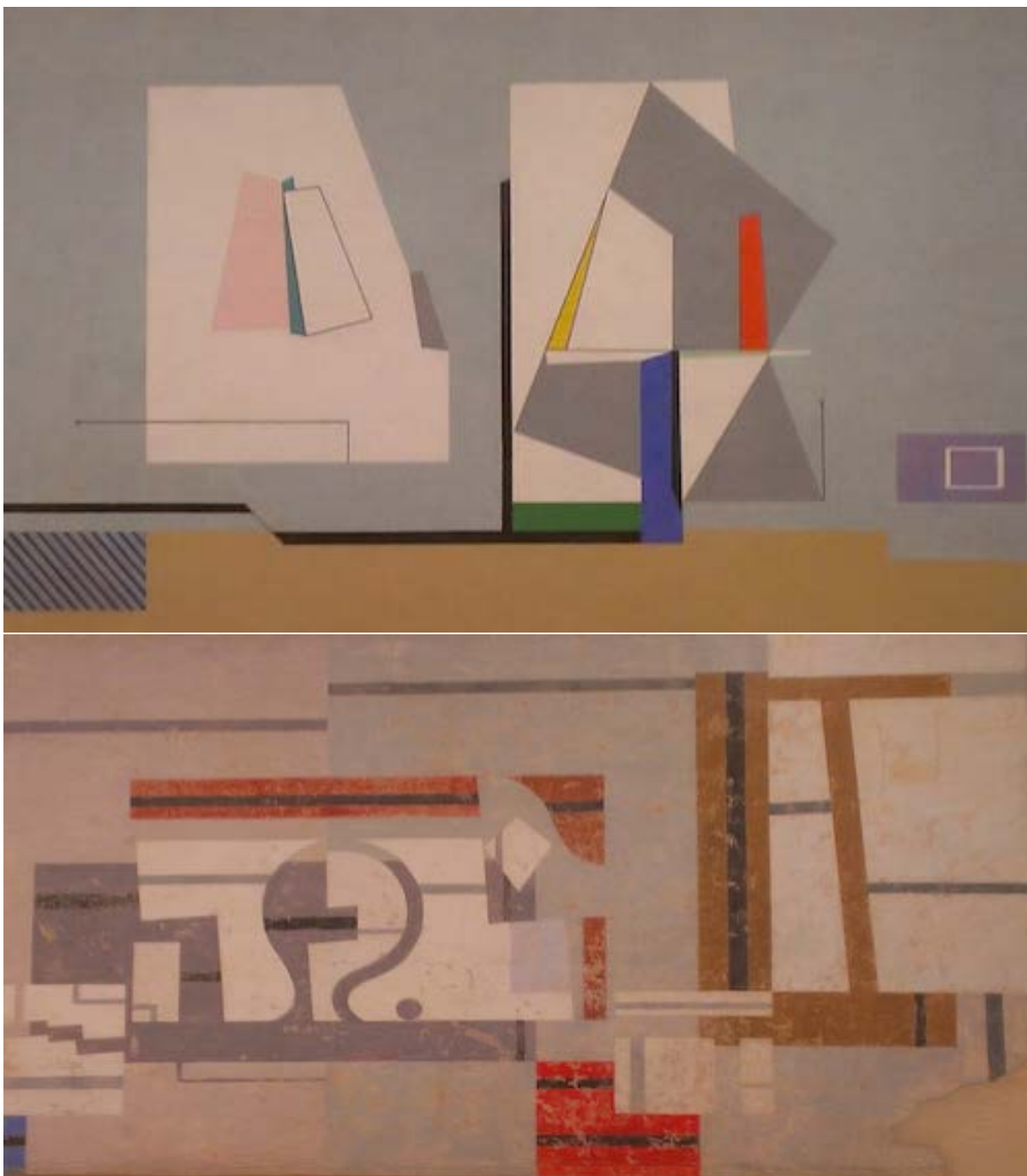


# Blackwell's Almanac

A Publication of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society



*Details of the Goldwater WPA murals by Ilya Bolotowsky (top) and Albert Swinden. See Back from the Disappeared: Three Historical RI Murals, page 4. All mural photo credits: Judith Berdy.*

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## A Royal Visit *Wherein the Royal Visitor Is Inspired*

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### Blackwell's Almanac

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Historical Society

Blackwell's (aka Roosevelt) Island has long boasted of visits by a number of celebrities (author Charles Dickens, journalist Nellie Bly and actress Mae West, to name a few). But until recently, little if anything was known about the journey made to our island by Queen Kapi'olani of Hawaii and her royal retinue.

