

GATE-JB.007
CRBIB# 401194
646/131242

Canarsie Pier

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June 1976

CANARSIE PIER
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6/76

Today, Canarsie Pier serves the residents of Brooklyn and Queens as a recreational facility used for fishing, boating and sunning, but in 1927, the pier was regarded as only the first step in the projected development of Jamaica Bay as a huge industrial port and shipping terminal. As early as 1909, New York City and the federal government, urged by interested developers and property owners, were considering plans to convert the waters and marshland of desolate Jamaica Bay into a subport of New York Harbor, through channeling, dredging and filling. In 1911, A Report on the Proposed Plan of Operations for Jamaica Bay Development was published by the New York City Department of Docks. This report specified the Canarsie area for concentrated development and in 1926, construction of a 600' x 400' pier was begun there. Commercial use of Canarsie Pier never materialized however, due to two major factors: the shortage of funds in the following decade and the efforts of Robert Moses, New York City Park Commissioner, to rehabilitate Jamaica Bay and to conserve it as parkland. In 1938, Moses's plan was adopted, rezoning of the area began, and Canarsie Pier was acquired by the City Department of Parks.

The pier, which is located at the foot of Rockaway Parkway, still appears as it did following the Department of Parks landscaping in 1938. In addition to a stucco concession stand/comfort station, the pier consists of a central parking lot enclosed on three sides by a cobblestoned picnic

area and a concrete promenade. Canarsie Beach and Canarsie Park extend to the east and west on either side of the pier. Canarsie Pier was acquired by the National Park Service as part of the Gateway National Recreation Area in 1972.

In 1907, a survey of Jamaica Bay was undertaken by the Army Corps of Engineers, in conjunction with the channeling and dredging begun there under the River and Harbor Improvement Act of 1880. The survey produced a map covering 45.5 square miles of water and marshes, perhaps the first comprehensive study of the Bay. The accompanying report noted only two communities of any substance on the north shore of the Bay, Canarsie and Bergen Beach. Within the entire Bay area only three landings suitable for shipping were recorded: Canarsie, Idlewood and Rockaway Beach. The major expanse of Jamaica Bay at this time was desolate and sparsely settled, with abundant marine and marsh wildlife. Canarsie was the center of a thriving fishing community and a channel had been excavated from its landing out to the main channel. In 1907, the volume of trade¹ conducted through Canarsie amounted to 450,000 tons in oysters alone. The Corps made recommendations for certain construction in their report, such as bulkheads, channeling and jettying to protect channels. These recommendations marked only the beginnings of the plans to develop Jamaica Bay.

1. U.S. Congress, House H. Doc. 1506, 60th Congress, 2nd . Sess., 1909, p. 17.

By the Acts of 1909 and 1912, New York State conveyed to New York City² "all of the lands under water and hassocks owned by it in Jamaica Bay." As was indicated by the Corp's report, the public's general presumption was that the Bay was to be industrialized, and interested backers and property owners vigorously supported such a plan. Parties such as the Jamaica Bay Improvement Commission and Henry Meyer, a Commissioner of the New York City Department of Docks as well as a real estate developer in Brooklyn, campaigned for a more intensive development than that suggested by the Engineers. By 1911, the New York City Department of Docks published a Report on the Proposed Plan of Operations for Jamaica Bay Improvement. The proposed plan within this report called for the creation of a huge support of New York Harbor. Through dredging and filling, the many small islands in the center of the Bay were to be consolidated into two large islands. Both these islands and the entire shoreline were to be bulkheaded and built up with piers, basins and other shipping facilities creating a harbor equalling the combined ports of Liverpool, Rotterdam and Hamburg. Canarsie Landing was specified as an area for concentrated development due to its existing channel and its comparatively strong commercial activity. Although the adopted plan was soon recorded on the official city and federal maps, actual construction did not commence until 1926.

