

# Blackwell's Almanac

A Publication of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society



*A steam engine pumper used on Blackwell's Island around the turn of the 20th century. (See "The FDNY on Roosevelt Island," p. 2.) Photo courtesy of the FDNY.*

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*Blackwell's Almanac*

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Publisher:  
Judith Berdy

Writer/editor:  
Bobbie Slonevsky

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## The FDNY on Roosevelt Island

by Anne Cripps

*When invited to speak on the history of the Fire Department of New York on Roosevelt Island, Gary Urbanowicz's first question was, "How long a talk?" "About an hour," said RIHS President Judy Berdy. "Well, I'm not sure there's more than about five minutes' worth of material," was Urbanowicz's less than optimistic reply.*

*A bit of digging unearthed a wealth of information that surprised even Urbanowicz. As Executive Director of the New York City Fire Museum and an honorary Assistant Chief in the FDNY, he's a man steeped in the history of the valiant people and specialized equipment of the city's Fire Department. Here's a summary of what he shared with those who attended the talk at the Roosevelt Island branch of the NY Public Library on January 11, 2018. (All photos courtesy of the FDNY.)*

In 1858, the hospital on Blackwell's Island burned to the ground. A short newspaper article reported that the fire began in the kitchen of the resident physician. Two fire engines rushed to the scene, and about 50 prisoners from the penitentiary and work house "did good service but to no avail." About 550 hospital patients were safely removed; however, all the furniture and bedding were destroyed.

Until the five boroughs were consolidated into the City of New York in 1898, the FDNY officially operated only in Manhattan; Blackwell's Island, alas, had no authorized coverage and depended entirely on staff volunteers.

Nevertheless, in 1867, the first act of the Board of Fire Commissioners' newly appointed Commissioner Wilson was to condemn the inadequate protection given Blackwell's Island and its 6,000 inhabitants. He demanded the installation of a fire signal and the transportation of fire equipment to the island. Watchmen and employees were trained as volunteer firemen, and fought fires with steam, chemical and hand-powered engines, as well as a hook and ladder truck and a supply of hose.



"Fire! Fire!" A Currier & Ives print.



*The original firehouse of Engine Company 49, erected in 1882 just north of the current Motorgate garage.*

A permanent contingent of two officers and ten experienced firemen from the FDNY was finally assigned permanently to Blackwell's Island in 1882, officially establishing Engine

Company 49 in a building located approximately where the Motorgate garage is today. The life of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century fireman was not easy, even when not actively battling a blaze. With only one day off every two weeks, the men worked 151 hours a week to protect the growing population of 12,000 to 14,000 island residents. Engine Company 49 had the distinction of housing the last steam-fired engine to be in service in the city. Today, that steamer is on display at the New York City Fire Museum. A horse-drawn steamer that also saw service on the island is on display at the New York Fire Academy.

Not only was the fireman's work physically dangerous, it also posed serious health risks. A 1910 article in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported on the exemplary way the fire commissioner dealt with any man who had become "dippy" while suffering near-asphyxiation in confined spaces. "He may remain that way for six months or a year, practically unfit for

work," according to the article. The quoted speaker went on to report that the injured men were then sent to Engine Company 49 because it was where "the men have nothing to do from one year's end to another." They were allowed to recover until the doctors and foreman certified that they were ready to return to active duty. It is hard to argue with the speaker's statement: "That is a much better plan than laying a man off, or discharging him."

Just two years later, in 1884, smoke was seen billowing from the dome of the Charity Hospital. The warden, named Roberts, was an old fireman, and after sending out an alarm, he gathered the equipment stored at the hospital and turned a stream of water on the fire until the arrival of Engine Company 49. Engine Company 16 joined the effort, arriving from 23<sup>rd</sup> Street aboard the steamer Thomas S. Brennan. The fire boat Zophar Mills also lent a hand. The fire was confined to the dome, made of wood-covered tin, but the center of the hospital was flooded and damages were estimated at \$1,000.



