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PRELIMINARY ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

for the

STEEPLECHASE AMUSEMENT PARK

BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

CEQR NO. 87 - 147 K

Prepared

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I. INTRODUCTION

The proposed Steeplechase Amusement Park would occupy a 24.7 acre site on the oceanfront of Coney Island, between West 15th Street on the east, West 21st Street on the west, and Surf Avenue on the north. Bounded by the Riegelmann Boardwalk along the beach to the south, the Project Area currently hosts New York City's 11.69 acre Steeplechase Park, as well as undeveloped land, a derelict roller coaster, and a single abandoned one-story structure along Surf Avenue. One unmapped street (Kensington Walk) and one closed street (Bowery Street) intersect on the site while existing streets (15th, 16th, and 21st) terminate at the Boardwalk. See the attached photographs, 1 - 4. As planned the Park would include outdoor and indoor rides, shops and arcades, food areas, and animation theaters. See Figures 1 and 2.

Coney Island looms large in the collective memory of New York. For a century Coney Island offered the urban populace a pleasurable retreat and relatively inexpensive escape from monotonous work routines and over crowded, often hot neighborhood enclaves. As will be detailed in the following report, the Project Area was an integral part of this amusement complex. Prior to the modern recreational use Coney Island was mostly vacant, wind swept salt meadow and marsh, only tenuously connected to the mainland by man's bridging battles against tidal and storm action. One of Henry Hudson's first landings in the New York area was in the Coney Island area. It is known that prehistoric peoples occupied the western end of Long Island at the time of colonization and it can be assumed that the Project Area experienced some degree of exploitation during the prehistoric period.

The purpose of the following preliminary assessment is to evaluate the necessity for a full Phase 1A archaeological assessment to make a determination as to whether potentially significant archaeological resources might exist on the project site.

II. ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

Situated on the Atlantic Ocean and northwest of Rockaway Inlet, the Project Area is in the extreme southern portion of Brooklyn. Coney Island is a textbook example of a barrier island, "a long island built of sand, lying offshore and parallel to the coast" (Flint and Skinner 1977:270). Such post-glacial sandy formations along the southern coastline of Long Island are the result of the scouring action of the ocean waves as they break a considerable distance offshore and drop loosened sand just landward of the breaker line. "Soon a submarine bar of this material is built up parallel to the shoreline. Growing in height with continued deposition of wave-tossed sand, the submarine bar soon appears above the water surface in various places along its length. When these have joined to make one fairly continuous strip of sand, a barrier beach, or barrier island, is formed. Behind the barrier beach lies a lagoon or zone of quiet water which no longer is a part of the open sea. Tidal inlets separate the island into several individual ones" (Schuberth 1968:200). Once formed, such barrier islands are persistently being remolded and altered (Schuberth 1968:201). As is typical with barrier beach formation, the Coney Island land form acted as a fence against the ocean and, in turn, created Gavesend Bay (Gratacap 1909:154).

Until the end of the nineteenth century Coney Island was separated from the ridge of sand hills forming the Brooklyn mainland. A wide expanse of salt marsh, traversed by a narrow tidal current known as Coney Island Creek, stretched between the island and the mainland (French 1860:372). This land formation can be seen on the 1845 U.S. Geodetic Survey (Figure 3) and on the Dripps 1879 survey of Coney Island (Figure 4). Over the past 100 years this old tidal marsh has been filled in, by both natural sedimentation and human manipulation, leaving only the western portion of Coney Island Creek at Gravesend Bay visible today.

The configuration of the ocean front has changed considerably in the last 150 years. There is documentation that a c.1839 storm washed away one-half of the entire island (Armbruster 1924:10). The current elevation of the Project Area is between 5 to 10 feet above mean high water. "Groins have been built along the ocean beach in an attempt to prevent erosion, giving the beach a scalloped look. The 1,000 foot Steeplechase Pier still juts into the ocean and is now a favorite fishing spot" (Willensky and White 1988:712).

III. LAND USE HISTORY

Prehistoric Period¹

The following discussion of prehistoric human occupation provides a basis on which to anticipate the kinds of cultural remains or sites that may be found in the Project Area. A brief description of the three periods of prehistoric culture history is presented first. This information summarizes the ways in which prehistoric peoples lived in the northeastern United States in general and in coastal New York in particular. These prehistoric cultural sequences describe the particular technologies, lifestyles, and environmental contexts of the three time periods.

Paleo Indian Period (c. 12,000 y.a. - 10,000 y.a.)

During the Late Pleistocene early man arrived in the New World, migrating from Siberia across the Bering Land Bridge to Alaska. These Indians were hunters and gatherers, a nomadic people who roamed widely following the big game animals that were their sustenance. Their settlement pattern consisted of small temporary camps. The diagnostic artifact of the Paleo Indian Period is the fluted projectile point. It is estimated that a large number of the sites from this period were submerged by the subsequent rise in sea level.

Archaic Period (c. 10,000 y.a. - 3,000 y.a.)

The Archaic Period produced a major shift in the settlement and subsistence patterns of the Native Americans. Hunting and gathering were still the basic ways of life during this period, but the emphasis in subsistence shifted from the large pleistocene herbivores, rapidly becoming extinct, to smaller game and plants of the deciduous forest. The hallmarks of this period are grinding implements, ground stone tools, and toward the end of this period, the use of stone bowls. The settlement pattern of the Archaic people indicates large, more permanent habitation sites. These people were increasingly more efficient in the exploitation of their environment. The shellfish beds, salt hay, tuberos grasses, fish and fowl that would have been developing in the ecological biome of Gravesend Bay, approximately one-half mile north of the Project Area, would have been attractive to the Native Americans of this period.

¹ The following overview of the Prehistoric Period is taken in large part from Kearns, Kirkorian, and Seyfried 1986.

Woodland Period (c. 3,000 y.a. - 300 y.a.)

Although the hunting and gathering way of life persisted in this period, horticulture began and later became well established with the cultivation of maize, beans, and squash. Clay pottery vessels replaced soapstone bowls, and tobacco pipes and smoking were adopted. Also, the bow and arrow replaced the spear and javelin during this period. The habitation sites of the Woodland Indians increased in size and permanence as these people continued to extract food more efficiently from their environment. Protected, elevated locations at the confluence of two water systems was a preferred village/camp site. Marsh biomes with abundant shellfish resources, as in the Archaic Period, were of considerable importance. The introduction of European goods at the time of colonization drastically altered the life-styles of the Woodland Period Indians. Metal and glass began to replace traditional materials.

