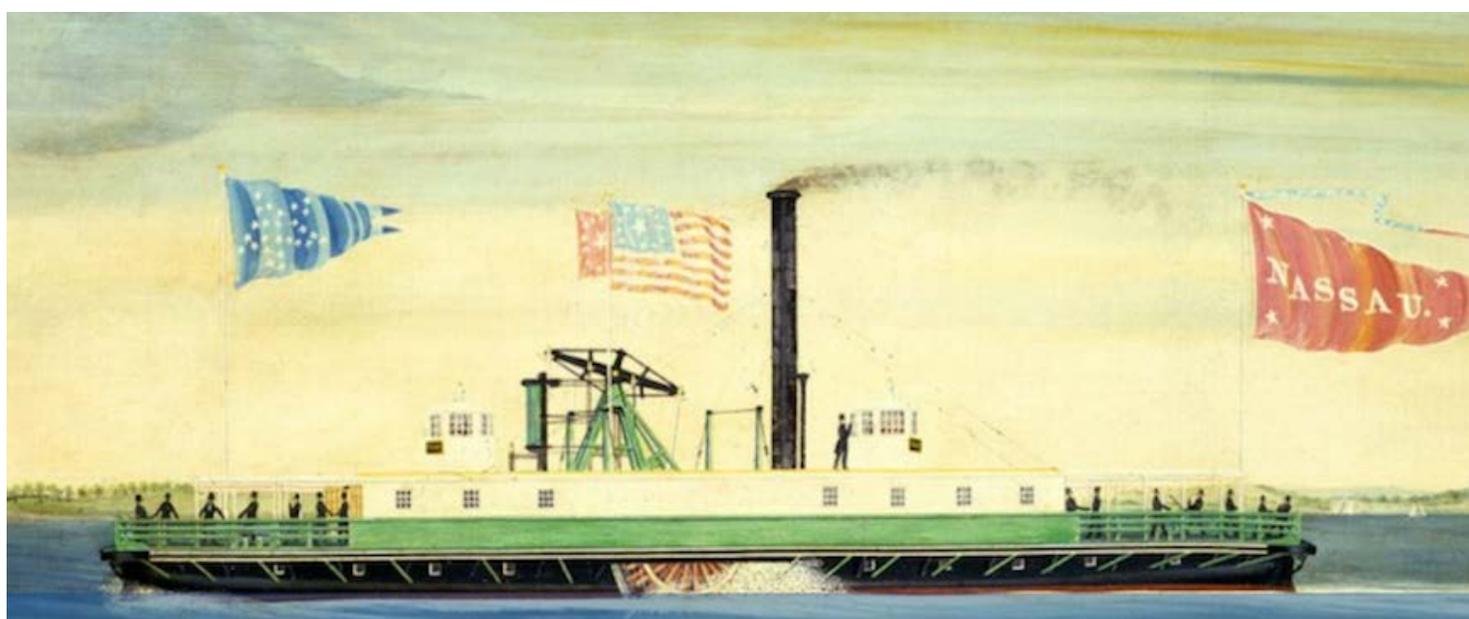


Blackwell's Almanac

A Publication of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society



Top: East River and Shoreline, circa 1746, Pierrepont Bartow, 1872, M1974.74.1; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Bottom: Steamboat Nassau of the Fulton and South Ferry Company, James and John Bard, 1846, M1974.100.1; Brooklyn Historical Society. See "Riding the East River: From Canoe to Yankee Clipper...and Beyond," p. 2.

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Blackwell's Almanac

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Judith Berdy

Editor:
Bobbie Slonevsky

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Historical Society

Riding the East River: From Canoe to Yankee Clipper...and Beyond

On September 8, Robert Singleton, executive director of the Greater Astoria Historical Society, gave a talk at the Library on the storied role of the East River in the life and evolution of New York City. Part of the lecture series sponsored by the Roosevelt Island Historical Society, Singleton's presentation covered such wide-ranging aspects of the river, it would be impossible to cover it all here. However, his material on the many different types of transport associated with the waterway inspired the following expanded treatment of the subject.

We look out the window at Our River and see an occasional scow, or tug, or pleasure boat. What we may not appreciate is that its 16-mile length, stretching northward from Upper New York Bay to Long Island Sound, was in centuries past a scene of dizzying maritime activity and the catalyst for New York City's growth.

