

Rikers – The Unwanted Island Of the Unwanted?



A presentation by CorrectionHistory.Org
webmaster Thomas McCarthy June 5, 2017 to
the Greater Astoria Historical Society

DISCLAIMER:

Long retired from NYC DOC, I am no longer a spokesman for it. I receive no compensation whatsoever for historical services I freely provide while pursuing my avocation: wannabe historian. Any views on current Correction issues I inadvertently express would be my own, and not necessarily reflect any correction agency, the Correction History Org site, its Facebook page, or NYCHS. Rather than vent opinions, I'll propose questions to consider.



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Their
Island,
Homes,
Cemetery,
and early
Genealogy

in Queens County,
New York

by

Edgar Alan Nutt

My
'Bible'
on
pre-1884
Rikers
Island is
the book by
11th
generation
Rikers
descendant
Edgar Alan
Nutt, an
Episcopal
Bishop



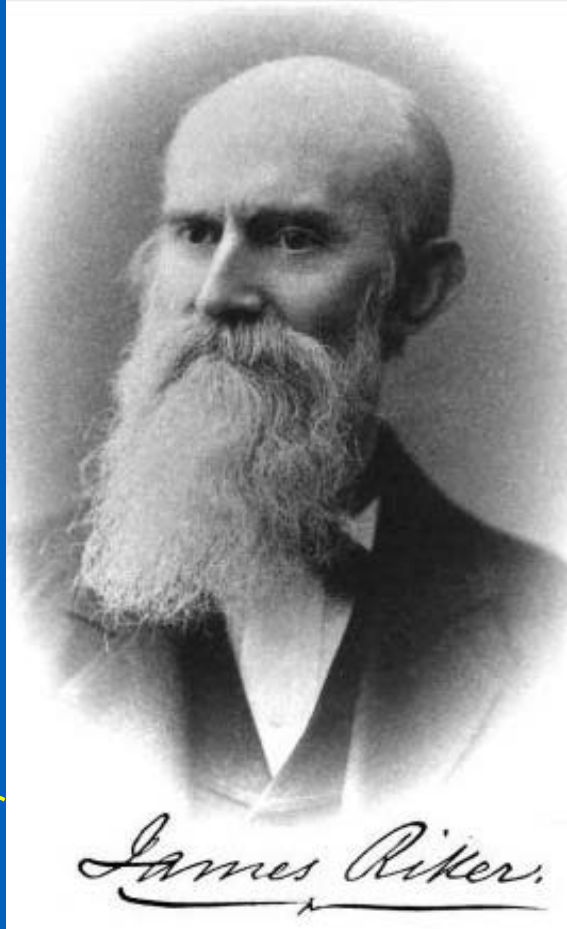
THE HALLETT FAMILY.

The Halletts, now mostly removed from this town, formerly composed here a very large and prominent family, and their history is closely interwoven with Newtown annals.

1. William Hallett, their ancestor, was b. in Dorsetshire, Eng., in 1616, and emigrating to New-England, joined in the settlement of Greenwich, Ct., whence he removed to Long Island, and acquired a large estate at Hellgate. (See pp. 29, 63.) In the fall of 1655 the Indians destroyed his house and plantation at Hallett's Cove, which induced him to take up his residence at Flushing. Here he was appointed sheriff in 1656,



Bishop Nutt begins with *The Annals of Newtown* by James Riker, adds research of his own, and notes role of Wm. Hallett



in the matter of 1664 ownership of the island known now these more than 350 years as Rikers Island. Busy year 1664.



