

Blackwell's Almanac

A Publication of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society



The ruins of Riverside Hospital, best known for treating Typhoid Mary. Do you know where the building is located? See lead article, page 2. Photo credit: en.wikipedia.org.

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Blackwell's Almanac

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Typhoid Mary and Our Colleague Island to the North

Of course you've heard of Typhoid Mary. She was the early 20th century cook who served up typhoid fever along with her tasty cuisine. But are you familiar with North Brother Island? It's another East River patch of land that, like Blackwell's Island, served the City to isolate infectious disease.

It is not surprising, then, that the two histories should be entwined.

Mary

Mary Mallon emigrated from Northern Ireland to the U.S. as a teenager in 1883 or '84. After living with her aunt and uncle for a time, she ultimately found work, first as a domestic servant and then cook to a series of affluent families.

In 1906, she took a position as cook with a family in Oyster Bay, Long Island. A couple of weeks later, seemingly out of nowhere, ten of the 11 household members came down with typhoid. Leaving that employ, Mary later found work in the home of wealthy banker Charles Henry Warren, who, it turns out, decided to settle his family for the summer in Oyster Bay. By September of that year, six of 11 family members had developed typhoid fever.

As the disease was more commonly associated with poor populations and unsanitary conditions (it arises from ingestion of food or water that has been contaminated by feces), the medical establishment found its outbreak in tony Oyster Bay "unusual." So much so, that one of the affected families launched an investigation.

At first, the typhoid researcher, George Soper, believed that freshwater clams were the culprit; but interrogation revealed that not all who had fallen ill had eaten them. Soper subsequently focused on Mary. He asked to obtain samples of Mary's feces, urine and blood, but was refused. He then began contacting the families for whom she had worked. In 1900, she began to cook in Mamaroneck; residents became sick not long after. In 1901 she moved to Manhattan. Members of the household that hired her soon developed fever and diarrhea, and the family's laundress died. Her next employer was a lawyer; seven of eight people in his home became ill. Other families had engaged her, and other occurrences of disease had followed. In one instance, a young daughter had died. A female Irish cook, about 40 years of age, tall, heavy, single, seemingly in excellent health, was implicated in all the outbreaks.



Mary Mallon in hospital. Credit: en.wikipedia.com.

Recognizing the threat to public health, Soper went to the authorities and Mary was forcibly brought in for testing. Although she never demonstrated any symptoms, her stool tested positive for *Salmonella typhi*. She was thus the first person to be identified as an asymptomatic carrier of the bacterium, a case “without parallel in medical records,” the newspapers proclaimed. She was immediately (1907) transferred to Riverside Hospital on North Brother Island, where she was quarantined (the first time) for three years.

North Brother Island (NBI)

Comprising some 20 acres between the Bronx and Riker’s Island, NBI (along with its sibling South Brother Island) was claimed by the Dutch West India Company in 1614. In 1869 a lighthouse was erected on its waterfront. Nevertheless, it remained largely uninhabited until 1885, when its Riverside Hospital became the successor to our own Smallpox Hospital after the latter closed. Eventually, the NBI facility’s mission expanded to include isolation of those infected with a number of other contagious diseases besides smallpox, including yellow fever, measles and, later, tuberculosis.

The island happened to be close by the route of turn-of-the-20th-century pleasure boats and it gained some notoriety, in 1904, when a weekend outing turned tragic. The *General Slocum* caught fire just off the island’s shore, killing over 1,000 passengers. It became still more notorious in 1907 when the infamous “Typhoid Mary” came to live there, confined to a hospital bungalow with only her fox

An Ironic Aside

Initially, doctors couldn’t figure out exactly how Mary Mallon transmitted the disease. They theorized that she failed to scrub her hands before handling food; but this wouldn’t have seemed to matter, since the elevated temperatures required to cook food would have killed the typhoid germs. It was left to Soper to discover that one of her most popular desserts was ice cream with raw peaches cut into it. “I suppose no better way could be found for a cook to cleanse her hands of microbes and infect a family,” he wrote in his official report.

terrier for company. Over the course of her stay, she was treated with Urotropin, Hexamethylenamin, laxatives and brewer’s yeast—all to no avail, as proven by over 100 lab tests.



