

AN ISLAND UNTO ITSELF

“Let us have no illusions about Jones Beach as we found it,” asserted Robert Moses, in a speech to the Freeport Historical Society in February 1974. “It was an isolated, swampy, sand bar, inhabited by fisherman and loners, surf casters and assorted oddballs.”

There is certainly some truth in those words, spoken forty-five years after the barren site of Major Thomas Jones’s primitive whaling operations had been transformed into a dazzling new public beach. The Jones Beach of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth century bore little resemblance to the magnificently engineered, painstakingly manicured landscape it would later become. It was rough, raw, often flooded, and constantly changing as sands migrated and storms forced opened new inlets into the fertile bay waters behind it—and then slammed them shut

again. Driven by winds blowing off the Atlantic, the dunes on Jones Beach would grow to 50 to 60 feet in height. Ponds of brackish water would develop in the valleys between these dune mountains. On the bay side salt hay grew and spread out like fields of wheat on a watery prairie.

It is also true that Jones Island—as it was once called—or Jones's Beach—as it was once spelled—was isolated. There was no land access, and even if there was, it's doubtful that many people would have packed up their carriages and headed there for a day of relaxation. Through the middle of the nineteenth century, the idea of the beach—any beach—as some sort of giant, outdoor recreational facility was unheard of. The beach was a workplace and a dangerous one, at that. "Early Long Island residents were fearful of the unknown," says Joshua Ruff, curator of the Long Island Museums in Stony Brook. "The beach was a mysterious place, subject to nature's violence. European mythology of sea monsters plus the constant tragedy of shipwrecks kept a larger public from enjoying the shore. Few saw any beauty at the beach."

Indeed, through most of the nineteenth century, a shipwreck or sighting of an alleged sea monster was about the only time Jones Beach ever seemed to register in the public record. When the packet ship *Montezuma*, from Liverpool, ran aground in May 1854, the *New York Times* described the location of the disaster as "Jones's Beach, near the New Inlet, off Freeport, a village in the town of Hempstead, Queens County, Long Island," adding—just in case readers were still confused as to the location of this obscure locale—that it "was not Rockaway Beach."

"Here He Is Again," read the headline of an 1888 newspaper story. "The sea serpent, that deceptive monster, made his appearance of the present season on Sunday last off Jones's Beach." The only slightly tongue-in-cheek story reports the sighting, by two fishermen from Brooklyn, of

what appeared to be a snake, 30 yards long. "I took a good look at it, and could distinguish between the glistening dark-brown back and the light gray belly," one was quoted as saying. "The head was even more like that of a snake than the body only it was very big and was held about eight feet above the surface of the water. . . . Once the serpent leveled his head with the rest of his body and blew forth a quantity of foam and water from his nostrils." The article notes that the fisherman had just opened "a bottle of cooling beer" when the monster appeared and quoted one of them as saying that the "shock caused by the sight of the monster made us sick. We did not care to fish anymore and left immediately."

The Birth of the Baymen

As we have seen, the hunting of what must have seemed like real sea monsters—whales—had early on become established as a seasonal business on Jones Beach. As that industry died out by the mid-eighteenth century, new ones developed. The waters around Jones Beach became part of an economic system, geared largely toward feeding the growing metropolis to the west, New York City. Generations of men commuted to Jones Beach to work from the old South Shore towns of Freeport, Merrick, Seaford, Massapequa, Amityville, and Babylon, following a series of creeks and channels and inlets into the East and South Oyster Bays, which lie on the north side of Jones Island. They were known as baymen. They raked for clams and blue-claw crabs, fished for striped bass and fluke, and hunted (which they called "gunning"). These so-called market gunners hunted waterfowl professionally. They shot pintails, redb-heads, widgeon, green-winged teal, brant, and black ducks, which proliferated in the bays. Afterward, they would make the trip back to their South Shore towns and sell their catch on the docks. From there the shellfish and birds were put