Now, thanks to Hawaiian native and Pacific Islands historian Colette Higgins, we know that, in 1887, Her Majesty traveled to London to commemorate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. On her way she visited Deer Island in Boston and Blackwell's Island in New York—both havens for the least fortunate in society.

Higgins, a professor at Kapi'olani Community College, is researching the life and legacy of the Queen. From news accounts that she has found, and especially from a personal diary kept by one of the royal party (the Queen's dressmaker and family friend), we get a vivid picture of both the May 18th visit and Blackwell's Island.

Her Majesty was dressed in black and wore a cloak trimmed with fur and a yellow fuzzy collar. She was accompanied by a large retinue, including Mayor Hewitt and Commissioners Porter and Brennan. On a sunny morning, they all boarded the steam ferry Minnehannock at the foot of East 26th Street and were taken upriver to Blackwell's Island.

It was a beautiful place, in the diarist's words—with expanses of grass and trees that were just starting to bud, roads made of gravel, and a notable cleanliness. First stop was the Women's Workhouse “where the streetwalkers and petty thieves” were kept.

*“[We] were taken into the receiving room and introduced to the manager and [his] wife. From there we went into the ladies' sewing room and saw about 100 women sewing on machines, making shirts for the prisoners.*

*From there we went to where [the prisoners] are put at night and saw how each man is locked in their cells. There [are] about 1,000 cells and most of them [are] filled. Some [inmates are] there for three and five months to one year. The prisoner has his hair cut short and wears... striped pants of blue and white. The cells are very small and a small mattress is just large enough for one to sleep on. The prison is made very strong. Its walls are two feet thick and of stone; [it] has six stories...The stone was got on the island and is of...dark granite. The prisoners do all the cutting of the stones and they do cut out some very nice work.”*

A news article describes the Queen's considerable curiosity—how she inspected a typical cell and then looked at the “delirium tremens” cell. Warden Pillsbury promised he would show her the prison's “big snake,” which turned out to be a long line of convicts shuffling along in lock-step in honor of the royal visitor.

The group was then treated to a dramatic entertainment at the Lunatic Asylum by “those who are getting better and are not so wild,” according to the diarist. It was clearly a red-letter day for all concerned. In a special theater-like facility, the proscenium and a semi-circle of chairs were decorated with the national colors, while in the center a grand and imposing seat had been created for the Queen. The rest of the audience was composed of the asylum inmates, but, according to the papers, a more decorous audience could not be found anywhere.

Her Majesty entered on the arm of Mayor Hewitt and the performance began. A young lady played a deftly executed piano solo—despite the fact that, when she was in her room, she was said to talk to herself continuously and to imagine someone perpetually at her window. A spirited farce followed, played by six other inmates, one of whom had tried to commit suicide just the day before. A vocal solo closed the entertainment, after which the Queen and her procession moved out, with the sovereign bowing right and left to the patients.



Queen Kapi'olani. Photo credit: America.Pink.

The New Nurses' Home, the Quarry and the City Home or Almshouse were also brief stops on the itinerary. The party didn't enter the poor house, but passed outside where crowds of all ages and class welcomed them with cheers and the waving of handkerchiefs.

Of all the visited facilities, it was at Charity Hospital that Her Majesty apparently found the greatest inspiration for bettering the lot of her own people. The Queen inspected several wards and found them very clean. Entering a room where there were women with their babies, she was described as...

*“...so kind and motherly and interested that some of the women patients were almost tempted to swap baby stories with her. The Queen talked Hawaiian mother talk to the babies, who understood all that she said.”*

Less than three years later, Her Majesty was moved to emulate what she had seen: in 1890 she opened the Kapi'olani Maternity Home in Honolulu, after having held bazaars and luaus to raise the required \$8,000 for development and construction. The hospital still exists today as the Kapi'olani Medical Center for Women and Children. It is the premier pediatric facility in all of Hawaii and, notably, the birthplace of President Obama.

In a different sort of inspiration and emulation, researcher Higgins is planning to re-create the Queen's journey, traveling in her footsteps across

the U.S. and to London.\* It turns out Higgins will visit Roosevelt Island and the various structures seen by the Queen on this May 16th, 129 years almost to the day after the original Royal Visit.

