The Net Men and the Anglers in Jamaica Bay, New York, A Case Study in the Conflicts Over Recreational and Commercial Fishing, 1890 – 1904.

2011 Highlands Conference
Sterling Forest, New York

A Long Standing Conflict or a Complicated Relationship?

- Cape Cod – 1951 - Tourism contributed $70,000,000 to Barnstale County while farming and fishing brought in only $8,000,000.
- Florida – 1994 - Amendment Three of the Florida Constitution, made unlawful the use of entangling nets (i.e., gill and trammel nets) in Florida waters. The use of other forms of nets, such as seines, cast nets, and trawls, was restricted, but not totally eliminated.
- Maine Coast – Today – 84% of coastal communities were concerned over a lack of shore access for working fishermen.

New York's Back Yard

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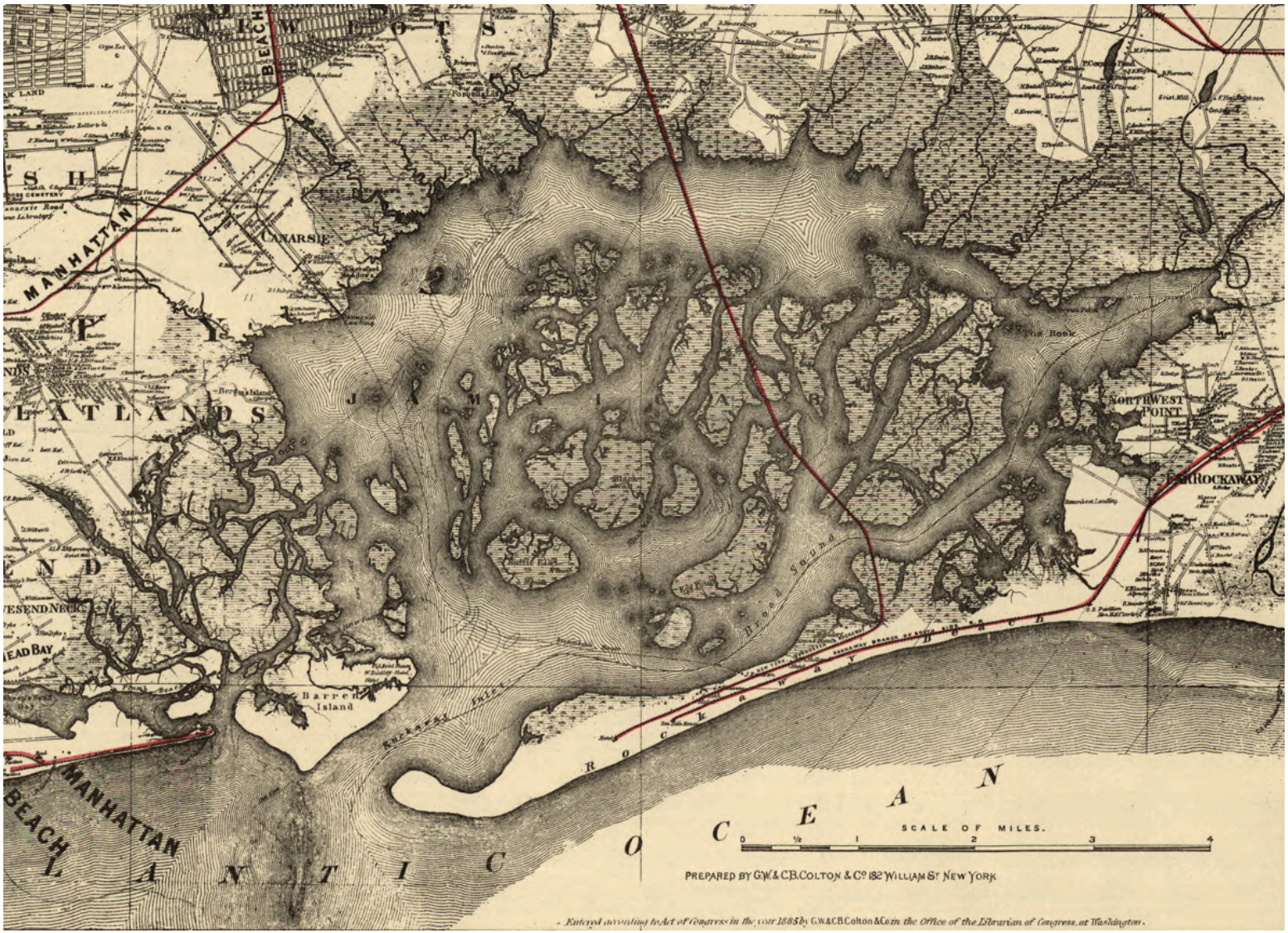


The Tourists and the Townies – Part ONE

- Amersfoort, later called Flatlands, 1636. (Flatbush and Flatlands Avenues in Brooklyn. New Lots was originally part of Flatlands.)
- Flatbush (originally Midwout or Middle Woods), 1634. (Near Prospect Park)
- New Utrecht, 1660. (Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn).
- Jamaica, 1656 (Queens where the Van Wyck crosses the Long Island Railroad)

Flatlands had control over the marsh lands of the Canarsie Meadows and beyond.
The freeholders of Jamaica, Long Island believed they controlled Jamaica Bay and all of its islands because the patent granted by Governor Richard Nicolls in 1665.

While the early towns and villages often quarreled over exactly who had control over specific areas of the bay and its resources, the one thing that they did agree on was that control was firmly vested in local governments.

Jamaica in Control

1791:

“all persons be precluded from coming with boats and pettiaugers in the bay of this town for the purpose of getting clams or oysters without paying the sum of one shilling for every thousand so taken. . . .no person or persons other than inhabitants of the township and paying taxes within the same presume to cut any sedge on the marshes… penalty of 40s. for each offence.

1869:

“Vote to exclude non-residents from fishing in the bay.

