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NY Correction History Society

Slide Script for PowerPoint presentation, Nov. 19, at *Researching NY 2009* SUNY Albany.



Saluting NY's Reform School Ship As SUNY Maritime College Ancestor?

Thursday
November 19, 2009

SESSION II
1:45 - 3:15 PM

CONSERVATION AND EDUCATION POLICY IN NEW YORK

Saluting New York's Reform School Ship as SUNY Maritime College's Ancestor?
Thomas McCarthy,
New York Correction History Society

More Life and Less Latin: The General Education Board Explores Alternative Education
Nancy Adgent,
Rockefeller Archive Center

"The Property of the People of the State:" Governor Al Smith's Conservation Policy, 1919-1928
Robert Chiles,
University of Maryland

Comment: **Lauren Kozakiewicz,**
University at Albany, SUNY
San Jose State University



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NY Correction History Society

The New York Correction History Society is not a New York revisionist history society.

“Correction” in our name refers to prisons, jails, etc.

But this particular case does involve “correcting” some “official history.”

At least, visitors to SUNY Maritime College’s website and the campus Maritime Industry Museum at Fort Schuyler might think the history there is “official.”

The college and museum are outstanding institutions. Nothing said here seeks to, or ever could detract from that fact.

Even so, their “official history” conveys, by commission and by omission, an erroneous impression. It is that New York’s – indeed, America’s -- merchant marine training history began in 1874 with the arrival of the NYC Board of Education’s ship *St. Mary’s*.

SUNY Maritime College website claim:




“... training America's sailors has changed since the school's and America's first merchant training ship went into service in 1874.”

Internet visitors are told that:

“... training America's sailors has changed since the school's and America's first merchant training ship went into service in 1874.”

Elsewhere on SUNY Maritime College website:




“... on Dec. 14, 1874, the USS St. Mary's arrived in New York harbor and became the home of the first commercial maritime [training] institution in the United States.”

Another page on the website shows the campus beneath the Throggs Neck Bridge and gives this bit of “training history:”

“ on December 14, 1874, the USS St. Mary's arrived in New York harbor and became the home of the first commercial maritime institution in the United States.”

The erroneous impression conveyed by those “official history” claims is perpetuated by the short entry for the college in the *Encyclopedia of NYS* that cites the website as a source. (Page 1511)

These claims might prompt you to think its 1874 school ship, the *St. Mary's*, was not only NY's 1st, but even America's first, to train boys for the merchant marine.



If so, not so. It was not NY's 1st nautical school ship, much less 1st in USA!

The problem with what these claims convey is that:

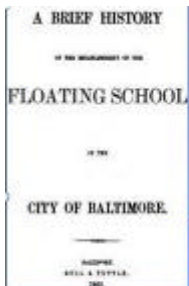
- the *St. Mary's* was not New York's, much less America's first merchant training ship; and
- its arrival on Dec. 14, 1874 did not constitute the start of NY's history in maritime training, much less America's.

Likely America's first non-Navy maritime school fitted up on a ship by a city and/or state began 1857 in Baltimore: the "Floating School."

The Board of Trade was the prime mover; the school board ran it. The ex-Navy ship stayed docked and didn't sail. Its public school pupils didn't stay overnight.



Prime mover for the 1859-launched Charleston, S. C., school ship *Lode-bar* was the Rev. W. B. Yates, the "Seaman's Chaplain," and the religiously-oriented Port Society. They did not take in adjudicated JDs, but they did recruit poor boys and at-risk youths. The boys lived aboard. It sailed S.C. waters.



Purpose of our institution is the removal of degradation from the pursuit of the sailor, and the elevation of his profession and himself to a respectable standing . . . The contrast is clear. Maryland would remove reproach from the profession of the sailor. Massachusetts would fasten that reproach upon it forever.

Massachusetts launched its first reform school ship in 1860; the second in 1866. They plied Mass. waters.

In 1860, about the time Massachusetts was considering launching a reform school ship, managers of Baltimore's Floating School issued a brief history of its founding.

