

Chapter Six

Homes on the Bay

In a pattern that would be repeated many times in the coming years, Manhattan's building boom and rapid economic growth of the early 1800s spilled over into Brooklyn. An act to incorporate Brooklyn as a city passed the State Legislature in 1834 (Burrows and Wallace 1998, 581). A large building boom in Brooklyn soon followed. Only a few months after incorporation as a city a movement began to build a new city hall that would rival Manhattan's. The neighborhoods of Williamsburg, Green Point, Prospect Hill, and Red Hook all experienced rapid growth around this time. A shortage of burial plots on Manhattan prompted Henry E. Pierrepont to propose building the rural, non-sectarian cemetery in 1832. Pierrepont's cemetery would one day become known as the Greenwood Cemetery (583).

The building boom of the 1830s did not reach south of the Heights of the Gowanus. With the exception of the construction of Fort Hamilton between 1825 and 1832, the farms and rural lanes remained large untouched. A community of construction workers and support services for the fort rose around the site. By 1835 the fort was connected to New Utrecht by a stage line (Burrows and Wallace 1998, 583).

In 1835 a Connecticut merchant named John R. Pitkin began buying up tracts of land from the Dutch farmers of New Lots (today the area is Brooklyn's New Lots Avenue). His plans called for houses, factories, schools, and parks with a centralized transportation

hub on Jamaica Bay. It would be many more years before the area would grow to anywhere near the size Pitkin envisioned but that may have mattered little to him. Within a year, Pitkin had already moved west into Queens where he established the village of Woodside (today Woodhaven). Like New Lotts, the country would remain largely unchanged until the arrival of the railroads (Burrows and Wallace 1998, 583).

Brooklyn's industrial development in the years after the Civil War was largely centered on the East River waterfront and the inlets such as Newtown Creek and the Gowanus Canal. Despite being limited to the western edge of the borough, the size of the growth was staggering, 500 factories in 1865 grew to 1,000 just five years later, and to 5,000 by 1880. Residential development also prospered nearer to the East River but developments farther east languished (Burrows and Wallace 1998, 933).

In 1865, Charles S. Brown, a developer who bought land north of Canarsie, built frame houses for working class people, and then modestly named the area Brownsville. According to *Gotham*, the development failed in part because it was downwind of the odors coming off Jamaica Bay and Barren Island (Burrows and Wallace 1998, 934). The area remained largely agricultural until 1887 when a Jewish real estate agent named Aaron Kaplan purchased property for tenement housing. The tenements became popular with Jewish people eager to flee crowding on the Lower East Side. The population

bloomed with the opening of the Fulton Street elevated railway in 1889 and then the Williamsburg Bridge in 1903 (New York City Department of Parks and Recreation). A branch of the Long Island Railroad now forms one border of Brownsville.

A complete description of how even a portion of the boroughs of Brooklyn or Queens developed is far beyond the scope of a single dissertation, or even a single lifetime. The important issues in environmental management are how Jamaica Bay's shorelines were impacted by development and how their physical geography shaped development. Generally speaking, on the shores of Jamaica Bay, residential development was dependent on two things, railroad transportation and dry land. Jamaica Bay's residential development was also linked to its character as a resort.

Even as late as the 1890s the shores of Jamaica Bay were still relatively isolated and despite both its popularity as a resort and the population growth in the rest of the city, residential buyers were not easy to find. Thomas Adams, Jr., (his father was the inventor of Tutti Frutti chewing gum) and Percy G. Williams, of Brooklyn discovered this in 1893 (Grey, Aug.23, 1899, 32). The partners had purchased the home and farm of the Bergen Family who had lived on the site near Canarsie since buying the land from the Indians. They had originally purchased the 300-acre property in 1853 including the family's farmhouse that was said to have been built in 1850. (The 1853 purchase date seems to be

a mistake propagated through numerous press reports. A date of 1893 is more likely since that is when the land was originally subdivided.) Eight generations of Bergens farmed the land but there was no reason given in the press reports as to why they sold it (“At Bergen Beach”, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 16, 1895).

Portions of the land property were described as a "sandy waste" but another section was considered more suited for development, if it had not been located too far from the railroads or rapid transit lines to attract more than a few purchasers (Grey, August 23, 1899, 32). Transportation to the area was via the Flatbush Avenue Trolley and a stage line from the trolley line terminal. A channel was being dredged and bulkheads created so that excursion steamers could reach the area from the Rockaway Inlet. Negotiations were also underway to extend the trolley line as far as the beach where a new hotel was planned. (Figure EH-2) Several cottages were already erected on the beach and there was a "pretty little club house." Press reports at the time listed the activities available for recreation. Canarsie, Coney Island, and Rockaway Beach were all a short sail away. Jamaica Bay abounded in fish and offered opportunities for fishermen and sportsmen. Bergen Beach was a good place to own a horse and the shady, shell-packed roads were well-suited for bicycles. The Bergen's original farmhouse was converted to the Bergen Beach Inn (“At Bergen Beach”, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 16, 1895).