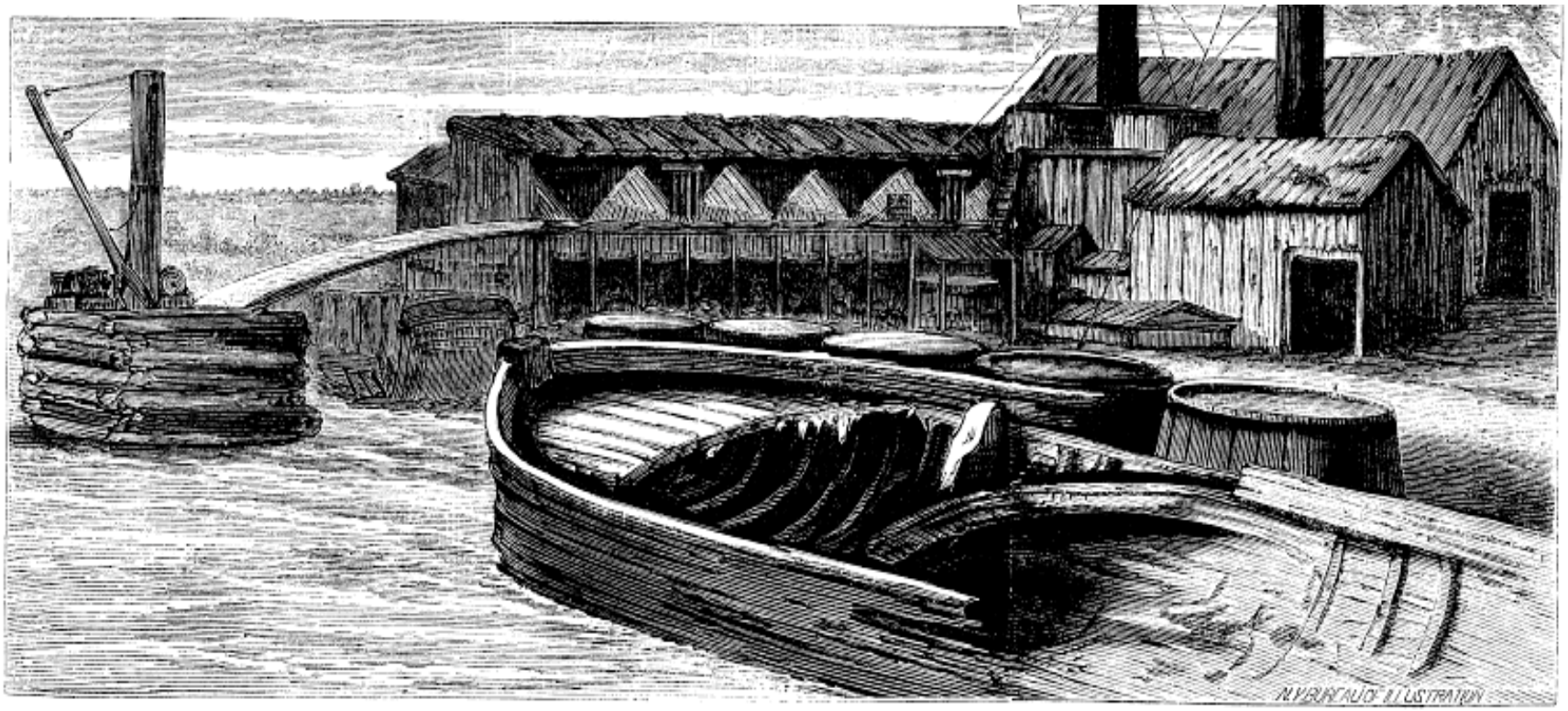
1871:

Trustees instructed to remove "all stakes or other obstructions illegally standing in the waters of the bay, or in the marshes thereof.”

Town Hall, Jamaica, Queens County.

Queens County will not become Queens Borough until 1898.

The Fish Oil Industry

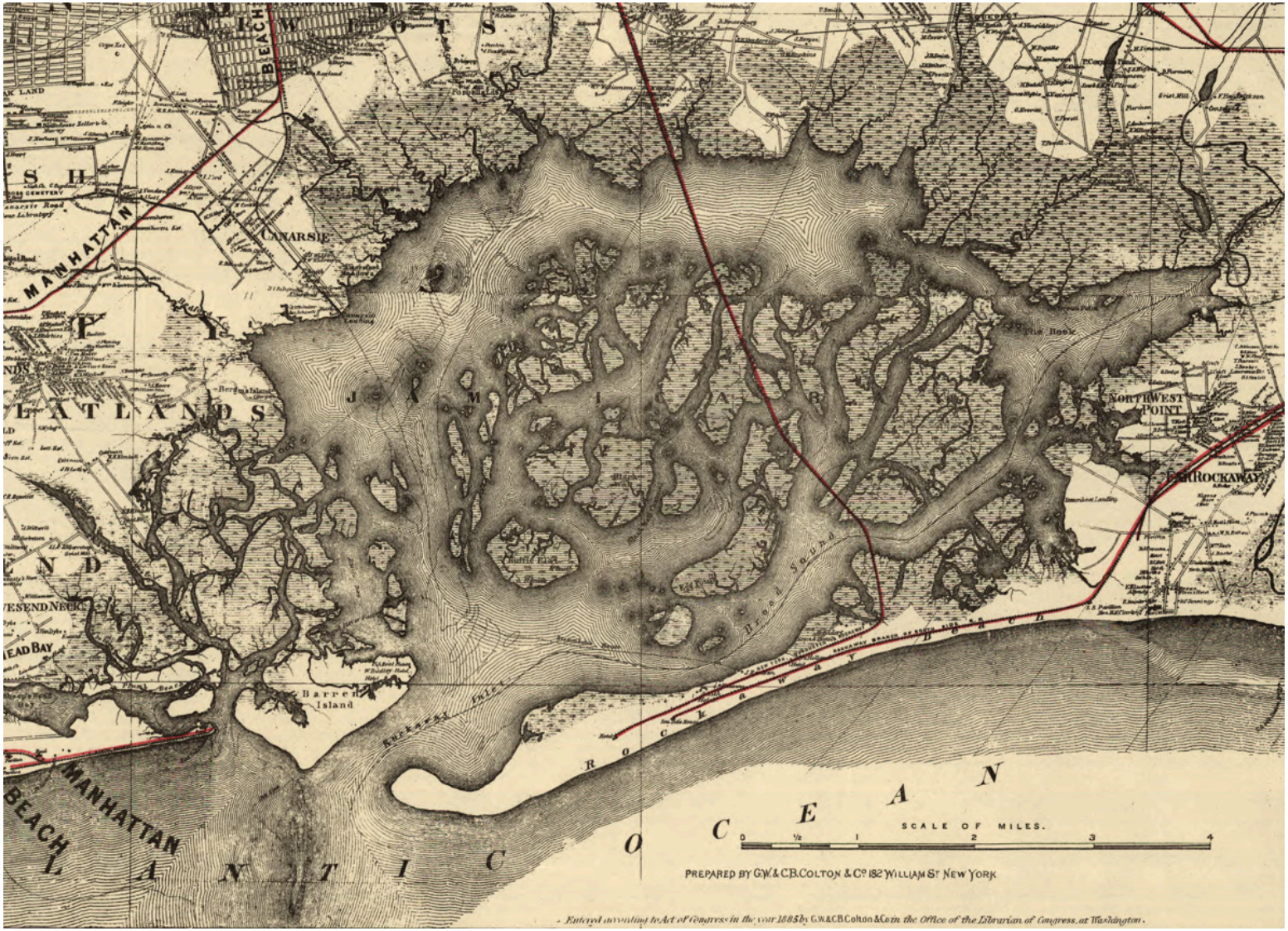


THE FISH-OIL MANUFACTORY ON BARREN ISLAND.

