

# Blackwell's Almanac

A Publication of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society



*Southpoint Park, the original site and beneficiary of City Hospital: its low stone walls are constructed from the stone facing salvaged from the hospital's demolition. See p. 2.*

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## Contents

- p. 2 Leading the Way: Our Island and the March of Medicine, Part 1—City Hospital
- p. 7 A Family's Life on RI—130 Years Ago, Part 2
- p. 9 Become a Member and Support RIHS
- p. 10 RI in the Movies, "My Man Godfrey," by Stephen Blank
- p. 11 RIHS Calendar

## Blackwell's Almanac

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Historical Society

# Leading the Way: Our Island and the March of Medicine Part 1—City Hospital

*Those of you who moved to Roosevelt Island before 1990 may remember the City Hospital ruin standing just south of Goldwater Hospital behind a chain-link fence. In its day it was an imposing building and, at its peak, a model of pioneering innovations in medicine. However, as with progress generally, it advanced in fits and starts, sometimes backsliding, struggling to regain its equilibrium, then recovering and moving on to greater achievement. Over the course of its life it had four names: Penitentiary Hospital, Island Hospital, Charity Hospital and City Hospital. This is its story.*

As the population of New York City swelled in the early 19th century, the strain on its social services became unsustainable. In particular, Bellevue, the major charity hospital in the city, was shockingly congested and ineffective—a place where people were sent to die. In 1828, the city purchased Blackwell's Island and within a few years, a penitentiary, a workhouse, and an almshouse were built to relieve city facilities of their human burden. To provide medical care to these unfortunates, the Penitentiary Hospital was carved out of part of the prison building. It was there that Bellevue discharged its roiling masses of the ill and destitute.

The hospital's beginnings were inauspicious, to say the least. At the outset its patients were the sickest and most hopeless, and this pattern continued over the decades. Other medical institutions, even private ones, viewed it as "the last refuge" of the impoverished and incurable, and were only too happy to improve their own death rates by transferring their dying to its precincts. Forty percent of the Penitentiary Hospital's patients were *in extremis* upon arrival; many died at the very door in the vehicles that brought them.

For the most part, there were only visiting physicians and surgeons. Supervision of the hospital lay with the Warden of the Penitentiary, and day-to-day care of the sick was left to the "nurses" and servants, who were almost all inmates of the workhouse—unskilled, uneducated, sometimes abusive and frequently dissolute.



*Partial façade of City Hospital. An additional section and tower capped the end of each wing.  
Photo courtesy of RIHS archives.*

The space allotted to the hospital on the upper story of the prison was utterly unsuited to its purpose. It was one open room, 40 feet by 60 feet, inadequate for the hundreds of bodies it was meant to house. As befits a prison, the windows were barred and could not be opened, so that inhabitants were constantly breathing fetid air. There were no “water closets”—each patient made use of a filthy bucket.

The depth of the facility’s inadequacies is illustrated by the account of a mid-century typhus epidemic. To isolate affected patients, they were placed in the only space available—a garret in the prison with no heat and badly leaking ceilings. Because the beds had to be placed right next to each other to accommodate the number needed for the huge influx of patients, drip pans to catch the rains had to be placed on the beds rather than on the floor. Treatment consisted chiefly of stimulation and raw whiskey was used for this purpose. To combat the extreme cold of winter in the unheated premises, whiskey rations were increased. One night and into morning, there was a blinding blizzard. When the attending physician arrived to check on his patients, he was greeted with an appalling sight. His two “nurses,” foul debauched prisoners, lay in a drunken stupor on the floor. Snow had drifted in through the rotten roof and lay in great white sheets about the room. On some of the beds, it had been partly brushed away by the dying patients. On

others, its surface was unbroken. The nurses had drunk the patients’ liquor, and during the night, 12 victims had died.

### **An Attempt at Reform**

In 1845, Dr. William W. Sanger was placed in charge of the Penitentiary Hospital. This was the first time a physician had authority over the facility, and the first time its administration was separated entirely from that of the correctional institutions.

