A History of La Guardia Airport

From Boardwalks to Runways
Change in a Queens Neighborhood (1886-1939)
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Gail O. Mellow, President, Fiorello H. La Guardia Community College/CUNY
Hon. Michael R. Bloomberg, Mayor, City of New York
Hon. Gifford Miller, Speaker, Council of the City of New York
Hon. Helen Marshall, President, Borough of Queens
Hon. Kate Levin, Commissioner, Department of Cultural Affairs
David Gedris, Vice President, Consolidated Edison Company of New York, Inc.

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Jo Anne Mulligan and Class 4-307
Maria Tsiros
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All photographs and documents used in this publication are from the La Guardia and Wagner Archives.

Cover Photos
Boardwalk at North Beach, 1902.
First plane to land at North Beach Airport, April 29, 1939.

Back Cover Photos
American Airlines Flagship, 1939.
The Yankee Clipper at La Guardia Airport Seaplane Base, 1940.
Dirigible, 1908. Photo courtesy of John Abramopoulos.
Orville Wright in test flight for the Army in Washington, D.C., 1908.

This publication is supported, in part, by funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and a grant from Consolidated Edison Company of New York, Inc.

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INTRODUCTION

Be an Historian

Do you have a favorite place that you like to visit? Did you ever wonder if that place was the same when your parents or grandparents were children? New York City’s neighborhoods have changed a lot over time, and many of the places we know today looked very different in the past.

In this booklet you will learn about one such place in Queens where an amusement park and resort once stood. Today, this area is home to one of New York City’s two major airports. Where people once went to enjoy rides and attractions, they now go to depart for vacations and good times in other places.

As you explore the story of this changing neighborhood, you will do the kind of investigating that historians do. Historians look at different kinds of information from the past that can help them to better understand what was happening at a particular time in history. Items like photographs, letters, diaries, newspaper articles, and maps are called “primary sources.” Primary sources were created by people living in the time period the historian is writing about. They give a first-hand account of events experienced by the people who lived them.

After studying primary sources, historians and other researchers write about what they learned. Materials such as books, encyclopedias, and articles written about events that have already happened are called “secondary sources.” Historians also use secondary sources—the work of other researchers—to learn about the past.

You will play the role of an historian as you explore the lessons in this booklet. You will look at primary sources, including photos, maps, and advertisements to get a glimpse into the past and show you how an important change was made to a neighborhood. Sometimes you will be able to learn directly from the primary sources. Other times, you will need to look up information in your Reference Guide, included in this booklet. Your Reference Guide is a secondary source, a kind of mini encyclopedia. Whenever you come across a word that is in bold print, you can find information about it by looking in the Reference Guide.

Now, begin your research and have fun!
Before the amusement parks of Coney Island opened beginning in 1895, there was North Beach Bowery Bay Gala Amusement Park. North Beach, in Astoria, Queens, opened on June 19, 1886 and was one of the most popular places in the city. All along the beach were hotels, restaurants, theaters, bowling alleys, and rides such as carrousels and Ferris wheels. Boat rides, called “shooting the chutes,” were like our modern water rides, where the boats drop from a slide. There were also toboggan slides and scenic railway rides. Because it was on the shores of Bowery Bay, North Beach offered swimming in the bay and sunbathing, as well. Swimming pools, picnic grounds, and places where people could go to dance and have refreshments were also part of the resort. And each week visitors could enjoy watching fireworks in a spectacular display over the water.

Locate North Beach and Coney Island on the map and circle them. In what direction was North Beach from Coney Island? (Circle one.) North  South  East  West  Northeast  Northwest  Southeast  Southwest

Using the scale of miles, measure the shortest distance between the two places. They were approximately _______ miles apart.

North Beach was on Bowery Bay. What bay is to the southeast? ________________________________

What body of water is Coney Island on? ________________________________
North Beach was in Queens and Coney Island is in Brooklyn. At the time the two places opened, neither Queens nor Brooklyn were boroughs of New York City. It wasn't until 1898 that New York became a city of five boroughs. This joining of the boroughs is known as consolidation.

Before consolidation, New York included only the borough of __________ and part of ______________. (Check your Reference Guide to find the answer.)

Visitors had two ways of traveling to North Beach. They could travel by ferry or by trolley, pictured above. Trolleys were also known as _________________. (Check your Reference Guide for the answer.)

