

Blackwell's Almanac

A Publication of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society



Cluster of cherry blossom trees north of Meditation Steps. See "Cherry Blossom Contender," page 9.

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

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Historical Society

In 1884, Robert Emmett Cleary was appointed Chief Commissary Officer of Blackwell's Island, then owned by the City and managed by the Department of Charities and Corrections. He and his family, which eventually included eight children, lived here until 1892, when, as a political appointee, he lost his job following the Democrats' ouster from office. The following 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.

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The pay was [good] and living quarters and servants were included, a real plus for a man with such a large family and still another child on the way...

[Buildings on the Island] included a prison, two almshouses, a workhouse, two small hospitals for contagious diseases, a large charity hospital, an insane asylum, various storage houses and residences for the superintendents. A seawall was built around the island. This as well as the public buildings were built of granite quarried on the island. Water was brought through mains running under the river from the Croton reservoir.

All food and supplies had to be brought on barges from the South St. and Fulton St. wharfs in lower Manhattan to the Island's dock on its southern tip. The public buildings were clustered on the lower end. The northern end still maintained an almost rural look, with trees and underbrush and open grassy areas. Armed guards in longboats patrolled the Island night and day.

Superintendents were required to live on the Island in residences provided by the city. Additional personnel traveled back and forth each day on a small boat that ran between the Island's docks and the New York City dock at 52nd St. Visitors to the Island had to have authorized passes. In every way it was a closed community and a rather strange one in which to transplant a group of young children. There were [then] seven of them, ranging in age from the oldest, Frank, my

father, who was 13 years old, to the infant Bernard. There were only two other children on the Island, a very young boy [about seven]... and another boy...son of one of the resident doctors, who was two years older than my father. They spent much of their leisure time together. For several summers he and his friend sat on the sea wall counting and cataloguing the great variety of shipping traffic on the river...

As head of the Commissary, it was Robert Emmett's responsibility to supervise all supplies and food needed by the 1200 plus people living on the Island. All orders had to go through his hands and disposition of them after arrival was a major operation... When they landed at the docks...they had to be checked and then allocated to various buildings. Frank and his friend Will sometimes helped with the checking. Trusted prisoners from the penitentiary moved the supplies from the dock to the places where they were to be used.

Aunt Jo's Story

[According to Aunt Jo, Cleary's fifth child and sister of the writer's father, Frank:] "At the time Robert Emmett decided to take the job... there was no residence large enough for his family of seven children. Somewhat apart from the other buildings was a large fieldstone one that housed offices, and on the second floor, [the almshouses' Catholic chapel that also accommodated Protestant services].

"[The first floor] was remodeled and...became a 10-room apartment... with the kitchen and store rooms in the basement. There were six bedrooms

and an immense dining room, parlor and a bathroom as big as the bedrooms and two immense central halls... Here is where after supper we did our homework with mother close by to help. Sometimes this is where we heard her famous stories. It was a good place to retire in a severe thunder and lightning storm. I was never frightened by thunder because mother told me it was only

Santa Claus rolling his large barrels of candy over wooden bridges. The louder the thunder, the more candy...

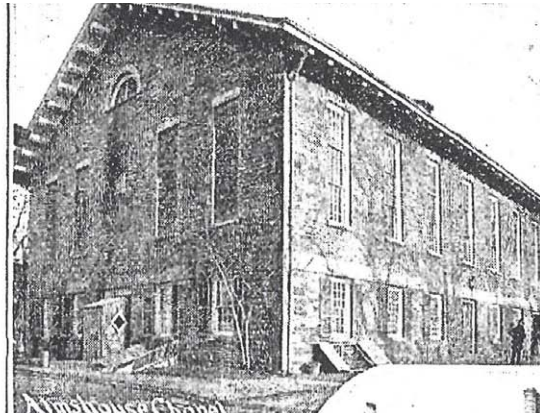
"A lovely green lawn stretched from the terrace around the front door and down to the East River.

Across the water on still summer nights we could plainly hear the German Bands of Jones Woods and Washington Park...

"On summer evenings about 5:30, the Fall River boat passed our house on the way to Boston. We children would seize a towel or a large napkin, run to the edge of the lawn and wave vigorously to the passengers on board. They always waved back and the band on the steamer... would strike up [an] old refrain, the words of which one of the workhouse women told us were:

'Then you work with shirk-
And go back to your cell.
A grand institution's
The Island Blackwell!'