In short order, Sanger also broke with Bellevue Hospital, which up to that point had exercised medical supervision over the hospital. He instituted separate medical services for children and convicts, groups that had previously been lumped together with the general patient population. And, perhaps, most important, he established a staff of salaried resident physicians who lived on Blackwell’s Island and had specific responsibility for a given section of the hospital. He also appointed two doctors and two surgeons of retirement age as volunteer consultants so that the young residents could profit from their experience and skill. Visiting physicians and surgeons from Bellevue were still available to treat island patients, and the overall medical services were rounded out by the addition of an apothecary.

Having radically improved the professionalism of the Penitentiary Hospital, Sanger then sought to rectify

the physical plant. By 1848, there was a tremendous increase in patient load and intolerable crowding. By default, the hospital had become the major center for the treatment of venereal disease (Bellevue would not admit these cases). In addition, thousands of immigrants, sickened by the foul conditions, unchecked disease, and inadequate nutrition that prevailed during their transatlantic passage, were sent to Blackwell's Island. Sanger wanted a bona fide hospital building. Fighting political chicanery and budget manipulation, he was finally successful in 1849, when the NYC Common Council voted to appropriate \$40,000 toward a new structure.

The large stone building was erected by prison convicts 100 yards south of the penitentiary. In the basement were a dining room, pantry, washing conveniences, and a large ward. There were separate male and female wings, each of which contained eight large wards, six small ones and examining rooms; water closets and pantries connected to each ward. Bathrooms on each floor had three tubs, each fitted for cold, warm and shower baths.

In the year 1850, some 2,200 cases of venereal disease were treated in the new hospital in addition to all the other illnesses. Sanger and his associates made every effort to treat, not just the physical illness, but its moral and social underpinnings as well. If "girls of vice" expressed a desire to lead an honest life, they believed that the means of securing honest employment should be provided. Mortality for that year dropped to 4%, a lower rate than ever reported for hospitals generally.

In subsequent years, the hospital instituted a system of medical records where none had existed before. Efforts were made to increase the quantity and quality of food. Sanger was so pleased with the hospital's "new life" that, in 1856, he had the name changed to

Island Hospital. Alas, such heady satisfaction was soon to be dashed.

### **Destruction and Disappointment**

In February 1858, in the midst of a freezing blizzard, the new building was totally destroyed by fire. Chicanery and fraudulent construction played their part. What appeared to be massive walls were almost entirely built of loam. Five hundred and thirty patients had to find refuge in other facilities that were already bursting at the seams. Almost immediately, the New York Legislature voted a \$100,000 tax levy for reconstruction and adopted James Renwick's plan—the grand building we knew of rough-hewn stone and copper mansard roof. Again the rough construction was executed by island convicts and again forward-looking conveniences were incorporated into the design. The three-and-a-half story building was to have a vastly improved ventilation system, more numerous wards, several single rooms for particular cases, as well as summoning bells and speaking tubes.

When Island Hospital opened in 1860, the need for medical care was so great, it received almost 5,700 patients. In 1861 this figure increased to 8,500 and in 1862, in the wake of a U.S. Government contract to care for Union soldiers, the number increased to 9,400. Unfortunately, Dr. Sanger resigned in 1860, and the hospital was again placed under the direction of the Warden of the Penitentiary. With the reinstatement of a "correctional culture," graft and corruption flourished, cleanliness suffered, and life at the hospital deteriorated.

Pauper and workhouse attendants began charging patients for items they should have had for free: a nickel for eggs or milk; more for sugar and butter; and a rental fee for the blanket coats worn around the wards. Stewards siphoned monies from the budget and the food supply was soon impoverished.

