making spirit. People are investing more money every year in the music halls, hotels and dancing pavilions down there. They build not only larger, but much more substantial and costly structures for the entertainment of crowds.\(^{12}\)

These words are evidence of a growing sense of change at Coney Island. In 1902, the purest expression of change was the enclosed amusement parks. Coney’s new-found eminence at the turn of the century was born of capitalist entrepreneurship, twisted by the growing desires for consumption, and nurtured by visitors who learned there, perhaps for the first time, how to have fun. Twenty-two million visitors came to Coney Island the summer of 1902—a major signal of change.\(^{13}\) Leisure consumption and consumerism were on the rise. The enclosed parks were challenging how the middle class viewed work and leisure. They were changing Coney’s landscape, its patrons, and its purpose. Vice did not dissolve but was overshadowed with beauty, civility, and order. After years of disrepute, Coney Island was reversing its reputation as Sodom by the Sea, and

\(^{12}\) “Meddling with Coney Island,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 23 July 1901.

\(^{13}\) “A New Coney Island,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 23, 1902.
becoming what Michael Immerso calls America’s “laboratory of the nascent amusement industry.” To understand how amusement consumption trumped the influence of reformers, it is necessary to distill further the dynamics of the changes happening there and who was driving them.

New Century, New Possibilities

In 1901, George Tilyou traveled to Buffalo, New York, for the Pan-American Exposition. He was Coney’s “most successful amusement entrepreneur,” a born and bred Coney Island businessman. Tilyou understood that novelty was central to his success. In Buffalo, he was on the hunt for new attractions for Steeplechase Park. Not just any attraction would do: he needed a particular caliber of attraction to help establish integrity among middle class patrons.

While in Buffalo, George Tilyou met amusement proprietors Fred Thompson and Elmer “Skip” Dundy. The two men created mechanized rides for a living; they were visionaries, mechanics, showmen, and salesmen combined. They showcased their creations at World’s Fairs and at exhibitions across the country. At the Pan American Exhibition, their “Trip to the Moon” was a huge hit. It simulated a lunar landing on a moon “full of green cheese, brilliant fountains, and dancing maids.”

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14 Immerso, People’s Playground, 10.
15 Register, Kid of Coney, 88.
16 As Register describes, Thompson and Tilyou had begun as rivals in the amusement business, consolidating their business of creating and selling amusements (Kid of Coney, 87).
Dundy had created a brilliant combination of science and fantasy that suited middle class tastes well.

Figure 10. Original postcard from Luna Park’s “Trip to the Moon.” Courtesy of The Brooklyn Historical Society.

Tilyou liked the ride and encouraged the amusement entrepreneurs to bring it to Steeplechase Park. Thompson and Dundy were familiar with Coney Island, and certainly Tilyou’s own reputation preceded him, but they were not immediately convinced.

The significance of this encounter should not be understated. These three men had a common motive that distinguished them from other amusement entrepreneurs: they sought middle class patrons and desired the multitude. Their interest in the middle class was understandable; it was this class of citizens that had more money and time to spend.
Thompson and Dundy had built their business around harnessing mechanical devices for the purpose of entertainment. Marketing those devices at World’s Fairs and Expositions was their way of catering to middle class sophistication and tastes. They feared relocating to a place that “bore little resemblance to the mass markets of affluent middle-class consumers at world’s fairs,” the crowds they knew so well.\(^{18}\)

What won them over? It is impossible to know, exactly. Perhaps gambling on a growing middle class patronage at Coney Island, Tilyou promised Thompson and Dundy great profits. There would be a contract with favorable terms. There would be large summer crowds and ample space to create and test new attractions. Of course, there was also the beautiful ocean. In January of 1902, Thompson and Dundy accepted Tilyou’s terms and relocated their “Trip to the Moon” and several other mechanized rides to Coney Island.

More than just a contract, there was something intangible that bound these three men together. They were amusement pioneers: creative, passionate, and committed to the burgeoning business of mass consumerism. They each had faith in Coney Island as a place where this mass consumer culture could blossom and expand. Like reformers, they too were committed to changing the place. They also knew what they were up against.

As Woody Register describes, the “great merchants and the theatrical businessmen of the era well understood that they had to overthrow the authority of deeply rooted ethical and religious traditions and proscriptions that encouraged work and self-denial and fostered a

\(^{18}\) Register, _Kid of Coney_, 88.
suspicion of material luxury and secular pleasures.”19 Within the larger societal tensions—industrialization, rapid urbanization, immigration—the three men saw a need for leisure and set out to supply that demand. Their mechanized amusements reflected the centrality of consumerism within these larger societal tensions. Perhaps not surprisingly, it was these men that continued to drive Coney’s momentum forward in the twentieth century.

**New Ventures**

By the end of the 1902 summer season, Thompson and Dundy were unsatisfied with profits made at Steeplechase. They decided to leave Tilyou, taking their “Trip to the Moon” and other amusements with them. Something about Coney Island must have impressed them, however, because they did not go far. They found a financial backer and leased the former site of Sea Lion Park, claiming a new twenty-two acre space.20 Their first purchase was a herd of elephants, from eastern Africa and India, which they used to drag their unwieldy attractions to the old Sea Lion Park site.21 It was a fitting first step towards their new park: a highly theatrical solution to a practical problem. Elephants dragged their enormous innovations across Coney Island, creating a spectacle that symbolized what was to come. There, at the birthplace of the enclosed amusement park,

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19 Ibid., 12.

20 It is not known who their financial backer was, but historian Woody Register suggests that it was John “Bet-A-Million” Gates, who later helped Thompson finance the creation of the Hippodrome (Kid of Coney, 94).

21 Denson, Lost and Found, 36.
with trained elephants for the heavy lifting, Thompson and Dundy began construction on their million-dollar investment: Luna Park.

Thompson and Dundy were resolute in their effort to attract “the new and growing employee class of white-collar clerks, salesmen, and salaried managers,” to their new amusement park. Yet, rumors of excessive construction costs turned many heads. Thompson was reassuring:

Our plans may seem venturesome and ambitious but they have been carefully conceived and matured, and, make or break, they will be carried out to the letter. We have unbounded faith in the future of Coney Island and are risking a fortune in this enterprise.

Thompson’s words reflect the hope he and Dundy had for Coney’s future. The sheer enormity and expense of the Park would change the face of Coney Island, luring new patrons and bringing new investment, he hoped. Luna Park would be a revival of a dilapidated space, an act of physical transformation and redemption. The Brooklyn Daily Eagle glorified the two men for their willingness to lead Coney’s “great transformation.” The newspapers heralded it as end of the “old Coney Island” and the coming of a “new

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22 Register, Kid of Coney, 95.

23 “A New Coney Island,” Brooklyn Daily Eagle, November 2, 1902.
Coney Island.” Indeed, the sheer volume of attention given to Luna Park in anticipation of its opening corroborates the significance of the changes occurring there. 

However, Thompson and Dundy’s large financial risk backed a vision of transformation that was very different from that of reformers. Charity or moral reform were not their goals. Thompson’s own notion of progress was staked on the people’s desire for amusements that were “quicker and steeper and more joyously terrifying all the time.” It was out of this commitment to leisure and consumption that Luna Park was born.

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24 “Splendid Midway Chief Feature of the New Coney Island,” Brooklyn Daily Eagle, November 23, 1902. As the article describes, “In the near future, old ‘Coney’ is destined to be not only a resort for the masses, but a grand national pleasure park. In order that the surroundings may be in consonance with the Commissioner’s scheme for beautifying the place, the ugly old buildings that mar the picture must go, and in their places must rise structures that will be a delight to the eye.”