The Progenitor: Abraham Rijcken van Lent

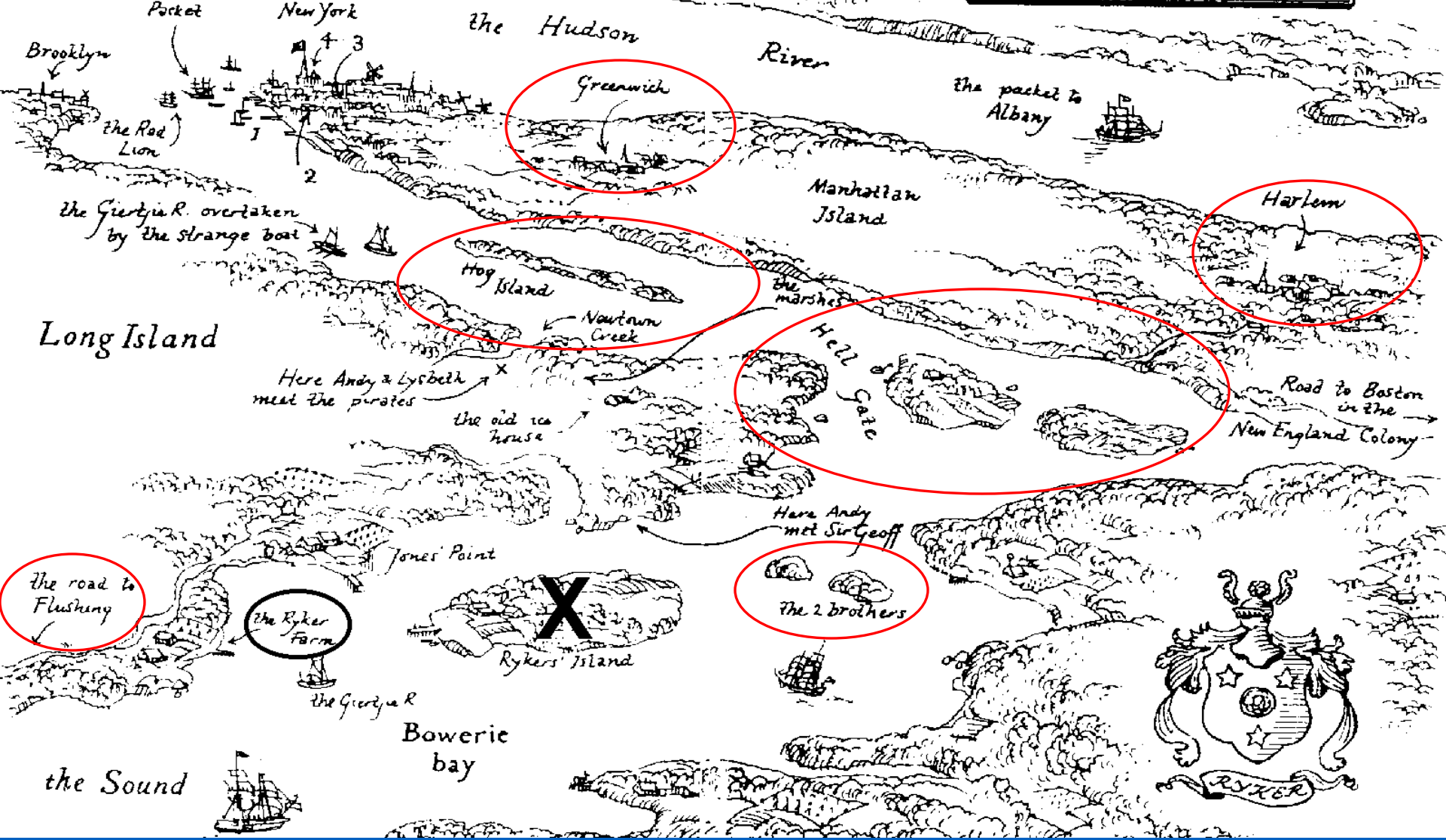
- 1638 -- Arrives in New Amsterdam from Holland. 19.
- Settles first in 'Lower East Side' near river.
- Obtains land grant in Wallabout (Brooklyn).
- 1640 -- Grant is formalize with detailed patent.
- 1654 -- Gets Newtown farm land grant, with LaG site.
- 1664 -- On 8/19 obtains from Peter Stuyvesant patent for Bowery Bay island near Riker's farm.
- On 9/8 Stuyvesant forced to surrender New Amsterdam to British.
- 1667-- On 12/24 the British ratify Stuyvesant patent giving the isle to Riker, even though on 12/5 the Brits were satisfied Wm. Hallett had got much of what's now Astoria from a Canarsee tribe by purchase 8/1/1664. Brits had a policy of recognizing Dutch colony patents. They OK'd much of Hallett's land purchase but exempted the isle protected by Dutch patent.



Granting Riker the patent for the isle made sense due to its proximity to his farm.

But Stuyvesant also had previously a run-in with Hallett whom he appointed as Flushing sheriff but then fired for letting a minister perform Baptist services. The dust-up in 1656 was a warm-up for the landmark colonial case in America's

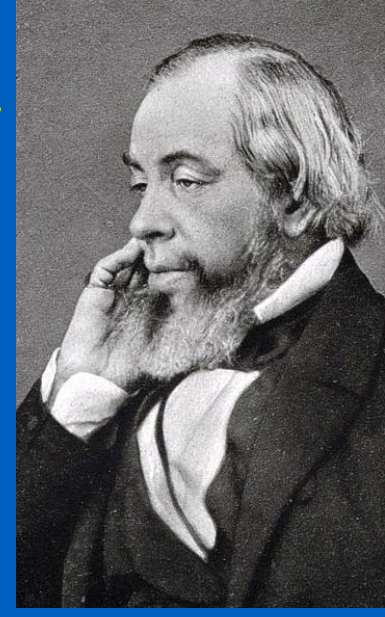
struggle for religious liberty: the Flushing Remonstrance of 1657 over Quaker rites. A Flushing sheriff was part of that one too.



