

Blackwell's Almanac

A Publication of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society



Colonial-era artifacts unearthed from an archeological dig near South Street Seaport (see "Is it Trash or Treasure?" p. 2). Photos courtesy of Joan H. Geismar.

To be added to the *Blackwell's Almanac* mailing list, email request to: rooseveltislandhistory@gmail.com

RIHS needs your support. Become a member—visit rihs.us/?page_id=4

Contents

- p. 2 Is It Trash or Treasure?
- p. 5 A Family's Life on RI—
130 Years Ago, Part 4
- p. 8 RI in the Movies: Two
for the Pen, by Stephen
Blank
- p. 9 Goldwater WPA Murals
on Exhibit
- p. 9 Become a Member and
Support RIHS
- p. 10 RIHS Calendar

Blackwell's Almanac

Published quarterly in
February, May, August and
November, Back issues may
be viewed at rihs.us Click on
Blackwell's Almanac at left.

Publisher:
Judith Berdy

Editor:
Bobbie Slonevsky

© 2016, Roosevelt Island
Historical Society

Is It Trash or Treasure?

Two or three hundred years from now, our descendants will have little difficulty discerning how we lived in the early 21st century. Our current civilization is awash in print and digital documents, recorded verbiage, and still and moving images. But what about past cultures—18th-century New York, let's say, for which surviving documents are sparse by comparison and records of everyday activities somewhat sketchy?

Well, believe it or not, abundant "communications" from that era do exist...in the form of trash and detritus.

"Garbage is an archeologist's best friend," declared urban archeologist and consultant Joan Geismar, PhD, at the first of this year's Roosevelt Island Historical Society lectures. And she proceeded to prove it by describing and interpreting her dig team's finds in a square block near South Street Seaport.

Unlike Rome or Mexico City, New York does not require that every construction site first be excavated for historical artifacts. However, if a developer wants an exemption from specific building codes—to make his building higher or wider than normal, for example—the trade-off is often a brief period of archeological exploration. That's what happened in October 1981, when a typical glass and steel skyscraper was planned for 175 Water Street in the block bordered by Water and Front Streets, Maiden Lane and Fletcher Street. The most interesting thing about this area, which was first developed by the Dutch and then the English, was that the shoreline had been expanded east to provide more real estate. And the landfill was composed entirely of trash!

Speaking to a standing-room-only audience at the Library, Dr. Geismar explained that, as shown on the map (see p. 3), there were three separate phases of land expansion. From Water Street to Front Street was the second phase, so that when the city sold water lots there in 1737, her dig site was waterfront property. Moreover, immediately prior to the dig, the site had been an asphalt-covered parking lot, "an archeologist's second best friend," according to the lecturer, since "it seals history."

The original owners of the excavated plots were fairly upscale English colonials. Among them were a former New York mayor, Abraham DePeyster, and a string of well-to-do merchants, including a woman, Elizabeth Schuyler. (This

was rather unusual for the time; while the Dutch had allowed women to hold land, the British extended this privilege to only widows and spinsters.)

To test the depth and composition of the landfill, a backhoe bucket of earth was taken every foot in selected places. Then seven five-gallon buckets of this sample were screened for artifacts. Each find was recorded either by photography or drawing. A major area of archeological focus is always, and was, the bottom of backyard water cisterns and privies. Privy pits, in particular, were primary dumping grounds for trash because residents assumed that ultimately the trash would be removed. The pits were cleaned out periodically by “night scavengers” (the equivalent of our septic tank cleaners) and, once no longer in use, they were supposed to be emptied and filled with clean sand. In truth, Geismar said, usually only three or four feet of waste material was removed and then replaced with sand, thus conserving a rich lode of debris underneath the sandy layer. The harbor, too, she stressed, was a convenient depository for garbage.

Among the historic artifacts and features uncovered by Geismar’s team were:

- A row of three backyard privies, suggesting that the residential structure might have been slave-trafficking quarters or a boarding house
- Chamber pot fragments, some quite fancy and probably imports from England or Germany
- A sump that collected excess water, always a problem for lots located on landfill



Mended chamber pots from privy pit. Photo courtesy of Joan H. Geismar.



