

# Blackwell's Almanac

A Publication of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society



*St. James Parish Hall, built in 1735, has a humble presence in modern-day, middle-class Elmhurst. But in its day, it hobnobbed with royalty. See "Hidden History of Queens," page 2. Photo credit: Richard Panchyk.*

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*Blackwell's  
Almanac*

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## Hidden History of Queens

*Audience members at the November 8th talk in the Roosevelt Island Historical Society Lecture Series were treated to an intriguing theme: historical secrets hidden in plain sight. Speaker Richard Panchyk, author of the book "Hidden History of Queens," urged listeners to notice what they are strolling by. A little attentiveness, he stressed, can yield glimpses of a buried past. Some of his Queens revelations are summarized below. (All photos are from the author's collection.)*

### Millstones from a Colonial-era Gristmill

In 2012, a new park, called Dutch Kills Green, opened at Queens Plaza, just north of Northern Boulevard. A compelling feature of the park is a pair of millstones from the centuries-old Burger Jorissen gristmill. One is embedded, monument-like, in concrete. What is their story?

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the northeast-flowing Dutch Kills branch of what is now known as Newtown Creek meandered through a very pleasant landscape of salt meadows and farms. Many settlers built homes there, including Jorissen, a blacksmith turned miller from Silesia, Germany. By 1654, Jorissen had built a tidewater grist mill at the edge of his waterside property, located at today's 41<sup>st</sup> Avenue and Northern Boulevard. The mill was still in operation as late as the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, but was demolished in 1861 for the coming Long Island Rail Road.

The area remained rural until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Then subsequent industrialization left the Kills (Dutch for "water channel" or "stream") stagnant and polluted, and the northernmost section was filled in over time. You can't see the stream anymore at that 41<sup>st</sup> Avenue address. However, you can still view the Kills from the Hunterspoint Avenue Bridge and the Borden Avenue Bridge. And, with a visit to the Dutch Kills Green, you can marvel at the centuries of history embodied in the original gristmill stones.



*A centuries-old millstone can be seen in the Dutch Kills Green Park.*

### Santa Claus: Connected to Queens

Most of us know the poem "The Night Before Christmas" by Dr. Clement Clarke Moore.

What you may not know is that it was written in 1822 as an amusement for Moore's niece and was originally titled "A Visit from St. Nicholas."

Though it was published and became famous, it took many years before Moore acknowledged his authorship. It may also have escaped your notice that Moore

allegedly drew his inspiration for the poem from the many Christmases he'd spent at the family homestead in the Newtown section of Queens (now Elmhurst).

As the story goes, great-great-grandfather Samuel Moore built the home at what is now 45<sup>th</sup> and Broadway around 1662. Still standing but greatly deteriorated in the 1920s, it was revered as one of the oldest and most storied structures in Queens. In 1929, it was announced that the house sat atop a planned subway tunnel and would be demolished. A furor ensued. Journalists, politicians and the public all decried the coming destruction of "the birthplace of Santa Claus." It nevertheless succumbed to the wrecking ball.

By 1944, populist emotion had prompted a granite marker on the site. And in 1987, an existing playground there (one that Panchyk himself had played in as a child) was renamed Moore Homestead Playground specifically in honor of Clement Clarke Moore. Poetic justice, you might say, except that it's all been thrown into question.

The Moores were apparently quite prolific, both in offspring and houses. According to the author's research, Clement's father was born in 1748 in the sixth of the Moore family's series of homes. It was erected on the

southern side of Woodside Avenue near the intersection with Broadway. But, since his father later moved to Manhattan, where



*The original 1662 Moore family homestead in Newtown (Elmhurst) survived until 1929.*

Clement was born, the creator of the modern Santa Claus tradition was neither born, lived, nor wrote his poem in either of the Queens homesteads.