Typhoid Mary in a 1909 newspaper illustration. Note the skulls she is tossing into the skillet. Credit: en.wikipedia.com

Mary was outraged, convinced she was being persecuted and had done nothing wrong. “Why should I be banished like a leper?” she complained. In 1909, she sued the health department to be released, but her petition was denied. One year later, though, the new health commissioner, Ernst Lederle, freed her on condition that she not work as a cook. Indeed, she agreed that she was “prepared to change her occupation...and would give assurance by affidavit that she would...take such hygienic precautions as would protect those with whom she came in contact from infection.”

Round Two

Upon her release, Mary was given work as a laundress, which—it must be said—paid considerably less than being a cook. Unhappy with her new lot in life, she eventually assumed the name Mary Brown and resumed her former occupation for a number of unsuspecting employers. As she no doubt had planned, the authorities lost track of her for years...until 1915, when 25 individuals at Sloane Maternity Hospital in Manhattan contracted typhoid fever, resulting in two deaths. Lo and behold, the hospital cook was Mary! After arresting her, public

health officials returned her to quarantine on NBI, where she remained confined until her death from pneumonia in 1938.

Confined, but not forgotten. Typhoid Mary was often interviewed by the media and became a minor celebrity. No one has ever been able to calculate the number of typhoid cases for which she was responsible. Estimates range from over 120 direct incidents of infection to thousands affected by outbreaks she may have triggered; she is blamed for from 5 to 50 fatalities. Today, “Typhoid Mary” lives on as a term for anyone who, knowingly or not, spreads disease or some other undesirable thing.

Riverside Hospital’s demise came not too many years after Mary’s. After World War II, NBI’s buildings were converted to temporary housing for veterans and their families, and from the 1950s it served as a juvenile drug-treatment center until it was shuttered in 1963. Since then many uses have been



Mary's hospital bungalow on North Brother Island.
Photo credit: New York City Municipal Archives.

proposed for the island, but none has materialized. After over 50 years of abandonment, it is a wild and isolated place, a nature sanctuary dedicated only to the shorebirds that make their nest there.

Editor's note: One person who was drawn to NBI's overgrown vegetation and crumbling structures is photographer Christopher Payne. He lectured

last year on the subject on R.I. and published his stunning images several years ago in [North Brother Island: The Last Unknown Place in New York City](#), Fordham University Press, 2014.

Sources:

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- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Mallon
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- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3959940/>



Announcing the Winners of the RIHS 40th Anniversary Raffle



Gloria Walters (second from right) and family (Lars, Jerry and Georgia Lindahl) having a great night at Yankee Stadium.

- Negash Abdurahman**, Roosevelt Island, NY—NYC Ferry pass
- Anne Cripps**, Roosevelt Island, NY—59E59 Theaters membership/tickets
- M. Frank**, New York, NY—Freshwater pearl necklace
- Rita Meed**, Roosevelt Island, NY—59E59 Theaters membership/tickets
- Alan Nadel**, Roosevelt Island, NY—Mobé pearl and sapphire pendant
- Arielle Robin**, Roosevelt Island, NY—Historic 1910s photo of Blackwell’s Island and Queensboro Bridge
- Pat Schwartzberg**, Roosevelt Island, NY—Framed set of C. Klein antique postcards
- Gloria Walters**, Hartsdale, NY—Four tickets to Yankees-Red Sox game
- Bill Weiss**, Roosevelt Island, NY—Greek key sterling silver necklace
- Shinko Wheeler**, Roosevelt Island, NY—Two tickets to New York City Ballet

The Blackwell's Island "Light": Tinged with Mystery and Disapproval

Recently, architect and New York Institute of Technology professor Matthias Altwicker mounted an exhibit in Rivercross' storefront windows. It discussed and depicted one of his favorite Roosevelt Island buildings—our landmark lighthouse. In addition, the display included a collegial nod to the structure's supervisory architect, James Renwick, Jr.

Alas, exhibits are short-lived. To give this one more permanence, Blackwell's Almanac has adapted its content here. While only a few of the accompanying images have been included, we hope our judicious selection will convey the lighthouse's physical artistry and haunting solitude.

Imagine trying to steer a boat up the west channel of the East River in utter darkness. Now think about how much more dangerous that nighttime task would be as the boat hit the treacherous waters of Hell Gate (the swirling confluence of the East River, Long Island Sound and Harlem River). Understandably, 19th-century mariners chose to anchor until daylight rather than try to pass through the narrow and difficult channel. That is, until the early 1870s, when the City commissioned construction of the Blackwell's Island (now Roosevelt Island) Lighthouse in order to "effectually light" the nearby New York City Insane Asylum.