Even before Europeans settlers arrived, the Lenape tribe fished and traveled the East River in their dugout-tree trunk canoes. The first sailboat, the "Restless," belonging to Dutch explorer Adriaen Block, made its appearance on the river in 1614. He was able to navigate the entire waterway, even surviving the whirlpools, jagged reefs and dangerous rocks of Hell Gate, the chaotic confluence of tidal waters from the Upper Bay, Harlem River and Long Island Sound. In his wake began the colonization that would transform the river, its transport and the city through which it flowed.



Dugouts and sailing ships in what would become New York harbor, 17th century. Credit: en.wikipedia.org

The Dutch arrived in numbers in 1623, landing at what is now Governors Island and quickly settling both banks of the East River. As with the Native Americans, river transport was central to their lives. By 1642 New Amsterdam's grain mills and flour trade were so active, ferries began running between Manhattan and Brooklyn. The earliest of these were primitive, oar-driven scows or small sailing ships that were summoned by blowing a horn or ringing a bell. By 1647, the first pier on the river was built at Pearl and Broad Streets. Within five years, that stretch of the East River was a vibrant,

commercial center featuring a forest of ships' masts. Among them were smuggler and pirate ships, including eventually those of Captain Kidd, who made the East River at Williamsburg and Bushwick his home port.

In 1664, the English wrested the colony from the Dutch, and both the city (renamed New York) and the river began to change character. A huge wharf called the Great Dock was built at Corlear's Hook and was almost immediately choked with ship traffic. A series of landfill projects on the lower river—continuing well into the 18th century (into the 19th century on the Brooklyn side)—narrowed the channel, causing the flow of water to become deeper and faster. This allowed very large vessels to tie up and unload their goods at a shoreline (particularly on the Manhattan side) that had previously been too shallow for them. The new land soon sprouted warehouses and other buildings essential to the growing sea trade.

The Revolutionary Period

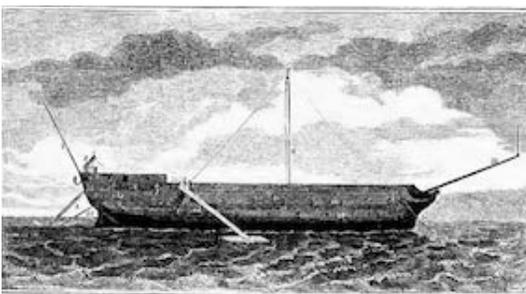
The East River and the boats that plied it were responsible for a number of historic events during the American Revolution. The most important was Washington's retreat after losing the Battle of Brooklyn in 1776. Aiming to save his little army from further devastation, Washington had his men round up "every flat bottomed boat and sloop" on the east side of the river. There were few sailing craft, so it was largely row boats that evacuated the troops from

Brooklyn Heights to Manhattan and allowed them to fight another day.

Most notorious were the British prison ships, particularly the *HMS Jersey*, that housed American captives. Situated off Brooklyn in the East River's Wallabout Bay (site of the later Navy Yard), these 24 ships embodied such hellacious conditions, some 12,000 soldiers, sailors and civilians perished there, almost twice as many as lost their lives during all the war's battles.

Also notable during the revolutionary years: The British *HMS Hussar*, which sank in the vicinity of Hell Gate with a reported fortune in gold that remains lost to this day; and the *Turtle*, America's first submarine. It provided proof of principle, but was unsuccessful in its attack on a British ship in the harbor.

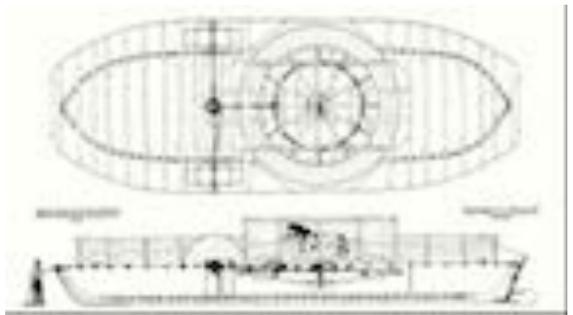
As the 18th century came to a close there appeared on the river another type of transport not widely known about today: horseboats. Yes, boats powered by horses. The animals walked on the boat deck, at first in circles around stationary posts and later on treadwheels or treadmills. The mechanical power from the posts or treads drove varying devices—most often paddlewheels—to propel the vessels. They were inexpensive to build and run and relatively fast. And so, at the height of their popularity, between 1814 and 1819, they actually competed successfully with "the next big thing"...