Higgins points out a couple of stark contrasts between the Queen's voyage and her own. Her Majesty journeyed by steamer to San Francisco, crossed the continent by train, then took another steamer to London, returning the same way. She spent 50 days on travel alone! Higgins will fly to San Francisco, also travel cross-continent by train, and take the Queen Mary II to London. She will return to Honolulu by air, for a total travel time of 13 days. The Queen's

party of nine people collectively brought 55 pieces of luggage. Higgins and her retinue (her husband) will each have one carry-on bag and a backpack. What a difference a century makes!

\*Higgins will be blogging about the experience on her own blog site ([www.travelpod.com/members/colette.higgins](http://www.travelpod.com/members/colette.higgins)), on Facebook and Twitter (@HigginsColette or #InTheFootstepsOfKapiolani).

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## Back From the Disappeared: Three Historic RI Murals

It was the Great Depression. Vast numbers of people were out of work. In his wisdom, FDR created the Works Progress Administration to give people jobs and dignity. Perhaps the greatest legacy to emerge from this initiative was the work produced by the Federal Art Program (FAP), a subsidiary organization that, between 1935 and 1943, employed thousands of artists to create art for public spaces. Our Island's Goldwater Hospital was among the lucky beneficiaries.

No doubt you've heard or read about the murals that were recovered from the hospital in 2015, just before its demolition. What you may not know is just how special they were, and just how difficult it was to recover them and bring them back from the brink.

### **Avant-garde New York**

Most federally sponsored art of the time featured social realism or regionalism, that is, realistic depictions of American

history and industry meant to inspire a troubled nation. But the New York branch of the FAP uniquely favored abstract art, a movement that was neither popular nor much exhibited. Even MoMA, in its 1936 exhibition of abstract art, showed only European artists (with the one exception of American Alexander Calder). It was said that the name itself was a dangerous thing, a more acceptable euphemism being "decoration."



*Detail from Rugolo mural.*

Fortunately for New York, the mural division of the FAP was headed up by abstract painter and founding member of the American Abstract Artists, Burgoyne Diller. His efforts were instrumental in persuading the authorities to consider abstract commissions. So that by 1941, when Ilya Bolotowsky, Joseph Rugolo, Albert Swinden and Dane Chanase submitted their avant-garde mural proposals for Goldwater Hospital, the four works were quickly approved.



Detail from Bolotowsky mural.

The murals each measured a gigantic 7 x 50 feet, so big that only the huge circular walls of the various day rooms in the hospital could accommodate them. As *The New York Times* speculated in a recent article, when the paintings were installed in the early '40s, their jazz-like abstraction and bold fields of color must have caused a sensation.

**Bolotowsky** reasoned that the round construction of the day room “might give some patients a feeling of being walled-in and fenced off from the rest of the world. Therefore,” he wrote in a statement accompanying his original sketch of *Abstraction*, “...I have sought to create a feeling of free, open space...The shapes of the doors and windows all around the day room have been woven into the overall design... Since straight lines are the most restful things to contemplate, this mural is of straight lines and geometric shapes.”

Details from Rugolo mural.



**Rugolo's** mural, *Fisherman's Bay*, reflects the presence of the East River, visible to the lounging patients through the windows. His vibrant color choices— aqua, periwinkle blue, yellow and red— are said to recall an afternoon at the beach: a rippling red flag, perhaps; a sail against the blue water; and might there be some birds traversing the summer sky?

A quiet man himself, **Swinden's** work features a soothing color palette that must have offered a quiet respite for patients. He believed in the relationship between forms and in their significance as a unity. Indeed, gray lines, golden blocks and deep blue swirls seem to glide forward, lazily moving together in a choreographed harmony.

And what of **Chanase**? Sad to say, his mural was never found.

### Sleuthing and Scalpels

It may beggar belief that a 350 square foot piece of art could be lost. But starting in 1957, an apparently blunted appreciation of the works caused them to be painted over. Additional layers of white, pink, green, yellow and brown followed in subsequent years. So that, by the time it was decided to salvage and restore the historic murals, they were literally entombed under seven layers of house paint.

