

# Blackwell's Almanac

A Publication of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society



World War I recruiting poster. By war's end, some 21,000 nurses had served overseas. Photo credit: American Red Cross and Library of Congress.

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## **Metropolitan Hospital Goes to “The Great War”**

### **Based on a presentation by Judith Berdy**

For more than 2 1/2 years, President Woodrow Wilson kept us out of the bloody conflict raging in Europe. But neutrality was becoming more and more difficult to sustain, and when we finally entered the war on April 6, 1917, the American Red Cross was already busy ensuring our medical preparedness.

This was the context of the recent library lecture sponsored by the Roosevelt Island Historical Society; it was delivered by the Society’s president, Judith Berdy, on the very date that marked the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of America’s entry into World War I.

From all over the country, doctors and nurses were recruited to serve as part of the American Expeditionary Forces overseas. In order to leave sufficient staff at stateside hospitals, only a small cadre could be taken from each one. So it was not uncommon for recruits in turn to tap alumni, friends and prior colleagues to complement their ranks. In the end, New York City proved its clinical leadership: according to Berdy, eight separate medical facilities formed stationary, behind-the-lines hospitals in France, called Base Hospitals. The organizing facilities included Bellevue, Presbyterian, Mount Sinai, Post Graduate (now NYU), New York Hospital, Roosevelt, Kings County and, of course, Welfare Island’s very own Metropolitan Hospital, then affiliated with New York Medical College and Flower Fifth Avenue Hospital.

Once war was officially declared, the logistics involved in training and transporting troops and medical personnel abroad were overwhelming. The initial goal was to supply some one million soldiers to be served by tens of thousands of doctors and nurses. Metropolitan Hospital organized its Base Hospital No. 48 at its premises in the Octagon in November 1917. However, the physician unit wasn’t actually mobilized until March 1918, when it proceeded to General Hospital No. 2 at Fort McHenry, Baltimore, for training and equipment. The 36 medical



*“Boarding the S.S. Aquitania” by Bob Riggs.\* B.H. 48 men sailed to Liverpool in the north of England, then traveled by slow train to Southampton, by boat across the English Channel to Le Havre, followed by another endless train ride to Nievre and Mars-sur-Allier.*

### *Blackwell’s Almanac*

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officers and 201 enlisted men finally sailed on the S.S. Aquitania on July 4, arriving at the site of their Base Hospital in Mars-sur-Allier, Nièvre, France on July 25. The nurse corps for B.H. 48, sailing on the S.S. Olympic, arrived about two weeks later on August 8.

They were the second medical group to arrive at the hospital complex, but would soon be joined by many, many more base hospital organizations from all over the U.S. Berdy pointed out that the complex was originally designed for a population of 40,000 and a convalescent camp of 5,000, covering 33 acres with 700 buildings. The reality, however, was that, when the Metropolitan medical unit arrived, it was still under construction, with a capacity of just 1,240 beds and acres of lumber and construction materials strewn about. (It would still be only half-completed when the Armistice was signed on November 11, 1918). The facility's major elements were a receiving ward, treatment area, surgical theater, convalescent camp, evacuation camp, barracks and kitchen/mess/canteen. While at the time no plumbing

existed in the nearby village, the American Corps of Engineers built a cutting edge system that brought and purified water from the Allier River to the hospital.

**Life at Mars-sur-Allier\***  
**“Getting the hospital ready for the expected influx of wounded...wards set up with full equipment...operating room made ready...rolling miles of bandages...sleeping on cots under the big marquee tent...the omnipresent French fleas with a bite you still remember...the diarrhea epidemic...the No. 48 mess... [featuring] slum [a stew of undefined ingredients], monkey meat [tinned beef], and goldfish [canned salmon]...ghastly reports of casualties in the fields... hospitals jammed with wounded American boys [as well as occasional French and Germans]...ten No. 48 surgeons summoned to the Front [leaving us even more shorthanded]...sometimes 50 badly wounded men being cared for by a single nurse.”**

**Action**

The first convoy of patients arrived on August 2, just a week after the B.H. 48 medics and well before the nurses. They arrived in the village on special hospital trains built in England specifically for the U.S. Army. There were 19 trains consisting of a total of 304 cars, each with three tiers of cots on either side. Convoys numbered 300 patients or more, some traveling from field hospitals as far as 50 miles away. And on this “inaugural” day for B.H. 48, there arrived three convoys in less than 24 hours.