A map depicts East River from Ryker family perspective circa 1720, about 30 years after progenitor Abraham died at age 89.



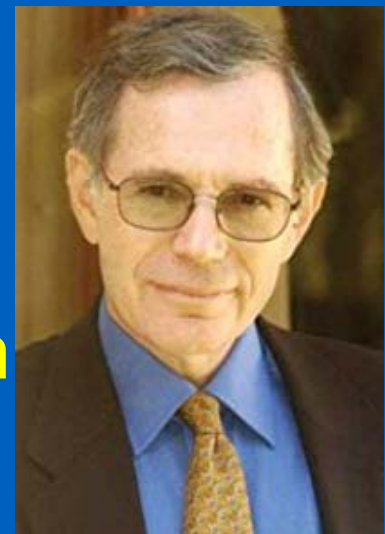
Benson Jon Lossing, right, early U.S. historian, portrayed Richard Riker as a humane judge (1815-1838) who rescued a Negro family from a street mob,



sheltering the victims in City Hall. More recent researchers, such as Leslie Harris, upper left; Graham Hodges, lower left, and



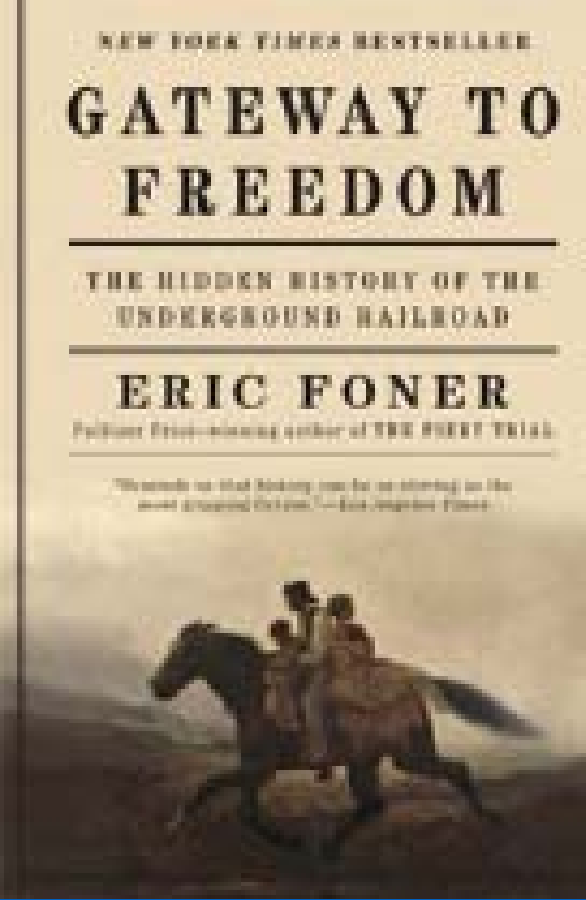
& Eric Foner, lower right, paint him as downright hostile to Negroes, ruling repeatedly against them in Fugitive Slave Act cases.





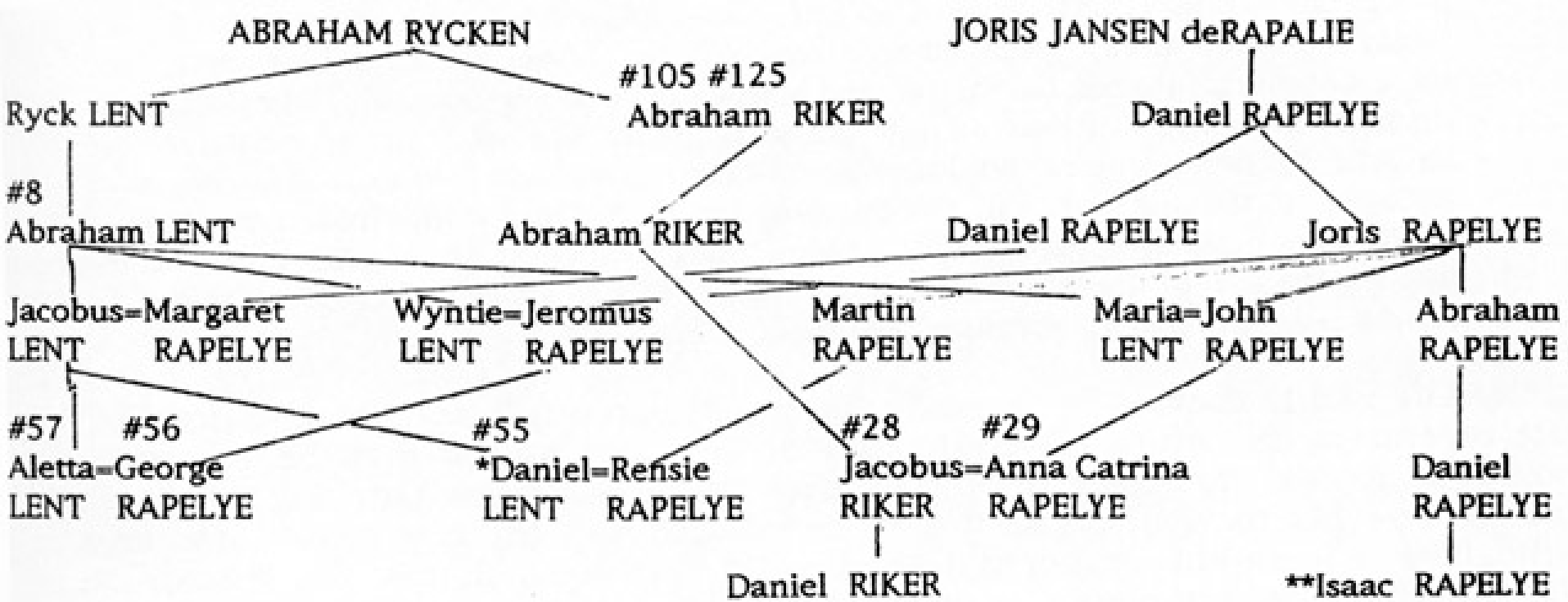
A NORTHERN FREEMAN ENSLAVED BY NORTHERN HANDS.

