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(<https://www.nps.gov/gate/marking-50-years-as-a-national-recreation-area.htm>)



National Park Service

Gateway

National Recreation Area
NY, NJ

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PARK CLOSURES

Dead Horse Bay (Brooklyn) Remains Closed to the Public

The entire southern area of Dead Horse Bay, including Glass Bottle Beach, is closed to the public. Crews are working in these areas using heavy brush clearing equipment and performing radiation surveys. Dead Horse Bay is located in Brooklyn, NYC.

Spring Creek (Queens) Closed to the Public

Spring Creek is closed to the public at this time. The NPS is conducting field investigations as part of a Remedial Investigation at the site. Spring Creek is located in Queens, NYC.

[More \(https://www.nps.gov/gate/learn/management/spring-creek-park-environmental-cleanup-project.htm\)](https://www.nps.gov/gate/learn/management/spring-creek-park-environmental-cleanup-project.htm)

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Work and Life on Barren Island

There is a history buried in South Brooklyn. As a matter of fact, that history pours into the bay. Today, it takes the form of trash, but to many of those who settled here in the second half of the 19th century it was a way of life. On the surface we see a decommissioned airfield. Floyd Bennett Field, New York City's first municipal airport and later a Naval Air Station built atop landfill. Dig a little deeper and you will discover a thriving community.

The following text and accompanying images were part of the pop-up exhibition, *A Most Self-Contained Community: Barren Island* curated by Gateway National Recreation Area, the Jamaica Bay-Rockaway Parks Conservancy, the Sanitation Foundation, and Miriam Sicherman – Author of *Brooklyn's Barren Island: A Forgotten History*. It was installed outside of the Ryan Visitor Center at Floyd Bennett Field from June to September in 2022.

A Most Self-Contained Community: Work and Life on Barren Island 1850s-1930s

Imagine, for a moment, that you are aboard a rickety ferry. As you sailed from Canarsie Pier and closer to your destination, the smells became more pungent—a mixture of burning garbage, drying fish, rotting animals, and in contrast, a brisk salt-water breeze.

Now stepping off the boat, you see men heading off to factories, chatting in German, Polish, Italian, and southern-accented English. Children are carrying driftwood home before heading off to the school. Women are gathering eggs from the chickens outside their tiny houses, while hogs are snuffling around in nearby piles of garbage. A horse and wagon carefully traverse a bridge over a creek, carrying supplies to the grocery store in someone's front room. A whistle blows as the last few workers arrive at the factories for their ten-hour shifts. You are on Barren Island. You're in New York City, yet you're also in a remote, windswept, marshy seaside village. Though most of your fellow New Yorkers have never heard of this place, essential tasks take place here. Here workers extract industrial grease from the city's garbage, preventing it from being dumped in the ocean and washing up on the beaches. Here skimmers, bone-cutters, and other laborers transform the thousands of horses who die on city streets each year into everything from gloves to buttons to products needed for Brooklyn's booming sugar refineries.

The people who live and work here are strivers: new European immigrants and Black migrants from Virginia and Delaware, creating a community on land that is so isolated that islanders are left to collect their own water, grow or catch much of their own food, fight their own fires, and lay planks on the ground to build their own roads.

As the decades pass, this cohesive, self-sustaining community will be attached to Brooklyn with landfill, host the city's first airport, and eventually disappear, leaving almost no trace. The following images reveal a nearly forgotten history and how the legacy of this community informs the landscape of New York City.

New York City Department of Sanitation at Floyd Bennett Field

Over the course of the 1920s Barren Island and its surrounding saltmarsh were filled in and attached to mainland Brooklyn. Floyd Bennett Field, the City's first municipal airport was built atop the new land. In 1931, the Navy began operating an air base on the grounds. In 1941, the Navy fully absorbed Floyd Bennett Field and operated a Naval Air Base there until 1971. Following the property's transfer to the National Park Service in 1972, the Navy's Aviation Patrol Base hangar was demolished. The site remained vacant until the 1990s, when the National Park Service granted New York City Department of Sanitation (DSNY) exclusive use of the hangar area as a training facility. Since then, DSNY has conducted its Safety and Training operations at Floyd Bennett Field and made Tylunas Hall, constructed by the Navy in 1970, its training headquarters. Prior to that, Sanitation Workers were trained at facilities at the East 23rd Street Pier in Manhattan and on Randall's Island.

Each year, between 250 to 500 new recruits enter the Training Academy at Floyd Bennett Field on their way to becoming Sanitation Workers. At the Sanitation Training Academy, these new employees receive instruction on how to perform every aspect of the job, including safely collecting refuse and recycling, cleaning streets, and clearing snow. Expert trainers also teach sanitation workers how to safely and effectively operate DSNY's heavy fleet and specialty equipment, from collection trucks to mechanical brooms, front-end loaders, and heavy-duty wreckers, using obstacle courses to simulate real-world situations. The Training Academy also trains promotional classes for Supervisors and Superintendents and provides specialized training for new operations and programs. To learn more about DSNY's historic and contemporary fleet of vehicles, click [here \(https://www.sanitationfoundation.org/fleet\)](https://www.sanitationfoundation.org/fleet).