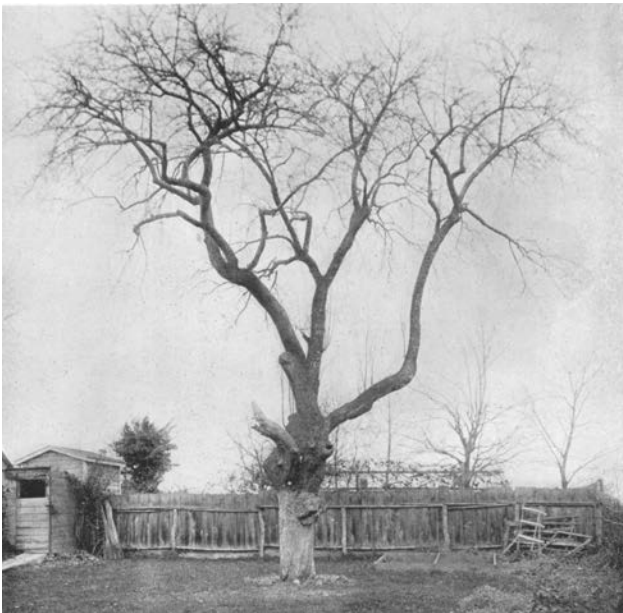
That sixth home was demolished in the 1880s and disappeared from popular

memory. The 1662 house had belonged to Clement's uncle and was, indeed, the family's ancestral home. It was also known to have a tradition of warmth and hospitality. Perhaps young Clement visited that house as well as his father's childhood home. Either way, his poem was undoubtedly inspired by memories of Elmhurst at Christmas.

### The Big Apple's Apple

If you walk by the Maspeth Federal Savings Bank on 69<sup>th</sup> Street near 56<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Maspeth, or the First Presbyterian Church on Queens Boulevard at 54<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Elmhurst, you will notice apple trees. Not just any apple trees, but those that bear Newtown Pippins. Based on Panchyk's narrative, they represent a remembrance of things past.

Sometime around 1700, the seed of an ordinary apple tree belonging to Newtown's Gershon Moore (yes, a Clement relative) fell to the ground, germinated and produced a tree of very different apples. They had the perfect combination of sweetness and tartness, and their crisp flesh could be cooked or eaten raw. Their flavor peaked toward the end of winter and they had a life of as much as nine months after picking. From that tree, Moore propagated an entire orchard and the bright yellow Newtown



*Photographed in 1902, this was one of the last surviving Newtown Pippin apple trees.*

Pippin, as it was known, became a star—the finest apple grown in America.

By mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the apple had conquered the likes of George Washington, Benjamin Franklin (he had them shipped to London when he was a diplomat there), and Thomas Jefferson (he requested cuttings in order to grow them in Virginia). In 1845, Newtown Pippins exported to London sold for the stratospheric price of \$21 a barrel. And in 1851, the Pippin was declared the finest apple in the London Exposition.

Of course, other geographic areas began cultivating and selling them, most notably the Hudson Valley, Pennsylvania, California and the Pacific Northwest, which still boast big commercial operations to this day. Whether they stack up to the original Newtown Pippin is an open question.

As Queens developed, there was less and less room for apple trees. By 1925 there were just six left clinging to life on Grand Avenue in Maspeth, and one near today's LaGuardia Airport. Hopefully the recently planted Maspeth and Elmhurst trees could signal a resurgence.

### **A Church Fit for Royalty**

At 86-02 Broadway stands St. James Parish Hall, a humble structure set among the neighborhood's contemporary apartment buildings. Little except its now landmark status would suggest its illustrious past.

Built in 1735 and officially chartered by King George III in 1761, it bore the name "The Church of England in America, mission church at Newtowne." Some years later, the Revolutionary War gave the church its cachet. Thirteen-year-old William, the Duke of Clarence, grandson of the hated King George III, joined the Royal Navy and was stationed in Queens as midshipman. He is said to have worshipped at the church, as did General William Howe, commander of the British troops, when he was headquartered in Newtown (Elmhurst).

You might say that the church's historical credentials were further burnished (or tarnished, depending on your point of view) when William became King William IV of England in 1830. In 1848, the church was demoted to parish hall when a new church was built across the street, but the St. James building has had the last laugh. While the new church burned down in the 1970s, the St. James Parish Hall, remodeled in 1883, has stood the test of time. It is now New York City's second-oldest religious structure after the Friends Meeting House in Flushing and, nearly 20 years after Richard Panchyk proposed it as a landmark, it was finally designated a city landmark in 2017.



