Jones Beach and Fire Island State Parks
After Fifty Years
Remarks of Robert Moses to the Freeport Historical Society

At the Freeport Memorial Library
February 26, 1974
My Friends,

Jones Beach began in 1924 with a remote little makeshift State park of two hundred acres on Fire Island, acquired to house passengers suspected of having cholera on a stranded ship offshore. There were five commissioners and each had a $1500 a year deputy. The federal government owned all the accreted land on Fire Island west of the Lighthouse. Four townships, two in Nassau and two in Suffolk, were the owners of Jones Beach.

Let us have no illusions about Jones Beach as we found it. It was a swampy sandbar accessible only by small boats and infrequent ferries, inhabited by fishermen and loners, surfcasters and assorted oddballs and beachcombers trying to get away from it all, encompassing meadowlands traditionally used for cutting salt hay for cattle. The yarns told of a lovely, primitive paradise wilderness with indestructible dunes were fiction.

Our concept of a matchless shorefront public recreation park open to everyone was generally regarded by the natives with suspicion and dislike. We open the park in 1929 in a sandstorm after I had borrowed money from my mother to pay busted contractors. The dedication took place before we planted beach grass. The sandstorm knocked out the carburetors of thousands of cars whose passengers said the whole thing was a fiasco and that nobody would ever come there again.

Jones Beach was in fact a mosquito-infested tidal swamp full of stagnant pools, flanked by shifting dunes. We filled and planted on it every shrub that would grow in sandy soil. This barrier beach was developed in the face of bitter, unreasoning, vindictive, personal opposition and threats of removal from office. We fought equinoctial storms, the local Ku Klux Klan, baymen and cottagers who hugged their isolation and rum runners who had no use for authorities. We did, however, establish rapport with the bootleggers who had twenty-mile-an-hour-skiffs powered by airplane engines, at our regular poker games with the lighthouse keepers we could order anything up to and including champagne.

For two years on the Babylon commuter trains no one spoke to me, and the porter was horrified when I strayed into the Islip Club Car, and ordered me out.

Ellison’s Hotel, a combination of bath, bar and cat house, stood stubbornly in our way in the Town of Hempstead. Ellison attempted to stop the entire Jones Beach program and
held up our engineers and contractors, although we had clear title from the township. We beat him and forced him to take his shacks elsewhere. He moved to meadowland which we took when we built the Loop from Jones Beach to Long Beach. That was the end of Ellison.

The Seaman Gore case to decide whether there was still private ownership of part of the Oyster Bay Beach went all the way to the United States Supreme Court. A Guggenheim game refuge blocked our way. These so-called sportsmen paid the town of Oyster Bay an annual rental of $500 an acre for fifty acres on a procured fifteen-year lease. Babylon’s claim to ownership of the entire land under water was fought to a finish, ending with town beach land for the State park and a right of way for our Ocean Parkway. Judge Cooper, a bitter opponent, owned the influential Babylon Leader, was a member of the Town board and himself a claimant to beach land.

Close friendly relations with Wilbur Doughty, Republican boss of Nassau, and his top political deputies, including Russell Sprague, was a tremendous asset. Our greatest friend was Governor Smith who had known Wilbur at the Fulton Fish Market and as an Assemblyman at Albany.

In those troublesome times, the Regional Plan Association of New York vigorously opposed our programs and even advocated splitting up Jones Beach into minute subdivisions and selling them to cottagers. They brought into the picture from abroad Thomas Adams, a distinguished British planner and chief advisor to the London County Council. Years later Mr. Adams, a Scot with a conscience, admitted his mistakes and congratulated me on the success of our program. This is verbatim what he said:

> Fifteen years ago you and I walked up Fourth Avenue and you told me that you had little patience with plans that did not lead to action. Since then you have been responsible for remarkable work in New York and by this time must have become rather blasé toward appreciative words. Perhaps, however, and expression of congratulation and admiration from one who had difference with you may startle you into feeling that it is based on real sincerity.

> No doubt I was too strong willed in holding my views and perhaps you were somewhat over-intolerant of ideas that failed to register in immediate action. My comparatively small efforts ended when yours really began, and the record of your achievements has made you widely and deservedly famous. I wish it were in the realm of possibility that you could come to London ad by a mere recital of what you have done in New York inspire the city fathers into doing something to emulate your great work.
As my connection with New York has long ceased, I have no object in writing to you except to offer these congratulations and to express the hope that there are no remnants of bitterness between us regarding past differences.

I hope to inspect some of your work when I next visit New York.