*This 1912 tractor-drawn apparatus was the last steam pumper used by the FDNY and was assigned to Company 49 on Blackwell's Island. It represented the transition between horse-drawn and motorized equipment.*

Several other fires were reported over the next few decades, one completely destroying the prison hospital; fortunately none resulted in loss of life. In 1930, two elevators were built on the 59<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge to transport cars, passengers and fire engines to what was by then

called Welfare Island. The elevators were capable of carrying ten to 15 tons of weight. However, when Engine Company 260 got a new pumper in 1939, the engine proved to be too long

to fit in the elevator. The truck was modified by putting a hinge on the rear step to be folded up when responding to the island.

1949 saw the erection of a new firehouse north of the 59<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge near today's tram station. It featured a unique brick and glass hose-drying tower, a lounge terrace, recreational facilities, a well-lit bunk room and generous locker and washroom facilities. Engine Company 49 wasn't the only occupant of the new building, which was shared with a new central laundry, designed to serve the island's numerous social service institutions and turning out 11,000 tons of clean laundry a year.

As a result of the construction of the 36<sup>th</sup> Avenue Bridge connecting the island to Long Island City, Engine Company 49 was finally disbanded in September 1958 and the firemen were reassigned to other locations, mainly in Queens. The company lives on, however, in a photo used on the cover of the 2018 Uniformed Firefighters Association calendar showing seven men with their steam engine and the company's Dalmatian.



*Engine Company 49 was organized in 1882 on what was then called Blackwell's Island. The Company was disbanded in 1958 following the construction of the 36th Avenue Bridge connecting the island to Long Island City.*

Not wanting to give up the Welfare Island building, the Fire Department repurposed it for the Mask Service Unit, a group of specialists who maintained air compressors and a

central air reserve. They also tested, serviced and repaired the department's self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA), delivering a clean air supply to fire sites when necessary. They were assigned a retired Civil Defense pumper to use in response to fires on the island.



*A new firehouse was built in 1949 on a site just north of the 59th Street Bridge near today's tram station. The unique brick and glass hose-drying tower is visible at the back.*

The Island's connection with the Fire Department took on another dimension in 1958 when the City allocated \$205,000 to build a new central Fire College on the island that would consolidate practical land and marine training in one location. In the early days, firemen learned on the job, but by the time Mayor Wagner unveiled the new training facility in 1962, probationary firemen, called "probies," were regularly undergoing military-type drills and practicing in simulated situations before being sent out on the job.

The original Blackwell's Island firehouse was used in training; probies sprayed hose streams into the vacant old quarters. They also mastered scaling and descending buildings using a hook ladder, also known as a *pompier* ladder (from the French *pompier* meaning firefighter) in a new state-of-the-art training tower built on the island. A fireman attached a hook ladder to a windowsill or ledge by the

use of a hooked extension. The ladder then hung suspended vertically down the face of the building. A pair of men and two ladders could scale a building to considerable heights by climbing from floor to floor, drawing the ladders up behind and pitching them to the next floor.



*An early fireman's hat, now in a private collection.*

The present building, located north of Motorgate, houses several specialized pieces of equipment, including a truck that can supply firefighting water when the fire hydrant system is not working and can also be put in "reverse" to suck out excess water—which it did at Bellevue Hospital during Hurricane Sandy.

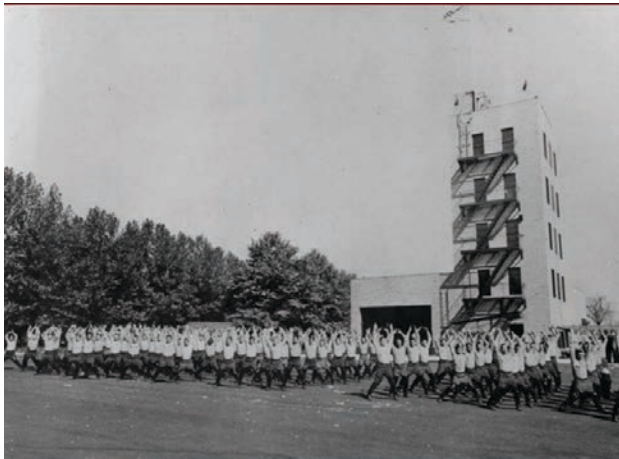
To make way for the increasing residential development on Roosevelt Island, the training academy was moved to Randall's Island in 1975. Yet the Fire Department still maintains a presence here. Since 1981 the island has been headquarters for the Special Operations Command (SOC), a group of specialists who respond to unique or highly critical situations throughout the city.

