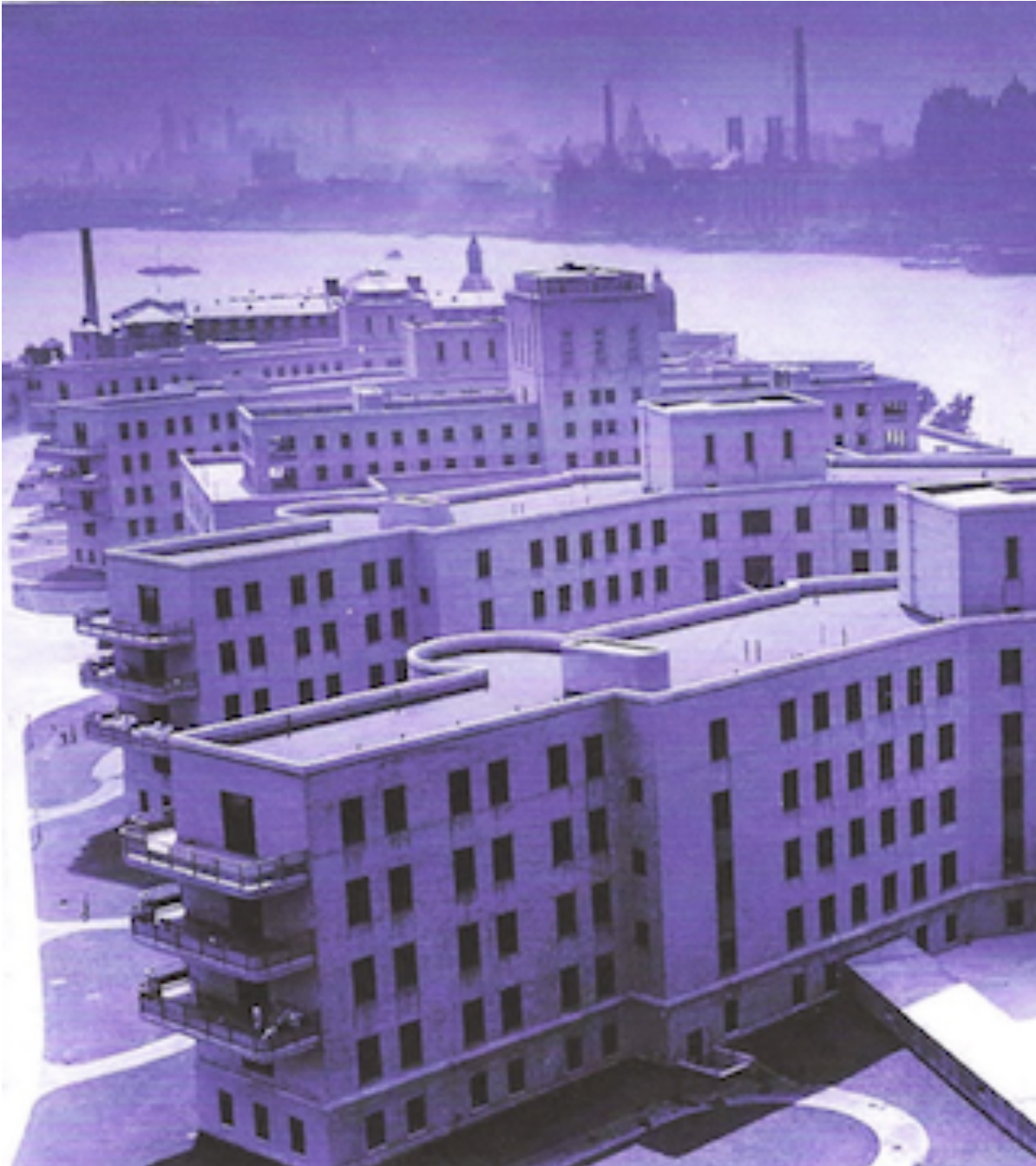


Blackwell's Almanac

A Publication of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society



Goldwater Hospital was one of two institutions that previously occupied the site where Cornell Tech now stands. See "Looking Back from Cornell Tech: Prisoners, Patients and Us," p. 2. Credit: RIHS Archive.

