

## DOC's walking-talking historical resources come up with answers about Penitentiary Dorms' timeline.



On Feb. 12, 2018, the Correction History website unveiled a presentation about the Rikers Island Penitentiary dormitories complex and invited in-puts to help nail down “when and why” the buildings were removed.

The presentation explained:

“Given that OBCC [Otis Bantum Correctional Center] opened in June, 1985 (after a speedy construction period of about a year and a half), one might reasonably suspect that the dormitory complex, which began in the mid-1930s as an annex to the original Penitentiary, was removed sometime in the early 1980s to make way for [the] new facility.

“But nailing that down would be more satisfying for those of us who like their history with all the t’s crossed and i’s dotted. Members of the NY Correction History Facebook group (1,800+ membership), the website’s social media extension, as well as other regular visitors to website are asked to share any additional information they may have about the history of the old Penitentiary dormitory complex, including but not limited to when and why of its removal.”

During the two weeks which followed addition of that presentation to the website, DOC’s walking-talking historical resources – retired, former and veteran staffers – came through with answers about those Dorms’ final years, other details, and additional images. Their responses enable the Correction History webmaster to have confidence in stating flatly

- that the Penitentiary Dormitory Complex was a feature of Rikers Island for about a half century (mid-1930s to mid-1980s);

- that while initially the Dorms group served as an adjunct to the Penitentiary (chiefly for housing), much later some individual Dorms were designated for other uses and/or assigned to other facilities and commands, and
- that the Dorms were removed circa 1984 to make way for what is now known as OBCC (but began as North Facility).

Here are some of the responses that provide the basis for the website having confidence in asserting the above three conclusions:

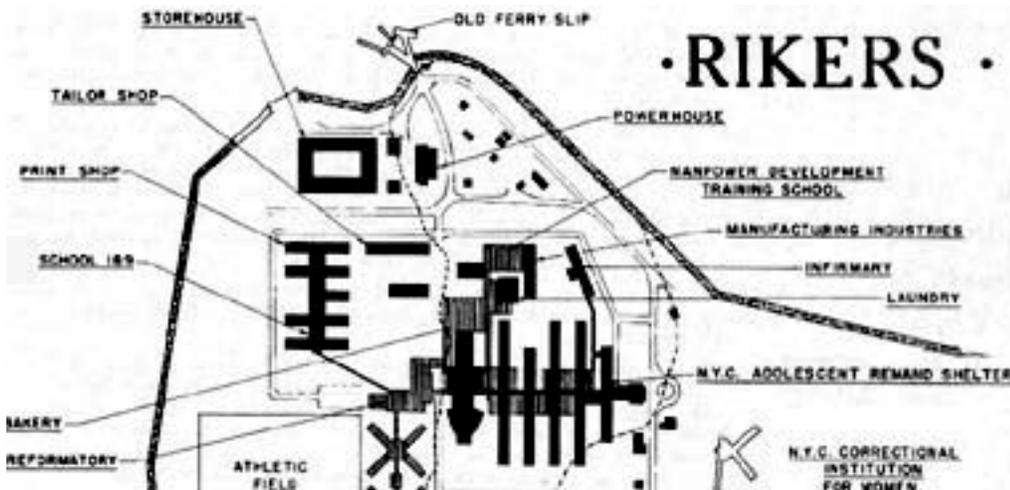
**CCA LEGISLATIVE CHAIRMAN JOSEPH FERRAMOSCA:**

Good morning Tom -

This is Captain Joe Ferramosca, currently on the Board of the CCA.

As an officer, I worked in Support Services and later Correction Industries from 1983 to 1987. When I was first assigned, the old dorms were still in use by SSD/CID - the Tailor Shop, Mattress Shop and Print Shop were all located in that complex or just adjacent to it. The Officers also used part of the area for our locker room.

The school area at that time was used by us with sentenced adolescent work gangs (the 1980s vernacular) who were assigned light tasks such as sanitation, landscaping around the area and similar tasks. Adolescent inmates were also assigned to the Tailor Shop and Mattress Shop. Adult sentenced inmates worked in the Print Shop.



If you look at Page 10 of your presentation, the bottom map shows where the Print and Tailor Shops were located. Just below where the Tailor Shop is, you see a shorter building which is unmarked. That is where the Mattress Shop was located. In that shop,

adolescent inmates would put together mattresses for the inmate population. The Tailor Shop would have rolls of mattress ticking and sew them, leaving one long side open so the cotton batting could be inserted.

Then, the opening would be sewn up in the Mattress Shop using a sewing machine that was attached to a large table. The sewing machine was on a track around the perimeter of the table and would move along the track while sewing. They also made pillows there. One Correction Officer was assigned to the Mattress Shop with a gang of 6-10 inmates.

In the Tailor Shop, the inmates made the sheets, pillow cases, towels, washcloths, ticking for mattresses and pillows, oven mitts and sentenced inmate uniforms. The materials came in huge rolls.

Sheeting was laid out on long tables to a particular length, with many layers. A large electric knife, (with an extremely sharp blade) similar to a jig saw was used to cut the material to length. After the cutting, inmates were trained to sew the cut ends so the sheet would not fray. Same with the pillow cases.