E.g. Foner cites anti-slavery activists' charges Judge Riker helped "Kidnapping Club" by not giving seized blacks chance to prove they weren't fugitive slaves.



Foner's book triggered a petition to remove the "historically disgraceful & despicable name of Riker" from the penal island. The petition errs on facts and makes "kickback" charges vs. Judge Riker attributed to the book but not found in it.

The petition asserts the island sale to NYC in 1884 was made by the Rikers family. It wasn't. The isle passed out of Abraham Riker descendant hands in 1851-1855 in a sale to 2 Totten brothers.



The petition asserts "Richard Riker was the Patriarch of the Riker Family." While he was perhaps then most publicly known individual Riker, Abraham's kin (as the chart shows) were not one unified family, klan or tribe ruled by a head authority, but were several separate yet linked families.

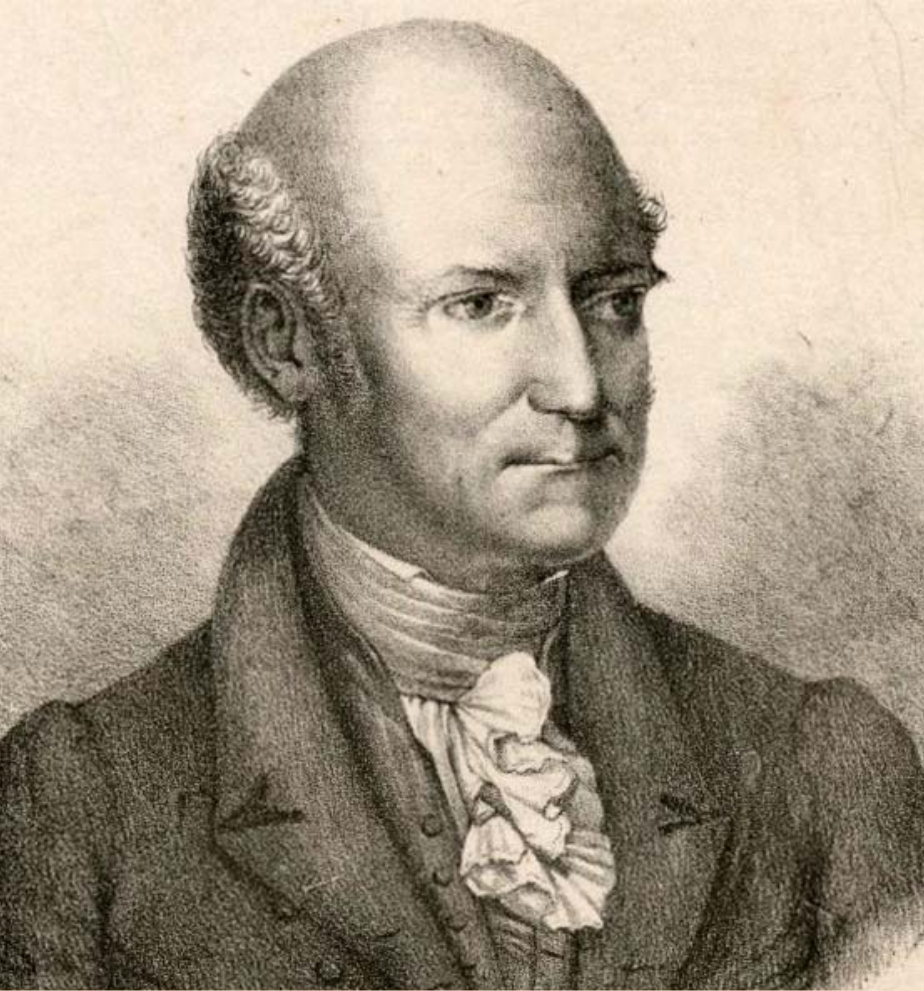
Ryker-Riker



Rilariter

The petition finds "nauseating" that Richard has "his name" on the island complex "that houses . . . primarily [incarcerated] Black and Hispanic Men. . . ."

