

PASSING OF BLACKWELL'S

Prison Colony to be Established on Riker's Island To-morrow.

It Is Proposed In Time to Have All Workhouse Offenders Committed to the New Quarters.



DEATH OF A LEPER. — Lee Hing, one of the four Chinese lepers who were isolated on Ricker's Island in 1893, died at the almshouse on November 3d. At one time the four escaped, but they were all captured and returned to the island. Soon afterwards, by a decision of Health Commissioner Cyrus Edson, made after a consultation with prominent dermatologists, to the effect that leprosy is not a contagious disease in this climate, the four were set at liberty. Lee Hing returned to his friends in Mott Street, New York, but finding that he was practically ostracised, he applied to the city authorities to be taken care of. He was then sent to the almshouse, where he lived and finally died in a small isolated building set apart for his use.

Above: Center image -- Greater Astoria Historical Society executive director Bob Singleton, at podium, introduces Correction History webmaster, standing left, prior to a [Rikers Island history slide presentation June 5, 2017](#). Left image -- clipping of NYT 6/21/1903 headline on transfer of first Blackwell's Island inmates to Rikers Island. Right Image -- clipping of NYT 11/4/1900 story about death of Hansen disease victim (leper), once confined to Rikers Island.

GAHS Talk Led to Two Old Clippings Triggering 'New' Line of Inquiry: Leprosy & 1st Rikers Inmates

At the Greater Astoria Historical Society June 5, 2017, after the Correction History webmaster's slide presentation about historical perspectives to weigh when contemplating Rikers Island's future, the speaker and a history major graduate student in attendance chatted together about the young man's interest in correction history.

In the course of that conversation, the graduate asked about "the lepers on Rikers Island," an aspect of its history about which the webmaster admitted his ignorance.

The history of North Brother Island, Rikers' East River neighbor, serving in effect as NYC's sanctioned leper colony has been well documented. Not so Rikers' history involving their care.

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Digital image of NYT 11/4/1900 story about Hansen disease victim (leper), once confined on Rikers Island, later released but who eventually sought refuge at the Blackwell's Island almshouse. Note spelling of Rikers Island.

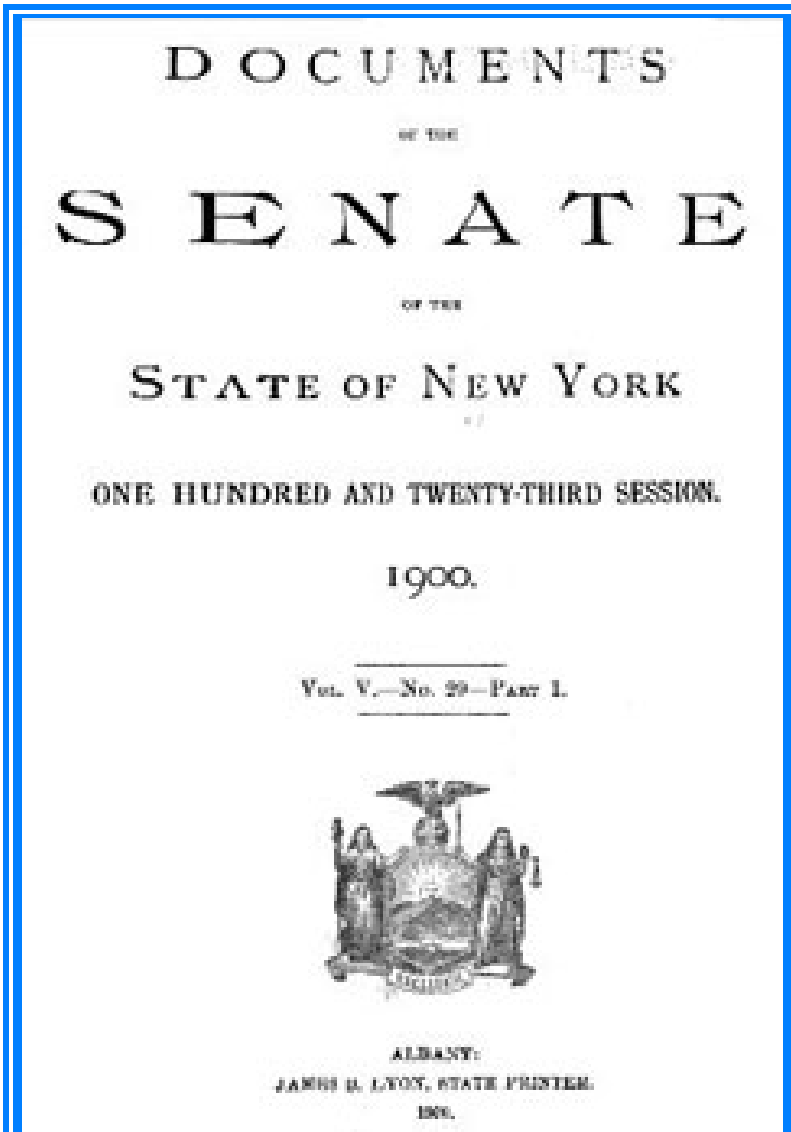
When Blackwell's Smallpox Hospital moved to North Brother around 1885, becoming Riverside Hospital, its mission was undergoing expansion that included treatment of patients with other diseases considered quarantinable such as tuberculosis and leprosy.

