

Blackwell's Almanac

A Publication of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society



From Episcopal Chapel of the Holy Spirit to Dayspring Church to a proposed new chapter in its life, the little stone church on the northwest side of Roosevelt Island has had its ups and downs (see p. 9). Photo credit: Bobbie Slonevsky.

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Barren Island

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On September 12, author Carol Zoref spoke at the library as part of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society Lecture Series. She introduced us to Barren Island and her award-winning novel of the same name. Though no longer found on a map of New York City, erased by the landfill engineers who connected it to Floyd Bennett Field, Barren Island was a real place. Located in Jamaica Bay off the southeast shore of Brooklyn, it was where dead horses and other animals were shipped to become fertilizer and glue. And the facts surrounding the place, its factories and the society created by the immigrants and African-Americans who lived and worked there are easily as fascinating as any novel.

Imagine an island so cut off from the rest of New York City, it could only be reached by public transport via an hours-long ride on a garbage barge or an unreliable ferry from Brooklyn. Except, that is, when neither of these could navigate the crossing. Needed repairs, bad storms and impenetrable fog were frequent obstacles and, in winter, accumulations of ice could isolate the island completely for weeks at a time. For over 80 years, from the mid-19th century until 1936, the “glue factory” workers of Barren Island and their families were born, lived and died there. They could see Brooklyn and certain Manhattan towers from their home ground, but most never left. The main thing they shared with other city residents was the stench of burning animal flesh; it was the subject of periodic complaints in Brooklyn and the Upper East Side, but a constant, everyday accompaniment on the island itself. Yet these people adapted and survived.

Ignored But Resourceful

The population of Barren Island ranged over the course of its existence from a few hundred to some 1,800 souls. The all-male workers lived in company dormitories in the early years, but families were eventually housed in small bungalows that they rented from the city. The original African-American population had either migrated or were largely recruited from the south. Many of the



(Top:) Barren Island and others were still separate from Brooklyn in this 1911 map. Note Dead Horse Bay, a name inspired by the island’s “glue factories.” Credit: hatchingcatnyc.com (Bottom:) Barren Island has been incorporated into Floyd Bennett Field. Credit: en.wikipedia.com

Blackwell's Almanac

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Publisher:
Judith Berdy

Writer/editor:
Bobbie Slonevsky

Contributing writer:
Melanie C. Colter

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Typical shack inhabited by Barren Island families. Many houses had enclosed pens for livestock. Photo credit: hatchingcatnyc.com.

immigrants were hired directly from Ellis Island. They were Polish or German or Italian or a smattering of other ethnicities and worshipped at Sacred Heart Catholic Church under a Polish priest or at a small, nondenominational Protestant chapel. Each ethnic group socialized largely among its own members, although there seems to have been little intergroup strife.

“Barren”?? Island

A wind-swept land of marsh, grass, and sand, the island had few trees within human memory. Yet there is some suggestion that it was once forested—so hardly “barren.” In fact, the name is a corruption of the Dutch “Beeren Eylandt,” or Bears Island, animals which, presumably, were abundant in centuries past.

Such a small and isolated constituency meant that the residents were ignored by both city officials and the normal forces of

commerce. They often had to improvise and, in many ways, life on the island was a throwback to a more primitive time. They clammed, crabbed, fished, raised hogs, chickens and ducks, gathered mushrooms and cultivated extensive gardens to provide the fresh food that was unavailable to them from the mainland markets. As late as 1920 and possibly beyond, there was no electricity in the residents’ homes; they scavenged driftwood to heat their cottages and cook. Water came from a communal tap until the inhabitants themselves collected rainwater and dug wells. The lack of a municipal water system and a complete lack of firefighting services obliged them to form bucket brigades to try (often unsuccessfully) to extinguish any conflagration—this at a time when New York City had steam-powered pumps and motorized trucks. In addition, the island lacked a hospital or emergency medical services, and was without a law enforcement presence for a significant portion of its history; instead the inhabitants policed themselves, and by most accounts, experienced little crime or civil disruption.

Gritty Work

Just as the city's undesirables (the sick, mentally ill, felons, minor offenders, poor) were relegated to Blackwell's Island, so too were "nuisance industries" or "offensive trades" relegated to Barren Island.



Seven or eight garbage scows arrived daily at Barren Island, bringing 500 to 1,000 tons of trash. This was in addition to the 50 or so dead horses that arrived every day by boat. Photo credit: hatchingcatnyc.com.