From a small group of volunteers equipped with rudimentary equipment to a sophisticated specialty operation, Fire Department facilities on Roosevelt Island have protected island residents and their New York neighbors for more than 150 years.

*Editor's note: To see the last steam engine from Blackwell's Island, visit the New York City Fire Museum, 278 Spring Street. The museum is open year round, seven days a week, from 10 am to 5 pm. For information: [info@nycfiremuseum.org](mailto:info@nycfiremuseum.org)*

*(l.) Probationary firemen, called "probies," practicing military-type drills in front of the training tower of the Fire College built in the 1960s.*

*(r.) The original firehouse became a practice site for the new Fire College.*



## Our Island Penitentiary: A Day in the Life...

Completed in 1832, the Blackwell's Island Penitentiary was the first city institution to be built on the island. At the cornerstone ceremony, an official expressed his great



*Blackwell's Island Penitentiary. Image credit: New York Correction History Society.*

hope for the coming facility. He predicted, according to Stacy Horn's *Damnation Island*, that it "would guide convicts in 'the paths of virtue.'" In actuality, alas, it became "a training ground for criminals"—even worse, "a graduate school for crime."

Perhaps that outcome was a function of its inmates; but the Penitentiary's physical environment and the administration's treatment of its prisoners likely played their part as well.

Picture a two-block-long structure of stone and iron. Cells, described by an inmate as "simply caves in the granite," were 6 feet 9 inches high, 3 1/2 feet wide, and 7 feet deep. From a humane perspective, Horn notes, they were hardly big enough for one person; yet the severe overcrowding that came to define the prison necessitated assigning two prisoners to most cells. Their beds were nothing more than two strips of canvas covered by a blanket that remained unwashed for the inmates' entire sentence (often as long as one to ten years). Their only other "amenities" were a tin drinking cup and a chamber pot. The latter item was emptied by the prisoners every morning into the river without regard for current health ordinances.

In fact, there seemed to be little concern for health or healthful conditions. The cells were, in the words of a Commissioner of the Department of Correction, "wet, slimy, dark, foul smelling, and unfit for pigs to wallow in." They were certainly devoid of air, light and heat. There were no windows. The narrow corridor outside the cells had only one gaslight every 50 feet and just one stove for heat. The eating hall boasted only a single reflector lamp, which often suffered from the poor quality and

inadequate quantities of gas supplied to the prison. And as the century advanced, the overcrowding became dire. By the 1870s, the facility's 496 cells held a daily average population of 865, and this number continued to climb.

### **Voyage to Misery**

Convicted prisoners traveled from the Tombs to the dangerous precincts of the Twenty-Sixth Street Pier in a bumpy carriage called the Black Maria. After disembarking from the river steamer onto Blackwell's Island, the men were herded into a large reception room where their personal information was recorded and they were—no doubt, roughly—stripped, publicly bathed, shaved and dressed in prison stripes. The women underwent similar processing elsewhere. Infants accompanying the women or born in the prison's lying-in rooms remained with their mothers until they were weaned, at which time they were sent to a facility on Randall's Island or to family or friends.

Although the law of the day prohibited offenders under the age of 16 (and later under the age of 14) from being incarcerated in the Penitentiary, little effort was made to