*St. James Parish Hall, built around 1735, is now a New York City landmark.*

### Of Ash and Trash: Flushing Meadow Park

Have you ever walked through Flushing Meadow-Corona Park with your eyes riveted on the ground? Panchyk did, and found a trove of ceramic shards, all different sizes, shapes, colors and designs. Huh?

The secret is that before Flushing Meadow was the site of two world's fairs, and before it became a park in the 1930s, it was, in the 1920s, the vast Corona Ash Dump. For almost 25 years, the Brooklyn Ash Removal Company deposited ash and garbage there. At one point, 110 train cars of garbage arrived each day, creating an ash dump that was 90 feet high at its peak. It is said that this foul-smelling eyesore inspired F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Valley of Ashes" in his 1925 novel, *The Great Gatsby*.



"Buried treasure" unearthed by the author in Flushing Meadow.

In anticipation of the 1939 World's Fair, some 1,200 trees were planted in 1937–38 to beautify the site. These days remnants of the area's mountains of junk work their way to the surface, especially

around the roots of these trees or near patches of dirt that may have been bulldozed or otherwise disturbed over the years. The speaker estimated that his ceramic fragments were dumped as far back as 1910, and might represent dishware purchased as early as 1890!

### Fort Tilden and Its Military Memorabilia

The site at Fort Tilden, named after 19<sup>th</sup> century New York State Governor Samuel Tilden and now part of the Gateway National Recreation Area on the Rockaway Peninsula, can make claim to military defenses as far back as the War of 1812. It actually became Fort Tilden in 1917 with our entry into World



Battery Harris East, dating back to the 1920s, makes for an interesting afternoon of sightseeing.

War I, and has boasted important military activity or artifacts ever since.

The Fort's early installation consisted of rudimentary structures and equipment. In the 1920s, Battery Harris East and Battery Harris West were installed with two immensely powerful 16-inch guns. Each could fire 2,100-pound projectiles a maximum distance of some 25 miles. The gun placements were originally in the open air, until a concrete roof was retrofitted in the early 1940s to protect them from aerial bombardment.

The construction of permanent buildings began sometime in the 1930s, and by the time of World War II, the Fort had become a full-on base with more than 90 buildings on site. After the war, the 69<sup>th</sup> Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion was assigned to its grounds. There were 1,000 men with four batteries of four 90mm guns each. When the Nike Ajax missile, the first surface-to-air missile, was developed, Fort Tilden became a missile battery. The Ajax was impressive—32 feet long, weighing 32,000 pounds, with a range of 30 miles and a speed of Mach 2.25, but was later replaced by the faster and even more powerful Hercules missile.

With the outbreak of the Korean War, Fort Tilden again became home to active troops.

