June 5 Marked 100th Anniversary of Law Establishing DOC

Chapter 912
Split Public Charities and Correction

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

On Wednesday, June 7th, 1995, in Albany, New York, Governor Levi Morton signed into law Chapter 912 of the statutes enacted at the 118th Session of the New York 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 department of charities, except and terminate on and after midnight of the 31st of December following passage hereof.

In effect, it required the New York City mayor to appoint a Correction Commissioner and three Public Charities Commissioners by Dec. 31, 1995, to assume those offices Jan. 1, 1996. The term of office was set at six years until appointment and qualification of successors. The per annum salary for charity commissioners 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 feebleminded, the sick, the infirm and the aged,” and the hospital wards attached to these branches together pre-

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

Penitentiary, Workhouse, Prison count began at 2,650

On Jan. 1, 1896, the Department of Correction began operating on its own, no longer under the Public Welfare Department. The initial inmate census on Jan. 1, 1896, was put at 2,650. This count was among the statistics contained in the Department’s first quarterly report to the Mayor, dated April 10, 1896, and published in The City Record, May 2, 1896.

Of the total inmate, the Penitentiary and Workhouse on Blackwell’s Island (now known as Roosevelt Island) accounted for 2,089 inmates -- 1,049 in the Penitentiary and 940 in the Workhouse. The City Prison, also known as the Tombs, contributed 465 to the total with the remaining 17 coming from the five District Prisons. Of the total of 2,650 inmates, the number of days labor expended was recorded in precise detail, even down to the count of shovels sewn. The occupations listed included blacksmiths, tinsmiths, carpenters, painters, upholsterers, and the like.

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, Ren---

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 J. O’Brien, and William Croft. Both Wright and Faure were Mayor Strong’s 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.