

Exploring Coney Island's Heyday in the Archives: The "Smorgasbord" Approach

an in-archives exercise by Eric Platt

featured on [TeachArchives.org](http://www.teacharchives.org) at <http://www.teacharchives.org/exercises/research-annotations/>

Students select an item from a wide array of primary sources about Coney Island, then craft a research paper around their chosen document.

Introduction

This exercise adopts a "smorgasbord" approach. Students visit the archives where they are introduced to a wide variety of primary sources related to Coney Island. Each student selects a source which will form the basis of a final research project. Over the course of several weeks, students analyze their chosen primary source and conduct additional secondary source research which they synthesize in a final paper.

This choose-your-own-document model allows students to match their research to personal or academic interests. For example, musicians tend to choose the sheet music while a future architect might gravitate toward the fire insurance atlas which details construction materials.

Objectives

Students should be able to:

- Conduct a close reading of a primary source
- Pose questions of a primary source, and locate answers in secondary sources
- Write a short research paper which makes a clear historical argument and demonstrates a working knowledge of a specific aspect of Coney Island's history

Context

Before the students visit the archives, they learn about the history of Coney Island during the early 20th century through two class lectures and discussions, readings from *Coney Island Lost and Found*, and a short documentary film by Ric Burns (See Further Reading below). We also practice primary sources analysis through in-class exercises.

Visit

Number of Visits: 2

Duration of Visit: 45 minutes each

Visit 1 Agenda

5 minutes	Standard introduction after a pre-visit
10 minutes	Group walk-through
20 minutes	Independent research
10 minutes	Wrap up

During the first visit, students are introduced to a variety of primary sources about Coney Island, including sheet music, ticket stubs, newspaper clippings, guidebooks and even the wax head and hands of Nat King Cole from a long-shuttered wax museum. The group walk-through led by archives staff helps students understand the different formats, what information each source can provide, and how to use each type of document. Without this introduction, students often ignored interesting items that at first glance were less visually appealing than others (for example: a pamphlet in a nondescript library binding).

Students then freely circulate to examine the documents, to choose one they will focus on for their project, and to begin analyzing it based on guidance from the professor.

Wrap Up

Students reconvene and, in a group discussion, answer the following questions:

- What was the most interesting/surprising/oddest source that you examined today?
- Why did you choose the source that you did?
- What did you learn about Coney Island through examining the sources?

In Between the Visits

There is about a week between our first and second visits to the archives. In between, students conduct additional background research about a subject related to the archival source that they chose. In doing so, they are required to use at least three different sources:

- *Coney Island: Lost and Found*, one of the required books for the class
- One additional print primary or secondary source
- One internet primary or secondary source from either the open web or from an online library database

I provide students with a list of possible sources (see Further Reading below), although I make it clear that they are not limited to my suggestions. To ensure that students complete this assignment before returning to the archives, I require them to post to the class blog (see End Products below).

Visit 2 Agenda

5 minutes	“Refresher” introduction
30 minutes	Independent research
10 minutes	Wrap up

During the second visit, students continue analyzing their primary source, incorporating the additional research they did between visits.

Wrap Up

Students reconvene and share:

- A brief description of their primary source and an interesting observation about it
- Something they learned from their secondary source research that informs their understanding of the primary source

End Products

Class Blog

Students post regularly to a class blog. They complete four posts related to this exercise:

- Before the first visit, students respond to the lectures
- Two days after the first visit to the archives, they explain why they chose the source that they did
- Prior to the second visit, they give a brief report on their secondary source research
- Two days after the second visit to the archives, they discuss how their additional research has contributed to their analysis

I use the blog to encourage additional student interaction. Leaving comments and suggestions on classmates' posts counts for 10% of the assignment grade. If students comment on two or more people's blog posts, I give them 10 extra credit points as well.

Research Paper

About two weeks after their final visit to the archives, students complete a 3 – 4 page research paper that integrates analysis of their chosen primary source with the outside research they conducted.

By and large, students have written creative papers that employed interesting (and often original) analyses. For example, a student who saw the price of a ticket to Dreamland in

the archives then found the costs of other early 20th-century Coney Island attractions by looking at other primary and secondary sources. She then adjusted the prices to their 2010 equivalent and compared them to the cost of visiting a park like Six Flags today. Her final paper was about how much a family would spend visiting an amusement park today compared to Dreamland in the early 1900s.

Another student chose in the archives an advertisement for a ride with the theme of Theodore Roosevelt and the Rough Riders. When she began doing additional research, she learned that park visitors had been killed in two different accidents on this ride. She synthesized contemporary newspaper articles about these incidents with secondary sources about accidents at Coney Island in general. In her paper, she argued that while the advertisement makes the ride look safe, fun, and patriotic, it also had a more dangerous side.