At the time of European contact, Native American populations spanned Long Island. The Brooklyn area was inhabited by the Canarsee Indians, members of the Delaware culture group, speaking a Munsee dialect. "Coney Island was first visited by Verazzano, in his discovery of this region, in 1527 and 1529. It would seem, from DeLaet's, and also from Juet's narratives of the voyage and discovery of Henry Hudson, in 1609, that this was one of the places at which they landed and had interviews with the savages" (Stockwell 1884:189). The first accounts of the Project Area, in the mid-1600s during the Late Woodland-Contact Period, describe a land called "Narriockh," a Munsee name meaning "a point of land" (Grumet 1981:37).

The initial settlers of Gravesend, the village directly north of the Project Area, undertook the direct purchase from the local Indians of land surrounding their center since Governor Kieft's patent had only bestowed on them the right to pasture on the island. In 1649 the village purchased Narriockh from Cipehacke, Sachem of the Canarsee. To insure their right to the island land, five years later the villagers bought the same land from the Nyack Indians who had claimed original ownership (Stockwell 1884:189). By the time of the confirmatory charter obtained from Governor Dongan in 1685, Coney Island was fully secured to Gravesend (Stockwell 1884:191).

According to Reginald Bolton and R. S. Grumet's twentieth century research to establish the Native American occupation at the time of contact, Coney Island did not host a village site or planting fields. Also, the major Indian trails in the southern Brooklyn area did not venture onto the island itself, terminating instead at the mainland (Figure 5). Based on Grumet's research, the

Project Area is a relatively modern landform and could not have hosted a prehistoric occupation.

The New York State Museum has recorded a prehistoric site (#3608) on the north shore of Sheepshead Bay, approximately 2 miles northwest of the Project Area. Based on Arthur C. Parker's 1920s publication, the burial site/shell midden is listed as Kings County #4 but no additional information is known (Kearns and Kirkorian 1986:Brooklyn Neighborhood 9). The prehistoric exploitation of bay areas is well documented (Solecki 1941; Black 1981) and such sites on Sheepshead Bay and the even closer Gravesend Bay would be anticipated. However, for two very important reasons we would not expect the ocean shoreline of Coney Island to have hosted a significant Native American site. Firstly, settlement pattern data indicates a marked preference for protected, elevated locations, not low-lying areas exposed to tidal flooding and constant ocean winds. Additionally, the bay areas would have provided the far resource-richer marsh biomes. Settlement pattern data indicates that the Indians moved, in different time periods to a greater or lesser permanency, to the shore for a seasonal harvesting of the important shellfish beds. Such camps and semi-permanent villages were usually located near the harvesting station and large Indian villages were located inland within walking distance of the shellfish collection stations (Kearns, Kirkorian, Seyfried 1986:8). Shellfish beds would not have formed on the southern, ocean shore of Coney Island. "Oysters [clams and mussels] live best in certain shallow bays, sounds, creeks, and estuaries where the salinity, temperature, food supply, and bottom provide favorable combinations for reproduction or growth. In the open ocean, however, the salinity is so high, 35 parts per thousand, that oysters do not ordinarily reproduce" (Kochiss 1974:33).

In addition to the low probability of intensive use of the ocean front Project Area, historical documents describe the devastation of the island in 1838. There are records which show that two cedar posts, cut to a point over two centuries ago, are now two miles out from the present shoreline (Armbruster 1924:10). Cartographic analysis also brings into question the actual age of the landform that the Project Area rests upon. It is most likely a relatively recent manifestation of man's attempts to reclaim land from the sea and the sea's relentless efforts to re-shape the southern shoreline of Long Island.

Historical Period

Gravesend, settled under the influence of the independent Lady Deborah Moody of Berkshire, England and Salem, Massachusetts, exploited the open, salt meadows of the string of barrier islands that later came to be thought of as one continuous land form - Coney Island. The island(s) were used initially for pig and cattle grazing (Overton 1929:42). Starting in 1702, and for the next hundred years, the Gravesend villagers leased out Coney Island but always reserved the privilege of fishing, grazing, fowling, hawking, gunning, hunting, cutting off and carting off any sort of timber (Stockwell 1884:192).

In the mid-1700s Thomas Stillwell organized a canal excavation through the salt marsh that spanned the area between Coney Island and the mainland, creating what became known as the "Jamaica Ditch" (Stockwell 1884:192). This waterway provided a safe and somewhat shorter route for the market boats traveling between Jamaica Bay and Manhattan. A further destructive action visited on the study area was the mining of sand, first contracted by the village in 1803 (Stockwell 1884:192).

Starting in 1734 a series of early roads were laid down to connect the island with the mainland. By an act of the legislature (1823), the Coney Island Causeway was constructed, in large part with clamshells, over the salt meadows, a bridge was installed over the creek and a toll gate erected (Stockwell 1884:171).² The first hotel on Coney Island, "Coney Island House," was razed soon after by the Coney Island Road and Bridge Company. Even the great storm of New Years Day 1839 that washed half of Coney Island away did not deter the continued recreational development of the study area. During the early 1840s the toll gate operator counted over 300 vehicles crossing the causeway on a July 4th Sunday (McCullough 1983:143). The Coney Island Plank Road was installed in c.1849 and served as the main thoroughfare for many years, later referred to as Coney Island Avenue.

In the 1840s the first of many amusement pavilions was raised on the western part of the island. Subsequently known as Norton's Point, this section of the island became the landing for steamboats from Manhattan, bringing crowds of sun bathers. By 1860 approximately six families were wintering on Coney Island (French

² There is some discrepancy among the various references reviewed. It is possible that the clamshell causeway and the Coney Island House were not constructed until after the 1839 storm (McCulloch 1983:142). One can speculate that a re-building phase was necessary after the storm's devastation.

1860:372). In 1870 three huge hotels were built west of the Project Area: the Oriental, the Manhattan Beach and the Brighton Beach (Snow 1984:11).

The surf, the beach, and the fresh salt air proved insufficient to meet the demands of the jaded throngs who came out to play. Sensations and the glare of lights must supplement nature. So it happened that, in 1874, Coney Island took the lead in the development of cheap and gaudy amusement - a place which it has maintained to this day. In that year, when its reputation was so foul that his best friends prophesied failure, Mr. Culver began laying the tracks of the Prospect Park and Coney Island Railroad. Two years later he acquired the great steel tower which had been one of the features of the Philadelphia Centennial of 1876. This was the first of the entertainment features that, within a few years, brought revolution to Coney. By the middle of the eighties, the new Coney Island was well on its way to fame. The scraggly sand dunes were covered with a city of amusements (Gabriel 1921 :178-179).