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Blackwell's Almanac

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A Look Back from Cornell Tech: Prisoners, Patients, and Us

by Stephen Blank

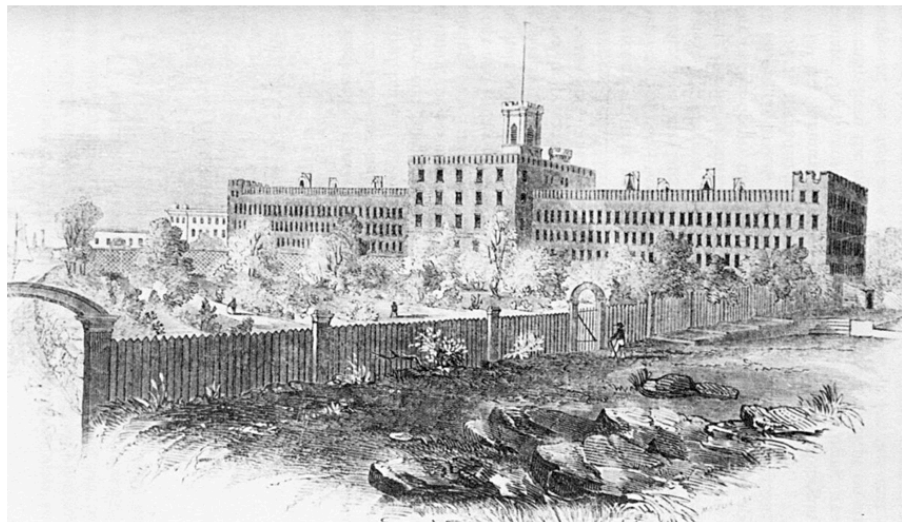
Let's sit outside at the Cornell Tech Café, enjoy the view and take the sun. Relax, and I'll tell you where we are.

To start, we are sitting where Blackwell's Island Penitentiary once stood—the first building on this site, and the first of what became an island full of social institutions: hospitals, work houses, alms houses and an insane asylum.

This story begins in 1828 when the City of New York purchased the island for \$32,000 from the Blackwell family. The purchase was one element of a City plan to relegate undesirable populations to several islands, isolated from the growing city. The penitentiary would keep bad guys out of town. (In those days, this island was pretty far from town.) In addition, there was the availability of fine building stone. Prisoners were put to work, breaking rock in the quarry, which was then used to build many island institutions.

The penitentiary began as a single unit, but by century's end it would stretch over a quarter-mile, expanding into a massive stone structure with slits for windows and 6- by 8-foot cells. It was frigid in winter, stifling in summer, and always reeked of humanity. The prison population divided itself into Italian and Irish gangs, each with its own hierarchy. Top dogs lived fairly well, taking the best for themselves.

Life inside was hard, but the building exterior itself had a redeeming aesthetic. Designed by James Renwick, Jr., it included his characteristic Gothic elements. Renwick, one of several well-known architects who worked on the island, was also responsible for the smallpox hospital and the lighthouse.



The penitentiary began modestly, but expanded to a footprint over a quarter-mile long. Credit: en.wikipedia.com.

The penitentiary seems never to have been well run and deteriorated badly over the years. A report issued in 1914 described the facility as “vile and inhuman” and “wet, slimy, dark, foul.” By the 1930s, the prisoners were in control. Among the ringleaders was “Boss Tweed,” the head of Tammany Hall, the Democratic Party machine that dominated the politics of 19th-century New York City and State. He was at last imprisoned after bilking the City out of millions, and was said to be living high in Blackwell.

The City struck with a nighttime assault. *Time* magazine reported on the raid: “The worst prison in the world,’ pronounced Commissioner MacCormick, whom new Fusion Mayor LaGuardia had enlisted from the Federal Bureau of Prisons to clean up penal scandals left by years of Tammany rule. ‘The most corrupt prison in the country, physically and from every other standpoint...A vicious circle of depravity that is almost beyond the ability of the imagination to grasp!’”