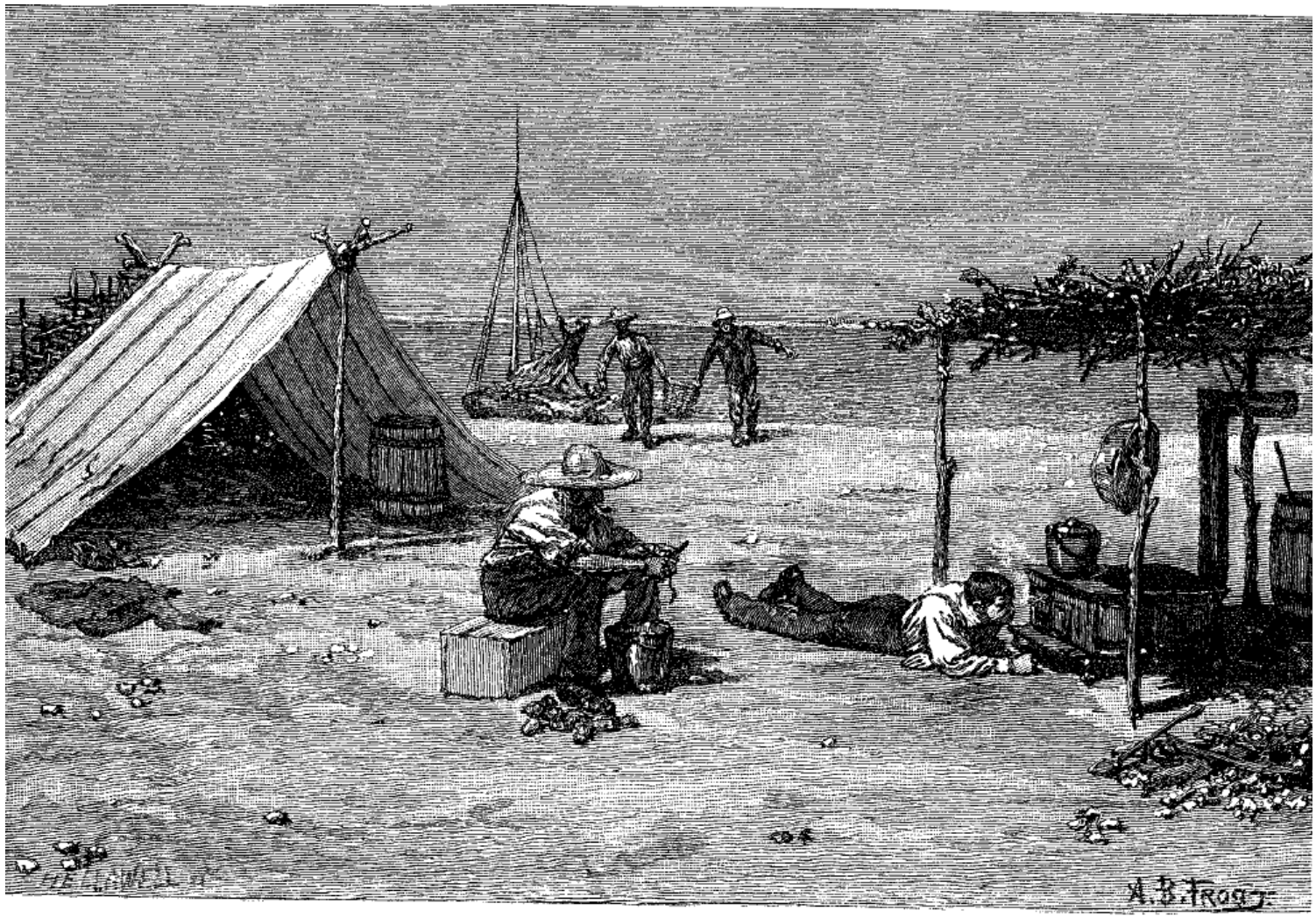
Fish Oil Processing Plant, 1871, at Barren Island, Brooklyn

"Vote to exclude non-residents from fishing in the bay."
How realistic was that?
or…
The Tourists and the Townies – Part Two