"There have been, I understand, many shocking tales told of the shocking conditions on Blackwell's Island, but they never intruded on us so far as I know. We lived in the little circle of our home, never coming into contact with



The Almshouse Chapel building.

the inmates [at] the Workhouse, Penitentiary, or Insane Asylum... The women of [the Island's] institutions sent to serve as cooks, seamstresses, nurses, laundresses, etc. were carefully chosen by the matrons. There is no doubt [that] my mother's constant vigilance and father's influence saved us from meeting up with the bad influences we might have encountered. These women knew that the slightest offense meant immediate return to the workhouse. It was considered a privilege to work for mother.

"On Sunday afternoon we were sometimes taken for a ride on the White Stage drawn by two horses with Old John, the coachman, on the front seat. Once he let me sit with him and hold the reins of the two horses who, no doubt, wouldn't even know how to run away. On these trips we usually made a complete circuit of the Island, passing



On the road to the Insane Asylum.

through the gates in the high stone walls that divided the Island into three sections. As we passed the Insane Asylum we sometimes saw the inmates behind bars on the balconies waving to us and uttering wild and frantic cries. We'd go up to the very end to the Lighthouse and back to the South and around 'Charity Hospital' as the City Hospital was then called. Then home past the Penitentiary, which of course was always quiet as the inmates were all in their cells.

"We were allowed to roam in freedom through the Almshouses and never did [sister] Marie and I ever encounter an untoward incident... [although] we met some queer characters. One was 'Johnny the Horse,' a poor demented young man who imagined he was a horse. He was the son, I understand, of a fine family. He went around the island pulling a wagon made from a large packing case. He was harnessed to it like a horse and carried an imitation tail made from unraveled rope. He often invited us to take a ride, but we were forbidden to do so...

"Then there was 'Sam the Fisherman.' Sam looked exactly like the statue of St. Joseph, gray hair and neat gray beard. His eyes were blue and gentle. To us, he seemed very old. He was the sexton and served as altar boy for Father Blumenstadt. When he was not busy around chapel, he spent almost the entire day sitting on the sea wall, his feet hanging over the water, fishing. I never remember him catching anything, although we children hailed him several times a day, 'Catch anything, Sam?' When he served on the altar, with [our brother] Rob as his assistant, his cassock, which had originally been made for a 12 or 14 year old boy and which had turned from black to green with age, came up to his knees in front and down to his heels in back... Sam made rosaries at a little wooden table in front of the chapel. The drawer was filled with many colored glass beads and he taught Marie and me how to string a rosary as well as he did."

TO BE CONTINUED.

Look for Part II of "A Family's Life on RI" in the next (August) issue of Blackwell's Almanac.

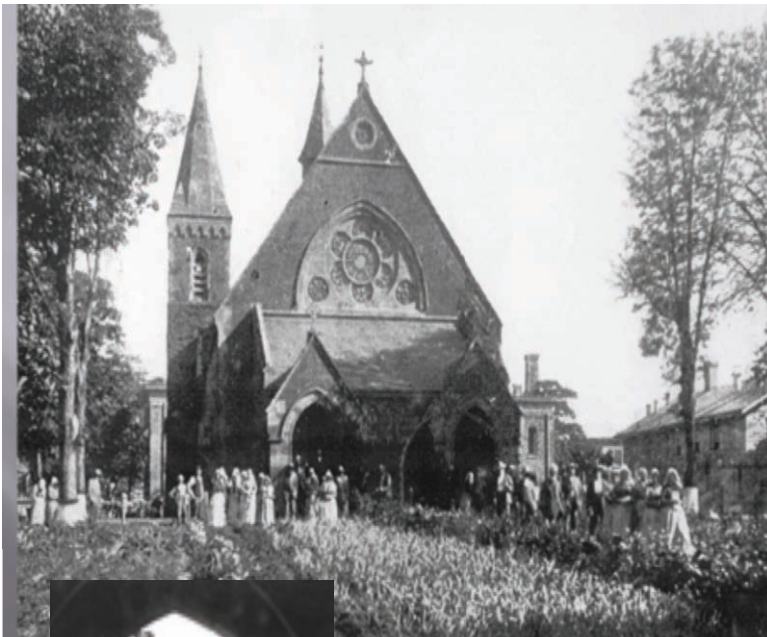
Religious RI: A Richness of Worship

By the mid-19th century, Blackwell's Island was a major center of social services for the already populous New York City. It counted a penitentiary for felons, an almshouse complex to house the poor, a workhouse to mete out justice for petty infractions, and a lunatic asylum and several different hospitals to isolate and treat the ill. As in 19th century America generally, religion was an important component of the lives of both staff members and inmates.