The Jersey prison ship in Wallabout Bay, 1782.
Credit: en.wikipedia.org



Cutaway of a replica of the Turtle on display at the Royal Navy Submarine Museum, Gosport, UK.
Credit: en.wikipedia.org

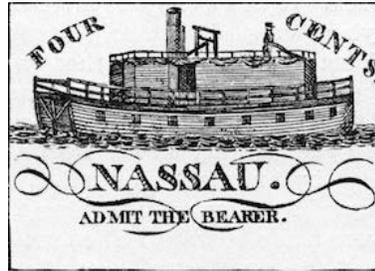


Top: Cross-sectional view of horizontal turntable (treadwheel) beneath boat's main deck (as though decking removed). Bottom: View of horse driving treadwheel backwards through large slots in the deck.
Credit: Kevin J. Crisman, www.nasw.org

The Steam Engine

In 1814, the steam engine, generally attributed to Robert Fulton, arrived on the maritime scene. For the first time, water travel could adhere to a set schedule, unaffected by weather and tides.

The river buzzed with more frequent and dependable ferry service. The earliest Brooklyn steam line, referred to as the Fulton Ferry, included a craft called the *Nassau* (see page 1). Passenger fare was 4¢; a range of other fees applied to wagons and livestock. At mid-century, ferries or barges like the one at the foot of Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn and the one at Hunters Point in Queens met and carried west-traveling railroad cars to Manhattan or New Jersey to link up with the continental rail network. By the last quarter of the 19th century, more than 30 ferries crisscrossed the East River daily as far north as 92nd St. Steam-driven paddle-wheel pleasure boats also became a standard feature of the river during this period. Thousands of New Yorkers enjoyed summer excursions up the river to beer gardens and other amusements at College Point and Clason's Point, as well as picnic sites on Long Island, until a series of disasters proved the boats to be unseaworthy and fire-prone.



Ticket to the steamboat ferry Nassau. Credit: Google site Brooklyn Queens Waterfront.

what was to be the hallmark of the 19th century: burgeoning trade and the expansion of East River ships and shipping to the greater U.S. and around the world.

Starting in 1817, steam packets hauled cargo, mail and passengers on a strict departure and arrival schedule to the four corners of the earth. By 1830, eight different packet ships went from New York to Liverpool alone. Clipper ships, too, though still under sail, sped across the waves due to their sleek design and maximum sail area. And

majestic foreign ships of every type and from every port came here to deliver their goods and take on cargo for the return. When the Erie Canal opened in 1825, providing an unbroken water passage linking the Midwest, the Hudson River and points south, the rest of America poured its produce into the holds of ships waiting in New York harbor. When the canal froze over in winter, its barge-boats were often tied up on the East River to serve as homes to the captains' families.



Clipper ship Lightning in the 1850s. Credit: en.wikipedia.org



Men-of-war. Credit: T. Whitcomb 1813, U.S. Naval Academy Museum.



A forest of ships' masts circa 1812. Credit: nyhistorywalks.wordpress.com

19th Century Expansion

Already in the 1780s, a sailing ship named the *Experiment* left its birthplace on the East River for a courageous round trip to China. This foreshadowed

Shipbuilding contributed to the massive volume of vessels journeying on the river. While ship construction in the area had actually begun in the 17th century with the Dutch, by the time of the Civil War, more than 30 shipbuilders operated yards on the river from the Battery to 14th Street. Among them, founded in 1801, was the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Off its slips and into our home waterway came many a

wooden man-of-war. It also launched the Civil War's *Monitor* (though the ship was assembled in Greenpoint), the first full-iron vessel with a rotating gun turret, that forever doomed the construction of wooden-hulled warships. (Equally famous products of the Navy Yard in future decades would be the less fortunate *USS Maine*, sunk in the harbor of the Spanish colony of Cuba, and *USS Arizona*, destroyed during the attack on Pearl Harbor. World War II officially ended four years later on the decks of another Brooklyn Navy Yard ship, the *USS Missouri*.) Over its 165-year course of operations, the yard built dozens of ships and repaired thousands more.

