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Jacob Riis Historic District

Ricardo Torres-Reyes

JACOB RIIS HISTORIC DISTRICT'
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The buildings which comprise the Historic District--especially the Bathhouse-- are excellent examples of recreational architecture of the early 1930's. They are the central structures of a fine example of public park designing and community planning in the early 1920's and 1930's.

Named after Jacob Riis, the journalist and social reformer who did much to alleviate the miserable conditions of New York's tenement slums, the park was established to provide a beach and other noncommercial recreational facilities for the people of New York. Officially opened in 1937, Jacob Riis Park is formally landscaped with playing fields and courts, a golf course and bathhouse in addition to a beach and promenade which stretch for almost a mile along the southern shore of Rockaway Peninsula. The park was acquired by the National Park Service with the creation of the Gateway National Recreation Area in 1972.

The western portion of Rockaway Peninsula on which Jacob Riis Park is presently located is a relatively new area created by the action of the sea in the latter half of the nineteenth century and stabilized by bulkheads and jetties in the early years of the twentieth century. In 1912 the area where the park is now located was acquired by the city of New York by the right of eminent domain. Formerly known as the Hatch Tract, the area was called Telawana Park although it remained undeveloped (American Guide Series, New York City Guide (New York, Random House, 1939 p. 594).

In 1923 stabilization of the southern shoreline (now Rockaway Beach) was begun with the construction of a bulkhead and jetty system on the eastern end of the park area. In 1927 a similar protective system was erected on the western end of the park. By this time the shoreline was straightened by cutting back on the eastern half and building up on the western half.

The name of the park was selected as early as 1924 when the area was designated as Jacob Riis Park in a special report on New York City Parks. Jacob Riis was an obvious choice for the park's namesake. Born in Denmark in 1849, Riis emigrated to the United States in 1869. As a reporter for the New York slum's, and through his writings and lectures, he succeeded in sparking a reform movement. His first and perhaps most famous work, How the Other Half Lives, was published in 1890. Riis, who died in 1914, held only one public office in his career, that of secretary of the New York Small Parks Commission in 1897.

Plans for the development of the Jacob Riis park were being drawn up in the early years of the 1930's. In 1932 a final set of plans was made public by Albert Benninger, Park Commissioner for Queens, who supervised the initial stages of construction. The extensive landscaping was planned by Julius Burgevin with the assistance of Joseph Gatring of the Park Board. The Regional Plan Association of New York also provided assistance in coordinating the various plans. The announced plans called for a park with 250,000 person capacity, equipped with landings, basins and piers for recreational boating, boys' and girls' playgrounds, eighteen

tennis courts, a swimming pool, a bathhouse for 5,000 people, and an athletic field with a 20,000 person capacity grandstand, as well as a baseball diamond, a skating rink, handball and volleyball courts and two hockey fields; 20,000 trees and 50,000 shrubs were to be planted in hedges separating the various areas. Work on the bathhouse by the architects Stoughton and Plonck was completed by 1932. This one-story structure is presently incorporated as the north site of the enlarged bathhouse. By 1933 the park was sufficiently developed to allow for its use although it had no official opening until 1937. Burgevin's landscaping, which included plantings of Japanese black pines, sea holly, bayberry, beach plum and other shrubs, as well as beach grass, was also laid out by this time.

In 1936 the New York City Department of Parks under the direction of Robert Moses began a project to complete the park with some modifications of the extravagant plans drawn up by Benninger. The major facets of the new plan were the enlargement of the bathhouse and the construction of a mall and two new buildings at the western end of the park. The bathhouse was expanded to the south where a second story and two four-story plans were eliminated in favor of expanded locker facilities, which then accommodated 10,000 people. A cafeteria and a sundeck were added on the second floor. The mall was laid out from a point near the new Marine Parkway Bridge south to the boardwalk which paralleled the beach. Near the intersection of the mall and the boardwalk, two semi-

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circular buildings housing concessions and other facilities were erected. To the west of the mall was the eighteen-hole pitch-and-putt golf course. The other courts and playgrounds were built between the mall and the bathhouse on the north side of the boardwalk. The boardwalk was partially decked with Douglas fir, and Oregon fir was used for the ship's railing on the boardwalk. At this time the parking lot, located north of the bathhouse, was completed. The sixty-two acre lot, with a 14,000 car capacity, was the largest in the world.

Although the park had received informal use since 1932, on July 3, 1937 the park was officially open. It was maintained by the City of New York until 1972, when it came under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service. The park has survived relatively unchanged over the years.

MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

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