Lots were advertised at \$150 and up. Advertisements claimed that a lot could be purchased at \$1 a week and a house for \$5 a week. The community had two miles of waterfront, its own park, bathing, boating, and fishing. But because the streetcar line still did not actually extend all the way to the new community, the advertisements promised that free stages met the Flatbush Avenue Cars at the line's terminal. The advertisements claimed that real estate values would double within the year ("Beautiful Bergen Beach", *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Oct.22, 1893). It should be noted that the partners did not build the streetcar line and therefore had no control over its route. This was not the pattern on Coney Island, Manhattan Beach, and portions of the Rockaways where railroad promoters also owned hotels and resorts.

By 1895 a few houses had been built and the conversion of the original farmhouse to an inn was complete. A clubhouse had also been erected for use by the residents. A bulkhead was built along the water front and an "immense dredge" was at work filling in behind it ("At Bergen Beach", *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 16, 1895).

Two years after its founding, Bergen Beach however, did not actually have a beach. It was reported that over a half a million yards of marshland had to be reclaimed and covered by a boardwalk before it was ready for visitors. A single trolley line linked it to the outside world. With sales still slow, the partners decided to promote the location as a

new summer resort (Grey, August 23, 1899, 32).

Adams and Williams decided to adopt the business model of the Chicago World's Fair. They obtained the best attractions and retained ownership of everything, from the beach, boat rentals, beer sales, candy stores, and even sales of peanuts. Concessions were rented strictly on a percentage of profits basis and all cashiers were employed by Adams and Williams and not the concessionaires. Williams explained that "nobody can make any profit here without sharing it with us" (Grey, August 23, 1899, 32).

The Bergen Beach Branch of the Brooklyn Heights Trolley System linked Bergen Beach to the rest of Brooklyn. It was opened on Saturday, May 23rd, 1896. Press reports announced that the line would operate cars on two-minute headway. The park at Bergen Beach was set to open for the season on Friday, May 29 ("Cars to Bergen Beach", *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 24, 1896).

At the time that the streetcar line opened, the Boardwalk stretched a mile and new attractions for the season included a large grand stand for viewing Paul Boyton's Water Circus featuring "fancy" swimming and high diving exhibitions. The circus also featured a miniature boat race in which trained monkeys were contestants, a walrus hunt was

reenacted, and a mock naval engagement featured a ship blown up by dynamite. Press reports stated that while performing in London, the show was seen by every member of the Royal Family, except the queen (“Cars to Bergen Beach”, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 24, 1896).

The Casino at Bergen Beach was almost completed. It housed a theatre that would be lighted by electricity and feature vaudeville productions. Comedians, magicians, sketch comedy, monologue artists, and dancers were to perform (“Cars to Bergen Beach”, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 24, 1896).

In 1896 advertisements began appearing touting the location. More than \$25,000 was spent advertising the resort in newspapers, with large colored posters, and on trolley cars. In only one or two seasons the resort took its place among the popular watering places (Grey, Aug.23, 1899, 32).

The Phoenix Iron Works of Phoenixville Pennsylvania constructed several large Ferris wheels including one at Bergen Beach that was similar to Ferris wheels at Coney Island, the Columbian Exposition, and the Atlanta Exposition. This was no small installation but a major piece of tourist infrastructure. It was 100 feet in diameter, stood on eighteen

piles each 8 inches in diameter and sunk twenty feet deep. A fifteen horsepower steam engine drove the wheel at a speed 2 feet per second, or one revolution every 2.5 minutes. The wheel had 12 passenger cars measuring 7 X 10 feet and capable of holding 14 passengers. The press reports do not mention the cost of this attraction but it is clear that the installation represents a serious attempt to create a major attraction (“A Steel Framed Wheel 100 Feet in Diameter”, *Engineering News*, July 30, 1896, vol.36, no.5, 70).

By 1899, it was claimed that more than 80,000 visitors came on a typical Sunday or Holiday. The average daily attendance was reported at 30,000. Since the streetcar lines charged a ten-cent fare, a conservative estimate for their revenues generated by Bergen Beach was \$200,000 for the season.

Bergen Beach was never as popular as Coney Island and the resort area closed in 1920. In 1925 The Manhattan real estate developers Max Natanson and Mandlebaum & Levine purchased the resort area for two million dollars and announced plans to build a residential community featuring a bathing beach, recreation pavilion and new amusement park. The plan never materialized and the land was sold off as small parcels. Much of the land remained undeveloped until the mid-century. The Bergen House itself was demolished during construction of the Belt Parkway. The remnants of the boardwalk and amusement park were torn down in 1939 (New York City Department of Parks and

Recreation).

