

# Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk



## DESIGNATION REPORT

# Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk

## LOCATION

Borough of Brooklyn  
West 37th Street to Brighton 15th Street,  
Coney Island-Brighton Beach

## LANDMARK TYPE

Scenic

## SIGNIFICANCE

Coney Island's boardwalk is one of the best-known waterfront promenades in the world. The 2.7-mile boardwalk has given people of all economic and social backgrounds free access to the beach and seaside since 1923. It is a significant destination unto itself and the embodiment of Coney Island's democratic spirit.



Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk, east of Stillwell Avenue  
1923



Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk, east of Stillwell Avenue  
2018, LPC

# Coney Island (Riegelmann)

## Boardwalk

Brooklyn

### Designation List 506

#### LP-2583

**Built:** 1922-23, 1925-26, 1940-41

**Designer/Engineer:** Philip P. Farley

**Landmark Site:** Borough of Brooklyn, Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk, extending from West 37th Street in Coney Island to Brighton 15th Street in Brighton Beach, consisting of the 2.7-mile-long public beachfront boardwalk, its structure and walkway, comfort stations, railings, benches and lighting fixtures, steps and ramps to the beach, Steeplechase Pier, and the beach beneath the boardwalk extending southerly approximately 100 feet from the north (land side) edge of the boardwalk into the beach (ocean side), as illustrated in the map at the end of the report.

On April 17, 2018, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk as a New York City Scenic Landmark and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 1). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of the law. Seven people spoke in support of designation, including City Council Member Mark Treyger, as well as representatives of City Council Member Chaim M. Deutsch, Coney-Brighton Boardwalk Alliance, Historic Districts Council, the Landmarks Conservancy, and the Society for the Architecture of the City. There were no speakers opposed to designation. The Commission also received letters in support of designation from New York City Department of Parks & Recreation Commissioner Mitchell J. Silver, New York State Assemblyman Steven H. Cymbrowitz, and the Alliance for Coney Island, as well as two emails.

## Summary

### Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk

The Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk is one of the best-known waterfront promenades in the world. Named for Brooklyn Borough President Edward J. Riegelmann, who played a leading role in its creation during his two terms in office, the 2.7-mile-long boardwalk was part of an ambitious plan to rejuvenate Coney Island and the beach. Inspired by the success of earlier public boardwalks in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and other locations, officials hoped the boardwalk would turn the area into a year-round resort. The Coney Island Boardwalk gave people of all economic and social backgrounds free access to the beach and has become a significant destination unto itself.

Prior to the 20th century, most of Brooklyn's waterfront was privately controlled. Though a public boardwalk was proposed for Coney Island as early as 1897, it wasn't until New York State took legal action that significant progress was made. Kings County Supreme Court ruled in 1913 that at low tide the beach was owned by the state and belonged to the public, thus requiring the removal of fences and barriers. In 1921 the New York State Legislature voted to transfer the land to New York City, which made various improvements to the beach and the adjoining street grid.

Planned and designed by engineer Philip P. Farley, the Coney Island Boardwalk is an elevated deck supported by reinforced concrete piles and girders. Eighty-feet wide and 9,500-feet long, the first section, between Ocean Parkway and West 37th

Street, opened in May 1923. In attendance was Mayor John F. Hyland who called it the "happiest day of his life." Riegelmann praised the boardwalk, saying "poor people will no longer have to stand with their faces pressed against wire fences looking at the ocean." Two years later, the boardwalk was extended 4,000-feet east, to Coney Island Avenue, and under Parks Commissioner Robert Moses in 1941, an additional 1,500-feet to Brighton 15th Street.

In 1940 the boardwalk's most heavily-used section, between Ocean Parkway and Stillwell Avenue, was straightened and moved inland. At this time, the expanded beach was replenished, new recreational facilities were built, and neighboring Surf Avenue was rerouted. The boardwalk has been continuously repaired and modified, replacing the original planks and street furniture. Such changes have not diminished the Coney Island Boardwalk's appeal; this waterfront promenade remains a memorable destination for all New Yorkers and visitors from around the world who are drawn to its democratic spirit and the access it provides to sun, sand, surf, and sea breezes.

## Description

Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk

### Historic Features

The Coney Island Boardwalk is a broad, 2.7-mile-long public promenade with multiple access points and entrances to the beach, incorporating various pavilions on the ocean (south) side. Located on the Atlantic Ocean in south Brooklyn, it extends from West 37th Street in Coney Island to Brighton 15th Street in Brighton Beach. It consists of a plank deck supported by reinforced concrete piles and girders. The width of the boardwalk is generally 80 feet, except between Coney Island Avenue and Brighton 15th Street, where it is 50 feet.

As originally constructed, the boardwalk deck consisted of wood planks laid in a modified chevron pattern, flanking two longitudinal paths. On the ocean (south) side, stairs led down to the beach at regular intervals, approximately every block and a half, and comfort stations and shade pavilions were located in several locations, both at boardwalk level and beneath the boardwalk at beach level. On the north (land) side, entrance ramps (not part of designation) connected the boardwalk to the adjacent sidewalks. The boardwalk also connects 1904 Steeplechase Pier, which was originally a wood dock with vertical posts, diagonal bracing, and decking.

The boardwalk, stairs, and ramps incorporated unpainted three-rail galvanized steel pipe fences and railings. Street furniture, including lamps, benches and drinking fountains, were installed along the length of the boardwalk. Street lamps were based on historic Fifth Avenue street lamps, and benches originally included a

combination of the New York City Parks Settee and the Coney Island Boardwalk Bench, designed by the J. W. Fiske Co., c. 1918. Original cast-stone drinking fountains are located at Brighton 2nd, West 21st, West 27th and 33rd Street. As part of a reconfiguration of the boardwalk in 1940, gray-colored interlocking paving blocks were added at the ends of certain streets to create fire breaks along the wood boardwalk.<sup>1</sup>

### Existing Conditions and Alterations

#### Deck and Structure

The boardwalk planking has been replaced as part of regular cyclical maintenance and reconstruction of portions over the years, and the current deck is constructed of various materials. In addition to replacement wood planking laid in a modified chevron pattern, concrete paving has been installed from Brighton 1st Road to Ocean Parkway, and West 33rd to 37th Streets. Recycled plastic lumber with a concrete carriage path has been installed from Brighton 15th Street to Coney Island Avenue. Recycled plastic lumber was also used in the 2013 reconstruction of Steeplechase Pier after it was destroyed by Hurricane Sandy in 2012. Firebreaks, with interlocking pavers of various shape, interrupt these materials at Brighton 2nd, Stillwell Avenue, West 2nd, 15th, 21st, 27th, and 33rd Streets. These firebreaks project onto the beach and have curved ends. Original concrete piles that support the deck remain, though as the beach has been modified over the years much of this structure is no longer visible because the level of the beach is at a higher elevation than when the boardwalk was originally constructed.

#### Entrances and Stairs

The boardwalk affords access to the beach along its south side and to adjacent streets, concessions and publicly-owned buildings on the north (land) side, including shops, restaurants, amusement parks, the B&B Carousell, MCU Park, and the New York

Aquarium. Historically, entrances along the north (land) side were located at intersections with major streets, and as the boardwalk was extended and the street grid filled in, entrances were added to accommodate public access to the boardwalk. Most of the original stairs on the south (ocean) side have been modified or removed, replaced by wider steps or ramps.

#### **Street Furniture**

The original lighting fixtures have been replaced with replica Fifth Avenue-style lampposts or “Cobra head” lamps. Many lampposts incorporate horizontal brackets for banners. 1939 World’s Fair-style benches, both with and without backs, were installed in the 1990s. In addition to non-functioning cast-stone drinking fountains, noted above, cast-iron drinking fountains are located along the boardwalk on both the south (ocean) and north (land) sides. Railings are typically replacement aluminum three-rail pipe railings.

#### **Pavilions**

Structures on the south (ocean) side are mainly non-historic, including shade pavilions, comfort stations, and life guard stations. Most of the shade pavilions and comfort stations have curved roofs and date to 2000, while the elevated comfort stations in the vicinity of the New York Aquarium and opposite the Brighton Beach Playground date to 2013. These were constructed after Hurricane Sandy and were elevated based on FEMA requirements for seaside structures. Earlier structures include a shade pavilion and comfort station (1957) opposite the entrance to the aquarium near West 10th Street, and life guard stations (1970s) near Coney Island Avenue and opposite the Ford Amphitheater at West 22nd Street.

#### **Steeplechase Pier**

Located near West 17th Street, Steeplechase Pier was rebuilt in 2013 using recycled plastic lumber. The

benches and lighting fixtures on this T-shaped pier are not historic.