1865 map of Lower Manhattan shows original contours (white) and landfill expansion (beige). On the east, Pearl St. originally bordered the river in some places. Three successive phases of land reclamation first added the block between Pearl and Water Streets, then expanded to Front St., and finally to South St. The red dot marks the plot excavated by Dr. Geismar’s team. Map detail from: Viele, Egbert, *Sanitary & Topographical Map of the City and Island of New York Prepared for the Council of Hygiene and Public Health of the Citizens Association*. New York, Ferd. Mayer & Co. Lithographers, 96 Fulton St. N.Y.

- Spread-footers, that is, horizontal timbers that spread the weight of the building to prevent its sinking into the wet environment
- Many ceramic fragments from the backyard privy of a China and Glass “Store” (actually a warehouse) on the east side of the block. They were painstakingly pieced together by the dig team to form plates, pitchers, cups, saucers, and other tableware (see p. 1)
- Many glassware fragments from the same “store” (also restored to their original functional form) and one beautifully intact wine glass (see p. 1); Geismar theorized that a shipment arrived

- from England mostly broken and was discarded in its entirety
- Shoe leather, suggesting there were a tannery and shoemakers nearby
- Many bottles, including an olive oil bottle from France, confirming trade activity between New York and France
- Wig curlers and cuff links
- A kosher seal, indicating the existence of a Jewish community
- Glass seals from wine and olive oil bottles and “proof vials,” which were inserted into a wine barrel’s bung hole to test the strength of the developing wine
- Most surprising from a 21st-century perspective



Mended pearlware fruit bowl. Photo courtesy of Joan H. Geismar.

was the discovery at the edge of and under Front Street of horizontal timbers with gun ports. It was a ship, but one

employed for a purpose few modern individuals would guess. It served as a barrier, or cribbing, to keep river water from infiltrating the fill. “It was a derelict ship, past its usefulness and probably about to be scuttled,” Geismar explained. “It was weighed down and sunk with Dutch bricks.”

Because of the presence of shipworms (slithery mollusks that burrow into wood) in the ship’s protective tar-and-horse-hair sheathing, a colleague first hypothesized that the ship had come from the Caribbean. He later revised his thinking: the craft has now been tentatively identified as the early 18th-

century Princess Carolina originating in the Chesapeake—its infestation possibly “caught” from other ships.

The lecturer estimated that over a million artifacts were found in the four and a half months the archeologists worked on the site (which now features a modern office building among whose tenants is AIG). While these finds were nothing more than discards and debris, they provide priceless insight into how past New Yorkers lived and handled the issues of daily life. They could certainly be thought of as stratified treasure—the upper layers of excavation reflecting later events, such as a nearby fire in 1835 that deposited a stratum of ash

throughout; the lower layers offering clues to earlier developments and possible evidence of warehouses or “stores” that occupied parts of the block following land reclamation.

At the end of the lecture, Dr. Geismar revealed that she actually had a prior connection with Roosevelt Island. When Manhattan Park was being planned, she researched and reported on the archeological potential of the site and, she admitted, would have loved to carry out an archeological investigation of the island. Think of it: our very own long-ago trash converted to historical treasure. Wouldn’t that be great!

This series of RIHS lectures is sponsored by Amalgamated Bank. Except for the ship, the artifacts mentioned are now housed in the New York State Museum in Albany. (Although they may not be on display, visitors can request to see them.) The ship is now part of the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island.

A Family's Life on RI— 130 Years Ago Part 4

Finally we come to the concluding Part 4 of the saga of the Robert Emmett Cleary family. As Chief Commissary Officer of Blackwell's Island, serving the City's Department of Charities and Corrections, he, his wife and eight children (briefly nine children, until Baby Emmett died) lived on what is now Roosevelt Island from 1884 until 1892. The narrative is excerpted from a family history researched and written by Cleary's granddaughter, Catherine Cleary Roberts, and made available to Blackwell's Almanac by her son, David L. Roberts. The quoted portion is the reportage of Aunt Jo (Cleary's fifth child).

© 2001, David L. Roberts. All rights reserved.