Drugs were over-ordered and pilfered. Tellingly, an average daily patient cost that had been 14¢ rose by 1864 to a fraudulently inflated 37¢. Even worse, the inattention to cleanliness led to reeking, filthy conditions in which the spread of disease was rampant. Criminal attendants often could not be dismissed, even after they had served their time, as politicians used these room-board-and-payment-in-whiskey positions to garner votes.

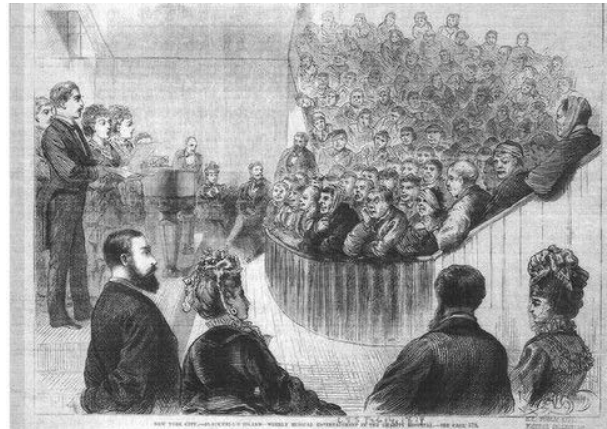
### Resurgence

Happily, this period of degradation was short-lived. By the 1870s, a physician had again been placed in supreme control of both civil and professional functions. The fortunes (and quality) of the hospital—now called Charity Hospital—were on the upswing, and over the next several decades, the institution took its place as a model in a number of different ways.

The house staff was greatly expanded to provide more personalized care to the 800 to 1,000 patients hospitalized at any one time. Visiting privileges were extended to 22 physicians and surgeons and two consultants. Ultimately added to the existing medical, surgical, gynecological, dermatological and venereal departments were ophthalmology, epilepsy and paralysis, maternity, nervous disorders and pathology. And an 18-month rotation through the various departments was established for resident physicians, similar to today's medical training practice. In fact, the hospital became part of the Bellevue Medical School.

On the civil side, the convict “nurses” and orderlies were replaced with decent (though still untrained) citizens who were paid a modest salary. A new diet (called the “extra diet”) was introduced that included supplemental foodstuffs such as oatmeal, butter, coffee, white sugar, lemons, whiskey, ale, porter, wine, beefsteak, mutton chops, ham and tomatoes (canned or fresh in season).

Not only were the ill better nourished, scurvy was virtually eradicated. To raise morale, inpatients enjoyed Christmas dances and regular musical concerts. And, finally, as they were invented, modern heating, lighting, plumbing and telephone were installed, along with a solarium complete with singing canaries.



*One of the weekly musical concerts at Charity Hospital, circa 1870s–80s. New York Public Library.*

### On the Cutting Edge

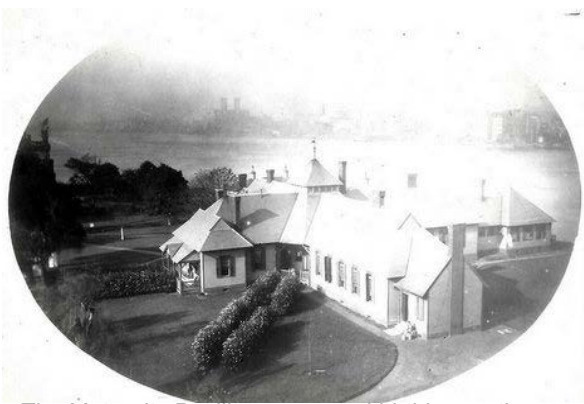
By the turn of the 20th century, the hospital, renamed City Hospital in 1892, was a distinguished medical institution that attracted resident physician applications from around the country and visiting medical personnel from around the globe.

- *Venereal disease:* The venereal service, the only one of its kind in the city, comprised six wards, each with 20 beds. It became a source for pioneering research and the hospital gained a worldwide reputation for its genitourinary clinics.