#### **Seasonal Fixtures**

Along the length of the boardwalk, its north (land) side is lined with amusements, restaurants, concessions, and recreational and residential structures, some of which front directly on the boardwalk. While these structures are not included in the landmark site, their functions — and in some locations near the amusements and east of Ocean Parkway in Brighton Beach, projections such as awnings or enclosures for cafes — occupy portions of the boardwalk on a temporary or seasonal basis.

## History

### Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk

The Coney Island Boardwalk was built in several stages, beginning in 1922, as part of an ambitious municipal plan to transform Coney Island into a year-round resort. The 2.7-mile-long boardwalk is a public space to enjoy sea breezes and uninterrupted ocean views. Eighty-feet wide (except east of Coney Island Avenue), this broad pedestrian promenade is wider than most city streets. Planned in combination with a greatly-expanded public beach and the opening of many new streets, the boardwalk made certain that Coney Island would remain a summertime destination, open to all.<sup>2</sup>

### Beaches and Boardwalks

The Coney Island Boardwalk connects four neighborhoods in south Brooklyn: Sea Gate, Coney Island, Brighton Beach, and Manhattan Beach. Though New York City has 520 miles of coast, prior to the 20th century there was relatively little public access to the shore. Crowded with commercial activity or left unimproved, it was a place where relatively few New Yorkers ventured.

One of the first areas with waterfront access was the Battery in Lower Manhattan, which by 1800 had been configured to include an “elegant and spacious promenade” facing Upper New York Bay.<sup>3</sup> Developer Hezekiah Pierrepont proposed a similar amenity for Brooklyn Heights in 1827 but this idea was not realized until construction of the Brooklyn Queens Expressway in 1950, which incorporates a cantilevered 1,820-foot esplanade (part of the Brooklyn Heights Historic District), overlooking the East River.



The first ocean boardwalk in the United States opened in Atlantic City in 1870. Conceived by hotel owner Jacob Keim, it was financed by the local government. Eight or ten feet wide and one mile long, it was laid on or close to the sand, and could be dismantled during winter months.<sup>4</sup> In subsequent decades the walkway was raised and enlarged, growing to 60 feet wide and seven miles long. In a 1904 article calling for a “comprehensive survey” of New York City’s waterfront, Atlantic City was described as the first city to “grasp the importance of developing their ocean frontage” and to “demonstrate the profit of public control of a beach.”<sup>5</sup> Other pioneering boardwalks in New Jersey were built in Asbury Park (1870s) and Ocean City (1880). One of the first in New York State was located in Long Beach, begun in 1907. Commissioned by developer William H. Reynolds, owner of Dreamland (amusement park) at Coney Island, this 50-foot-wide walkway was part of a projected “ideal city by the sea.”<sup>6</sup>

One of the first public boardwalks constructed in New York City was, arguably, part of the Brooklyn Bridge (1883, a New York City Landmark). Threaded between the center cables, this elevated public walkway rises above vehicular traffic, offering pedestrians sweeping views of Manhattan and Brooklyn.

In Coney Island, early boardwalks were privately owned. By the 1890s, a boardwalk had been constructed in Brighton Beach and Manhattan Beach, connecting prominent hotels and, later, residential bungalow colonies.<sup>7</sup> Entrepreneur George C. Tilyou erected boardwalks in Coney Island and Rockaway Beach, Queens.<sup>8</sup> In addition, there were several wood-and-iron ferry landings that incorporated seating, such as the Iron Pier (1879, demolished), built by the Ocean Navigation and Pier Company near West 8th Street, followed by the New Iron Pier (1881, demolished), built by the Culver

Railroad, near West 5<sup>th</sup> Street, and Steeplechase Pier (1904, reconstructed), originally part of Steeplechase Park, near West 17th Street.<sup>9</sup>

New York City currently has three waterfront boardwalks. In addition to Coney Island, there is the Franklin D. Roosevelt Boardwalk (2.5 miles, 1935) in Midland Beach, Staten Island, and the Rockaway Beach Boardwalk (6.2 miles, unified in 1920s) in Queens. Both were damaged during Hurricane Sandy in 2012 and have been mostly rebuilt. Orchard Beach (1934-37, a New York City Landmark), facing Long Island Sound in the Bronx, has a crescent-shaped promenade made of concrete pavers.

### **Coney Island**

Coney Island has been a summer destination for nearly two centuries.<sup>10</sup> Named by Dutch settlers for the rabbits (konijn) that once flourished among the dunes, it faces Lower New York Bay and Sandy Hook, New Jersey, and was formerly part of Gravesend, one of Brooklyn’s original six towns. Gravesend and Coney Island are separated by a waterway called Coney Island Creek. A bridge was built in 1823, followed by the area’s first hotel, Coney Island House, in 1824 or 1829. Ocean Parkway (1874-76, a New York City Scenic Landmark) connects Coney Island to central Brooklyn and Prospect Park (1866-73, a New York City Scenic Landmark). To the east of this multi-lane road’s south terminus is Brighton Beach and Manhattan Beach, and to the west is what was originally known as West Brighton Beach (now generally called Coney Island) and Norton’s Point (now Sea Gate).<sup>11</sup> Designed by landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, where Ocean Parkway ended in Coney Island was originally a “concourse or shore road” that ran for about a mile “upon an embankment of sand.”<sup>12</sup> Like the future boardwalk, this public amenity had

“platforms with seats” that were “available to all, without money [sic], and without price.”<sup>13</sup>

Prior to construction of the boardwalk there was limited public access to the beach. In 1882, *The New York Times* reported that many “valuable lots on the sea-shore” had been acquired from the town of Gravesend under suspicious circumstance “at prices very much below their actual value.”<sup>14</sup> These plots were subdivided and resold, without regard to public needs and circulation patterns. The West End Improvement League of Coney Island later observed:

The fact is, there is but one street that is physically and legally opened from Surf avenue to the beach – West Twenty-third Street. West Tenth street is privately owned, and is closed in on both sides by barriers. West Twenty-first street is some two hundred feet short of reaching the beach. All other access to the beach is through narrow, privately owned alleys leading to “toll gate” hotels and pavilions at the beach end. Everything here, physical, moral and political, is haphazard. There is no comprehensive scheme of development.<sup>15</sup>

During the last decades of the 19th century, local property owners profited from the growing popularity of ocean bathing. Swimming was perceived as healthy and invigorating and many private bathhouses opened close to the waterfront. A welcome escape from urban life, these Coney Island businesses catered to city residents who came for the day, charging them a fee to rent lockers, change into swimsuits, and use the beach.

West Brighton, located between Brighton Beach and the far western point of Coney Island, was

served by the Prospect Park & Coney Island Railroad, commonly known as the Culver Line. Carrying numerous day-trippers from teeming tenements, this train terminated at a large depot near 17th Street across from Culver Plaza.<sup>16</sup> Eventually three railroad terminals on the north side of Surf Avenue between West 7th Street and Stillwell Avenue were merged into a single elevated structure known as the New West End Terminal (now Stillwell Avenue) in 1919.

West Brighton attracted numerous bathing pavilions, restaurants, saloons, variety shows, small stores, games and unusual attractions such as “Lucy the Elephant” (destroyed 1896) and the Iron Tower (relocated from the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, 1876-1911). It was “Coney’s true entertainment district, attracting the lion’s share of the island’s visitors.”<sup>17</sup>

By the end of the 19th century a series of devastating fires opened up vast tracts of land for redevelopment and the West Brighton section became home to a new type of diversion: the enclosed amusement park. In 1895 Paul Boyton’s Sea Lion Park opened, quickly succeeded in 1897 by George C. Tilyou’s Steeplechase Park, and along with Luna Park (opened 1903) and Dreamland (opened 1904) the parks offered gravity-defying mechanical rides, exotic fantasy architecture shimmering with electric lights, sideshows, live entertainment, music and dance halls, bathing pavilions and eateries.<sup>18</sup> As described by Charles Denson in *Coney Island Lost and Found*: “The masses had their own world.”<sup>19</sup>

These semi-enclosed entertainment venues charged admission and often incorporated structures that extended onto the beach and into the ocean. Piers, as well as amusement rides like “Shoot-the-Chutes” at Dreamland, blocked views of the sea and interfered with swimming. By the first decade of the 20th century, beach conditions were considered

dreadful. Not only was access to – and along – the beach obstructed by structures, stairs, ladders and barbed wire, which “made it necessary to either swim around or make a detour of four thousand feet by way of Surf Avenue,” but in many places the sand had begun to wash away, leaving only a sliver of shoreline.<sup>20</sup>

It was during the first decades of the 20th century that the idea of a “New Coney Island” began to take shape. The “New Coney Island” was promoted by some Coney business leaders who wanted to turn Coney Island into a year-round resort, similar to Atlantic City, and to change its image to a more wholesome one.<sup>21</sup>

### Public Privileges

Interest in creating a public boardwalk dates to the late 1890s and the consolidation of New York City. As part of an effort to improve Coney Island’s character, Brooklyn Borough President Edward M. Grout and the Board of Public Improvements developed plans for a public park in 1897. They hoped owners of waterfront property would cede small parcels to the city, resulting in a 100-foot-wide strip for construction of a boardwalk.<sup>22</sup> Though hearings took place in 1900, only Seaside Park (1902, reconfigured), on the north side of the concourse, between Ocean Parkway and West 5th Street, was built.