25 For more examples, see Snyder-Grenier, 194; and “Luna Park Opening Night,” The New York Times, May 17, 1903.

Electricity and Spectacle: Advertising Luna Park

During Luna’s construction period, a series of tragedies transpired. Thompson and Dundy’s most famous circus elephant Topsy killed three staff during the park’s construction. The third death occurred after a worker fed a lit cigarette up her trunk, but Thompson and Dundy knew they had to put her down. They tried poisoned carrots but Topsy survived. The showmen then contemplated how to make money off her death. As the story goes, they spoke with a number of people including Thomas Edison. The famous American inventor and scientist suggested an electrocution and volunteered to assist. He had patented “direct current,” but would use “alternating current”—the patent
of his rivals Nicola Tesla and George Westinghouse—to kill Topsy. It would be a highly publicized experiment in the “battle of the currents” to illustrate the dangers of alternating current and elevate Edison’s own patented version of electricity.\textsuperscript{27}

On January 4, 1903, at the future site of Luna Park, Edison and his assistants connected Topsy to the Park’s two large generators. An estimated fifteen-hundred persons paid to watch the elephant’s demise. Circus justice prevailed and Topsy collapsed in a pile of smoke and gray flesh moments later. Thomas Edison recorded an early motion picture capturing the electrocution, which he distributed across the country as publicity for his patented electric chair. As a result, thousands more witnessed the event. Edison’s technology served as an advertisement for Luna Park, creating its first moment of notoriety and spreading that moment far beyond Coney Island.\textsuperscript{28}

The event was brutal. Yet, nobody called it that. There was no reform outcry. Instead, the paying public was thrilled. What is most interesting is that the middle class cheered alongside the working class when Topsy collapsed that day; they were jeering crowds of a like-mind. Perhaps onlookers had been fooled into seeing what they wanted to see: a menacing killer elephant meeting just ends. Maybe they viewed the event as a sign of progress and of man’s triumph over science and nature. In fact, Edison was

\textsuperscript{27} Craig Brandon, \textit{The Electric Chair: An Unnatural American History}. (New York: MacFarland, 1999),71. As Brandon describes, earlier in 1902, several deaths had occurred in New York City when direct current power lines collapsed in a snowstorm, so Edison’s campaign to re-popularize his patented electricity was strategic and sure to draw a crowd. Her death would be symbolic of the dangers of alternating current; a publicity stunt designed to elevate Edison’s own patented version of electricity in the eyes of American consumers. They would market the electrocution and draw huge crowds. Edison hoped the even would defame Nikola Tesla and George Westinghouse’s patented current for good.

\textsuperscript{28} Denson, \textit{Lost and Found}, 23.
building his electricity business on equating these notions of science and progress. Since 1902, The Edison Company had placed advertisements in the local paper with the catchy phrase, “Be Progressive!” The advertisements played to the popular notion:

Progression means Electricity. Advertising means success. Progress and succeed by obtaining an electric advertising sign free of cost.\(^{29}\)

Electricity was exciting and new, yet, there was something decidedly uncivil and even barbaric about its application in Topsy’s death. The application of electricity that day not only created a spectacle but wet a cultural appetite for bizarre and fantastic displays. Edison, Thompson, and Dundy awakened that dark, sadistic side of the human psyche—the voyeuristic side that desires the shocking and painful. This experiment in human nature yielded an interesting result: cultural power. Electricity took its seat in the pantheon of wonders at Coney Island. As characterized by one historian, the event also marked the beginning of a “ceaseless search for technological novelty and gross spectacle that would characterize many twentieth-century leisure trends.”\(^{30}\) Within this broad context of electricity and mechanized amusements, Coney Island was now an epicenter. The stakes were raised. Luna Park’s opening could not come soon enough.

**Fantastic Possibilities: The Triumph of the Enclosed Amusement Park**

On the night of May 16, 1903 an estimated forty-five thousand men, women, and children lined Surf Avenue.\(^{31}\) It was Luna Park’s opening night. There was tremendous

\(^{29}\) *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 23, 1902.

\(^{30}\) Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 270.

anticipation, describes Register: “Thompson and Dundy orchestrated the premiere with military precision, booming in throughout the metropolitan area with exuberant posters and press releases.”\textsuperscript{32} Beneath Luna’s massive arched entrance, the people waited anxiously for the moment when Luna’s gates would open, revealing the amusements Fred Thompson and Skip Dundy had assembled for them inside. What to try first? What to buy? They stared at Luna’s gates, adorned with five giant Roman chariots and covered in thousands of electric lights. It evoked ancient grandeur as well as the best of modern technology. When the gates opened at precisely eight o’clock, jaws dropped. One reporter watched as men and women “rubbed their eyes, and stood in wonder and pinched themselves.”\textsuperscript{33} As they entered Luna’s realm, thousands gazed upward at hundreds of towers, domes, and minarets, each decked in thousands of lights.\textsuperscript{34} They walked Luna’s Court of Honor towards a dark and shining lagoon. At the center of the lagoon stood a 200-foot tower covered in lights, the magnificent centerpiece of the park. There were towers, palaces, canals, trellises, terraces, bridges, colonnades, and an entire Venetian city—all adorned in electric lights. Visitors beheld acres of gardens, theatres, pavilions, villages, boats, mountains, and exhibit halls.

It was not just spectacle: every inch of the Park was \textit{alive}. Elephants roamed freely, draped in bright fabrics. There were hundreds of circus performers, acrobats, equestrians, actors, and “exotics”—people representative of cultures from all over the

\textsuperscript{32} Register, \textit{Kid of Coney}, 92.

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Brooklyn Daily Eagle}, May 17, 1903; Snyder-Grenier, \textit{Brooklyn!}, 190.

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Immerso}, \textit{People’s Playground}, 60.
world. Thompson and Dundy had assembled them all for the constant entertainment of crowds. It was this human element that really drew spectators in.

The park was in motion. Mechanical rides were spinning, toddling, and bouncing; each adorned with electric lights. The physical effects of these rides were spectacular: they shook, jolted, spun, and bumped patrons in new ways. A Shoot-the-Chutes plunged “boatloads of screaming humanity” into a majestic lagoon below. The entire assemblage was breathtaking—other worldly, even.

It is this other-worldliness that made Luna Park remarkable, not only in design and visual appeal, but in purpose. Thompson and Dundy had evolved the purpose of the park from the pastoral to the mechanized to the exorbitant. The result hardly resembled Steeplechase Park—it was much more lavish, ornate, and detailed. Yet, the audience looked the same. The New York Times called Luna Park the “most ambitious attempt at amusement catering in the history of Coney Island.” This corroborates a sense that Luna Park was built for a particular audience. Others confirm these intentions. As Register describes, “Thompson was not interested in catering to recent immigrants…they already went to Coney Island when they could.” Rather, he sought middle class clerks and managers, those “who staffed or supervised the offices of New York’s government, legal, financial, retail, and service economy.” These men, Register contends, were the

35 Denson, Lost and Found, 36.

36 As Koolhaas asserts, Thompson used architecture as the “definitive sign of otherworldliness, the mark of another condition,” (Delirious New York, 41).

“critical foundation of the city’s new commercial amusement economy.” At Luna Park, they found “everything was for sale.” Admission cost only ten cents.

What had Thompson and Dundy created that appealed to this middle class? What did Luna offer that would make them want to buy more? To begin with, Luna Park offered visitors something radically different from reality. Its overwhelming beauty and magnificence was seductive. This seduction was accomplished with Luna’s most prominent feature, its architecture.

*Tricks of the Amusement Trade: Architecture*

It is no surprise that Luna Park reflects a clear architectural plan; Fred Thompson was a former architectural draftsman and student. As he promised before Luna opened, his plans were “carefully conceived and matured.” He is credited for Luna’s design and there is evidence that Thompson sought both architectural uniformity and the elimination of classical architecture in planning it. These were his first priorities. He explained:

> You see, I have built Luna Park on a definitive architectural plan. As it is a place of amusement, I have eliminated all classical conventional forms from its structure, and taken a sort of fee Renaissance and Oriental type for my model, using spires and minarets wherever I could, in order to get the restive, joyous effect to be derived always from the graceful lines given in this style of architecture.

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38 Register, *Kid of Coney*, 92, 95.