The penitentiary was torn down (its population transferred to Riker’s) and a new institution was constructed on the site: The Welfare Hospital for Chronic Disease. When I moved here in the 1970s, the hospital had become dark and forbidding. But in fact, when it was constructed, it was viewed as a monument to the golden years of public health in New York City. It was designed by architect Isadore Rosenfield in the latest sanatorium style, with parallel wings (“chevrons”) that provided light and air to all its patients.

The public health thinking behind the hospital reflected a shift from emphasis on epidemics and infant mortality to chronic disease and care of the aged as life spans increased. In fact, the facility was designed to be a new model of care for chronic illness. Dr. Sigismund Schulz Goldwater, health commissioner under Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, had a vision for serving emerging needs and training young doctors in research. Goldwater wanted to create a hospital park on the island composed of seven modern medical facilities. The chronic

disease hospital would later be renamed Goldwater Memorial Hospital.

Sadly, Goldwater’s vision of the island did not materialize. A nurse’s residence was built in 1938, after Goldwater Hospital was completed. Everything else was postponed because of World War II. Bird S. Coler Hospital at the north end of the island opened in 1952, but after that, the island largely decayed.



Goldwater Hospital, designed by architect Isadore Rosenfield, featured balconies fronting every bedroom. Credit: charlesgiraudet.com.

Photographer and architect Charles Giraudet documented Goldwater Hospital in its last days. In the years before penicillin, sunlight was part of the cure as much as any medication and architect Rosenfield was deeply concerned with light in the buildings. His design ensured that the building elements were placed so that they would not shadow each another. Wards were designed to encourage the use of the outdoor space, with every bedroom opening onto a wide balcony or terrace. Even the roofs of the main gallery were meant to be used as circulation and terraces by patients during the sunny months. In fact, almost every single space in the facility received natural daylight. Corridors set deep in the building were lined by glass partitions or doors with transoms. The dumbwaiter lobby in the laboratory building got its light from a window set high

above the sink of a bathroom that had its own six-foot-high window.

In time, Goldwater Hospital undertook major longitudinal research, based on its chronic long-term patients. Both New York University and Columbia ran research units here. The War Department also conducted secret research on malaria and human tolerance for heat and cold, as well as studies on the minimum food requirements for health and life.

But we're not in a hospital now. Far from it. We are sitting in the middle of one of the newest, most modern university campuses in North America.

Why here? What's the story behind the third institution on this site?



Each building on the Cornell Tech campus was designed by a different architect or architectural firm. Credit: <https://nv.curbed.com>.

In 2008, Mayor Bloomberg ordered an examination of New York City's future in a world of profound economic change. The resulting report concluded that the City had significant opportunities in the high tech sector and recommended a series of initiatives to capitalize on this potential. Bloomberg then launched a competition for the construction of an applied sciences campus in New York City with a focus on entrepreneurship and job creation. In July 2011, the City issued a request for proposals, seeking a university, institution or consortium

to develop and operate a new or expanded campus in the City in exchange for City capital, access to City-owned land and the full support and partnership of the Bloomberg Administration. Roosevelt Island, Governors Island, Downtown Brooklyn, and the Brooklyn Navy Yard were discussed as possible locations.

Seventeen institutions around the world responded to the RFP. The winning proposal was submitted by Cornell University in partnership with Israel's Technion University. "Cornell Tech" was selected because of its innovative model for graduate technology education and its emphasis on collaboration between academia and industry and advanced fields of study. The new university complex would be located on Roosevelt Island. In 2013, the demolition of Goldwater Hospital began.

The Cornell Tech plan promised to nearly double the number of full-time graduate engineering students enrolled in leading New York City Master's and Ph.D. programs. A New York City Economic Development Corp. study projected the campus would generate more than \$7.5 billion and more than \$23 billion in overall economic activity during the coming three decades. The study also projected that the campus would generate \$1.4 billion in total tax revenue.