In 1871 Charles Feltman, the man who is believed to have invented the hot dog, arrived on Coney Island and opened a small stand on the beach. And in 1880 the first sideshow barker arrived with a company of out-of-work circus freaks. By 1884, when the first roller coaster was erected, the Iron Steamboat Company was running steamers from Manhattan (McCullough 1983:148-149). Beer's 1873 atlas (Figure 4) shows the Bath and Coney Island R. R., the Dripp's 1879 guide to Coney Island shows the Brooklyn, Bath and Coney Island Railroad and the New York and Sea Beach Railroad.

The Elephant Hotel, built in 1884 and also west of the Project Area, set the tone for what Coney Island was to become. A tin-coated structure shaped like an elephant, complete with howdah, it had 34 rooms and a dance hall, and its eyes blazed yellow in the night (Snow 1984:12). It burned in 1896.

In 1897, a year after the Elephant burned, George C. Tilyou opened Steeplechase Park, site of the Project Area. Even as a boy, he showed his imagination and enterprise by selling packages of Coney Island sand and vials of sea water. The main feature of Steeplechase Park, "the Funny Place," was just that: a simulated horse race. The entire 15 acre park was ringed by a fence with one main gate at West Sixteenth Street. Inside a 1400 foot iron track snaked along the perimeter of the park, and on it were eight life-sized horses with saddles big enough for two. The boy sat behind, his arms around the girl, one of the many examples of the license Coney Island supplied for hugging in public. At the

finish of the ride, and elsewhere in the park, were air jets to lift the skirts of usually but not always unsuspecting girls (McCullough 1983:153).

Steeplechase Park was leveled by a spectacular eight-hour fire in 1907. Characteristically, Tilyou quickly posted a sign reading "Admission to the Burning Ruins - 10 cents." "The next season saw a new twenty-five-acre glassed-in, roofed-over "Funny Place" bearing the familiar Steeplechase Funny Face trademark" (McCullough 1983:153-154). This trademark can be seen today just off West 15th Street, see Photograph 4. See Figures 6 - 9 for some of the photographs of Steeplechase that provide the clearest image of the fun it afforded millions of visitors. The lone towering remnant of Steeplechase visible today (Photograph 2) is acutally not from Tilyou's early twentieth century heyday. It is the parachute jump brought from the New York World's Fair in 1940 and placed next to the boardwalk where it is today.

Other, more elaborate amusement parks were built between Surf Avenue and the beach. The famous Luna Park was established just north of Surf Avenue. Figure 10 shows the location of these attractions in relation to the Project Area. As can be seen on Figure 10, the Project Area covers the original Steeplechase Park land and a small block to the east and two blocks to the west. "Steeplechase, the least ambitious of the parks, survived into the early 1960s, outlasting the others with the simple formula of making the customers themselves the center of attention" (McCullough 1983:161).

In 1964, Steeplechase Park closed. Richard Snow, author of CONEY ISLAND: A POSTCARD JOURNEY TO THE CITY OF FIRE, comments bitterly on the corporation that "pulled it apart to develop real estate, developed no real estate, and eventually sold the level patch of cinders to the city" (Snow 1984:113). The creation of a New York City park on the majority of the Project Area followed but remnants of the earlier fun-filled days survive in a derelict state.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is no doubt that Native Americans occupied the western end of Long Island and exploited the embayed, marsh biomes along the southern shore. It is very possible that prehistoric peoples harvested salt hay from the barrier islands that became Coney Island and collected shellfish from Gravesend Bay. However, the exposed, low-lying characteristics of the Project Area strongly argue against any form of sustained harvesting station, camp site, or village location. And, if any prehistoric resources were possibly deposited in the Project Area, it is most likely that subsequent storm and tidal actions completely destroyed their contextual integrity. We do not recommend that a phase 1A archaeological assessment be required for potential prehistoric resources.

During the historical period the Project Area was transformed from a vacant land dotted with low, scrubby bushes into a full-scale amusement center that lasted for 67 years. Coney Island's contribution to the leisure hours of millions of Americans has been well documented. The historic importance of the recreational activities of Coney Island has been recognized through official landmark designation of two rides, the Cyclone, a roller coaster five blocks east of the Project Area and the Wonder Wheel, a ferris wheel located three blocks east of the Project Area.

The 1907 fire and the subsequent reconstruction of Steeplechase Park undoubtedly destroyed any evidence of a pre-1907 historical occupation in the Project Area. The 1964 demolition of the second Steeplechase amusement center, the landscaping of the city park land, and the construction of the Abe Stark Skating Rink most assuredly destroyed any possible resources of the Steeplechase Amusement Park. The extant structures on the Project Area (the building along Surf Avenue and the roller coaster on West 15th Street) have impacted the subsurface integrity of the perimeter of the original Steeplechase Park. Because of the available documentary information on the late historical use of the Project Area and the known disturbances visited on the Project Area, we do not recommend that a phase 1A archaeological assessment be required for potential historic resources.

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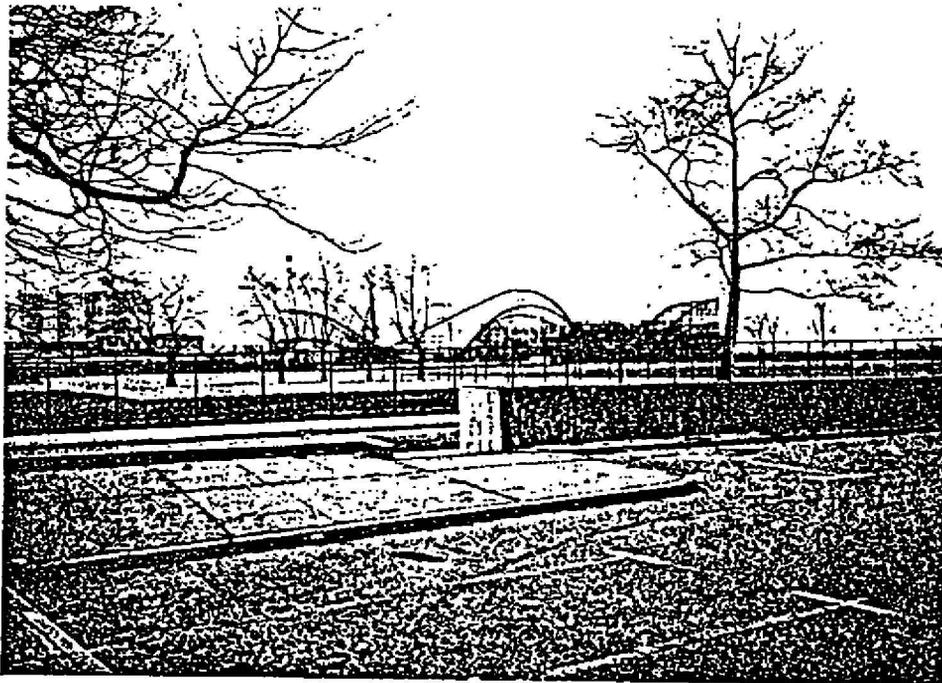
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Photograph 1

Project Area

view: northwest to southeast across the New York City
Steeplechase Park

note: The north-south oriented roller coaster in the background
is situated between West 15th and West 16th Streets.