The young scholar promised to email the relevant clipping which he had run across and which prompted his inquiry about lepers on Rikers.

He followed through a few days later by emailing that clipping along with another; this one about the first contingent of Blackwell's Island Workhouse inmates sent to Rikers Island. It too had a brief but significant leprosy reference. Thanks, CUNY Grad Center student and researcher "JB."

Upon receipt of the clipping images, the Correction History webmaster did some follow-up research of his own. He found confirmation in the 1899 annual report Vol. 1 of the State Board of Charities in Volume V No. 29, Part I of the *Documents of the Senate of the State of New York* for the 123rd Session 1900.

In the state charities board's review to the Legislature about the Blackwell's Island almshouse's conditions and activities, the report said, among other things:



Digital image of the title page of Volume V No. 29, Part I of the Documents of the Senate of the State of New York for the 123rd Session 1900, wherein was found reference (see text excerpt right) to Lee Hing in a 1899 Blackwell's Island almshouse review report by the State Board of Charities.

"LEPROSY

"In the men's barracks, in the lower wards, 5 - 8 there is a case of leprosy, one of three which were sent to the almshouse.

"One of these three died, one left the island, and the third remains, he goes at will during the day.

"This is the ward in which all newcomers are kept the first night, and while it is probably true that leprosy in this climate is not contagious, it would be better to isolate those who are afflicted with the disease, for the sake of the other inmates. . . .

"CLASSIFICATION

". . . with so many wards, a more extensive system of classification is possible, and it is to be hoped that in time an experiment, based on both moral and physical qualifications, may be tried.

"Among the other inmates is Lee Hing ... 48 years old, who has been an inmate since 1896. He is partially paralyzed, and will doubtless remain a permanent charge."

According to Montgomery College professor Michelle T. Morgan in her "Colonizing Leprosy" book, published 2007 by University of North Carolina Press, leprosy had been documented present in the U.S. 100 years before Congress devoted any consideration of it in the 1880s.

Scholars debate whether its first reported appearance in Louisiana in the mid-18th Century traces to French Acadians or the Spanish West Indian slave traders. In the 19th Century, physicians attributed leprosy in New York to various European and Asian

immigrant groups.

Prof. Morgan also wrote that, while localities appeared not to have imposed mandatory incarceration on all persons with leprosy, public health officials often would place in specialized institutions those sufferers who seemed to have no or unsuitable caregivers. While New York required doctors to report identified cases of leprosy, there was no official policy on containment or treatment.

"Lack of a coherent policy led to an uneven handling of patients," according to the history professor. "Immigrants without families tended to end up in urban pest houses, while other leprosy patients were allowed to convalesce within their homes."

In 1873, Dr. Gerhard Henrik Armauer Hansen of Norway was the first person to identify under a

microscope the germ that causes leprosy: Mycobacterium leprae.

His discovery proved that leprosy was caused by a germ, and was thus not hereditary or the result of a curse, evil eye, etc.