In 2001, the Bolotowsky work was rediscovered and rehabilitated in place by the Municipal Art Society's Adopt-a-Mural program. The caked-on paint was chiseled away or dissolved with solvent paste. Missing areas of pigment were in-painted, and adhesive was injected into the canvas base to keep it securely fixed to the wall. Thus, when the



painting had to be removed in advance of the hospital's demolition, its whereabouts were known.

Not so the other murals. There were 32 day rooms in Goldwater where they might have been, and the original architectural plans were useless since room numbers had been changed. With few clues, the hunt was on!

Gillian Randell, a conservator with the restoration firm EverGreene Architectural Arts, spent almost a year examining every single day room. Layer by layer, she first softened the applications of paint with chemical solutions. She then used a surgical scalpel to scrape away a tiny "window" in hope that a mural would peak through. Hindrances abounded. Many of these "archeological" explorations had to take place between the hours of midnight and 4:00 am because some of the rooms were still being used by the facility's remaining patients. What's more, there was the complicated question of how Randell would know if she found something. Different from exposing a figurative work in which an arm or head might be recognized, would a faded or grimy patch of color register as anything more than wall paint?

Then, one day, Randell sighted a sliver of canvas on the third floor of the hospital's B wing. It was the Rugolo. Shortly thereafter, one floor up in the same wing, behind a sterile white wall mounted with a bulletin board and Purell dispenser, she uncovered the Swinden. Alas, Chanase's *Abstraction Based on Music* never reappeared.

### Still a Long Way to Go

Last April, EverGreene and the Fine Arts Conservation Group began the daunting task of removal and restoration. The canvases had been affixed to the walls with a highly toxic lead-based adhesive, thus requiring the crew to don hazmat suits and respirators. Advancing a few feet each day, they used pastry knives to pry the murals loose. Individual sections, some more than 10 feet wide and weighing hundreds of pounds each, were rolled into tubes for transport to the conservators' premises. By this date in 2015, the hospital's electricity had been turned off, so the canvases had to be carried down a pitch-black staircase by the light of headlamps.



Details of Swinden and Rugolo murals.

Having been restored once, the Bolotowsky was in better shape than the other murals. Adhesive residue had to be removed

and the prior in-painting, now discolored, had to be matched to its surroundings. The other two, still under layers of paint, were subjected for over two months to painstaking curettage with scalpels, sculpting tools, chemicals and heat guns. Next in the process: a program of stabilization and judicious in-painting.

Ultimately the murals are slated to be part of the new Cornell Tech campus and the university is underwriting the entire cost. While conservation efforts continue, restored sections of the artwork are currently on exhibit until May 29 at the Johnson Museum on the main Cornell campus in Ithaca, New York. The complete Bolotowsky will make its contemporary debut in the Bloomberg Center, Cornell Tech's first academic building, scheduled to open in 2017. It will be reinstalled in a circular room

similar to the one it originally occupied. The Rugolo and Swinden murals will go into storage until future buildings are built.

Though less known than the famous post-war abstractionists Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock, this trio of artists were forerunners in abstract mural painting. Their work was groundbreaking. And despite the inevitable losses that come with time, the joy and beauty of their canvases are still very much apparent today.

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## Leading the Way: Our Island and the March of Medicine Part 3—The Maternity Pavilion

*In Volume I, No. 3 of Blackwell's Almanac (August 2015), we initiated a series on the medical institutions of Blackwell's Island. The first installment was a detailed look at Charity/City Hospital. Although outcomes at the hospital (as at most hospitals of that era) were generally poor—not to say dire—for several decades, dedicated leadership ultimately turned the institution into a model facility. Among its much admired and imitated innovations was the Maternity Pavilion.*

*As it turns out, a recent Roosevelt Island Historical Society library talk explored this very topic. Medical historian Jane Pacht Brickman, PhD, first described a time when childbed fever and maternal death were regular occurrences. Eventually, though, our Island pioneered obstetrical care that was so transformative, according to the speaker, it gave rise to the modern hospital. Here is a summary of her eye-opening presentation.*

Throughout most of the 19th century, Dr. Brickman began, "hospitals sat at the margins of medicine"—and with good reason. They were generally associated with rampant infection and high rates of mortality. Anyone of means received care at home, and that included women in childbirth. These laboring patients were attended by a physician or midwife, and were also supported in their familiar surroundings by female friends and family.