Soon, the concentration focused on design, and most reviews of the plans were positive. The 12-acre campus would not look like a traditional university. Each building would be designed by a different architect and the overall environment would be a key design feature. The First Phase included the Morphosis-designed Emma and Georgina Bloomberg Center, located where the café is now. This is an academic building named for the daughters of the former mayor, whose philanthropy gave the applied sciences graduate school \$100 million in 2015. Across from us, the glass building, is what was initially named the Bridge, designed by Weiss/Manfredi. Renamed the Tata Innovation Center, it is a seven-story "co-

location” building intended to create a link between entrepreneurs and academics. The tallest building (tallest on the island), by the bridge, is the House, by Handel Architects, a 26-story, 350-unit dormitory for students, staff, and faculty. Recently opened is a Snøhetta-designed hotel, the Graduate, and the Verizon Executive Education Center.

In the *Architectural Record*, Joann Gonchar writes, “To shape the campus layout, Cornell Tech turned to Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. The firm’s master plan, which eschews the usual collegiate trappings of campus walls and gates, places a series of schematic volumes so that the buildings-to-come would define oblique view corridors of the Manhattan skyline and the Queens waterfront. A pedestrian route called Tech Walk threads through the site, helping to link the mostly residential neighborhood to the north of the site with Four Freedoms Park, designed by Louis Kahn.

“The master plan also delineates open areas that permeate inward from the island’s perimeter to form large public spaces. These outdoor rooms keep a sizable chunk of the site open and accessible to nearby residents, the Cornell Tech community, and visitors. As further expression of Cornell Tech’s forward-looking values, it has incorporated crucial resilience and sustainability measures into its overall plan. Even before Hurricane Sandy hit New York in October 2012, the school decided to elevate all of the structures above the 500-year flood plain. To meet the buildings’ front doors, the Tech Walk slopes up significantly, but almost imperceptibly, from the island’s perimeter roadway. The individual buildings all have their own ambitious green goals: the Bloomberg Center aims for net zero energy; the co-location building is on track for LEED Gold (LEED, Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, is the world’s most widely used green building rating system); and the residential tower recently certified as the largest Passive House project in the world—that is, the House is so tightly built and insulated that its energy requirement can be reduced by as much as 90%.

The links between Goldwater Hospital and Cornell Tech include more than location. During the demolition of the Hospital, several large murals dating to the federal Work Projects Administration in the 1940s were found and then restored by Cornell conservators. The *Times* notes, “The murals must have caused a sensation in the early 1940s, when they were installed in the patients’ circular day rooms. Not your standard W.P.A. social-realist allegories, these were works of almost pure, jazzlike abstraction, bold fields of color that barely suggested any literal imagery. Then someone covered them up. Perhaps they were deemed too exciting for recuperative ends, or too wild for contemporary taste, or too grimy to be appreciated.”

Over the years, this has been a busy, serious and often sad place. Prisoners, patients and now students have lived and worked here. Some have suffered here. But each iteration has been lighter and more hopeful. Surely, this is the best.

So now you know where you are, and what happened on this site in the past. I hope you’ve enjoyed your coffee.

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Old New York: Part IV—The Civil War

Prelude

Much to most people's surprise, reputedly liberal New York City was not staunchly anti-slavery or anti-South in the run-up to the Civil War.

Sure there was a sizable portion of the city's population that found slavery immoral and reprehensible. It's what the newly crystalized Republican party was all about. It attracted abolitionist Whigs and Democrats, ministers (Rev. Henry Ward Beecher), journalists (Horace Greeley of the *Tribune* and William Cullen Bryant of the *Post*), New York's black inhabitants, and businessmen whose enterprise might be harmed by southern domination.

But the major economic interests of the city insisted on backing the South, their most lucrative customer. Hundreds of millions of dollars were at stake—for cotton, rice and tobacco merchants; shipping lines that carried export cotton; bankers who lent to the South and accepted slave populations as collateral; bond brokers for Dixie states and enterprises; manufacturers who sold to the region; certain publications targeted to a southern readership; and, most notably, ship builders/owners and merchants who quietly participated in the slave trade.



New York City's Seventh Regiment were also known as "Blue Bloods" and the "Silk Stocking Regiment" because so many of them were part of the social elite. Credit: Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898.

Even laborers (white laborers, that is) sympathized with the South against Republicanism. They recognized that their jobs depended on New York's thriving economy. They also feared the prospective competition of freed Negro workers. They had frequently suffered from such competition when employers engaged black laborers as strike-breakers; so working-class racism was already in full flower.