Early Recreation

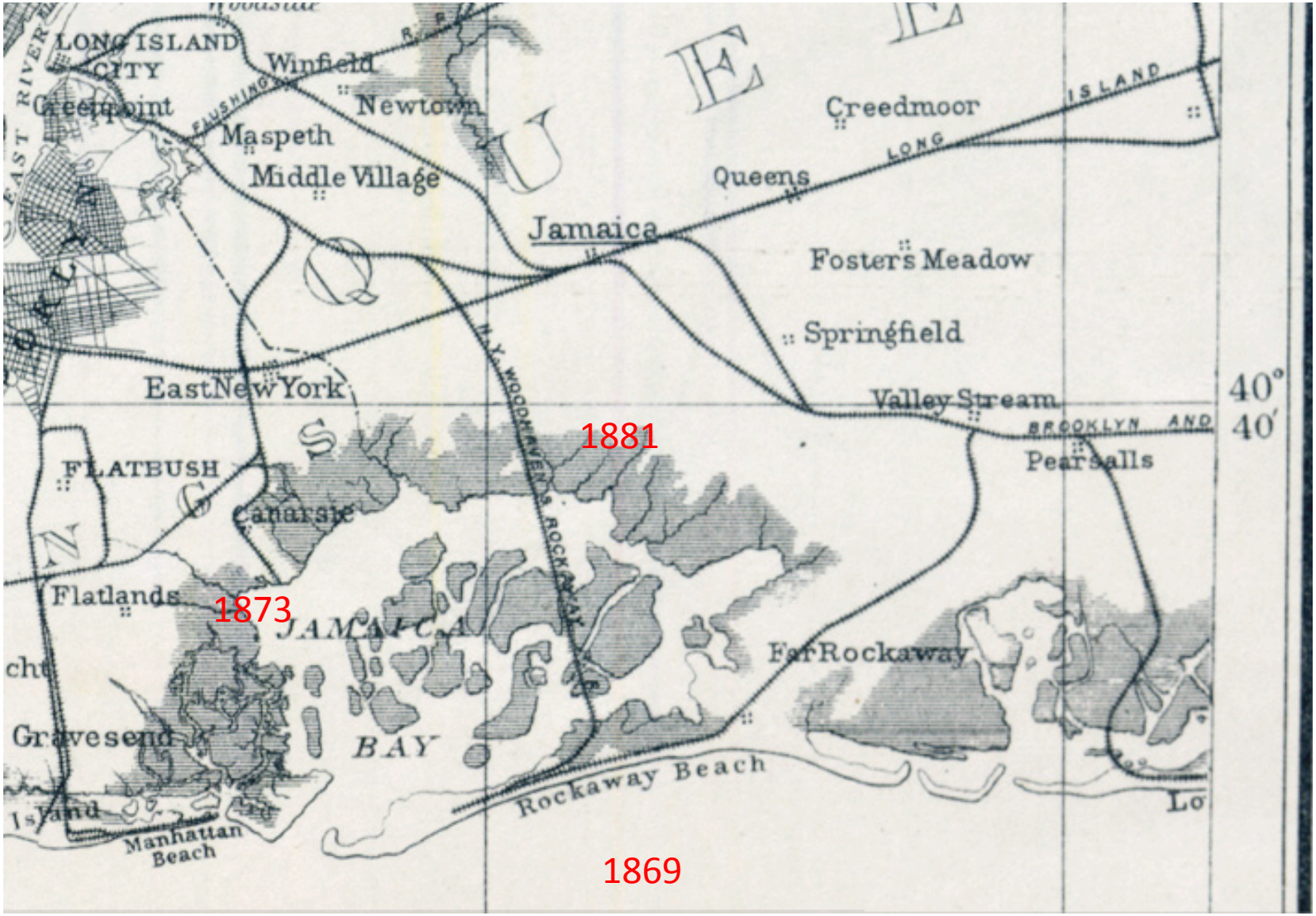


Early Recreation



THE FIRST OLYMPIC.

