

Blackwell's Almanac

A Publication of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society

Your Island, Your History

The recorded history of Roosevelt Island begins in 1633 when Wouter Van Twiller, the New Netherlands governor, bought it from the local Canarsie tribe. The Dutch used the property to raise hogs for the larger colony's tables. From that moment on, the heritage of this little strip of land—known variously as *Varckens Eylandt* (Hogs Island), Blackwell's Island, Welfare Island, and finally Roosevelt Island—has reflected the development, politics and culture of the city to which it belongs.

The Roosevelt Island Historical Society is dedicated to researching and communicating that heritage—by collecting, preserving, exhibiting, and educating. To date, the Society has produced books, photo collections, talks and tours. It has been instrumental in preserving such artifacts as the WPA murals in Goldwater Hospital. It maintains extensive archives for students of history. It trains interns in conjunction with local graduate history departments. And it offers historical consults to an array of academic and commercial undertakings.

Now, for the first time, the Society is publishing a newsletter. Its purpose is to share Roosevelt Island's past on a regular basis with you, its residents. Issued quarterly as a digital publication, *Blackwell's Almanac* will chronicle interesting historical events and publicize current activities surrounding them. Look for it in February, May, August and November.

Judith Berdy, President, RIHS

A Currier & Ives print from 1862 looking south on the East River. The Octagon Asylum, with its dome, and Blackwell's Island are seen on the left.

To be added to the *Blackwell's Almanac* mailing list, email request to:

rooseveltislandhistory@gmail.com

RIHS needs your support. Become a member—visit http://rihs.us/?page_id=4

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Blackwell's Almanac

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Island Historical Society

Blackwell House: Our Link to the 18th Century

On September 8, 1664, the history of our city and island took a dramatic turn. That was the day New Netherlands Governor Peter Stuyvesant officially surrendered to the British. All Dutch lands came under control of King Charles II, who in turn granted Long Island and its neighboring islands to his brother, James, Duke of York (ultimately to become King James II).

It would be more than a hundred years in the future before the iconic house with which we are familiar came into existence. But the stage was set.

James awarded the island to Captain John Manning, the Sheriff of New York, for his loyalty to the Crown. When he died in 1685, ownership passed to his stepdaughter Mary and the property was eventually deeded to her husband, Robert Blackwell.

The Blackwell family farmed the island throughout the 18th century, witnessing the tumultuous period of the Revolutionary War, when Blackwell's Island was occupied by the British and used to quarter American prisoners of war.

In the aftermath of the conflict, James and Jacob Blackwell, probably the great grandsons of Robert, found themselves in financial difficulties and tried to sell the family holding. From their advertisement of 1784, we know there were “two small Dwelling

Houses, a Barn, Bake, and Fowl House, a Cyder Mill, a large orchard, stone quarries and running springs”— but not yet “our” house. That was finally built in 1796.

It seems the brothers never found a buyer! But having recovered from the earlier financial setbacks, James constructed a clapboard farmhouse in the vernacular style of that period. The beautifully proportioned



A 20th-century sketch of the original Blackwell House drawn for purposes of restoration. New York State UDC.

structure originally consisted of a single two-story section with pairs of dormers projecting from a gabled roof on both the east and west. On both sides of the façade, two windows flanked either side of a simple central doorway on the first floor, and five windows adorned the second—all with six-over-six sash. On the east (Queens side), there was a spacious one-story porch on a stone foundation. It was surrounded by a simple wood rail, and the wood-shingle roof rested on elegant slim columns. Shortly after completion, a one-story kitchen wing was added on the south, approximating the Blackwell House we know today.

For almost 30 years, the family homestead reigned over its bucolic environment. Then, in the 1820s, New York City purchased the island and



Blackwell House in an advanced state of decay before restoration and before the north wing was razed. Historic American Buildings Survey, Library of Congress.

repurposed both the land and the house. Agriculture gave way to institutional development, beginning with the erection of a penitentiary in 1829, and Blackwell House became the residence of a series of administrators.

Fulfilling this function well into the 20th century, the house was subsequently abandoned and, by the 1960s, was a decayed ruin. Fortunately, however, the

New York State Urban Development Corporation (UDC) had plans to redevelop the island (renamed Welfare Island in 1921), and with those plans came renewed life for Blackwell House.