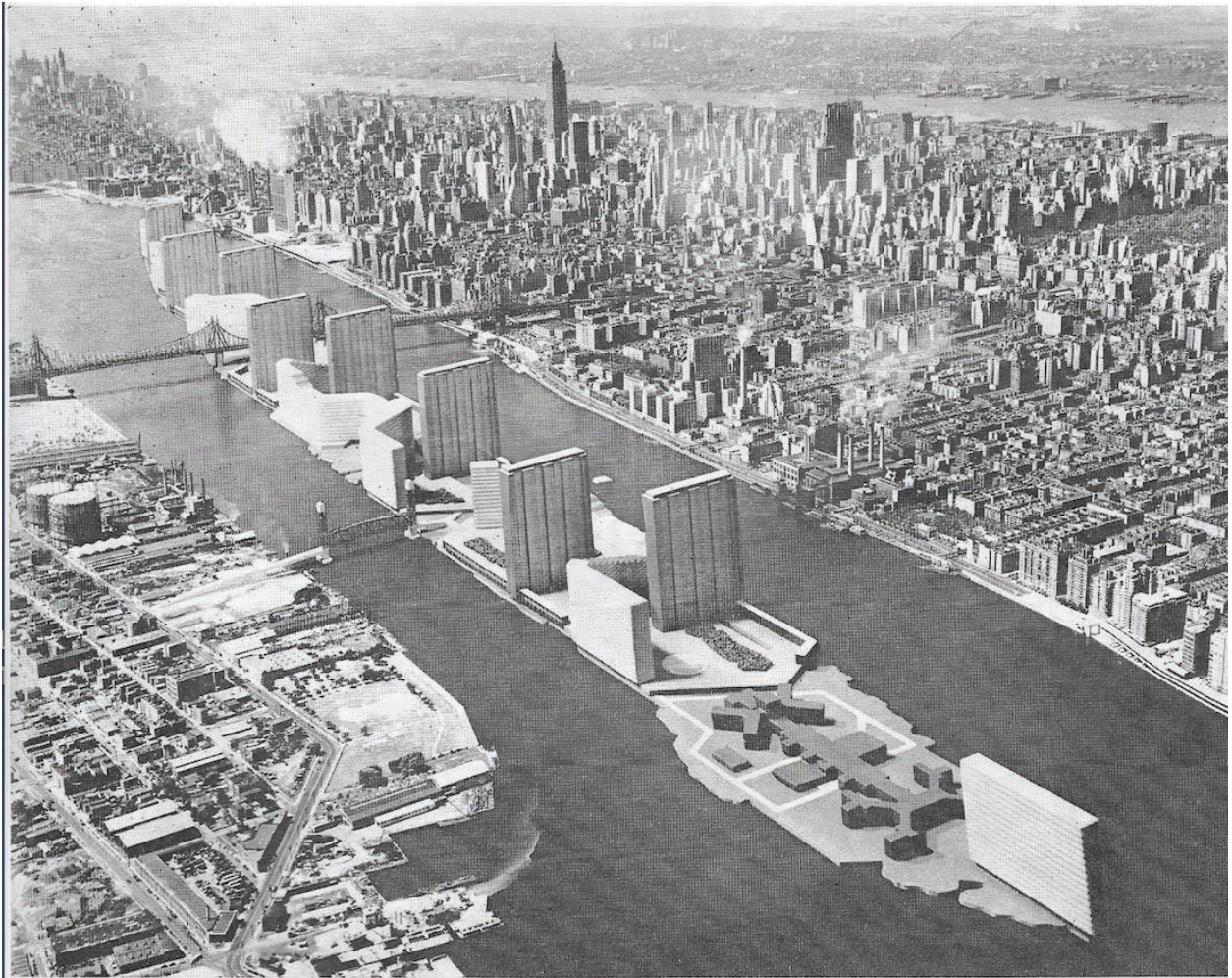
Then, in 1974, it was abandoned as a base. Nevertheless, even as a park, Fort Tilden offers some fascinating glimpses of war: warehouses, ruins, the guns with their bunkers and concrete encasements, and even a relic missile at the park's entry. As the speaker described it, a full afternoon's sightseeing experience.

**An Excellent Adventure**

Are you hooked yet? Bear in mind that this article barely skims the surface. You might want to dive into the many more vignettes and voluminous detail of Panchyk's book (available at the Visitor Center kiosk). It would be the perfect guide to a history-tracking tour of Queens.



For more information and tickets, visit [rihs.us](http://rihs.us).



*Photo credit: Architectural Forum.*

## **The Roosevelt Island That Never Was**

In the 1960s, Welfare Island suddenly became a target for transformation. Many city neighborhoods were being completely revamped by urban renewal projects. And the island's nearness to midtown Manhattan made it the perfect candidate for a mixed-use masterplan.

Enter shopping mall pioneer Victor Gruen. In 1961, this Austrian-born American architect and city planner designed a comprehensive blueprint for converting the island into a modern development encompassing schools, churches, stores, a subway station and 70,000 residents.