They gave sound arguments for American maritime training: that better trained seamen, and more of them, would increase safety and reduce loss of lives, cargo and ships. But also they attacked Massachusetts' reform school ship idea as:

. . . entirely subversive of the philanthropic purpose of the founders of our institution in the removal of degradation from the pursuit of the sailor, and the elevation of his profession and himself to a respectable standing . . . Maryland would remove reproach from the profession of the sailor. Massachusetts would fasten that reproach upon it forever.

1812: NY prisons chaplain Stanford seeks JDs ship. 1845: NY Marine industry seeks 'native-born US seamen.' Why? Because NY docks were forest of ship masts with few 'Americans' to climb them.

The same clash of approaches played out in NY. Prison chaplain Stanford in 1812 urged nautical training for JDs. In 1845, NY maritime industry leaders petitioned Congress for more apprentice programs. Their focus was more “native-born Americans” to man their ships. Their pamphlet claimed only about 1/3rd of the crew of any American ship were “native-born Americans.”

The rivalry in approaches seen in the antebellum period resumed in post-Civil War NY. The House of Refuge and the Chamber of Commerce each wanted a nautical school of its own set up by the NYS Legislature.

2 rivals in 'race' for NY school ship: Chamber of Commerce wanted 'honest boys' ship under its control or at least a share in managing. Randall's Island House of Refuge wanted its own JDs' ship school.

The maritime industry wanted an “honest boys” ship under Chamber control or, at least, sharing management with the Bd. of Ed.

The venerable philanthropic Randall’s Island institution of refuge, rescue and reform wanted a ship for its wayward youths.

But in 1869 those two rivals lost out to a late-starter: NYC/ County’s Public Charities & Correction (PC&C), the “superagency” of its era.

2 NY rivals lost out to late-starter: Public Charities & Correction (PC&C) Annual report cover shows 'Mother NYC' suckling one of her children, while balancing scales of justice and watchful of her orphans, their safety and education.

But in 1869 those two rivals lost out

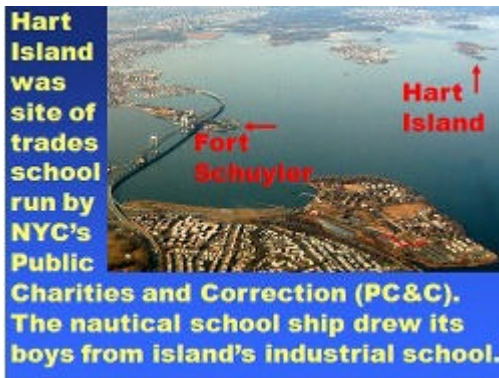
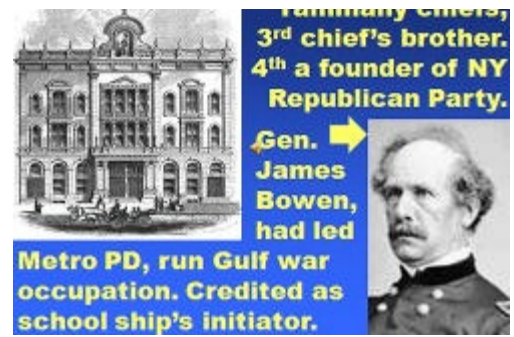
Prisons: The Tombs, Jefferson Mkt., Essex Mkt., 57th Street, Penitentiary, Workhouse, Industrial School, Asylums: Lunatics, Inebriates, Colored Orphans, Indigent Blind, Idiots

Morgue, Cemeteries, Almshouse, Charity, Colored Infants, Home, Incurables, Labor Randall's I., Bureau. Small Pox, Out-door Poor, Epileptic, Paralytic, Soldiers Retreat.

Think Correction, Youth Services, Juvenile Detention, Health and Hospitals, Mental Hygiene, Social Services, Human Resources, the City Morgue and Potter’s Field all rolled up into one humongous agency -- NYC’s third most powerful, after police and fire departments.