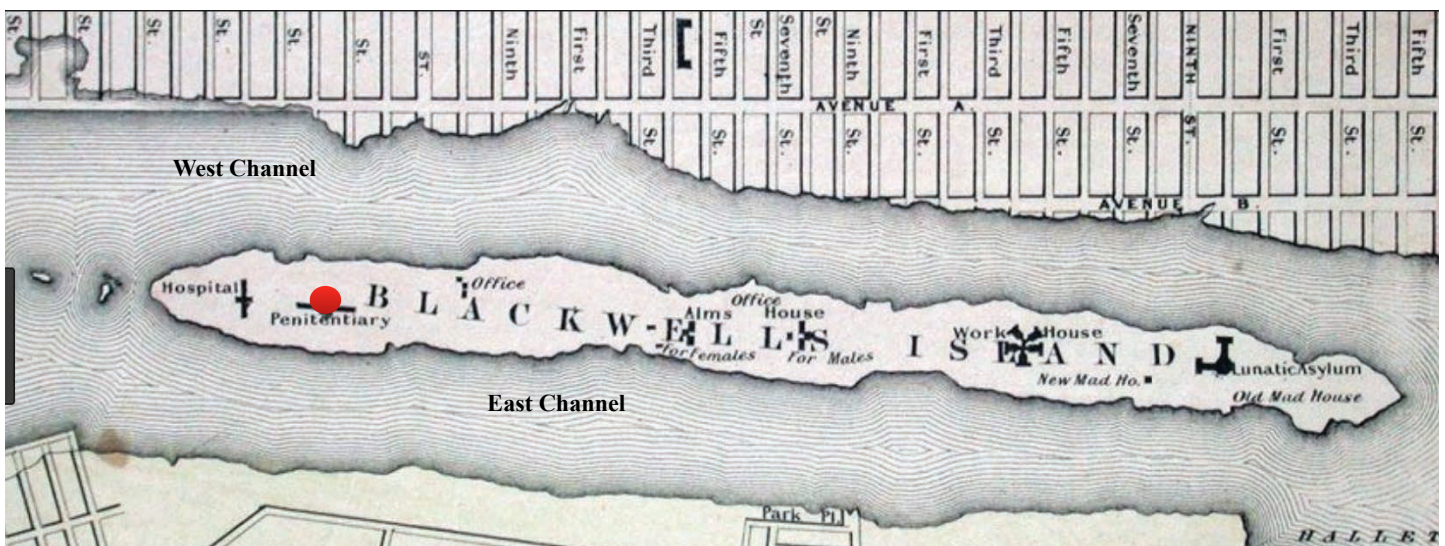
verify the ages of incoming prisoners and, as *Damnation Island* makes plain, the rule was regularly flouted. A well-meaning warden, John M. Fox, who began his tenure in 1875, tried to separate the youngsters from the older criminals. But his powers were so limited that, ultimately, the two groups were free to “corrupt each other without restraint.”

The inmates’ day began when they were awakened before dawn and permitted just two to five minutes at a communal tank to wash themselves. Drying off was even more of a scramble, with only one towel allotted to every 50 prisoners. A breakfast of bread and weak coffee followed, after which everyone went to work. The women did the cleaning, sewing and laundry, while the men were assigned to help in the blacksmith shop or boathouse, or assist in the repair or construction of buildings, sea walls, and roads. The prisoners broke for lunch and supper, where the rations were so meager, they often fostered a slow starvation. Throughout the day, the convicts were marched in lockstep and in enforced silence from one place to another.

To prevent escapes, guard boats with armed personnel circled the island by day, and armed watchmen patrolled the cell blocks in the evening and at night. Because of the cramped quarters, nights were often a hideous cacophony of screams and fights. Eruptions the guards couldn’t handle or

missing inmates were immediately reported by telegraph to the warden’s residence, the Department of Public Charities and Correction, police headquarters located on Mulberry Street, and the Nineteenth Precinct at 59<sup>th</sup> Street. Under the notoriously ruthless warden Louis D. Pilsbury, who assumed the post in 1886, attempted escapes and many other lesser infractions landed the perpetrator in a dark cell, the era’s version of solitary. A one-time missionary at the Penitentiary is rumored to have ordered prisoners into solitary merely for coughing during the religious service. So bleak was the time spent in “the cooler,” as it was referred to, guards checked daily to see if the inmate was still alive, crazed, or dead.

Mistreatment and abuse were just as likely on the women’s side. Head matron Isabella De Graff (1890s) was notable for taking great pleasure in tormenting the prisoners...unless they paid her off. Despite a doctor’s order to admit a sick, 70-year-old woman to the hospital, De Graff decided the woman was faking and set her to scrubbing, on and on and on—until she died the day before completing her sentence, “legally murdered,” as one inmate put it. Bribes, on the other hand, could buy a life of privilege, although De Graff is said to have continued to hound her charges for pay-offs even after they got out.



Late 19th-century Blackwell's Island. Red dot indicates location of the Penitentiary, approximately where Cornell Tech is now.