The towels were also in rolls, cut to length and ends sewn. Washcloths had to be sewn on all four sides. Civilian instructors (about 6 or 8 were there) would teach the inmates how to use the machines and monitor their work. Inmates who showed interest in tailoring were given additional training by the instructors.

There was a morning and afternoon crew of inmates. The morning gang was picked up at 0500 and fed breakfast in the C-76 mess hall and brought out to work by 6:30. When they came in for lunch, the officers would have their meal break and pick up the p.m. gang.

The Tailor Shop didn't take up the entire building. SSD had civilian shops there also - locksmith, plumbing, electricians - all used parts of the building for their equipment and materials storage.

In early 1984, when the North Facility was to be built, all of the shops had to vacate the area. The Tailor Shop moved to its present location behind C-76. The Mattress Shop moved to the basement of the Laundry.

The Print Shop moved to its present location in C-76. The civilian shops were scattered around the island wherever they could find space.

All of the equipment and materials were moved by inmates, supervised by the officers, except for the equipment in the Print Shop. The Department needed to hire riggers with heavy duty equipment to move the printing presses.

As I recall, by the spring of '84, everything was moved out of the old shops and school. It was a good thing too - the buildings were all dilapidated and collapsing, even though we still used them. The concrete floors were all buckled and there was an infestation of rats. So it was good timing to finally leave there . . . .

I hope this gives you a little better insight on the history of the buildings in question.  
-- Joe Ferramosca

### **RETIRED CHIEF OF DEPARTMENT MARTIN MURPHY:**

The picture below is undated. However, it has GMDC in the foreground. HDM and dorms are in the background. Notice the front of AMKC has yet to be built. I believe it was completed in the '70s.

The corner stone for the cell blocks of C-71 complex that became AMKC is dated 1961. That's when C-71 intake and Building 1-2 of AMKC were built. They were part of HDM at the time.



[*Webmaster note:* Left is an enlargement of a relevant section of an earlier aerial photo of Rikers Island sent by retired Chief of Department Martin Murphy during the Pen's Dorms FB discussion, with a comment in which he confirmed for the webmaster that the earlier name for OBCC had been North Facility.

The webmaster had joined DOC many years after the facility's name change and also quite a few years before DOC "joined" the web.

In his recent research into the Pen's Dorms, the webmaster kept encountering references to a "North

Facility." The comments by Chief Murphy and others comments nailed down what the webmaster had surmised.]

### **RETIRED DEPUTY WARDEN MICHAEL SORRENTINO :**

I don't remember when, but as someone who worked in them on midnight tours, I remember them fallen apart and freezing cold.

Probably knocked down with all the new building that took place.

### **RETIRED C.O. MAURICE HARPER :**

I believe they were condemned in the '80s . . .

I remember working out there on O.T. It had become the Short Dorm. The roof was partially missing; it was cold and severely rat infested.

I remember driving the food truck from C-76, bringing the inmates their chow. I'm not sure if Benjamin Ward was still the Commissioner at that time.... 😊 [Webmaster note: Benjamin Ward's DOC Commissioner term was 8/13/79 to 12/31/83.]

### **RETIRED C.O. MICHAEL PARRINO:**

I remember in 1982 there were some small one-story buildings where the North Facility or OBCC now stand. These buildings were once storage facilities and later converted to dormitories staffed by C-76. They were called the Outside Dorms.

I believe there were Dorms 15 & 16 which were separate buildings and a larger building which had two dorms 17 & 18. These Outside Dorms housed, "city sentenced" inmate work gangs that serviced HDM & R.I. Hospital mess halls.

### **RETIRED CHIEF OF DEPT. MURPHY:**

[Commenting on CO Parrino's comment.] Those dorms became the NIC annex. Dorms 1-4. Dorm 3 was the old C-76 Dorm 18.

### **RETIRED ASSISTANT DEPUTY WARDEN LEONARD REGOLIZIO:**

In 1972 to 1973 I was assigned to CIFM. I did some meal and vacation reliefs in Dorm 14. That was the only dorm that housed inmates at that time.

Some of these inmates were assigned the change-of-tour bus. Also the house gang for that dorm and other small gangs were housed there. There were many inmates that had "short time" and did nothing.

Many inmates ate in that dorm (from the contraband they had stored). These items were found on a search only once a year.

Among the contraband items were salami, cheese and other Italian foods. This dorm also had its own outside garden.

Headquarters Command was located on the island at that time. This command use these dorms. Dorm 13 was this command's locker room. The island bus service was operated for this dorm. Located in the other dorms were the island print, tailor and welding shops. The central storehouse was also in a dorm .

Inmates that worked in these shops came from CIFM.

The rest of these dorms were used for storage of material from old jails that had been torn down in other parts of the city. Other supplies need for the island, such as fertilizer and snow equipment, were stored there.

Also HDM had a butcher and storehouse in these dorms. In the late '70s or early '80s the print and tailor shop were relocated inside CIFM. The island dispatcher became part of Transportation Command.

New institutions were planned for these dorm sites. These dorms were removed about this time.

