

Jews in Coney Island: A History

From the fashionable to the freak-show.

By Ilana Abramovitch | September 9, 2009



Sodom by the sea, the Electric City, the Nickel Empire, the poor people's paradise...

Coney Island is a peninsula, formerly an island, in southernmost [Brooklyn, New York City](#) with a beach on the Atlantic Ocean. For hundreds of years, Coney Island has been a place of tremendous popular pleasure as well the site of inglorious land disputes. As early as 1800, a newspaper account shows the area being used for recreational bathing. Its first hotel opened in 1829. Centuries before, Canarsie Indian villagers used the island for catching its plentiful fish and collecting shells for wampum—traditional, sacred shell beads, later used as forms of currency. Wampum of a different kind motivated real estate developments and land grabs for the past 150 years, as member of other “tribes” enjoyed the beauty—both natural and manufactured—of Coney Island.

Jews have played a notable part in the history of Coney Island's development since the late 19th century and up to the present.

Summer in the City

In the 1870s, Coney Island's newly-developing Manhattan Beach was a destination for wealthy, fashionable vacationers, among them affluent Jews. However, August Corbin, developer of the opulent Manhattan Beach Hotel, publicly declared in 1879 that he did not wish to welcome Jews [“Israelites”], claiming that their “uncouth manners” were distasteful to gentile patrons.



The famous Cyclone Rollercoaster

Even though laws did not exist to prohibit segregation such as this, a public brouhaha erupted. The exclusion of Jews was short-lived, but many Jews, like other ethnic groups, tended to congregate informally in certain sections of Coney Island.

Inspired by the national expositions of the late 1800s and their displayed wonders of technology, Coney Island by 1900 featured, alongside sea-bathing and raucous midway areas, three amusement parks: Steeplechase, Luna Park, and Dreamland. Their lavish rides, fantasy landscapes, and honky-tonk carnival atmosphere transformed the American amusement industry.

Life of Leisure

Samuel W. Gumpertz, Jewish entrepreneur and once performer in [Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show](#), became the general manager of Dreamland in 1904. Gumpertz searched tirelessly for novelty entertainments during his 28 years as a Coney Island showman.

Lilliputia, or “Midget City” was one of his most popular projects. A year-round “city” of 300 midgets, it was a permanent experiment in daily life performed for an audience, with its own mock parliament, a Midget City Fire Department that responded hourly with roaring fire engines to a false alarm, and its own beach—complete with midget lifeguards. The era's fascination with

“primitive tribes and savage peoples” embodied a popular yet condescending zeal for exotic peoples and human oddities in sensational circus “freak shows.”

Many of Coney Island’s artisans and businessmen who created the entertainment and rides were Jewish, including eastern European Jewish immigrant woodcarvers—some of whom acquired their skills through carving [Torah arks](#) in the old country. In the early 20th century, men like Solomon Stein and Harry Goldstein became known as master craftsmen of Coney Island carousel horses.

Beyond the Carnivals



Nathan’s Famous
Frankfurters

Perhaps the most celebrated Jewish-owned business in Coney Island is “[Nathan’s Famous](#),” founded in 1911. Nathan Handwerker, a Polish-Jewish immigrant, undersold his competition, charging only 5 cents for a frankfurter, instead of his former boss’s 10 cents. Since the “hot dog”—a variation on a German or Austrian sausage—was fairly new to the U.S., Nathan hired actors conspicuously costumed in medical outfits to order from his stand. This apparently reassured wary customers of the cleanliness of his product, which did not contain dog meat! Nathan’s Famous became a beloved icon of Coney Island, and by 1955, sold its one millionth hot dog. [Nelson Rockefeller](#), Governor of New York, once stated that, “No man can hope to be elected in this state without being photographed eating a hot dog at Nathan’s Famous.”

The burgeoning leisure industry featured numerous rising Jewish entertainers who performed at Coney Island theatres and clubs. [Harry Houdini](#), [George Burns](#), [the Marx Brothers](#), [Al Jolson](#), [Sophie Tucker](#), and [Fanny Brice](#) all started out as Coney Island entertainers—even

Irving Berlin worked there as a singing waiter.

Jews in Coney Island have been most conspicuous as consumers and participants in its amusements. In the early 20th century, Jews were among those who rented summer bungalows there. A way of life developed for many Jewish regulars around the area’s “bath houses,” which grew from simple changing rooms to establishments with restaurants, swimming pools, steam rooms, swimming pools, and nude sunbathing solaria. From the 1930s to the mid-50s, Jews dominated Coney Island’s busy handball courts.

In the mid-20th century, many lower middle class Jews lived year-round in the nearby neighborhoods. Some worked in or owned small businesses in Coney Island, serving food and offering amusement-park rides or other entertainment.

[Joseph Heller](#) (*Now and Then*, 1998) and other Jewish writers, such as [Neil Simon](#) (*Brighton Beach Memoirs*, 1983) and [Isaac Bashevis Singer](#) (*Enemies: A Love Story*, 1972) grew up in or visited the local neighborhoods, and some of their works describe the wonders of daily life near the Coney Island sideshows. [Darren Aronofsky](#), a Jewish filmmaker born in 1969, pictures a seamier side of the neighborhood in his *Requiem for a Dream* (2001). Photographers like Diane Arbus and Weegee also captured some of the more grotesque imagery of Coney Island. In *Annie Hall* (1977), [Woody Allen](#)’s anti-hero grows up in a house located directly underneath Coney Island’s Thunderbolt roller coaster.

The Island Itself

The history of Coney Island is directly tied to the New York real estate market. Because of its popularity, its entertainment industry, and potential profits associated with both, private and public interests have competed for over a century to control its ownership and development.

Some prominent Jews have been involved—somewhat controversially—in the urban development of Coney Island. Starting in the 1930s, and continuing through the 1950s, [Robert Moses](#)—the

master urban planner of New York City—undertook to improve and reform Coney Island, to diminish the tawdry aspects of its entertainment, and to expand public housing there. Moses did bring some good results to the neighborhood, such as expanding the beach, and making it cleaner and safer. But his ill-advised demolition of Coney Island's West End and replacement with high-rise public housing led to further decline.

In the 1990s Brooklyn-born Joseph Sitt, the private real estate developer of Thor Enterprises, quietly bought up large parcels of Coney Island and created plans to develop it into a big Las Vegas-style destination. Opposing camps included the city planning commission and local community activists, trying to hold onto Coney Island's unique historical flavor. By the end of July 2009, the New York City council approved Mayor [Michael Bloomberg](#)'s plans to redevelop Coney Island, in negotiation with Sitt, and new plans are being made to create more high-priced entertainment and luxury housing and hotels. With activists continuing to protest these plans, it seems the future of Coney Island may be unpredictable as its past.

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