In 1969, a UDC report recommended that it be restored, and between 1973 and 1976, noted architect Giorgio Cavaglieri recreated the structure inside and out. Somewhere along the way, a large wing had been added to the north side of the house. This was razed, while two lesser changes were made that enhanced the house: a root cellar entrance was constructed at the northeast corner of the main section, and a pedimented portico in Greek revival style replaced a less esthetic addition to the doorway on the west façade. Antique furniture was donated to the cause, and the community suddenly had a wonderful facility that was used for weddings, parties, and Christmas celebrations, complete with a local Santa Claus.

In less than two decades, though, fortune withdrew its smile. Hungry for revenue, the Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation (RIOCC) leased the landmarked building to a private design firm in 1992. The tenant turned out to be completely irresponsible, wrecking the interior and failing to pay rent. After a court battle, the company was evicted in 1999 and, again, the neglected structure began to deteriorate.

Again, in 2006, the exterior was repaired. Nevertheless, much still needs to be done before a certificate of occupancy can be issued and the building can be returned to community use. An American Disabilities Act-compliant entrance to the house and exit from the kitchen must be added. The entrance decking on the Main St. side has already started to decay and must be repaired. And the interior also needs repairs. Discussion between the

city's Department of Cultural Affairs and RIOC began in 2010. The two agencies have agreed on the share that each will pay toward the required construction. But city and state building practices do not agree and so the talks slog on.

Hopefully there will be a resolution to the stand-off. In the meantime, Blackwell House remains the sixth oldest farmhouse in New York City—one of the few dating from the years immediately after the Revolutionary War. It was designated a landmark in 1975 and serves as a concrete link to our past. If you've never taken a really good look at the house, you should.

Note the delicate decorative work under the eaves of the roof. Compare the related cut-outs under the portico. Appreciate the scale and proportion. You could be forgiven for thinking that the 18th century still has much to teach us today.

Sources:

Berdy, Judith, and RIHS. *Images of America: Roosevelt Island*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2003.

<http://www.history.com/news/the-dutch-surrender-new-netherland-350-years-ago>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackwell_House

http://rihs.us/?page_id=1323

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/16/nyregion/before-it-was-called-roosevelt-island.html?_r=0

Happy 50th Anniversary Landmarks Preservation Law

It was 1965. After years of wrangling, New York City finally enacted a Landmarks Preservation Law. Its purpose was to protect historically important structures and neighborhoods from alteration or destruction.

Among the early designated landmarks were six buildings on Roosevelt Island:

- Blackwell House
- Chapel of the Good Shepherd
- Strecker Laboratory
- The Smallpox Hospital
- Octagon
- The Lighthouse

As part of the anniversary celebration, RIHS, in conjunction with the Municipal Arts Society, will host three tours of our historic buildings. In addition, RIHS will sponsor background talks sometime before each tour providing wider context on the subject.

See **Calendar**, page 8, or visit <http://rihs.us> for further details.

RI Landmark Events

Chapel of the Good Shepherd:

**Talk—“Religious RI,”
February 10, 6:30 pm @
Library**

Tour, March 15

Strecker Lab & Smallpox Hospital:

**Talk—“Medical RI,” April
14, 6:30 pm @ Library**

Tour, May 24

Octagon & Lighthouse:

**Talk, “North End of RI,”
Date TBA**

Tour, Date TBA

The Many Lives of the Visitor Center Kiosk

Mugs, maps, books, toy trains and cars may now be the stock in trade of the Roosevelt Island Visitor Center kiosk. And information dispensed to over 35,000 (mostly off-island) visitors in 2014 may be its current claim to fame. But if the 100-year-old walls could speak, they would tell a checkered tale.

“Born” in 1909 along with the Queensboro Bridge and its trolley service, our kiosk was one of five erected on the bridge trolley plaza just east of Second Avenue. Designed in the Beaux-Arts style, they were cast iron covered with terra cotta. Each kiosk led to stairs that descended to tracks in the subterranean trolley terminal, with each kiosk leading to a different destination: Astoria, Flushing and College Point, Corona, Steinway, and Queens Boulevard/Jamaica. In 1916, after completion of the elevator and storage building just north of the bridge’s midpoint, a stop at Blackwell’s Island was added to the trolley itinerary.