But does the Riker name belong to him alone? Is it not also a name shared by literally hundreds of Abraham's off-spring – some farmers, bakers, ironsmiths, druggists, carpenters, sextons, undertakers, inventors, doctors, mariners, civil servants, merchants, jewelers, ministers, etc.?



THE HON. RICHARD RIKER
RECORDER OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK IN
1826.

Should the Rikers name be erased from the island because of this one man, for whom it wasn't named; who never owned or was otherwise involved with it, and who never headed any of the Rikers families

who were involved with it? Does he render as naught the service of those Rikers who fought for this country, some dying for it?

John (Jan) Riker (1736 - 1828) in
French & Indian war, and the
Revolution.

Gerardus Ryker (1740 - 1781) in the
Revolution.

Abraham Riker (1740 - 1778) died at
Valley Forge.

Dr. John B. Riker (1738 - 1794) in
Battle of Trenton saved life of
future President James Monroe.

Samuel Riker (1743 – 1823) member of the Revolutionary Committee of Correspondence, Lt. of Light Horse Reg. in the War, member of Assembly, House of Representatives.

Abraham Riker (b.1734) killed in the Revolution.

John Lent (1735 – 1768) French & Indian war.

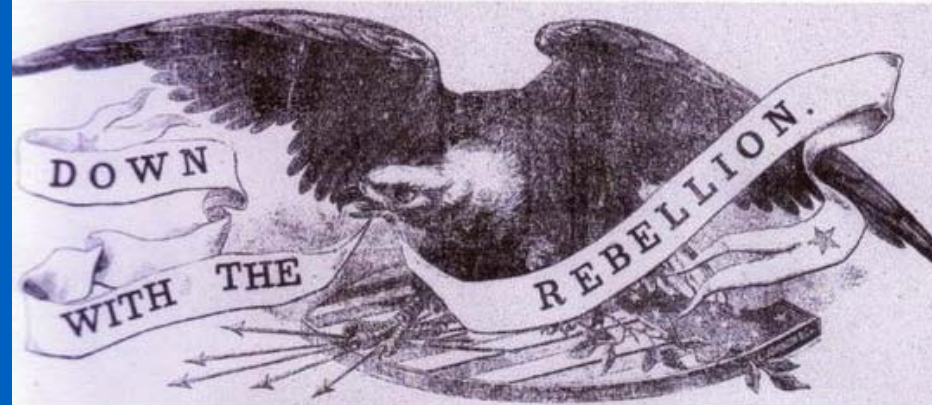
Tunis Riker (1770 – 1864) major in War of 1812.

Andrew Riker (1771–1817) captain of 2 ships during War of 1812.

Abraham Riker (1776–1821) captain of marines under kin Andrew.

John L. Riker (1787 – 1861) captain in 97th Inf. during 1812 war.

James Webber Lent (1761 - 1849) in Revolution, a county registrar.



VOLUNTEERS NEEDED!

ABLE BODIED MEN NEEDED FOR:

"ANDERSON'S ZOUAVES"

62nd New York State Volunteers

COLONEL JOHN L. RIKER COMMANDING.

Under Col. John Lafayette Riker, Zouaves mustered on Riker's Island 6/30/1861 and left 'Camp Astor' to fight 'Rebs' 8/21/61. He died in Fair Oaks, Va., battle on 5/30/1862, while attacking Confederates at the head of his 62nd NYS Volunteers Inf. Reg.



Rikers Island has been a geographic & navigation landmark on maps for more than 3 centuries. That's a lot of maps. Instead of changing the island's map name, why not "top" it with the historically fitting name of NYC DOC's first African American Commissioner?

Why not call the 10-jail campus the "Benjamin J. Malcolm Correctional Complex at Rikers Island"?

When prisoners at the Rikers Island jail complex rioted and took hostages in 1975, Commissioner Benjamin Malcolm, accompanied by Board of Correction chairman Peter F. Tufo, crawled through tear gas into inmate-held turf, worked out a truce, negotiated the hostages' release, and ended the insurrection. A *New York Times* editorial declared, "because of the courage of these men, no lives were lost."



DOC Commissioner Benjamin Malcolm gets a situation update in this 1975 photo.

