

Blackwell's Almanac

A Publication of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society



Sadly derelict for decades, the Vernon Boulevard “house under the bridge” seems to be coming back to life. (See “Terra Cotta King!” page 2.) Photo credit: Mitch Waxman, The Newtown Pentacle.

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Terra Cotta King!

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Blackwell's Almanac

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You've passed it numerous times—the diminutive, stepped-gable brick house that sits on Vernon Boulevard just south of the Queensboro Bridge. For decades it's been derelict: grimy, boarded up, seemingly uncared for. Recently, however, workmen have been bringing it back to life: it has been power-washed, given a new roof, and its newly revealed signs and decorative plaques reflect a fascinating history.

It turns out the building was not a private home at all. It was built in 1892 as office headquarters to the prominent New York Architectural Terra-Cotta Works.

Architectural terra cotta is raw, clay-based brick material that is shaped into decorative forms and then fired. It became popular in the 1880s for its low cost compared to stone, its ornamental and color versatility, and the fact that it was fireproof. That was also the decade when skyscrapers began changing New York's skyline. To cash in on the trend, in 1886 New York Architectural Terra-Cotta Works constructed an "industrial complex" comprising a five-story factory, kiln works and a storage yard, all surrounded by a 12-foot high wall of brick. The company located its enterprise on the



The New York Architectural Terra-Cotta Works, 1906. (Note span of the not-yet-completed Queensboro Bridge in background.) Photo credit: Greater Astoria Historical Society.

former Wallach and Gottlieb waterfront estates in what was then rural Queens, thus enjoying crucial river access to the building explosion across the way. The company's showrooms and headquarters were in the nearby Wallach mansion.



Roof tiles and flues decorated with spiral and incised checkerboard patterns. Photo credit: klq19.tumblr.com



"OFFICE" door with decorative frieze and side panels. Photo credit: ScoutingNY.com

By 1892 the firm had already supplied or was on its way to supplying terra cotta for Carnegie Hall, the Plaza Hotel, the Ansonia Hotel on 73rd and Broadway, the elaborate Montauk Club in Brooklyn, and scores of other construction projects here and across the country. It was time for a dedicated office building that bespoke the company's stature and could showcase its capabilities and wares. Designed by Francis H. Kimball, the 20- by 60-foot, Tudor Revival structure embodies what one writer has called "an exuberant use of brick and terra cotta."

- The roof is sheathed in semi-circular terra cotta pantiles
- The chimney flues are beautifully decorated with spiral and checkerboard patterns and are topped with Tudor Revival chimney pots identical to those featured in the company's catalog
- The ends of the roof gables are stepped with beige terra cotta coping stones
- Below the roof is a terra cotta belt of whimsically grotesque faces set in a scroll pattern running the width of the façade
- On the sides of the two doorways are carved panels with paired figures
- Above the doors are friezes of intricate leaf patterns and masks
- Above that is a course displaying egg and dart motifs
- The steps to the entrances are beige terra cotta
- Terra cotta signs abound: the original address, 401, above the south door; the word "Office" above the north door; "Anno Domini 1892" in a flowing design on a small plaque high on the rounded bay; and the spectacular plaque displaying the company name against a terra cotta background of vines and leaves and a mask



Address, frieze and egg-and-dart course above south door. Photo credit: flickriver.com

- Above the name plaque, more terra cotta ornamentation echoing that above the doors

The company excelled at custom work, but also kept a large “off the shelf” stock of chimney pots, wall copings, panels, tiles, moldings, sills, jambs, lintels, brackets, and corbels. It eventually became the largest facility of its kind in the U.S., supplying terra cotta to over 2,000 buildings here and in Canada and ranking as the fourth largest employer in Long Island City. Time, however, was not kind. Architectural styles changed, favoring the use of cast-concrete over terra cotta, and economic perils that would soon trigger the Great Depression took their toll. The company filed for bankruptcy in 1928-29. Another manufacturer, the Eastern Terra Cotta Company, occupied the premises through the mid-1940s and produced architectural terra cotta for New York’s parks under the administration of Robert Moses. Other businesses involving construction, plastics and waste paper were housed there until 1968, when the entire complex was sold to Citibank.