**RETIRED CAPTAIN FRED BACCHI:**

I believe C-76 had them listed as Dorms 17 & 18.

**RETIRED CAPTAIN LARRY COLETTI:**

I believe they were Dorms 13 and 14.

**FORMER ACTING ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER/CAPT. STEPHEN A. RICCI:**

The year OBCC was being built I believe they came down. Dorm 13 & 14 were being used as an annex to C-76.

**RETIRED C. O. BOB LEIBROCK:**

A few Dorms were still there when I started on the job in May 1970.

That September there were riots in some of the borough jails and they housed adolescents from C71 "reformatory" in one and we worked 12-hour shifts. The floors were so bad that we used books to level some of the beds.

**RETIRED ADW LEONARD REGOLIZIO:**

*(in follow-up comment.)* I remember Dorm 13 being used as a locker for officers. These officers were assigned to Headquarters. Sorry, guys! After I turned 50, I do not want to remember numbers anymore.

**RETIRED SUPERVISING WARDEN QUASLIM INHAM:**

I remember well the "outer" dorms, the CMRS garage and the evolution into the North Facility. I was its first commanding officer. Initially as a deputy warden while Arthur Cinnotti was the warden @ C-76 and then as warden of the North in 1983. I am extremely proud to note the three of my five tour commanders became Chief of the Dept.: E. Riley, M. Hopkins and R. Davoren. We put work in as a team!

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The above cited comments by veteran, former and retired DOCers put a down-to-earth perspective on the R. I. Dormitory Complex story. Among the earliest to respond to the webmaster's appeal for dorm data was T.J. Johnson Sr. on FB's NYCDCOC Memories: "I worked out of C-76 in those dorms which later became North Facility. We worked out of

at the old garage and those old buildings where OBCC stands now. The last of those was where the intake sally port is. It was the tailor shop. Female staff from the old House of Detention for Women worked out of there." Johnson is a retired captain.

### **Some Notes from NYC Board of Correction Minutes**

As follow-up to the Correction History website unveiling of the Penitentiary Dorms presentation in early February, the webmaster researched the minutes of the NYC Board of Correction and found these interesting items of information relevant to the Dorms end-time question:

- At the June 16, 1983 board meeting, the then First Deputy Commissioner Peter Seitchik indicated, according to the minutes' phrasing, that "the Department has plans to add additional new bed spaces to the system either through renovation or new construction. In FY '84, 108 new cells will be added to ARDC. By January 1984, plans call for creating 80 bed spaces in the Manufacturing Industries area.

"Also, plans call for two new 400-bed facilities to be completed on Rikers Island by the end of FY 84. When completed, these new facilities will constitute the North Facility and Dorms 18 A-D will be closed. The North Facility currently consists of Dorms 18A-D. Dorms 15, 16 and 17 are closed."

- Sharon Keilin, the then DOC Deputy Commissioner for Administration, was recorded as reporting to the board at its September 13, 1983, meeting, that "The current North Facility will be replaced by a new 800-bed modular structure which is scheduled to open in late 1984 or early 1985. This new North Facility will be a totally autonomous jail for sentenced misdemeanants."
- At the Oct. 4, 1983, board meeting, "Chairman Tufo introduced Barbara Dunkel, former Department of Correction Assistant Commissioner for Planning, Research and Information Systems, as incoming Counsel to the Board of Correction . . . ."
- At the April, 1984, board meeting, "Ms. Dunkel reiterated that the most problematic facility for a prospective increase in inmates would be the North Facility, which is already below standard and lacks adequate plumbing fixtures and dayroom space. Lack of sufficient data on its incident levels also poses problems in planning for possible population increases.

"Ms. Dunkel further said that an increase to 58 at AMKC dorms seems reasonable in light of the Board's having already approved capacities of 58 for periods of 14 days. . . . Ms. Dunkel expressed the belief that 50 square feet might be adequate at

the North Facility only if physical attributes such as dayroom space and bathroom facilities can be improved.”

The above extracts from the Bd-of-C minutes help illustrate factors which figured in removal of the old and inadequate penitentiary outside dorms, which formed part of North Facility. Their removal cleared the site for what became OBCC.

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### ***ACKNOWLEDGMENT and APPRECIATION***

*Webmaster Note:* An expression of appreciation is appropriate at this point to gratefully acknowledge the veteran DOCers who communicated their recollections of the Rikers Island Penitentiary Dorms.

As admin of the New York Correction History Facebook group (1,844 members), the webmaster also wishes to thank the admins of several NYC DOC-focused Facebook groups for permitting him to post on their pages the New York Correction History appeal for information about the Penitentiary Dorms timeline “mystery.” These included but are not limited to the Retired NYC Correction Captains, Correction Captains Page (Unofficial), NYC DOC Memories, From NYC DOC to Florida, Corrections Retirees, New York City Retired Correction Officers, and Boldest Survivors (retired members of D.O.C.).

Link to [\*\*“The Rikers Island Penitentiary Dorms Mystery” presentation.\*\*](#)

Link to [\*\*New York Correction History\*\*](#) website’s home page.