Unfortunately there developed during this period of growth a significant threat to the river's continued shipping dominance. The Narrows was silting up with sand and decreasing the water's depth, a critical problem since ships were becoming bigger and bigger. Starting around the middle of the century, some of the dangerous rocks that populated Hell Gate had been blasted away to make the area more navigable. Then in 1885, its perilous 9-acre reef, called Flood Rock, was dynamited, reportedly the largest man-made explosion until the advent of the atomic bomb. Ten years later the Harlem River Ship Canal was completed. The world now had a "back door" through the cleared East River to the port of New York from two directions: from the Atlantic through the Long Island Sound, and from the Hudson River via the Harlem River.

20th Century and Beyond

The opening of the Brooklyn Bridge in 1883 and, later, the other East River bridges and tunnels introduced a new concept in our city's transport: bypassing the river. The result, eventually, was to make ferry travel obsolete. These workhorses lingered until the 1930s and then disappeared. Interestingly, they have since revived in the form of water taxis.

The 20th century saw the advent of another river workhorse. These were the tugboats that do everything from pulling barges of coal or trash to helping ships in and out of their berths. Dredges on the waterway also multiplied. They are constantly scooping out the shifting sand and rock of the harbor bottom that pose unexpected navigation hazards. In addition, police launches and water-spraying fireboats became frequent river features.

Unimaginable in earlier centuries, cargo- and passenger-carrying sea planes began to skim the waters of the East River at LaGuardia's Marine Air Terminal. The first plane to take off from there was Pan Am's luxury Yankee Clipper in 1940. Though the aircraft was no longer in service after World War II, its short life did help to solidify the notion of international passenger air travel.

Since the 1950s, cargo traffic on the East River has been virtually eclipsed by container ships. Even so, the waterway is hardly empty of activity. Today an array of pleasure craft has been added to the roster of its transports. Spend some time peering at the river and you will see sailboats, motorboats, yachts, kayaks, modern canoes, sightseeing boats, and, of course, jet skis. And, if the river ever freezes over again, it's a good bet that iceboats may once more glide into sight as they did in the not-so-distant past.



Boeing 314 Clipper, 1938–1941. Credit: en.wikipedia.org

Sources:
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A Humble Side of History: The Almshouse Ledger Collection

There are many avenues for connecting with our island's past: Historical and newspaper accounts, of course; period artwork and photographic records; archeological finds, such as those collected by the Reverend Chapin; as well as interviews with individuals who served on the staffs of our island's later institutions. Now we who attended the Roosevelt Island Historical Society library lecture on October 13 have learned about yet another window into our local history: the Almshouse Ledger Collection.

According to speaker Nathalie Belkin, an archivist with the NYC Municipal Archives,

Water damage and spine degradation, two examples of the ledgers' poor condition.



Department of Records and Information Services, the term almshouse actually encompassed numerous affiliated institutions on Blackwell's/Welfare Island, including the penitentiary, workhouse, lunatic asylum, poorhouse, hospitals and a nursery. Each of these entities kept detailed

records, in ledgers, of its operations. In a plodding daily exercise, they chronicled such information as admissions, discharges, deaths, accounts, census records, wardens' outgoing correspondence, hospital supplies and inventories, and even the personal property of inmates. Yet from these



NYC Municipal Archives team: Sylvia Kollar, Director; Nathalie Belkin, Archivist; Nora Ligorano, Conservator; Alexandra Hilton, Archivist.

unpretentious lists, researchers can tease out historical perspectives unavailable elsewhere.

The books, over 400 of them, date from 1758 to 1952. They were collected in the 1960s from other associations and historical societies around New York, as well as abandoned buildings here on the island. Although the volumes were immediately transferred to a climate-controlled storage facility, their condition was poor. In most instances, the spine and paper were deteriorated. Earlier rebinding techniques, such as the use of thick metal rods to hold pages in place, or resewing the binding with thick, string-like thread, had only degraded the paper further, causing loss of information. Some volumes were so badly damaged by water and mold, no information could be salvaged.

So, as Belkin explained, a lot had to happen before the books were ready for public consumption. Each ledger that came into the Archives' possession was first conserved, then almost always digitized, and ultimately housed in a custom-made box to protect it.