Boardwalks were championed at the start of the 20th century as a solution to various urban woes. Economist Simon Nelson Patten claimed in 1904 that the boardwalk had “saved” Atlantic City’s reputation, driving back “vulgarity and vice,” while stimulating “wholesome amusements.”<sup>23</sup> The New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor shared this view, urging city officials to create an “ideal seaside park” with a “passable free beach.”<sup>24</sup> In the spirit of the Small Parks Act, passed in 1887, this reform group developed a modest

scheme that incorporated a 20-foot-wide boardwalk.<sup>25</sup> The organization maintained that Coney Island offered:

. . . the grandest opportunity to influence the attitude of New York’s citizenship, rich and poor alike . . . to compensate the industrial classes for the monotonies of their toil, widen their mental and social horizon, and increase their capacity for enjoyment.<sup>26</sup>

In subsequent years, various organizations drafted proposals for grander boardwalks. These schemes, however, expressed little interest in the beach, swimming, or reclaiming the waterfront. A 1908 plan presented to the Board of Estimate & Apportionment called for a two-mile-long, 60-foot-wide boardwalk with eight approaches “to be built over the ocean,” whereas a 1911 proposal was “staked down in the ocean, so far from the shore that it [would] be beyond the breakers, and so high in the air that no wave [could] ever reach it.” Wider than Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, this “huge promenade” would have stretched from Manhattan Beach to Sea Gate – about the same length as the current boardwalk.<sup>27</sup>

*Neglected Coney Island*, a 36-page booklet, was published by the West End Improvement League of Coney Island in 1912. Illustrated with full-page photographs, it concluded that “the conditions pictured and described herein call for prompt action.”<sup>28</sup> The League urged the city to construct a 60-foot-wide boardwalk on land acquired through condemnation. The booklet included a rosy rendering of the League’s scheme, forecasting the construction of new hotels and streets. Not only did the Brooklyn Board of Real Estate Brokers “heartily endorse” the proposal, but so did the Board of Estimate, which approved a special committee’s report

recommending construction of a similar-width boardwalk in April 1913.<sup>29</sup>

New York State took legal action to clear beach obstructions in October 1912. Attorney General Thomas Carmody sued the owners of 40 waterfront properties, including Steeplechase Park, contending that the public:

. . . have always had and now have the right to use the [beach] at all times for the purposes of bathing, boating and fishing, and to pass over the same free from unnecessary and unreasonable obstructions or interference.<sup>30</sup>

Justice Russell Benedict of Kings County Supreme Court ruled in the state's favor, determining in late September 1913 (*People v. Steeplechase Co.* 218 N.Y. 459) that:

. . . ownership of the foreshore at Coney Island is vested in the State, and bulkheads, fences, and other structures which interfere with the right of the public to a free passage along the beach between high and low water must be removed.<sup>31</sup>

The court's finding shaped the future of Brooklyn's waterfront, as well as the shore of Long Island and other "navigable waters of the State."<sup>32</sup>

This legal decision confirmed that New York State owned the "beach at low tide."<sup>33</sup> In May 1921 the Legislature voted to authorize the release of this land to the city, which was empowered to acquire "any upland" by purchase, cession, or condemnation from the west end of Coney Island to Beach 25th Street in Far Rockaway, Queens. Furthermore, Borough Presidents were permitted to build and improve "streets, avenues, boulevards, promenades,

walks, boardwalks and ramps for the use of the public within such public beach" and to fill in "lands under water when necessary."<sup>34</sup>

In anticipation of the legislation's passage, the Board of Estimate held preliminary hearings on the boardwalk's design in December 1919. Despite disputes concerning financing and the expense of condemnation, the basic plan was approved in July 1920 and title to the land was vested to the City of New York on October 1, 1921.<sup>35</sup> Though some public officials believed Brooklyn should cover the full cost of construction, in late July 1921 the Board of Estimate approved a \$1.9 million plan "to initiate the improvement of the public beach at Coney Island . . . with streets, avenues, boulevards, promenades, walks, boardwalks, and ramps," in which 65 percent would be "borne and paid by The City of New York" and the remainder assessed to local property owners.<sup>36</sup>

### **Brooklyn's "Municipal" Boardwalk**

Edward J. Rieglemann (1869-1941) was called the "father" of the Coney Island Boardwalk.<sup>37</sup> As Brooklyn Borough President, from 1918 to 1924, he voiced unwavering support for its construction, claiming in 1919 it was too late to "restore the dunes known by our fathers" and only by placing the entire waterfront under municipal control could a public beach be built, enhancing local realty values. During construction, Rieglemann boasted:

All I can say is that after we get old Coney cleaned up, and the Boardwalk going, there will be no other place like it in the whole, wide world . . . On the sites of the existing cheap structures you will see great modern hotels going up. Atlantic City? Atlantic City won't be in it. Just wait and see.<sup>38</sup>

Born on Manhattan's Lower East Side, Riegelmann attended Metropolis Law School (now part of New York University). He lived in a YMCA rooming house on Marcy Avenue in Williamsburg for many years and had a distinguished career as a public servant, acting as assistant counsel in the Bureau of Street Openings (c. 1909-15), Kings County Sheriff (1915-17), Brooklyn Borough President (two terms), and Justice of The Supreme Court of New York State (1925-1939). He was also chairman of the Manhattan Bridge Approach & Plaza Commission (a New York City Landmark, 1910-15) and helped secure funding for the Municipal Building (part of the Borough Hall Skyscraper District in Brooklyn, 1923-26).

To explain the city's plan to the public, a 40-by-15 foot illuminated sign was installed at the south end of Ocean Parkway in August 1921. It described the boardwalk in precise detail, providing information about such varied matters as ownership, condemnation proceedings, contracts, construction materials, and related improvements.<sup>39</sup> A public ceremony celebrated the start of construction on October 1, 1921. This event, attended by more than 2,500 people, took place on an "improvised platform" adjacent to the beach. Riegelmann drove in the "first stake" and later that evening the Coney Island Board of Trade hosted a dinner attended by former New York State Governor Alfred E. Smith, Mayor John F. Hylan, and Manhattan Borough President Henry H. Curran.

The boardwalk generated frequent press coverage, including both brief new reports and longer feature articles. In June 1922, *The Brooklyn Standard Union* claimed that "No public improvement since the completion of the Brooklyn Bridge [had] aroused greater public interest" and that "thousands of communications" had been received from other cities and resorts requesting "advice on every detail of construction."<sup>40</sup> And *The Evening*

*Telegram* observed in September 1922 that:

New York scientists and engineers have succeeded where King Canute failed to halt the onward march of the tides and have further disturbed the ocean by moving its bed to make a playground for hundreds of thousands of city children.<sup>41</sup>

Decades later, in 1994, the boardwalk (and beach) received an award from the American Shore & Beach Preservation Association (ASBPA), which claimed it was "on par with renowned infrastructure accomplishments" like the Catskill Mountain water system and Central Park, which serves people who would "not have access to exclusive Long Island beaches."<sup>42</sup>

### Design and Construction

Philip P. Farley (c. 1871-1958) planned the boardwalk and beach. He described the project in practical terms:

Naturally to the lay mind the most attractive feature and popular part of the improvement is the construction of the boardwalk. While it cannot be said that the structure itself will be a work of art, it will be strong, durable and suitable to the needs of the immense crowds that yearly throng New York's most convenient beach.<sup>43</sup>

Born in Brooklyn, Farley was a graduate of the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, New York, in 1893. He began his career as a civil engineer in Atlantic City and later worked on construction of Brooklyn's 4th Avenue subway.<sup>44</sup>

Riegelmann appointed Farley as consulting engineer for the Borough of Brooklyn in 1918. He served six successive borough presidents, retiring in 1951. In addition to Coney Island's boardwalk, he worked on various highway projects and the Brooklyn Heights promenade.<sup>45</sup>

In a 1923 presentation to the Municipal Engineers of the City of New York, Farley described the boardwalk as an "elevated highway." The wood deck was erected 13 or 14 feet above normal high tide to protect it from storms and to "give ample clear space under the boardwalk both longitudinally and laterally."<sup>46</sup> Farley, who consulted with J. W. Hackney, engineer of Atlantic City's boardwalk, used precast reinforced concrete girders and bents to support the deck. Hackney reported that when this material was used above the high water mark, as it would be at Coney Island, it showed almost no deterioration.<sup>47</sup> Each bent contains two groups of four 14-inch square reinforced concrete piles. Manufactured by the contractor Phoenix Construction in Flushing, Queens, the 28-foot-tall piles were driven into the sand at an approximate depth of 19 feet. The first bents were installed in March 1922 and the last in January 1923. Placed almost 20 feet apart, the girders were visible at the ends, where they cantilevered slightly beyond the piles.