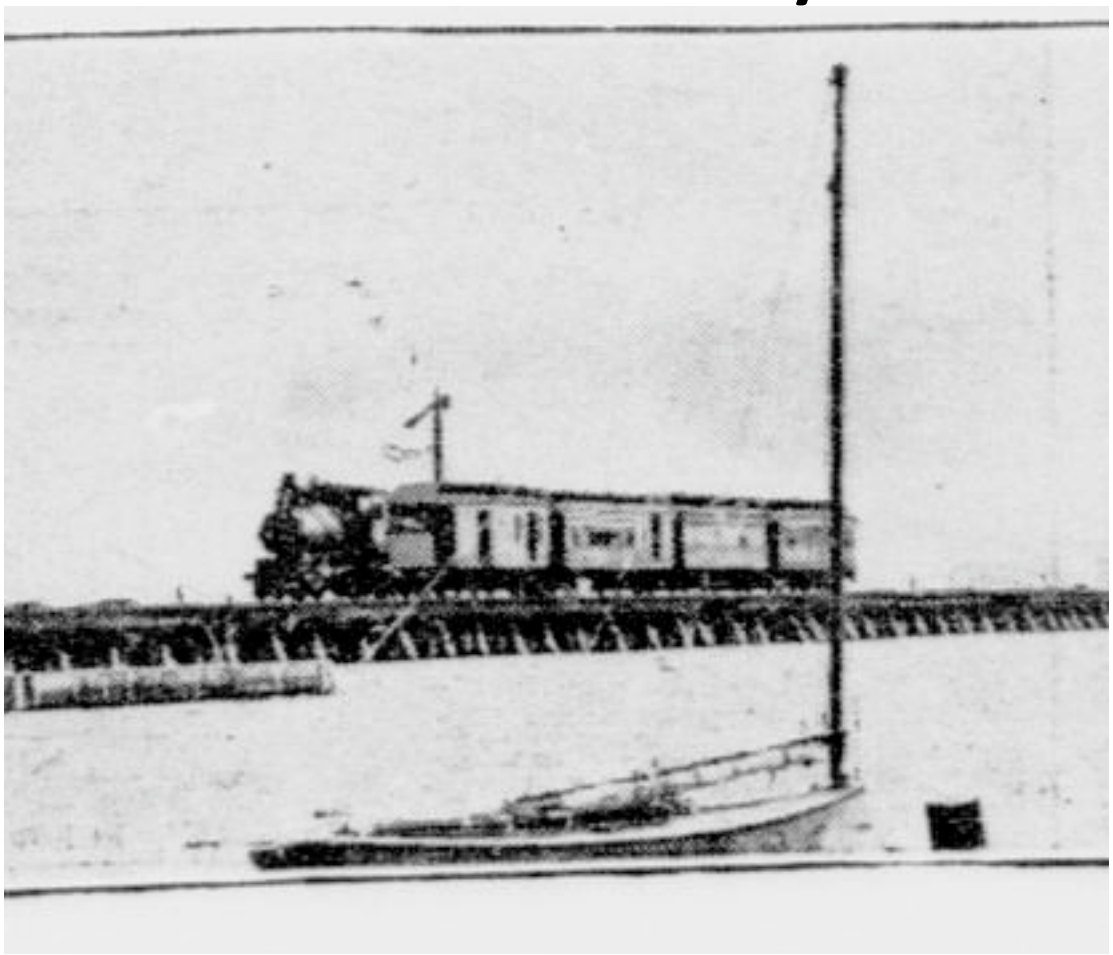
The Railroads Come



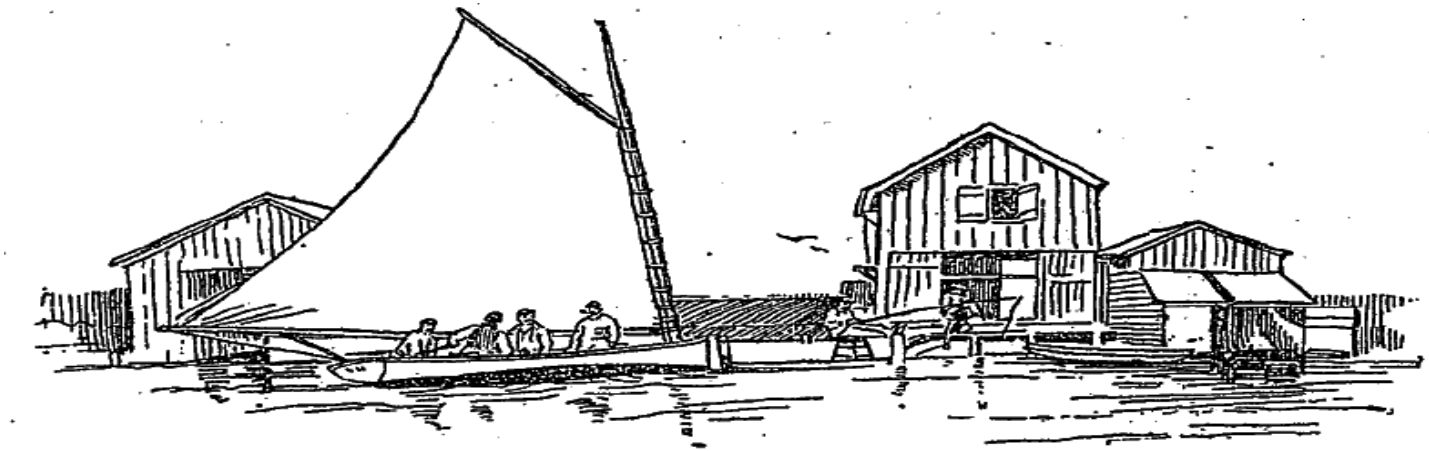
That is, the Passenger Railroads Come

Prospect Park and Coney Island Railroad

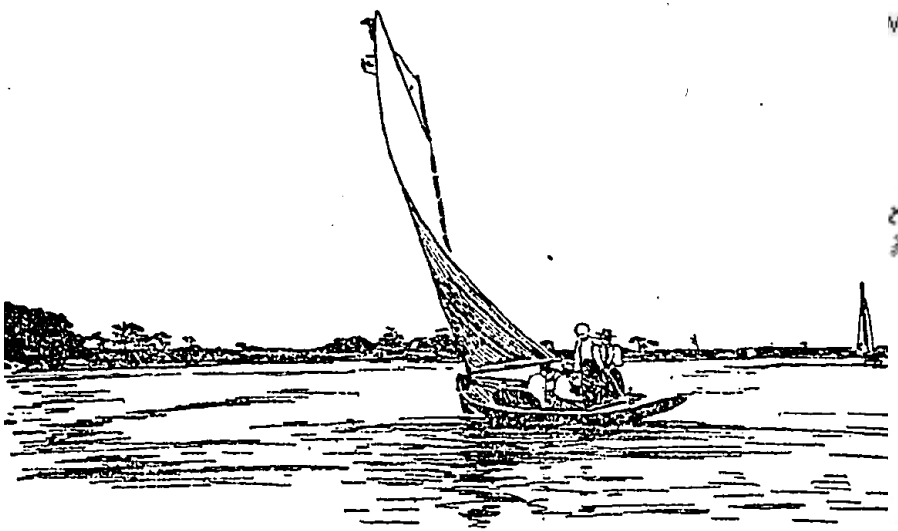
Over the Bay



Recreational Uses of the Bay

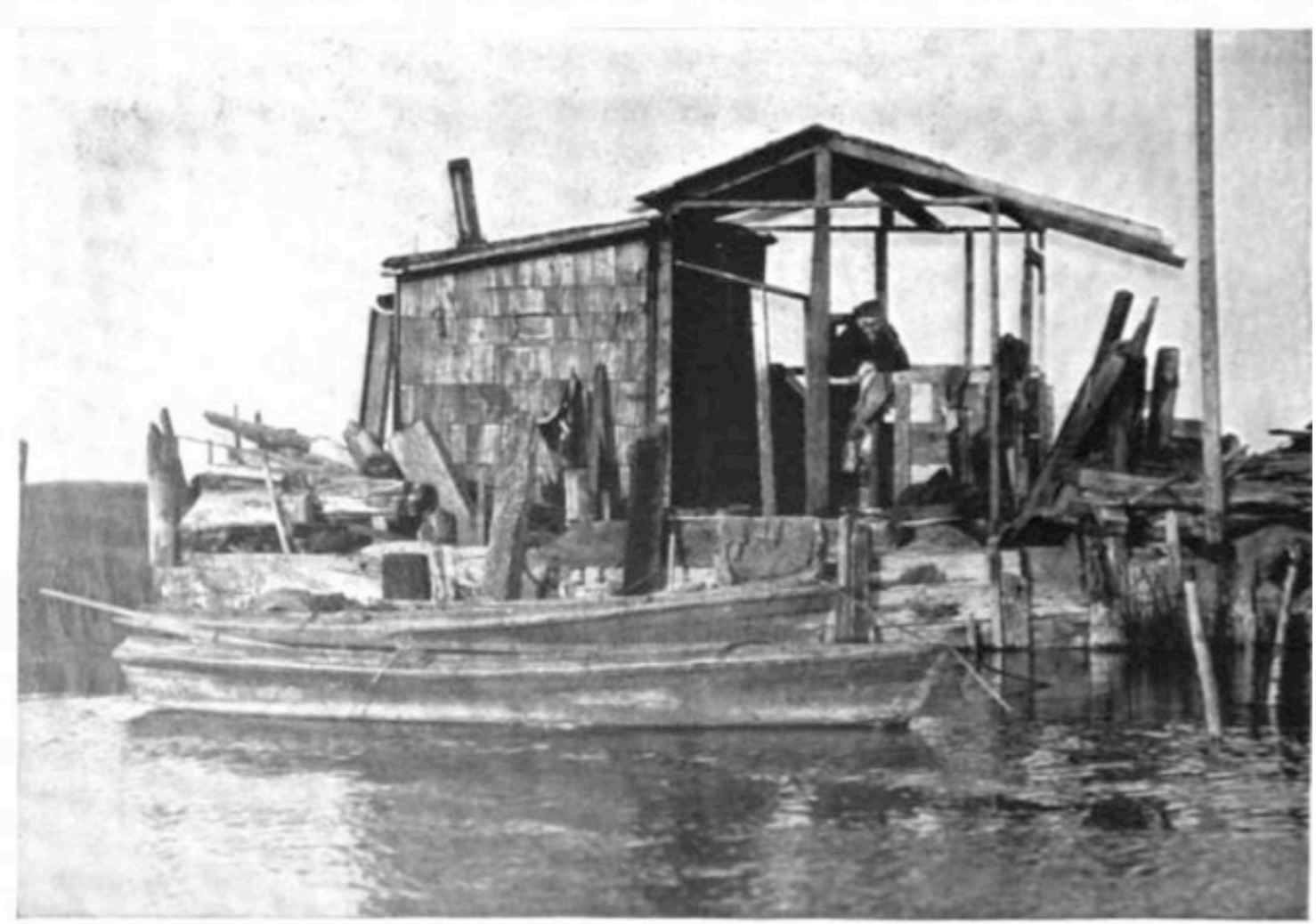


Wheelmen Preparing for a Sail on the Bay.