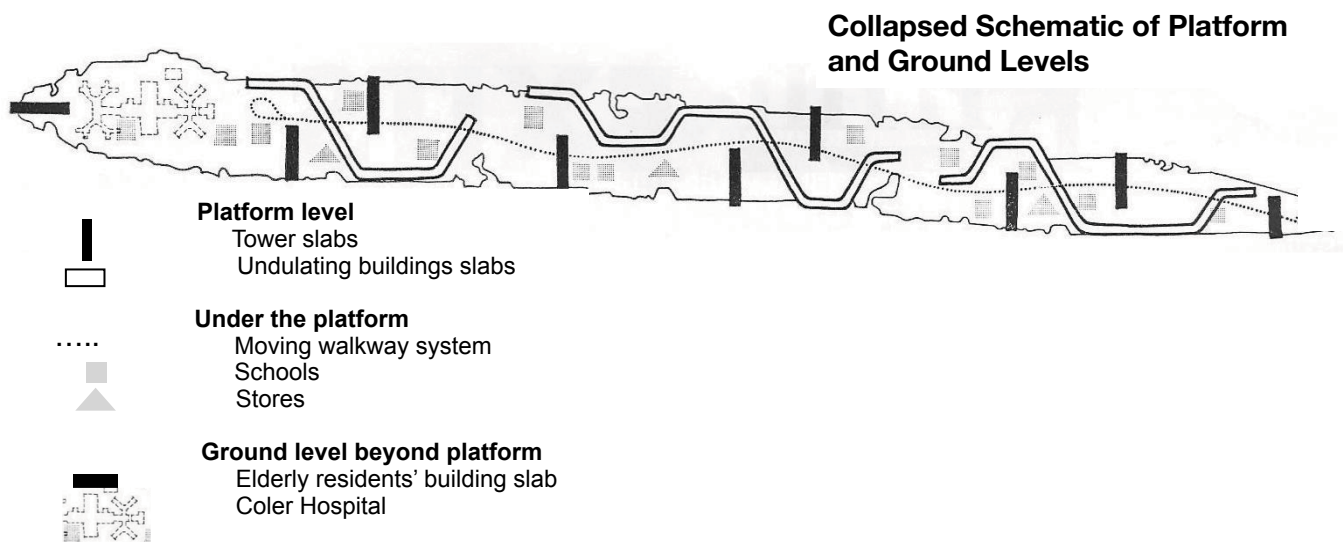
The planned community called for eight 50-story apartment towers interspersed with an undulating string of lower-profile residences ranging from eight to 30 stories. The approximately 20,000 apartments would run the entire length of the two-mile island; they would consist mostly of two- and three-bedroom homes averaging 1,177 square feet and intended for middle-class families with children. While Goldwater Hospital was not mentioned, it was specified that the city would continue to operate what was described as

the mostly geriatric Bird S. Coler, and an adjacent residence would house non-infirm elderly who could, nevertheless, take advantage of the geriatrics services on offer. The new entity would be renamed East Island.

An utterly unique feature of the island was an immense concrete platform, some 22 feet above ground, on which the residential buildings would be built. As no private vehicles were going to be allowed on the island and parking was going to be provided in a nearby facility in Queens, the raised platform would presumably allow for an automobile-free environment. Under the platform there would be a moving pedestrian walkway system and a service road for official, emergency and hospital-related vehicles. This space was also expected to accommodate commercial services, mechanical infrastructure, storage, and two-story schools whose rooftop play areas would rise to the level of the raised platform.

A contemporaneous news article was quick to point out just how much the value of the island would appreciate. When New York City purchased the island in the 1820s, it paid \$52,500. Selling or leasing development rights at an estimated price of \$3,000 per unit x 20,000 units would have realized a revenue of some \$60 million.

Victor Gruen was indeed a visionary. We can only wonder what he might think of the planned island development that ultimately got built.



Sources:

“New York gets plans for a brand-new city of 70,000, including 50-story towers, on island in East River.”  
*Architectural Forum*, June 1961.

“Roosevelt Island — NYC Urbanism,” <https://www.nycurbanism.com>.