The deck was originally constructed with Douglas fir planks. Resting on yellow pine beams, the planks were sourced in Washington State. This type of wood was chosen due to its successful use on the Atlantic City boardwalk and for seating at Yale Bowl (1913-14), New Haven, Connecticut.<sup>48</sup> Dressed on four sides, with thin joints, the planks were laid on a diagonal to "facilitate ease in walking."<sup>49</sup> In addition, there were two six-foot wide longitudinal strips for rolling chairs.<sup>50</sup> This arrangement gave the wood deck a chevron-like pattern.

Construction was completed in three phases.

From east to west, sections opened in October 1922 (Ocean Parkway to West 8<sup>th</sup> Street), December 1922 (to West 17<sup>th</sup> Street), and May 1923 (to West 37<sup>th</sup> Street). A major achievement, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported that Coney Island's boardwalk was longer, wider, and more costly than similar promenades in Atlantic City, Rockaway Park, Rockaway Beach, and Long Beach.<sup>51</sup> In April 1923, despite opposition from Riegelmann (and his Commissioner of Public Works), the Board of Alderman passed a resolution that named the boardwalk for the Borough President.<sup>52</sup>

### Opening

On May 15, 1923, the boardwalk formally opened. Approximately 10,000 people attended the flag-raising ceremony, which took place at Ocean Parkway in heavy fog. This event was followed by a luncheon and parade. From the reviewing stand, Riegelmann spoke first. He thanked Farley for his contributions, while criticizing the "private owners who formerly fenced off their little beaches and obstructed the view of the ocean to the general public." He boasted that "poor people will no longer have to stand with their faces pressed against wire fences looking at the ocean." Mayor John F. Hyland praised Riegelmann and "declared it was the happiest day of his life."<sup>53</sup>

For street furniture, Farley selected familiar designs made from durable materials. The original fences and railings were made of unpainted galvanized steel pipe and the 170 iron-pole lamps were similar to the street lamps on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. Each pole had twin arms with glass luminaries, installed about every 80 feet along the ocean side, and where streets intersected with the boardwalk.<sup>54</sup> J. W. Fiske Ironworks Company supplied the original wood-and-iron settee benches, which were oriented towards the ocean.

At the time of the boardwalk's completion,

New York City Comptroller Charles L. Craig proclaimed there was still work to be done and that it could not be called a “real boardwalk” until pergolas, rest rooms, and related conveniences were designed and installed.<sup>55</sup> In June 1924, the Board of Estimate adopted a resolution to fund construction of five “pergolas or pavilions within the lines of the public beach,” as well as five comfort stations.<sup>56</sup> Completed in the spring of 1925, these structures were designed by J. Sarsfield Kennedy (d. 1946), architect of the Howard & Jessie Jones House (1916-17, a New York City Landmark) in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, and the Prospect Park Picnic House (1927, part of Prospect Park Scenic Landmark).

Located on the ocean side of the boardwalk, these Mediterranean-Revival-style pavilions (replaced, no longer extant) were described as “artistic,” with arched entrances, rows of Tuscan columns, corner piers, and red tile roofs.<sup>57</sup> Illuminated with electric fixtures, each structure’s seating capacity was reportedly more than four hundred. Comfort stations (replaced, no longer extant) were built beneath the level of the boardwalk. Each structure had a semi-circular footprint flanked by curving ornamental stairs, with roof terraces that originally formed an extension of the boardwalk.

The boardwalk was also designed with neo-classical-style drinking fountains. Though few survive, some non-functioning units are found near the West 21st, 27th, and 33rd Street entrance ramps. Probably made of cast stone, now painted, these fountains have recessed niches with basins and curved pediments that support torch-like lighting fixtures.

### “Free and Open Access”<sup>58</sup>

Riegelmann also persuaded the city to fund major improvements to the beach. *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* called this “the most important feature of the entire plan.”<sup>59</sup> Several hundred feet were added to

the eroded shoreline by pumping sand from the ocean floor. *The Evening Telegram* claimed that this was “the first attempt in history to create a beach of such proportions in such a manner.”<sup>60</sup> In an attempt to protect the shore from future erosion, various protective structures were built, including a series of timber groynes and granite rip rap jetties, as well as a bulkhead of timber piles, buried in sand.<sup>61</sup> Work began in August 1922 and the beach was completed by the time the boardwalk was dedicated the following year. Capacity was greater than 500,000 and people could now rent beach chairs, available at a price that was “considered within the means of the average patron.”<sup>62</sup>

With the opening of the boardwalk and beach, a new street plan was implemented in Coney Island. Approved by the Board of Estimate in December 1922, construction began in late 1923 and was mostly finished in 1925. At a great cost to the city, 288 city lots were condemned, including 175 houses and sections of Steeplechase Park.<sup>63</sup> Surf Avenue and Stillwell Avenue were widened and approximately 18 asphalt streets, mostly 60-foot wide, were opened between West 8th and West 35th Streets. *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported:

These new highways will be at about 250-foot intervals and will give convenient access to the deck of the great elevated boulevard from nearly every part of Brooklyn.<sup>64</sup>

Streets that were formerly private were also integrated into the street grid. For instance, Thompson’s Walk, a narrow passage between Surf Avenue and the boardwalk, was widened and renamed West 12th Street.<sup>65</sup>

These changes greatly improved public access to the boardwalk and beach. Sidewalks and curbs were installed, as well as sewers. Where most

of the new streets intersected with the boardwalk, people could now enter the beach directly at grade, passing beneath the deck, or ascend newly-constructed wood ramps that were generally located at the end of each sidewalk.

Municipal improvements like these were anticipated to transform Coney Island. Not only did public officials believe the boardwalk would attract new investment to the rejuvenated shore, but that it could play a role in relieving congestion on Surf Avenue, Coney Island's busiest thoroughfare. Though the promise of a year-round resort with stylish hotels like Atlantic City was never realized, these improvements proved popular with city residents and businesses.

### **Brighton Beach Extension**

The Board of Estimate approved construction of the Brighton Beach Extension in June 1925.<sup>66</sup> The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* later reported "The Coney Island Boardwalk is to be lengthened 3,000 to 4,000 feet carrying it to Coney Island ave."<sup>67</sup> The city took title to the land in August 1925. Work began that fall and was completed in July 1926. In addition to extending the boardwalk east, the shoreline's jagged edge was straightened and a beach was created between Brighton 2nd Street and Coney Island Avenue. To increase public access, formerly private streets were widened and paved, and new streets, such as Brightwater Court, were established.<sup>68</sup>

No "ceremonious opening" was held to mark the end of construction. Borough President Joseph A. Guider believed people would rather use the new boardwalk than "listen to talk about it."<sup>69</sup> The extension transformed Brighton Beach. Not only did real estate values surge but it became a year-round residential neighborhood, with "hundreds of bungalows" between the elevated railway and the boardwalk replaced by mostly six-story elevator apartment houses in the late 1920s and 1930s.<sup>70</sup>

A comfort station and two shade pavilions were built along the extension's ocean side in late 1926 or early 1927. These Mediterranean-Revival-style structures have been replaced, while an original (non-functioning) drinking fountain survives at Brighton 2nd Street.

### **Steeplechase Pier**

Near West 17th Street the boardwalk intersects with Steeplechase Pier, the only remaining ocean pier in Coney Island. Built (or perhaps lengthened) in 1904, it was originally a simple wood dock with vertical posts, diagonal bracing, and decking.<sup>71</sup>

Originally a steamboat landing, the pier served daily ferries from Manhattan and other locations that delivered thousands of passengers directly to Steeplechase Park. Estimated to be as long as 2,000-feet in 1904, it was especially popular for fishing. The catch was said to be "first class, and at times there [were] hundreds of anglers busy filling their baskets."<sup>72</sup> Also used as a promenade, *The Evening World* urged strollers to:

Just walk out to the end of the pier if you wish to enjoy the ocean. And at night! There is no more beautiful view around New York than the sight of the twinkling colored lights of Coney Island and its reflection in the water.<sup>73</sup>

Early 20th-century photos and postcards show the deck contained boat landings and related structures, possibly used by ferry operators, as well as wood benches and lighting fixtures along both sides.