2. Meyer, Henry, Looking Through Life's Window (New York, 1930) p. 171.

In 1926, the Department of Docks let its first contract for the construction of a pier at Canarsie. By March 19, 1927, a 600' land and 400' wide pier with side platforms of concrete construction throughout, including piling was completed by A.M. Hazel, Inc. at a cost of \$487,889.³ By December of the same year, the second contract, which called for the filling of the pier, was completed by W.H. Gahagan, Inc. for \$19,999.98.⁴ The completion of this contract however marked the end of the city's commercial development at Canarsie. In order to utilize the large pier, it was essential that both freight handling facilities and inland connection to the railroad be provided. For a variety of reasons, such provisions were never made. The broadest reason for this neglect was the economic depression of the ensuing decade. In combination with the general lack of funds, the construction of Floyd Bennett Field also prohibited work at Canarsie. Floyd Bennett Field was to be New York City's first airport. Its location at Barren Island on the western shore of the Bay made the airport another facet of the proposed port development, although this was not commonly recognized. The construction began in 1928, under the aegis of the Department of Docks. Due to the widespread interest in aviation and the city's desire to have its own airport, Bennett Field was given top priority in the budgeting. Even

3. New York City Department of Docks, "Fifty-Sixth Annual Report" for the year ending Dec. 31, 1927, Contract # 1858.

4. Ibid, Contract # 1904.

then its original plan was never completed, but its construction effectively prevented any other development in the Bay area. Supporters of the Bay development were content to allow the construction of the airport continue, as they felt the business it would generate would spark a general boom. The field was substantially completed by 1931, but between then and 1939 when it was transferred to the U.S. Navy, it failed to generate any commercial success. The greater part of air passengers, mail and freight continued to go to other airports in the area, most notably , Newark Airport. Thus, by 1938, the developers of Jamaica Bay could point to only three achievements; commercially unsuccessful Bennett Field, Canarsie Pier, which remained idle, and a small complex of industrial plants at Mill Basin. In the same year, Robert Moses, New York City Park Commissioner, submitted a new plan, The Improvement of Jamaica Bay, to Mayor LaGuardia.

In the course of Moses's park and parkway construction, the energetic commissioner perceived a potential recreational resource in Jamaica Bay. His early successes in the reclamation of Marine Park and the rehabilitation of Jacob Riis Park marked the beginning of a new future for the Bay. As the Marine Parkway had provided the access to Rockaway Point and Riis Park, so the construction of the Shore Parkway along the north shore of Jamaica Bay opened up the Canarsie area, among others, while at the same time, the new parkway and the fill on which it was built, blocked the potential basins and other vital connections between shore and inland. During parkway construction, Moses also took the opportunity

to rehabilitate the tawdry Canarsie amusement park and to expand the Canarsie Beach park. In the plan which he submitted in 1938, Moses aptly indicated the lack of any substantial progress in the grandiose plan of 1911. He further warned against implementing a new plan to fill the Bay with the city's garbage. Pollution had already made such severe inroads in the Bay's marine life, that commercial fishing was banned, Moses called for a rezoning of the Bay area as residential and recreational land, rather than industrial. He also requested that all islands be transferred to the Park Department for recreational use. By the end of the year, the rezoning had been implemented and Canarsie Pier, with other properties, passed into the jurisdiction of the Park Department. Shortly after the pier was acquired, the Park Department had it landscaped, and built a concession stand and comfort station. Access ramps were built off of the Shore Parkway, and a traffic circle constructed at the foot of Rockaway Boulevard provided another approach to the new park. The pier was now utilized by pleasure boats and fishing parties, as well as strollers and sunbathers. As the city continued rezoning along the bayshore, the possibilities of commercial development grew progressively smaller. Canarsie Pier was maintained as recreational site by the city Department of Parks until 1972, when it was acquired by the National Park Service as part of the Gateway National Recreation Area. Today the pier still serves the residents of Brooklyn and Queens as a recreational facility which has changed little if at all in the past thirty-five years.