Early on, most of the institutions had small chapels shared by the various

denominations. These were within or specific to their buildings. Priests, ministers and rabbis rowed over regularly to serve their ministries. Then, the New York City Episcopal Mission Society built and opened the Chapel of the Good Shepherd in 1889, and a string of houses of worship followed.

Below is a pictorial account of Roosevelt Island's historic religious institutions, based on a presentation given earlier this year at the Library by Judith Berdy, President of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society.



1889, Chapel of the Good Shepherd

Designed by Frederick Clark Withers (also architect of the Strecker Memorial Laboratory). His initial construction estimate was \$5,000, subsequently revised to \$10,000. The final cost was \$80,000. The church's materials and design were considered so beautiful, people came from across the U.S. and abroad to visit. It was originally lit by gas jets that can still be seen in the chapel.

Protestant inmates of the almshouses were the first congregants, led by first minister William Glenny French. Men and women had to enter through separate entrances and sit on their respective sides of the chapel. The elderly were helped up a temporary entrance ramp; haul ropes helped with those in wheelchairs. Women parishioners tended the vegetable garden.

The church was closed in 1958 with the closing of the City Home almshouses. In 1965, while working at Coler Hospital, Rev. Oliver Chapin moved in with his family. In

1975 the building became State property; it was restored to accommodate both Protestants and Catholics and serve as a community center for the newly developed Island.



Can You Find the Backward Brick?

In the sanctuary there is a brick that was placed backwards. The side with the manufacturer's embossed stamping "Sayre and Fisher" is showing. (Hint: Check out the northwest corner.)

1909, Chapel of Our Lady Consoler of the Afflicted

The first Catholic church on the island, built by the Archdiocese of New York for the almshouses' Catholic population. It allowed the weak and disabled, who could not climb the rickety almshouse chapel staircase, to worship. On the day of dedication, all donors and VIPs attended the service and lunch afterwards at the church. Unfortunately there weren't enough places at the dining table to go around; so some of the Catholic guests had to eat with



the (then thought of as rival) Episcopalians in Good Shepherd. Ultimately, however, the church ecumenically provided a Catholic service one hour and an Episcopal service the next. The chapel was abandoned when the almshouses closed and was ultimately demolished.



1913, Chapel of the Sacred Heart

Built to serve the consumptive Catholic patients of Metropolitan Hospital, whose illness prevented them from mixing with other people. It was designed so that every surface could be cleaned to prevent TB from infecting others. The chapel was very big (seated 900) and very beautiful; it included an elaborate rectory with a porch overlooking the river, an extensive garden, and a

magnificent statue of Christ outside. The church was offered to the RI community when it was under development. However, the clergy thought it was too big and declined the offer. The structure was demolished in the late 1970s to make room for community tennis courts.

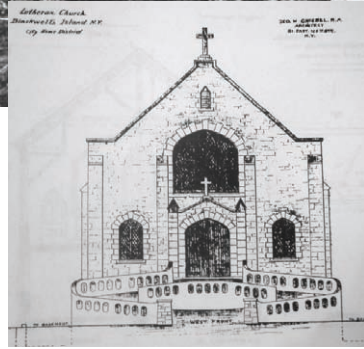
1925, Chapel of the Holy Spirit

Built by the Altar Guild of the NY Episcopal Mission Society for the Protestant patients of Metropolitan Hospital with tuberculosis. It resembled a quaint English parish church with an attached rectory and



slate roof. The main set of stained-glass windows above the altar memorialized a Metropolitan nurse who had passed away. The church also featured a gazebo behind the original structure. Holy Spirit was home to the Metropolitan Hospital clergy, including Rev. Hemm who, early RI residents may remember, lived there with his family and pet dogs. The building was closed in the 1980s when Metropolitan Hospital was relocated to Manhattan. It was leased to Dayspring Church in the 1990s.





1926, Good Samaritan German Lutheran Church

Opened by the Lutheran Inner-Mission Society and designed by architect George Henry Griebel. The church was located adjacent to Chapel of the Good Shepherd. It was known for exceptionally beautiful stained-glass windows. But once it was abandoned, no one rescued them and they were ultimately vandalized. The structure was demolished in the early 1970s.