The Howard Beach section of Queens followed a similar history. Originally it was a collection of shacks and summer cottages known as Ramblersville. It was located on the north shore of the bay at the point where the New York, Woodhaven, and Rockaway Beach railroad's trestle touched the shore. Residential development began with William J. Howard's Mexican Angora goat farm that was established to provide goatskins for the Howard family leather business. The farm was washed away in a storm sometime around 1903. The agricultural operations were moved upstate and Howard's focus shifted to real estate (Petrulis, 2010).

In 1908 Ramblersville was a collection of two-story houses on both sides of a tidal creek, all built on piles and clustered so close together that there was only room for a narrow boardwalk between them. There were no streets as the houses all fronted on the creek. A four-foot wide boardwalk ran from the shoreline out along the backs of the houses. The front of each house featured a veranda and at least one flat-bottomed rowboat but some houses had sailboats or motorboats. The community boasted a post office, three or four hotels, and a few grocery stores. The fire department consisted of a small pump mounted on a hand-barrow, a pikes, axes, and buckets. The population was mostly seasonal but there were a few year-round residents (Rewey 1908, 149).

Residents could swim off their front porches, but they had to watch the tides. At high tide, the water was clean but at low tide the water coming out of the creek was contaminated with sewage (Rewey 1908, 149).

The Howard Estates Development Company was founded in 1909 and began constructing vacation homes on the newly filled ground next to Ramblersville. The dredged sand from Howard's channel improvement projects was used in this project. By 1912 there were fourteen bungalows available at \$2,000 each, a casino, a sandy beach, ornamental trees and a cobblestone bicycle path (Petrulis 2010).

After Howard Estates expanded west beyond Ramblersville a railroad station officially named Howard Beach was built in 1916. By this time pollution was credited with destroying the area's potential as a resort and thus led to the construction of more year round homes. Shellbank Basin was dredged for the construction of a submarine base in 1920 and while this was never built, there was now more sand available for landfills. More waterfront homes followed. Subsequent housing developments on the east bank of Hawtree Basin became Hamilton Beach. Finally, the construction of Cross Bay Boulevard ensured automobile access for all of these areas (Petrulis 2010).

Howard himself did profit greatly from these efforts. The city's plans for a new seaport (see chapter 9) caused real estate prices to rise and Howard sold his development company for a profit. He moved to Ardonia, New York, to grow alfalfa and it is thought that this decision came because he anticipated a need for animal feed with the First World War looming in Europe (Petrulis 2010).

As properties such as Ramblersville were improved around the bay, land values rose and created new incentives for corruption. Ruffle Bar was a 60-acre sand bar near Canarsie in the western half of Jamaica Bay. The bar was often submerged and as of 1892 was home to a few small hotels built on piles and a handful of small frame houses owned by fishermen and oystermen. Ruffle Bar was popular with anglers and the largest of the hotels that catered to them was owned by a Henry Schmeelke of Canarsie. The hotel was located on a 29-acre plot and as he owned almost half the island, Schmeelke was very concerned about which township actually has jurisdiction over it. For most of its history, the exact boundary line between Kings County and Queens County was not settled in many places and especially under the waters of Jamaica Bay. In 1876 a commission was appointed by the state legislature to settle the matter and they decided that it should pass through Ruffle Bar. At the time, both the towns of Flatlands and New Lotts claimed the island and frequently both towns taxed the residents. Finally the boundary was fixed so that the majority of the island became part of Flatlands. Schmeelke had for some time

opposed to being part of Flatlands and an anti-Flatlands faction grew up around him. The settlement of the boundary line resolved the question of jurisdiction but did not erase years of fighting and animosity (“Strictly on the Quiet, the "Development" of Jamaica Bay Real Estate”, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Sep.29, 1892).

When the boundary was settled a number of smaller islands came to be owned by the town of Flatlands. The smallest were just sandbars but the largest were up to ten acres in size. With the growing tourist industry however, all of them were becoming increasingly valuable. On Ruffle Bar itself there were rumors that there would soon be a new large hotel, regular ferry service from Canarsie, and the establishment of a large fishing club. Flatlands officials did their best to downplay these stories. Meanwhile Schmeelke faced new problems. The title of his land was granted by the state and it was not clear if the town of Flatlands was going to honor it. The town also claimed that Schmeelke owed it for twenty years of back taxes and the total amount of these was more than the value of the hotel and the land. Flatlands officials began selling off smaller parcels for \$25 for each building lot. Most of the purchasers were fishermen and boatmen, few of whom had enough money for the purchase price (\$25 in 1892 was equivalent to \$?? in 2010) but all of them were somehow associated with Flatlands officials. To further suspicions were aroused by the fact that most of the sales were made without any publicity. Constable George Hendrickson of Canarsie bought a six acre island for \$10 an acre but refused to answer questions from reporters about how he obtained the property or what he intended

to do with it (“Strictly on the Quiet, the "Development" of Jamaica Bay Real Estate”, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Sep.29, 1892).

There are no press reports about what happened in the subsequent weeks and months.