**BENJAMIN J.
MALCOLM**
August 24, 1919 -- May
25, 2001

**NYC Parole Commission
Officer**
**NYC DOC Deputy
Commissioner**
**NYC DOC
Commissioner**
**U.S. Parole Commission
member**
**CEO, Parole Services of
America**

Would not the name "Benjamin J. Malcolm Correctional Complex at Rikers Island" in itself be a positive statement supporting the still on-going struggle for equality?

Why do I devote a dozen slides to Riker name removal when the overriding issue is whether to close it? Because, while name removal petitioners seem few, its media coverage is huge. It introduces highly charged elements into the closure question,



complicating efforts to find a solution that makes sense as penology. Even so, I too am outraged & disgusted at activities imputed by the abolitionists to the Kidnapping Club.

We would be remiss not to note in passing how during the Civil War the island gave sanctuary & security

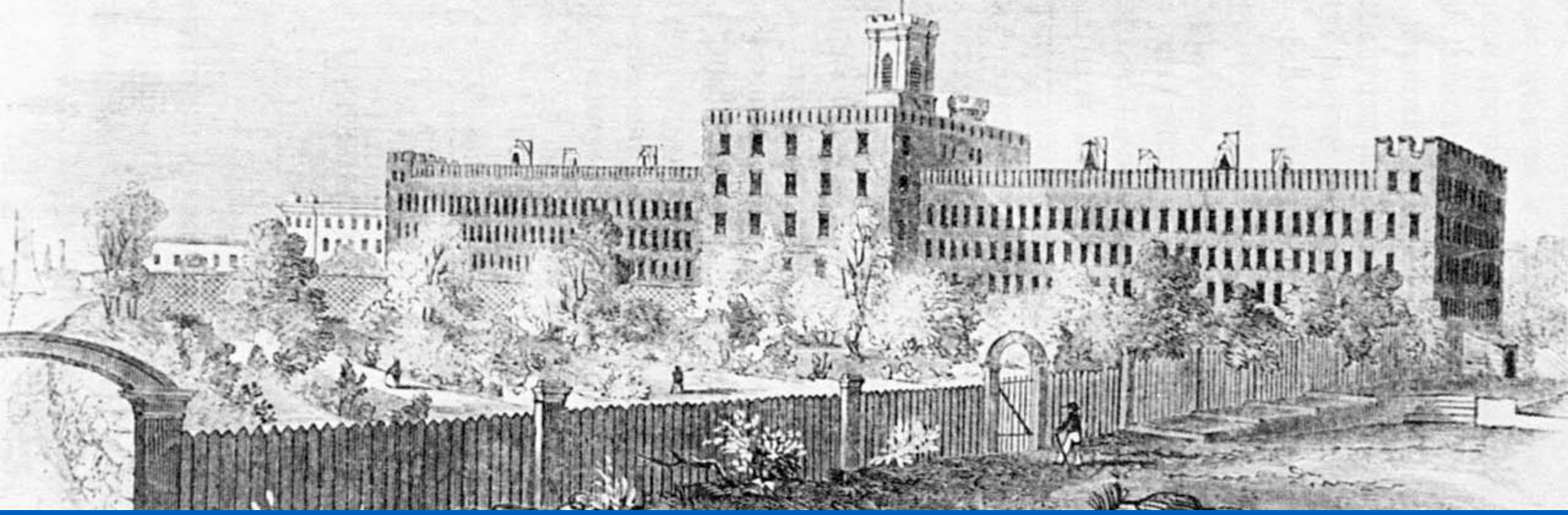


to Colored Orphanage children and other African Americans targeted by racist mobs roaming Manhattan streets, wreaking havoc for days in the 1863 "draft riot."

Rikers
Island
in the
Civil
War
was a
camp



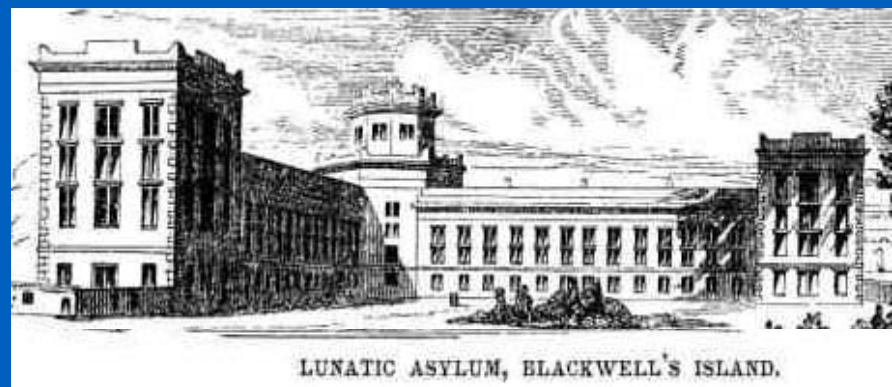
where various Union regiments mustered in, organized, & received brief training before shipping out. Among them were the 20th and 26th United States Colored Troops. Above: the 20th USCT receives in 1864 its unit flags at Hq of its sponsor, Union League before B'way march to ship.