1927, Council Synagogue

Funded by the National Council of Jewish Women for Jewish residents of the almshouses, the temple also served about 100 Jewish patients from Goldwater Hospital. It was located northwest of the Chapel of the Good Shepherd. Immediately after opening, conflict arose between reformed and orthodox congregants; the latter wanted services three times a day. They staged a protest, but details of the outcome are unknown. The building was demolished after almshouse residents were relocated elsewhere (some to Coler) in 1952, although the national organization continued to serve the Jewish patients of Coler and Goldwater, hosting services, parties and seders.



Cherry Blossom Contender

It is well known that the more than 3,000 cherry blossom trees gracing the Potomac Tidal Basin in Washington DC were a gift of the city of Tokyo early in the 20th century. Less well known is how and when we acquired ours.



Allée of cherry blossoms on the west promenade.

The name Mary Lasker reverberates in philanthropic circles, mostly in the field of medicine. But she had other interests too. Wife of advertising mogul Albert D. Lasker, Mrs. Lasker was determined to contribute, and inspire others to contribute, to the beautification of New York City. The two best-known programs of her Salute to the Seasons Fund, founded in 1957, are the Park Avenue Malls Planting Project and the Park Avenue Holiday Lighting. However, another donation may have proved even more consequential.

In 1975–76, at the dawn of the Roosevelt Island development, Lasker made a generous gift of cherry blossom trees to the community. They now constitute the magnificent allées along the west promenade across from what was Goldwater Hospital and will soon be Cornell Tech, and all along the east promenade. There is no doubt that their

cloud-like masses of blossoms that bloom every April enriched our Island landscape. But, just as important, they seem to have inspired RIOC, other RI organizations and Island developers to plant more. Additions over the years now embellish all of Roosevelt Island. Of particular historical note is the grove of less mature trees south of the Rivercross lawn, which was dedicated in 2011 to the people of Japan in the wake of the earthquake/tsunami. The trees were planted by RIOC and the Roosevelt Island Residents' Association in coordination with the Roosevelt Island Tree Board. They anchored a fundraiser hosted by RIRA, the Japanese Association of Roosevelt Island and other groups to raise money for Japan Society's Earthquake Relief Fund.



Trees planted after the earthquake/tsunami. A commemorative plaque on the rock reads: "Celebration of Hope: This grove of trees is dedicated in solidarity with the Japanese people."

Roosevelt Island boasts several varieties of cherry blossoms. They all flower within a couple of weeks of one another, the white blossoming earlier than the heavier pink blooms. The exquisite blossoms that come and go so quickly are said to symbolize the

evanescence of life, the cycle of life, death and rebirth, an aspect of Asian cultural tradition often associated with Buddhist influence. When the flowers burst out of their buds, the Asian people celebrate with food, dance and music—the very components of the Cherry Blossom Festival that took place in Four Freedoms Park on April 25, and has been an annual tradition since 2010.

There are upwards of 400 cherry blossom trees on RI. This compares with 500 in Central Park and just 200 in the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens. What's more, the recent festival attracted several thousand visitors. Our celebrity may be in its infancy, but surely we have made it to the Cherry Blossom Big Leagues.

RIHS Calendar

Sunday, May 24, 2:00 pm – “Landmarks Preserved, Part I: Two Medical Structures Saved by Landmarking.” Tour of the Smallpox Hospital and Strecker Laboratory in conjunction with the Municipal Arts Society. These buildings (and the Octagon) started out as medical institutions on Blackwell's Island. Learn what happened to these structures and how they are used now that they have been landmarked. (Look for “Landmarks Preserved, Part II: The Octagon” at the end of the summer, TBD.) Guided by Judith Berdy, president of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society. Cost: \$20/\$15 for members. (Tour must be booked through MAS—<http://www.mas.org> Advance reservations are required.)

All Summer Long – “Ice Cream and Island Memorabilia.” Stop by the RIHS Visitor Center kiosk every Saturday and Sunday from 12 noon to 5 pm for a scoop (or two) of delicious ice cream from Coach Scot's Sweet Shop cart.



Then check out the new shipment of coffee mugs celebrating our Island history. The mugs feature renderings of either Blackwell's Island Lunatic Asylum or Blackwell's Island Workhouse—a fun reminder of these long-gone institutions.

June is coming and lots of great new merchandise will be available at the Kiosk. Come by for great gifts and remembrances.

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.

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