There were additional mentions of Schmeelkes in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* but none of pertained to the real estate sales (“Strictly on the Quiet, the "Development" of Jamaica Bay Real Estate”, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Sep.29, 1892).

Not all real estate plans worked out well. Frederick W. Dunton was a well-known real estate promoter, Queens County Commissioner, and promoter of a steam-powered monorail that was known as the "bicycle railway." In April of 1900 Dunton proposed developing housing sites on about 4,000 acres on the islands and along the shorelines of Jamaica Bay. He had already taken out a 99-year lease on the necessary lands from the Jamaica Town Board. Dunton claimed that about 100,000 workingmen and their families could be housed on the reclaimed land. To finance the reclamation Dunton asked that the members of the Central Federated Union for \$1,000 per acre for dredging and improvements. The Central Federated Union was an umbrella organization for a number of craft unions. Affordable housing for its many members would have been an important concern for the organization. Dunton promised that once the land was ready, it would be sold back to union, minus his commission (“F.W. Dunton's Proposition”, *Brooklyn Daily*

Eagle, Apr.9, 1900).

Dunton was a well-known public figure although his career was hardly without controversy. Four years earlier had been Dunton had been accused of misappropriating \$10,000 (other press reports place the sum at \$20,000) belonging to the New-York and Brooklyn Suburban Investment Company for his own use (*New York Times*, Mar.9, 1896, 1). Charges were later dropped because of a lack of evidence (“F.W. Dunton Discharged”, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Mar.26, 1896). At about the same time, Dunton was also busy promoting a new resort in Jamaica Bay but like many others, these plans never materialized (“City on Jamaica Bay; Attractive Plans for a Big Summer Resort. Make Waste Meadows Beautiful Scheme of Mr. Eppig and Mr. Dunton To Build a Rival to the Great Sea-side Watering Places”, *New York Times*, Mar.15, 1896).

Plans for seaport expansion (see chapter 9) caused a spike in real estate prices and it was reported in 1910 the last remaining marsh lands on the bay’s shores were being bought up by speculators. The *New York Times* predicted that soon there would be “no meadow land for sale around Jamaica Bay.” Although the plans for the new seaport were announced several years earlier the appropriations by city and state governments convinced investors that the plans would be implemented in the near future (“Buying Meadow Land”, *New York Times*, Apr.3, 1910). It is not clear what became of these

investments when the new seaport failed to materialize. Most would have been sold to the city for the construction of the Belt Parkway (see chapter 11) during the Great Depression when real estate prices were low.

In July of 1924 it was announced that one of the last remaining open tracts of Brooklyn land near Jamaica Bay was to be developed with 1,000 homes. Developer Edmund G. Burke announced the purchase of the Kowenhoven Estate. The 170 acre estate was one of the earliest Dutch land grants. The property lies just outside Flatbush between Ditmas Avenue and Avenue J. The tract straddled the tracks of the Manhattan Beach Railway Company. At the time the Manhattan Beach Railway was to be incorporated into the Interboro Rapid Transit (“One Thousand Small Houses to Be Erected in Brooklyn”, *New York Times*, July 27, 1924).

A map of Queens prepared in 1920 shows only one road along the north shore of Jamaica Bay between Howard Beach and Head of Bay. No side roads extended down to the water's edge and the shoreline remained undeveloped (*Queens Borough New York City, the Borough of Homes and Industry* 1920, 120). (Figure EH-24)

One unexpected source of population pressure on Jamaica Bay was the growth of

industry within the borough of Queens. The borough's chamber of commerce reported that industrial growth often outpaced the availability of housing and that in 1920 about 50% of Queens' industrial workforce lived outside the borough. The Queens Chamber of Commerce estimated that for every dollar spent on industrial construction, four dollars would have to be spent on housing (*Queens Borough New York City, the Borough of Homes and Industry 1920*, 116 - 118). (Figure EH-25)

Although the city was growing outwards and around Jamaica Bay the shores of the bay remained largely undeveloped. The shoreline marshes appear to have been preserved because developers could not afford to dredge and fill, not because they were valued for ecosystem services or natural beauty. Protection of the shoreline for recreational purposes, fishing, hunting, and boating seems not to have been a priority even though most of the real estate developments advertised these things as amenities. Creating sufficient land for waterfront development required the resources of the city and federal governments.

Chapter Seven

A Yachting Mecca

Noting the popularity of canoeing was on the rise, the *New York Times* in August of 1872 described canoe trips that were possible within the metropolitan region. While fishermen would want to cruise to good fishing spots and lovers of picturesque scenery would prefer to find dramatic scenery, the canoe traveler who sought exercise by paddling or excitement in sailing had a number of longer cruises available. One trip suggested began in Manhattan and passed through the Narrows. Hugging the Brooklyn Shore the canoe entered Coney Island Creek, and then Jamaica Bay. At this point the traveler had the choice of going out the Rockaway Inlet and sailing along the southern shore of the island. If the route through Jamaica Bay was taken, the canoe would have to be portaged over the neck of land between Jamaica Bay and Great South Bay. The route required another portage to Shinnecock Bay followed by a ten-mile sail to the Long Island Railroad station. The canoeist could then catch a train back to New York (“A Canoe Trip”, *New York Times*, Aug.8, 1872).