- *Surgery:* Antiseptic surgery was born in 1876. Previously, instruments were merely washed in soap and water; the surgeon might wear the same protective frock coat, encrusted with blood spatters, over and over again; and neither surgeons' hands nor patients' body parts were washed. Even minor operations in the hands of the best doctors could turn septic and fatal.

Charity/City Hospital adopted the conventions of antiseptics and contemporary surgery with a vengeance. An entire room was dedicated to sterilization. Specially trained operating room nurses oversaw the two specially equipped ORs and recovery rooms. The hospital was known for the best order of excellence, brilliant in both execution and result. Indeed, practitioners regularly vied to observe several of City's surgeons perform their operations.

• *Maternity:* Before 1875, the lying-in department of Bellevue was the default maternity center. The mortality rate there (as in other municipal hospitals) was appalling. Pasteur's principles of bacterial contamination were unknown. Women in labor were sometimes attended by individuals who had come directly from septic cases. Spread of infection was inevitable, but never more so than in 1875 when an epidemic of puerperal fever reached such proportions that the entire service was transferred to



*The Maternity Pavilion separated birthing mothers from possible contagious disease in the main hospital building. Photo courtesy of RIOC archives.*

(then) Charity Hospital. Handling about 50 confinements a month, nurses in the department were untrained, although several had excellent experience and skill. The results were remarkably good considering the lack of modern methods. But then came a

breakthrough: Dr. Henry J. Garrigues introduced a system of antiseptic midwifery, the first of its kind. Mortality plunged by 90% and his methods were soon adopted throughout the country. In 1884, to further protect birthing mothers from the threat of ambient infection, a dedicated Maternity Pavilion was constructed. Although it adjoined the hospital, it was the first in the nation to be built as a separate unit from its main institution.

• *Nursing:* In 1875, through advocacy by the Ladies' State Aid Association, a regular training school for female nurses was established—only the fourth such school in the country after Hartford, Boston and Bellevue. The first American school for male nurses was opened in 1887. With the advent of their professional skill, the evils of the old order of nursing became unimaginable. Wards were spic and span and suddenly lacked the foul smell of stale pus that had permeated them earlier. Attention to antiseptics and attentiveness to patients' condition actually helped save lives. With the nurses' qualities of compassion and tenderness, the entire atmosphere of the hospital was transformed. According to a *New York Times* article dated July, 1883, "...the pride and chief strength of the City's Charity Hospital is...its corps of trained nurses, than which there is none superior in the country...'Charity' ...is one of the great hospitals of the world... There are few hospitals...that compare with it, not [even] the most private and exclusive."

City Hospital soldiered on until 1955, when its patients were transferred to Elmhurst, Queens. It was demolished in 1990. Today its presence is perpetuated in Southpoint Park, whose beautiful stone walls are constructed from the original, island-quarried stones of the hospital.

## A Family's Life on RI— 130 Years Ago Part 2

*In the last issue, we introduced you to the Robert Emmett Cleary family and their life on what is now Roosevelt Island. Cleary was appointed Chief Commissary Officer of Blackwell's Island in 1884, serving the City and the Department of Charities and Corrections. He, his wife and eight children lived here until 1892, when, as a political appointee, he lost his job following the Democrats' ouster from office. Here is Part 2 of their saga, excerpted from a family history researched and written by Cleary's granddaughter, Catherine Cleary Roberts, and made available to Blackwell's Almanac by her son, David L. Roberts.*

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### **Aunt Jo's Story, continued**

