

# Blackwell's Almanac

A Publication of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society



*Pilings in Jamaica Bay are century-old relics of a doomed idea. (See “The Persistence of Delusion: How Jamaica Bay Almost Became a Great World Port,” page 5.) Photo courtesy of Tom Campanella.*

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## Metropolitan Doctor Part 2

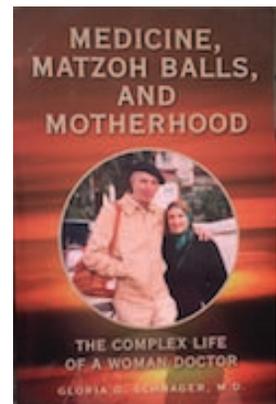
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*In our last issue, we began the story of Dr. Gloria O. Schrager, whose pursuit of a career in medicine was as unlikely a choice as could be imagined. She was born in 1924, the daughter of Russian-Jewish immigrants. At the time, there was deep prejudice 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 2 of Dr. Schrager’s experiences and observations during her time on our island. It is excerpted from her autobiography Medicine, Matzoh Balls, and Motherhood, published in 2006 and available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and Xlibris websites. (Photos courtesy of Dr. Schrager.)*

One of the most hazardous services was on the TB pavilion. Antibiotics for TB, such as streptomycin, had just been discovered and their use was limited. The building was crowded to capacity with patients who had advanced disease. The main treatment consisted of pneumothorax, a procedure in which air is inserted into the chest cavity with a needle to collapse the lung so it would “rest.” If that didn’t work, several ribs would be cut away to expose the lung and the diseased part would be surgically removed. Interns performed the pneumothorax procedure almost daily. We were supervised the first few times but then we were on our own. We also assisted at all surgery and were responsible for the post-operative care. We would have to irrigate (wash out) the open, draining wounds. The lung was clearly visible when we washed away the quantities of...purulent material swarming with live tubercle bacilli.



We fluoroscoped patients daily in a small, windowless, poorly ventilated room. It was no bigger than a walk-in closet, accommodating about six people at the most. This included the several patients to be examined. The rule about wearing face masks was only casually observed by both patients and doctors.

Blackwell’s Almanac

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Fluoroscopy is similar to X-ray except that you do not get a permanent image on film. You see the image on a screen, in real time. It is possible to see the heart beating and how the lung functions with each breath. The screen emits much radiation. With present technology, the radiologist isn't in the room when that kind of imaging is done. There is a monitor outside, and the room is constructed to prevent the escape of radiation. Back then, the dangers of radiation were largely unknown and a group of us would gather in the small fluoroscopy room without any protection.

The senior resident demonstrated the extent of disease... He kept his foot on the pedal of the fluoroscope for long periods of time so that the screen would remain lit while we checked the progress in each patient. We learned a lot about anatomy and TB this way, but were ignorant of the radiation damage that might be happening to our own bodies. In addition to this hazard, the constant exposure to active tuberculosis caused most of us to develop positive TB skin tests. Our own immune systems had to fight the disease. TB prophylaxis did not exist. Some of the interns came down with the active disease.

I also had to ride the ambulance. The year before, a medical technician had made the inexcusable error of pronouncing an ambulance patient dead, only to have him sit up later in the morgue. The scandal made huge headlines and the Mayor decreed that doctors had to go on all ambulance calls. The area covered by Metropolitan stretched from the posh residences on Sutton Place to Harlem tenements. Regulations stated that the ambulance driver and the police were to accompany doctors to all emergencies. I noted they were always prompt to assist on calls to the Sutton Place area, but somewhat slower to make their appearance in Harlem. I often climbed dimly lit, rat-infested, rotting staircases alone, dragging the heavy

emergency medical bag without help. I don't remember any feeling of fear. My white uniform created a sense of invulnerability. And in truth, nothing frightening ever happened. Some of my most pleasant memories were delivering babies under primitive conditions in these tenements, with a happy, grateful family gathered around, pressing me to eat their homemade delicacies.