## R.I. Inspires the Visual Arts: Louis Kahn's Four Freedoms Park

On September 24, 1973, our island in the East River was renamed Roosevelt Island in honor of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. For some time, influential voices had been advocating for a park that would enshrine the ideals expressed in his iconic 1941 speech (see box, p. 10). So, on that very same 1973 date, it was announced that such a park would be built on the four southernmost acres of the island and that renowned architect Louis I. Kahn would be its creator.

Kahn completed his design in 1974—whereupon a series of unforeseen obstacles intervened. Alas, realization of the park would turn out to be a tale of delays and difficulties stretching over almost 40 years.

First, Governor Nelson Rockefeller, a major force behind the park, was appointed Gerald Ford's vice-president and moved to Washington D.C. Around that time Kahn died of a heart attack in New York's Pennsylvania Station, ironically carrying the finished designs with him. Meanwhile, New York City was teetering on the edge of bankruptcy. All thought of the park sank into obscurity.

Subsequently, a number of attempts to resurrect interest in the project failed; Kahn's design became legendary as a masterwork that would remain forever unbuilt. Happily, though, the naysayers were wrong.

Thirty years after Kahn's death, his son Nathaniel produced a widely seen documentary about his father titled "My Architect." In addition, The Cooper Union



Entryway and "Garden." Photo credit: ny.curbed.com.

mounted an exhibition of Kahn's drawings. His name again reverberated in the corridors of power and the park was reconsidered.

In 2005, William vanden Heuvel, a former U.N. ambassador and one of the founders of the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute, launched a campaign to get the park built. He raised more than \$50 million in public and private funds. In a swirl of ever-changing politics, he also managed to garner commitments from Governors David Patterson and Andrew Cuomo and Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Finally, construction began on March 29, 2010.

"IN THE FUTURE DAYS, WHICH WE SEEK TO MAKE SECURE, WE LOOK FORWARD TO A WORLD FOUNDED UPON FOUR ESSENTIAL HUMAN FREEDOMS. THE FIRST IS FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND EXPRESSION - EVERYWHERE IN THE WORLD. THE SECOND IS FREEDOM OF EVERY PERSON TO WORSHIP GOD IN HIS OWN WAY - EVERYWHERE IN THE WORLD. THE THIRD IS FREEDOM FROM WANT... EVERYWHERE IN THE WORLD. THE FOURTH IS FREEDOM FROM FEAR...ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD. THAT IS NO VISION OF A DISTANT MILLENNIUM. IT IS A DEFINITE BASIS FOR A KIND OF WORLD ATTAINABLE IN OUR OWN TIME AND GENERATION."

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT, JANUARY 6, 1941

Of course, that didn't mean that all would proceed smoothly or easily. Architect Gina Pollara, Executive Director of the monumental park project, recounts a tale of thorny decisions and seemingly impossible snags.

- Before construction could even start, Kahn's design required some important preparation: half an acre of the landfill that extended the length of Roosevelt Island on its southern tip had to be removed and a "rip rap" rock barrier installed to prevent erosion.

- His design also stipulated that the underwater foundation should be concrete with a granite veneer. But that didn't reckon with the very forceful currents in our tidal strait that would tear off the veneer and destroy the exposed concrete. Departing from the architect's specifications was difficult, yet it was necessary. So the expensive decision was made to use solid granite blocks instead.

- Then there was Kahn's level of perfection. His drawings embodied measurements down to an impossible 1/32 of an inch. It was clear that no one could deliver such tolerances. The quarry responsible for cutting the 190 granite stones was ultimately persuaded to accept the still difficult limit of 1/8 of an inch.

- The sheer mass of the main granite blocks (they measure 6 by 6 by 12 feet and weigh 36 tons each) made it impossible to truck them across the Roosevelt Island Bridge and down the helix. A work-around had to be found: trucking them first from North Carolina to New Jersey, one stone per tractor-trailer, and then barging them to the construction site—a problem of its own.

- The barges couldn't move against the river's currents. That meant that transport times had to be calculated exactly with the tides. There was only a narrow window when the barges could arrive, the stones could be off-loaded and the barges could again depart. A missed schedule might result in days of delay.

