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Our history: A history of the area's favorite amusement parks

Jeff Suess Cincinnati Enquirer
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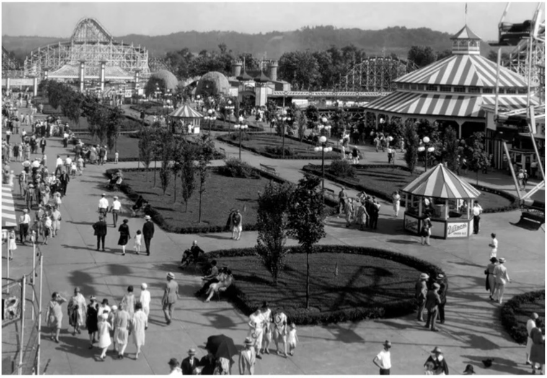

Fun-seekers stroll the mall at Coney Island in 1928. *The Enquirer/Harry Pence*

Kings Island opens its 48th season on Saturday, giving us an excuse for a history lesson on some of the region's favorite amusement parks.

Coney Island

Cincinnati's first fun park evolved from Parker's Grove, a picturesque apple orchard along the Ohio River where steamboats would park for a picnic. James Parker purchased the farm land in 1867 and soon added a carousel and shelters. In 1886, it was heralded as "the new Coney Island of the west," and that's what people called it.

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Coney Island added its own steamboat, the Island Queen, to ferry visitors to the park, a voyage that was as memorable as riding the Shooting Star roller coaster, paddling in Lake Como, dancing at Moonlite Gardens or swimming in Sunlite Pool.

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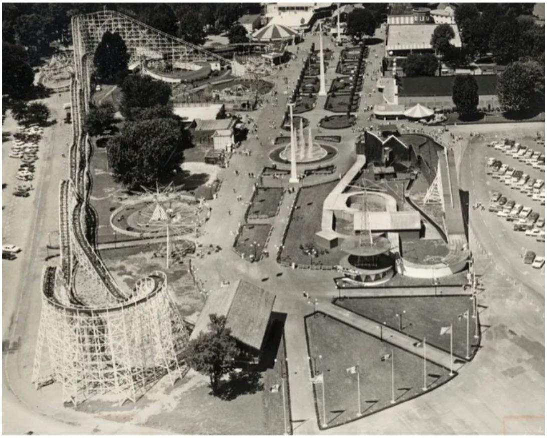
Despite Coney Island's reputation as "America's Favorite Amusement Park," it took civil rights protests to push owners to finally allow African-Americans into the park in 1955 and the pool in 1961.

Frequent flooding contributed to the decision to close old Coney in 1971, although Sunlite Pool stayed open and the park eventually added new rides and the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra's Riverbend Music Center.



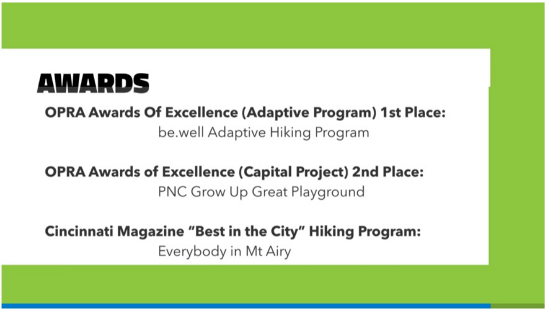
Old Coney Island closed in 1971. *Provided/Coney Island*

Kings Island

Looking for a way to market their Hanna-Barbera characters, Cincinnati-based Taft Broadcasting Co. bought Coney Island in 1969, but closed it in favor of building a new $20 million park in Warren County. Kings Island, named for the town Kings Mills and Coney Island, opened on April 29, 1972.

The Eiffel Tower, the dual-tracked Racer and the Enchanted Voyage were early favorites. In the first few years, visits from the Partridge Family, the Brady Bunch and Evel Knievel – the last one jumping 14 Greyhound buses on a motorcycle – put Kings Island in the national spotlight. Then, the Beast, billed as the “biggest, baddest, longest, fastest roller coaster in the world,” arrived in 1979.