Project Area

view: north to south from Surf Avenue

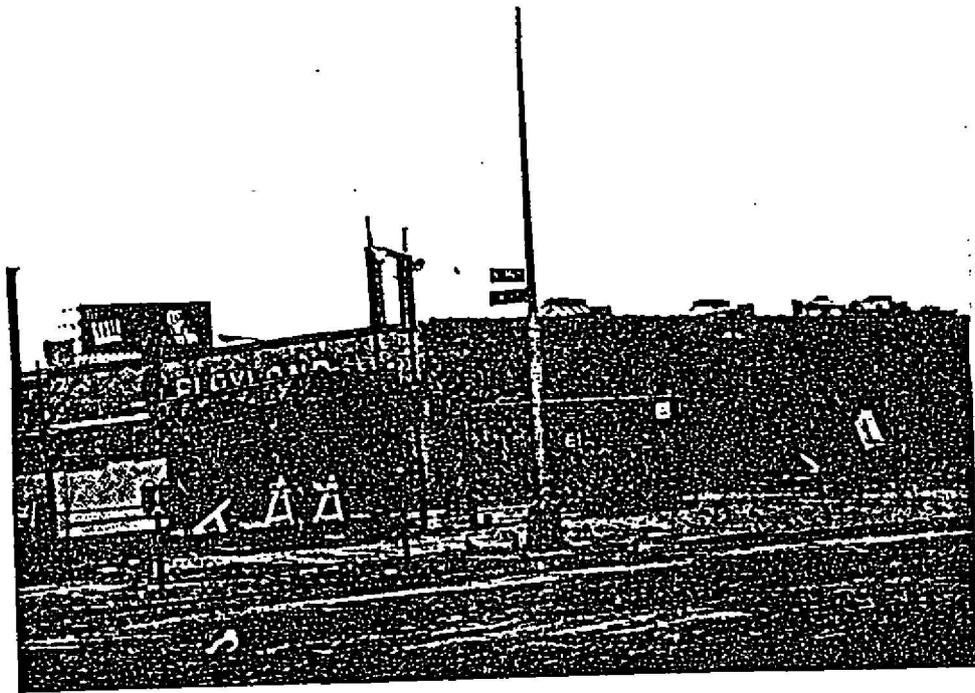
note: Transplanted 1939 World's Fair "parachute jump" on left
and the Abe Stark Skating Rink on the right.



Project Area

view: southeast to northwest from West 15th Street

note: Closed Bowery Street on left. Structures front on Surf Avenue.



Project Area

view: west to east

note: The Funny Face trademark still visible today on a building wall on West 15th Street.



Figure 1

U.S.G.S. Topographic Map, Coney Island Quad

scale: 1:24,000



Figure 2

Project Area map provided by AKRF, Inc.