39 Ibid.

40 Immerso, *People’s Playground*, 64.


There were few right angles. Luna’s spires and minarets gave it uniformity and artistry. As Thompson himself confirmed, “It is marvelous what you can do in the way of arousing human emotions by the use that you make, architecturally, of simple lines! Luna Park is built on that theory, and the result has proved the theory’s truth.” The buildings were not neatly aligned or arranged, but rather scattered in every direction and at every height. Luna was not only enchanting but also disorienting. All of it done, Thompson said, “in keeping with the spirit of carnival.” He wanted it to be active, mobile, free, graceful, and attractive.” This attractiveness helped capture the imagination and hearts of middle class visitors, who equated beauty with refinement and civility.

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45 Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 34-36. As Kasson describes, the amusement entrepreneurs “sensed the emergence of a large heterogeneous audience who simultaneously desired the assurance of ‘wholesome’ entertainment and hungered for forms and themes that satisfied their taste for sensory appeal and emotional release.”
Other aspects of Luna Park helped capture the middle class imagination. In particular, Thompson and Dundy emphasized education in their amusements.⁴⁶ There were historical recreations like “The War of Worlds,” a miniature battle simulation of the world’s greatest navies.⁴⁷ There were Irish, Hindu, German, and Eskimo villages. Thompson bragged to the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* that he would bring the original log cabins of Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis for display.⁴⁸ Luna boasted many

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⁴⁶ Snyder-Grenier, *Brooklyn!,* 190.
⁴⁸ “A New Coney Island,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle,* November 2, 1902.
simulations of real places complete with buildings, markets, and foreign people, all designed to satisfy “a middle class desire for scientific and historical information.”\(^49\)

Science was central to Luna’s success in other ways. Fred Thompson believed that “electricity is the showman’s best friend” and at Coney Island he and Skip Dundy turned the practical application of electricity into a theatrical stunt.\(^50\) Their use of electric light at Luna Park was in itself a novelty—almost nobody had electricity in their homes in 1903.\(^51\) Electricity served a dual purpose there: function and spectacle. They knew that a well-lit park was a vastly more welcoming space—safe and respectable. With this, Thompson and Dundy reclaimed the night in the name of respectable fun, purchasing over two-hundred thousand light bulbs for Luna Park. Improving a sense of security at night, the implementation of electricity at Luna increased the profit-making hours of the day.

The other purpose, spectacle, was even more significant to Luna’s success. At night, the Park was transformed by light. Rather than use an adequate amount of lighting, the two showmen showered Luna with electric light bulbs. The use of the incandescent light symbolized the application of technology for aesthetic and visual purposes. Light

\(^49\) As Snyder-Grenier describes, “a century later they seem exploitative and decidedly racist, ‘Exhibits’ showing how cultures and peoples fit into a racial hierarchy, with non-whites as the most ‘savage’ or ‘simple,’ had little to do with science and much more to do with reinforcing biased views,” (Brooklyn!, 191).

\(^50\) At the turn of the century, few households had electricity but electricity was popular at World’s Fairs and exhibitions, a growing part of the leisure “birthright,” as Register calls it. “Between 1890 and 1910 the use of electrical lighting in public spaces for community or national celebrations grew in both degree and extravagance with the invention and manufacture of comparatively inexpensive incandescent lamps, plus further advances in developing powerful concentrated sources of light,” (Kid of Coney, 133).

\(^51\) Snyder-Grenier, Brooklyn!, 190.
was used to showcase Luna’s unusual architecture, its towers and spires puncturing the night sky. Perhaps the Russian author Maxim Gorky captures the spectacle best:

With the advent of night a fantastic city all of fire suddenly rises from the ocean into the sky. Thousands of ruddy sparks glimmer in the darkness, lining in fine, sensitive outline on the black background of the sky, shapely towers of miraculous castles, palaces and temples...Fabulous beyond conceiving, ineffably beautiful, is this fiery scintillation. It burns but does not consume. Its palpitations are scare visible. In the wilderness of sky and ocean rises the magic picture of a flaming city.52

There is surrender in these words. The place was dreamlike, exotic, and warm. 53

Advertisements for Luna Park capitalized on its fiery spectacle, calling it “Electric City by the Sea” and the “Electric Eden.”54 *The Times* warned it was a “realm of fairy romance in colored light, so beautiful that the rest of Coney Island will have to clean up and dress up, if it is to do business.”55 Thompson and Dundy made Luna Park “playfully and wastefully extravagant” in a way that Tilyou had not dared.56

**Disaster as Spectacle**

Thompson and Dundy had heightened the demand for the wastefully extravagant. Excess was becoming a popular ingredient of the emerging amusement culture. At Luna Park, fire epitomized this waste. One of the most famous spectacles was called “Fire and

52 “Gorky Writes of Coney Isle,” *Baltimore Sun*, August 10, 1907.

53 Many have referred to Luna Park’s “dreamlike” qualities, including Michael Immerso and John Kasson. As Kasson suggests, the lighting scheme also help them live out their *dreams* at Luna Park, pushing the limits of night time leisure, giving new meaning to interactions between strangers—particularly between men and women. (*Amusing the Million*, 63-69).

54 Register, *Kid of Coney*, 131-135.


56 Register, *Kid of Coney*, 131.
Flames,” an attraction designed to show, at close range, the drama and danger of fighting large fires in an urban setting. The terrifying spectacle consisted of sixty uniformed firemen, trained by the New York Fire Department, who used every known resource—engines, hoses, pumps, extension ladders, trucks—to fight a fire spreading over a five story apartment building. With each show, the building “would gradually fall to bits every day in a glare of red fire and polytechnic smoke.”57 In total, Fire and Flames employed 1,000 people, serving to dramatize the rescue work, its impediments, and the casualties of the daily blaze. The horses, engines, and water were all real. Certainly, it was wasteful and extravagant, but also fantastic to watch.

Watching the flames spread at close range and the life-like drama that ensued must have harrowed many minds among the exhibit’s estimated 3,000 daily spectators.58 Fire was a very real threat to New Yorkers, many of whom lived in poorly designed, crowded tenements or apartment buildings that offered little ventilation, no warning system, and no easy escape route.59 At Fire and Flames patrons paid to face this horrible fear, watching actors live their worst nightmares. The exhibition was “designed to be reassuring” to the audience, many of whom lived in such buildings.60 It was strange and


58 Fire was nature’s great equalizer, destroying everything in its path, blind to wealth or power and responsive only to water, an element equally fundamental but scarce. The homes and businesses of middle-class citizens were threatened equally by fire as those living in tenements. For years, stories of city fires had enlivened the newspapers on an almost daily basis. Fire was both a fundamental element of the New York’s urban industrial society and a symbol of man’s inability to control or tame nature.

59 Snyder-Grenier, Brooklyn!, 191.

60 Denson, Lost and Found, 38.
scary, but it also had a “safe, happy ending,” which was critical to its popularity.\textsuperscript{61} This suggests it offered catharsis to onlookers, helping them transcend their fears by bearing witness to them in a safe, theatrical setting.\textsuperscript{62}

![Copy of original drawing of Luna’s “Fire and Flames.” Courtesy of The Brooklyn Historical Society.](image)

Fire and Flames reveals the centrality of novelty in Coney’s success. It also shows that novelty itself had evolved. Novelty was Coney’s bailiwick since the beginning, but this particular brand was divorced from immorality or impropriety. Fire and Flames did not offend moral sensibilities. It was just a \textit{show}. It was even

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{61} Snyder-Grenier, \textit{Brooklyn!}, 191.
\item \textsuperscript{62} Kasson, \textit{Amusing the Million}, 70-72. Kasson points to the safety of these spectacles: “In its very horror, disaster conferred a kind of transcendent meaning to its victims’ lives, transforming commonplace routine into the extraordinary. Sensationalized re-creations of such disasters gave a vicarious sense of this transcendence to their audience—with of course the inestimable advantage of allowing them to emerge from the performance unharmed.”
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educational—showing how large fires are fought. Yet, like Topsy’s execution, the spectacle was arguably perverse and sadistic. However, the underlying message was of salvation: punishing a murderer, fighting fires that threaten innocent human life, saving humanity from tragic death. Like the execution of the elephant, the amusement entrepreneurs gave onlookers what they wanted to see. Novelty had matured to reflect middle class values. Civilized parks had progressed toward mechanical thrills which gave way to extravagant simulations.