What kinds of transportation do we use to get around the city today? Name two.

1. ____________________________ 2. ____________________________
Looking at photographs, postcards, and advertisements from long ago helps us to learn about the past. The picture above is an advertisement from 1910 for North Beach. Look at it to answer the questions.

In the early 1900's electricity was just becoming available as a way of lighting places. Do you think “bathing by electric lights” is a fun attraction? ________ Why or why not? ________

Why do you think it was listed as an attraction in this advertisement? ________

At the time of this ad, the word “bathing” had another meaning. (Check your Reference Guide to find out what it was.) It meant ________

When this advertisement appeared, was New York a city of five boroughs? (Hint: Was this after consolidation?) ________

The ad says North Beach, L.I. L.I stands for Long Island. Why do you think North Beach is described as being part of Long Island? (Check your Reference Guide.) ________

Circle the attractions listed in the advertisement that people still enjoy today.

The ad lists vaudeville as a kind of entertainment. (Look up this word in your Reference Guide.) Vaudeville was performed (circle one): in a theater on television on the radio.
Greetings from North Beach

Like vacationers today, visitors to North Beach sometimes sent postcards to their friends and relatives. The postcard below was sent from North Beach in 1905. It says:

Dear Friend—Would be pleased to hear from you once more. Sincerely, MH Johnson  1147 E. Grand St, Elizabeth N.J.

This postcard can tell us certain things about the person who wrote it, while some things still remain a mystery. For example, we know the person’s name and address, but can we tell if the person is male or female? Who is MH Johnson writing to? What emotions do you think MH was feeling while writing? Write a short letter back to MH Johnson using both your imagination and the information you learned from the postcard.

Dear MH,

________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________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How Much did it Cost?

Look at the documents on these two pages to see how much things cost at North Beach.

A.
A page from the North Beach Amusement Guide.

B.
A supper check, or ticket, for the First Annual Trolley Ride for members of the Benchman's Association of Retail Butchers of Greater New York, 1901.

It cost ________ to ride the toboggan slide. (See photo A.)

A ticket to celebrate the first trolley ride of the year cost ________ in 1901. (See photo B.) This price included __________________ and __________________.

A season pass to go swimming cost ________ in the year ________. (See photo C.)
C.
A season pass for the Silver Springs Bathing Pavilion at North Beach, 1897.

Compared to today, things cost a lot less long ago. But people also made a lot less money. For example, if in 1900, the average person made $500 a year, and if the average person today makes $40,000, then the average pay for today would be how many times higher than it was in 1900? _______________________

Compare some average prices from 1900 with today. Which price has risen the most? The price of a ________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>1900</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>The cost is:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bread</td>
<td>5 cents</td>
<td>$2 a loaf</td>
<td>40 times higher than today</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy’s coat</td>
<td>$2.50</td>
<td>$60</td>
<td>24 times higher than today</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washing Machine</td>
<td>$4.75</td>
<td>$400</td>
<td>84 times higher than today</td>
</tr>
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LESSON 3

A Mayor’s Dream

In 1919, things began to change for North Beach. In that year the federal government passed a law that made alcohol illegal. This was called Prohibition. It meant that restaurants could no longer sell drinks like beer and wine, which many people enjoyed. As a result, many places had to close down because they were not doing enough business. Also, in the 1920’s, other new amusements, such as movies and automobiles, competed with North Beach. In time, although people still went there to swim, North Beach was no longer the great amusement park and resort it had once been.

Years later, in the 1930’s, Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia* wanted to build a major airport in New York City, and he thought the perfect place for it would be North Beach. At the time La Guardia was mayor, New York did not have a large airport of its own. Passengers had to fly into airports in New Jersey and then travel to New York City. Back in the 1920’s, a small private airport had been built at North Beach, but it was not big enough to handle large planes or large numbers of visitors. La Guardia knew that more visitors would come to the city if transportation were more convenient. He worked hard at this project, and was very enthusiastic. He convinced both the city and the federal government to give New York money to build an airport.