Thousands of dead horses, dogs, cats and an occasional alligator or bear were dumped annually on the island dock, then carted to the "horse factory" where a variety of substances was produced. First an accomplished skinner removed the horse's hide, which was boiled into glue. The hair of the mane and tail were used for stuffing mattresses. The flesh was also boiled to create potash. The remains were then separated into distinct piles: the head bones were sold for use in refining gold; the ribs were made into manure; the jaw, thigh, and hip bones were used for refining sugar; the shin bones were manufactured into buttons and umbrella handles; and the hooves made into Prussian blue pigment. Whatever was left was converted into fertilizer.

The processing of household garbage was another island industry. Mountains of refuse were "reduced"—steamed under 50 pounds of pressure and cooked for eight to 10 hours—until everything disintegrated into pulp.

Stored in molds, the material was ultimately converted into grease and soap. Similarly, until the turn of the 20th century, menhaden, a bony, inedible fish, was cooked, then subjected to hydraulic pressure to extract its oils.

The men labored for at least 60 hours a week and the work was gritty and hazardous. This was an era that pre-dated safety regulations. There were boiler explosions and escaping steam that scalded victims' bodies and could be fatal. Factory fires not only threatened lives, but in one instance burned the only two telephones on the island, completely cutting off communications. Limbs were damaged and even severed by factory machinery. Workers fell from elevated structures and were badly hurt or killed. But, consistent with the times, there

was little outrage at these injuries and deaths; they were more or less considered inevitable.

Irony

The "offensive trades" located on Barren Island disposed of garbage and carrion in an efficient and environmentally sound way. The



These Brooklyn Ash Company factories, in addition to those of the New York Sanitary Utilization Company and the Barren Island Fertilizing Oil and Guano Company, were largely responsible for the awful smells emanating from the island. Photo credit: hatchingcatnyc.com.

A Christmas Wish

Because of recurring fires and other considerations, the garbage plant closed in 1919. With the decrease in available jobs, Barren Island suffered a parallel drop in population. However, that wasn't the only after-effect. The remaining children of Barren Island were apparently bereft with the disappearance of their scavenging activities. How do we know? The revelation came in the form of a Christmas wish. Asked by a teacher what they would wish for if there were such a thing as a fairy godmother, the answer was virtually unanimous: "The garbage back. We'd wish the garbage back."

unending stream of waste generated by the city's populace would otherwise have been thrown into the ocean and ultimately washed up onto the city's beaches. So, not only were the island's trades essential to the functioning of New York City, they also provided jobs for workers and profits from marketable by-products for owners. And yet, the work and the people engaged in it were reviled by nearby communities.

They termed the smell "pestilential," feared its health effects and complained to the State Board of Health. Even as sympathetic a personage as Jacob Riis described the emanations as "...rotten, disgusting, swilling, unbearable to mankind." In fact, a Barren Islander was thrown off a Broadway Railroad train because he allegedly smelled so awful. When he sued and lost, the railroad made a specific rule

Island Life

In addition to working in the principal industries, islanders were quick to take advantage of any entrepreneurial opportunity that presented itself. To accommodate seasonal workers and visitors, rooms were let and boarding houses developed. One man saw a need and made a livelihood out of sharpening saws. Another undertook drayage with a horse and wagon. Barbers, butchers, grocers, dry goods merchants, clothing shops, an apothecary and a number of taverns also

arose to serve the community. And almost every inhabitant—adult and child alike—scavenged through the heaps of collected garbage looking for salable "treasure:" pieces of coal, scrap metal, precious metals, accidentally discarded cutlery/utensils, jewelry, etc. It was said that there was no child on Barren Island without a ring from the dump.



P.S. 120. The teachers arrived by police launch early on, then by public ferry. They lived on the island from Monday through Friday. Photo credit: New York Public Library Collections.

banning islanders from their trains. Nevertheless, the Barren Islanders managed to create a functional, even thriving, community from absolute scratch—a pioneering rural village right on the edge of an indifferent and often hostile urban center.

The island children went to a public school at least from the 1880s when Barren Island was part of the Town of Flatlands in Brooklyn. This consisted of one room on the first floor of a house where the children were taught by a single teacher. After the boroughs consolidated in 1898 and Brooklyn was integrated into New York City, things improved. In 1901, P.S. 120 opened in a more suitable, purpose-specific building. It boasted two stories, six classrooms and living space on the second floor for teachers and a janitor. However, even this generous space did not mitigate all the obstacles to a robust education. It was very difficult to retain teachers, as the unreliable transportation to the island required them to live in the community during the week. Student attendance was quite low, and because there was no eighth grade, the opportunity to attend high school was essentially foreclosed.