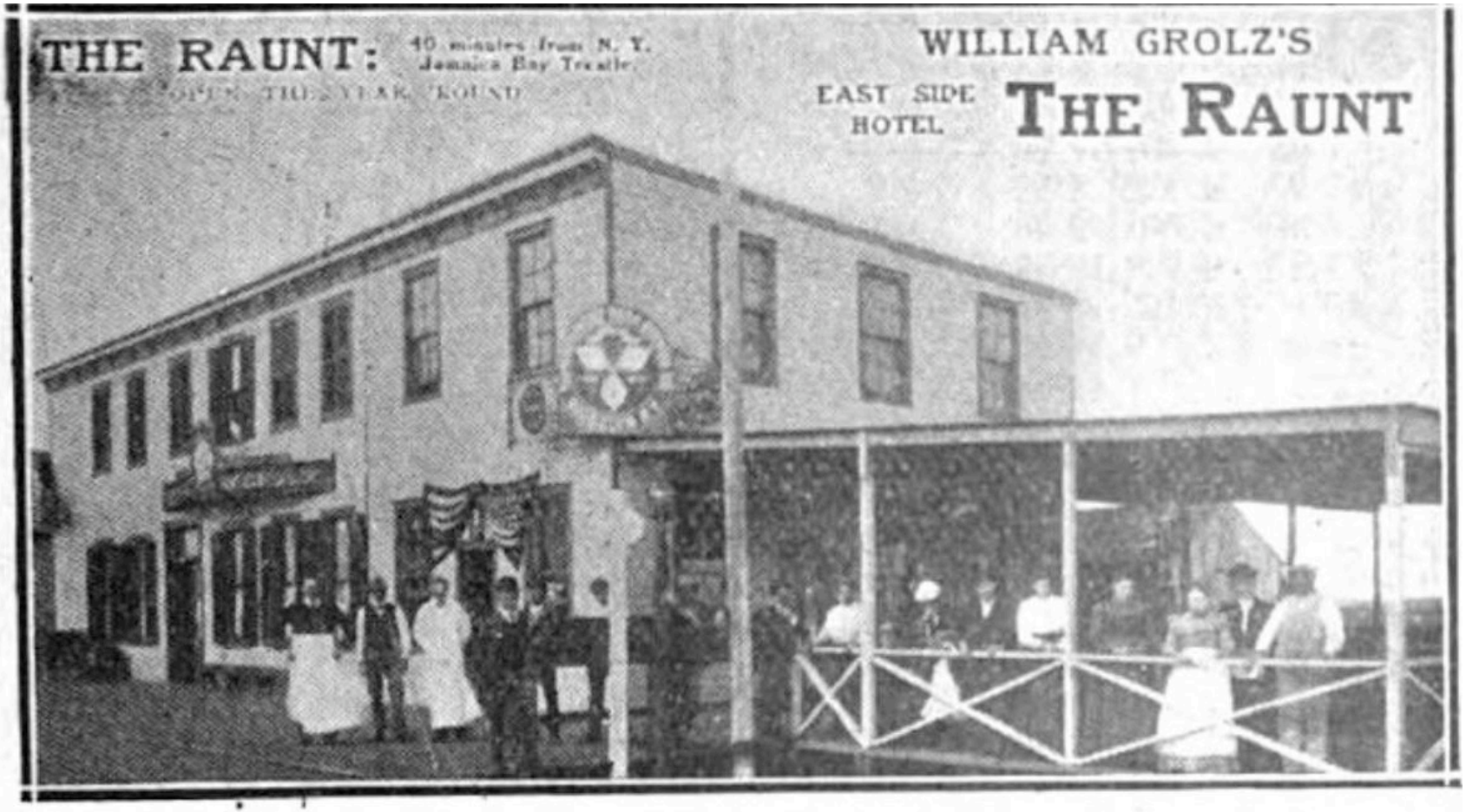
Cat Watchogue and Her Feminine Crew.

The Anglers Come

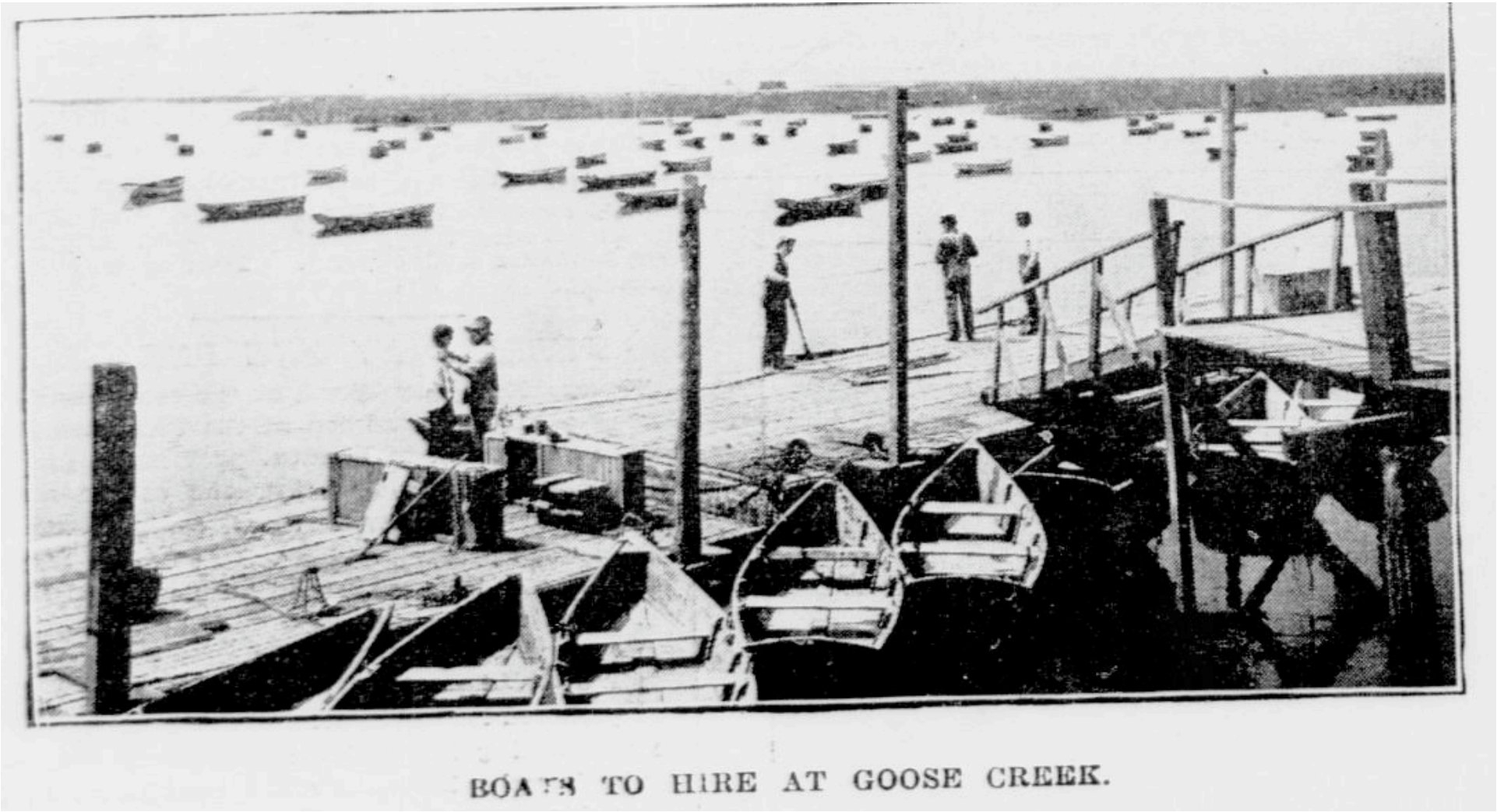


Cabin of a camper who doesn't care for style.