Designed by noted architect James Renwick, Jr. (see sidebar, p. 7), the 50-foot-tall structure was made of the island quarry's own gray gneiss in a handsome example of the Gothic style. It began operation in September 1872, displaying a fixed red light at a focal plane 54 feet above the river, and was no doubt a welcome beacon to river

navigators. But that's where much of the certainty about the lighthouse ends.

First there is the murky matter of its construction. Inmate labor was probably used. Yet who exactly this was remains a mystery. Legend has it that, before the lighthouse was built, asylum patient John McCarthy feared a British invasion and was feverishly constructing a four-foot high clay fort on the very same site. Because he was reclaiming significant areas of marsh in the process, asylum officials encouraged him, even giving him old Civil War cannons as incentive. Once the lighthouse was planned, however, these same authorities either persuaded or bribed McCarthy to take the fort down.

Then, the story goes, another asylum inmate was summoned to build the new



According to the Landmarks Preservation Commission, "the Lighthouse is a handsome 19th century structure with an interesting legendary history...it was built under the supervision of one of New York's most prominent architects...[and] its boldly scaled Gothic detail and rock-faced walls give it a stony, rustic character..."

project. Although adherence to Renwick’s blueprint is deemed questionable, this resident, styling himself “Thomas Maxey, Esq., architect, mason, carpenter, civil engineer, philosopher and philanthropist,” did indeed complete the construction. So why, one might ask, did a plaque at the base of the lighthouse (see box) credit McCarthy with the work? Why did the plaque mysteriously disappear in the 1960s? And might McCarthy/Maxey have been one person or even figments of someone’s imagination?

THIS WORK WAS DONE BY JOHN MCCARTY WHO BUILT THE LIGHT HOUSE FROM THE BOTTOM TO THE TOP ALL YE WHO DO PASS BY MAY PRAY FOR HIS SOUL WHEN HE DIES.

Another question concerns just how welcome the Blackwell’s Island Lighthouse was among waterway authorities. Actually built by the Department of Public Charities of the City of New York, it was not an official Coast Guard tower. While the U. S. Lighthouse Board acknowledged that it was one of the best of the so-called “private lights,” even furnishing its lantern room with a fourth-order Fresnel lens (a type of thin, lightweight lens particularly useful for lighthouses), criticism and controversy eventually followed.

In its 1883 Annual Report, the Board fumed over the unreliability of private parties who

establish lights (and buoys) simply for their own convenience:

“The Board cannot establish a light without special authority of law in each case. It never exhibits a light without previously issuing a formal notice to mariners, and it never extinguishes one without giving similar notice sufficiently in advance to inform all

concerned. Private lights are established and extinguished without such notice, much to the annoyance of mariners, who are confused and misled by irregular beacons. Besides this, the lights, not being properly kept, go out from time to time.”

The Blackwell’s Island beacon prompted particular ire:

“It has gone out a number of times recently, and so much to the inconvenience, if not danger, of mariners, that complaint has been made, and the Board has been subjected to unmerited criticism for failing to do what was alleged to be its duty, when in fact it has not the slightest control over that light.”

The Board concluded that the display of lights and placement of buoys by corporations or private parties ought to be prohibited by law.

In what would seem to be a specific repudiation of the Blackwell’s Island



All lighthouse image credits: Google Photo.

Lighthouse, the Lighthouse Board was authorized a decade later to install an electric light on Hallet's Point, 2,300 feet northeast of the island. Its stated purpose: to guide mariners through Hell Gate.

Presumably our lighthouse continued in operation anyway, since it was not decommissioned until the 1940s. And then it became famous. In 1972, it was named to the National Register of Historic Places. In 1975, the Landmarks Preservation Commission found that the lighthouse had "special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City," and it was granted city landmark status. The structure was partially restored the following year and, in 1998, an anonymous grant of \$120,000 funded a complete restoration, including its internal lamps.

Whatever the vagaries of its past, Renwick's structure has endured. It may no longer be functional in a maritime sense; still it functions. It endows contemporary Roosevelt Island with a veneer of history, romance and aesthetic accomplishment.

James Renwick, Jr., Architect

James Renwick, Jr. (1818-1895) was the son of a highly regarded professor at Columbia College. He began his notable career in 1836 as an engineer for the Croton water supply system supervising the construction of the great Distributing Reservoir at 42nd Street. In 1840, his drawings were selected in a competition for the design of Grace Church, which, at the time, was New York's wealthiest and most fashionable congregation. Renwick, only 25 years old and entirely self-trained as an architect, achieved instant recognition.