This all changed in 1918 with the arrival of a veteran educator and force of nature, Jane Shaw (see sidebar, p. 7). Shaw actively encouraged parents to send their children to school. She instituted an eighth grade, with a gold pin for graduating and the expectation of continuing on to high school (once there was a road and bus service). She was also a source of inspiration to both teachers and students. By the 1920s, “a new spirit had taken hold of the place.” Educational statistics on Barren Island far surpassed those of New York City: 100% of elementary-school-aged children (estimated at 150 to 200 pupils) attended school and daily rolls generally exceeded 95%, topping the charts. Visitors often commented on the children’s intelligence and impressive schoolwork.

Entertainments on the island were mostly simple. As children do, the kids wandered and explored, played in the creeks, and tracked turtles across the sand. They also had a baseball team and an improvised space for handball. In later years, they were even able to roller skate and watch movies in the basement of the school. In general, islanders enjoyed swimming in Jamaica Bay, making bonfires on the beach, row-boating, listening to the radio, dancing at the dance hall, and, of course, drinking in the local taverns. Weddings were week-long celebrations. And after Prohibition began in 1920, making home-brew and weekly parties became entertainment staples.

A Pleasant Place

Despite the mainstream contempt for Barren Islanders

and their living situation, a number of “outsiders” closely connected with the island described its inhabitants as exemplary. Except for an occasional tavern brawl, it was mostly a peaceful, law-abiding community. Doors were left unlocked. Day or night, there was little fear for one’s safety. When, finally, a mini police substation was established on the island, most infractions were misdemeanors. There were very few arrests over the years, of which one was for a traffic violation and another for selling beer on Sunday. Rather, the islanders were “hard working, thrifty people—people who [were] respectable... remarkably honest and generous almost to a fault.”

It should be said too that, according to oral histories and contemporaneous documents, the community members were generally quite happy with their lives. They seemed oblivious of (or perhaps inured to) the smells abominated by their urban neighbors. They enjoyed their closeness to nature and were, indeed, spared many of the ills of the big city, including overcrowded tenements and high levels of crime.

The End

In 1926, the Flatbush Avenue extension was built, connecting mainland Brooklyn with Barren Island (where travelers could catch a newly instituted ferry to Rockaway beaches).

In 1927, a private airport somehow materialized right on Barren Island. And in 1931, the city’s first municipal airport opened at Floyd Bennett Field. These innovations brought new forms of entertainment and

Entrepreneurial Teens

After the Flatbush Avenue extension was built and off-island visitors came in droves to watch planes take off from the Barren Island airport, some boys created a lucrative little gig. Parked cars inevitably got stuck in the sand. The boys offered to push, but when drivers stepped on the gas, the “helpers” held the cars back so that the wheels spun deeper and deeper. Then they’d run home to get a shovel and scrap lumber which they used to “rescue” the cars. Once freed from the sand, the grateful drivers would invariably give the boys a nickel or dime.

opportunities. Islanders could stare for hours at the stream of cars, quizzing each other on the various makes and models. They could watch the airplanes do stunts, sometimes persuading pilots to take them up for a short flight or to release a homemade mini-parachute consisting of a handkerchief tied to rocks. In addition, commuting to off-island jobs was now possible, students could take a bus to Brooklyn to attend high school or even college, and student excursions to such places as Coney Island, Prospect Park or the circus became doable. But the other side of the coin was that modern life held the seeds of the community's demise.

Jane Shaw

When educator Shaw began living on the island in 1918, she was appalled at the lack of services. She made it her mission, not only to improve academics, but also to try to improve living conditions. The need for medical care struck her immediately. So she took first-aid lessons, learned some basic diagnostic and treatment skills and served, by default, as island doctor. She gave cooking and English lessons to willing parents. She created a library. She also fought valiantly for fire protection and insurance, although there is no evidence that she ever succeeded.

In her own way, Shaw was a skilled publicist and advocate. In the aftermath of World War I, she improved the Barren Islanders' image by painting them as committed patriots. When a wave of influenza hit the area, she persuaded the Red Cross to provide the sick with fresh milk, as opposed to condensed, the only milk that had ever been available. And she was extremely effective at getting philanthropic organizations to donate needed items (for example, roller skates and a movie projector) or respond in other needed ways. No wonder she was considered "the guardian angel of Barren Island."