When Coney Island's waterfront was vested to the city in October 1921, Steeplechase Pier became public property and part of the new boardwalk. Separated from the amusement park, it was now open to all. When the first section opened



in December 1922, people streamed onto the pier, which was slightly elevated and reached by broad steps. Extensive alterations were proposed in the mid-1920s, including the widening of the pier and construction of the “largest auditorium in the city.”<sup>74</sup> This ambitious project did not move ahead but repairs were made to accommodate various users, including ferry operators until 1932.<sup>75</sup>

Damaged over the years by boat accidents, repeated fires and storms, as part of a 1957 reconstruction projection a T-shaped extension was added to the ocean end. Following Hurricane Sandy in October 2012, the pier was redesigned by LTL Architects. The now 1,040-foot pier reopened in October 2013.

### “Streamlining” the Boardwalk

With changes to the City Charter in 1938, control of the boardwalk was transferred from the Borough President of Brooklyn to the New York City Parks Department. Robert Moses, who became Parks Commissioner in 1934, was a strong critic of his Brooklyn predecessors. He wrote Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia in 1937:

. . . these beaches and boardwalks were never properly planned, and cannot under present conditions be properly maintained . . . The boardwalk was constructed too near the water without providing any play areas on the north side . . . when sand was pumped in to increase the width of the beach, instead of obtaining good white material, the contractor was allowed to deposit brown sand on the beach.”<sup>76</sup>

To remedy the situation, a 3,800-foot section, between Ocean Parkway and Stillwell Avenue, was

straightened (with a gentle curve) and moved almost 300 feet inland. By altering the boardwalk’s course, 20 buildings were condemned and the Municipal Baths at West 5th Street (c. 1911, no longer extant) was partly demolished.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, the Parks Department replenished and expanded the beach, using sand imported from Rockaway Inlet, Queens, and New Jersey.<sup>78</sup> Surf Avenue was rerouted and a new street was cut through to the boardwalk from Surf Avenue, near West 9th Street.<sup>79</sup>

Though some criticized the scheme, saying the “streamlining” of Coney Island would diminish the area’s character, making it into “another Jones Beach,” a revised plan was approved by the Board of Estimate in December 1939 and construction began in January 1940.<sup>80</sup> Five months later, at the end of May 1940, the boardwalk reopened “without fanfare.”<sup>81</sup> The Arthur A. Johnson-Necaro Company, of Long Island City, served as general contractor.<sup>82</sup> James A. Dawson (d. 1973), Parks Director in Charge of Design, recalled:

The boardwalk job was completed ahead of time, and the spring crowds, who visit Coney Island, never knew that their old boardwalk had, almost literally, taken a walk itself during the winter months.<sup>83</sup>

The following year, 1941, the Parks Department extended the boardwalk 1,500 feet east, from Coney Island Avenue to Brighton 15th Street, near Corbin Place. An 18-acre parcel had been acquired in October 1938 from Joseph P. Day, developer and operator of the Brighton Beach and Manhattan Beach Baths. With this narrower 50-foot-wide extension, Coney Island’s boardwalk reached its current length of 2.7 miles.<sup>84</sup>

## Cultural History of the Boardwalk

Coney Island is historically associated with New York City's popular culture at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, summed up by historian John F. Kasson in *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century*:

Its purest expression at this time lay in the realm of commercial amusements . . . Nowhere were these symbols and their relationship to the new mass audience more clearly revealed than at the turn of the century Coney Island.<sup>85</sup>

Beginning as a seaside resort, by 1882 Coney Island “had been transformed into a popular seaside pleasure ground, ‘the true republic of watering-places,’” and “was host to five million visitors annually.”<sup>86</sup> Urban populations were growing rapidly at the turn of the 20th century, and a need for an affordable, leisurely escape led to the construction of amusement parks throughout the United States. Places like Philadelphia's Willow Grove Park (1896), and Boston's Atlantic Paragon Park (1868)<sup>87</sup> provided needed relief from urban life. Among these, Coney Island was the biggest and most famous.<sup>88</sup> Its amusement parks<sup>89</sup> took visitors to exotic places and changed the meaning of “amusement” from events that spectators watched to events they participated in.<sup>90</sup>

In the first two decades of the 20th century, public transportation to the area rapidly developed, increasing the number of people that visited Coney Island. An article in *The New York Times* noted that more than 300,000 people visited Coney Island in a single day during 1918, with people beginning to arrive as early as day break.<sup>91</sup>

In 1923, as construction of the boardwalk was nearing completion, *Rider's New York City*, a

popular guide-book, observed:

. . . the most westerly of the series of popular seaside playgrounds on the S[outh] coast of Long Island, is, including West Brighton, the oldest, most densely crowded and most democratic of them all.<sup>92</sup>

For the first time in New York City, the boardwalk and beach were accessible to people from all economic and social backgrounds. The boardwalk attracted residents and visitors from all over the world, who were impressed by the democratic spirit of this new public space. Historian Michael Immerso wrote:

About Coney's grand new boardwalk, the French visitor commented: “Around this city of cheap pleasure for cheap people, New York has built a magnificent promenade, three kilometers long and swept by the air of the sea. Families which cannot go to the rich watering places come in hordes on Sunday to enjoy the municipal beach. It is like the Promenade des Anglais at Nice turned over to the proletariat.”<sup>93</sup>

### Spectacle and Amusements

The boardwalk enhanced Coney Island's amusements by providing a main pedestrian thoroughfare linking various sites and the beach, and prompted the construction of new ones. It was an attraction in and of itself, and created an additional amusement in Coney Island – the simple act of promenading, of seeing and being seen. As pedestrian traffic shifted from crowded Surf Avenue,

it became Coney's "Main Street."<sup>94</sup>

The boardwalk provided a new way to reach and enjoy the Wonder Wheel (1920, New York City Landmark), the 150-foot tall structure designed by Charles Herman. The Wonder Wheel provided open views of the ocean and all of Coney Island, and at night it illuminated the new boardwalk. New York City Landmarks that date from the early decades of the boardwalk include: Childs Restaurant, The Cyclone, and the Coney Island (later Shore) Theater. Childs, a restaurant chain that started in the late-19th century, opened on the boardwalk at West 19th Street in 1923. The fanciful building incorporated the vernacular of location into its design, including elaborate terra-cotta tile ornament relating to the sea and shore.<sup>95</sup> The colorful building has large arched openings that connected diners to the experience of the boardwalk. The Cyclone was constructed in 1927, not long after the boardwalk opened, and is the only remaining operational roller coaster from Coney Island's early 20th-century heyday. Aviator Charles Lindbergh rode the Cyclone and claimed, "A ride on the Cyclone is a greater thrill than flying an airplane at top speed."<sup>96</sup> Later, in 1940, the Parachute Jump from the New York World's Fair (1939-40) was moved and rebuilt in Steeplechase Park, adjacent to the boardwalk at West 16<sup>th</sup> Street. At 250 feet, it remains one of Coney Island's most recognizable landmarks.

The ubiquitous American summer staple, the hot dog, was invented in Coney Island, and remains a key element of the culture of the boardwalk. Charles Feltman, a German immigrant, ran Feltman's Ocean Pavilion along West 10th and Surf Avenue, the largest establishment of its kind in late-19<sup>th</sup> century Coney Island.<sup>97</sup> He started by selling fresh-baked pies to Coney Island hotels,<sup>98</sup> and installed a stove in his vending cart in order to cook what became known as hot dogs and served them in buns so they could be eaten as sandwiches. The popularity of hot

dogs rose quickly, and visitors to the boardwalk enjoyed the fact they could eat them without having to leave the beach. "The year the boardwalk opened, 1923, Feltman's Coney Island served more than 5 million customers."<sup>99</sup>

In 1915, Nathan Handwerker worked at Feltman's,<sup>100</sup> and from there started his own hot dog stand. It was located at the corner of Surf and Stillwell Avenues and charged five cents less than Feltman's. This prominent location, close to the new subway station, and its lower price, led to Nathan's popularity, with a second location directly on the boardwalk. Nathan's annual July 4th competitive hot dog eating contest receives international attention.

In the tradition of spectacle associated with Coney Island, the annual Mermaid Parade started in 1983 as a means of "self-expression in public."<sup>101</sup> Each summer participants dress in a wide range of sea themed costumes, stroll down Surf Avenue, and complete the parade route along the boardwalk. The King and Queen of the parade are crowned and perform the "Beach Ceremony" to open the beach for a new season.

#### **The Boardwalk and the Arts**

Artists and filmmakers have historically been drawn to Coney Island and the boardwalk to capture the throngs of visitors, and also the city and nation's changing social mores and demographics. The boardwalk has been featured prominently in the visual arts since opening. Harry Roseland painted several remarkable paintings of the boardwalk and beach in the 1930s. In *Coney Island* (late 1930s, private collection), the boardwalk divides the canvas showing the promenading visitors along it, while the crowded beach below is filled with bathing-suit-clad visitors. Benton Murdoch Spruance's lithograph *The People Play-Summer* (1938, Philadelphia Museum of Art) depicts a similar scene. In both works the boardwalk is the focal point, drawing the viewer into

the scene. In Roseland's painting, the boardwalk carries the reader's eye through the work, while in Spruance's piece the boardwalk acts as an organizer, helping to arrange the chaos of the people on and below it. In many such artworks the boardwalk is the focus and embodiment of a larger Coney Island.