**Luna’s Impact**

With this monumental leisure site, Thompson and Dundy aligned the forces of theatricality in a single setting. Luna’s lavishness was undeniable. Its size, its beauty, its carnivalesque purpose, and its complexity were inherently gluttonous. Photographic evidence certainly underscores this.

This excess defied traditional middle class values of thrift, yet the middle class liked it. They came in throngs. Many came as often as possible. It was the subject that every newspaper was dispatched to cover. *Munsey’s Magazine* claimed, “The character of the crowds showed great change. The man who formerly came with a gang of fellows from his office or shop to enjoy a relapse into rowdymism now brought his womenfolk and was decent.”

What Thompson and Dundy did at Luna Park had both a personal and corporate component. At a corporate level, there was money and notoriety to be had. Everything

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was designed to induce spending. It was an expensive experiment in amusement consumerism. However, it would be too much to attribute it all to corporate motives. At a personal level, Thompson and Dundy wanted to entertain and even transform people. As Register describes, they wanted their park to be “built by and for a new kind of man, one who would accept no less than all the fun to which he was entitled.”

This entitlement is visible in Luna Park’s two very different faces. Its dominant face was that of enchantment and beauty; light-hearted amusements, fantastic scenery, laughter and happiness. It was a face of light and warmth. The other face was more sinister—dark, brutal, even sadistic. It jeered at Topsy’s death and was exemplified in the daily ritual of Fire and Flames. At Luna Park, these forces coexisted in a single setting. Both were rooted in commercialism and consumerism and equally powerful in the seduction of patrons.

Luna’s popularity among middle class patrons is evidence of evolving tastes and attitudes towards leisure consumerism. This evolution began with seduction. Thompson and Dundy were agents of this seduction, deploying every known power to target and lure patrons to their park. The beauty and wonder of their creation made even the wary middle class susceptible to its charms. People went there looking for transformation—to transcend their everyday lives and be part of something bigger than themselves.

At Luna, leisure could simulate these outcomes. It tempted their senses and they surrendered to the pleasurable experiences it offered. Seduction was nurtured by the

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64 Register, *Kid of Coney*, 133.
positive experiences visitors had there. Luna was something seen, felt, and remembered; it was a place with transformative qualities. Architecture or technology alone could not have accomplished this. Luna touched something more cerebral and emotional. These sensations fueled pleasure which gave way to more consumption. Visitors were converted to consumers.

It was all rooted in Thompson and Dundy’s desire to transform the individual—from skeptics to enthusiasts; from frugal to wasteful. The inputs were simulated and reproducible experiences but it felt more unique personal. In aggregate, these transformations created a phenomenon. And so it was: a true amusement wonder the likes of which the world had never before seen. The phenomenon Luna created looked very different from the transformation reformers imagined for Coney Island. Traditional notions of discipline and control had progressed toward unbridled leisure. All attempts to curtail leisure at Coney Island end with Luna Park.
CHAPTER 4
LEISURE MEETS NEW LIMITS

Progressive Reform on the Rise

While their impact was narrow, it would be incorrect to cast reformers as failures. Their struggle is also relevant to this inquiry. An examination of primary sources during the summer Luna Park opened reveals heightened activity among reformers. Consumerism was on the rise, but so was reform sentiment. Leaders of the movement were emerging. The progressive cause was gaining national standing. Locally, some progressives now spoke of a crusade far more expansive than vice. One such crusader came to Coney in July of 1903. Called “Mother Jones,” she was well-known nationally as a progressive leader and child labor activist. She brought an “army” of young orphans with her that day. Coney Island was a final stop on their trip to meet President Roosevelt in Oyster Bay, New York.

Their visit was highly anticipated at Coney Island. Bostock’s Animal Circus advertised Mother Jones as a coming attraction, pictured behind the bars of an animal cage. Upon her arrival, she refused to enter the cage they had set up for her, but allowed the circus animals to remain on stage with her. From a platform at the center, she delivered a dramatic speech, surrounded by “snapping, snarling leopards.”1 She spoke of poverty:

I will tell the President that I saw men in Madison Square last night sleeping on the benches, and that the country can have no greatness while one

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unfortunate lies out at night without a bed to sleep on. I will tell him that the prosperity he boasts of is the prosperity of the rich wrung from the poor.

Her words strike a chord: they ring with patriotism and of the progressive voice. She portrays the struggle that leaves poor Americans behind. It was the same message she would deliver to President Roosevelt himself. However, what is most interesting is the context of her address. Jones had literally been put on display at Coney Island. As The Times describes, she was “the central attraction” of the Bowery that day, her speech “constantly interrupted by the discourteous beasts.”2 The event is symbolic of the struggle between the serious-minded reform cause and leisure. Coney’s circus animals—a personification of wild amusement—impinged upon her cause.

Not surprisingly, the Bowery proved a raucous setting for such a somber speech. Like other progressive voices before, her seriousness had no place at Coney Island. It was a place for pleasure and amusement. Its visitors were no strangers to poverty, but they went there to forget it. The amusement parks satisfied “their hunger for the gorgeousness of foreign realms, their eagerness to taste splendors beyond their experience.”3 Even Jones’ army of orphans understood this significance on some level. They said “they would be willing never to go back to the mills if they could only live with the show and see the sights of Coney Island.”4

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3 Kasson, Amusing the Million, 69-70.

That she spoke in the Bowery was not a coincidence. Its low-brow amusements were still detested by reformers. The Bowery continued to offer patrons what Steeplechase and Luna Park did not: “dozens of games of skill, shooting galleries with indecent animal figures, hole-in-the-wall joints with slot machines, and darkened dance and music halls where extravagant drinking was commonplace.”\(^5\) It looked as it always had—a hub of commercialization, now more popular than ever. This popularity disturbed the progressive mind because it exposed “precisely how malleable human beings were” and the power of leisure to impact human behavior.\(^6\)

In an effort to change these patterns and behavior, reformers continued their cleansing and anti-vice efforts. Suspicious of illegal activity in the Bowery, they clamored for police raids. In August of 1903, Coney Island’s police attempted to appease them. Police forces descended on four well-known brothels. Thirty-five police officers participated in the raids and quickly arrested fifty persons. As the suspects were carted to jail, an estimated 1,000 people pursued the police wagons in mob fashion:

> The respectable element on the Island is delighted with this action of Capt. Dooley and expressed themselves as hoping that they would keep up the crusade until the evil conditions now blighting so many parts of the resort should be blotted out.\(^7\)

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\(^5\) Sterngass, *First Resorts*, 258.


\(^7\) “Coney Island Raid Resented by a Mob,” *The New York Times*, August 9, 1903.
The Police bragged to the newspapers, calling it the “greatest clean-up on a single night in Coney Island history.” It was a big event, but its impact was temporary. The establishments soon re-opened. What is most interesting about the raids is that, like most of Coney Island’s pageantry, the events reflect a desire to please the middle class.

**New Limits: The Forces of Nature**

The most critical change to ever take place in the Bowery happened that winter. On November 1\textsuperscript{st}, 1903, a fire broke out in a Bowery apartment. Its cause was an act of arson, started by a jealous lover. The flames spread quickly across the Bowery’s ramshackle buildings and could not be controlled. Firefighters were “crippled by a lack of water” and stood “helpless for the first half hour, watching the frame buildings crumble into glowing masses of debris.” As the Battalion Chief declared, “We’ll have to let her burn; there’s nothing else for it.” Everyone prepared for a losing battle. They dispatched messages of desperation across Brooklyn, begging for more water pressure and backup forces. In a fantastic display, the flames quickly devoured several blocks, consuming apartments, businesses, restaurants, and houses.