By the early 1970s, the site was abandoned and overgrown. Citibank demolished all but the office building in 1976, piquing the ire of local activists who fought to have the orphaned structure landmarked and thus protected. They were finally successful in 1982, at which time the owner boarded up the doorways, windows and plaques to protect them from vandalism. The windows and doors are

still covered, but why suddenly have the bricks been cleaned, the roof restored and the plaques unboxed?



Photo credit: ScoutingNY.com

At some point Silvercup Studios acquired the property, and the Terra-Cotta Works’ recent change of fortune would seem to have something to do with Silvercup’s plans for expansion. The company anticipates building a 2.2 million square foot, 1 billion dollar film studio-mixed use complex flanking the Queensboro Bridge. It would include eight sound stages, an office tower,

1,000 apartments, a parking facility, retail space and an esplanade...as well as the refurbished Terra-Cotta Works as a special feature. The building is indeed a worthy attraction. It is an elegant gem of brick and terra cotta artistry. It is the only structure of its type known to have survived in the United States. What’s more, it stands as a symbol of the material and industry that

transformed construction during a singular period of the city’s growth.



Photo credit: ScoutingNY.com

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Leading the Way: Our Island and the March of Medicine Part 2—The Smallpox Hospital

As far back as the founding of New Amsterdam, smallpox epidemics seemed to ravage New York City regularly, and the 1850s were no exception. City officials knew that 25 to 30% of those affected would die, while survivors would be left scarred and occasionally blind. Yet, little was being done. Affluent victims tended to be treated at home—thus promoting further contagion, while the less fortunate were cared for in a pile of porous wooden shacks on the banks of the East River known as “deadhouses.” In one of history’s clarifying moments, health experts realized the necessity of not just improving treatment conditions, but also of isolating all those with the disease—and so was born the Smallpox Hospital.



The original Smallpox Hospital designed by James Renwick, Jr. Photo credit: NYC Municipal Archives.

Designed by celebrated architect James Renwick, Jr., the 100-bed facility, which opened in 1856, was constructed of gray gneiss quarried on the Island. Both quarrymen and construction workers were recruited from the Island’s penitentiary. This kept the price modest (\$38,000), but in no way compromised the building’s aesthetic. Its imposing Gothic revival façade included a grand entrance portico, third floor windows with unusual triangular arches, a crenellated roof, and a massive tower topping it all.

Of course, the Blackwell Island hospital’s most critical feature was that it was the first actual medical facility in the entire United States “to receive victims of contagion and plague” (previously victims of cholera, TB, yellow fever, scarlet fever, measles, and typhus had been isolated on boats or other islands surrounding Manhattan). It was also the only hospital in New York City that admitted and treated smallpox patients, and given its location, was uniquely able to quarantine its charges from the rest of the population. Visitors were strictly prohibited, and even were they not, the inconvenient journey by boat—with grisly views of corpses and coffins being readied for shipment back to Manhattan—was a frank discouragement. Instead, paid runners carried letters from the boat dock to the hospital.

Once the hospital was built, by law, all residents with smallpox were to be referred to it for quarantine. So, unlike other institutions on the island, which accepted only charity cases, this facility also accepted well-to-do, private patients. While the poor and immigrants occupied wards on the lower floors, these affluent inmates were assigned special rooms on the upper floor and paid \$5 or \$10 a week for somewhat better food.



An additional wing was added onto either end of the hospital (see right) once it became a nursing school. Photo credit: NYC Department of Public Welfare.

Surviving reports of the care given to the nearly 10,000 patients treated in the 1850s and '60s at the Smallpox Hospital are decidedly mixed. On various occasions, *The New York Times* decried "deplorable conditions," a facility that was a "mere shanty," poor ventilation contributing to "many deaths," inhumane overcrowding, with seven or eight patients confined to a room with only four beds, repeated re-use of clothing and bedding already contaminated by the smallpox virus, and orderlies and nurses who were nothing more than "semi-reformed drunkards and women of questionable character." On the other hand, stories and letters in the very same publication spoke of the hospital's excellent organization and setting resulting in "the best of care," "better fed" patients, doctors who were "zealous...attentive...and thoroughly competent," physician visits to the wards at least twice a day and sometimes as often as three to five times daily, and nurses who were "as good as can be obtained for twice their present wages."