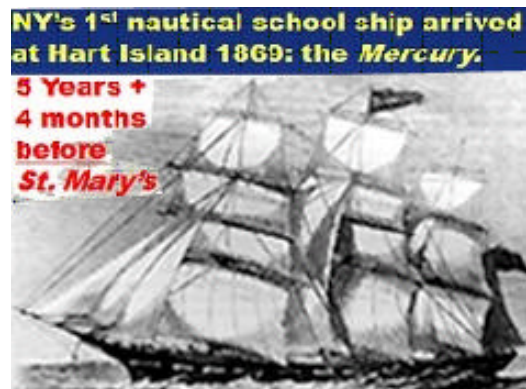
The 1869 PC&C board of commissioners was politically powerful, balanced, and unified to a unique extent in NYC 19th Century history: 2 Democrats, 2 Republicans, each influential in his own right, each having in common a personal appreciation of NY as America’s Port City.

One Commissioner had run a line of Hudson River steamers. Another had run an ocean steamship line. A third had been a NYC Harbor Master. The fourth had been a NYS Harbor Commissioner. Their shared Port-of-NY orientation may account for why, despite different party labels, they worked so effectively on the nautical school and other projects.



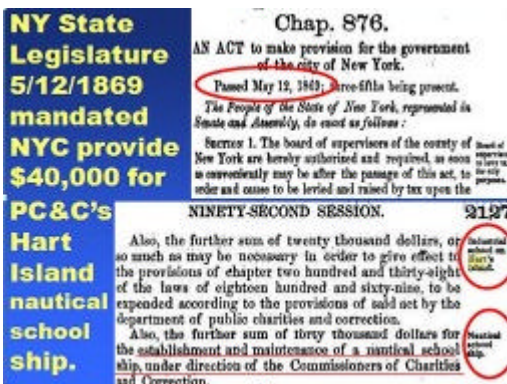
The two Democrats were top Tammany chiefs (Sachems). One of the two Republicans was brother of yet another top Tammany chief. The 4th Commissioner, wealthy James Bowen, was a founder of the Republican Party in NY, had led the Metropolitan Police before the Civil War, raised six regiments, administered the Gulf region occupation, retired a General, was named PC&C Commissioner and is credited as the initiator of its nautical school.

A little east of Fort Schuyler lies Hart Island in L.I. Sound. Acquired in 1868 as the city's Potter's Field, it also became the site of PC&C's industrial school, aka reformatory.



PC&C applied to the Legislature for authority to include in its reformatory's industrial education program a nautical school ship. As stated in its 1869 annual report:

“Under authority conferred by the Legislature, a ship of 12,000 tons as been purchased and fitted up as a Nautical School. . . . The mercantile marine suffers for want of intelligent seamen, and there are a multitude of boys fitted by temperament only for a seaman's life who are growing up in idleness and vagrancy. . . .”



The *Mercury* arrived July 3rd, 1869 at Hart Island. The former NY-to- Havre commercial packet took its first group of boys aboard in September, 1869. It had been in actual operation as a nautical school ship 5 years and 4 months before the *St. Mary's* arrived.

The reform school ship continued in service another year after *St. Mary's* arrival. Thus 1875 was the first full year for the *St. Mary's* and the 6th and final year for the *Mercury*.

From Page 283 of the 1869 annual report of the Comptroller of NYC

NAUTICAL SCHOOL-SHIP.	
Appropriation.—Amount appropriated per ordinance, May 19, 1869.....	\$40,000
Expended.—Paid James Bowen, President, for the use of the Commissioners of Public Charities and Correction	40,000

NOTE.—For particulars of the expenditures of the above appropriations see the Annual Report of the Department of Public Charities and Correction.
Recapitulation—Department of Public Charities and Correction.

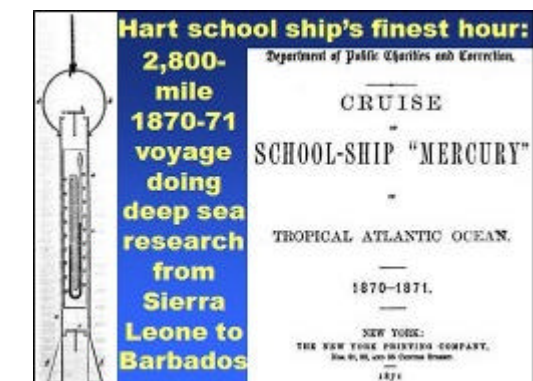
1/1/1870 NYC Bd of Ed voted to provide \$3,832 to cover salaries of teaching staff of PC&C's Hart Island industrial school and school ship.