To plan Riker isle future, recalling how we got here may help. For why NYC bought it in 1884, look to the 1828 city purchase of Blackwell's island. Charities & Correction Commissioners installed institutions for the neediest among the poor: the chronically ill, homeless and anti-social, all viewed as drains on NYC's treasury.



Not just Penitentiary
isle: 19th Century
Blackwell's Island was
a mix of other penal &
charitable edifices, in-
cluding the Workhouse
& its work shops (top
left & right), Lunatic
Asylum, almshouses,
small pox hospital. Named
Welfare island in 1921.



TO BUILD A BIGGER JAIL

SOME NEW GREAT WORKS OF THE CHARITIES COMMISSION.

A MODEL PENITENTIARY, FARMS FOR
THE INSANE, BELLEVUE'S VENTILA-
TION, AND THE TRAINING SCHOOL.

The Commissioners of Charities and Correction, who have charge of the city's criminals, paupers, and sick, idiotic and insane persons, are preparing for some extensive and much-needed improvements. Two years ago, having in mind a project for the enlargement of the penitentiary, they bought Riker's Island for \$180,000. They had long cherished a desire to draw a very distinct line of demarcation by territorial restrictions between the institutions for relief of the distressed and those for punishment of the guilty. So long, however, as both were upon the same island the distinction between them in the popular mind was rather nominal than actual, and by its association with crime in an official way a new disgrace was imposed upon helpless poverty and even some stigma cast upon the victims of physical suffering and mental alienation. The shadow of the penitentiary rested upon all the noble works of charity upon Blackwell's Island. From this, as it seemed manifest to the Commissioners, there could be no escape until the penal institution should be removed to some other place.

NYT 9/20/1886:

PC&C Commissioners long cherished a desire to draw very distinct demarcations between institutions for relief of the distressed & those for punishment of the guilty.

Shadow of penitentiary rested upon all the noble works of charity on Blackwell's Island.

NYT 9/20/1886:

So long as both kinds of institutions are on same island the stigma of the convicts will carry over by association



in the public mind to the victims of helpless poverty, physical suffering and mental alienation.

Also, something has to be done to relieve penitentiary overcrowding where 700 cells house 1,100 inmates by doubling up nearly half the population. No hope for reform.



Message From Mayor
Rudolph W. Giuliani - Page 4

Special Edition No. 1

June 1995

2 Correction Centennials

June 5 Marked 100th Anniversary of Law Establishing DOC

Jan.1 Marks 100th Anniversary of DOC Operating on Its Own



Levi P. Morton
Governor Signed DOC into Law

Ex-Vice President Helped Shape DOC

The governor who signed the DOC-creation bill into law 100 years ago was Levi Parsons Morton, who only two years earlier completed serving a term as U. S. Vice President.

In 1861, seven years after opening a dry goods business in the city, Morton founded an investment banking house that bore his name and helped keep the Union financially afloat during the Civil War and advanced U.S. postwar international trade interests. He served in the U.S. House of Representatives (1879-81) and as U.S. minister to France (1881-85).

In 1888, Morton was elected Vice President on the Republican ticket headed by Benjamin Harrison against then-President Grover Cleveland, himself a former New York governor. Cleveland had won the popular vote but lost in the Electoral College. Four years later he defeated Harrison. Morton then returned to New York where in 1894 he was elected governor.



Grover Cleveland
President When DOC Created

Chapter 912 Split Public Charities and Correction

Monday, June 5th, 1995, marked the 100th anniversary of the law mandating that New York City establish the Department of Correction as a separate agency.

On Wednesday, June 5th, 1895, in Albany, then-Governor Levi Morton signed into law Chapter 912 (of the statutes enacted at the 118th Session of the New York State Legislature). The legislation divided the city Department of Charities and Correction.

Chapter 912's preamble described the law as: "an act to abolish the department of public charities and correction in the city of New York, and to provide for the establishment of two separate departments in place thereof, to be known respectively as 'The department of public charities of the city of New York' and 'The department of correction of the city of New York,' and to define the powers and duties of such departments."

It declared that the terms of office of the commissioners of the old combined department "cease and terminate on and after midnight of the 31st of December following passage hereof."

In effect, it required the New York City mayor appoint a Correction Commissioner and three Public Charities Commissioners by Dec. 21, 1895, to assume those offices Jan. 1, 1896. The term of office was set at six years until appointment and qualification of successors. The per annum salary for the charity commissioner was set at \$5,000, and for the correction commissioner, \$7,500.