Whatever the truth, by the mid-1870s, almost 20 years after its opening, the

hospital was frankly in need of renovation and improvement, and there was, indeed, reluctance on the part of patients to go there. City officials were convinced that a campaign was needed to change the hospital's image. First, they renamed it, choosing the more picturesque "Riverside Hospital." Then they replaced the old, open "sick wagon" with a closed coupe for transporting smallpox victims from Manhattan to the boat dock. And finally, they enlisted the Sisters of

Charity at New York's St. Vincent Hospital to reform the facility's domestic operations (housekeeping, laundry, non-medical staffing, etc.) and nursing care. There is little doubt that these dedicated women brought a sea-change to patients' experience. The City report asserted that:

"Since the change in management...the hospital has been steadily gaining in popularity, and it is not at all unusual for us to be gratified with the sincere thanks of returned patients for the kindness and tender care which they received during the period of exclusion from their homes and from society...."

In the late 1870s or early 1880s, the Health Department closed the hospital and transferred its population to a new facility on North Brother Island. The exact reason is unclear. Some suggest that the facility was no longer needed. Indeed, around the same time, the City opened a state-of-the-art cowpox farm

Smallpox and Vaccination

In the early 18th century—for the first time in history—the pioneering practice of “variolation” (from the medical term for smallpox, *variola*) offered some protection against smallpox. A physician inserted a dose of pox-infected pus into a patient’s arm. The trick was to introduce just enough virus to cause very mild disease, thus conferring immunity for the rest of the patient’s life. It was not an exact procedure, however, and one to five patients per 100 inoculated died.

A much more practical and safer technique emerged almost a century later. In 1796, the British doctor Edward Jenner demonstrated that smallpox could be prevented by inserting cowpox, a very similar virus, into the skin. This “vaccination” (from the Latin for cow, *vacca*) left only a faint scar on the skin and the technique’s simplicity seemed to promise widespread control of the disease.

Unfortunately, this was not immediately to be the case. Many people, New Yorkers in particular, shunned vaccination. Some were simply complacent; others thought the procedure ineffective, even dangerous; but most important was that New York City residents strongly distrusted any health program promoted by a government that could not clear the streets of rotting animals, could not provide clean drinking water and was regularly caught skimming money from municipal contracts. In fact, the incidence of smallpox in the City actually rose in the middle of the 19th century, thus compelling construction of the Smallpox Hospital.

That epidemic eventually subsided, but in the 1870s, the disease raged anew, killing over 1,200 victims. It returned in 1900, claiming the life of some 700. The Health Department got off to a slow start, but by 1902 it was vaccinating 10,000 New Yorkers a day. “The early prejudice against vaccination has to a great extent disappeared,” wrote *The Times*. In fact the inoculation program was so successful, the disease didn’t reappear until 1947, almost 50 years later.

By then the City’s population had grown to seven million, a beckoning invitation to contagion. But to the surprise of everyone, residents turned the tables on the disease. At health officials’ urging, New Yorkers lined up for blocks in front of dozens of vaccination clinics. Thousands of volunteers worked long hours giving shots. Within two weeks, five million people had been vaccinated, with another million immunized in the next few weeks. The danger was past: just 12 people had contracted the disease and only two had died.

In 1967 a campaign was mounted worldwide to wipe out smallpox. After spending \$300 million on education and immunization, the World Health Organization, in May 1980, declared the disease dead! An intensive multinational effort had achieved the virtual eradication of smallpox, the only such successful effort against any naturally occurring disease in the world.

in downtown Manhattan, where a dozen cows provided a continuous supply of safe and reliable vaccine (see sidebar). The hospital structure became the New York City Training School for Nurses (to be discussed in a future issue of *Blackwell’s Almanac*) and the original building was ultimately expanded with an additional wing at each end to serve as the nurses’ residence. After many decades as a nursing school and temporary use as a maternity ward in the early ‘50s, the Renwick masterpiece was abandoned in 1955 and now stands as a roofless, nearly gutted ruin.