The fish and garbage operations had already closed years before. As automobiles gained popularity, the number of horses seen on the streets of New York gradually decreased. There was less and less call for the services of Barren Island. Conversely, as New York City's population grew, there was more and more objection to the island's smells. The horse factory finally ceased operations in 1934 and, in early 1936, "master builder" Robert Moses closed the island entirely in order to construct the Marine Parkway Bridge connecting the Flatbush Avenue extension and the Rockaways. Despite his almost dictatorial power in the matter of development, Jane Shaw succeeded in getting him to keep the island school open until the end of the academic year, after which almost all the island families were evicted. There was some discussion about making the area a shipping port, but it would have required too much costly dredging and it never happened.



Today Barren Island exists only as a bottle-littered beach where "treasure hunters" go to find remnants of its past "civilization." Photo credit: thetablet.com

Today the island's identity has been obliterated. Physically connected to Floyd Bennett Field, it is now a park, part of the Jamaica Bay unit of the Gateway National Recreation Area managed by the National Parks Service. But it should not be forgotten. Despite a polyglot environment in which not everyone could communicate with one another, transition difficulties imposed by an almost total absence of the immigrant and welfare agencies that aided assimilation in the city proper, and the hardship of living

without modern city services such as plumbing, electricity and fire-fighting, these people persevered. They forged a lively community and provided an essential service without which New York couldn't have prospered—a ringing epitaph for a largely unknown and unappreciated population.

Editor's note: The above article is based largely on a Master of Arts Thesis submitted by Miriam Sicherman in 2018 to the Faculty of the

Department of History at Brooklyn College. On November 18 of this year, Ms. Sicherman's non-fiction book on the subject, *Brooklyn's Barren Island*, 160 pages, will be published by History Press. Carol Zoref's fictional story of the island, *Barren Island*, is also available, published by New Issues Poetry and Prose, 415 pages.

Other sources:
The Hatching Cat, hatchingcatnyc.com
Wikipedia, en.wikipedia.com



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From the RIHS Archive:

Chapel of the Holy Spirit: A Difficult Past, an Uncertain Future

by Melanie C. Colter

The Roosevelt Island Historical Society has been collecting materials pertaining to our island's past for over 40 years and encourages use by the public. If you are interested in investigating some aspect of Roosevelt Island history, contact RooseveltIslandHistory@gmail.com for an appointment.

The gray stone chapel on the northwest side of the island—known by island residents for the past 15 years as the Dayspring Church—was built in 1924 for the growing Metropolitan Hospital community. Originally named the Episcopal Chapel of the Holy Spirit, it was located adjacent to the hospital (then housed in the Octagon building), and resembled a quaint English parish church with English-style buttresses and gothic revival elements. The chapel served Metropolitan patients and



The Chapel of the Holy Spirit as it looked when first built. Photo credit: Archives of the Episcopal Diocese of New York.

staff until 1955, when the hospital outgrew its headquarters and relocated to Upper Manhattan. This coincided with the widespread abandonment of many of the island's late 19th- and early 20th-century medical buildings. For nearly a generation, the chapel sat vacant, apart from its resident

chaplain and his family, who continued to live in the adjoining rectory. As with the few surviving structures from this period, demographic changes on the island rendered it a vessel for re-use later in the 20th century.

Financial Woes from the Beginning!

Completed in January 1925, the building boasted the finest finishes, including gothic tracery around the colorful painted lights, a slate roof, and cladding of gray gneiss quarried from the island. So, a ballooning construction budget was perhaps no surprise. According to the New York Altar Guild, a non-profit charged with serving the needs of religious institutions throughout the city, the cost had expanded by more than \$55,000—a debt so sizable, it prevented the chapel's consecration.

The Guild described items already gifted to the chapel by patrons: several furnishings, lamps, linens, and Bibles. Even the central stained-glass window above the altar had been a gift in memory of a student who died before finishing nursing school at Metropolitan. Now the Guild was obliged to solicit further donations from “non-Roman, non-Jewish persons connected with Metropolitan Hospital.”

It took till mid-year for the debt to be settled. Then, led by Bishop William T. Manning, previously of New York's Trinity Church and currently tenth Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New York, a consecration ceremony finally took place.