The total distance was about 130 miles and a sailing canoe could cover 30 miles a day. The *New York Times* suggested fish, eggs, and milk could be purchased from the farms along the route. The total cost of the trip would be about ten dollars including train fare and baggage fees for shipping the canoe (“A Canoe Trip”, *New York Times*, Aug.8, 1872).

A trip like the one described by the *New York Times* was for the adventurous solo traveler. In contrast, yachting on Jamaica Bay in the last years of the 1800s was dominated by established clubs, organized races, and formal events. It would appear from the press reports about the activities and races organized that the catboat was the dominant type of recreational craft on the bay. (Figures 26 and 27) This type of boat was so popular that it was the only type of sailboat allowed to compete under the auspices of the Windward Club. Press reports of the period describe the first class catboats of the late 1880s as ranging from 19'11" to 22'2.5". Second class catboats are described in the same press reports as ranging from 16' to 18'11" ("Catboats Compete; The First of a Series of Races Under the Windward Club Auspices", *New York Times*, Aug.12, 1889). Other press reports of the period mention first class boats as being between 17 and 23 feet and second class boats being less than 17 feet. The reports also mention a boat builder named Rigby in Canarsie who constructed both first and second class catboats, but do not provide any additional details ("With Plenty of Wind", *New York Times*, Aug.15, 1887). A later report in the magazine *Outing* mentions that H.T Rigby and Son of Canarsie had constructed ten identically designed "half raters" (sailing canoes) for use in the open waters of the lower New York Bay and racing with member of the New York Canoe Club ("Yachting", *Outing*, Vol.28, 1896, 35). Henry T. Rigby was one of two yacht builders listed in an 1890 Brooklyn business directory; he was also listed as a liquor dealer. The other builder was Richard Youman (Lain & Co. 1890, 354).

The final race in the 1888 season for the Windward Cup, awarded by the Windward Club of Ruffle Bar, was described as a, "dozen pretty cat-rigged yachts, manned by jolly crews from Brooklyn, Canarsie and Ruffle Bar" (*Outing* Vol.13, no.2, Nov.1888, 190). The final race in a series was held on Saturday, September 23, 1888, and was won by the *Julita*, built three years earlier by Dick Wallin, of South Brooklyn (190) An important race might involve boats from several clubs and watched by hundreds of people. A steam tug might be chartered to carry the race judges ("Catboats Compete; The First of a Series of Races Under the Windward Club Auspices", *New York Times*, Aug.12, 1889).

Many of the details about boating and recreation on the bay went unrecorded until something went wrong. The capsizing of the sloop yacht *Mystery* in July of 1887 is one such instance. The *Mystery* and the *Christina* were chartered by the Crescent Yacht Club for a Sunday day trip from Canarsie to Ruffle Bar. The Crescent Yacht Club owned no boats nor did any of its members. They chartered boats like the *Mystery* for outings. On this particular day they went to Ruffle Bar for a "chowder party" which included several kegs of beer. The press reports state that the captains of the *Christina* and *Mystery* both knew the bay. The trip to Ruffle Bar was 3 miles at high tide but 4.5 at low tide but the captains of the two boats appeared to have made the trip without difficulty.

The *Mystery* was described as being sloop-rigged, 30 feet long, with a fifteen foot boom,

and drawing about six feet of water with her centerboard down. The *Mystery* was owned and skippered by David Hendrickson. Hendrickson's nine year old son was on board the day of the accident.

When the time came to return to Canarsie the members of the club decided that the men should take the *Christina* while the women and children should board the *Mystery*. When the *Mystery* left Ruffle Bar she was carrying 35 passengers. She was under jib and double-reefed main sail but Hendrickson took out the reefs shortly after departure. Some of the passengers were concerned that the boat was so low in the water but Hendrickson joked that he would give the passengers a swim before returning. With the wind blowing directly from the west, the two boats would have to beat back into it. The passengers gathered on the windward side of the *Mystery* when Hendrickson tacked without giving any warning. The weight of the passengers was now on the leeward side of the boat and combined with the stiff winds capsized the *Mystery*. The jib sheets also jammed at this critical moment and if they could have been released at least some of the pressure on the sails would have been relieved. The *Christina* was only two hundred yards away but in a moment of panic an unidentified passenger lowered her main sail and the *Christina* could only move slowly under jib alone. Some of the *Christina's* passengers were able to swim to the *Mystery* and help some of those struggling in the water. Assistance also came from Andrew Robinson, a crew member of a schooner unloading coal at Barren Island. Robinson brought a rowboat out to the *Mystery* and several passengers were able to save

themselves by clinging to the rowboat's gunwale. Robinson attempted to claim no credit for the rescue but left with the schooner when she departed for Perth Amboy the next day. In a strange irony the schooner was named *Reaper*.