The ambulance reached the island by an elevator located in one of the pylons of the Queensboro (57<sup>th</sup> [sic] Street) Bridge. The elevator was enclosed in a building at bridge level. The building also had a garage for the ambulances, an on-call dormitory for the interns, and an office with a desk and phone where the ambulance drivers kept a log book of calls. A pot of very strong, very hot coffee sat on one side of the desk and was constantly replenished. It was in great demand to help us get through the long, hectic nights. The interns' dormitory was a small windowless room with

several cots placed close together. When we came back from a call, we would throw ourselves indiscriminately on whatever cot was empty. It was the one area of the hospital where sleeping accommodations were co-ed, but the hospital authorities did not seem concerned. If they thought about it at all, they probably realized that we were all so exhausted, the only thing on our minds was to get as much sleep as possible between calls.

Although sleep-deprived, I remember the excitement and delight of making ambulance calls as the sun rose and the ambulance descended from the heights of the bridge. The city looked so beautiful and clean and golden in the dawn. Wide-awake, despite little sleep, I wished I was an artist or a poet to capture the beauty of the sight.

One day I went on an ambulance call to a Manhattan police station. They had just

captured an escaped prisoner who had killed a policeman. His scalp was bleeding

profusely from a deep wound he had sustained in the struggle leading to his arrest. After I disinfected the area and controlled the bleeding, I filled a syringe with a local anesthetic and prepared to inject it before stitching. One of the policemen growled, "Don't

bother with the anesthetic, doc, he's just an animal."

I replied quietly, "I'm sure he'll get the punishment he deserves. But I always use an anesthetic before sewing up any human being." When I finished, I gently cleansed the blood from his head and his face. During all this time the prisoner, a giant of a man, had sat stoically silent, head bent, manacled to a chair. As I cleansed the blood from his face our eyes met for the first time. We were both expressionless, and yet—

...In general, internship was a constant state of fatigue. But I found this time exciting, marking not only my development as a doctor, but my growth as an adult. At first the

idea of having responsibility for another person's health and well-being was quite daunting. After a while you accept the fact that patients have faith in your ability and it increases your self-confidence. I was still a young woman in my twenties with all the usual insecurities, but I learned to control these emotions and project an air of reassurance for the sake of my patients. I still believe that a doctor's confidence and sympathy are powerful medicine. The constant daily crises certainly did transform us quickly from inexperienced house staff to sophisticated young doctors who had "seen this, done that." This was probably more likely in a large charity hospital than it would have been if I had interned in a small private hospital.

At the end of my internship, after I turned down the offer of a surgical residency, I accepted a residency in pediatrics and stayed at Metropolitan for three more years.

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



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## The Persistence of Delusion: How Jamaica Bay Almost Became a Great World Port

Imagine you are living in New York in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Statistics of the period reveal that between 1875 and 1905, goods passing through the Port of New York have doubled to 19 million tons. New York State is upgrading the Erie Canal so that it will link the port to Lake Ontario and Lake Erie, Cleveland and Detroit, thus reaching into the agricultural heartland of the country. What's more, America is now involved in constructing the Panama Canal. It is an era of unprecedented global trade and port cities are preparing themselves for the coming influx. By the eve of World War I, New York is the busiest port in America.

This was the picture painted by Thomas J. Campanella, Cornell professor and Historian-in-Residence of the New York City Parks Department, during his recent presentation to the Roosevelt Island Historical Society. Held in lower Manhattan at the New York City studio of Cornell's College of Art, Architecture and Planning, the presentation appropriately afforded audience members a bird's-eye view of New York Harbor. "But," said the speaker, 100-odd years ago, all was not well. "Everyone complained of the deplorable condition of New York's aging port infrastructure and its inability to keep up with steadily increasing traffic."

Critics decried port operations as costly, corrupt and crime-ridden. They were also profoundly inefficient. Many choke-points impeded the flow of traffic. For example, trains carrying goods from Queens and Long Island had to be loaded onto floats to meet the rails in Bayonne and Hoboken, and ditto for shipments coming the other way. Also, as the contemporaneous writer George Walsh

pointed out, "The Island of Manhattan is too full."