After conservation and digitization, the ledgers are boxed, labeled and stored.

Conservation

“The first order of business,” said Belkin, “was to clean each ledger.” The front and back and individual pages were very carefully vacuumed. As with all work carried out on the ledgers, conservators wore protective gloves and the book being worked on lay in a special cradle. This device kept the volume open at an angle rather than completely flat, which could inflict further damage on the spine.

During this conservation process, torn or loose sheets of paper were mended or re-attached; water-damaged paper was stabilized to prevent further degradation; loose or broken bindings and covers affected by mold or red rot (a common problem in old books covered with vegetable-tanned leather) were gently removed. In some cases, if the binding was loose but in otherwise good condition, the ledger was covered with a protective layer of mylar (a thin, strong polyester film). As many of the ledgers were not paginated, the conservation team had to go through them leaf by leaf and number them to ensure the pages remained in proper order during digitization. A few of the earlier ledgers posed a special numbering problem because they were “turnabouts.” Although bound as one volume, they contained one subject on one side (for example, hospital admissions), and a second subject on the reverse (for example, an inventory of goods).

Digitization and Re-housing

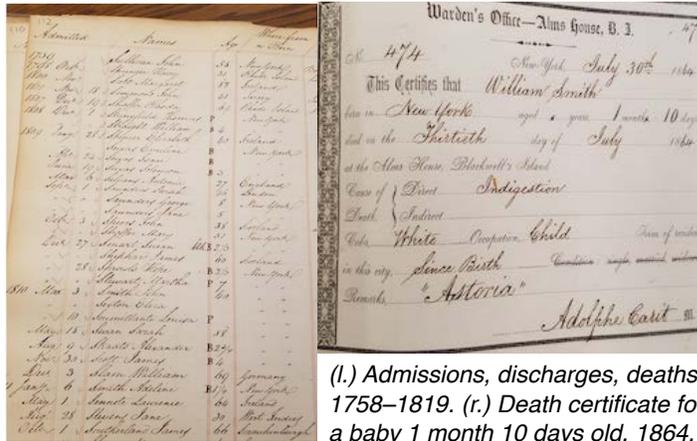
Most of the ledgers were digitally photographed, page by page, some of them numbering over 500 pages. A few were not because they duplicated other ledger information. To prevent further deterioration, individual four-flap boxes were custom-created for each volume using a special Excel formula. The computer program automatically calculated measurements for every tome, a necessary step since they were of all different sizes and weights—the heaviest tipping the scales at almost 40 lbs. In fact, for those over 30 lbs, the originally specified adhesive was not strong enough to keep the box intact and a stronger adhesive had to be found. Once re-housed, these ledgers would be taken out on only the rarest of occasions in order to avoid additional damage.

Content

“There was no standard for record-keeping across the institutions,” the speaker stressed. However, many volumes contain not just the names of individuals confined to the institution, but also their age, gender, disease, date of admission and discharge or death. Later ledgers may also indicate country of origin (“nativity”), color and religion; for example, a “b” or “p” noted in the entry stands for black or Protestant. Some even include inmates’ profession, family member information, reason for admittance, cause of death, and, if transferred to another institution, which one. Such information—when it exists—can be invaluable in tracing relatives or other persons and illuminating something of their lives.

Many mother-child pairs are noted in the registers, another light shed on how society functioned at the time. Belkin noted that with few opportunities for employment outside the home, a widow or unmarried woman was often forced to turn to the city for help. Many women, she explained, brought their children with them or had their babies in the institution. If a mother was unable to nurse or care for her child, she was assigned a wet nurse or caregiver paid for by the city agency overseeing the institution. Most of the time they were actual inmates. This was not an

unusual arrangement; many residents of the almshouse, workhouse and penitentiary worked as in-house employees, providing cheap or even free labor. Some other particularly informative elements of the collection include:



(l.) Admissions, discharges, deaths, 1758–1819. (r.) Death certificate for a baby 1 month 10 days old, 1864.

some cases, which cemetery or borough they are buried in. Sadly, there are certificates for a great many children.

Stock books—Including requisition, distribution and inventory volumes.

These contain information on the clothing inmates needed, as well as the types of food, beverages and

other supplies required to run the institution. Further insights into what the institutionalized population ate (and what might have been a staple diet of the era) is provided by daily or monthly reports on food consumption, and weekly menus issued by the Office of the Dietician.