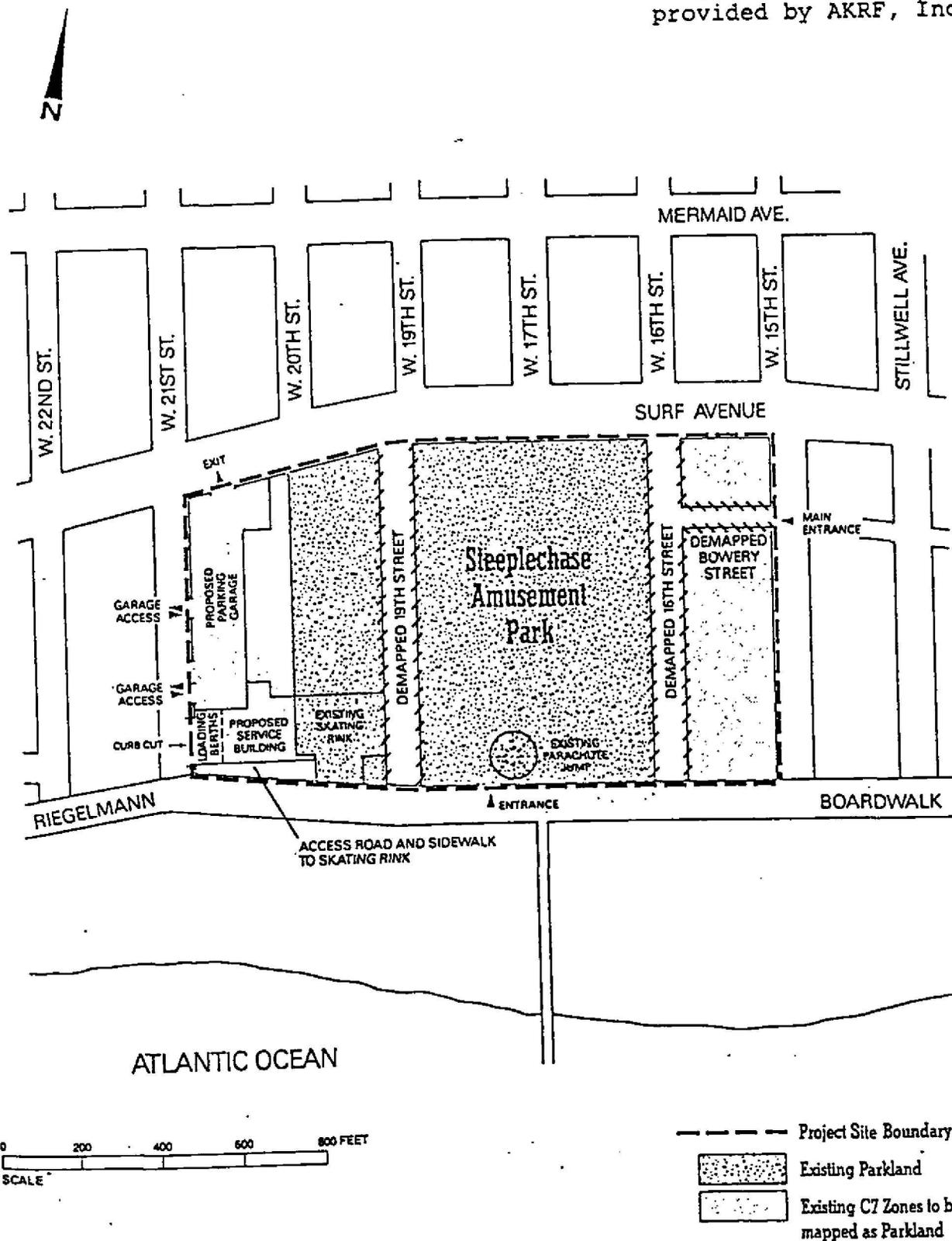


Figure 3

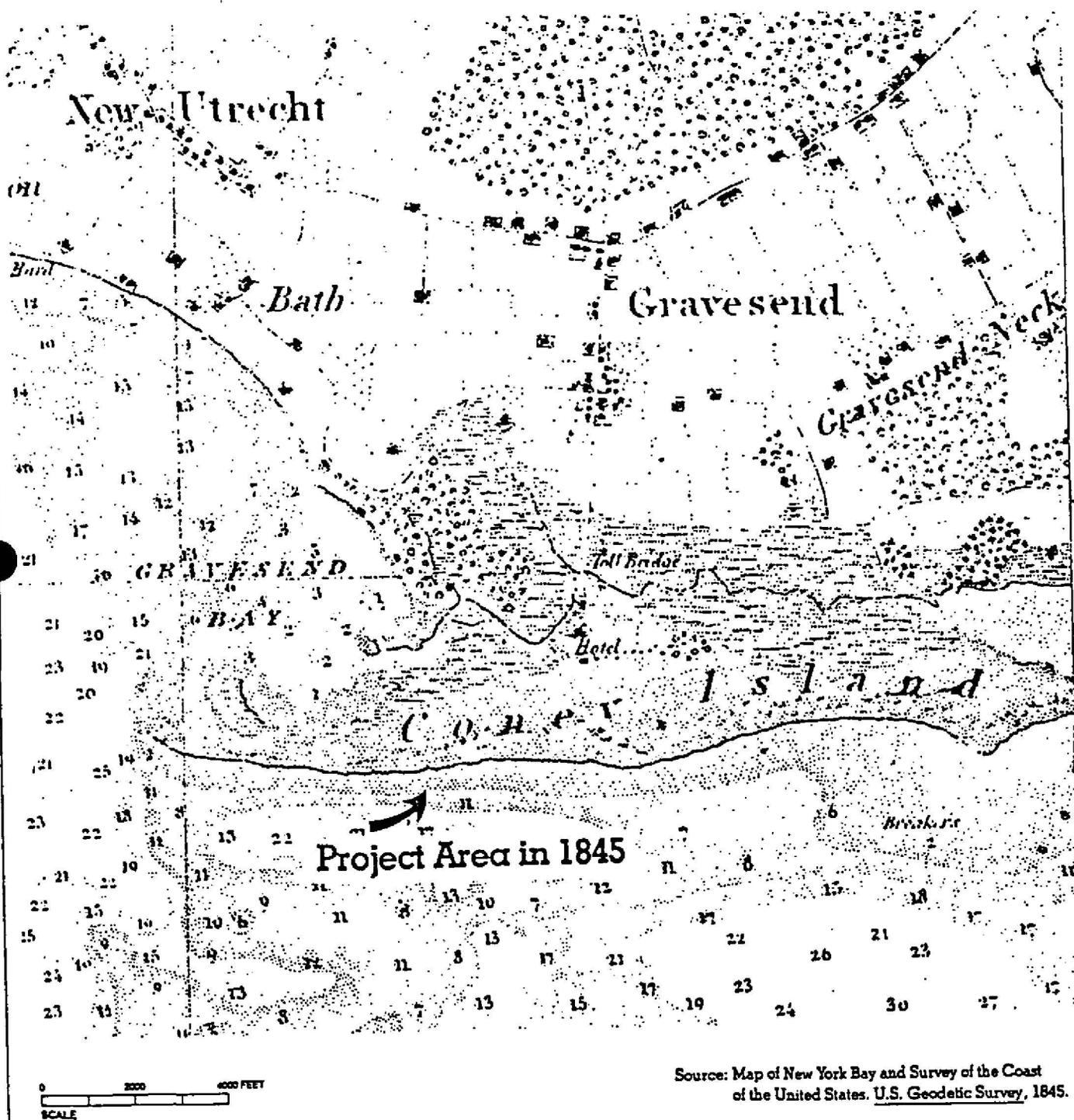
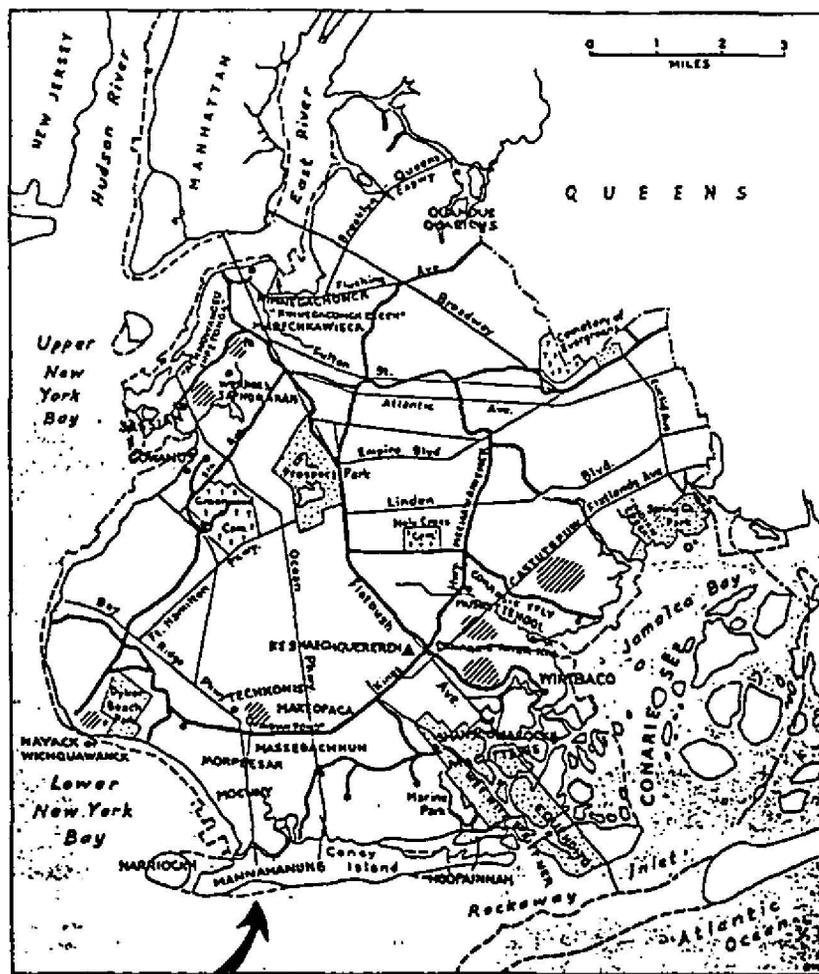


Figure 5

Photocopied from Grumet, 1981.