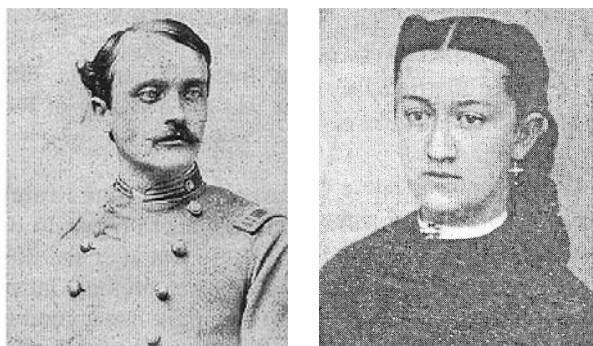
"Father's breakfast was served after the children were off to school or away in the care of the maids. Mother hovered over him seeing that everything was perfect. Only the current baby [two children were born on Blackwell's Island; only one survived past infancy] was allowed to sit in the high chair beside him. His breakfast usually consisted of a peeled and quartered orange or other fresh fruit, two soft boiled eggs, hot homemade rolls, broiled steak or chops and coffee with heavy cream.

"It was customary for the Commissioners of the Department of Charities and Corrections to visit the island on inspection trips. When they did so, Williamanna [Cleary's wife] served lunch. Theodore Roosevelt, who had been their landlord on Pleasant Avenue in Harlem [before they moved to Blackwell's Island], was one of the

commissioners who often visited.... Father disliked Roosevelt, considered him a bore, and on the occasions of his visits always sent word to mother that he would not appear at the table. I understand that he once threatened to 'pull Teddy's nose.'

"When Papa came home, about 6 pm, from the office (we children had already had dinner), he relaxed in his big comfortable chair while one of us removed his shoes, warmed his slippers and slipped them on. That was a privilege we vied for. Then he would enjoy his toddy with some macaroons or sweets, smoke his fragrant cigar and listen to the news of the day. The only household chore I ever remember my father doing was the weekly winding of the clocks on Sunday morning. This was quite a project. Frank [the oldest child], with the high step, followed him from clock to clock, holding it steady as father solemnly climbed up, wound the big-faced clock, and then came down. Off to the next clock they proceeded, and when all were properly wound, father's weekly chore was done."

Occasionally Robert Emmett and Williamanna went to the city to a lecture or concert. Aunt Jo recalls one occasion: "I can see her ready to start



*Robert Emmett Cleary (b. 1845, d. 1897) and Williamanna Fitzpatrick (b. 1847, d. 1889, Blackwell's Island) at the time of their wedding, July 1870.*

off with father, sealskin coat, a tiny white velvet bonnet tied with a white velvet ribbon under her chin, her beautiful black hair, her beautiful diamond earrings sparkling in her tiny ears,

**The Children of Robert Emmet and Williamanna Cleary**

1. Frank (Francis Xavier) b. 1871, d. 1940
2. Agnes Cecelia b. 1873, d. 1918
3. Williamanna (Willie) b. 1875, d. 1939
4. Robert Lee, b. 1877, d. 1918
5. Johanna (Aunt Jo) b. 1879, d. after 1960
6. Marie Cecelia b. 1881, d. 1940
7. William Bernard b. 1884, d. 1957
8. Marie Rose (Rosebud) b. 1885 (Blackwell's Island), d. 1908
9. Emmett b. 1888 (Blackwell's Island), d. 1889 (Blackwell's Island)

pulling on her tiny white kid gloves...How sweet she looked and how proudly she gazed at father in his splendid outfit, not the least interesting part of which, to us children, was his collapsible opera hat. He too wore his diamond studs in his stiff shirt bosom and with his smart mocha colored gloves and spats to match, not forgetting his dandy cane, he was in our eyes a fit companion to our pretty little mother. We rushed to the nursery window to wave goodbye as they walked arm in arm down the road to the... boat which would take them to the city and their 'Night at the Opera.'

"Mother made all her own and our clothes. Of course, she always had a seamstress to help. One of my proudest moments was when she invited me to stand up on a chair to be her 'Sally Betsey.' Then she would drape and arrange the skirt and bustle of her new dress over my little figure. A favorite game was to seat myself on the floor behind her Singer sewing machine and

work the pedal up and down on signals from herself, the engineer... What fun! Little did I realize at the time that it meant more than a game to mother. She was probably glad to be relieved of the effort of pedaling...