That is not, however, the end of its story. Almost everyone agrees there is something hauntingly beautiful about the Gothic shell. In 1972 it was included in the National Register of Historic Places and in 1975 was designated a New York City Landmark. It inspired an art installation in 1992 by Japanese sculptor Tadashi Kawamata and a choral/dance performance in 1994 by Meredith Monk. At night it is illuminated, offering a dramatic and spectral reflection of our past history.

To ensure the ruin’s survival, it has so far been stabilized twice, most recently in 2007 when the north wall collapsed. And now that it is the centerpiece of the recently opened Southpoint Park, yet another, more comprehensive engineering rescue is envisioned for the future. There is some talk of making it a visitors’ center—certainly a fit new life for a building that has already seen so much.

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A Family's Life on RI— 130 Years Ago Part 3

By now you are well acquainted with the Robert Emmett Cleary family and their life on what is today Roosevelt Island. Cleary was appointed Chief Commissary Officer of Blackwell's Island in 1884, serving the City's Department of Charities and Corrections. He, his wife and eight children lived here until 1892, when, as a political appointee, he lost his job following the Democrats' ouster from office. Here is Part 3 of their saga. It is largely the reportage of Aunt Jo (Cleary's fifth child), 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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Going to School

"What fun it was when Marie and I were old enough to join Willie and Rob in going to school! Every school morning the stage came to the side of our house outside the nursery window. We piled in one after the other while mother asked from the window, 'Did you say your prayers? Did you wash your teeth? Have you your lunch? Have you your rubbers?' (if it was raining). Nearly always, someone would have to get out to fulfill these directions and, at last, we would be off to meet the 8 o'clock boat at the dock near Charity Hospital.

At the dock I can remember boarding the little pilot boat named, I think, the 'Fidelity.' If the tide was low, the gangplank would be almost perpendicular and, with fear and trembling, we slid down. When all were aboard, off we were to our destination, the dock in NYC at 52nd Street. The trip across the river was always a thrill. The dock at 52nd Street was at the foot of a steep cliff with many wooden steps leading to the upper level. [Then we made] the long walk from the river through 53rd St. to Third Avenue, an equivalent of six long city blocks, and then up Third Ave. to 68th St and another block west to Lexington Ave... We were seldom late and absent only in

the event of very bad weather or illness. Indeed we were often pointed out to a group of late pupils as models.



An East River ferry of the sort that might have carried the Cleary's to Manhattan. Photo credit: Gibbs Marine Photos.

"On Mondays, when we kissed papa goodbye, he would give us a dollar to be divided among us: 25 cents each. On our way to school we passed a bakery named Purdy's. Here we stopped to spend some of our allowance. Willie's favorite was 'Lady Baltimore Cake,' a white cake iced and flavored with almond. She wouldn't permit either Marie or me to buy [the same thing]! That, she declared, was her kind of cake!...Imagine how simple and naïve

we must have been to submit so easily to her tyranny!

“Willie was subject to bad headaches and often during the morning or afternoon sessions we were summoned to go home because ‘Your sister is sick!’ That didn’t bother us any and besides it meant, when we got back to the dock at 52nd St., we could ring the big brass bell stationed there to signal an emergency trip from the city to the island...

“After mother’s death, Aggie [Cleary’s second child and oldest daughter], for a while, tried to take over the management of the children, house, and servants. She was very young, not more than a little over sixteen. She insisted on buying Marie and me straw hats to wear to school. If we didn’t like a certain hat, strange to say, the wind blew it off and we saw it floating down the river to the bay toward the Statue of Liberty. This happened so frequently that papa became annoyed and finally ordered Aggie to take us to Bloomingdale’s to get bonnets with strings to tie under our chins. How mortified we were when the children in school called us ‘Granny.’

Celebrations

“...Charles, the handyman, showed us many funny games and stunts at Halloween, such as ducking for apples (always generously spiked with coins—dimes, nickels and quarters)...telling fortunes with melted lead and involving forfeits. Father always hid a dollar somewhere in the house and the one who found it could keep it...