At the Mars-sur-Allier train station, the sick and wounded were transferred to stretchers and carried by foot over a long route of usually muddy terrain to the medical site. “It turns out,”

the lecturer said, “that the summer of 1918 was one of the rainiest in history.” The wooden buildings were sodden and damp and the surrounding grounds

were swamp-like, adding significantly to the already difficult situation. In a major departure from



Officers of Base Hospital. 48.\*

normal protocol, nurses were allowed to wear pants because of the awful conditions.

### Incoming Wounded\*

“...everybody out to carry stretchers...the first awful sight of the interior of a hospital train...the sickening stench of blood, gangrene and foul air...the tender but inept handling of the wounded...the moans and curses of the very bad cases...the journey from the train through the rain and mud, stumbling over the bad roads...the traffic jam of stretchers in the Receiving Ward...assignment to the various wards according to the nature of the wounds—gas cases, head wounds, fractures, walking cases... many desperate and in need of immediate operations.”

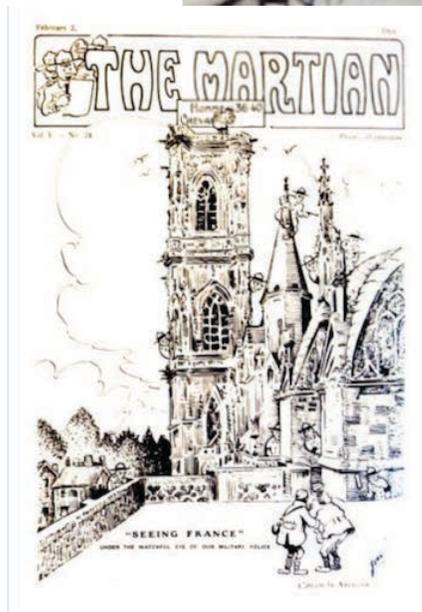
Generally, new arrivals were filthy, their clothes muddied rags, and their hair and skin crawling with lice. Those who didn't immediately require surgery were scrubbed clean despite limited quantities of hot water and, when possible, deloused. Twenty thousand patients were outfitted by the hospital complex with new breeches, blouses, shirts, overseas caps, leggings, shoes, underwear, overcoats, and slickers.

### Off Hours

No matter how serious or grim the task at hand, the human spirit generally prevails. And the situation at B.H. 48 was no exception. Staff read, wrote letters and poetry, socialized, sang, drew cartoons, played football, attended and played in theatrical performances and celebrated their free time with food, drink and hi-jinx in the neighboring towns.

The Paris edition of *The New York Herald* and the military's *Stars*

and *Stripes* were always welcome arrivals. What's more the hospital complex started its own camp newspaper called *The Martian*, boasting a weekly circulation of 5,000 and dominated by the men of No. 48. It featured excellent reporting, sophisticated poems and an abundance of timely cartoons, notably by Alfred Ablitzer. Ablitzer had actually joined the army as a private. He was first yanked from drill to teach wounded soldiers how to draw, and subsequently withdrawn from active duty to run *The Martian*. A very sophisticated illustrative chronicle was provided by Bob Riggs, who went on to achieve some celebrity in the art world after he returned to civilian life.