During his long and successful career, he designed many buildings—some smaller, like the Blackwell's Island Lighthouse, and others quite important, including the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, the Main building at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, the William E. Dodge Villa (now Greyston Conference Center) and St. Patrick's Cathedral. These latter two, as well as Grace Church, are designated landmarks.

Renwick's other interests ran to yachting, art collecting and possibly philanthropy. His altruism is believed to be the motivation behind his ongoing association with the Charities and Corrections Board that oversaw the charitable institutions on several islands in the East River. Thus, he designed the Workhouse, City Hospital and Smallpox Hospital on Blackwell's Island, the Inebriate and Lunatic Asylum on Ward's Island, and the main building of the Children's Hospital on Randall's Island.

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R.I. Inspires the Visual Arts: Sebastian Cruset's *North View Queensboro Bridge*

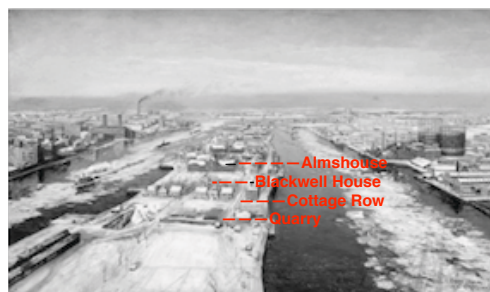
Although born in Spain (1859-1943), oil painter Sebastian Cruset is known mostly for the works he produced after coming to live in New York. He is also known for a couple of things that make him utterly unique.

which a knowledgeable viewer could identify the almshouse, Blackwell House, cottage row where the institutions' senior officials lived, and the stone quarry which provided the gray gneiss used in the many stone structures that



Beginning in 1909, the year the Queensboro Bridge was completed, he spent a number of years painting from the balcony atop its third tower. Cruset had an interest in mapmaking and perhaps that is what drove him to “topographic city views” and his aerial studio. But it wasn’t just a passing fancy. On the first day of each year, like clockwork, he went to the Bridge Commissioner and renewed his permit. And so his eventual engagement with Blackwell’s Island was inevitable.

In January 1910, he completed *North View Queensboro Bridge*. This snowy scene depicts the northern half of the island, from



dotted the island (for example, the Smallpox Hospital, City Hospital, various churches, and the lighthouse). Manhattan and Long Island

City are also in view, as they are in other of his paintings.

He was the victim of a singularly enterprising aerial thief. In June of 1914, the artist had just finished a panoramic work measuring 5 feet 4 inches wide by 10 inches high. Like many of his canvases, it was a

painstaking re-creation of the details of the urban landscape. Returning to his studio after an absence of two days, Cruset found that someone had climbed the 200-foot ladder leading to the tower balcony and stolen the completed painting and a camera. The Commissioner questioned all the men who worked on the bridge and the police continued the hunt. But, as far as is known, the man called by the artist “the meanest burglar” was never found.



Despite the disheartening setback, Cruset went on to produce many other paintings, both in the city and out. A measure of his success: According to AskART.com, his work is included in the collections of the Museum of the City of New York. *North View Queensboro Bridge* sold at auction at Christie's Los Angeles in 2002 for \$4,780, while *Lindbergh's Ticker Tape Parade*, auctioned at Doyle's New York in 2018, fetched \$7,500.



Top: Lindbergh's Ticker Tape Parade, WWI Memorial, Madison Square Park, New York City, 1927. Left: The Hindenburg over New Rochelle. Right: Sledding in New Rochelle, 1924.

Sources:
 "Robs Bridge Tower Studio,"
New York Times, June 27, 1914.
 AskART.com

RIHS Calendar

Roosevelt Island Historical Society Lecture Series—FREE
@ the New York Public Library Branch, 524 Main St., 6:30 pm

Our upcoming series of programs at the RI Branch of the NYPL is being finalized. Save these dates:

Thursday, November 8
Thursday, December 6,
Thursday, January 17
Thursday, February 7

Thursday, September 13, 2018

Opening of the Museum of the City of New York exhibit “Germ City.” Features two items from Roosevelt Island: an iron lung from Coler Hospital and bronze lettering from a Goldwater Hospital laboratory.