While the Cleary children always had pets, dog and cats of mixed parentage, their real love was for Billie, [the seventh child] Bernard's goat. He wanted one for his birthday, so he and Charlie, the handyman, went to the city to get one. They brought home a tiny white kid, so young that he had to be fed from a bottle. As he grew he learned to follow them around, butting them playfully from time to time. They were all impatiently waiting for the time when he could be hitched to the smart little wagon that was part of the birthday gift. Unfortunately Billie never reached that stage. He died from having eaten two large sponges a maid had left outside in a slop pail, then [having] drunk about a gallon of water. Billie was buried under the large elm tree at the foot of the lawn and his name was carved on the bark of the tree.

Our Christmases

"The Sunday after Thanksgiving was the day on which we wrote our letter to Santa Claus to tell him what we wanted him to bring us Christmas morning.

"Mother sat at the dining room table with pen, ink and paper before her. We all sat around waiting our turn. Usually as a preliminary warning she would tell us whether Santa Claus had been

prosperous, or, as sometimes happened, our requests would have to be limited because of conditions that year. We all understood she would start the letter thus:

Dear Santa Claus,

As Christmas will soon be here, we thought it best to let you know what we would like you to bring us.

Frank wants _____

Aggie wants _____

Willie wants _____

Rob wants _____

Jo wants _____

Marie wants _____

Bernard wants _____

Rosebud wants _____

Baby Emmett wants _____

"After a proper closing, the letter was solemnly closed and placed before the clock on the parlor mantelpiece. Of course, when we flew in to look the next morning, it was gone, which meant that it was safe in Santa's hands. Now we had only to be good boys and girls till Christmas. If we were not, there were plenty of Santa's Helpers to report to him.

...“We went to bed extra early Christmas Eve, sometimes even at six, in the notion that we could bring Christmas dawn more quickly! Just that night, [the youngest] six of us all [slept] in one room ready for any pranks or tricks we could conceive. Then for hours we fooled and played tricks on one another till from sheer exhaustion we finally quieted down. Rob conceived the idea of putting his night drawers on over most of his clothing, thus accelerating his dressing when he woke in the morning. We thought it a good idea and followed his example.

“Long before daybreak, sometimes even at three in the morning, [Rob] aroused us all by ‘Hey! Wake up, it’s Christmas morning.’ We’d struggle to wake and begin frantically to dress while he stole softly out of the nursery door to scout. By the time he got back, Father was at the nursery door, still clad in his slippers, flannelette pajamas and robe and a broad grin. ‘Merry Christmas, everyone.’ That was the signal for a mad rush to view our presents. No one had any trouble finding his or her presents, for each was neatly laid out on a chair and proclaiming its ownership. I never remember not getting anything I had wished for.



“Only once I thought I had caught Santa napping. After inspecting our own gifts, we compared all the others. On this occasion as I was looking over Rob’s gifts, I said ‘O Rob. Santa forgot your War Sword!’ ‘My War Sword!’ he

exclaimed. ‘O you mean this!’ showing me a copy of a new book entitled ‘Thadeus of Warsaw!’”

The Blizzard of 1888

A few weeks before [the oldest child] Frank’s 17th birthday, on a raw March day, a larger than usual load of supplies had arrived. A biting wind had made the outdoor work more uncomfortable than usual, so, since the packing cases and crates and small cases had been moved indoors, it was decided that the barrels containing flour, sugar, molasses, kerosene, beans, cornmeal and pickled meat could wait until the next day. There were over 100 barrels, awkward things at best to manhandle, that would take no harm from the light snow which was beginning to fall.

By the time Robert Emmett [now ten years old] and Frank reached home, nearly a mile from the dock, the wind had risen to gale force and snow was being driven almost horizontally. The alarm bell could be heard above the wind, calling them back. Fighting the wind and the blinding snow, they rode back. By the time they got there, quite a number of the barrels had been blown into the river and others were rolling around crazily. The Blizzard of ‘88 had struck New York City and its full force was driving across the island.

So strong was the wind that the working crews had to hold hands in a human chain to get across open areas. Visibility was practically nil. Before they were half way through the work, the alarm bell rang again, this time signaling that a prisoner had escaped. A squad was [sent] off to search for him. [The search] was about as thorough as it could be under the circumstances.

It was obvious that no man could survive the freezing, raging river alive

with ice floes, which was [the prisoner's] only avenue of escape. Several days later, his frozen body was found in an icehouse, where apparently he had hidden.