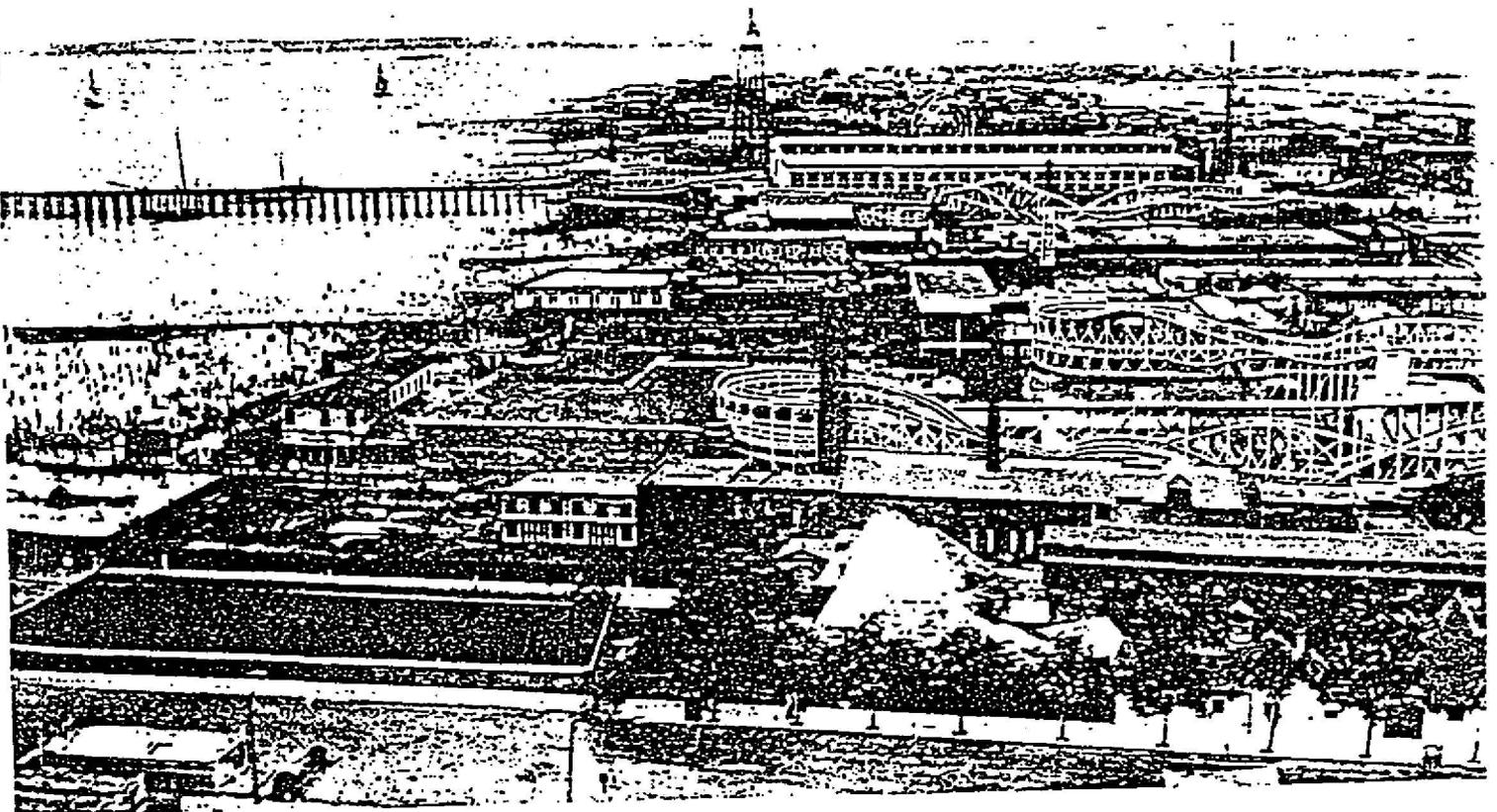
LEGEND FOR FIVE BOROUGH MAPS

- TRAIL (AFTER BOLTON 1922)
- PLANTING AREAS AND OLD FIELDS
- INDIAN NAMES OF LOCAL ORIGIN
- NAMES NOT OF LOCAL ORIGIN
- HABITATION SITE
- PRESENT-DAY CITY PARKS
- MODERN SHORELINE
- CEMETERY

