



An American Tour: 5



New York's Coney Island

When Henry Hudson first sighted the beach at Coney Island in early September 1609, the land was nothing more than desolate sand dunes, clam beds and wind blown scrub that stretched for five miles along the shore of the Atlantic Ocean. By the late 1800's, Yankee ingenuity had turned it into America's first amusement park.

Coney Island is the story of a tiny spit of land at the foot of Brooklyn that at the turn of the century became the most extravagant playground in the country (it's not actually an island, but a small peninsula that hangs from the southernmost edge of Brooklyn. In scale, in variety, in sheer inventiveness, Coney Island was unlike anything anyone had ever seen, and sooner or later everyone came to see it. "Coney," one man said in 1904, "is the most bewilderingly up-to-date place of amusement in the world." Coney Island is a lively and absorbing portrait of the extraordinary amusement empire that astonished, delighted and shocked the nation -- and took Americans from the Victorian age into the modern world.

From its beginnings as a quiet seaside town, Coney Island went on to boom years in the 1880s, as entrepreneurs rushed to stake their claims and make their fortunes. The area enjoyed brief stability in the late 1890's and early 1900's, the heyday of Luna Park (1903-1946), Dreamland (1904-1911) and Steeplechase Park (1897-1907, 1908-1964), Coney Island's famed amusement parks, but with the Great Depression, Coney Island transformed once again. The area became a "Nickel Empire" of cheap amusements; a nickel paid the fare on the new subway line, and visitors were greeted by the original Nathan's Famous, home of the five-cent hot dog. The amusement parks struggled to stay afloat and Coney Island began to experience hard economic times.

Today, Coney Island is in the midst of a revival, spurred by public, private and community initiatives. KeySpan Park remains sold out season after season and the amusement area has witnessed ever-greater crowds for both everyday beach activities and events, from the annual Mermaid Parade, Siren Festival and rock concerts occasionally held at KeySpan, to mini-marathons and summertime concerts held at the Asser Levy Park Amphitheater. With the creation of the Coney Island Development Corporation, the area is poised for further positive change, in which the Parachute Pavilion will play a vital part.

Beach bathing near the Iron Pier - 1880's