Included in the list of appropriations that Chapter 876 of the Laws of 1869 mandated the Board of Supervisors of New York County, aka NYC, to make was *“the further sum of \$40,000 for the establishment and maintenance of a nautical school ship, under the direction of the Commissioners of Charities and Correction.”*

The 1869 annual report of the NYC Comptroller, under the heading “Nautical School-Ship,” included an entry showing the expenditure of \$40,000 to James Bowen as PC&C board president and as “per ordinance 1869.”

On Jan. 1, 1870, the NYC Board of Education voted to \$3,832 to cover the salaries of the teaching staff of Hart Island industrial school and nautical school ship, as PC&C had requested.

Unlike Baltimore’s Floating School that stayed at the dock or Massachusetts’ and South Carolina school ships that sailed only in state bay and coastal waters, Hart Island’s Nautical School Ship sailed the Atlantic to major ports in the Americas, Europe and Africa.



One *Mercury* captain called it the “only School Ship cruising the world.” Open-ing the oceans for American non-Navy maritime training vessels was the *Mercury's* greatest legacy to the *St. Mary's* and later school ships.

Perhaps its “finest hour” was the 2,800-mile 1870 - 71 voyage doing deep sea research from Sierra Leone to Barbados.

PC&C in 1871 published a report on the trip and its results, involving temperature readings and water samples from depths and confirming theories related to ocean flows of warm and cold currents.

For all its political and governmental muscle, PC&C couldn’t fix its school ship’s basic flaws: (a) non-voluntary students, (b) indeterminate stays, and (c) an unsupportive maritime industry.



PC&C couldn't fix school ship flaws:
 - non-voluntary students,
 - indeterminate stays, &
 - maritime industry unwillingness to help train or hire grads.

Even if PC&C could have solved “a” and “b,” the maritime industry’s general reluctance to hire reform school nautical graduates would still have doomed the program.

A few boys found jobs as seamen, some more entered the Navy. But the numbers were not encouraging enough to overcome complaints about the expenses involved.

An estimated 2,800 to 3,000+ boys had been admitted at one time or another during the *Mercury*’s six years as PC&C’s nautical school ship. Average aboard at any one time: about 265.

In its final year, *Mercury* counted 422 boys had been aboard with a daily average of 229. Only 28 left for life at sea: 24 in U.S. Navy, 4 in “Merchant Service.”

Year	Average Number of Pupils	Total Tufts Per Expenses	Total Daily Wages	Daily Average Cost Per Pupils
1870	371	\$40,833 76	\$188 09	\$1.8
1871	394	43,999 87	137 78	41.4
1872	387	48,433 43	183 96	47.1
1873	393	61,425 14	169 99	63.3
1874	256	31,437 56	189 94	61.1
1875	339	35,363 98	51 79	49.9

6-yr total: 3,000+ boys admitted. Average aboard any one time: 265

Showing the number of boys on board of U. S. S. Mercury, on January 1, 1875, admitted, discharged, shipped, transferred, deserted and died, during the year 1875.

On board, January 1, 1875	269
Admitted during 1875	422
On board during the year	691
Discharged	36
Shipped in U. S. Navy	24
Merchant service	4
Transferred to other schools	12
Deserted	3
Died	4
Remaining on board, December 31, 1875	256

Showing the total expenses for the years 1870 to 1875, both inclusive.

Capt., 3 execs, paymaster, MD, 10 petty officers, 17 seamen

PC&C put up a 1875 chart to show how little per day each boy cost: less than 41 cents. Given that employment of graduates as seamen or sailors was one of the program’s aims, and only 28 went to sea, the figures could be read that each seafaring grad cost about \$1,197. In 1875, that was far too much for too few.

Tweed downfall opened way for C. of C. to get its kind of school ship: one run by Bd. of Ed. with Chamber in-put.



Anti-Catholic, nativist threads in push for public school ships but the real issue: ‘Better class’ seamen sought.