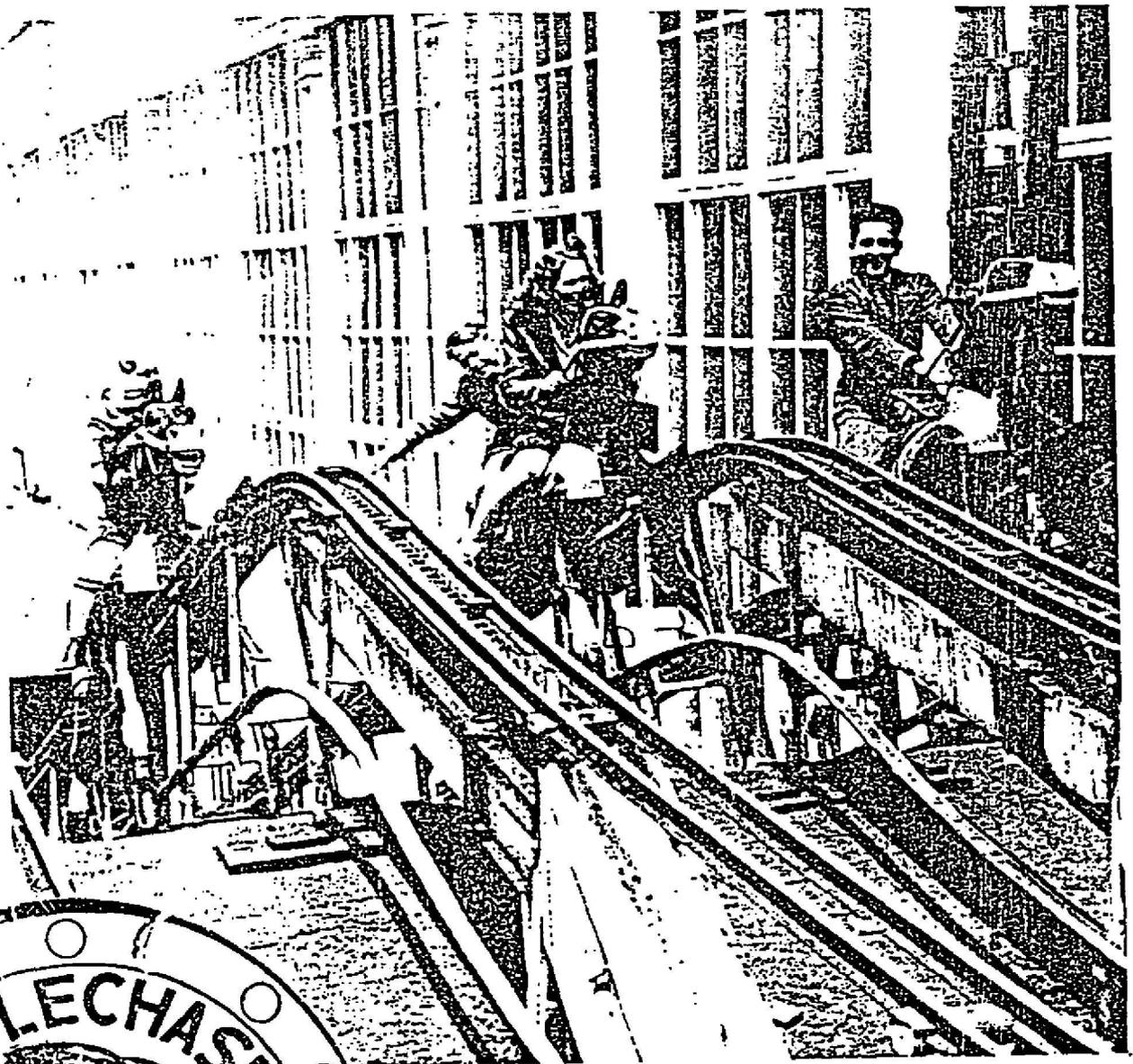
Figure 6

"Looking west from West Tenth Street: the red-roofed half-timbered buildings in the foreground are part of Feltman's enormous restaurant and beer garden; beyond the trellising fo roller coasters is the long, glass-covered shed of Steeplechase Park; and at the left bathers stand in the Atlantic in front of Ward's Bathing Pavilion" (Snow 1984:24).

Bird's-eye View, looking toward Sea Gate, Coney Island, N. Y

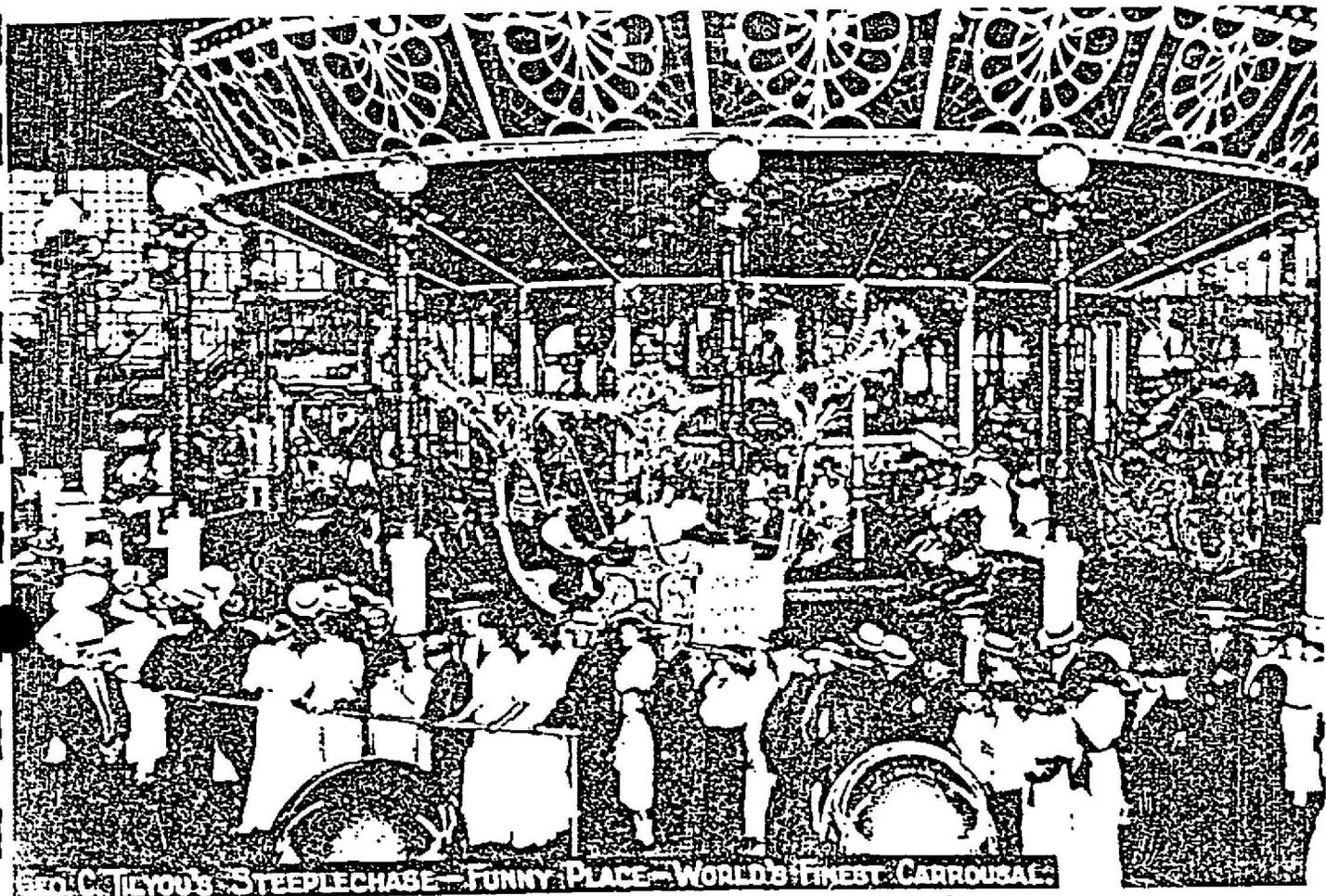


Photocopied from Willensky 1986:124.



The exhilarating ride for which Steeplechase Park was named. Four horses, often carrying more than one rider, departed every thirty seconds to circle the enormous, glass-enclosed Pavilion of Fun. (Smart riders knew the horse carrying the heaviest weight always won.) The scene is in 1939.