**A Few Good Men**

Against this background, Horn points out that there were a few kind and generous individuals who truly wished to do good and to help reform the poor souls trapped in the Penitentiary. Eminent among them were Warden Fox and the Episcopal missionary on Blackwell’s Island, the Reverend William Glenney French. Under their influence, an evening school was begun in 1875 for the purpose of teaching reading, writing and arithmetic. Around the same time, a library was established in the prison and a new blacksmith workshop was inaugurated. Fox did his level best to lobby for new accommodations for the female population and earnestly advocated for the prisoners’ welfare. In the end, however, the school was not successful and the facility seemed to resist every reform. For all these gentlemen’s

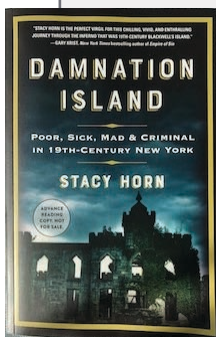
efforts, the prison remained a cesspool of misery and corruption.

Such profound failure could not go unnoticed. Any optimism that had been entertained in connection with the institution was irrevocably dashed. And in 1884, the Department of Public Charities and Corrections paid \$180,000 for the [now, with landfill] 413-acre Rikers Island. The plan was to “build a magnificent penitentiary there.”

[The Blackwell’s Island Penitentiary was ultimately emptied and demolished in the mid-1930s.]

Source:  
Horn, Stacy. *Damnation Island*, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, a division of Workman Publishing, New York, NY, 2018.

**New Merchandise at the Visitor Center**



Just-released *Damnation Island* by Stacy Horn revisits the grim reality of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Blackwell’s Island with its penitentiary, almshouse, workhouse, lunatic asylum and hospital—a tale of grand hopes for compassion and reform gone awry.

The quirky and clever *An Introduction to New York City’s Most Interesting Neighborhood*

by Mandy Choie summarizes and illustrates everything you ever wanted to know about Roosevelt Island’s past and present—an entertaining “zine” for newbies, visitors and even island veterans who may not be fully informed.



**Coming this summer:**

We present an array of items featuring our fresh, new, pictorial logo design by noted graphic artist Julia Gash. Choose from T-shirts, note cards, totes, spiral-bound jotters, mugs, magnets, towels, aprons and prints.



**STOP BY!**





From the RIHS Archive:

## **Elesio Mastrocola: Immigrant and Prison Inmate**

**by Melanie C. Colter**

*The Roosevelt Island Historical Society has been collecting materials pertaining to our island's past for over 40 years. It currently maintains an extensive archive of documents, maps, photos and artifacts. The archive is frequently used by academics and graduate students pursuing research in history, landmark preservation, social services, etc. But the Society encourages use by the public as well. If you are interested in investigating some aspect of Roosevelt Island history, contact [RooseveltIslandHistory@gmail.com](mailto:RooseveltIslandHistory@gmail.com) for an appointment.*

*To publicize the archive and illustrate its contents, Blackwell's Almanac is inaugurating this new feature. Look periodically for tidbits of our history that may reside in no other place.*

RIHS recently acquired the discharge papers of an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century "resident" of the Blackwell's Island Penitentiary. They shed light on the circumstances of some, if not many, of the individuals who were sent there.

Elesio Mastrocola emigrated from South Lugo, a small agrarian town and commune located in the northern region of Emilia-Romagna, Italy. He was one in successive and growing waves of mostly young men who came to America from Italy in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. At age 23, as part of the third major wave of European migration, he boarded the New-York-bound ship "Massilia" in Naples as the 608<sup>th</sup> passenger; he was scheduled to arrive on March 17, 1897.

Like many of his countrymen, Mastrocola appeared to be traveling alone, and like most who came from farming regions, he brought little applicable skill to a dawning industrial America. The young man's reasons for leaving home were not clear, but his documents indicate that he intended to stay in New York and that he successfully found work as a cake baker during his first year of residency.

Unfortunately, in January 1900, shortly before his two-year anniversary, he was arrested for assault in the second degree.