Movies, television and music videos have used Coney Island and the boardwalk as their visual backdrop or plot narrative throughout its history. The 1930 movie *Sinner's Holiday*, starring James Cagney and Lucille Laverne, is based on a play about a penny arcade along the boardwalk. The 1953 movie *Little Fugitive* was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Writing (now screenplay) and showcased the boardwalk and attached amusements as a seven-year-old boy tries to escape his worries and lose himself in the rides and attractions. Subsequent films featuring Coney Island and the boardwalk include *Annie Hall* (1977) and the cult classic *The Warriors* (1979), in which a teenage gang fights to save its neighborhood. The boardwalk has appeared in a broad spectrum of television shows, from children's shows like *Dora the Explorer*, to the epitome of New York-based shows, *Seinfeld*. Coney Island's boardwalk and amusements have also inspired musicians: Lou Reed's album *Coney Island Baby* (1976) pays homage to the neighborhood, while music videos by Salt-N-Pepa (1993) and Beyonce (2013) showcase the boardwalk.

### Evolution of the Boardwalk

Since opening in the 1920s, the boardwalk has been continuously repaired in response to fires and storm damage. Such repairs have affected the character of the deck, the types of street furniture, and the various structures that border it, with limited impact on how the public experiences the promenade. One of the earliest changes occurred in 1941, when concrete pavers were installed where the boardwalk intersects with specific streets. These fire breaks are located at

the foot of Brighton 2nd Street and Stillwell Avenue, and at West 15th, 21st, 27th and 33rd Streets.

In the 1960s, the original iron street lamps were replaced by "cobra head" lights. Most of these sleek aluminum fixtures have been replaced with reproductions of the original iron fixtures along the south side, facing the ocean. Current street furniture includes World's-Fair-type seating and benches, as well as iron drinking fountains.

The original pavilions and comfort stations have all been replaced. The oldest existing structure is located near West 10th Street. Possibly dating to 1940 or 1957, this flat-roofed concrete structure combines a shade pavilion with a beach-level comfort station. Other ocean-side structures include concrete and brick lifeguard stations built in the 1970s, comfort stations and shade pavilions with curved roofs from c. 2001, and comfort stations from 2013.

On the north side of the boardwalk, several structures (not part of designation) were built on public property, including a comfort station (1940) adjoining the hand-ball courts, the Shorefront YM-YWHA (1950s) near Coney Island Avenue, New York Aquarium (1957/1965/2018) at West 8th Street, Abe Stark Recreation Center (1969), near West 19th Street, and the B&B Carousell (2013), near West 16th Street. MCU Park was built in 2001 on the former site of Steeplechase Park, and is home to the Brooklyn Cyclones, a minor league baseball team. The park's location directly adjacent to the Parachute Jump allows visitors to enter from the boardwalk. The Ford Amphitheater at Coney Island opened in 2016 next to the Childs Restaurant Building, which was restored in 2017, and operates as a music venue.

Maintenance of the boardwalk began to decline in the 1970s. According to the *Daily News*, 75 percent of the deck was in "good shape" in 1983.<sup>102</sup> As part of a 1992 reconstruction project, the

Parks Department began to fill the open space beneath the boardwalk with sand. It also began to test new types of decking, including Ipe wood in 2001 and “concrete strips” in 2010.<sup>103</sup> A plan to replace all of the wood slats with man-made materials was approved by the Public Design Commission in March 2012. This proposal addresses the section between Coney Island Avenue and West 15th Street, except for blocks adjacent to the amusement area.

Concrete paving is presently installed in sections of the boardwalk near Ocean Parkway and West 37th Street, while recycled plastic lumber planking is used between Coney Island Avenue and Brighton 15th Street, and on Steeplechase Pier. The entrances at Brighton 2<sup>nd</sup> Street and West 33<sup>rd</sup> Street were modified in 2011-12. In addition to landscaping, the Parks Department has installed new ramps, steps, railings, and seating.

The boardwalk and surrounding beach have been modified to help mitigate storm damage. The level of the sand has been raised substantially since the boardwalk was first constructed, and now, in most locations, is directly below the deck.

## Conclusion

Since opening in May 1923, the Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk has been one of the best-known waterfront promenades in the world. It was part of an ambitious municipal project to rejuvenate Coney Island and establish a public beach, and was built in three phases between 1922 and 1941. The 2.7-mile boardwalk gave people of all economic, social, and ethnic backgrounds free access to the beach and became a significant destination unto itself. The iconic boardwalk is showcased in art, music and film, and though much of the original fabric has been replaced or modified, it remains a significant public space and a memorable destination for New Yorkers and visitors.

## Statement of Regulatory Intent

Designation of the Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk as a Scenic Landmark recognizes the cultural and historic significance of the boardwalk and its presence along the beachfront of Coney Island and Brighton Beach, and seeks to protect and preserve this iconic, familiar and resilient site for future generations.

Since the 1920s, many changes have been made to the boardwalk, largely in response to the coastal environment at the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, including additions to and redesign of the boardwalk and its elements and its relationship to the beach. These have not diminished its cultural significance, and this designation recognizes that the boardwalk must continue to meet city, state, and federal goals and requirements for resiliency and safety within an ever-changing coastal flood zone and environment.

The designation also recognizes that while the boardwalk is a permanent structure and a year-round beachside amenity, it is most popular and heavily visited during the summer months. The boardwalk has historically hosted many temporary and seasonal installations for summer uses including awnings and seating for outdoor cafes, mobile vendor carts, and signage for events such as musical performances, parades and dance parties, all of which is part of the experience of the boardwalk and will continue in the future.

For Scenic Landmarks, which are New York City-owned properties, the Landmarks Preservation Commission’s (LPC) review of proposed work is advisory to the Public Design Commission, with the exception of proposed changes to existing buildings within the landmark site for which LPC has binding authority.<sup>104</sup>

In reviewing proposed work, the full Commission will review significant changes in length, width or configuration of the boardwalk,

removal of portions of the boardwalk, removal or reduction of entries to the boardwalk from the north, significant alterations to existing comfort stations and shade pavilions, and designs for new permanent structures.