"Marie and I were of an age when we were alone a great deal. Frank, Aggie, Willie and Rob went to school and were able to care for themselves. The little ones, Bernard, Rosebud and Emmett had nurses to look after them. That left Marie and me a lot on our own and so we loved to stay near mother and play games. She taught me to read while she sewed away at the sunny nursery window. The *N. Y. Herald* in those days always had large headlines on the first page of the Sunday edition, set in letters about 2 1/2 inches high, each made up of hundreds of similar little letters. I sat at the foot of the nursery bed and spelled out to her the words thus formed.

"Every Saturday afternoon the boat brought in the mail and our copy of 'The Golden Days' to which we subscribed. Rob on his high-wheeled bicycle was always off to meet the boat and take possession before we could lay our hands on it. [Eventually] Marie and I would read every last word of it. Some of the stories were serials and we awaited the continuance of the story breathlessly...

"Then there was 'The Chatterbox,' a thick paper-bound book filled with stories, articles, pictures, etc., each one more fascinating than the other. Each year at Christmas we had a new 'Chatterbox.' It furnished us with reading matter for nearly the whole following year.

"When I learned to read, I loved the Elsie Dinsmore books and the Louisa M. Alcott books. We had all of them. Rob loved the Horatio Alger books. Marie and I enjoyed them too... I remember that I began to read serious books



rather earlier than most children: Dickens' works, Sir Walter Scott, Bulwer Lytton, and Fenimore Cooper were all favorites and devoured before I was 12 years old.

"...[Mother] would tell us the stories of most of the classics of those days. 'The Count of Monte Cristo,' 'East Lynne,' 'John Halifax, Gentleman,' and dozens of others... What a joy it was to gather about her in front of the big pot-bellied stove glowing red hot before us as she unfolded some of her famous stories.

"I remember one time particularly. It was a bitter cold winter night near Christmas, the ground snow-covered and the wind howling outside. We were in the living room that night, gathered around mother to hear 'The Count of Monte Cristo.' She had just gotten to the part where the Count escapes from the Chateau D'F when we heard, coming from the direction of the Penitentiary to the south, the loud clanging bell of warning which

indicated the escape of a prisoner. Mother stopped and said, 'Let us kneel down and pray our Blessed Mother to take care of the poor fellow. Perhaps he wants to get back to his children for Christmas.' Just then, Father and his clerks came home mounted up on horses. When a prisoner escaped, all officials joined the hunt. Off they went and we returned to the stories. Mother told us of some famous escapes. We listened until nearly midnight for the signal of the bell telling the search had been successful, but in vain. We went to bed with visions of the poor fellow trying to swim the East River to safety. A few days later, I believe, they found him frozen to death in one of the icehouses."

**TO BE CONTINUED.**

***In the next (November) issue of Blackwell's Almanac, Part 3 of "A Family's Life on RI" describes "Going to School" and "Celebrations."***

### **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](http://rihs.us/?page_id=4)**

## RI in the Movies: “My Man Godfrey” by Stephen Blank

The “RIOC Advisory” on July 9 was no big deal: “Please be advised on Friday, 7/10/15, the Roosevelt Island Bridge has been permitted for a Film Shoot which will involve the use of various prop weapons and staged emergency responders.”

We’ve long been accustomed to film shoots. Indeed, our little island has played a starring—or at least supporting—role in quite a few films since it became Roosevelt Island. It appeared on the big screen in the early days when the tram was held hostage in “Nighthawks” with Sylvester Stallone. (We worried that this might give some idiot an idea.) We were tickled when we saw that Billy Crystal’s character Mitch Robbins in “City Slickers” lived on the island. We knew that scenes from the thriller “Conspiracy Theory” with Julia Roberts and Mel Gibson were shot in the old nurses’ residence. And who could forget when, in the 2002 “Spider-Man,” the Green Goblin threw Mary Jane Watson from the bridge, and Spider-Man had to decide between saving her or passengers on the Roosevelt Island tram.