Hurricane Sandy

In 2012, the expertise of the DSNY was on display as the department played an essential role in the recovery efforts after Hurricane Sandy, which caused an estimated \$19 billion in damage to New York City. DSNY fully mobilized the morning after the storm, working around the clock for over a month to remove over 420,000 tons of storm debris. Much of this was staged in the Jacob Riis Park parking lot, working in partnership with the National Park Service/Gateway National Recreation Area. DSNY also operated additional collection services for impacted communities like the Rockaways, where food and supplies were being distributed and residents were gutting their flooded homes. Then-Commissioner John Doherty stated: "It was important for the Department to ensure that the residents of these areas, reeling from the devastating impact of the storm, felt some comfort in knowing that the seemingly endless debris placed out at the curb would be removed quickly to create a safe and clean environment, which would aid them in the process of moving on and rebuilding their lives."

Landfills: Disposal and Reuse

In addition to championing the recovery of New York City after extreme events, the DSNY also plays a key role in the establishment of park land. Sanitary landfills are engineered facilities where people dispose waste. Once full, it is possible to reclaim landfills for other uses, such as parkland. This process usually involves capping the landfill with impermeable materials, soil, and vegetation. It may sound easy but creating parks from landfills is an elaborate undertaking that can take decades to complete.

Restoration in the Works: Dead Horse Bay

One challenging legacy of landfill is Dead Horse Bay (named for the animal carcasses once used to manufacture glue and fertilizer on nearby Barren Island), located to the east of Floyd Bennett Field. In the 1940s and 50s, the City of New York filled the area with great mounds of garbage and sand. Much of this historic waste is eroding along the shoreline, earning it the nickname "Glass Bottle Beach." Environmental investigations have found locations at Dead Horse Bay with radiation above ambient levels, often due to the disposal of deck markers—glowing disk-shaped objects once used by the military to provide light at night. Under the authority of CERCLA Act (commonly known as the Superfund program), Dead Horse Bay is now the site of a cleanup that may take many years to complete. While it is important that park visitors avoid this area, NPS is evaluating options to allow for continued use of Dead Horse Bay. Community involvement is an important aspect of this process. You can find out more about Dead Horse Bay [here \(https://www.nps.gov/gate/learn/management/dead-horse-bay-environmental-cleanup-project.htm\)](https://www.nps.gov/gate/learn/management/dead-horse-bay-environmental-cleanup-project.htm).

A Landfill Restored: Shirley Chisholm State Park

However, nearby Shirley Chisholm State Park is an excellent example of landfill restoration. This 400-acre park sits above the former Pennsylvania and Fountain Avenue landfills. After the landfills were closed in the 1980s, decades of work began. The City of New York installed a massive plastic cap and four feet of clean soil to cover the landfills, as well as pipes to channel methane generated by the site to two ever-burning flares. Where there once was decaying trash, visitors can now enjoy spectacular views of New York City and Jamaica Bay; 10 miles of trails; and 35,000 native trees, shrubs, and grasses. As you consider the history of landfills in Jamaica Bay, ask yourself: How did we get here? What is the future for polluted sites like Dead Horse Bay? Given that the average American produces four pounds of waste every day, what can you do to help? Get started today—consider [taking the zero-waste pledge \(https://dsny.force.com/zerowastepledge/s/?language=en_US\)](https://dsny.force.com/zerowastepledge/s/?language=en_US) to commit to reducing what you send to landfill:



PHOTO GALLERY

Sanitation and Jamaica Bay: Pa...

20 IMAGES

In Summer 2022, a Sanitation Museum Pop-up was held at Floyd Bennett Field — New York's first municipal airport and currently one of its largest open spaces. Floyd Bennett Field was largely built on filled land in Jamaica Bay, an urban estuary central to the history of waste and sanitation in New York City. The exhibit celebrated this history through several themes. First, it told the story of the bustling working-class community of Barren Island, which once produced useful products from an enormous volume of animal carcasses and other solid waste produced by the growing city (photos 1-7). Second, it celebrated the ongoing contributions of the Department of Sanitation, whose training academy is located on the eastern edge of Floyd Bennett Field (photos 8-14). Finally, it explores the past and future of sanitary landfills around Jamaica Bay — including landfills that have been transformed into celebrated public spaces like Shirley Chisholm State Park (photos 15-20). This gallery invites visitors to take a moment to admire archival and present-day images of sanitation in Jamaica Bay as they consider their place in the past, present, and future of waste in New York City.

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