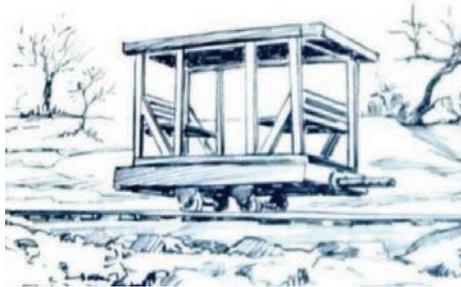


(Top) B.H. 48's Ward 20. (Bottom) Cover of the camp newspaper *The Martian*.\*

On free evenings, staff members took walks or donkey carts to Moiry, St. Parize, St. Pierre and other picturesque villages nearby. They blew off steam drinking cognac and singing bawdy songs in a local café/bar, or got their first taste of French cuisine and wine culture in some friendly farmhouse that welcomed the extra income.

“Agony quartets” in every part of the

barracks wailed their entire repertoire nightly: favorites were “Sweet Adeline,” “Mademoiselle from Armentiers” with dozens of original verses, mostly unprintable, “How Ya Gonna Keep’em Down on the Farm After They’ve Seen Patee,” and “I Don’t Want to Get Well, I’m in Love with a Beautiful Nurse.”



*The trysting car, drawn by Lieut. Howard McCall, a patient in Ward No. 10.\**

1,862 medical; 85 of them didn’t survive. (The number of casualties passing through the entire Mars complex reached almost 38,000.) A significant number of fatalities were due, not to combat wounds, but to the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic. Both soldiers and staff succumbed. Victims

burned up with very high fevers and were so weak, they could barely move. Nothing much could be done for them. The hopeless cases were relegated to remote cubicles toward the back of the ward. Each day, those whose condition was deteriorating were moved, bed by bed, closer to the cubicles.

After many rumors, news of the real Armistice finally came through at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. The reaction was an emotional orgy. In the villages, hospital staff locked arms with the French, paraded down the main street, sounded bugles, banged on drums and tin pans, pushed into already overcrowded cafés, and partied themselves ragged. Huge bonfires crackled. Eye witnesses even reported dancing and drinking on top of the hospital trains.

Following a post-cessation surge of backlogged patients, cases began to dwindle. On January 14, 1919, Evacuation Hospital No. 37 took over No. 48’s duties, and the latter was moved to the town of Clisson for a two month rest while waiting to be shipped home. Given that there were over two million U.S. soldiers in France by then, the wait promised to be a long one. As “therapy,” the general staff decided to reward the idle medics with a week’s vacation, courtesy of Uncle Sam. Some 15 or 20 individuals were chosen each week to go to Grenoble, Aix, Nice, Cannes, etc. Many who had never set foot outside their hometowns before the war now had the opportunity to take in great art, cathedrals, spas and famous resorts.

Finally, on April 13, the B.H. 48 doctors boarded the S.S. Freedom at St. Nazaire for their return passage. Reaching New York on

### In the OR\*

“...a long brick building...two tables working constantly those first few days... a rib resection in progress under an umbrella... [another casualty] with a jagged thigh wound caused by high explosives...the fumes of ether...the terrible glare of the big white light...the pains taken at sterilization... Vaseline, gauze, tongue clips...as ether begins to take...man groans, starts to struggle, throws his arms about...painting the wound with iodine...the swift, sure cut of the knife...blood...the hemostat...then more hemostats...probing for the piece of shrapnel...finally finding a jagged piece of steel covered with a piece of cloth from the man’s uniform...tying up blood vessels... cutting away all affected tissue...red rubber tubes for drainage...filling the wound, now a big open cavity, with gauze soaked with Dakin Solution [chlorinated lime, sodium carbonate, boric acid, water]...vast lengths of bandage.”

Indeed love, or at least romance, blossomed where it could. Nurses were democratic in their affections, sometimes socializing with officers, but just as often with buck privates. The stone quarry on moonlit nights, the haystack and the trysting car were the prime objective of almost every couple out for an evening stroll.

### War’s End

By the end of the war, 4,822 cases had passed through B.H. 48—2,960 surgical and



*The nurses of Base Hospital 48.\**

April 28, they were all demobilized by May 10. The original unit of nurses followed a slightly different path: after leaving Mars, they were scattered all over France to occupy temporary posts in underserved zones. Ultimately, of course, they too took various vessels and routes home when their duties were completed.