Bond ledgers—Nineteenth-century ships' captains or owners of vessels arriving in New York had to post a bond acknowledging that no passenger they were transporting would become a charge of the city. Should certain newcomers become the city's responsibility, these men agreed to pay their upkeep for two years.

Warden death certificates—These enable a researcher to find out how someone died, in which institution, the cause of death, and, in

Census records—Daily, monthly or yearly counts of admissions, deaths and discharges were submitted to the supervising agencies, giving researchers a way to look at patterns of overcrowding and how they related to contemporary conditions in the city at large.

Timeline of Agencies/Departments

1736–1785
Overseers of the Poor, House of Correction, Workhouse and Poorhouse

1784–1832
Commissioners of the Almshouse and Bridewell (Prison)

1832–1860
The Almshouse Department

1860–1895
Department of Public Charities and Correction

1895–1920
Department of Public Charities

1920–1938
Department of Public Welfare

1938–1967
Department of Welfare

The research value of these ledgers, speaker Belkin indicated, is actually surpassing expectations. They offer glimpses of the period's medical landscape, social contracts, and lives—both inmates' and ledger-keepers' (through accompanying doodles, poems, and decorations). Research is also enabled by the collection's method of organization. Belkin recalled that the numbers assigned at an earlier time to the ledgers seemed arbitrary and incomplete. So she decided to sort the ledgers in accordance with the sequence of agencies that oversaw the almshouses—seven different ones over the course of 230 years (see table)—in order to provide an evolutionary framework and “finding aid.” Through the lens of these departments and agencies, the collection has become an exquisite tool for researchers, scholars, genealogists, and educators—in fact, for anyone interested in the social,

cultural or medical history of Blackwell's/Welfare Island and New York City during two centuries of incredible change and growth.

All photos courtesy of the NYC Municipal Archives.

The Finding Aid for the volumes can be accessed online at archives.nyc/almshouse or <http://www.nyc.gov/html/records/html/archives/collections.html>, or at the office of the NYC Municipal

Archives, 31 Chambers Street. The complete ledgers are in the process of being uploaded to the New York City image website, <http://nycma.lunaimaging.com/luna/servlet/NYCMA~2~2>, and should be completed in Winter 2017.

This archival work was funded by a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records. The lecture was made possible through the support of the Hudson Companies and the Rivercross Tenants' Corp.

RIHS Calendar

Roosevelt Island Historical Society Lecture Series—FREE @ the New York Public Library Branch, 524 Main St.

Thursday, November 10, 6:30 pm

Madison Square—The Vibrant History of a Unique City Center In an 1880s engraving, the triangular plot of land formed by the crossing of Broadway and Fifth Avenue at 23rd Street is declared "The Center of the United States." Designer and author Miriam Berman will explore Madison Square Park and its environs, discussing its architectural treasures and the numerous personalities who contributed to its dynamic reinvention throughout the decades.

Thursday, December 8, 6:30 pm

Green-Wood After 178 Years: Past, Present and Future Jeff Richman, Green-Wood Cemetery's historian, will entertain us with stories of this National Historic Landmark and final resting place of 570,000 residents. He will talk about what is old, what is new and what of the future—in trees, sculpture, buildings and more.

Thanks to Nicole Nelson and her Staff at our branch library. Special thanks to the Hudson Companies-Riverwalk Point and Rivercross Tenants' Corp. for sponsoring this lecture series.

Historical Tour Series—FREE

Tuesday, November 29, 10:00–11:00 am

First Tour—The Chapel of the Good Shepherd Discover the chapel's history, lore and folklore. Presented by the Roosevelt Island Historical Society and led by its president, Judith Berdy. Availability is limited, so reserve your spot on the tour now: at the Senior Center (546 Main St.) office, or by phone, 212-980-1888. Watch for future tours.

This is a program of the Carter Burden Center for the Aging (Roosevelt Island Senior Center), partially funded by the NYC Department for the Aging.

Upcoming Events:

Wednesday, December 7, 11:00 am

New-York Historical Society Exhibit "The First Jewish Americans" Watch for details of this and other current NYHS exhibits.

Special Holiday Shopping Days at the Visitor Center Kiosk Watch for dates.

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