An estimated 70,000 witnesses watched the blaze mid-day from the streets. Many treated the events like any other Coney Island show. As Edo McCullough describes,

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\[8\] Ibid.


\[10\] “Coney Island Swept by Fire,” *The New York Times*, November 2, 1903. As The Times described, “From Gravesend, Bensonhurst, Bath Beach, and even from so far away as Flatbush came the engines and trucks, laden with firemen. Their hoarse whistles bellowing in unison with the excited cries of the multitude…In vain the firemen sought for water. The hydrants still dripped mockingly. The men, ready for work though they were, had to watch the fire in helpless impatience.”
saloonkeepers offered free drinks to the firemen, and women and men with bottles of liquor in hand were everywhere “dealing out drinks to whoever wanted them.” Even in times of crisis, Coney’s revelry was never-ending. The Times reported:

An interesting feature of the blaze was the reluctance with which the fakirs and the Sunday afternoon merrymakers gave up their respective occupations. Dancing continued in several of the large dancing pavilions, while the flames were already beginning to eat at the building…. 11

The words describe a trance-like reluctance to quit. Dancing in the dance halls “continued as though nothing were happening.” It is a chronicle of Coney’s powerful seductive nature. 12

Something major was happening. When firefighters finally contained the blaze, it had leveled the Bowery completely. They had deliberately sacrificed the Bowery area to save the nearby parks. The Times reported that the “most disreputable of Coney’s old haunts” were destroyed: numerous dance halls, hotels, and saloons. Coney’s oldest and most detested section of town was gone in a matter of hours. It had been a hub throughout all of Coney’s development since the early 1880s. Now, its remnants looked like a battlefield: the mangled earth, the smoke-laden air, blocks of wreckage and waste. Five hundred people had lost their homes and were left wandering the streets. The property losses totaled $1,200,000. 13 The Bowery was gone and would not be rebuilt.

11 McCullough, Good Old Coney, 202.
12 McCullough, Good Old Coney, 202.
13 See “Coney Island Swept by Fire,” The New York Times, November 2, 1903. Strong western winds also kept the flames from traveling westward away from the parks, and they sustained only minor damage. As Immerso describes, Fred Thompson, the former architectural draftsman, had always feared fire and had created his own fire department and pumping station at Luna Park. Luna’s own fire department
All efforts to cleanse it had that led to this day. It was a windfall for reformers in the fight against vice, a swift stroke of luck in their twenty-year battle. The events surprised everyone. Somewhere in New York, trumpets and drums sounded when the shocking news was heard.

Nature accomplished what reformers could not, a complete cleansing of the Bowery. Leisure lived on, however. Next to the ruins, against the backdrop of the ocean, stood Steeplechase and Luna Park, singed but proud. Like domineering guards, their large locked gates protected the amusements inside. The parks were Coney’s only

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**Figure 14.** Copy of original photo of the Bowery after the fire. Courtesy of The Brooklyn Historical Society.

was in large part responsible for defending the Park from ensuing flames, an unintended benefit of Fire and Flames’ daily theatrical routine. Only one property owner reportedly had insurance coverage.
remaining stronghold of fun, symbolizing the day’s triumph. It was visible evidence of the enclosed parks’ preeminence over the chaos of the Bowery.

This was a key moment. The reign of the enclosed amusement park in American leisure had been consolidated. Coney’s transition to commercialized excess was complete. Juxtaposed against the Bowery ruins, the parks touted the *permanence* of the newest amusement form.

However, the parks’ survival displayed merely an illusion of physical permanence. Tilyou, Thompson, and Dundy had spent millions creating enchanting worlds out of thin wood, plaster, and glue. Theirs was an extraordinary vision executed with the cheapest of materials. Coney’s harsh winter storms endangered even the most durable structures, so entrepreneurs learned quickly the value of building for the single season. Their business model demanded it. As McCullough describes, they excluded iron, brick, and stone from their construction. Their parks had a few durable structures surrounded by thousands of expendable ones.\(^{14}\) What is clear, however, is that the materials did not matter. Middle class visitors saw beauty, grace, and civility when they looked at what Tilyou, Thompson, and Dundy had assembled. Their crowning achievement was not the permanence of the physical parks, but the enduring nature of the phenomenon they created there.

\(^{14}\) McCullough, *Good Old Coney*, 203.
The New Coney Island

The following summer in 1904, there was much buzz about Coney Island. Everywhere the newspapers were referring to “The New Coney Island.” As The Times described Coney’s opening day, “Coney Island is regenerated, and almost every trace of the Old Coney has been wiped out.” It was the message middle class New Yorkers had been waiting for, a major signal of respectability made possible only through the violent destruction of “the old Coney Island.” To commemorate the rebirth of Coney, The Times ran the headline, “A New Coney Island Rises from the Ashes of the Old.” The summer season promised to be Tilyou and Thompson’s most profitable one yet, and in turn, they promised patrons every fun device known to man. New Yorkers read the menu of Coney’s coming attractions with renewed interest and excitement. A week before opening day, The Times titillated their interests:

The New Coney Island, risen this Spring from the ashes of a fire last Winter that swept away most that was objectionable in the ‘old Coney,’ is an all-Summer treat.

The newspapers confirmed rumors that the Bowery was gone, intriguing visitors to visit the ruins and newest attractions. If ever there was an appeal to middle class consumerism, this was it.

Thompson and Dundy had added sixteen acres to their Park, setting aside several for an enormous reproduction of the “glittering Dunbar of Delhi.” They built an enormous upper-deck which allowed for 70,000 additional visitors at a time. As a

practical addition, the new “promenade on stilts for the public” not only increased the Park’s capacity but provided shelter from sun and rain.\textsuperscript{17} Aesthetically, it increased Luna’s visual grandeur, like adding a layer to an already ornate cake. Amid Luna’s ever-growing maze of spires and minarets, the upper deck was embellished with flowers and gardens. It offered the perfect position to watch the sea of people below unobtrusively.\textsuperscript{18} This improved design appealed to middle class desires to observe others, offering a certain anonymity among the crowds.

Figure 15. Luna Park in 1905. Courtesy of The Brooklyn Historical Society.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{18} Sterngass, \textit{First Resorts}, 100. Jon Sterngass describes, people watching was “so blatantly a part of the public resort experience.”
Newspapers touted Coney’s new season. The inaugural issue of Luna Park’s own daily newspaper “The Evening Star” included an interview with Coney’s Police Commissioner who deemed Coney “clean, moral, and magnificent.”\textsuperscript{19} It was a description intended to delight the middle class mind. \textit{The Times} described the components of this magnificence at Luna Park:

> With the new order of things came herds of elephants, genuine Nautch girls, Indian rajahs, snake charmers, Eskimos, Indians, Japs, Russians, Chinamen, acrobats, jugglers, performing camels, pugilistic horses, and bears that could ride a horse.\textsuperscript{20}

There was added beauty and stimulation to be found at Luna Park making it even more wonderful than the summer before. This is critical evidence of what Register calls “new expectations” in leisure that “gradually supplanted genteel Victorian assumptions that respectable recreation would elevate the spirit, instruct the mind, and purify the body.”\textsuperscript{21} Luna Park promised physical thrills and an educational component, but traditional standards had been drastically changed.

\textbf{Dreamland: Corporate Fantasy at Coney Island}

That summer, Luna Park had company in the pantheon of wonders at Coney Island. Seeing the success of Luna’s inaugural year, a group of New York investors and politicians, led by real estate speculator and former state Senator William “Billy”

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  \item \textsuperscript{19} “New Coney Dazzles Its Record Multitude,” \textit{The New York Times}, May 15, 1904.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Register, \textit{Kid of Coney}, 11.
\end{itemize}
Reynolds, invested millions in the creation of a new enclosed amusement park.\textsuperscript{22} Their park was not the creative brainchild of theatrical entrepreneurs like Luna, but a clever copy.\textsuperscript{23}

A frenzy of construction had been underway in the months following the jarring Bowery fire. The new Park, called Dreamland, occupied the seaward side of Surf Avenue, very near Luna Park. On May 14\textsuperscript{th} of 1904, Dreamland opened its gates. Inside, visitors were greeted with unsurpassed grandeur. “It cost $3.5 million and every effort was made to surpass Luna Park,” says Immerso.\textsuperscript{24} Not coincidentally, Dreamland was “crammed with attractions and entertainments lifted bodily from Luna Park.”\textsuperscript{25} For example, Dreamland’s own disaster spectacle, called “Fighting the Flames,” employed an estimated 4,000 actors, firemen, stunt men, and technicians to fight a real fire as it engulfed a hotel and an entire city block. Luna’s Fire and Flames looked boring by comparison to Dreamland’s large-scale disaster drama. Every day, the entire block was rebuilt for the next showing. It was wasteful and expensive, but patrons loved it.