Speaker Berdy summed up the heroic activities of the medical corps as “the second

### **Night Out in a Moiry Farmhouse\***

“Three of us left camp at 7:30 well supplied with Army bread and American sugar. The ladies made their appearance at 8 pm, after a hazardous hike through the rough, muddy lane across the fields, and evasion of the ever-present M.P.’s... Here is the menu, prepared in its entirety in an enormous fireplace:

**Soup**  
**Steak smothered with mushrooms**  
**Lettuce salad**  
**Mashed potatoes with sauce**  
**Roast chicken**  
**Creamed peas**  
**Vin rouge**  
**Coffee, milk**  
**Cream cheese**  
**Fruit**

**Arrived back at camp at 10 pm.”**

### **Before Boarding the S.S. Freedom\***

“We were put through the delouser...Each of us hung all his clothes on a rack built on wheels, which was rolled into a heating chamber... [so the clothes could] ‘cook’ until any itinerant cooties were dead, dead, dead...To make doubly sure, each of us, in his birthday suit, had to pass a guard, who, with a large whitewash brush, plastered us back and front, top and bottom, with some strong disinfectant...We then went under showers...[before again] donning our wrinkled, [sanitized garments].”

battlefield.” Like the war itself, the battle to salve wounds and save lives was fought with relentless fury—but then just as suddenly came to an end. By mid-1919, Metropolitan Hospital’s B.H. 48 ceased to exist—living on only in the memories of those who worked or recovered there.

Sources:

\*Quotes, graphics and supplemental information from: “The History of U.S. Base Hospital 48,” <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~gregkrenzelo/basehospno48aefww1.html>

Also:

Metropolitan Hospital Medical Library; The Informal and Mostly Pictorial History of Base Hospital 48; Spencer Museum of Art; Stripper’s Guide, a blog discussing the history of the American newspaper comic strip; American Homeopathy in the World War, by Frederick M. Dearborn, A.B., M.D.; Forty-Eight: A History of U.S. Army Base Hospital No. 48—Our Nurses; Roosevelt Island Historical Society Archives.

## Metropolitan Doctor

*On a Friday in 1942, at precisely 3:30 pm, Gloria Ogur decided to pursue a career in medicine. Born in 1924, the daughter of Russian-Jewish immigrants, the younger Ms. Ogur could not possibly have predicted this direction for herself. At the time, there was deep prejudice against women in medicine; quotas limiting the admission of Jews to medical school were severe; her family had a very modest income; and her academic interests seemed to lie in the humanities. But life takes unexpected turns. In September 1944, she entered the Women's Medical College in Philadelphia, and in the spring of 1948 was accepted into the intern program of Welfare Island's Metropolitan Hospital.*

*Following is Part I of Dr. Gloria O. (Ogur) Schrager's experiences and observations during her time on our island. It and subsequent installments are excerpted from her autobiography *Medicine, Matzoh Balls, and Motherhood*, published in 2006 and available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and Xlibris websites. (Unattributed photos courtesy of Dr. Schrager.)*

"Metropolitan Hospital, one of New York City's largest, was situated on Welfare Island (now called Roosevelt Island) in the middle of the East River...Only ambulances were permitted; private cars were forbidden on the island. Pedestrians had to use a ferry, a little tugboat contraption that slid sideways across the currents from its dock at the foot of 76<sup>th</sup> street...

"The city had several institutions on the island. City Hospital was situated on the southern end and Metropolitan Hospital was on the northern end [its main facility housed in the Octagon]. Both were acute care hospitals that alternated the days that they admitted patients. Both were terribly overcrowded. In the middle of the island, close to the 59<sup>th</sup> Street (Queensboro) Bridge, was Goldwater Memorial Hospital, a chronic disease hospital. The 'Girls' Camp,' a euphemism for a detention center for

delinquent young women, was situated between Goldwater and Metropolitan. Many had sexually transmitted diseases as well as malnutrition, tuberculosis, and a host of other problems. The interns at either City Hospital or Metropolitan were responsible for treating them when they became acutely ill.