The Anglers Come



Lots of Anglers Come

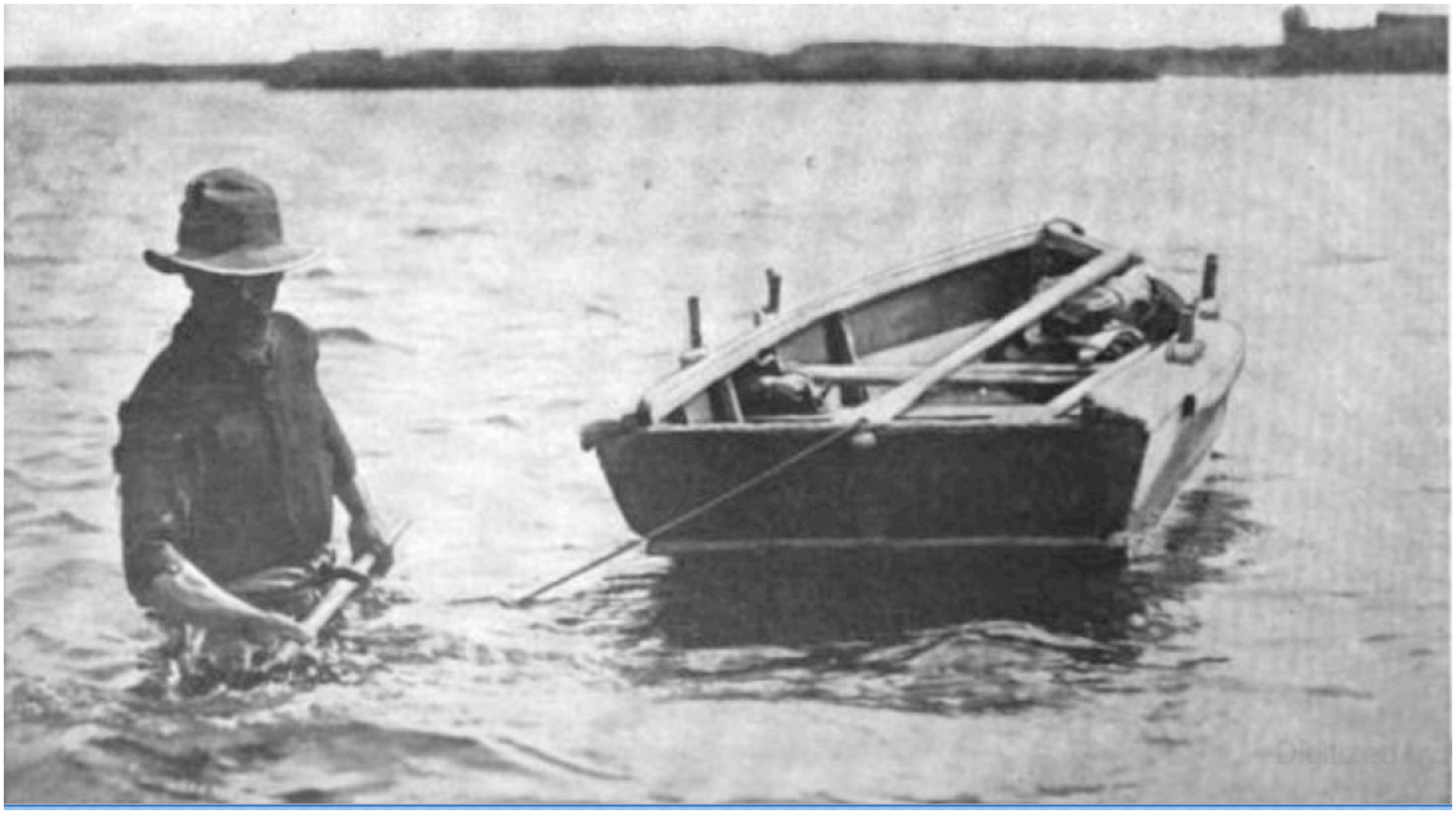


BOATS TO HIRE AT GOOSE CREEK.

Why the Anglers Came

- Jamaica Bay not only had convenient transportation, numerous hotels, boat liveries, and restaurants, its many diverse habitats created opportunities for many types of fishing:
- Deep water channels: weakfish, fluke, sea bass, porgies, and flounder.
- Small creeks: blackfish and sea bass.
- Small creeks lined with sedges: striped bass
- Deep water near Rockaway Inlet: blackfish, fluke, weakfish, and snappers.
- *The diversity of surviving habitats made Jamaica Bay an attractive wildlife refuge when the area became a national park in 1973.*

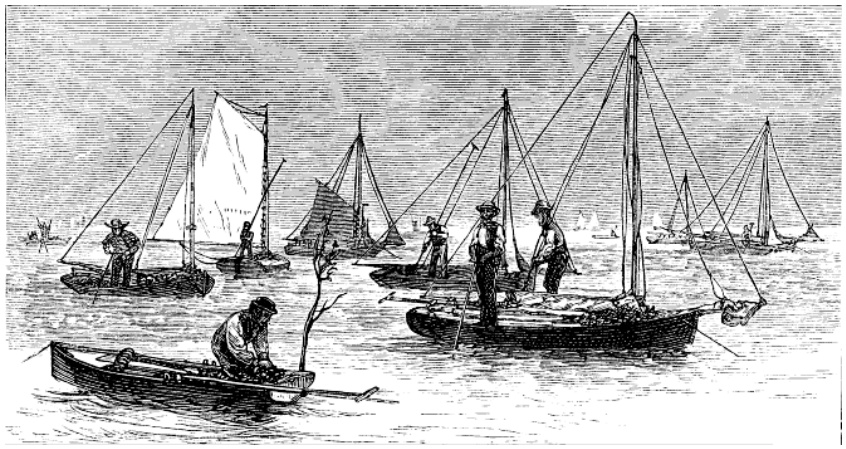
Do the Net Men Have a Future?



Tourists and Townies, some numbers

In Flatlands, just one of the small towns on the bay shore:

- Men engaged in finfishing would peak at 200 between 1870 – 1880. The number of men engaged in fishing would decline to less than 50 by 1892.
- Men working in the oyster industry would begin to rise in 1870, peak at about 75 individuals in 1880 and then decline to almost none by 1892.