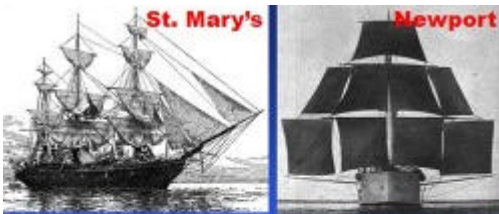


The major factor in the ship’s operating budget was the nautical staff: captain, 3 executive officers, a paymaster, a surgeon, 10 petty officers, and 17 seamen. They taught by showing in real time and live action how to sail a ship on the high seas in calm weather and foul.

Not its cost, but the downfall of “Boss” Tweed and the rise of the so-called reformers opened the way for the Chamber to have the Legislature mandate the kind of school ship it wanted: one run by the NYC Board of Education with Chamber in-put; a good boys’ boat, not a bad boys’ brig.

The arrival of the *St. Mary’s* at the end of 1874 spelled the beginning of the end for the *Mercury*. NYC would not long pay for two such expensive schools; one maybe, not two.

Just as nativist themes had attended the push to train native-born Americans for the maritime, so perceived anti-Irish, anti-Catholic themes – such as Thomas Nast’s cartoons – attended Tweed’s downfall.



Bd of Ed's ship school also flawed & wore out its welcome, even after getting propeller gunboat *Newport* in 1907. NYC wanted to be rid of the burden early on, succeed in 1913.

Nevertheless, the driving force behind resistance to the reform school ship and insistence on the public school ship seems to have been more class consciousness than xenophobia and bigotry. The maritime industry’s nautical school focus was on “training of a better class of men for manning our ships.” They did not want to entrust their ships and cargo to reform school graduates.

The Bd. of Ed/Chamber ship school was also flawed and soon wore out its welcome. Even after getting propeller gunboat *Newport* in 1907, NYC wanted to be rid of the burden and succeeded in 1913.

As early as 1878, efforts began to get NYC out from under the school ship burden. One bill to transfer it to the state was vetoed by Gov. Flower in 1893.

But in 1913 Governor Sulzer signed a bill setting up a NY State Nautical School, conditioned on NYC Nautical School’s demise. The *Times* headline about its impending demise partly blamed the linkage in the public mind of school ship and reformatory.



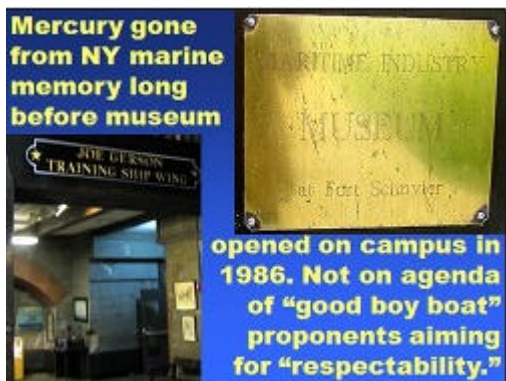
What emerged was a successor to, not a continuation of the 1874 school. Other than same ship and port, the state school bore no resemblance to the failed NYC Bd. of Ed. school. It drew students from the entire state. The entrance age was raised to late teens. A board of governors from the maritime industry guided it.

Even so, Governors Charles Whitman and Al Smith wanted the U.S. to take it. But ex-Navy assistant secretary/outgoing Gov. FDR gave it Fort Schuyler Dec. 29, 1932, a belated Christmas present.

In state hands, what had been a city public vocational school to train boys to be seamen evolved within 33 years into a college for maritime officer training.

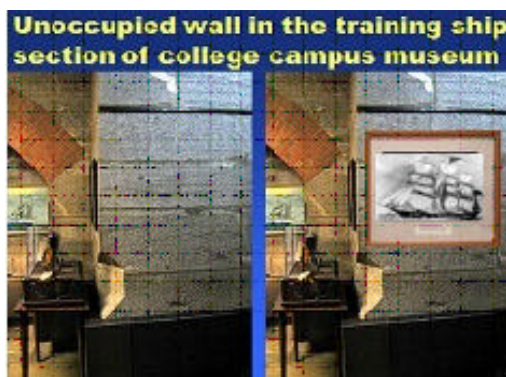
Evolution involves antecedents. The 1913 NY State Nautical School, from which the college evolved, had the 1874 New York Nautical School as its antecedent. That, in

turn, had as its antecedent, PC&C's 1869 Nautical School. But the reformatory ship seems like the ex-con ancestor an upwardly-mobile family doesn't mention in "better class" social circles.