It is not surprising then that, in the 1860 presidential election, 62% of New York City voted against Republican Lincoln. Upon his electoral triumph, panicked city merchants drafted a document of conciliation to reassure the South that they would continue to defend slaveowners' rights. And if southern leaders chose secession, they vowed, they would support the region's peaceful departure.

But New York's elite hadn't conjured with southern ruthlessness. By February 1861, the rebel states had declared their withdrawal from the Union and among their first acts was the repudiation of all debt owed to the North and cessation of trade. Frantic merchants pleaded with Lincoln to compromise with the now established Confederacy. There was even a plot afoot to declare New York City's independence in the hope of permitting a neutral commercial relationship with the South and also freeing the municipality's port of federally imposed tariffs. Both efforts failed.

War

On April 12, 1861, Fort Sumter was fired upon and the entire city closed ranks against what was now an avowed enemy. Rallies, flags, banners, speeches, drums, parades, farewell dinners and talk of great adventure fanned the flames of war fever. By year's end, 66 New York regiments had deployed, including the Seventh Regiment, composed of young members of the recently oppositional moneyed class. When the three-month service commitment was up, returning

soldiers were met with uproarious welcomes and blaring bands. Carried away by their hero's reception, most reenlisted. Absent from the deployment were black troops. They trained, raised money for uniforms and equipment and offered three regiments to the effort, but were rejected.



"Greenbacks," or U.S. dollars, were first created to finance the Civil War.
Credit: pinterest.com.

In the immediate aftermath of losing its southern trading partner, the New York economy plunged. Manufacturing, ironworks, shipbuilding, carriage-making, clothing manufacture (hoop skirts, boots) and even ice-cutting tanked. Thirty thousand workers were idled. For most of 1861, residents feared the worst. Late in the year, however, a miracle occurred: the war and the West began pumping new life-blood into city commerce.

While a massive crop failure swept across Britain and other European countries that year, our western farmers sent bumper harvests of wheat and corn and tons of cattle for export through the port of New York. Supplies of lumber, sugar and oil also surged. A blockaded Mississippi River forced westerners to ship via the Great Lakes, the Erie Canal, the Hudson and rail—most of which ran East-West with connections to New York. Where there wasn't an efficient rail corridor, new track was laid. And shipbuilding, including development of the cutting edge ironclads such as the *Monitor*, soared to meet both war needs and the explosion of northern water traffic.

It is safe to say that almost every existing business boomed and new ones were created regularly. As the conflict continued, the gross industrial product of New York City alone virtually equaled that of the entire Confederacy.

Necessary innovations in financing also

avored New York. The Federal government's reserves were minuscule compared to the funding required to float the war and it was compelled to borrow. When the banks began running out of gold and coin, Congress authorized the Treasury to print paper notes, or "greenbacks." The individual states took this as a green light to print their own paper money. In order to combat the ensuing monetary chaos, the government instituted a regulated system of "national banks"—of which the very lucrative center was in New York. When the government turned to selling war bonds to the public, the result was similar. It relied in a major way on New York's investment houses and brokers. And when all this circulating money ignited the stock market (stock values increased by 200 million dollars in two years), New York's brokers were earning a weekly average of \$3,000 in commissions.

Inequity

As in most wars, the effects of this one were uneven. The city's aristocracy was making undreamed of amounts of money and spending it on every entertainment and extravagance imaginable. As they dressed in velvet coats, gold jewelry, mink and sable, and thousand-dollar camel's hair shawls;

shopped in A.T. Stewart's new cast iron, five-story luxury emporium; summered in Saratoga enjoying fancy dress balls, horse-racing and gambling; attended theater and concerts and dined on truffled partridge at Delmonico's; the war existed only in the newspapers.