Chapter 912 gave the public charities department "charge of all hospitals, asylums, almshouses and other institutions belonging to the city or county of New York which are devoted to the care of the insane, the feeble-minded, the sick, the infirm, and the destitute, except the hospital wards attached to

(Continued on Page 3)



William L. Strong
Fathered DOC
Fusion Mayor Reformed DOC&C

Mayor William L. Strong, who came to power as a Fusion candidate fielded in 1894 by reformers, fathered the emergence of Correction as a separate city agency. A businessman nominally Republican, he ran with corruption fighter Democrat John W. Goff and named a former U.S. Civil Service Commissioner, Theodore Roosevelt, to steady the then scandal-ridden Police Department.

In his first annual message to the Common Council, submitted January 8th, 1895, shortly after taking office, Mayor Strong declared: "I am clearly of the opinion that the care of the indigent should be separate from the discipline of those who have broken the law. To continue these branches together pre-

(Continued on Page 4)



Theodore Roosevelt
Police Commissioner

Reform's Reasons Focused on Patients

The reasoning behind the reform splitting Public Charities and Correction focused on protecting poor patients from inmates.

Besides concerns about actual exploitation by inmates working in hospitals, the reformers were concerned that ill indigents were being stigmatized by association deceptively with accused and convicted criminals. The agency division bill had emanated from

(Continued on Page 3.)

Penitentiary, Workhouse, Prison count Begon at 2,650

On Jan.1, 1896, the Department of Correction began operating on its own, no longer joined to Public Charities.

The initial inmate census on Jan. 1, 1896, was put at 2,650. That count was among the statistics contained in the Department's first quarterly report to the Mayor, filed April 10th, 1896, and published in *The City Record* May 2, 1896.

Of the initial total, the Penitentiary and Workhouse on Blackwell's Island (now known as Roosevelt Island) accounted for 2,009 inmates -- 1,049 in the Penitentiary and 960 in the Workhouse. The City Prison, also known as the Tombs, contributed 465 to the total with the remaining 176 coming from the five District Prisons. By the end of the quarter -- that is, on March 31, 1896 -- the total inmate population had risen by more than 10 percent to 2,926.

Much of the first quarterly report of the first DOC Commissioner, Robert J. Wright, was concerned -- as were subsequent reports -- with detailing the work done by inmates for the Department of Public Charities as well as for the Correction Department itself.

The number of things made or repaired and the number of days labor expended were recorded in precise detail, even down to the count of shrouds sewn. The occupations listed include blacksmiths, tinsmiths, carpenters, painters, upholsterers, coat and broom makers, tailors, stone cutters, yard and coal workers, and outdoor laborers.

Wright itemized the number of inmate days of "ordinary labor" done for -- and in many cases, done at -- various city facilities "under the care and supervision of Keepers" (the 19th Century term for Correction Officers). These included: Bellevue, City, Gouverneur, Ran-

(Continued on Page 3.)



Robert Jefferson Wright
DOC's First Commissioner

New Agency, Not New Commissioner

Under terms of Chapter 912 establishing the Correction Department, Mayor William L. Strong had until Dec. 21, 1895, to name his appointees to run the two emerging departments.

He did so 11 A.M., Dec. 21, designating Robert J. Wright as Commissioner of Correction. Named Commissioners of Public Charities were John P. Faure, Retired Gen. James R. O'Beirne and Silas C. Croit.

Both Wright and Faure were Mayor Strong-appointees to the old combined Charities and Correction board and therefore already familiar with their departments' operations.

Commissioner Wright's background was that of business. He was a partner in the fertilizer firm of Kane & Wright. A staunch Republican, he had been first appointed by Mayor Strong in Spring 1895 to the old Charities and Correction board.

(Continued on Page 4)



Francis J. Lantry
First Greater NY DOC Commissioner

DOC's emergence as a separate agency in 1895-6 was tied into removal of Correction institutions from Blackwell. Reformers championing charities pushed a law that mandated removal & split PCC into two agencies. Convicts back then were seen as undeserving drains on public treasury vs. deserving poor. Now?

Is replacing Rikers Isle by scattering jails a step forward in penology or step backward to 19th Century to mid-20th when NYC had the district jail system?
1st, 2nd & 3rd District prisons respectively were the original Tombs, the Jefferson Market Prison, and the Essex Market Prison.

After PCC replaced Almshouse Dept. in 1860, other district prisons were added: Yorkville 1863, West Side 1865, Fordham 1875, West Farms 1915, and various others too short-lived to count.



The only district prison still standing is unused structure attached to the beautifully restored 1892-3 Harlem Court House at 121st St. & Sylvan Place, btwn Lex. & 3rd Aves. I've guided groups touring the still functioning court and ex-jail. But City Admin. Services stopped visits to the ex-jail. Another story for another day.

www.correctionhistory.org

**the web
resource
for NY
Correction
History**



**since its
launching
on the
Internet
in 1999**

NY's Correction History website