It was clear that some great new receiving location was needed, especially given the expected surge in trade that would come once the Panama Canal was finished. The response was a proposal, first made in 1907, for a large-scale industrial seaport in Jamaica Bay.



Map credit: Wikipedia

### The Biggest of All

Campanella described the originators' vision: The project would turn the 45 square miles of Jamaica Bay into the biggest seaport in the world, large enough to absorb the ports of Liverpool, Antwerp, Hamburg and Rotterdam and still have room to spare; its huge piers would be able to accommodate 50 ocean-going vessels at one time; it would contain warehouses and factories, and yet part would remain in a semi-natural state as a great park with interlacing marshes; it would double New York City's industrial waterfront.

The project was actually seen as the terminal of the New York State Barge Canal, and indeed, it would have its own canals. One would be the Gravesend-Sheepshead Canal to protect ships coming down the Hudson into Jamaica Bay. Another, tracing the current path of the Van Wyck Expressway, would lead to Flushing Bay and Long Island Sound, providing transport to and from New England.



*Time and tide have turned structural supports into sculpture. Photo credit: Tom Campanella.*

New Yorkers were agog with excitement. Many powerful people lent their support. In addition, every civic and commercial association in Brooklyn was an advocate.

In truth, according to speaker Campanella, the idea was totally impractical and ecologically reckless—a delusion fueled by collective enthusiasm and ignorance or willful denial of reality. To be kind, the concept probably didn't seem as unworkable as it should have for several reasons. First, on maps, the Bay looks like a perfect harbor—enclosed, dotted with coves, protected from

thunderous ocean waves. In addition, industry was not exactly new to the locale. The Bay's isolation made it well suited to noisy and smelly operations such as "night soil," garbage, and processing of dead animals into fertilizer (recalled in the name Dead Horse Bay). Barren Island (now Floyd Bennett Field) was also the site of recycling and fish processing plants.

### **Too Many Obstacles**

Nevertheless, the undertaking was as wrongheaded as it could be.

- The Bay, formed as a delta by glacial moraine, is shallow, sandy and full of shoals—almost impossible to navigate except by watercraft with minimal draft. So, despite public enthusiasm, the plan languished for many, many years. Then civic leaders Edward M. Grout and Charles B. Law secured federal help to dredge the main channel and, with the dredging of Mill Basin in June 1921, the long-awaited project was finally under way. They soon found, though, that it was an uphill battle; coastal tides kept bringing the sand back. To keep the channel open would have required continuous dredging 24/7, 365 days a year.
- The Jamaica Bay port project, like the Port of New York, would still have required rail connection and thus massive expenditure on new rail construction. An alternative solution proposed a freight terminal transfer point where a fleet of trucks would take on rail goods in container-like receptacles for delivery to far-flung stores. The idea anticipated containerized shipping, but never saw the light of day.
- The proposed canal across Queens would have necessitated the construction of locks because of the difference in high tides.
- In general, Jamaica Bay was remote and inaccessible to much of the city, and the scheme threatened to destroy its rich colonies of marine life.

Perhaps most damning of all was the competition elsewhere. In the spirit of the

Panama Canal, various harbors were being proposed on the Hudson River—both upriver and down. Ultimately the proposals were realized downriver in New Jersey, a location with obvious advantages. It was a mainland perch with access to existing railroads and the heartland. And it was a lot closer to the vibrant markets of Manhattan than Jamaica Bay.

In April 1931, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey formally assumed management of the states' shared waters as a single entity. Yet that still didn't stop the Jamaica Bay boosters. Their flickering hopes continued on for years. When the Marine Bay Bridge was built in 1936, it was designed with a huge central lift span. Why? Because it was still widely believed that Jamaica Bay would eventually become an industrial seaport, and huge ocean-going vessels would have to pass beneath it.

Ironically, it was the man who built the bridge—Robert Moses—who put an end to the persistent pipe dream. He argued that the Bay should remain largely natural and never be given to industry. He halted a mammoth scheme to turn the Gerritsen estuary into a vast, paved playground, arguing that it should remain a wetland. It is for that reason that the adjacent neighborhood of Marine Park was spared flooding during Hurricane Sandy in 2012. Today there are still some piers and heavy industry in the area, legacies of the great port project. But the delusion of a grand harbor in Jamaica Bay was finally put to rest.