Meanwhile, the metropolis's working classes bore the brunt of the conflict's sorrows. In the first flush of the war boom, jobs were plentiful and well paid. And the government provided generous relief payments to families whose breadwinners had gone off to fight. But as the war continued, the reams of unbacked paper money, the scarcity of consumer goods that had been diverted to the war effort, as well as widespread profiteering fueled a corrosive inflation. By 1863, currency had depreciated 43%, compared with wage increases of only 12%. Prices of food, housing and coal, the staples of civilian survival, were rocketing out

Far worse, of course, was the carnage on the battlefield. In 1862 alone—at Shiloh, Second Bull Run, Antietam, Fredericksburg—tens upon tens of thousands of soldiers were maimed or killed. "Men mutually butchering each other," wrote Walt Whitman, a mountain of disembodied limbs "cut, bloody, black and blue, swelled and sickening."

New York's hospitals were overflowing with the wounded. In the less fortunate neighborhoods, legions of crippled young men hung about and non-stop funeral processions filled the streets. The mood was bleak. Little enthusiasm remained for what had started out as a lark and volunteer enlistments dried up.

Emancipation

On January 1, 1863, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Reactions were swift and varied.



A.T. Stewart created the first department store. It was so successful, it had to move to bigger quarters in 1862, occupying a full block on Broadway between 9th and 10th Streets. Credit: [photos.com](https://www.photos.com).

of reach. Public relief was first slashed and then halted. Even soldiers were pinched. Military pay was low to begin with, and often payment was deferred for as much as a year.

The city's abolitionists and black population (ie, most Republicans) were elated. They were less enchanted, however, by another part of Lincoln's plan. He was strongly encouraging African-Americans to leave the U.S. and settle elsewhere—on an island off

Haiti was one of the proposals. In general, blacks rejected the idea, insisting that America was their native country. A modest number of conservative Republicans largely accepted the notion of emancipation, but denied that the war had anything to do with slavery. In their minds it was simply a matter of anarchy versus order, the authority of the Constitution versus its violation.

The Democrats were more profoundly divided. War Democrats wished to continue fighting the insurrection to its victorious conclusion, but condemned Lincoln's tampering with civil rights. They loudly objected to the President's suspension of *habeas corpus* and the ensuing arrests, as well as his prohibition against distributing rebel-tinted papers through the mails. Peace Democrats were outraged. To them emancipation represented a complete and illegitimate shift in the war's goals. Most of them wanted an immediate, negotiated restoration of the Union and slavery. A more extreme wing adamantly upheld the right to slave property, but were indifferent to reunification.

New York's white working class shared Democratic sentiments. In the face of devalued wages mentioned above, there had been a spate of strikes. Many were eventually successful; but as had happened frequently in the 1850s, numerous employers used African-American scabs to try to break the union movement. White laborers deeply resented these black workers and now fumed at the idea of emancipated southern blacks flooding northern cities.

Riots

In March 1863, in the wake of huge troop losses, surging desertion and feeble enlistment, Congress enacted the National Conscription Act. Authorities were empowered to go door-to-door to register married men from 20 to 35 years of age, and unmarried males as old as 45, who would then be selected for service by lottery. The law also stipulated that draftees could evade service by sending someone else in their



Fires were set by firefighters who had been, but were no longer exempt from military service. It took other volunteers to extinguish them. Credit: The Historical Atlas of New York City.

place or paying a fee of \$300. Such an amount was clearly out of reach of the average laborer and only reinforced the unfair privilege of the upper classes.

The law was particularly unpopular in New York—first, because the heavily Democratic (read: states' rights) city viewed this as an intolerable intrusion of the Federal government into local sovereignty; and second because the very high draft quota imposed upon the city was seen as partisan and discriminatory.

In New York, the lottery commenced on July 11. After a couple of days of angry brooding, wage-workers from almost every industry swarmed through the streets, banging pots and pans, vehemently denouncing the draft, and closing machine shops, shipyards, foundries, factories, construction sites, and stores. Volunteer firemen, previously exempt but now subject to military service, stormed the lottery office, destroyed the draft wheel and set the place on fire. When the few veteran troops at hand and police were sent to stop the attack, the mob stoned them and beat them bloody.