In *Newsday* column of May 21, 1966, entitled “Jones Beach After 40 Years,” I said in substance:

Back in 1925 Sid Shapiro, later Chief Engineer, was running a little survey party from a shack at High Hill on Jones Beach. A Coast Guard crew and out adopted hermit, Will Cuppy, were his neighbors. So were abandoned, vicious wild cats and dogs, scores of rabbits and one family of red foxes, not to speak of clam-diggers who boasted they had not been in New York in twenty years and had no idea of ever returning. At one stage of the game, the Albany auditor called off Sid’s funds because he was surveying beyond the tidal line mentioned in the appropriation bill. Sid’s engineers were starving, and some of us personally brought food to keep them alive. Almost nobody in those days believed in Jones Beach.

Here are two editorials, years apart, from the New York Herald Tribune. There was never a decent apology for the first, nor an explanation of what caused this change of heart. The Herald Tribune on Saturday, November 14 1925: “In overwhelmingly rejecting the program to turn over Jones Beach to the Long Island State Park Commissioner, the voters of the Town of Hempstead delivered a deserved rebuke to that blundering body. Now come the proposals for the Nassau and Suffolk Park Commissions to handle the development of beaches and other playgrounds, and there is an excellent prospect that Long Island is on the way to escaping from the clutches of a Moses Commission, and will before long begin the sound park development that is so greatly needed.”

In the same paper, on Monday August 21, 1933, came an editorial entitled “Four Years of Jones Beach: “A few days late, perhaps (but the anniversaries of bathing beaches are seldom announced with cake and candle), we congratulate Jones Beach and the people of the State of New York upon its fourth birthday. There is, to our knowledge, nothing of its kind as fine as Jones Beach anywhere in the world. Millions of New Yorkers who have derived health and pleasure form its facilities, both natural and artificial, will probably agree with us, no matter how few the order of lesser world’s public beaches they may have seen.” It is quite a change.

Our difficulties at Fire Island were similar to those of Jones Beach. Harold Phelps Stokes, a Yale classmate of mine, persuaded Herbert Hoover, then Secretary of
Commerce, to give us Fire Island west of the lighthouse. Personal friendship, to super planning did this. Our original plans for the reclamation and elevation of the Jones Beach and Fire Island barriers on the Ocean Parkway were ridiculed until they began to attract visitors in 1929. The planting of trees, shrubs, and grass that would grow in sandy soil was called absurd, but most of it endured.

We owed much our accomplishments to a succession of devoted, dedicated, unpaid commissions, heading today by Holly Patterson, who has been around almost as long as I have; engineers such as Arthur Howland, Earl Andrews, Ken Morton, Stanley Pollack, and Sid Shapiro. For our Council, Ray McNulty and Frank Doherty, and to my secretary, Hazel Tappen, and now we have Hawthorn Bill as chief of staff, a worthy successor to the early executives.

The future of Jones Beach and Fire Island are sure. Protective works to prevent beach erosion are still and always necessary. There is room for more bath houses and parking on state and federal land. The road east of Fire Island from the lighthouse to the natural seashore must be built because without it on 20% of those demanding recreation can be accommodated.

We have established high standards of upkeep and they have been maintained to this day. We have demonstrated that the public beach could be run for the benefit of 95% of good people and not surrender to three of four percent of bums.

Of course the same time operated city, suburban, and exurban parks, can testify to the differences and objectives of visitors. There are policemen and firemen who want to get out of town for a day of fishing in the open boats off Captree to preserve their sanity. There are gregarious, compacted Bronx families loaded down with incredible paraphernalia who can’t bear to be far apart and want outdoors just what they have indoors at home. There will be much more year round usage as we magnify the sun’s rays and glass out the wind. I remember when bathers had to wear tops to escape arrest. Today the only punishable offense is stark nudity.

The assorted obstructionists did us a great favor because they unwittingly made us more stubborn, hidebound and bullet proof. Position, persistence and luck saved us at least as much as nobility of purpose.

Last Sunday The Players Club in New York on a revival of *South Pacific* which brought back memories of the many splendid outdoor shows thousands have enjoyed at Jones Beach under the constellations and over-looking the Atlantic. For more than forty years, aficionados of all ages have marked time to the music and sung the words to Rodgers and Hammerstein’s unforgettable melodies and have thanked Guy Lombardo, Mike Todd and other Beach impresarios, and celebrated the architecture of Aymar Embury and Gilmore Clarke.
There it is in a nutshell – an example of planned, imaginative, persistent, non-political public enterprise. This was conservation in the broadest sense before the three E’s of Ecology, Environmentalism, and Ekistics became slogans of extremists and crusaders. When the critics tell you there has been nothing but neglect of the great outdoors, take them to Jones Beach and Fire Island and tell them to look about.

Transcript of this event is located at the Freeport Memorial Library (LI R 974.721 M)

A recording of event is available at the Freeport Historical Society.