

# Black History Month

## Correction Connections: Fitzgerald Phillips & 'Firsts'

Among those attending the 1957, swear-in of Maurice W. Grey as NYC DOC 2nd Deputy Commissioner was Fitzgerald Phillips, a predecessor in that post. His attendance serves to illustrate the proposition that history is a multi-levered net of interconnecting lines in time. Phillips links to a series of "firsts" in Black History and Correction History:

- NYPD's first African-American officer,
- DOC's first female commissioner and its first African-American commissioner,
- Yankees' legendary Iron Man first baseman, and
- America's first municipal parole board.

**Samuel Jesse Battle** became the first Black appointed to the NYPD uniformed force on June 28, 1911, successfully overcoming initial rejection. Battle's quiet perseverance, study, hard work, spotless record and bravery, including rescuing a threatened white officer, overcame initial hostility of many on the force.

Not very long after Patrolman Battle was assigned to Manhattan's West 135th Street Station in 1913, a new administration came to power at City Hall. John Purroy Mitchel surprised even supporters of his successful 1913 campaign as Fusion-Progressive Party candidate for mayor when he picked Bedford Hills Reformatory Superintendent **Katharine Bement Davis** as Correction Commissioner. On Jan. 1, 1914, she became the first woman ever to head any major municipal agency in the city.

Among reforms that Commissioner Davis initiated was the creation of the NYC Patrol Commission in December, 1915, becoming its first chairperson. It involved indeterminate sentencing of up to three years served at the NYC Reformatory in Orange County or the NYC Penitentiary on Blackwells Island (now Roosevelt), with parole an incentive for inmate rehabilitation. No other city in the nation had such program and panel.

NYC's parole board consisted of five commissioners including the Police and Correction Commissioners serving ex-officio. On Oct. 11, 1939 at the World's Fair "City Hall," Mayor LaGuardia announced appointment of **Henry Louis Gehrig** as a Parole Commissioner for a 10-year term to begin the next January. Two months earlier, the original "Iron Man" of baseball had stood at a Yankee Stadium home plate microphone and uttered farewell to the game he loved and that loved him back. The Columbia U.-educated Gehrig read books and reports on parole and attended commission meetings even before his term



Samuel Battle

Fitzgerald Phillips

Benjamin Malcolm

began. Once officially on the board, he immediately visited the Tombs and Rikers, but without news media. Up until about a month before his death in June, 1941, Gehrig went regularly to his parole board office at 130 Centre St.

On June 20, 1941, **Samuel Jesse Battle** -- who had become NYPD's first Black police sergeant on May 21, 1926, and its first Black police lieutenant on Jan. 7, 1935 -- was named by Mayor LaGuardia to fill the remainder of Gehrig's unexpired term running to January, 1950.

In 1946, about the time Battle was into his fifth year as Parole Commissioner:

- A young lawyer active in Harlem civics, **Fitzgerald Phillips**, was named a NYC DOC Deputy Commissioner by Mayor O'Dwyer on Jan. 14, beginning a 22-year career of dedicated city correction-related service, and
- A different young man joined the city parole board as a parole officer, starting what would become a distinguished career of more than half a century in the correctional field. His name: **Benjamin Malcolm**.

Phillips served as DOC Deputy Commissioner until Jan. 9, 1950, when he was appointed by Mayor O'Dwyer as a NYC Parole Commissioner for a 10-year term but he remained with it for 17 years until he retired on Sept. 1, 1967 when the state took over all parole functions and absorbed much of the city parole staff. That was a decade after the Maurice Grey swear-in at DOC.

Parole officer Malcolm advanced through the ranks and pursued graduate studies. In 1970, Mayor Lindsay appointed him DOC Deputy Commissioner. On Jan. 24, 1972, Malcolm became the first African-American to head

the municipal jail agency. He stepped down Nov. 19, 1977, to accept appointment by President Carter to the U.S. Parole Commission.



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139 CENTRE STREET  
NEW YORK CITY

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