LPC staff will review work to repair, restore, and replace the boardwalk surface material and structure, and minor changes in length, width or configuration of portions of the boardwalk. LPC staff will also review repair, restoration, replacement, and minor changes to the boardwalk shade pavilions and comfort stations, stairs and ramps to the beach, railings, benches, light fixtures, and water fountains. Additionally, where review is required, LPC staff will review the installation of temporary and seasonal fixtures including but not limited to awnings and kiosks.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Information on original construction and replacement campaigns was provided in a Briefing Memorandum from the NYC Parks Department, “Coney Island Boardwalk (aka Riegelmann) Boardwalk Chronology,” J. Krawchuk, April 27, 2015; revised November 18, 2015.
- <sup>2</sup> Richard B. Dornheim, “The Coney Island Public Beach and Boardwalk Improvement of 1923,” September 2003, 52-63, viewed at [ascelibrary.org](http://ascelibrary.org). This essay is based on “Coney Island Public Beach and Board-Walk Improvement,” presented by Philip P. Farley on November 28, 1923, *The Municipal Engineers of the City of New York* (Vol. 10: 1924), 136.1-136.32.
- <sup>3</sup> *A Gazetteer of the State of New York*, (Albany: B. D. Packer, 1824), 349, viewed at [googlebooks.com](http://googlebooks.com)
- <sup>4</sup> See <https://www.loc.gov/item/today-in-history/june-26/>
- <sup>5</sup> “The Ocean Front and Its Opportunities,” *The Charities* (New York, 1904), 801, viewed at [googlebooks.com](http://googlebooks.com)
- <sup>6</sup> “Elephant Labor Here,” *The New York Times*, October 11, 1907.
- <sup>7</sup> Charles Denson, *Coney Island Lost and Found* (New York: Ten Speed Press, 2002), 41.
- <sup>8</sup> “A Rockaway Boardwalk,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 20, 1900, 37.
- <sup>9</sup> See *Atlantic City: In Living Color* (Indigo Custom Printing, 2005), 16, viewed at [googlebooks.com](http://googlebooks.com); <http://www.heartofconeyisland.com/west-brighton-coney-island-history.html>
- <sup>10</sup> Denson, 41.
- <sup>11</sup> Sea Gate was originally a native American settlement known as Narriockh.
- <sup>12</sup> *Laws of the State of New York* (1874), Chapter 583, 781, viewed at [googlebooks.com](http://googlebooks.com); “The Coney Island Concourse,” *New-York Tribune*, August 19, 1882, 5.
- <sup>13</sup> *New-York Tribune*, *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> “Coney Island Leases,” *The New York Times*, October 3, 1882.
- <sup>15</sup> *Neglected Coney Island* (West End Improvement League of Coney Island, 1912), 10; “Coney Island’s Board Walk May Now Be Built, *Real Estate Record and Guide*, May 25, 1918, 669.
- <sup>16</sup> Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), *Coney Island Theater (Later Shore Theater) Building Designation Report* (LP-2408) (New York City of New York, December 14, 2010), prepared by Jane Cowan and Virginia Kurshan, 2.
- <sup>17</sup> Ellen M. Snyder-Grenier, *Brooklyn! An Illustrated History* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1996), 182; LPC, *Coney Island Theater (Later Shore Theater) Building Designation Report* (LP-2408), 2.
- <sup>18</sup> LPC, *Coney Island Theater (Later Shore Theater) Building Designation Report* (LP-2408), 2.
- <sup>19</sup> Denson, 50.
- <sup>20</sup> “The Ocean Front and Its Opportunities,” 805; *Neglected Coney Island*, 22. According to Charles R. Ward, Chief Engineer of the Topographical Bureau in Brooklyn, up to 1897 “there were no obstructions to the free passage of the public along the beach, at least between high and low-water marks, from the Concourse to Norton’s Point.” See “Coney Island’s Boardwalk May Now Be Built,” 670.
- <sup>21</sup> LPC, *Coney Island Theater (Later Shore Theater) Building Designation Report* (LP-2408), 2.
- <sup>22</sup> “Move For A Boardwalk,” *New-York Tribune*, September 15, 1900, 6.
- <sup>23</sup> “He Likes The New Coney Island,” *New-York Tribune*, June 12, 1904.
- <sup>24</sup> William H. Allen, “The Opportunities at Coney Island,” *Charities*, Vol. XII, no. 23 (June 4, 1904), 582.
- <sup>25</sup> “The Ocean Front and Its Opportunities,” 806.
- <sup>26</sup> Allen, 580.
- <sup>27</sup> “Plans For Two-Mile Boardwalk,” *New York Tribune*, December 4, 1908, 2; “Plan Huge Promenade Over Sea Out Beyond Coney Island’s Breakers,” *New York Tribune*, March 5, 1911, A5.
- <sup>28</sup> *Neglected Coney Island*, 14.
- <sup>29</sup> “Coney Boardwalk Now Assured,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 3, 1913.
- <sup>30</sup> “State Sues To Win Back Coney Island For People,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 24, 1912.

<sup>31</sup> “Holds Tidal Lands Belong To State,” *The New York Times*, September 28, 1913, 12.

<sup>32</sup> “Ocean Beaches Are The Property of the Public,” *The New York Times*, October 19, 1913, SM8.

<sup>33</sup> “Holds Tidal Lands Belong to State.”

<sup>34</sup> *Laws of the State New York* (1921, 1925-1929), Chapter 610, viewed at googlebooks.com

<sup>35</sup> “Third Av. Railway Asks Bus Franchise,” *The New York Times*, July 17, 1920.

<sup>36</sup> “Notice is Hereby Given,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 26, 1921; “Coney Board Walk Cost Appropriated As Big Crowd Cheers,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 29, 1921; “Estimate Board Grants \$1,900,000 For Coney Walk,” *New York Tribune*, July 30, 1921, 4.

<sup>37</sup> “A Fine Public Servant,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 16, 1941.

<sup>38</sup> “Oh, Mr. Riegelmann, ‘Are You Going To Head That Big Baby Parade’,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, August 6, 1922.

<sup>39</sup> “Giant Sign Relates Facts Relative To Coney Boardwalk,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, August 25, 1921.

<sup>40</sup> “Eyes of Country Focused On New Coney Island Boardwalk,” *Brooklyn Standard Union*, June 25, 1922, 6.

<sup>41</sup> “Pushing the Ocean Back to Make a New Coney Island Boardwalk,” *The Evening Telegram*, September 8, 1922, 2.

<sup>42</sup> “Coney Island Public Beach and Boardwalk Improvement,” American Shore and Beach Preservation Association, 1994, clipping, Brooklyn Collection.

<sup>43</sup> “Eyes of Country Focused on New Coney Boardwalk.”

<sup>44</sup> “Won Prominence As Subway Builder,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 3, 1940; “Philip P. Farley, Engineer, Is Dead,” *The New York Times*, April 20, 1958.

<sup>45</sup> “Philip P. Farley, Engineer, Is Dead,” *The New York Times*, April 20, 1958; *The Brooklyn Standard Union* also claimed he built (or rebuilt) the boardwalk at Atlantic City. Also see “Coney Island Beach Created by Engineers,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 26, 1935, 15.

<sup>46</sup> “The Coney Island Boardwalk,” *Brooklyn Life*, April 7, 1923, 3.

<sup>47</sup> The earliest proposal for a boardwalk in Coney Island was designed by John Y. Cuyler in 1897. In contrast to Farley’s design, the deck would have rested on decorative

iron columns, similar to the Oriental Pavilion in Prospect Park, where Cuyler served as chief landscape engineer. See “Col. John Y. Cuyler’s Idea of Improving the Concourse,” *The World*, August 18, 1897, clipping in Brooklyn Collection; letter from J. W. Hackney to P. P. Farley, March 16, 1921, part of report to Board of Estimate and Apportionment (May 10, 1921), reprinted in *Municipal Engineers Journal* (Vol. 7), 70.

<sup>48</sup> “Douglas Fir For Coney Island,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 14, 1921, 4.

<sup>49</sup> “West Coast Lumber for Coney Island Boardwalk,” *Lumber World Review* (November 25, 1921), 39, viewed at googlebooks.com; “Coney Island to Have 80-foot Boardwalk,” *American Lumberman*, June 17, 1922, viewed at <http://rubysbar.com/archives/369>

<sup>50</sup> “Seven Years of Progress and Important Public Improvements and Achievements by the Municipal and Borough Governments,” City of New York, 1925, 157.

<sup>51</sup> “How Coney’s Boardwalk Compares With Others,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 13, 1923, 20.

<sup>52</sup> “Coney Island Boardwalk Is Named After Riegelmann,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 18, 1923.

<sup>53</sup> “Coney Festive As Boardwalk Is Thrown Open,” *New-York Tribune*, May 16, 1923, 24.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> “Crowds At Coney To Open Boardwalk,” *The New York Times*, May 16, 1923.

<sup>56</sup> The comfort stations were located at West 8<sup>th</sup>, West 15<sup>th</sup>, West 21<sup>st</sup>, West 27<sup>th</sup>, and West 33<sup>rd</sup> Streets. The pergolas were located between West 12<sup>th</sup> Street and Jones Walk, West 23<sup>rd</sup>-24<sup>th</sup> Streets, West 29<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup> Streets, and West 35<sup>th</sup>-36<sup>th</sup> Streets. See “Instructions to Bidders,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 18, 1924.

<sup>57</sup> “Seven Years of Progress and Important Public Improvements.”

<sup>58</sup> “To Start Building New Coney Streets During Next Months,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, September 30, 1923, A7.

<sup>59</sup> “Coney Island Boardwalk To Be Completed in 1921,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, August 22, 1920.

<sup>60</sup> “Pushing the Ocean Back to Make a New Coney Island Boardwalk,” *The Evening Telegram*, September 8, 1922, 2.

<sup>61</sup> For details of construction, see *Coney Island Public Beach and Board-Walk Improvement*.



<sup>62</sup> Henry Isham Hazelton, *The Boroughs of Brooklyn And Queens, Counties of Nassau And Suffolk, Long Island, New York, 1609-1924* (New York: Lewis Historical Pub. Co. Inc., 1925), 1082.

<sup>63</sup> “Awards \$6,139,968 For Land Taken In Coney Street Plan,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 11, 1924.

<sup>64</sup> “Razing Buildings To Clear The Way For Coney Streets,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 10, 1924, 6.

<sup>65</sup> LPC, *Childs Restaurant Building Designation Report* (LP-2016), prepared by Ginny Kurshan, (New York, 2014), 5.

<sup>66</sup> “Work Starts Soon on Coney Island Extension,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 14, 1925.

<sup>67</sup> “Old Coney Island Undergoing Transformations in New Structures,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 15, 1925.

<sup>68</sup> “Open Boardwalk Addition July 4,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 1, 1926; “Coney Taxpayers In For a \$350,000 Levy,” *The Brooklyn Standard Union*, June 14, 1925.