Kings Island opened its gates on April 29, 1972. *Share/Don Helbig*



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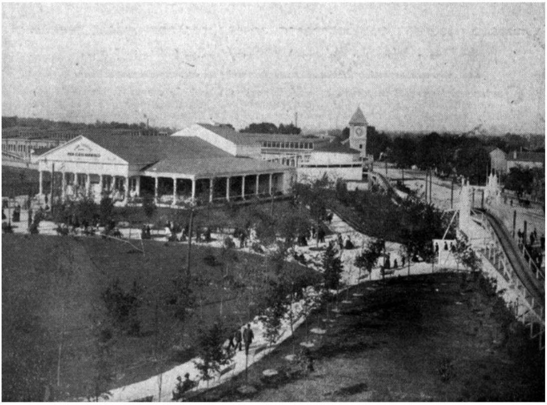
Over the past year, CPF invested heavily into supporting programming within Cincinnati Parks. *Cincinnati Enquirer*

Chester Park

Chester Park, located on Spring Grove Avenue in Winton Place, began as a horseracing track in 1875, named for owner George N. Stone’s favorite horse, Lady Chester. The Cincinnati Street Railway Co. bought the track in 1896 with the idea of an amusement park as a draw to get people riding their electric streetcars.

The track was turned into a lake complete with a fancy Colonial-style clubhouse, and lively attractions such as the Tickler, the Blue Streak coaster and the Hilarity Hall funhouse.

Chester Park was as popular as Coney Island, but more accessible. Rather than taking a steamboat, visitors hopped on streetcars. Route 47 continued to use the name Chester Park for years after the park closed in 1935. The pool was open until the Greater Cincinnati Water Works built its offices on the site in 1957.

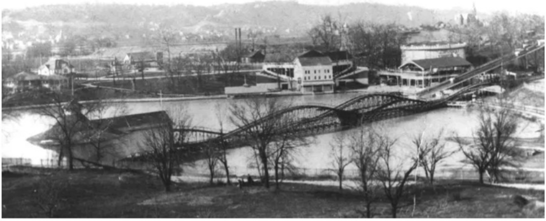


Chester Park on Spring Grove Avenue was a popular rival to Coney Island. *File*

Ludlow Lagoon

Ludlow Lagoon was a short-lived amusement park in Ludlow, Kentucky, created by J.J. Weaver in 1894. As its name suggests, there was a lake with bathing beaches, plus the Scenic Railway, one of the earliest roller coasters that ran over the water, and an elevated automobile track called Autoing Above the Treetops.

Quite popular in its day, it could not sustain a string of disasters. The worst was the tragic wreck in the Motordome in 1913 when daredevil rider Odin Johnson's tire blew, sending his motorcycle into the crowd. The gas tank exploded, and the fire and panic led to multiple deaths. Ludlow Lagoon closed in 1917.



Ludlow Lagoon Amusement Park in Ludlow, Kentucky, was even more popular than Coney Island. The Scenic Railroad, one of the first roller coasters in the country, runs out on the lagoon. *Courtesy Of The Kenton County Public Library*

LeSourdsville Lake

Described by The Enquirer as a “blue-collar Coney,” LeSourdsville Lake in Monroe, Ohio, had similar origins as a picnic and swimming spot opened by Edgar Streifthau in 1922. In its peak in the 1940s, the park added the Sunset Gardens Ballroom and the Screechin’ Eagle wooden roller coaster.

Competition from nearby Kings Island proved to be too much. LeSourdsville rebranded as Americana Amusement Park in 1978, then closed in 1999. It reopened as Great American Amusement Park at LeSourdsville Lake in 2002 but didn’t last the season.

Belle of LeSourdsville

The Belle of LeSourdsville paddlewheel heads out into LeSourdsville Lake underneath the Sky Rider during the re-opening of LeSourdsville Lake Amusement Park, June 7, 2002. *Michael Snyder/Cincinnati Enquirer*

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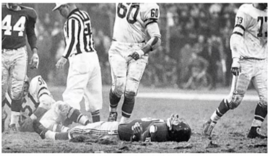

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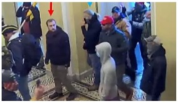

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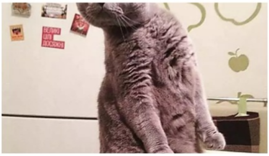

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