When the mayor wants to raise money to do something for the city, it is helpful if he gets the citizens to support his idea. He gets the word out by making public appearances and getting his ideas in the newspapers and on the radio. In order to show that New York needed an airport of its own, La Guardia did a clever thing. He took a flight to Chicago and when he returned at Newark Airport, in New Jersey, he refused to get off the plane. He claimed that his ticket said “Chicago to New York,” and he was not in New York. So he stayed on the plane, surrounded by reporters who would write about this in their newspapers.

* Check your Reference Guide under La Guardia to find out what the “H” stands for. It stands for ____________

The drawing on the opposite page shows Fiorello La Guardia asleep. What is he dreaming about? ____________

What does his expression tell you? ____________

This drawing is called The Dreamer (and Doer). What is the difference between a dreamer and a doer? ____________

What are your dreams about the future of the city? ____________
A sketch portrait of La Guardia by G.E. Bachelor, 1939. Drawing courtesy of Marie La Guardia.

What are your dreams for your own future?

Describe a daydream you had and which you made come true.
A Travel through Time

A. Jackson's Mill, at entrance to North Beach, 1870.

By his tireless efforts, Mayor La Guardia was able to fulfill his dream. North Beach Airport became a spectacular new, large airport—the place we know today as La Guardia.

Look at the photos on these two pages. They show how the same place looked at different times. The first photo, from 1870, shows a mill in the area where North Beach Amusement Park would later be built. The second photo, from 1900, shows the Ferris wheel at the park, and the third shows La Guardia Airport when it opened in 1939.

Imagine you are a time traveler and that you begin your journey in 1870. Look at photo A. You are standing in front of the mill. Describe what you see.

Now look at photo B. You have traveled thirty years into the future and are at North Beach Amusement Park in 1900. Compare photo A and photo B. List two things about the place that have changed and two things that have remained the same.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Changed:</th>
<th>Same:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>1.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
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C.
Opening of La Guardia Airport, 1939.

Notice the tracks in the road in photo B. What do you think they are for? (Hint: Go back to page 3 to see how people traveled to North Beach.)

Look at photo C. Now you are in 1939, at the newly opened La Guardia Airport. Compare photo B and photo C. What has changed?

Look at the planes to see what airline companies owned them. Name two of the companies.

1. __________________________ 2. __________________________

Can you find signs of technology in any of the three photos? Name two things.

1. __________________________

2. __________________________
Fiorello H. La Guardia was interested in aviation long before he ever made plans to build an airport for New York City. In fact, he knew how to fly! La Guardia began taking flying lessons as early as 1915, when he was thirty-three years old. During World War I (1914–1918), La Guardia enlisted in the Air Service division of the United States Army and became a fighter pilot. At the time, he was not yet mayor. He was a member of the United States Congress, which makes the laws for the country. La Guardia was given permission to take some time off from his duties as a congressman to join the war in Europe. Soon he worked his way up the ranks to become a captain, and then a major, which are high positions in the military. During his time as an Army pilot, La Guardia sometimes tested newly built planes to make sure they worked right. Only then would they be safe for other pilots to fly.

On the opposite page is a scene from a 1941 comic book called True Comics. In two sentences, describe what is going on.

1. ____________________________

2. ____________________________

In what country is La Guardia testing the plane? ____________________________

How would you describe La Guardia’s response when he is told he must have an operation? ____________________________

At the time this event took place, what rank did La Guardia hold in the Army? ____________________________

After reading this page from the comics, what three words would you use to describe Fiorello La Guardia?

1. ____________________________  2. ____________________________  3. ____________________________
When the U.S.A. entered World War No. 1... 

Related to Congressman La Guardia, young fellow?

Not exactly, sir. You see, I am the Congressman!

The "little flower" was impatient with the delay in going overseas.

I want 152 passages for my cadets, and let's get started!

At the training field in Italy, he tested a foreign-built plane.

I'm above the storm at last... 15,000 feet...

The plane proved defective.

Whew! What a crate this is!

We'll have to operate.

I can't wait here that long!

General, those planes are defective.

Thank you, captain. Your prompt report will save lives.
The new airport was known as North Beach Airport because it was in the part of Astoria still called North Beach. On October 15, 1939, a big celebration, called a Dedication Ceremony, was held at the new airport to officially name, or “dedicate,” it New York City Municipal Airport #2.* Many people, however, felt the airport should be named after Mayor La Guardia. During the celebration, three planes flying over the crowd wrote the words “Name it La Guardia” across the sky. The crowd yelled in agreement, and a month later the City Council decided to rename the airport New York Municipal Airport—La Guardia Field. In 1947, the name was changed again to La Guardia Airport.