At least one steamboat approached the *Mystery* earlier during the trip and the captain offered a tow, which Hendrickson refused. The tugboat *J.C. Deane* under Captain Henry William Rohde also followed the *Mystery* briefly in hopes of getting a tow. The two boats were only a half-mile apart when Rohde saw the *Mystery* capsize and turned to help. However to reach the *Mystery*, Rohde had to make a detour of two miles around the sandbars. Steaming at full speed, it still took the *J.C. Deane* about ten minutes to reach the site of the accident.

In total, 12 passengers were rescued, 13 were drowned, and at least another 10 were missing including Hendrickson and his son. An inquest ruled that the *Mystery* was dangerously overloaded, was carrying too much sail in heavy winds, and should have had at least one additional adult crew-member. Although there was a keg of beer aboard the *Mystery*, Hendrickson was reported not have drunk more than two glasses during the picnic and not to have drunk anything else either before departure or en route (“Only Twelve Rescued”, *New York Times*, July 12, 1887).

Sloops like the *Mystery* did not have deep, fixed keels. Such boats with shallow hulls, broad beams, and somewhat flattened bottoms and were known in some circles as the "skimming dish" type. The *Mystery* only drew 2 feet, 5 inches with her centerboard raised. Between 1884 and 1887 an average of ten lives per year were lost among British yachtsmen. However, because of the English preference for deeper keels, none of these incidents involved a capsizing. In the period between 1887-1888 there were two serious capsizes in the United States in addition to the loss of the *Mystery*. The *Gracie*, 70 feet long, 21 feet wide and drawing 6 feet capsized with a loss of one life and the *Olivette* capsized in Newark Bay with the loss of six lives (Beynon, *Knowledge an Illustrated Magazine of Science*, Oct.1, 1891, 181-182).

Because the sailboats lacked auxiliary engines, it seems that tugboats regularly solicited towing jobs from sailboats operating in the bay. The events surrounding the *Mystery's* capsizing also dramatically demonstrated how shallow and difficult to navigate Jamaica Bay was. It is easy to understand the enthusiasm for dredging projects. It also serves as a reminder of how little regulation governed passenger-carrying boats of that period. The passengers of the two boats were working class people, entirely from Brooklyn, and all young families. Twelve of the reported 23 drowned or missing passengers were under 12-years old, several of these were infants or toddlers, and the oldest reported age of any of the passengers was 42-years. It is unfortunately not clear how typical these people were of the thousands of city dwellers who recreated on Jamaica Bay. Andrew Robinson

was described as a "coloured man" but nothing more was known about him. His quick response to the capsizing clearly saved many lives and every witness gives him credit. However there is also a sense that much was made of his being "coloured" by a society that was still struggling with the birth of the modern multicultural world. Press reports of the period often sound slightly surprised that any non-white person was capable of performing a feat of heroism or achieving anything of note.

A happier account of a short cruise was reported for July, 1896 in which members of the Rockaway Yacht Club were going to sail 26 of their members' yachts from their anchorage near Rockaway around Coney Island to the Gravesend Bay Yacht Club. Of the boats reported to be making the six-mile trip, most were described as sloops and only one as a catboat, the *Pathfinder* belonging to Fleet Captain Ben Daly. The non-sailing members of the club, dubbed the "Rocking Chair Fleet" were also reported to be making the visit ("To Visit Brother Yachtsmen", *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 24, 1896).

Jamaica Bay did not have a standardized one-design racing boat until shortly after the end of the First World War. Proposals for a one design were drawn up by the Yacht Racing Association of Jamaica Bay. The association had been formed by representatives of five yacht clubs in 1901 ("Match Yacht Race On Jamaica Bay; Lilly S. Wins the Inter-Club Event for Catboats. Boats Covered a Ten-Mile Course -- Jamaica Bay Yacht Racing

Association May Be Formed”, *New York Times*, Aug.19, 1901). Having a single class of racing sailboats had been a goal of the organization for some time but a decision was not made until the spring of 1919. A committee made up of representatives from the Canarsie Yacht Club, the Rockaway Park Yacht Club, and the Motor Boat Club of Jamaica Bay selected the Sea Mew as the class design. The design of the Sea Mew was by Fred Goeller and plans were published in *The Rudder* in November of 1917 (“Sea Mews on Jamaica Bay”, *The Rudder*, May 1919, 241).