Dreamland’s Shoot-the-Chutes was bigger, too. It boasted a 300-foot tall slide that carried boats of up to twenty people, dumping the screaming riders directly into the ocean. The Park was laced with one million electric light bulbs, a true excess of color.

\textsuperscript{22}Denson, \textit{Lost and Found}, 38.
\textsuperscript{23} McCullough, \textit{Good Old Coney}, 194-196; Denson, \textit{Lost and Found}, 39.
\textsuperscript{24} Immerso, \textit{People’s Playground}, 68.
\textsuperscript{25} McCullough, \textit{Good Old Coney}, 194.
and electricity.\footnote{As Lilliefors describes, the electricity bill was rumored to have cost four-thousand dollars a week, \textit{(America’s Boardwalks, 30)}.} One-tenth of these bulbs lit the Park’s centerpiece, an enormous 375-foot ornate building called the Beacon Tower. It was reminiscent of Luna’s tower but taller and built in the traditional French Renaissance style. The Tower was painted a blinding white, covered in ornate bas-reliefs, and surrounded by a large lagoon.\footnote{“A New Coney Island Rises from the Ashes of the Old,” \textit{The New York Times}, May 4, 1904.} As the tallest building at Coney Island, it offered visitors a forty-mile view. Dreamland also had five scenic railway rides to Luna’s one. There were the usual circuses, animal shows, and acrobatic displays, as well.

What Luna had, Dreamland also acquired. For example, both parks had Dr. Martin Couney’s Infant Incubator pavilions. These pavilions were open to the paying public and “billed as a scientific exhibition of the care of premature infants.”\footnote{Immerso, \textit{People’s Playground}, 68.} Inside were premature babies in glass incubators. \textit{The Times} described the strange scene: “Seven sterilized infants under glass in regulated temperatures…slept peacefully in their little white blankets.”\footnote{“Dreamland Reopens and Shows New Glories,” \textit{The New York Times}, May 20, 1906.} These infant attractions were highly profitable, a testament to the growing appetite for bizarre and even morbid attractions. Like Fire and Flames, the exhibitions usually had a happy ending, however. Many infants’ lives were saved.

**Novelty and the Consequences of Design**

For all their similarities, there were also very different theories of design behind Luna Park and Dreamland. The latter was deliberately more refined. Unlike Luna, its
architectural style was not unified, but rather had “almost every style of architecture represented in one building or another.” Nor was it whimsical. Dreamland’s buildings were all plain white with ionic columns and Beaux-Arts motifs. Its architectural elements echoed order, symmetry, and classical beauty. Everywhere refinement abounded: on the large esplanade where bands played beautiful classical music, in the enormous ballroom jutting out over the ocean, in the beautiful gardens, and at the Japanese tea pavilion. The *Brooklyn Eagle* called it a “glorious conquest of Good Taste.” The general picture is of refinement, but it was precisely this characteristic that made Dreamland somewhat boring. Maxim Gorky, who had described Luna Park so splendidly, said the following:

> The City, magic and fantastic from afar, now appears an absurd jungle of straight lines of wood, a cheap hastily constructed toyhouse for the amusement of children. Dozens of white buildings, monstrously diverse, not one with even the suggestion of beauty. They are all built of wood, and smeared over with peeling white paint, which gives them the appearance of suffering with the same skin disease. The high turrets and low colonnades extend in two dead-even lines insipidly pressing upon each other. Everything is stripped naked by the dispassionate glare…Everything round about glitters insolently and reveals its own dismal ugliness.

Luna’s wildness was deliberately excluded at Dreamland, in favor of a more classic style. Reynolds and his consortium thought middle class patrons preferred the more refined look. He borrowed many aspects of the design from Chicago’s Columbian

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Exposition of 1893 to create it.34 But it had been eleven years since the Columbian Exposition dazzled crowds. Middle class tastes had changed. Luna Park had set a new standard. Michael Immerso describes Dreamland with the following: “as a citadel of refined amusement, it was a bit out of place at Coney Island. Perhaps the sheer size of the buildings cowed the crowds that came to visit.”35

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While attractions at Dreamland were larger and more costly than the rival Luna Park, Dreamland could not eclipse Luna’s success, despite many creative and expensive
inputs. Reynolds and his manager, Samuel Gumpertz, tried incessantly to surpass Luna’s profits. Compared to Luna, Dreamland was distinctively lacking in novelty. This was a problem for Reynolds. As Register argues, “people are involuntarily attracted to originality and novelty and tire quickly of the same old fare.”

Fred Thompson knew the truth of this statement. He once declared, “The life of your average summer device is ephemeral—an hour in the scheme of days.” Samuel Gumpertz, Dreamland’s manager also understood: “The only way to make an old show go is to hang out a new sign—and that won’t work more than one time with the audience.” Creating novelty at Dreamland proved difficult. Its creators were pure businessmen, not amusement entrepreneurs. Moreover, with amusements changing almost daily, they had come into the game late. They measured Luna’s success in terms of profit only, failing to see its broader impact on leisure tastes.

Despite some deficiencies, Dreamland’s presence at Coney Island is testament to growing commercialism and consumption. The Park did offer some unique experiences and visitors certainly spent money there. However, it did so against a backdrop of two rival amusement parks. Dreamland was just the newest addition in the competition to win middle class patrons at Coney Island. What was created at Coney Island in these years might be thought of today as the franchise syndrome. It was like having a

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36 Register, Kid of Coney, 100.

37 Frederic Thompson, “Amusing People,” Metropolitan 32 (August 1910): 604; Register, Kid of Coney, 100.

McDonald’s and Burger King on opposite corners of the same street. Both Dreamland and Luna offered pre-packaged experiences, designed to induce spending. For a few years, huge crowds and the middle class appetite for leisure practically insured some financial success. Yet, Dreamland is proof of just how reproducible it all was. The products were alluring in their own ways but the purely capitalist function was now exposed when Dreamland copied so much of Luna’s attractions. Yet, it all worked because the middle class was now accustomed to paying for leisure. The parks had built a reputation of respectability that kept them coming.

Figure 17. Map of Coney Island amusement parks. Source: Charles Denson, *Coney Island Lost and Found* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2002), 27.
With the closing of the 1904 season, Dreamland and Luna Park were “locked in a spectacular competition” says Immerso. An ever-increasing array of amusements was erected as each entrepreneur worked tirelessly to surpass the other. In 1905, Dreamland staged an elaborate depiction of the book of Genesis, called “Creation,” which Reynolds brought from the St. Louis exposition of 1904. As Immerso describes, this biblical depiction, “beginning with chaos and ending up with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden…skipping happily about on the fresh grass” was met with adulation at first but soon grew tired. In 1906, Dreamland opened “The End of the World,” a Biblical depiction of the separation of the righteous and wicked at the end of time. That same year, Fred Thompson replaced the ever-popular Fighting the Flames with a massive San Francisco Earthquake spectacle.³⁹

³⁹ Immerso, *People’s Playground*, 73.
The years between 1904 and 1907 show the movement towards bigger, more elaborate, and expensive entertainment at Coney Island. Fred Thompson described change at his Luna Park with the following:

You see, this being the moon, it is always changing. For that reason, ever since the season closed last September, I have had from 500 to 1,200 men at work here transforming things for this season, and so living up to our reputation. A stationary Luna Park would be an anomaly, you know. What have we got that is new? Before the park opens next Saturday you will say pretty much everything is new—and that would be true enough in a general way.  

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There was a constant “chaos of scaffolds” in the off-hours, noted The Times. Thompson introduced “The Great Train Robbery” that summer, which included “a real locomotive and train of cars, hundreds of actors, and fifty wild mustangs. Frank James, brother of Jesse James, would lead a band of train robbers, he promised. Luna Park had a replica of the Globe Theatre and a “Mountain Torrent” boat ride, which produced a flume carrying 35,000 gallons of water a minute. These years of constant change echo the words of The Times: “Coney is always young.” This is because it had to be. Mass consumerism and commercialization demanded it.