Archival Material Used

Bound Items

Armbruster, Eugene L. *Coney Island*. New York: 1924; Main collection F129 .C75 A76p 1924; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Coney Island Old Timers' Album and Directory. Brooklyn, NY: 1941; Main collection F129 .C75 C67 1941; Brooklyn Historical Society.

The Iron Steamboat Service to Coney Island and Rockaway : "Grand Republic" and Other Popular Steamers Ready to Commence the Thirty-Seventh Season. Coney Island, NY: 1917; Main collection HE327 .I76 1917; Brooklyn Historical Society.

How to See Coney Island and Save Money: A Souvenir and Guide with Magazine Supplement. New York: Greater New York Magazine Co., 1906; Closed stacks F129 .C75 H69 1906; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Moses, Robert. *The Improvement of Coney Island*. New York: Department of Parks, 1939; RefFolio TC 343 .N58 193; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Programs

Seidl Society's Brighton Beach Programme, 1894; Brooklyn ephemera collection, ARC.272, series 5: Entertainment, box 2, folder 8a; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Manhattan Beach Programme Gilmore's Band Grand Concerts, 1889; Brooklyn ephemera collection, ARC.272, series 5: Entertainment, box 2, folder 8a; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Sheet Music

Luna Park March and Two Step, 1903, M1987.9.2; Broadside collection, box 1; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

My Little Coney Isle, 1902, M1987.9.4; Broadside collection, box 1; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Newspaper Clippings

“Death of Coney Pioneer Recalls Early History,” September 25, 1910; Charles E. Scriven collection on Brooklyn history, 1973.254, box 2, folder 16; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

“Coney Island in Historic Annals,” Citizen, May 27, 1906; Charles E. Scriven collection on Brooklyn history, 1973.254, box 2, folder 16; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

“Gravesend Topography Unchanged Since 1643,” Brooklyn Eagle, May 24, 1908; Charles E. Scriven collection on Brooklyn history, 1973.254, box 2, folder 16; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

“Days When McKane Rules Gravesend,” Brooklyn Eagle, January 19, 1913; Charles E. Scriven collection on Brooklyn history, 1973.254, box 2, folder 16; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

Maps

Atlas of the Borough of Brooklyn, City of New York, The First 28 Wards. Vol. 7, part 1. Brooklyn, NY: E. Belcher Hyde, 1907; Fire Insurance Atlas (39a) 1907; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Map of Coney Island and Sheepshead Bay. New York: M. Dripps, 1879; Flat Maps B A-1879b.FI; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

Map of the County of Kings Showing the Ward and Town Boundaries. 1869; Flat Maps B A-1869b.FI; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Ephemera

Various items from Coney Island Jockey Club collection, 1987.007; Brooklyn Historical Society.

“St. Michael’s Day” ticket stub to Dreamland, September 1, 1909; Brooklyn ephemera collection, ARC.272, series 5: Entertainment, box 2, folder 8a; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Advertising Card for Rough Rider's Ride, circa 1907 – 1916; Brooklyn ephemera collection, ARC.272, series 5: Entertainment, box 2, folder 8a; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

Luna Park tickets, 1933 – 1939; Brooklyn ephemera collection, ARC.272, series 5: Entertainment, box 2, folder 8a; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Objects

Wax Head and Hands of Nat King Cole, 1986.77.10; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Further Reading

Textbook

Denson, Charles. *Coney Island: Lost and Found*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2002.

Documentary Film

Coney Island. Film. Directed by Ric Burns. New York: Steeplechase Films, 1991.

Print Source Suggestions

Ierardi, Eric J. *Gravesend, Brooklyn: Coney Island and Sheepshead Bay*. Dover, NH: Arcadia, 1996.

Immerso, Michael. *Coney Island: The People's Playground*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002.

Kasson, John F. *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1978.

McCullough, Edo. *Good Old Coney Island: A Sentimental Journey into the Past: The Most Rambunctious, Scandalous, Rapsallion, Splendiferous, Pugnacious, Spectacular, Illustrious, Prodigious, Frolicsome Island on Earth*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2000.

Register, Woody. *The Kid of Coney Island: Fred Thompson and the Rise of American Amusements*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Snow, Richard. *Coney Island: A Postcard Journey to the City of Fire*. New York: Brightwaters Press, 1984.

Stein, Harvey. *Coney Island*. New York: Norton, 1998.

Internet Source Suggestions

[Brooklyn Daily Eagle Online, 1841-1902](#). *Brooklyn Public Library*. Accessed January 2014.

[Coney Island History Project](#). *The Coney Island History Project*. Accessed January 2014.

[Coney Island History Site](#). *The Westland Network*. Accessed January 2014.

New York Times Historical Database, 1851-2007.

ProQuest subscription database accessible to my students through our college library

This Exercise Was Used In

HIS 1201: History of the United States, 1896 - Present A survey of 20th-century United States history that fulfills the general education requirement. My section examines several themes through the lens of Coney Island.

Cite This Exercise

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