### **Hospitals Are Necessary Despite Calamitous Conditions**

Nevertheless, there was a clear need for hospitals despite their reputation as medical resources of last resort.

Brickman, who is Professor of History at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point, NY, pointed to urbanization, immigration, social dislocation, frequent epidemics and grinding poverty; these, she said, were the factors that assured a steady stream of admissions to the many philanthropic clinics that sprung up in large cities.

Among these were a number of lying-in facilities spearheaded in 1799 in New York City by New York and Bellevue Hospitals. Their primary purpose, to assist pregnant women widowed by deadly epidemics, was laudable. But morality undermined a broader charity. Private facilities at first excluded unmarried women. It wasn't until administrators saw how many of their beds remained empty that they accepted first-timers, invoking elaborate justifications of innocence and seduction. Women about to birth second



out-of-wedlock babies, however, were deemed beyond redemption. In fact, staff members were urged to remain vigilant for “those who have not repented, and have fallen a second time” so that “no evil association contaminate those who we hope to restore to a virtuous life.”

Until Charity Hospital opened on Blackwell's Island in 1861, Bellevue was the only medical institution compelled to admit anyone in need. But its days as a maternity hospital were numbered. In 1873, the first report of the Bellevue Visiting Committee “shocked New Yorkers,” Brickman declared. It claimed that patients were served food without dishes, knives or forks; rats often cleared away food scraps; and laundry was done without soap. Then, the following year, a severe epidemic killed one of six women on the maternity ward.

Bellevue's lying-in service was summarily closed and its patients transferred to Charity.

Unfortunately, conditions did not materially improve for the 500 or so women, mostly immigrant and unmarried, who gave birth there each year. Staff were condescending and inattentive, and the mortality rate in a good year reached 10%. In addition, as the speaker recounted, transportation to the Island facility was horrifying. Imagine the indignity and discomfort of women in labor being rowed in all kinds of weather by Island inmates, with no medical attendant present. The boat left for Charity Hospital twice daily, at 6:30 am and mid-afternoon. If a patient was unlucky enough to arrive at the landing at other hours or at night, she had to stay in a waiting cabin boat until the ferry was ready to depart.

Doctors often attributed the hospital's high mortality to patients' prior condition and derelict habits. “Our inmates represent the very lowest of the poverty-stricken,” explained a hospital spokesman. “Forty-five percent...last year were unmarried women...or prostitutes suffering with venereal disease... We are obliged to receive all who come.”

### **Medical Mysteries Foster New Ideas**

But this didn't explain a medical anomaly that became ever more pronounced as the 19th century progressed. “Virtuous” women, giving birth at home, were now developing childbed fever at an alarming rate and also experiencing a climbing death toll.

The culprit, Brickman revealed, was the forceps. First assuming a truly practical design around 1750, this instrument greatly facilitated childbirth when a mother's exhaustion or illness or a child's positioning was impeding delivery. As its benefits of speed and safety became more widely known,



women of means clamored to have it. But only licensed physicians were permitted the forceps' use. Soon wealthy women overcame their modesty and hired doctors instead of midwives. Thus they invited a plague of instrument-caused bacterial contamination (aka childbed fever, puerperal fever or septicemia), followed almost inevitably by death.



*Leather-covered forceps, one of several anatomically adapted designs pioneered by male midwife William Smellie in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century.*

For decades, practitioners simply ascribed these events to “accident” or “providence,” convinced there was little they could do. But the mystery set curious men to thinking. In the 1840s, even before Pasteur formulated the germ theory of disease and Lister developed techniques for antisepsis, Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. (father of the Supreme Court justice) proselytized that simple cleanliness would reduce death rates. But because he was not an obstetrician and could provide no clinical evidence, the medical establishment ignored his paper and dismissed his message.

In a Vienna clinic two decades later, obstetrician Dr. Ignaz Semmelweis noted incredulously that women delivered by a medical student or doctor died at three times the rate of women attended by midwives. The enigma unraveled when a close friend died of blood poisoning after suffering a cut to his hand during an autopsy. Pathological examination revealed changes matching those in women who died of puerperal fever. Realizing that doctors were carrying fetid organic matter from autopsied cadavers into women's vulnerable wombs, Semmelweis, too, exhorted colleagues to wash their hands. For his trouble he

was brutally lambasted by leaders in the field and ostracized by his peers.