- Again because of the heaviness of the stones, raising them from the horizontal (their shipping position) to the vertical was an existential challenge. Still using the same method the ancient Egyptians employed to raise obelisks (but with five different types of cranes and lifts instead of manpower), the stones were set in sand pits where they could be turned slowly without damaging the corners or edges.

- Finally even the trees posed a problem. Working from Kahn's short list of proposed species, the decision-makers had to select those that could best withstand the salt environment and exposure to periodic storms. Months of research, trial plantings and disagreements went into the decision, and then, for the allées, 120 trees of comparable caliber and size had to be found.

Despite everything, Kahn's vision was realized and dedicated in a ceremony on October 17, 2012; it opened to the public as a New York State Park a week later.

The "Room and Garden," as Kahn called it, combine stones of ancient megalithic scale with modernist minimalism. A work of pure form is found in the geometry of the entry stairs, the vast sweep of the central lawn and the stark lines of the promenades. In contrast with the hard granite forms, five copper-beech trees adorn the entrance and two allées of little-leaf lindens create a forced perspective to focus the visitor's gaze on the bust of Roosevelt sculpted by Jo Davidson in 1933. They also propel the visitor in the direction of the "Room." Described by Pollara



*A different perspective. Photo credit: Langan.com*



*"The Room." Photo credit: wikimedia.org.*

as "simultaneously monumental and intimate," the "Room" bears the inscription of an excerpt from Roosevelt's defining speech. All these features interact with the sea and the sky to foster the serenity of an open-air Greek temple.

Roosevelt Island is fortunate, indeed, to have such an historic symbol and architectural gem. Four Freedoms Park will serve as an eternal reminder of the courage and leadership of FDR and the artistic genius of Louis Kahn.

Sources:

Pollara G, Martin S, eds: "Four Freedoms Park, a Memorial to Franklin D. Roosevelt, Expanded Edition." <https://www.fdrfourfreedomspark.org/overview/>  
<https://placesjournal.org/article/past-perfect-four-freedoms-park...>  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franklin\\_D.\\_Roosevelt\\_Four\\_Freedoms\\_Park](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franklin_D._Roosevelt_Four_Freedoms_Park)

## **RIHS Calendar**

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

### **Thursday, February 7**

#### **“Eleanor Roosevelt”**

Historian and professor of history Blanche Weisen Cooks discusses her new book, *Eleanor Roosevelt: The War Years and After, 1939–1962*, part 3 of a series about our historic First Lady.

### **Thursday, May 9**

#### **“Hart Island Project”**

For decades, Potter’s Field on Hart Island and the island itself have been run by the Corrections Department. Melinda Hunt, Trustee of the Hart Island Project, will update us on proposals to change administration of the island to the Parks Department, their implications, and other projects.

### **Thursday, June 13**

#### **“The Woman in the Iron Coffin”**

Scott Warnasch has been a forensic anthropologist/archaeologist for the New York City Office of Chief Medical Examiner, director of the Human Remains Recovery excavations at the World Trade Center site, consultant to the NYPD and FBI on crime scene search and recovery operations, and has recently opened his own consulting business. He will discuss several forensic search and recovery excavation projects, including the mysterious woman in the iron coffin.

### **Thursday, September 12**

#### **“Barren Island”**

Carol Zoref discusses her book about the “factory” island in Jamaica Bay where dead horses and other large animals were rendered into glue and fertilizer from the mid-19th century until the 1930s. It is a story of immigrant families who lived their entire lives steeped in the smell of burning animal flesh in a world that no longer exists.

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### **Sunday, February 10, 2:00–4:00 pm**

#### **“Sunday Tea with Mae West”**

Mae West returns in person for an utterly unique afternoon of gourmet refreshments, intimate confessions, risqué repartee and vintage movies. Seating is limited, so get your tickets now. Visit [rihs.us](http://rihs.us).

### **Midsummer (TBA)**

#### **Walking Tour of Long Island City**

Jack Eichenbaum, geographer and professional tour guide, will lead us from Pepsi to Amazon.