"Early in the morning of the last day in June, 1948, I took the island ferry to Metropolitan to start my internship. The boat was filled with young people making one of the most difficult transitions in their lives, from students to physicians with responsibility for their patients' welfare... [Among them] was Alvin Schrager, whom I was to marry several years later after a stormy courtship...



*The Metropolitan Hospital Campus looking south. The Octagon building is on the right, its familiar dome hidden by the tree. Photo credit: RIHS archives.*

"...we newcomers discovered that Metropolitan consisted of several buildings situated in different areas of the large campus... The dining room at the staff house was a large, airy room with many windows and round tables that seated about

ten people. It was not a cafeteria. We were waited on by a cheerful staff who always checked to see that the white linen tablecloths and napkins were fresh. The staff house was a pleasant building that reminded me of an old-fashioned hotel. It had a huge front porch, many rocking chairs, and was surrounded by a beautiful lawn that stretched down to the river. We all ate there but only the male

doctors lived there. The women were housed in the spare brick nurses' quarters several blocks away...

"There were just two or three women among the intern and resident staff in a house staff that numbered close to a hundred if one counted all the residents and fellows... Unlike the men, we had no phones in our rooms. Pagers were still science fiction in a Dick Tracy comic strip. There was just one phone in the hall. When its clamor woke us at night, we'd pull the covers over our heads and wait with bated breath while the night watchman came slowly clumping down the hall on his artificial leg to knock loudly on the door of the luckless intern called for an emergency. Each night had these multiple interruptions but I can't say they seriously interfered with my slumber. As soon as I knew the call wasn't for me, I'd sigh with relief and drop back to unconsciousness in an instant. When you're chronically sleep-deprived, your body learns to take advantage of every precious moment...

"Metropolitan Hospital was one of New York City's oldest, its wards crowded with the poorest of the poor. It had a certain Dickensian quality about it. In fact, Charles Dickens, visiting America in the 1840's, had seen it and had written about the dreadful conditions—and little had changed since. [He had actually visited the Lunatic Asylum,

Metropolitan's predecessor in the Octagon.] But he had described the broad, graceful spiral staircase that wound up the three flights of the huge central hall in the main building. One had to admire its beauty despite the sordid surroundings.

"The wards all led off this main area, so crowded that beds were in the halls and every other available space. The admitting area was in the dank basement, with exposed, leaking pipes above the patients' beds. New patients couldn't be sent to the wards until someone died or was discharged (the probabilities were about equal). Interns have often complained, rightfully so, about the conditions under which they worked, but I believe that Metropolitan Hospital is in a class by itself.

"The main building housed the medical and surgical adult patients. There were separate buildings for pediatrics and obstetrics, for the laboratories and for tuberculosis (TB) patients. As a rotating intern, my training was in all these areas. Few training programs today offer that kind of first year program. Medical students have to pick their field of specialization before they graduate. I think this unfortunate. The extra year's experience in a variety of fields makes one more sure of one's interests.

"I enjoyed all the services, but my favorite was surgery. I loved the drama of the operating room and my last two years of medical school, assisting as an emergency technician, made me more experienced in the OR than most of the other interns. The surgeons appreciated this and I was offered a much-



coveted residency in surgery. I was delighted and flattered. A young surgeon who had become a good friend took me aside and said, 'Think twice before you accept. Sure, the attending surgeons like you to assist them. But which one of them will offer to take a woman as a partner in his private practice after she graduates from the program? And what chance would you have setting up a surgical practice on your own?'

"I remembered the few women surgeons I had known at Women's Medical College, a place mostly free of sexual bias. I didn't envy their life styles. They seemed to have few interests aside from their work... None of them appeared to be married or have any family life. With great reluctance and hesitation, I finally declined the offer.