### **Enter Garrigues**

Then, in 1881, Danish-born and -educated Henry Jacques Garrigues was named obstetrical surgeon to the maternity department of Charity Hospital. Having studied the recently published findings of Pasteur and Lister, he was convinced that the hospital environment, not patients, was

responsible for puerperal fever. To reduce mortality, he initially introduced antiseptic washes of carbolic acid for both attendants and patients. Much to his chagrin, septic deaths rose from 4% to 16% and hospital administrators expressed their disapproval of his costly and ineffective experiments.

Under a great deal of pressure, he redoubled his efforts. Whereas the department's 70 to 80 patients usually stayed in the general wards before and after transferring to maternity for delivery, Garrigues arranged for post-partum women to stay in separate rooms for at least nine days. He barred doctors and nurses who attended at childbirth from serving on the medical



*Maternity Hospital, the very first in the nation to house its obstetrical service in a building separate from the main hospital.*

and surgical wards, as had previously been the norm. He changed the antiseptic scrub and insisted that attendants' hands be washed, rooms be cleaned antiseptically, wards be ventilated and fumigated, and the maternity ward laundry be sterile.

Results were astonishing. Over three months in early 1884, not a single death occurred among 102 women delivered. From October 1884 to October 1885, there were only four deaths among 541 women delivered, a rate of 3/4 of one percent. Over the next ten months, the death rate was again under 1%.

The continuation of these results convinced the city in 1888 to permit Garrigues to design a separate maternity building adjacent to the main hospital. It was called Maternity Hospital or the Maternity Pavilion. As Brickman

wryly observed, for a brief moment in history, poor and destitute women were receiving better medical care than their wealthy counterparts. But not for long. Other hospitals quickly adopted Garrigues' innovations and the well-off soon moved there for medical care and childbirth. By 1937, 37% of babies in the U.S. were born in hospitals; four years later, the rate jumped to 51%; and five years later, in 1946, 82% of all births took place in hospitals.

The shift that Garrigues' work produced was seismic. Not only did it bring radical reform to obstetrical care. His methods of cleanliness and hospital organization, conceived and validated on Blackwell's Island, literally shaped the modern medical institution and paved the way for today's hospital-centric system of health care delivery.

## **“Green Metropolis”— Paeon to Roosevelt Island**

A champion of landscape, Elizabeth Barlow Rogers almost single-handedly launched the restoration of Central Park in the 1980s. She also captivated readers with her acclaimed books extolling gardens and the natural environment. And now she has triumphed again!



“Green Metropolis: The Extraordinary Landscapes of New York City as Nature, History and Design” introduces us to seven remarkable green spaces in and around the city. They include the greenbelt on Staten Island, Jamaica Bay, Inwood Hill, the Central Park Ramble, Freshkills, and the High Line. But nearest and dearest is the 30-page chapter on our Island home, which she titles *Green Community and White Memorial: Roosevelt Island and the Four Freedoms Park*. It is a beautiful, touching, almost lyrical rendering of our history, physical environment, day-to-day life and the utopian principles upon which our community was founded.

If you think you know Roosevelt Island, you will be humbled to find out how much more there is to know and feel about this place.

**AVAILABLE FOR SALE AT THE VISITORS' KIOSK**

## RIHS Calendar

**Tuesday, May 17, 1:00 pm**

**40th Tram Anniversary Celebration at the Tram Plaza**

Enjoy a reunion of tram staff, celebration music by students of PS/IS 217, the Grand Tram Cake from Riverwalk, greetings from VIPs and friends, and more surprises! Watch for announcements of further details.

**Thursdays, September 8, October 13, November 10, December 8**

**Save These Dates: Fall RIHS Lecture Series at the RI Branch of the New York Public Library—FREE**

Thanks to Nicole Nelson and her Staff at our branch library. Special thanks to the Amalgamated Bank for sponsoring this lecture series, as well as our new member and tour program for new neighbors.



**Present to October 11**

***Picturing Prestige: New York Portraits, 1700-1860, at the Museum of the City of New York***

Portraits of the rising moneyed class of New Yorkers, who commissioned paintings of themselves and their families as indicators of prestige. The exhibit includes a portrait of Brigadier General Joseph Blackwell, Jr., owner of a premier firm in the iron trade, and a commissioned officer in the War of 1812. He also happened to be the grandson of Colonel Jacob Blackwell, owner of Blackwell's Island and farm.

**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)**