Nature’s Limits: Fire at Steeplechase

Much was built in these years, but a lot was also destroyed. On July 28th, 1907, fire again struck Coney Island. It began with a discarded cigar in the Cave of Winds exhibit. Steeplechase Park and surrounding areas were “leveled in an eighteen hour conflagration.” At the gates of Steeplechase Park, George Tilyou posted a sign that read:

I have trouble today that I did not have yesterday. I had troubles yesterday that I do not have today. On this site will be erected shortly a bigger, better, greater, Steeplechase Park. Admission to the Burning Ruins—10 cents.

41 Ibid.
42 For accounts of the fire, see McCullough, Good Old Coney, 202; “Flames Sweep Over Coney Island,” The New York Times, May 27, 1911. As the article describes, thirty-five acres were leveled, causing an estimated $1,500,000 in damages and injuring a dozen people.
43 McCullough, Good Old Coney, 202.
As workers sifted through “interesting ashes” to salvage metal the following day, George
Tilyou made a speech: “Steeplechase will be rebuilt. I can’t tell my complete plans yet,
but you can say surely that the park will be greater, grander, more splendid than ever.” Tilyou’s words echo the pattern of incessant building and rebuilding, to feed the middle
class appetite for leisure.

As one journalist pleaded in the aftermath, “Will the owners of the property heed
the lesson? Will they be wise enough and generous enough to rebuild in a substantial and
permanent way?” Of course, the amusement entrepreneurs had not learned. They knew
fire posed a threat to everything they built, but their businesses depended on a
continuously evolving setting, not permanent structure. They had witnessed several fires
at Coney Island already and “each time, the showmen involved had waited only for the
embers to be soaked down before moving in to rebuild.” This pattern was abhorred by
some critics. It was testament to the excess and waste that Coney Island had always
represented. One correspondent had grown so tired of Coney’s shoddy fabrication he
declared:

People will be inclined to call the fire a blessing for more than one reason. Some of the worst resorts have been destroyed, and we may fairly hope they will not rise from their ashes. Property at Coney Island is valuable, and there are plenty of decent folks to make well-conducted restaurants and other places of entertainment profitable.

42 McCullough, Good Old Coney, 202.
The Steeplechase fire did not change the unwillingness of proprietors to build more costly, substantial buildings. Nor did it change the popularity of the enclosed amusement parks. As promised, Steeplechase Park was rebuilt in 1907. Tilyou built the “Pavillion of Fun” and the “Palace of Pleasure,” enormous enclosed structures that sheltered the Park’s many amusements. The Steeplechase Race Track was rebuilt to be the longest in the world. They reasoned that “the public demands a change of architecture as well as a change of shows every little while,” and while they were “heartily in favor of fire-proofing,” they were not going to spend the money to build more permanent structures.44

The stage was set for several more years of stiff competition between Luna Park, Steeplechase, and Dreamland. There were record expenditures in these years. Everything old was leveled to make room for the new. Rumors floated that Thompson and Dundy had invested so much that they defaulted on loans. Twenty million visitors came to Coney Island the summer of 1908 and they spent an estimated 45 million dollars there.45 They consumed ten million hotdogs that summer. On a single weekend, they mailed 250,000 postcards. An estimated 150,000 people populated the beach at once.46

An almost limitless environment had been created to satisfy the middle class.

A final anecdote moves this inquiry to a close. On May 26, 1911, preparations were underway at Dreamland’s “Hell Gate” exhibition, a boat ride through caverns and whirlpools. Opening day was just hours away. Reynolds and his partners hoped that the fantastic Hell Gate exhibition was the attraction they needed to eclipse Luna’s success that summer. They needed it to work; business had been a struggle the summer before. Never had tensions been so high.

As the workmen worked well past midnight to prepare for opening day, a fire erupted inside Hell Gate. The men fled the cavern in fear. A bucket of tar was knocked over. The flames grew bigger and began “feeding on the flimsy woodwork and paper-mâché structures.”

Fire consumed the shoddy cavern walls. Light bulbs exploded from

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the heat. The flames billowed from Hell Gate, and spread to nearby exhibitions. Fire quickly destroyed the infant incubator pavilion, killing six infants. The electricity was cut and the park plunged into darkness. Hundreds of terrified animals—frantic pumas, lions, bears, wolves, leopards, deer, and antelopes—“began to howl at the top of their lungs.” Then, as McCullough describes, “Hell broke loose.”

Traveling west, the fire consumed Dreamland’s decadent tower “and each moment mounted higher up its sides, until presently the tower glowed out against the black of the night sky like some huge bonfire.” The enormous tower crashed in flames on Surf Avenue. Embers struck the circus animals and they began “fighting each other savagely.” One magnificent three-year old lion named “Black Prince” leapt in a panic through the Park’s gates, terrorizing crowds that had gathered nearby. As McCullough describes, “His mane was a collar of fire; his flanks and feet were torn and bleeding. He screamed piteously.” Crowds climbed fences and poles to escape as police began chasing and shooting at the animal, who howled in pain, running towards the darkness of

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50 McCullough, Good Old Coney, 213-215. McCullough’s account of the fires at Coney Island is detailed and poignant. He is the only scholar who offers a first-hand account which he likely heard from his own grand-father, George C. Tilyou. This inquiry relies heavily on his account of the Dreamland fire because the available primary sources do not offer the same wealth of detail.
52 McCullough, Good Old Coney, 221.
54 McCullough, Good Old Coney, 221.
a switchback railway ride to hide. Black Prince lunged at his aggressors as they followed him into the paper-mâché cavern. Trapping the lion in the darkness of the cave lit only by his burning mane, his trainer quickly gave the execution orders. As crowds watched nearby, Black Prince collapsed on the cave floor with a reported 24 bullets in his skull alone. The crowds dragged his lifeless body into the street where his teeth were quickly “snatched for souvenirs.”55 Within hours, his body was exhibited for ten cents in a makeshift tent.56 The appetite for the unusual, the morbid, and bizarre certainly revealed itself in those hours.

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Figure 20. Copy of original postcard depicting the Dreamland Fire. Courtesy of the Brooklyn Historical Society.

56 Ibid.
Every inch of the park was ablaze. Coney Island’s fire department turned every engine and piece of apparatus on Dreamland but their efforts were doomed. Thousands gathered along Surf Avenue to watch Dreamland fall.\footnote{“Flames Sweep Over Coney Island,” \textit{The New York Times}, May 27, 1911.} In a few short hours, the dream of “Coney Island’s most successful season ever had gone glimmering.”\footnote{McCullough, \textit{Good Old Coney}, 227-230. As McCullough describes, five square blocks were razed, a resulting $5,200,000 in property losses and an abrupt end to several thousand jobs. A full investigation as to the cause of the fire followed. Everyone blamed each other in what proved to be a huge political mess.} The loss was utterly devastating. The falseness and the impermanence of it all was dramatically exposed. The limitless environment that the amusement parks created had crumbled quickly.