The Sea Mew was named for a type of gull, the black-backed gull (*Larus Marinus*). The boat design was for a cat-rigged, 14 feet long, and 6.5 feet wide boat drawing 15 inches of water with the centerboard raised and 2.5 feet with it lowered. The Sea Mew was said to be large enough to fit six adults comfortably (“Sea Mews on Jamaica Bay”, *The Rudder*, May 1919, 241). In reporting on this decision, *The Rudder* praised the association for its appreciation of the needs of yacht racing and for taking the steps needed to keep sailboat racing on the bay. The same article also listed some of the yacht clubs represented in the association and the officers elected to the association:

Louis Weld, Canarsie YC, President

G.H Norris, Rockaway Point YC, First Vice President

John E. Linstrom, Bergen Beach Yacht Club, Second Vice President

F.E. Williams Tamaqua YC, Secretary

Samual Lauderbach, Rockaway Park YC, Treasurer

Charles Green, Motor Boat Club of Jamaica Bay, Measurer

("Sea Mews on Jamaica Bay", *The Rudder*, May 1919, 241)

Boat builders Rider & Suydam of Old Mill Creek were commissioned to build the boats which were expected to be ready by the start of the summer. Advertisements for Rider & Suydam list their offices at 353 West 37th Street in New York. The firm also produced an 18-foot long, vee-bottom motor boat designed to be run with a 2.5 horsepower motor (*Field and Stream*, June 1919, Vol.89, 305).

In a report on the postwar revival of yachting throughout the greater New York area, the *Rudder* of July 1919 reported on the progress of the Sea Mews. The magazine stated that during the early part of the 1919 season; most of the racing on the bay was in powerboats. During a regatta of the Old Mill Yacht Club, out of a fleet of twenty starters, there were only four sailboats. The first twelve Sea Mews were nearing completion and expected to be raced during the season ("The Revival of Yachting", *The Rudder*, July 1919, vol.35).

Three years later *The Rudder* reported that the Sea Mews were "giving their owners a great amount of fun in the Jamaica Bay section." A one J. Oppenheim (no first name or affiliation given) was credited with giving both his time and money to get the class

established (Young, "Jamaica Bay Yachting News", *The Rudder*, August 1922, Vol.38, no.8, 40). The author has been unable to locate any additional information on the class or the fate of the fleet sailing in Jamaica Bay.

With its easy access to Coney Island, Manhattan Beach, and the Rockaway Inlet, Sheepshead Bay would also grow into a center for recreational boating. In 1920 there were three yacht clubs in Sheepshead Bay, the Sheepshead Bay Yacht Club, Varuna, and the Tamaqua, which was well known for its annual races and regattas. The bay was also home to two repair yards, Olson's and Lindquist's. There was a dredged basin separating Sheepshead Bay from Manhattan Beach that was popular with canoes, skiffs, racing shells, and commercial fishing boats (Loomis, "The Motor Boat Pathfinder, Part III - South Shore of Long Island", *Country Life*, vol.38, no.2, June 1920, 116). In 1936 the city constructed a series of concrete piers as an improvement for recreational boating.

At the start of the 1920s, facilities for yachtsmen were abundant in Jamaica Bay.

Resident baymen boasted that there were about 102 boat, canoe, rowing, and yacht clubs in the area (Loomis, "The Motor Boat Pathfinder, Part III - South Shore of Long Island", *Country Life*, vol.38, no.2, June 1920, 116). The channel from the Rockaway Inlet to Canarsie was dredged to a depth of six feet and was well marked with stakes. Two barges were docked off the site that sold gasoline and local repair yards could

accommodate boats up to 40 feet. The channel past Barren Island into Mill Basin was dredged to a depth of 18 feet. The Briggs Engineering Corporation of Mill Basin specialized in modernizing coal-burning steam yachts and could also perform other types of yacht repairs. The Rockaway Peninsula was home to the Belle Harbor, Rockaway, Neponsit, and Bayswater yacht clubs. The Broad Channel Yacht Club and the Raunt Motor Boat Club were located on nearby islands (116).

The wider availability of internal combustion engines after the First World War made motorboat racing become increasingly popular. On Saturday, July 12th, 1919, seventeen power boats raced from the Rockaway Park Yacht Club to Poughkeepsie, New York. The next day they returned by the same route, covering a total distance of 180 miles. The boats were divided into two classes and timed for the northward trip. The first boat to arrive was the *Bedouin* owned by L.H Strauss. She made the trip in 8 hours and 43 minutes. The sailors had a night's rest while the race committee computed their handicaps and corrected the running times accordingly (“Poughkeepsie and Back”, *The Rudder*, Aug.1919, Vol.35, no.8, 383).

The next day the boats returned to Jamaica Bay, the *Miamada*, owned by J. Freidenberg was the first to depart at 5 am returned by 3:48 pm. The *Bedouin* won the race on corrected time in the A class and the *Virginia*, owned by A. Benkamp, won in the B class

("Poughkeepsie and Back", *The Rudder*, Aug.1919, Vol.35, no.8, 383).

Of the seventeen boats to start the race, two in the A class did not finish. The *Siren*, owned by Westfall-Kruger, was disabled. The *Terrybell*, owned by M. Schiff, withdrew. In the B class, the *Viola*, owned by G. Adolph, was disqualified ("Poughkeepsie and Back", *The Rudder*, Aug.1919, Vol.35, no.8, 383).