Disappearance of the *Mercury* from NY's collective memory of its early maritime training endeavors had come to pass long before the museum opened on campus in 1986. The "good boys boat" proponents, whether in Baltimore or NY, made clear their objective was to reshape the public's perception of the seafaring life and seafarer by raising it and him to "a respectable standing." Their aim was to "remove reproach from the profession of the sailor."

Since they feared the reformatory ship "would fasten that reproach upon it forever," preserving *Mercury's* memory was hardly on their agenda. Their letting its memory fade was aided by the 1895/6 split of NYC PC&C into separate agencies. Charities sub-divided into multiple agencies, few of whom took interest in their PC&C origins. Until NYCHS' founding in 1999, Correction took little interest in any of its history.

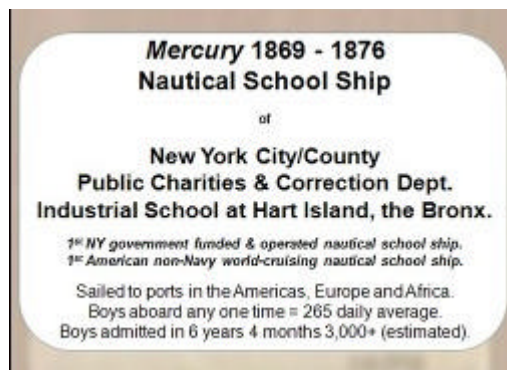


This "correction" of the erroneous impression in the NY maritime training history presented by the college website and campus museum does not suggest they knowingly misrepresented that history. Rather they too fell victim to the success of reform school ship opponents' strategy to let memory of it sink into oblivion.

But setting the record straight now poses no risk of the maritime profession losing its hard-won "respectable standing." To its credit, the museum is open to having an article on the *Mercury* in a newsletter issue.

Hopefully, it also will be open to having an unoccupied wall receive a framed and appropriately captioned illustration of Hart Island reformatory's Nautical School Ship. It was NY's own first maritime training vessel -- the first NYS legislatively-mandated, the first NYC-funded, the first NYC-operated.

After much more than a century, has not the time come for the reform school ship to be credited as



one of the college's antecedents?

In NY marine training history, it is antecedent in the developmental ancestral sense as well as in the strictly timeline sense. Like the Bd. of Ed. nautical school, the PC&C nautical school was a flawed model, a failure. But NY learned from both failures and came up with a model that worked, survived and succeeded. That's the real story the "official history" ought to reflect.

So what that some aboard NY's first nautical school ship -- and apparently America's first world-cruising non-Navy publicly-funded school ship -- were juvenile delinquents! Did not they serve their time in a way worth noting for all time? Have they and their non-JDs shipmates not earned a salute in the "official history" of NY maritime training?

I believe so.

Will they receive it? I trust so.

###

To menu page opening detailed 8-Part web presentation with source links:

["Saluting NY's Reform School Ship as SUNY Maritime College Ancestor?"](http://www.correctionhistory.org/html/chronicl/school-ship/Hart%20Island%20start%20of%20Fort%20Schuyler%20Marine%20Academy0.html)

[http://www.correctionhistory.org/html/chronicl/school-](http://www.correctionhistory.org/html/chronicl/school-ship/Hart%20Island%20start%20of%20Fort%20Schuyler%20Marine%20Academy0.html)

[ship/Hart%20Island%20start%20of%20Fort%20Schuyler%20Marine%20Academy0.html](http://www.correctionhistory.org/html/chronicl/school-ship/Hart%20Island%20start%20of%20Fort%20Schuyler%20Marine%20Academy0.html)

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Webmaster note: NYCHS gratefully acknowledges the help of maritime historian Norman Brouwer regarding the correct illustration for the *Mercury School Ship*.