The Clergy of Holy Spirit

Rev. Herbert C. Dana, 1925–1934

First chaplain in residence
Previously served 17 years as rector of
St. Mary's Church in Providence, RI

Rev. William Martin Tilton, 1934–1946

Rev. Richard S. Purdy, 1940–1967

Rev. George B.H. McNamara, 1946– 1955

Rev. Richard Gene Hemm, 1967

All in all, it had been a difficult “birth.” The Bishop recalled that plans to construct the chapel had been discussed as early as 1910. It took nearly eight years for the plans to be approved, then seven more years for fundraising and construction. But finally the long-awaited addition to Metropolitan Hospital was realized.

A number of clergymen presided at Holy Spirit (see sidebar); they served collectively from 1925 to about 1967. By then the hospital had been gone for over a decade; ultimately the decreasing population and institutional presence on the island saw the end of the church's ministry.

Reverend Hemm Calls Chapel Home

Even after the chapel ceased operations, Rev. Hemm and his family continued to live in the rectory for many years. The setting seemed appealing: the seven-room stone building they occupied provided ample space; and, as the Reverend remarked in a 1970's *New York Times* interview, he and his neighbors had grown accustomed to the spectacular Manhattan views from their quiet, open countryside. Moreover, the city continued to provide for the few chaplains and rabbis who remained, at least until the New York State Urban Development Corp. broke ground on the

monumental urban renewal project that would become Roosevelt Island. The plans proposed dense, multi-family housing that would drastically transform the sparsely-populated and increasingly dilapidated island into a new community, positioned along a central main street. It brought the sort of close-quarter living that many of the island's remaining inhabitants did not appreciate. Nevertheless, early RI residents may remember the Reverend, who continued to occupy the rectory with his family and pet dogs until the 1990s.

Recent History Echoes Older Troubles

In 1997, a new chapter in the chapel's history began when the Redeemed Christian Church of God, later named Dayspring Church, leased the chapel from the Roosevelt Island Operating Corp. Time had not been kind to the structure and, over the years, the Baptist congregation rehabilitated the church with extensive repairs. The work included exterior as well as interior refurbishing, and transformation of the rectory into a school.

The church remained in operation nearly 21 years. But financial woes finally put its future in question. Pastor Dr. Olusegon Obed described the compound challenges of



The stained-glass window above the altar was donated in memory of a Metropolitan student-nurse. Photo credit: Bobbie Slonevsky.

maintaining a historic structure in need of maintenance, while membership and attendance continued to decline. Similar to the first year of its operation in 1925, the chapel's congregation publicly solicited financial assistance in October of last year—to no avail. As of January of this year, the ministry was evicted from its beloved sanctuary.

What of the chapel's future? At the moment, the Related Companies are proposing to convert it into an event space. Whether the project is successful is anybody's guess. For now, the building's only certainty is uncertainty.

Sources:

Briana Warsing, "Island Retail: Comings and Goings," *Main Street Wire*, January 27, 2019.

"Chapel of the Holy Spirit at Metropolitan Hospital," *Roosevelt Island Historical Society Archives*.

Images of America: Roosevelt Island, Arcadia Publishing, New York 2003.



Interior view of the chapel, 1927. Photo Credit: Episcopal Diocese of New York.

RIHS Calendar

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

Thursday, November 14, 2019

In the Shadows at Newtown Creek

Newtown Creek is the boundary between Queens and Brooklyn. Mitch Waxman has explored and photographed the architecture and landscape of the area and serves as historian of the Newtown Creek Alliance. Waxman will share photographs of *In the Shadows at Newtown Creek*, his recently published book. He will describe the creek's rich history as a transport route for farm produce, its industrial use and the area's current environmental challenges.

Thursday, December 19, 2019

New York's Bridges as You Have Never Seen Them Before!

Known as *The Bridge Man*, photographer Dave Frieder has climbed 20 of New York's great bridges to photograph them in intimate and distinctive ways. Gain a new perspective as he discusses his approach to capturing the engineering behind the bridges that you may take for granted.

Thursday, January 16, 2020

Façades and Fashions in Medical Architecture

Take a closer look at the buildings that have provided medical care over the years in New York. Bert Hansen will discuss how architecture intersects with medical practice and education.

Thursday, February 13, 2020

Eighty Days: Nellie Bly and Elizabeth Bisland's History-Making Race Around the World

Intrepid journalists Nellie Bly and Elizabeth Bisland set forth on November 14, 1889 to travel around the world as quickly as possible, racing each other and the fictional 80-day voyage by Jules Verne. Matthew Goodman will recount stories of their trips, capturing vignettes of the late 19th century.

These lectures are supported by funds from Amalgamated Bank, Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation's Public Purpose Fund and New York City Council Member Ben Kallos, with additional funding from the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development.

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