Also in 1873, Father Damien, from Belgium, a member of the missionary Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, began his work among the lepers of Kalaupapa on the island of Moloka'i in the then Kingdom of Hawaii.

In that era, people with leprosy were under a government-mandated medical quarantine on that island's Kalaupapa Peninsula.

After 16 years of devoted hands-on service, the priest contracted the disease but continued his labors until death in 1889.

But his story had inspirational impact world-wide, contributing to changing public attitudes toward Hansen disease victims.

In the 1940s, the New York Health Department ended the compulsory segregation of the Hansen disease patients into specialized facilities and allowed them to seek treatment at any NY hospital and, between treatment, live in the general population.

In the 1970s the first successful multi-drug treatment (MDT) regimen for leprosy was developed and in 1981 the World Health Organization began recommending MDT, a combination of three drugs: dapsone, rifampicin, and clofazimine.

Currently MDT is still considered the best treatment for preventing nerve damage, deformity, disability and further transmission. Research continues to find a vaccine and ways to detect the disease sooner in order to start treatment earlier.



Photo of Fr. Damien taken by William Brigham shortly before the 49-year-old priest's death after contracting leprosy.

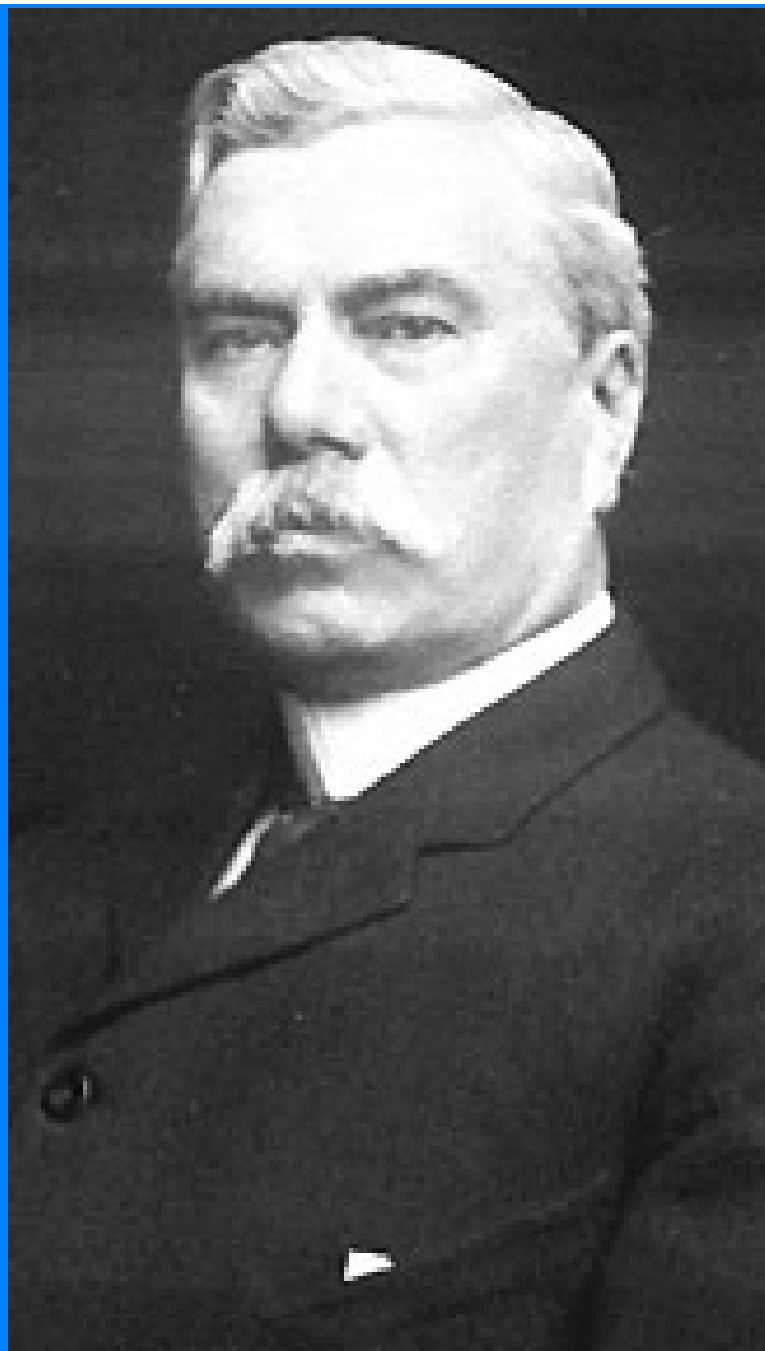
Story on 1st Blackwell's Inmates to Rikers Noted Kitchen & Dining Room for Lepers