But the island had its moments on the screen before it was Roosevelt Island.

We appeared, as Blackwell’s Island, in at least a couple of very early films—for example, “Thro’ Hell Gate” (1902) and the Edison Company’s “Panorama of Blackwell’s Island” (1903). During the great film era of the 1930s, Blackwell’s Island made various other appearances on screen. Indeed, one movie in 1934

starring the very up-and-coming John Garfield was titled “Blackwell’s Island.” The flick was about the corruption in the old Blackwell’s Island jail that led to a midnight amphibious assault on the island by New York police, the transfer of the jail’s inmates to Riker’s Island and the construction of the now-history Goldwater Hospital. Dick Lutz told the whole story in an article in *The Wire* dated April 17, 2004.



And there are others. To give you a taste of our island’s cinematic fame, “RI in the Movies” will be a frequent feature of *Blackwell’s Almanac* over the coming issues. I sincerely hope you will derive as much pleasure from reading about these screen gems as I will from writing about them.

To start, think of the perfect “screwball comedy” (film historians have called it the “definitive” screwball comedy), “My Man Godfrey.” In this 1936 film, a depression-downed “forgotten man,” William Powell, tangles with (his real-life ex-wife) Carole Lombard and a grand supporting cast in a story with very strong class overtones. Bill Powell is not a “bum,” but educated, sophisticated and down on his heels. Lombard’s wealthy family is—a typical plot line in these films—rich, crass and dumb. Eugene Pallette plays his frequent role as paterfamilias of this hoard. Lombard drags Powell in as a butler, but he has entrepreneurial ideas of his own. This is great fun and really good cinema: “My Man Godfrey” got Oscar nominations for writing, directing and all four acting awards (though not for Best Picture).

Blackwell's Island? Well, it's there even if you don't see it. In the opening credits, the background is the 59th Street Bridge and Blackwell's Island. Why? Because the story line develops around Powell's plan to open a night club on the shore of the East River, basically where Sutton Place is now. The background to all of the scenes that deal with his plan is Blackwell's Island. The film was shot in Universal Studios in California, so none of this is live. The scenes are filmed against a rear projection of the island. Look carefully and you will see that, in

one scene, there's a slip-up and the image is reversed, so that the old elevator ("upside-down") building is suddenly on the south side of the bridge.

Viewing "My Man Godfrey" is a snap. You can see it online for free at Internet Archive and YouTube. You can download it on Amazon Instant Video, rent it from Netflix or you can purchase both inexpensive and fancy (Criterion) DVD versions.

## RIHS Calendar

**Wednesday, August 19, 2015 @ 11:00 am—**

**Private Guided Tour to Two New York Historical Society Exhibits:  
Picasso's "Le Tricorne"...**

Impresario Sergei Diaghilev commissioned Picasso to paint this stage curtain for the ballet "Le Tricorne" ("The Three-Cornered Hat"), which his Paris-based Ballets Russes danced for the first time in 1919. Subsequently The Four Seasons restaurant purchased the curtain and it hung there until recently when it was acquired by the New York Historical Society.

**...and "The Hirshfeld Century: The Art of Al Hirshfeld."**

Over 100 examples of Hirshfeld's distinctive celebrity drawings are on display, with special emphasis on those that appeared in the *New York Times*.



**Wednesday, September 2, 2015 @ 11:00 am—**

**Private Guided Tour to the Exhibit "Saving Place: 50 Years of New York City Landmarks" at the Museum of the City of New York**

The Roosevelt Island Historical Society and the Museum celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of New York's pioneering Landmarks Law with an exploration of the effects of preservation and renovation on city neighborhoods.

**Reservations for either event:**

**212-688-4836, or**

**[rooseveltislandhistory@gmail.com](mailto:rooseveltislandhistory@gmail.com)**

**Donation: \$20—members**

**\$25—non-members**

**Space is limited, reserve early.**

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