Aunt Jo remembers that the next day "the snow was piled in great drifts, preventing deliveries by wagon... Father and Frank and his clerks, mounted on horseback and wrapped to protect ears and face from the bitter winds, traveled with large clothes baskets from bake house to the two Almshouses and the Hospital to deliver the freshly baked bread. We watched breathlessly for them to stop back for hot toddies and steaming mugs of coffee mother had ready to warm them up and sustain them during their heroic fight with the elements."

Williamanna [Cleary's wife]

Aunt Jo continues: "My father was not the easiest man to live with, but mother worshipped him, and was a perfect slave to all his whims. Her patience and loving care never failed us. Never can I remember hearing her voice raised in anger, but when she gave an order, it was obeyed. Even the hardboiled women from the Workhouse who worked for us adored her and begged to be assigned to our family.

"Like all convent-bred girls of those days, mother was an accomplished musician and needlewoman. She taught my father to play the organ and the piano. They played together evening after evening, he playing his beautiful double manual Mason and Hamlin organ, she the piano, which were tuned in unison...

"Mother died of pneumonia, contracted, we always thought, by getting her feet wet running across to the laundry to

broil father's breakfast steak because the kitchen fire was not glowing enough. The snow was deep; in her little house slippers, her feet were soaked and she neglected to change them, no doubt too busy to think of herself. The result was double pneumonia...([Baby] Emmett died three months later.) I'll never forget mother's funeral on Washington's Birthday... Deep snow covered the ground and... road leading from our house to the boat the 'S.S. Breanan,' which was to take the funeral party to the city. The old people from the Almshouse knelt in the deep snow along the road weeping for their 'true friend.' It was a wonderful tribute to her loving charity for them all."

For a while thereafter, Aggie, 16 years old, tried to manage the household and direct the servants, but things didn't run smoothly or easily. Frank, then about 18 years old, was seldom home... Robert Emmett, accustomed to a lifetime of indulgent catering, while grief stricken, became more and more baffled and angry at the way his world had fallen to pieces...

Robert Emmett's job as Superintendent of Commissary was a political appointment. In 1892, the NYC Democrats were ousted from office and Robert Emmett was out of a job. When the Commissioners announced the change, they said, according to Aunt Jo: "He is the only man who leaves this position as poor a man as when he took it," ...a compliment in that it was accepted procedure to expect and accept graft.

"Taken all in all, our home on Blackwell's Island was a Paradise—something we didn't realize until the Bleak Years that followed our leaving it."

RI in the Movies: Two for the Pen by Stephen Blank

Blackwell's Island in the early 20th century was known mainly for its prison, and our prison played a role in several films. It wasn't mentioned by name. But everyone knew what was going on.

One of them was "No Man of Her Own," a 1932 romantic comedy starring Clark Gable and Carole Lombard. Lombard had been in films longer than the slightly older Gable and she was better known, but neither had hit the big time yet.

The plot is straight forward enough. Gable plays "Babe" Stewart, a card shark who hides out to avoid the cops. He meets a lonely but slightly wild librarian named Connie Randall (Carole Lombard, still married to William Powell, but soon to divorce). There follows a certain amount of pre-code, much enjoyable grappling. They marry on the flip of a coin and the grappling, now legit, continues.

Problem: how does Babe keep new bride Connie from learning that he is still in the racket? He can't. Connie discovers Babe hasn't reformed and demands that he lay off the cards. Gable says he can't, and tells Lombard he's taking off for South America.

But love makes us do strange things. In fact, Babe has turned himself in and copped a plea. He agrees to spend 90 days "across the river." This is New York City and "across the river" is nothing other than our own little island jail. What's cool is that Lombard is wise to the action and gazes out of her hotel window at Blackwell's Island Penitentiary. Granted, there's never been a hotel with that view, but it's still cool.

This excellent Paramount film was directed by Wesley Ruggles and it



launched him into several fairly well regarded comedies, including Mae West's 1933 "I'm No Angel." (Another Blackwell link: In 1927, Mae West served eight days in our prison on an obscenity charge for her play "Sex.")

Epilogue: In one of screenland's dreamiest marriages, Lombard and Gable were wed in 1939. The story is that he was totally devastated when she died in an airplane crash flying to California in 1942. However, the story also goes that she was rushing home after hearing that Gable was fooling around with Lana Turner while they filmed "Somewhere I'll Find You."