Photocopied from Snow 1984:74.



Any Coney Island advertising superlative is suspect, but there is a case for Tilyou's calling his carousel the world's finest. The magnificent El Dorado was born in Germany, made by Hugo Hasse, a Leipzig railroad bridge builder who also kept eight carnivals on tour and manufactured amusement devices. Seething with intricate carving, the forty-foot-high carousel had three tiers of platforms, each revolving at a different speed. It cost \$150,000 to build and \$30,000 in customs charges just to get it into the United States in 1910.

The El Dorado opened for business on West Fifth Street, where it made its presence known by the Ruth und Sohn band organ, whose voice could be heard clearly even on clangorous Surf Avenue. Tilyou got hold of the sumptuous machine in 1911 and moved it into his Pavilion of Fun. There it stayed for years, scintillating so splendidly that it gave rise to the legend—still irritating to carousel purists—that the finest merry-go-rounds inevitably came from Germany.

Photocopied from Snow 1984:70.



The lofty roof of the Pavilion of Fun covered more than five acres of hardwood floor, where Tilyou's rides shook and spun. During the park's first few seasons, its owner liked to advertise that he "is the inventor of all the amusement novelties in his big plant," and although that changed by the time the Pavilion went up, Steeplechase prospered solely through Tilyou's understanding of how people worked.

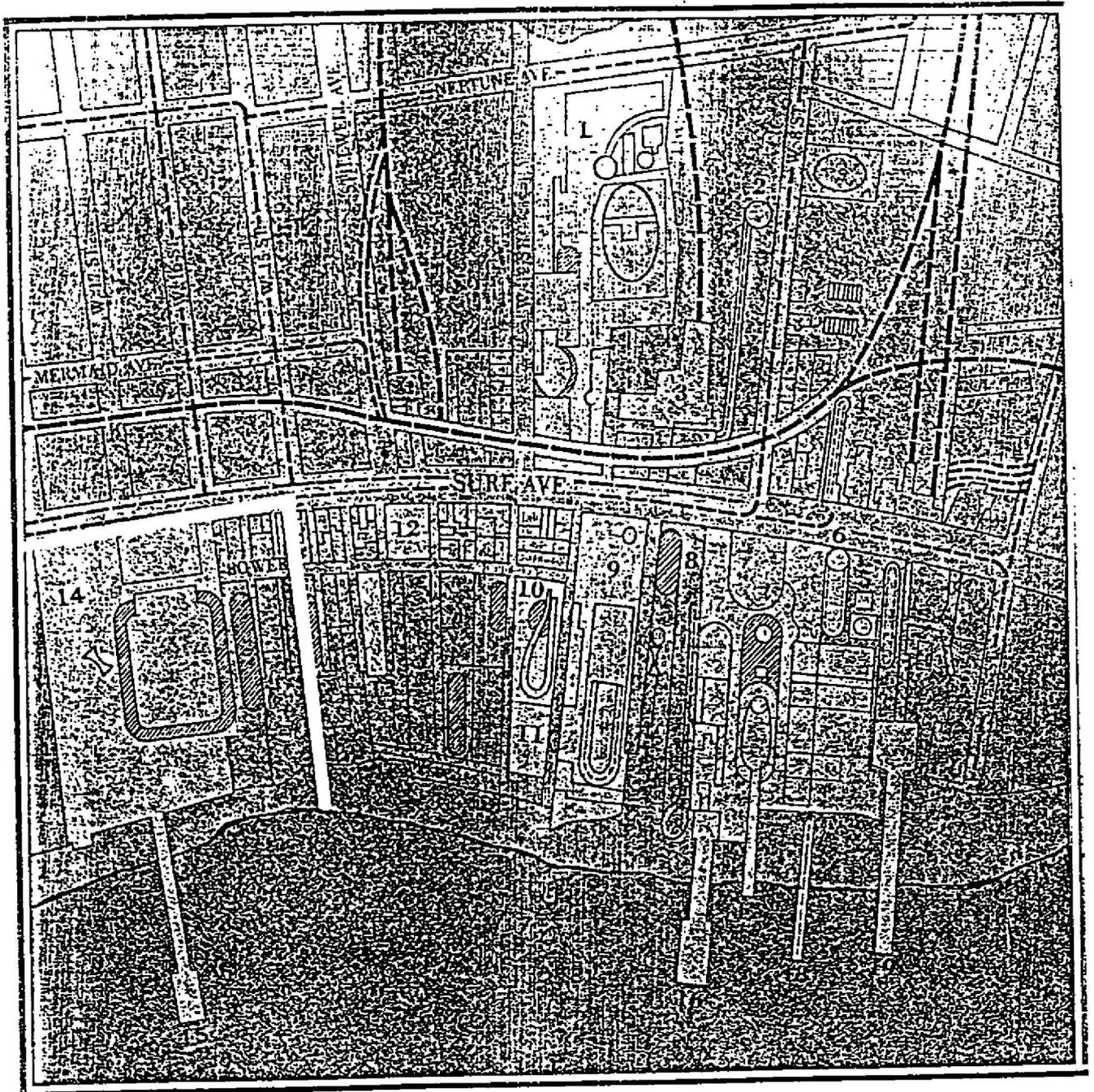
The steeplechase ride cost \$37,000 to build; the park's second "big hit," Tilyou said, "cost me precisely \$5."

"I built a flight of six steps up to a table, placed a box on this and in the box put three broken bricks." He advertised this exhibit as "The California Red Bats." "Then I charged ten cents a look." People climbed the ladder, peered into the box, found they were looking at brickbats, climbed back down, and refused—as Tilyou had known they would—to say what they'd seen. "Naturally the curiosity spread like the measles and in that season 300,000 people came to see [that] exhibit."

Figure 10

Photocopied from Snow 1984:17.

Nineteen different Coney Island attractions and their locations.
 note: Project Area on the extreme bottom left, original Steeplechase Park listed as number 14.



1. LUNA PARK
2. L.A. THOMPSON RAILWAY
3. SEA BEACH PALACE
4. ROCKY ROAD TO DUBLIN
5. OBSERVATION TOWER
6. PIKE'S PEAK RAILWAY

7. DREAMLAND
8. LOOP THE LOOP
9. FELTMAN'S
10. ROUGH RIDERS
11. WARD'S BATHING PAVILION
12. HENDERSON'S MUSIC HALL
13. STAUCH'S DANCE HALL

- ➔ 14. STEEPLCHASE PARK
- ➔ 15. STEEPLCHASE PIER
16. DREAMLAND PIER
17. DREAMLAND CHUTES
18. LEAP FROG RAILROAD
19. NEW IRON PIER