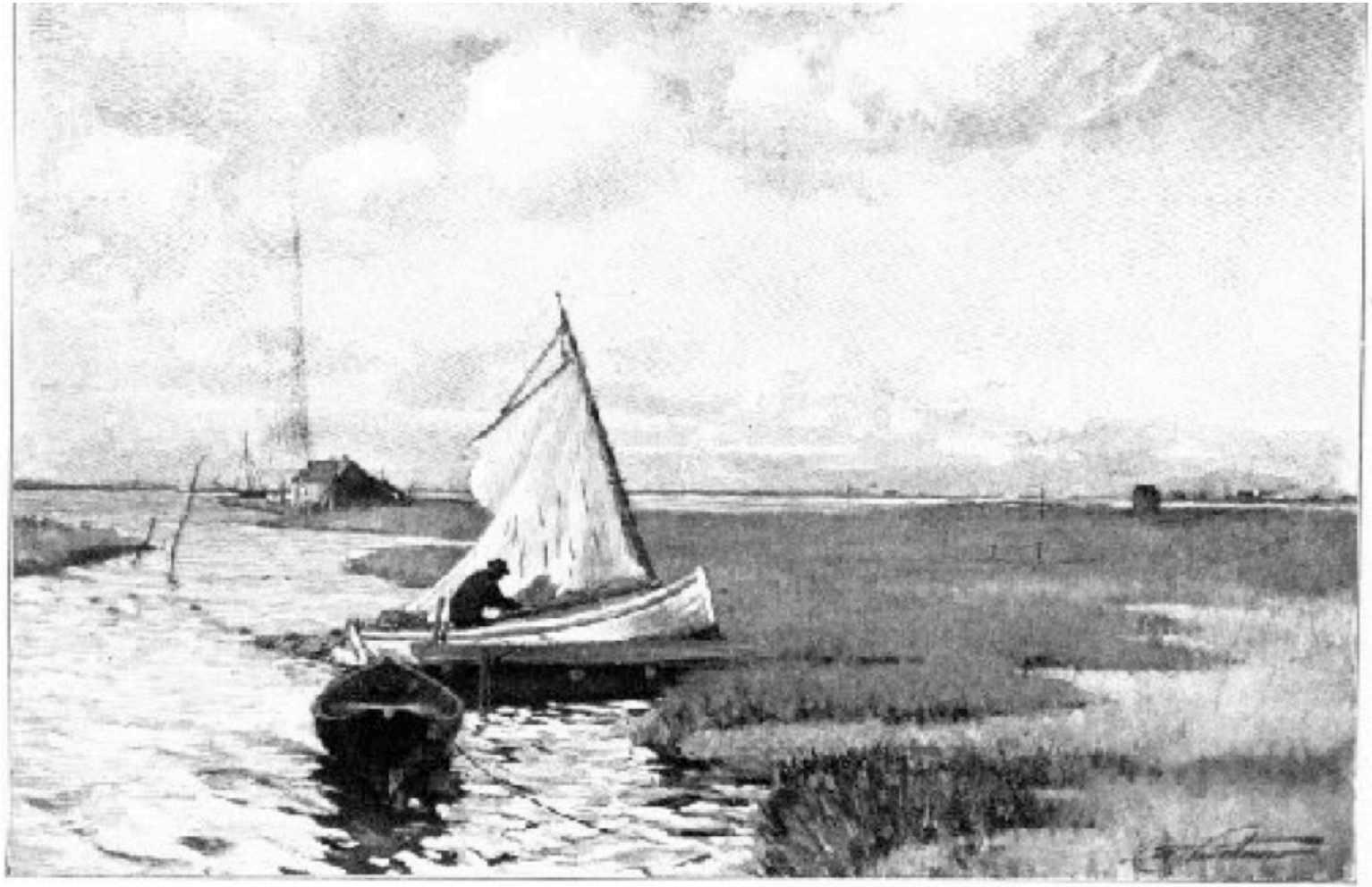
Clamming in Long Island, 1886

- In 1889 it was still possible for fishermen to net eight to tens tons of fish daily. Fish prices ranged from 8 to 10 cents per pound. Any fish not sold for human consumption went to the fish oil, fish meal, and fertilizer manufacturers, a number of whom operated in Jamaica Bay.
- Overall catches in Jamaica Bay had been decreasing since 1894.
- In 1890, Opponents of a net fishing ban would claim that 300 men in Flatlands worked in the fishery. Supporters of the ban claimed that not more than fifty men worked the fishery and the total value of the catch was a mere $3,000 a year

Tourists and Townies, more numbers

- By the summer of 1890 an estimated 500 to 1,000 recreational anglers arrived at Jamaica Bay every day.
- Seasonal catches of sheepshead, bass, and weakfish were reported to be as small as 100 individuals.
- In March 1890 over 15,000 signatures in support of a net ban had been collected from Rockaway Beach and nearby communities. The estimated value of the hotels, boat liveries, tackle shops, and tourist infrastructure exceeded $200,000.

Net Fishing



Another Kind of City Life—Along the Marshes of Jamaica Bay.

The Protective League Finds An Unlikely Conservation Hero

Charles A. Stadler (1848 - ?) represented the 9th District as a Democratic member of the State Senate from 1888-1891. He was the president of American Malting Company and involved in a number of other businesses. A member of the committees on railroads, internal affairs, navigation and commerce, Stadler is remembered for his support of relaxed liquor licensing laws. We can speculate that Stadler was sympathetic to the hospitality sector as a result of his involvement in the liquor industry

A NEW YORK DRINKING BAR.

The 1890 Stadler Bill

New York Governor David Hill (1843-1910) signed the measure on June 7th, 1890. It would only last one year and provide a test principle.

The bill specifically banned any type of net fishing. It extended to all of bay's waters, no creeks, basins, or smaller bays were excluded. It also specifically prohibited placing nets across the Rockaway inlet.

Violators face a fine of one hundred dollars, thirty days imprisonment in the county jail, or both.

Half of any fines collected would be paid to the person or persons who made the complaint, and the other half was to be paid to the treasurer of the town where the case was tried.

Problems?

The state government was in favor of net fishing in any of New York's tidal waters and had no interest in discriminating against net fishermen in favor of recreational anglers.

But….

Jamaica Bay was close to population centers and many of the anglers were poor people in need of recreation.

The Wild East

In the summer of 1889, an unidentified party of "some Rockaway Boys" raided the commercial fishing camps and burned several hundred yards of nets.

The organization that had lobbied hardest for the law, the Association for the Protection of Jamaica Bay, documented violations of the law and appointed three special constables who would enforce it. The association also announced a reward of $50 for the arrest of the net law violators. The Association promised to hire five special constables to monitor compliance and even proposed to fit out a gunboat for patrol duties.

In September of 1891 five fishermen from Canarsie were arrested for using nets. A constable Ward and his party are credited with making the arrest but it is not clear if Ward was the special constable hired by the Association for the Protection of Jamaica Bay and who comprised his party. Ward's full name was not mentioned in the press reports. As the constables descended on the men's boat, Ward drew his revolver. The fishing captain jumped overboard leaving the rest of the men.

The press reports that the commercial netters were growing increasingly bold. They were said to have taken several tons of weakfish and assorted game fish. This was reported to have lead to a decline in fish stocks during the summer of 1891.

The commercial fishermen struck back at the hoteliers, boat livery operators, and operators of fishing resorts. Noting that selling bottled beers and liquors on Sunday was unlawful, they threatened that the excise laws would be immediately enforced if any one of their number were arrested for using nets.

One commercial fisherman responded to these announcements by claiming to have a loaded shotgun ready for any persons enforcing the law.

Everyone Loses

Venice on Long Island

RAMBLERSVILLE, WHERE THE STREETS ARE ALL WATERWAYS.

Recreation Today