

Text of Panels in Museum of Modern Art Exhibition

Liberty State Park: History of the Site

Sixteen thousand years ago, Liberty Park was dry land and was home to the mammoth, mastodon, muskox and giant moose. Man shared their habitat later but the rising sea level drove him to the outcroppings of higher land which still remain visible around the Park among the industrial development of the last century.

The Indian names of sites close to the Park's perimeter still remain. Thus Communipaw, a name given to an area of settlement, a cove now filled in, and a creek, comes from the Indian word "gamoenpa" which means "the water that remained." Caven Point and Rancocus still bear their Indian names.

The Dutch came to the area in the early seventeenth century. They bought land from the Hackensack Indians and by 1642 their farms lay on the higher ground along the shore from Hoboken south to Caven Point. Early settlers gave their names to areas that are now sections of Jersey City adjacent to the northern rim of the Park -- Paulus Hook and Van Vorst.

After two wars with the Indians, the Dutch built a palisaded village at Bergen which became the area's outpost to the west, allowing the shore farms and fishing community to remain in relative peace. Although the first ferry to Manhattan ran from Communipaw, starting in 1661, it ceased operation in about 1800 and the settlement remained isolated, retaining much of its Dutch character until the mid-nineteenth century.

Another ferry service was inaugurated from Paulus Hook in 1764. It was interrupted by the War of Independence when the Hook was fortified by the Americans but taken in 1776 by the British who held it against further attack until 1783. After the war the ferry service was resumed and the position of Paulus Hook on the route between New York, New Jersey and Philadelphia made development inevitable. In 1804, speculators laid out a city on and around

the Hook. Prosperity was slow to come, but the arrival of the first railway in 1834 and of the Morris Canal in 1838 ensured the growth of what became Jersey City as a center of both transportation and industry.

The development of Jersey City led to the earliest encroachments on the marshes and waters of Communipaw Cove. In the century and more that followed, the site of Liberty Park was created as the Cove was progressively filled in, largely from north to south. The dominant forces behind this process were first the Morris Canal and Banking Company and then the railroads, in particular the Central Railroad of New Jersey and the Lehigh Valley Railroad and the businesses associated with them.

In 1838, the Morris Canal and Banking Company, which was set up primarily to ship Pennsylvania coal to revive New Jersey's failing iron industry, built its terminal basin partially in the Cove on Bergen Street, then the most southerly street in Jersey City. In 1859, in response to its expanding business, the Company built the larger Tidewater Basin in the waters of the Cove immediately to the south. The Canal eventually succumbed to railroad competition and the configuration of the basins was substantially changed. Both basins will, however, be preserved in their present form as features of the northern section of Liberty Park.

In 1860, the Central Railroad of New Jersey was finally granted permission to terminate at the riverfront in Jersey City and began to place fill reaching out from the Communipaw Cove shoreline on the west to the permitted limit in the Hudson River. From this filled area, immediately to the south of and encroaching upon the Tidewater Basin, the company ran its passenger service, ferry service to New York and a freight service whose expansion required the filling in of successive areas of the Cove to the south.

At the southern rim of Liberty Park, filling took place on and around

Black Tom's Reef where contemporary maps locate an island by 1876. The piers adjoining the island were developed primarily by the Lehigh Valley Railroad which at one time had thirty tracks on the principal pier alone.

As the railroads later declined, the Central Railroad of New Jersey leased many of its facilities, and other businesses moved in. Light industrial plants and truck transfer terminals were built in the 1950's and now abut on the Park's southern boundaries.

The northern and southern areas of fill were not joined finally until 1928. Subsequent land fill to the east was never completed and, over time, the open area has evolved into a salt marsh which will become one of the two wetland preserves of Liberty Park.

By the early twentieth century, the site of Liberty Park had become the repository of aspects of life that many preferred to ignore: oil storage; a multiplicity of railroad tracks; an abattoir; garbage dumps; and, as America provided the Allies with aid for World War I, munitions.

As a result, the Black Tom area of Liberty Park was the scene of the most effective act of sabotage in the United States in World War I -- an act which brought the war close to home for many Americans. On the night of July 29, 1916, some two million pounds of munitions destined for the Allied powers were temporarily (and illegally) stored in barges and railroad wagons at Pier 7 on Black Tom Island. A saboteur working for the Germans eluded the guards and started several fires. The two explosions that followed were felt ninety miles away in Camden and in Philadelphia. Their force blew people off their feet in the streets of Brooklyn, broke almost every window in the surrounding communities and damaged many buildings, particularly in Jersey City. Exploding shrapnel and shells from the drifting barges rained down on Ellis Island, Governor's Island and Bayonne and the crews of the fireboats attempting to reach the scene

had to lie flat on the decks for cover.

The loss of life was amazingly low -- no more than seven, including a baby blown from his crib to his death in Jersey City -- but property damage approached \$20 million. The presidents of the two railroads and the storage company concerned were arrested and lawsuits initiated which finally laid a futile claim for damages on Germany in 1939.

Jersey City was the link between the commercial centers of the west and the shipping of New York Harbor. As such, it was the goal of many major railroad companies, the staging ground for the world's largest lighterage and carfloat freight service, and the destination of other forms of transportation such as the Morris Canal and the sailing ships which, until the late 1930's, brought timber to the piers of Black Tom Island from the Carolinas, Nova Scotia and the West Indies.

In 1864, the Central Railroad of New Jersey revived the Communipaw ferry from its site on landfill south of the Tidewater Basin. In the early 1900's, up to 28,000 passengers passed through its terminal daily in each direction and two hundred trains were received and dispatched. This terminal, built in 1889, extensively remodeled in 1914, and now being restored, will play an important role in Liberty Park.

In the early twentieth century, the railroads began a long decline. In 1967, the Central Railroad of New Jersey filed for bankruptcy and in the subsequent reorganization abandoned its passenger terminal and ferry service in Jersey City. It closed its roundhouses at Communipaw in 1973, leaving the Lehigh Valley freight operation on the south bank of the Tidewater Basin as the only railroad activity in the Liberty Park area. This, too, was shut down in 1977.

The decline of shipping, canal, and railroads left derelict facilities

over much of the site of Liberty Park. The creation of the Park will return the area and its view of the Harbor to the public realm, nature will revive after more than a century of desecration, and memories of the past will be preserved among the pleasures of the present.

#