"No Man of Her Own" is available on an inexpensive DVD. (Note: There is another film of the same name released in 1950, starring Barbara Stanwick and directed by Mitchell Leisen—no link to us.)

Another comedy from the same era also featured the Blackwell's Island pen as a key element —"The Daring Young Man" (1935) with James Dunn, Mae Clarke and Neil Hamilton, directed by William A. Seiter. I've never seen this film, so

the following is patched from several sources, mainly a review posted on Prison Movies (<http://www.prisonmovies.net/the-daring-young-man-1935-usa>).

“Don (‘Mac’) McLane (James Dunn) is a newspaper reporter with *The Ledger* and a self-declared gynephobe [the abnormal fear of women in the uninitiated], intent on handing out warnings about the graspingness of women to anyone who will listen. He even trots out the same line to Martha Allen (Mae Clarke), a reporter on the rival newspaper, *The Star*, with whom he is immediately smitten.” Of course, they quickly plan to wed, but Mac leaves Martha at the altar when he’s swayed by his editor to go undercover at the local lockup, a once-in-a-lifetime chance to bare the corruption endemic there. The editor is supposed to tell Martha what’s

going on, but, of course, he doesn’t.

The plot winds on, but you get the idea. The film plays off the real-life drama that had recently unfolded on Blackwell’s Island when the NY police raided the island pen. (All of this was immortalized a few years later in the John Garfield flick, “Blackwell’s Island.”) The prison is called the Westgate Jail in the film, but who (particularly in NYC) could have missed the reference? The lily is gilded as the movie makes the jail look “like a racketeer’s country club.” I am sure I will not spoil it for you when I tell you that everything ends well and Mac and Martha walk off together into the fluorescent light of the newsroom.

“The Daring Young Man” is available on an inexpensive DVD. (Again note that it is not the 1942 movie of the same name, with Joe E. Brown.)

Goldwater WPA Murals on Exhibit

In 1935, four abstract murals were commissioned by President



Roosevelt’s Work Progress Administration to enliven the common spaces in what came to be known as Goldwater Memorial Hospital. When the hospital was demolished, three of the four—by artists Ilya Bolotowsky, Albert Swinden and Joseph Rugolo—were recovered and restored. Eventually they will be incorporated into the buildings of Roosevelt Island’s Cornell Tech campus. But for now, portions of the

three murals (they are 7 x 50 feet in their entirety) are on display at the Johnson Museum of Art on the main Cornell campus in Ithaca, NY. They will be in the Gold Gallery from January 30 to May 29, 2016. (Watch for a feature story about the murals in a future issue of *Blackwell’s Almanac*.)

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

RIHS Calendar

Tuesdays, February 9, March 8, April 12, 2016 at 6:30 pm

Special Lecture Series at the RI Branch of the New York Public Library—FREE

2/9 The Stories of the Suitcases: Photographer Jon Crispin shares his images and secrets of inmates' suitcases and belongings found in an attic of the Willard Psychiatric Center after it closed in 1995—vibrant personal stories frozen in time.

3/8 The SS Columbia and Return of the Hudson River Day Liner: Liz McEnaney of the SS Columbia Project recounts the history of this 113-year-old steamboat—its pleasure trips from downtown Detroit to Bois Blanc Island in Canada, its role in civil rights, its restoration and status as a National Historic Landmark vessel and its contribution to current plans to revive the steamboat tradition on the Hudson River.

4/12 Childbirth in 19th-Century America—The Role of Charity Hospital: Midwives, nurses and doctors at our island's Charity Hospital were recognized as pioneers in transforming the then dangerous experience of childbirth into a safe one. Janet Brickman, Professor of History at the Merchant Marine Academy, describes some of their breakthroughs.

Save the dates. 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.



Blackwell's Almanac is published quarterly in February, May, August and November. Back issues may be viewed at: rihs.us Click on *Blackwell's Almanac* at left.

RIHS needs your support. Become a member—visit rihs.us/?page_id=4

To be added to the *Blackwell's Almanac* mailing list, or to add friends to the list, send email address(es) to: rooseveltislandhistory@gmail.com

To be removed from our mailing list, please email your request with the word "Remove" in the subject line to: rooseveltislandhistory@gmail.com