“Then there were the Fourth’s of July! Days before, the packing cases containing our firecrackers and fireworks were delivered. On the morning of the Fourth, we were up almost at daybreak, ready to start our celebration. We started down near the boathouse so as not to disturb papa’s sleep. By nine o’clock the celebration had moved up to the front of the house and was in full blast! Marie and I were furnished with harmless Cracker Jacks, which exploded with a ‘pop’ when thrown on the stone walk! But, before the day was over, we too went armed with lighted punk and even ventured to shoot the tiny firecrackers while Rob and Willy handled with ease the ‘giant’ crackers.

“After supper papa and Frank and Charles and old John entered the picture. They set up the pin-wheels, sky rockets, colored lights, etc. Sometimes the celebration went on till nearly midnight...I remember the boys were forced to shoot off the crackers by packs to get rid of all we had. What a mess the grounds and lawns were the following morning! But two strong men soon cleared it away and another Fourth had passed in a blaze of glory and noise!

“I remember one Fourth of July partly because it was the day that ‘Maggie escaped.’ The family was all at dinner (on holidays only, Papa graced the table with his presence!). For some reason or other I left the table

and went out the front door to look at something. As I reached the door, Maggie, our cook, and an excellent cook she was, rushed up the basement steps, tore off her apron, threw it up into the air

The Children of Robert Emmet and Williamanna Cleary

1. Frank (Francis Xavier) b. 1871, d. 1940
2. Agnes Cecelia b. 1873, d. 1918
3. Williamanna (Willie) b. 1875, d. 1939
4. Robert Lee, b. 1877, d. 1918
5. Johanna (Aunt Jo) b. 1879, d. after 1960
6. Marie Cecelia b. 1881, d. 1940
7. William Bernard b. 1884, d. 1957
8. Marie Rose (Rosebud) b. 1885 (Blackwell’s Island), d. 1908
9. Emmett b. 1888 (Blackwell’s Island), d. 1889 (Blackwell’s Island)



Brighton Beach Hotel. Photo credit: Wikipedia.

and shouted to me: 'Goodbye. I'm off to New York!' With that, she rushed down to the seawall and apparently jumped into the water. Her boyfriend's boat was waiting for her and into it she had jumped. I ran into the dining room shouting, 'Papa! Papa! Maggie has escaped!'

"Election day was another occasion for fun. All during the days before Election Day, Rob, Johnny White and some of the clerks from father's office were kept busy collecting crates and barrels, etc. for the Election Night Bon Fire. There would be a great pile, perhaps 25 or 30 feet high, ready for the torch. After

supper we all, even the quite little ones, gathered in the square before Father's office. Seated in a circle far enough away from danger, we breathlessly watched the boys start what I truly believed was the biggest Election Bon Fire in the world. Not until the last burning embers had expired did we leave. I can still remember being carried back home half asleep and dumped into bed.

"...Once a year Father took us all to Brighton Beach to have dinner at the Brighton Beach Hotel and afterwards to see the famous Paine's Fireworks and hear Gilmore's band... At Christmas we could have any toys we asked for. Dolls, beautifully dressed by mother like real babies were our favorites. They were perfect in all details, even down to the tiny buttons and buttonholes. Later on she taught us how to make doll clothes."

TO BE CONTINUED.

Look for Part 4, the conclusion to "A Family's Life on RI," in the next (February) issue of Blackwell's Almanac.

Five Island Landmarks Receive Historic Markers

If you walk past Good Shepherd Chapel, the Lighthouse, Strecker Lab, the Smallpox Hospital or Blackwell House, you'll notice something new. Each site now has a brown and white marker indicating it is registered on the National Register of Historic Places (as well as being a New York City designated landmark).

The Register is the official list of the nation's historic places worthy of preservation. Authorized by a 1966 law, it is part of a national program to coordinate and support public and private efforts to identify, evaluate and protect America's historic and archaeological resources.

The markers were donated to the Roosevelt Island Historical Society by the William G. Pomeroy Foundation, a private foundation that focuses on historic research, preservation and historic tourism.



RIHS Calendar

Wednesdays, December 2, 9, 26, 23, until 9:00 pm

Late-night Holiday Shopping at the Visitors' Kiosk

Browse a great assortment of gift items plus refreshments.

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

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

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.



Coming Soon: Watch for Date

Another Auction House Evaluation Event

Following our most successful event last year, auction professionals will again assess the value of your treasures. Collect your precious and interesting items for this informative day.

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