In general, trolley service to neighborhoods in western Queens and use of the kiosks continued until 1939, when the Queens streetcar network was abandoned. The sole line to continue in operation was a sort of shuttle from the

Second Avenue terminal to a street terminal at Queensboro Plaza. It was obliged to continue because the Blackwell’s Island (by then renamed Welfare Island) trolley stop on the bridge provided the only access to the facilities here. Finally, in 1957, with the opening of the Welfare Island Bridge, the last trolley was eliminated and the underground terminal was made into garage space for city vehicles. The kiosks had outlived their usefulness and three of them were demolished.

The two that remained lived very different lives. One is still on the plaza close to its original position. It was moved a short distance away because vehicular traffic had crashed into it three times in five years. The other kiosk—ours—was claimed by the Brooklyn Children’s Museum sometime in the 1970s to serve as its building entrance. When the museum underwent a major renovation in 2003, the kiosk was about to become an orphan. In stepped the Roosevelt Island Historical Society with a request to adopt.

As in most transactions with the city, red tape abounded and money was tight. Nevertheless, RIHS persevered and funding was eventually secured from the



Undated photo of people entering kiosk, which led to stairs and the trolley track. Small sign to right of stairs says: “Entrance to Bridge Local Cars,” which was the RI trolley line. Sid Kaplan and the NYC Municipal Archives.



City Council office of Gifford Miller and the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs. Finally, in 2006, the kiosk was transported to Roosevelt Island in what could only have been a Hollywood-worthy spectacle.



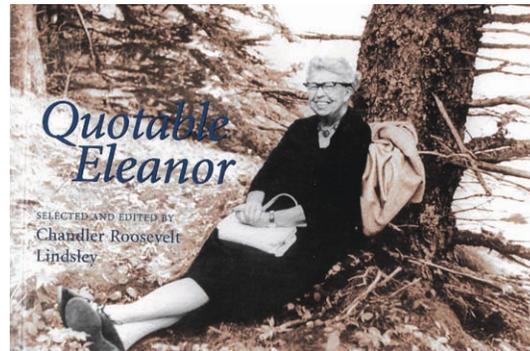
OMG! Our kiosk getting ready to roll. Brooklyn Children's Museum.

The 80,000-pound structure was lifted off its base and put on a flatbed truck. A route was laid out that avoided all overpasses because the cargo was too heavy. Then, in the middle of the night, when the roads would be relatively clear, the very wide load slowly made its way. A tow-truck accompanied the transport so that parked cars that impeded its progress—for instance around corners—could be moved. Those responsible undoubtedly held their collective breath as the truck inched its way across the Roosevelt Island Bridge and down the ramp. But it all worked. The kiosk was deposited on an as yet empty Southtown building site to await its latest incarnation.

A new foundation was poured; stairs, ramp and an entrance were added; and

in July 2007, the Visitor Center opened for business just west of the tram station—a few minutes from its original location. It was an immediate success, welcoming tourists, orienting them with maps and information, and selling them souvenirs. In keeping with its ambassadorial role, the kiosk has since been spiffed up with a new copper roof, restored interior tile, a new floor, a coat of paint and landscaping. And its stock of merchandise has been enlarged and upgraded.

In fact, not only did 35,000 visitors use its services this past year. But rumor has it that it has become a favorite hangout of young children who love to play with its toy trains, yellow cabs and plushy, stuffed squirrels, while their mother or babysitter browses the array of books.



The kiosk's best-seller of all its history books.

Sources:
Berdy, Judith, and RIHS. *Images of America: Roosevelt Island*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2003.
<http://www.columbia.edu/~brennan/abandoned/qborobr.html>

Become a Member and Support RIHS

You can choose the level of membership that is most appropriate for you and your family. Your dues (and additional donation, if you can manage it) will help support the many activities and programs we put on every year.

Visit http://rihs.us/?page_id=4

Unknown New York: Filming “The Great Gatsby”

Anyone who saw “The Great Gatsby,” the 2013 3D film by Baz Luhrmann, could not help but be impressed by the lavishness of the scenes. Not just the opulence of the party scenes, but the incredibly rich detail of the circa-1923 New York City backdrops: shots of the main characters driving over the Queensboro Bridge with period-appropriate buildings, boats, oil tank, smokestacks and blimp in the background; a view of Times Square with an eclectic tangle of cars and illuminated billboards characteristic of the flapper era.



How did they do it? With a great deal of help from the Greater Astoria Historical Society—which got the job through a lucky accident involving our own Roosevelt Island Historical Society.