Further research did not uncover the motive for or details of the assault. But we do know

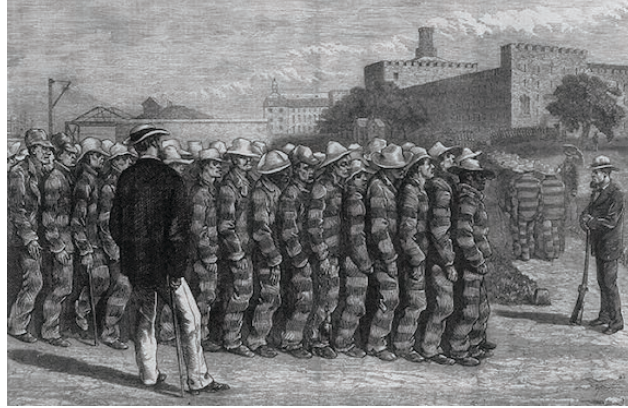
### **Another Inmate's Thoughts—Possibly Shared by Mastrocola?\***

**"...I spied the outline of the penitentiary squatting on the lower end of Blackwell's Island. It was my first view of it and the impression made on my mind was so ominous and sinister that my heart almost sank within me as I entered the fateful gates."**

**"Harlequin's costume never looked more ridiculous than our own, which was mended, patched, and repatched from long use by generations of long suffering convicts."**

that Judge Warren W. Foster was assigned to the case, and that Mastrocola was convicted on January 26<sup>th</sup> and sent to serve his sentence at the Blackwell's Island Penitentiary.

The foreboding sight that greeted him was a four-story building constructed of blue-grey gneiss quarried on the island (about where Starbucks is now). It had two wings and featured a distinct battlement reminiscent of a medieval castle. He was received there by Warden John J. Fallen, following which his belongings would have been confiscated and he would have received a short haircut, a humiliating striped prison suit of oversized trousers, an ill-fitting shirt, and a matching cap.



*Inmates in their prison garb, marching in lockstep. Originally published in The Illustrated London News, Feb., 1876.*

After serving two years and one month, Mastrocola was discharged on March 6, 1901. The New York Statute of 1879 permitted him a \$23 credit towards “clothing, mileage and money.” A “suit of clothes and oven coal” were furnished by the Department of Correction for \$18.

What little else is known of our subject comes from census records: He went on to marry, have children, own a house, and live out his life in Brooklyn.

Source:  
\*Fornaro, Carlo de, *A Modern Purgatory*, New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1917, <https://archive.org/details/amodernpurgatory00forngoog>

## Announcing The Roosevelt Island Historical Society 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Raffle

Please support the only organization on our island that helps preserve, teach about, archive, and exhibit materials pertaining to our almost 400-year-old history—from its documents and images to its artifacts and landmark buildings.

**BUY A RAFFLE TICKET (\$10 each, book of 4 for \$30).**

**NINE fabulous prizes, including Yankee baseball tickets, NYC Ferry pass, fine jewelry, tickets to theater and ballet, and historic prints.**

Purchase raffle tickets at: the Visitor Center Kiosk (also a RIHS undertaking) every day except Tuesday from 12 noon to 5:00 pm; the Saturday Farmer’s Market from 10 am to noon (weather permitting); or email [RooseveltIslandHistory@gmail.com](mailto:RooseveltIslandHistory@gmail.com) to arrange a purchase.

We accept cash, checks and credit cards.

Drawing Saturday, June 16 (see RIHS Calendar, p.11). You need not be present to win.

## RIHS Calendar

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

**Thursday, June 14, 2018**

**Brooke Kroeger: “Nellie Bly—From Blackwell’s Island to Well Beyond.”** Known for her exposé of the inhumane conditions in the asylum on Blackwell’s Island, Bly continued to cover issues of importance to women, including a seminal interview with Susan B. Anthony and major events in the suffrage campaign. NYU professor Kroeger, whose biography, *Nellie Bly: Daredevil, Reporter, Feminist*, is considered the definitive account of the reporter’s life, will flesh out our knowledge of this fearless woman.

**May Through Friday, June 15, 2018**

**“Blackwell’s Island Lighthouse and James Renwick.”** An exhibit in the Rivercross display windows presents the history of the lighthouse and its architect James Renwick, Jr. Curated by island resident and architect Matt Altwicker.

**Saturday, June 16, 2018**

**Roosevelt Island Day and drawing of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Raffle.** 3:00 pm at the RIHS table (exact location to be announced). If you’ve bought raffle tickets, you need not be present to win. If not, get them before 3:00 for a chance to snag one of nine great prizes. (See box, p. 10.)

**Thursday, September 13, 2018**

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