However, in contrast with the physical amusement realms, a force with permanence also reveals itself. What is most interesting to this inquiry are the events following the fire. They echo the permanence of the cultural changes that took shape in the preceding years. The morning after the fire, New Yorkers awoke to see the shocking newspaper headlines. An estimated 350,000 of them got dressed and boarded the trains to visit the Dreamland ruins. Coney Island was torn apart, nothing open, and yet the throngs \textit{still came}. Proprietors set up makeshift shows and exhibits. Dreamland’s animal trainers exhibited the survivors—five lionesses, four leopards, six ponies, and several monkeys—in a five-part act.\footnote{“Ruins Help Draw 350,000 to Coney,” \textit{The New York Times}, 29 May, 1911.} The sign on a tent advertised that “A Congress of Freaks,” the Fat Lady and the Tattooed Wonder included, would testify about their experiences the
night before.60 Thousands gathered along Surf Avenue to watch and listen to their shocking stories. Temporary arrangements were made everywhere among the ruins to accommodate the curious crowds, using scorched ovens as crude kitchens for cooking franks. Patrons rested on blistered, warped furniture.61

A hundred years later, these actions sound somewhat mad. What was the lure of a burnt out amusement park? Why did 350,000 people go to see the wreckage? Their presence is further evidence of the seductive nature of the parks: even their ultimate destruction was fascinating. The parks existed to blur the distinction between reality and fantasy. They gave people a safe place to become lost in it all.62 To see the physical demise of this fantasy must have shocked the senses. The appetite for this particular type of spectacle reveals how much cultural change had occurred. A contemporary journalist asserted in 1913:

Coney Island furnishes no amusements; it’s the people who go there who furnish them. Coney Island simply says: Here you not only may be crazy, but you absolutely must be crazy if you expect to have any fun...It is said that all of us are a little mad, but most of us strive to appear sane, and Coney Island has discovered that if there is a place where we can be mad if we like we will pay for the privilege.63

The reporter got it exactly right. It was the people, not the amusements, that created the phenomenon there. They were the objects of seduction and temptation which the

60 McCullough, Good Old Coney, 232.
amusement entrepreneurs engineered. They were consumers whose insatiable appetite had been revealed. Just as the fire had the night before, they ate it all up. Their massive turnout shows how consumerism can be an almost uncontrollable force.

Every day at Coney Island, people saw what they wanted to see. This day was no different. Among the ruins, against the backdrop of the blue and expansive ocean, they beheld fascinating, shocking, and bizarre people and things. If ever there was proof that novelty and spectacle reigned supreme, this was it. Their experience was seen, felt, and remembered. Most importantly, Coney Island let them experience it in a way the “rest of the world seemed to discourage: with wonder.”64 And so it was; a physical place designed to help people forget reality and everything the reformers, the muckrakers, and the pulpit told them was wrong with society. As Register affirms, there was truly an “innocence to it all.”65

64 Lilliefors, Boardwalks, 24.
65 Register, Kid of Coney, 8.
With the Dreamland fire of 1911, an era was indeed over. The 1911 summer season had ended before it even started. Dreamland was not rebuilt. Reynolds urged the City to buy the land and build a public park. That same year, Fred Thompson filed for bankruptcy. Luna Park was taken over by creditors and never looked the same. George Tilyou died just two years later in 1913. More fires would devastate the place.

Coney’s new amusements looked nothing like their elaborate predecessors as they became cheaper, less exotic, and less impressive over the years. With the onset of World War I, the appetite for disaster spectacles quickly dissolved. Every American city now had its roller coaster and a Ferris Wheel. It all looked rather commonplace. There were hundreds of amusement parks across the country, though most were but a shadow of Steeplechase, Luna Park and Dreamland. Movies and film became the new escape in the

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years that followed. Nonetheless, amusement park leisure had taken a permanent place in American culture.

The progressive reform movement had to evolve, too. Reformers had failed to curtail the consumerism and commercialization that these parks represented before 1911. It all burned down in the end, but they had little to do with Coney’s physical demise. Their battle waged on in the face of consumerism and commercialization. Their cause matured after World War I when many more middle class citizens would head the reform cause. What began as local anti-vice fervor became a powerful force for social change with strong leaders and a more cohesive voice. Like the amusement parks, the movement spread nationally and assumed a permanent place in American culture and history. By all accounts, it flourished in the 1920s, imposing harsh limits on leisure, showing us just how constant change is.
CONCLUSION

From its very beginnings, Coney Island was a harbinger of change. Having traced the dramatic transformation that occurred between 1880 and 1911, one sees the emergence of powerful forces that demonstrate the influence of mass consumerism and private enterprise over the fledgling progressive voice. The evolution of these two movements, and the ultimate victory of the former over the latter, happened incrementally, however. The process started with Coney’s transformation in 1880s from a pastoral beach scene to a place of crime and corruption. Its depravity inspired local reform fervor that was born more of an impulse and lacked cohesion or a clear vision. Despite some deficiencies, progressive reformers clearly defined the limits of traditional leisure, confronting Coney’s vice directly and fervently. In response to these limits, an equally powerful force ascended—private enterprise. A series of cleverly designed amusement parks emerged as the creative products of brilliant showmen. These men deliberately targeted the middle class by appealing to their values of civility and refinement and creating something palatable for these tastes. Whereas reformers dwelled on society’s failures, these parks offered an optimistic approach to life.¹

The role of the amusement entrepreneurs was both creative and central to the changes that took shape. They took amusement seriously and were aggressive in their attempts to seduce the middle class. Their private, enclosed parks show a distinct progression—each was more elaborate and grand than its predecessor. At first, these

¹ Register, Kid of Coney, 100-110.
parks worked within the accepted limits of leisure and tradition to expand possibilities for the reform class itself, tempting them with novelty. Civilized parks progressed toward mechanical thrills which gave way to extravagant simulations. Their overwhelming success lies in the sensations they created, which made patrons feel something exciting and different. The height of visual spectacle and novelty was Luna Park, which shirked traditional Victorian norms of civility and refinement and turned towards increasingly extravagant and bizarre attractions. It dazzled everyone, breathing new life into a demanding middle class existence. As a result, middle class notions of leisure changed along with their own patterns and behaviors. As a journalist once remarked, “Whoever goes to Coney Island nowadays except everyone?”

The seduction and the cultural force of the amusement parks was potent. Novelty was the crucial element of the cultural changes that transpired in these years. Its many examples are evidence of changing middle class tastes and values. Aided by novelty, consumerism and commercialization infiltrated the middle class way of life at Coney Island. Traditional notions of discipline and control progressed toward unbridled leisure. People took their experiences with them when they left—to their homes, their work, and their places of worship.

Periodically, reformers got what they wanted: a cleansing, a public park, a raid. Yet, these moments of notoriety pale in comparison to the long-term changes that were happening. The impact of reformers was weakened with the advent of amusement parks

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which disguised consumerism with respectability. At times, it seems they did not even realize it was happening. They could not permanently curtail vice at Coney Island, and saw even less success in dismay ing the masses from going there.

The stories of reformers and the amusements parks between 1897 and 1911 all point to a similar pattern: a dramatic cultural upheaval. Fire punctuates this upheaval, showing that change was constant, unpredictable, and sweeping. The middle class was at the center of all these tensions. Despite their seemingly contradictory roles as patrons and reformers, they bore the mark of the era—a movement towards change. Middle class Americans were searching for a transformation on many levels—personal, communal, societal. At Coney Island, they found it in two very different ways. Both the amusement parks and the reform cause simulated transcendence by touching something cerebral and emotional. Progressivism was of cerebral and emotional beginnings, its fervor nurtured by the results of the changes it promoted. The amusement parks were conceived to literally touch people in new ways. The sensations they simulated fueled pleasure and optimism, giving way to more consumption. For all their complaining and drum beating, the progressives also offered hope of a brighter future. It is this impulse towards change and improvement that make both so compelling. The sensations they inspired were intimately felt but also connective and communally experienced.

The amusement parks looked nothing like the transformation reformers imagined, but they were of the same momentum. The amusement entrepreneurs successfully

3 Kasson, Amusing the Million, 8.
captured the momentum of the age in a way that impacted middle class values more immediately and permanently than reformers were able to. This impulse towards change took several shapes, had many proponents, and faced many obstacles at Coney Island. Any place where all these forces collided was destined to be an experiment of changing middle class values in the twentieth century. There is no question that the phenomenon that emerged from these tensions—commercialization and middle class consumerism—endures. As such, Coney’s history serves as a rich resource for thinking about these values today.

George Tilyou got it right when he said, “We Americans want either to be thrilled or amused, and we are ready to pay well for either sensation.” But the place was so much more. It was at once a light-hearted leisure spot and the epicenter of catastrophic social upheaval. It was a battleground of American thought and intentions; a physical place experiencing the death throes of the antebellum era and the birth pangs of a mass consumer culture driven by private enterprise. It was a synthesis of American hopes and fears.

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