On January 21, a rapt audience listened and watched as Bob Singleton, Executive Director of the GAHS, told the story at the Library as part of RIHS’s new series of talks—*Unknown New York*. The GAHS and RIHS had recently collaborated on the book *The Queensboro Bridge*. Bob was peddling the just-completed book at a street fair in Queens, when a Baz Luhrmann scout approached him looking for information about Queens—especially about what Gatsby and friends would have seen driving from West Egg (actually Great Neck) over the bridge into Manhattan. He specified they wanted

to show the bridge and its traffic from every angle. The GAHS had already amassed tens of thousands of images of Queens, including a treasure trove of

bridge photos assembled for the book. Also able to promise a first-rate team of researchers, the Society got the job as advisor.

Technically, the backdrops were created with

computer-generated imaging (CGI), then projected onto a “green screen” behind the actors. But the set designers needed to know what images to generate. The infamous Valley of Ashes (now Flushing Meadow), where the character George Wilson owned a gas station, was a major challenge. This was a forbidding moonscape of mountain-high heaps of coal ash and landfill deposited at what was then the Corona dump. Bob came through with at least one photo actually taken in the summer of 1923, as well as images of period gas stations, and Luhrmann was able to duplicate the hellish aura, complete with greasy light and dour workers seen through a scrim of dust.

Luhrmann requested batches of photos of various neighborhoods: Central Park and the Plaza, Washington Heights (where Myrtle lived), downtown Manhattan. Surely one of the most spectacular scenes in the movie grew out of the images from downtown. Asked for aerial views of the area,

**Coming soon in the
Unknown New York
series:
Floyd Bennett Field—
WWII Naval Aviation and
Women’s Role in It
with speaker
John Lincoln Hallowell
March 10, 6:30 pm
at the Library**

Bob was able to furnish shots looking up at the Woolworth building (the tallest building in the world at the time and a stand-in for the film's Probita Bank), and images of the rooftops of the buildings around it. The result: a vertiginous digital zoom down the side of the building, toward the lower buildings, to the street below.

Ironically, most of the actual filming was done in Australia where Luhrmann lives.

Communication was entirely via email, and because of the time difference, most of the requests for and fulfillment of images happened in the wee hours Astoria time. But Bob wasn't complaining. "The Great Gatsby" won an Oscar for set design, obviously based on the material they were supplied. And after fighting tooth and nail, the GAHS actually managed to be included in the film credits.

**"Antiques Roadshow" Comes to RI
Saturday, March 7 – Experts from Capo Auctions will
evaluate and informally appraise your treasures.
Details to be announced.**

RIHS Calendar

Tuesday, Feb 10 – "Religious RI," background talk about religious expression on RI during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Provides wider context for upcoming tour of the Chapel of the Good Shepherd (see March 15). 6:30 pm at the Library.

Saturday, Mar 7 – "Antiques Road Show" comes to RI.

Tuesday, Mar 10 – *Unknown New York: Celebrating Women's History Month*, John Lincoln Hallowell, National Park Service Ranger at the Gateway Recreation Area, Jamaica Bay Unit, will talk about the Naval Air Station at Floyd Bennett Field and how women answered the call to service. 6:30 pm at the Library.

Sunday, Mar 15 – "Landmarks Preserved: A Chapel Saved by Landmarking." Tour of the Chapel of the Good Shepherd in conjunction with the Municipal Arts Society to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the NYC Landmarks Preservation Law. Built in 1889 for the inmates of the NYC almshouse, this Frederick Clark Withers-designed chapel has served many communities. Learn about its most interesting past and how landmarking has affected its use now.

(Tour must be booked through MAS—<http://www.mas.org> Advance reservations are required.)

Tuesday, April 14 – "Medical RI," background talk about medical institutions on RI during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Provides wider context for upcoming tour of the Smallpox Hospital and Strecker Laboratory (see May 24). 6:30 pm at the Library.

Sunday, May 24 – "Landmarks Preserved: Two Medical Structures Saved by Landmarking." Tour of the Smallpox Hospital and Strecker Laboratory in conjunction with the Municipal Arts Society. These buildings and the Octagon started out as medical institutions on Blackwell's Island. Learn what happened to these structures and how they are used now that they have been landmarked.

(Tour must be booked through MAS—<http://www.mas.org> Advance reservations are required.)