The June 21, 1903, NYT story about the first contingent of Blackwell's Island Workhouse inmates relocating to Rikers Island included a passing reference to a dining room and kitchen having been built as a special extension to the inmate mess hall in order to accommodate lepers.

How many and whether they were part of the Blackwell contingent or already present on Rikers are not spelled out but provide a line of research for follow up.

The specific sentence is underlined here to spotlight it; it was not underlined in the original, the text of which

has been transcribed below with quotation marks to indicate quotation of the entire text:



In 1902, to replace Tammany district leader Francis Lantry as Correction Commissioner, Fusion reform Mayor Seth Low named the widely-respected Thomas W. Hynes, long a leader in Brooklyn and Greater New York charitable activities. For more than a quarter century prior to that appointment, Hynes had been active in the leading Catholic charities organization of laity, the St. Vincent de Paul Society

(The above image and caption were not part of the 1903 clipping.)

"The first step toward the occupation of Rikers Island as a place for the confinement of prisoners, with the probable result, in time, that all the workhouse prisoners will be committed there, will be taken to-morrow morning.

"Under the direction of Commissioner Thomas W. Hynes of the Department of Correction 150 prisoners will be transferred from Blackwell's Island to the branch workhouse, Rikers Island.

"It was with this view that Rikers Island was purchased by the city in 1884.

"Since the present administration took office twenty-five acres of new ground have been added to the island by filling in the crib work erected on the western side, and it is expected that greater progress yet will be made when the prisoners are established there.

"For the accommodation of the prisoners. three of ten buildings that are on the island have been fitted up, two as dormitories, and one as a bathhouse.

"A mess hall is already in existence.

"In the bathhouse ten showers have been installed. Nearly all the improvements have been made by the prisoners.

"To the prisoners mess hall a large extension has been built, which has been fitted up as a kitchen and dining room for the lepers.

"The dining room is so arranged that a clear view can be had of the mess hall of the prisoners. For the keepers' quarters one of the buildings has been entirely remodeled in the interior.

"Commissioner Hynes says that in making this new prison settlement he intends, as far as possible, to make it as complete as any other similar institution.

"He has therefore fitted up a comfortable hospital, with doctor's quarters adjoining, and a doctor soon will be assigned there.

"A building has also been fitted up for religious services.

"There is a blacksmith's shop, a residence for the head keeper, a stable, and a "cooler" for troublesome prisoners.

"When Riker's Island was purchased by the city it contained eighty-seven acres, but when the crib work is completed 400 additional acres will have been added.

"The property is valued at \$10,000 an acre, which will mean an added valuation to the city of \$4,000,000.

"With the prisoners living on the island, and thereby adding several hours a day to their labor, Commissioner Hynce expects that a greater amount of work will be accomplished, and that before the end of the present year the larger part of the work of filling in will have been accomplished.

"Up to the present 1,000 feet of sea wall have been built, roads have been made and curbed, cellars have been dug under all buildings, and the necessary supports have been erected.

"On the farm on the island vegetables have been raised for the institutions of the department

"In order to accomplish this transfer of prisoners it was necessary to have the city water system extended to Rikers Island. In fact, the lack of a proper water supply delayed the movement for several months. There is now, however, a good supply of Croton water there.

"The prisoners who are to be transferred to Rikers Island will leave Blackwell's Island to-morrow morning on the 7:30 boat."



A month before DOC Commissioner Thomas W. Hynes' planned 1903 transfer of 150 Blackwell's Island inmates to Rikers, Thomas A. Edison's film crew cruised around the island and shot a silent movie showing the extensive landfill operation also described in the clipping. To access the YouTube page for viewing the 2+ minute film, click the above image.

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