The names of the boats and owners are interesting in that most of the owners' surnames appear to be German, Strauss, Hamblen, Ullman, Schiff, with a few English names, Benkamp, Simmers, Growne. The boats names do not have any particular ethnic identity, *Bedouin*, *Ciro*, *Ruthie II*, *Miamada*, *Smarty II*. One boat name reflected the owner, the *Fannie U.*, owned by A. Ullman.

The problem facing organizers of motorboat racers is that all things being equal a larger boat will generally be faster than a smaller one. But a small boat fitted with a large engine will be faster than a larger boat fitted out for cruising in comfort. Fairness can only be maintained by restricting the design of the boats and the allowed horsepower.

This problem did not stop race organizers who used racing rules developed by the American Power Boat Association (APBA). The Yacht Racing Association of Jamaica Bay received so many complaints about these rules that a committee led by John F. Young was appointed to work out a new approach. The committee decided that the APBA rules would be in force for the first two races of the season. Afterwards boats would receive handicaps based on their performance in earlier races. This was reported to be the system used for sailboat racing by the Long Island Sound Handicap Class (“Yachting Items From Near and Far”, *The Rudder*, May 1922, vol.38 no.5, 46).

Not all boats of Jamaica Bay used power or sails. Many houseboats were anchored or moored in the bay. These were mostly unpowered and used as vacation cabins. The New York Times observed in June of 1900 that; “To those who have a taste for outdoor life, yet do not care to assume the cares and expenses of a country seat, the houseboat offers particular inducements.” The low-end houseboats were little more than shanties on a scow-shaped hull. They were usually of crude construction and prone to leaks. At the other end of the scale were boats like the unpowered *Nirodha*. This boat was kept on Jamaica Bay by Remington Vernon around 1900. Vernon was the developer of the Averte section of Queens. His \$10,000 boat was 107’ long, had ten staterooms, a 16 X 10’ reception room, baths and toilets, (hot or cold, fresh or salt water), her tanks could hold 1000 gallons of fresh water and 5 tons of ice (“Houseboats and How to Run Them,” *New York Times*, Jun. 10, 1900).

Power boating continued in popularity after the Second World War and Jamaica Bay became a center for the sport. The postwar plans for park development included dredged channels, launch ramps, marinas, and other amenities for boaters. On August 10th, 1947 a crowd of 400,000 persons lined the shores of Jamaica Bay to watch the International Gold Cup races. The Gold Cup was considered the top prize in speedboat racing. Guy Lombardo, the famous bandleader, was one of the contestants that day. Lombardo's boat, the *Tempo IV*, was stove by an unidentified floating object (trash maybe?) and he lost the second 30-mile heat. The *Tempo IV* was unable to complete the third heat. The day's races were won by ex-fighter pilot Danny Foster in the *Miss Peps V* ("Speedboat Race", *Life*, Vol.23, no.9, Aug.25, 1947).

Despite the water quality problems, Jamaica Bay continued to attract a number of boaters, some of who were using specialized small craft. Olympic hopeful Alexandra Harbold was the daughter of Sandor Bernhart, a champion rower from Hungary. He had qualified for spot on the country's Olympic team but was ousted for political reasons, his family having opposed the communist takeover. Alexandra began Olympic style kayaking at the age of 11 and trained in Canarsie's Paerdegat Basin. Teased by her schoolmates for carrying a canoe around Brooklyn and missing time on the Rockaway beach, Alexandra nonetheless continued training only to drop out of the sport to pursue a degree in government from Georgetown University. She re-entered competitive

kayaking after marrying Michael Bernhard, a member of the US Olympic kayaking team (“Kayaking to Barcelona”, *New York Magazine*, July 27, 1992, vol.25, no.29, 21).

Alexandra did eventually compete in the 1992 and 1996 Olympic games but did not win a medal.

Few yacht clubs survived the construction of the Belt Parkway in 1934. The parkway ran along the shores of the bay and its construction required the demolition of many of the older club buildings. The Belt Parkway also cut off access to the bay from most of the nearby neighborhoods. Although there was some protest from the clubs, it never represented a serious challenge to parkway construction. Spared from the Belt Parkway’s path, the Mill Basin and Marine Park neighborhoods of Brooklyn became the postwar centers of recreational boating activities. They are still recommended for prospective home-buyers who want to also own a boat.

Boat owners today have become involved in the bay as environmental advocates but this was not always the case. For all of their popularity yachting and sailing clubs of the late 1800s and early 1900s are conspicuously absent from debates over the future of the bay or its protection. The clubs organized regattas and races, created a one-design class, and drew up motorboat racing rules but seemed to have nothing to say about the waters they would sail upon. This stands in stark contrast to the activities of recreational fishermen,

hoteliers, oystermen, and numerous public park advocates. There is no clear reason why these groups stayed out of the controversies or if they did become involved why so no evidence of their activities remains.