*Thomas J. Campanella is the author of the forthcoming book Brooklyn: A Secret History, to be released by Princeton University Press in 2018. His talk was drawn from one of its chapters, "Port of Empire."*



**You Are Invited to a Reception Celebrating  
"Treasures from Our Collection"**

**The Roosevelt Island Historical Society invites you to view a selection of photographs, artifacts, plans, images, and other objects collected over the years, reflecting our island's unique story.**

**The exhibit, currently open, continues through August 15, 2017. Admission and reception are FREE.**

**Octagon Gallery, 888 Main Street  
Thursday, August 3, 2017, 6:00–9:00 pm.**

## R.I. Inspires the Visual Arts: Currier and Ives/Fanny Palmer

*With this issue we begin a new department covering the intersection of our island and the visual arts. Over the course of its history as Blackwell's Island, Welfare Island, and then Roosevelt Island, our humble home and its immediate surroundings have been the subject of numerous paintings, prints, sketches and photographs. Periodically we will feature one or several such works with notes about their creator and creation.*

In the very first issue of *Blackwell's Almanac*, page one showed an image of the Currier and Ives' print titled *Blackwell's Island, East River*. It's a view southward from 86<sup>th</sup> Street, along the west channel of the river, with a view of the island and the Lunatic Asylum on the left. It dates to 1862.

Nathaniel Currier and James Merritt Ives ran their very successful New York City-based printmaking firm from 1834 to 1907. They chose or commissioned fine paintings and reproduced them as black and white lithographs, which were then hand-colored. The ease and economy of printing lithographs meant that these images could be purchased inexpensively; they were advertised as "colored engravings for the people."

The original *Blackwell's Island, East River* painting was by English artist Fanny Palmer (née Frances Bond).

Raised in affluence, Palmer attended a select private school in London where she studied music, literature and the fine arts. When decades later her husband suffered financial reverses, Fanny turned to her artistic training to earn a living. She taught drawing in her home and, starting in 1842, operated a lithography business with her husband in which she was the artist and he the printer. Their work received high praise, Nevertheless, when it proved unable



Photo credit: New York Public Library Digital Collections.

to provide sufficient income, the couple emigrated to the U.S. around 1844 in the hopes of greater opportunity.

Settling in Brooklyn, they scrambled for whatever business they could find. They created advertisements for local enterprises, authored work for existing printmakers and again launched their own printing firm. Again they were unsuccessful, but this time their darkening cloud was endowed with a silver lining. One Nathaniel Currier bought out their stock, and recognizing Fanny's talents, he hired her to work for his firm.

During her association with the two printmakers, between 1849 and 1868,

Palmer is credited with creating over 200 lithographs (mostly landscapes). By now her talent and contribution encompassed not just painting, but the technical aspects of lithography

as well. Testament to the quality and longevity of *Blackwell's Island, East River*: An 11" x 15 1/2" print is currently offered on the website *The Old Print Shop* ([oldprintshop.com](http://oldprintshop.com)) for the considerable sum of \$2,750.

## **RIHS Calendar**

**Treasures from the Roosevelt Island Historical Society Collection:  
FREE Exhibit and Reception**

**Thursday, August 3, 6:00 to 9:00 pm**

At the Octagon Gallery, 888 Main St.

Exhibition, currently open, will continue until August 15, 2017

**Fall Library Lecture Series—FREE**

**Dates to be Announced**

New York Public Library, RI Branch, 524 Main Street, 6:30 pm

### **“Blissville: An Investigation”**

Media arts professor Hank Linhart’s hour-long film explores the tiny (80 houses), overlooked Queens neighborhood known as Blissville. Located along Newtown Creek, south of the Long Island Expressway and West of Calvary Cemetery, it boasts, among other things, the largest fortune cookie factory in the world and is the most interesting place you never heard of.

### **Other Lectures in the Series**

**“Art Deco”** with noted New York art deco authority Tony Robins

**Talk** presented by architect and associate professor at the New York Institute of Technology School of Architecture Matt Altwicker