*Check your Reference Guide under Municipal Airports to find out what Municipal Airport #1 was.

It was __________________________ in the borough of _____________________________.

*
La Guardia Airport “Firsts”

Fiorello LaGuardia and his son, Eric, with crew of the first passenger plane to depart from the airport, 1939.

Envelope of first airmail letter to reach the airport, 1939.

The photos above show two first-time events at La Guardia Airport. The first photo shows Mayor La Guardia shaking hands with the pilot of the first passenger plane to depart from the airport. (Keep in mind that besides passengers, planes also carry cargo and mail.) La Guardia’s son Eric is beside him.

What is the name of the airline that owned the plane? ________________________________

The second photo shows an envelope with a cachet marking the first airmail letter to land at the airport.

On what day and at what time did the first airmail land in New York? ___________________________

What airline carried it? ___________________________

What name did the airport have at that time? ___________________________

The envelope says it was the World’s ___________________________

How much did airmail stamps cost at that time? ___________________________
La Guardia Airport, 1939

Adapted from the brochure, New York Municipal Airport, North Beach, printed for the opening of the airport, 1939.

When La Guardia Field opened to the public on December 2, 1939, it was a big attraction. Most people at the time could not afford to travel by plane, but many people came to the airport on weekends just to see the planes landing and taking off. Going to the airport was a new amusement for New Yorkers. Also, many people flew in from other parts of the country to go to the 1939 World's Fair in Flushing Meadows, Queens.

Above is a map of La Guardia (North Beach) Airport in 1939.

How many runways does it have? ________________________________

How many feet is the longest runway? ___________________________ The shortest? ________________________________

What is the total number of runway feet in the airport? ________________________________

What body of water is northeast of the airport? ________________________________

What body of water is west? _____________________________________________
CONCLUSION

You have played the role of an historian by investigating how a neighborhood changed. You have carried out research by looking at primary sources and using your Reference Guide as a secondary source. But the role of the historian is not just to examine the past, but to help preserve records for future historians to learn from. You can continue being an historian by doing the following activities.

A Story from the Past

Interview an older family member or neighbor about the first time he or she flew in an aircraft. What kind of aircraft was it? How old was the person at the time? Did the person travel alone or with someone? Where was he or she going and why? Was it scary? What did the person like most about the experience? What did the person like least? By interviewing someone about his or her life experiences, you are getting an "oral history" (a story that is told to you). Oral histories can then be written down. You can write down the oral history you hear in a special journal, and, if you like, make your own book of oral histories by interviewing several people.

An Ad for the Future

We have seen how advertisements can teach us about the past. Remember the ad for North Beach on page 4? The photo on this page shows a poster from 1939 advertising La Guardia Airport. Do you have a favorite amusement park, like Disneyland or Great Adventure, or other place, like a sports stadium, that you like to visit? On a separate sheet of paper, draw an advertisement for it. Imagine that people in the future will look at your ad and learn about our time in history from it.
Early Aircraft

Aviation has had a place in Queens history going back to the 1920's. (To learn more about this, look in your Reference Guide under Aviation.) At that time, airports were different than today because aircraft were different. Runways were a lot shorter, and hangars were smaller. Planes were a lot smaller, not like the jumbo jets we travel in today. One of the types of planes used in the early days of aviation was the biplane. The biplane has a double set of wings, one on top of the other.

If you could travel back in time to visit Holmes Airport, the first airport to open in Queens, in the 1930's, you would also see another kind of aircraft. Holmes Airport had a special hangar for dirigibles. A dirigible is an airship that looks like a giant, potato-shaped balloon. (Check your Reference Guide to learn more about airships and dirigibles.)

La Guardia Airport had a special hangar for seaplanes. These planes were known as flying boats, and landed on the water when they arrived. The building where passengers went after arriving on the seaplanes was the Marine Air Terminal ("marine" has to do with water).

First, match the aircraft with its description.

A. Seaplane  _______ A plane with double wings.
B. Dirigible  _______ A "flying boat."
C. Biplane  _______ A modern plane, what we usually take to go on vacation.
D. Jet  _______ A kind of airship.

Now, write the name of the aircraft next to its photo.