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 the Department of Correction as a separate agency. On Wednesday, June 5th, 1995, in Albany, New Governor Levi Morton signed into law Chapter 912 (of the statutes enacted at the 118th Session of the New York General Assembly). The legislature 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 charity 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 city of New York and the city of Brooklyn shall be one year and shall 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 a Public Charities Commissioner by Dec. 21, 1955, to assume those offices Jan. 1, 1956. 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 helpless, the sick, the invalids, and the hospital wards attached to them.”

Penitentiary, Workhouse, Prison count began at 2,650

On Jan. 1, 1896, the Department of Correction began operating on its own, no longer joined with Public Charities. The initial inmate census on Jan. 1, 1896, was put at 2,650. That count was accurate. The statistics contained in the Department’s first quarterly report to the Mayor, filed Dec. 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 was 2,926, more than 10 percent to 2,926.

Much of the first quarterly report of the first DOC Commissioners -- Robert J. Wright, Theodore Roosevelt, and others -- 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.

Reform's Reasons Focused on Patients

The reasoning behind the reform splitting Public Charities and Correction was to improve the treatment of patients in imbecility. Besides concerns about actual exploitation by inmates working in hospitals, the reformers were concerned that ill inmates were being stigmatized by association departmentally with accused and convicted criminals. The agency was split to address the issue.

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 appointee to run the two emerging departments. He did so 11 A.M., Dec. 21, designating Robert J. Wright as Commissioner of Correction (and Commissioner of Public Charities). The new man had run the city’s criminal courts.

Both Wright and Faure were Mayor Strong’s appointees to the combined Charities and Correction board and were more 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.