More crowds emerged to cut down telegraph poles, block railroad cars and tear up tracks. As more police were summoned to control the situation, they and any homes suspected of harboring them were viciously set upon. Luxurious mansions were looted and

destroyed. An armory was raided and torched. Then the mob turned to attacking African-Americans. It hunted them everywhere...in their homes, in their workplaces, on the streets. Racially mixed couples were assaulted. Black lodgings and churches and gathering places were ransacked and burned. The intensifying mania even led to lynchings.

The race riots continued the following day. But now the roving gangs also targeted the wealthy and the power elite, including mercantile establishments and financial institutions. They sacked Brooks Brothers, then menaced the Customs House and the Sub-Treasury Building. The defenders escalated the "arms race," resorting to bombs, douses of sulfuric acid, howitzers, and even a gunboat moored at the foot of Wall Street.



Sacking Brooks Brothers. Credit: New York Historical Society.

The atrocities continued. At the city fathers' request, Federal troops—five regiments—began arriving on the evening of the third day. The soldiers used primitive fragmentation bombs to clear the streets, fought their way from building to building, and bayoneted anyone in their path. Finally, on the evening of the fourth day, it was over.

Aftermath

Backlash to the largest single occurrence of civil disorder in the nation's history was fairly benign. Refusing to impose martial law, Lincoln simply appointed a well-respected Democrat as commander of the Department

of the East. Few rioters were prosecuted, and even fewer served any jail time. What's more, the uprising did have its effect. First the draft quota was cut in half. Then the city appropriated two million dollars toward purchasing substitute draftees for poor men with families and municipal workers, thus allowing the military selection process to recommence in peace. Relief, in the form of money and clothing, was given to poor blacks. And perhaps most satisfying, the Republicans compensated the city's blacks by organizing two regiments of Negro troops that received their colors in a celebratory, thronged march down Broadway.

New York's riots had little effect on the greater war. It slogged on for two more years. In the 1864 presidential election, Democrat George McClellan drubbed Lincoln in the city, but Lincoln prevailed nationwide. In late 1864, Sherman sacked Georgia and Sheridan scorched the Shenandoah Valley. In March of 1865, a massive procession wound its way through Manhattan rejoicing at Lincoln's and the Union's recent wins. As April arrived, Richmond and Petersburg were taken. Then on April 9, Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox and the Civil War officially ended.

The jubilation in New York would probably have lasted weeks—but for the tragic epilogue. President Lincoln was shot on the night of April 14 and died the following day.

Light turned to darkness. The entire city was draped in black. Even ships in the harbor wore "widow's weeds." On its way from Washington DC to Illinois, Lincoln's body lay in state at City Hall, receiving long lines of mourners. Finally, under the gaze of an estimated million onlookers, a sixteen-horse funeral wagon carried the body up Broadway, up Fifth Avenue and across to the Hudson River Railroad Depot.

The North had triumphed, but it was a bitter victory.

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RIHS Calendar

FREE TOUR

Tuesday, August 17, 4 p.m.

Octagon Visit

The Roosevelt Island Historical Society and the New York Public Library invite you to discover the history of the notorious asylum and subsequent hospital, and learn about the now landmarked building's restoration. Register with danielle.shur@nypl.org. Meet at the Octagon.

FREE Roosevelt Island Historical Society Lecture Series in conjunction with the New York Public Library. Attend in person at the NYPL Branch, 504 Main St., or on Zoom. Times to Be Announced. Register with danielle.shur@nypl.org.

Tuesday, September 21

Stunt Reporters

Author Kim Todd discusses her book "Sensational: The Hidden History of America's Girl Stunt Reporters" about the new breed of journalism pioneered in the second half of the 19th century by women who went undercover to expose society's ills.

Tuesday, October 19

Rest in Peace

Richard Panchyk, author of "Hidden Queens" and "Abandoned Queens" now returns with his latest book "Dead Queens," the story behind the many cemeteries in our largest borough.

Tuesday, November 16

Eclectic

Meet Dorian Yurchuk, an Associate at the architectural firm W.B. Melvin, for an evening of art, history, architecture, trivia and fun.

Tuesday, Dec. 21

The Trajectory of Cities

Professor Mary Woods of Cornell University presents a fascinating look at cities as embodied in her book "Buffalo at the Crossroads: The Past, Present and Future of American Urbanism."