"I was also fond of the pediatrics service. In medical school, although we had learned the rudiments of this specialty, our actual contact with young patients had been very limited. I found now that working with children was a great pleasure. I had the same feeling of instant gratification that had attracted me to surgery, but it was of a different nature. You might admit a desperately ill child one day, start the appropriate treatment, and return the next day to find the child laughing and jumping around in the crib. As one of the pediatricians put it,

'Mother Nature is on your side when you treat kids.'"

**TO BE CONTINUED in the next (August) issue of *Blackwell's Almanac*.**

**Doctor Comments on  
"The Laundry: From Modern Miracle to Modern Art"  
*Blackwell's Almanac* Vol. III, No. 1**

As an intern, and then resident, in pediatrics at Metropolitan from 1948-51, I remember beautifully laundered white uniforms and cloth napkins in the staff house, the product, no doubt, of the newly-installed laundry. GOSchrager, MD

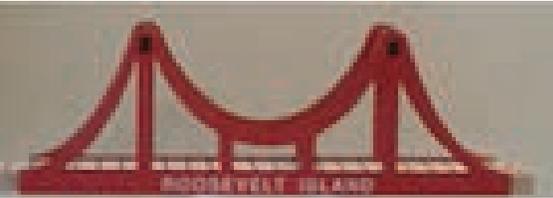


**Through Different Eyes**

This wire sculpture is an example of art on display at The Living Museum, on the Creedmoor Campus in Queens (Winchester Blvd. just south of Union Turnpike). Housed in what used to be the psychiatric facility's kitchen hall, the gothic-looking museum consists of multiple rooms chock-a-block full of past and present patients' work. Although the artwork seems neither curated nor organized, the jumble of eye-catching impressions presents a variant of Outsider Art imbued with the often forceful perspective of mental illness. The museum is open to visitors Monday through Thursday by appointment. Anyone interested in a tour should contact Judy Berdy, [jbird134@aol.com](mailto:jbird134@aol.com).

## New Merchandise at the Visitor Kiosk

Two great new items have already made their way to the kiosk, one for kids and the other a potentially wonderful Mother's Day present.



The Roosevelt Island Red Bridge just arrived from

our favorite American custom manufacturer, Maple Landmark. The bridge has tracks and all your child's favorite trains will be able to ride its rails. (\$28.00) *Cookies for Eleanor* [Roosevelt, of course] is a charming book with delicious recipes for cookies and other desserts to be enjoyed with tea. (\$8.00)

Coming in June is a set of special Roosevelt Island building blocks. In observance of the

Roosevelt Island Historical Society's 40th anniversary, these custom-made wooden blocks represent our six landmark structures plus the tram and our visitor kiosk. Each set of eight will be specially packaged for gift-giving.

Watch for details on how you can purchase a limited edition set.



## RIHS Calendar

### Roosevelt Island Historical Society Lecture and Tour Series—FREE

**Thursday, May 4**

**1930s Triboro Hospital—Photographs and Presentation with Charles Giraudet**

@ the New York Public Library Branch, 524 Main St., 6:30 pm

Constructed at the same time and by the same architect as Goldwater Hospital on Welfare Island, this hospital in Jamaica, Queens, has been extensively documented by photographer Giraudet as plans are being evaluated for its transformation.

**Thursday, June 15**

**Field trip to Cornell's Architecture Art Planning Center in Manhattan**

Thomas J. Campanella, Professor of City Planning at Cornell University and Historian-in-Residence of the New York City Park Departments, discusses "Port of Empire: How Jamaica Bay Nearly Became a Great World Harbor." Group meets at 26 Broadway at 6:30 pm.

Reservations required by e-mail to [rooseveltislandhistory@gmail.com](mailto:rooseveltislandhistory@gmail.com). Further details to come.

### Other Events of Note

**Through October 9**

**World War I Posters at MCNY**

After persuading Americans of the benefits of neutrality, the government abruptly had to undertake the opposite task. Check out "Posters and Patriotism: Selling World War I in New York" at the Museum of the City of New York, open seven days a week, 10:00 am to 6:00 pm.

**Coming Soon**

**Anniversary Event**

A celebration of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society's 40th anniversary. Watch for details.

**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)**