<sup>69</sup> “Open Boardwalk Addition July 4,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 1, 1926. Guider was borough president in 1925 and 1926.

<sup>70</sup> “Coney Civic Bodies Urge Construction of Pier and Hall,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, August 29, 1926; “Brighton Beach Real Estate Sales Total \$2,000,000,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 18, 1925; “New Coney Boardwalk Makes Realty Demand,” *The Brooklyn Standard Union*, October 18, 1925.

<sup>71</sup> The Kelly Pile Driving Company reportedly built Steeplechase Pier in 30 days. “Miscellaneous,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 30, 1904; “F. J. Kelly, Dies: Building Executive,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 21, 1940.

<sup>72</sup> No title, *The Sun*, August 23, 1908, 3.

<sup>73</sup> “The Ocean Attractions Are Incomparable,” *The Evening World*, June 6, 1904.

<sup>74</sup> “Seven Years of Progress”; “Old Coney Island Undergoing Transformation in New Structures; Big Theater and Hotels Under Way,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 29, 1925, 10.

<sup>75</sup> Though boats continued to land at the pier, scheduled ferry service mostly ended in 1932.

<sup>76</sup> “The Improvement of Coney Island, Rockaway and South Beaches,” Department of Parks (New York City, 1937), 3-4.

<sup>77</sup> “Coney Island Work Begun,” *The New York Times*, January 17, 1940, 19.

<sup>78</sup> “Park Design and Construction Methods,” *The Municipal Engineers Journal*, Vol. 28 (1941, 4<sup>th</sup> quarter), 35; “Coney Island To Get White Beach Sand,” *The New York Times*, February 21, 1941, 21.

<sup>79</sup> “Streamlining Can’t Hide Fact It’s Still Coney Island,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 31, 1940.

<sup>80</sup> “Lone Protest Made Against Moses Plan,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 7, 1939; “Streamlining of Coney Island Due for Completion by May 15,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 18, 1940.

<sup>81</sup> “Revamped Boardwalk At Coney Is Opened,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 26, 1940.

<sup>82</sup> “Coney Island ‘Streamlining’ Starts Monday,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 12, 1940.

<sup>83</sup> “Park Design and Construction Methods,” 35.

<sup>84</sup> Proposals to extend the boardwalk east into Manhattan Beach were opposed by property owners. See *Tribune*, September 27, 1955, clipping, Brooklyn Collection.

<sup>85</sup> John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (Hill and Wang, 1978), 4.

<sup>86</sup> Stern, et. All, *New York 1880: Architecture and Urbanism in the Gilded Age*, New York, 942.

<sup>87</sup> “Paragon Park,” *The Boston Globe*, June 2013, accessed December 29, 2017.

<sup>88</sup> Kasson, 7.

<sup>89</sup> Steeplechase Park opened in 1897, as its owner George Tilyou’s version of the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago. It featured formal gardens, rides that included a boat trip along the Grand Canals of Venice, and the largest ballroom in New York State.

<sup>90</sup> Kasson, 8.

<sup>91</sup> “300,000 At Coney Island,” *The New York Times*, July 18, 1918.

<sup>92</sup> Frederic Taber Cooper and others, *Rider’s New York City: A Guide-Book for Travelers* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1923), 616.

<sup>93</sup> Michael Immerso, *Coney Island: The People’s Playground* (Rutgers University Press, 2002), 127.

<sup>94</sup> Kasson, 8.

<sup>95</sup> LPC, *Childs Restaurant Building Designation Report*.

<sup>96</sup> LPC, *The Cyclone Designation Report* (LP-1636) prepared by David M. Breiner and Janet Adams, (New York, 1988), 5.

<sup>97</sup> Immerso, 23.

<sup>98</sup> John S. Berman, *Portraits of America: Coney Island*, (Barnes & Noble, 2003), 18.

<sup>99</sup> Immerso, 131.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> See <https://www.coneyisland.com/programs/mermaid-parade>, 2018.

<sup>102</sup> *Daily News*, August 3, 1983, clipping, Brooklyn Collection.

<sup>103</sup> “A Fight Over Keeping Boards in the Boardwalk,” *The New York Times*, July 1, 2011; “Down By The Shore: Bringing the Rain Forest Into a Boardwalk Battle,” *The New York Times*, January 21, 2001.

<sup>104</sup>For Scenic Landmarks the LPC reviews proposed work pursuant to the provisions of section 25-318 of the Administrative Code. This section provides that city agencies must seek Commission review of proposed work but that the review is advisory only. This jurisdiction was altered slightly by an amendment to Charter section 854(h), which governs review of city projects that are regulated by both the LPC and the former Art Commission, now the Public Design Commission (“PDC”). In cases where proposed work “primarily” concerns work affecting an existing building in a Scenic Landmark, the LPC acts in lieu of the PDC and its review is binding; in all other situations, review of work affecting a Scenic Landmark the LPC’s review remains advisory.

## Findings and Designation

### Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, design, and other features of this public space, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk has a special character and a special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and culture characteristic of New York City.

The Commission further finds that among its important qualities, the Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk is one of the best-known waterfront promenades in the world; that it is named for Edward J. Riegelmann, who played a leading role in its creation during his two terms as Brooklyn Borough President; that the 2.7-mile-long boardwalk was part of an ambitious plan to rejuvenate Coney Island and the beach; that it was inspired by the success of earlier boardwalks in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and other locations; that public officials hoped the boardwalk would turn the area into a year-round resort; that prior to the 20th century most of Brooklyn's waterfront was privately controlled; that Kings County Supreme Court ruled in 1913 that the beach was owned by the state and belonged to the public, thus requiring the removal of numerous privately-constructed fences and barriers; that in 1921 the New York State Legislature voted to transfer the land to New York City, which made improvements to the beach and the adjoining street grid; that the Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk was planned and designed by engineer Philip P. Farley; that it consists of an elevated deck supported by reinforced concrete piles and girders; that it is 80

feet wide and 9,500 feet long; that the first section, between Ocean Parkway and West 37th Street, opened in May 1923; that Mayor John F. Hyland attended the event, who called it the “happiest day of his life;” that two years later the boardwalk was extended 4,000 feet east to Coney Island Avenue, and in 1941, under Parks Commissioner Robert Moses, an additional 1,500 feet to Brighton 15th Street was added; that in 1940 the most heavily-used section, between Ocean Parkway and Stillwell Avenue, was moved inland and straightened; that at this time the beach was expanded and replenished, new recreational facilities were built, and Surf Avenue was rerouted; that the boardwalk has been continuously repaired and modified, replacing the original planks and street furniture; that these changes have not diminished the Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk’s appeal and that this waterfront promenade remains a memorable destination for all New Yorkers who seek sun, sand, and views of the Atlantic Ocean.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Scenic Landmark the Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk, Borough of Brooklyn, extending from West 37th Street in Coney Island to Brighton 15th Street in Brighton Beach, consisting of the 2.7-mile long public beachfront boardwalk, its structure and walkway, comfort stations, railings, benches, lighting fixtures, steps, Steeplechase Pier, and the beach beneath the boardwalk extending approximately 100 feet from the north (land side) edge of the boardwalk into the beach (ocean side).

**Meenakshi Srinivasan, Chair**

Frederick Bland  
Diana Chapin  
Wellington Chen  
Michael Devonshire  
Michael Goldblum  
John Gustafsson  
Anne Holford-Smith  
Jeanne Lutfy  
Adi Shamir-Baron  
Kim Vauss  
Commissioners



**Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk**, close to west end, near West 32<sup>nd</sup> Street  
Sarah Moses (LPC), 2018



**Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk**, near West 15<sup>th</sup> Street  
Sarah Moses (LPC), 2018



**Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk**, lifeguard station near West 22nd Street  
Sarah Moses (LPC), 2018



**Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk**, shade pavilion and comfort station near West 10th Street  
Sarah Moses (LPC), 2018



**Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk**, shade pavilion near Parachute Jump  
Sarah Moses (LPC), 2018



**Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk**, life guard station near Surf Avenue  
Sarah Moses (LPC), 2018



**Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk**, comfort station near Brighton 2<sup>nd</sup> Street  
Sarah Moses (LPC), 2018



**Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk**, restaurants near Brighton 4th Street  
Sarah Moses (LPC), 2018





**Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk (above)**  
New York Aquarium  
Sarah Moses (LPC), 2018



**Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk (left)**  
Historic drinking fountain near West 33<sup>rd</sup> Street  
Sarah Moses (LPC), 2018



**Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk**, west end at West 37th Street  
Sarah Moses (LPC), 2018



**Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk**, east end at Brighton 15th Street  
Sarah Moses (LPC), 2018



**Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk**, entrance to Steeplechase Pier  
Sarah Moses (LPC), 2018



**Coney Island (Riegelmann) Boardwalk**, south end of Steeplechase Pier  
Sarah Moses (LPC), 2018

