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, 1895, in Albany, Governor Levi P. Morton signed into law Chapter 912 of the statutes enacted at the 118th Session of the New York State 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."

Chapter 912 split the public charities and correction departments in New York City. The new Department of Public Charities was responsible for child welfare, mental hospitals, and other social services, while the Department of Correction was tasked with managing jails and prisons.

Reform's Reasons Focused on Patients

The reasoning behind the reform split Public Charities and Correction board responsibilities over concerns regarding patient care. Hospitals, reformers were concerned that ill patients were being stigmatized by association departmentally with accused and convicted criminals. The agency division bill had emanated from

June 1. 1896, the Department of Correction began operating on its own, no longer joined Public Welfare and Public Charities.

The initial inmate census on Jan. 1, 1896, was put at 2,650. That count was amid the statistics contained in the Department's first quarterly report to the Mayor, filed April 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, the remaining 176 coming from the five District Prisons. By the end of the year – that is, on March 31, 1896 – the total inmates had reached more than 10 percent to 2,926.

Much of the first quarterly report of the first DOC, Commissioner Robert J. Wright, 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.

The number of things made or repaired and the number of days labor expended were recorded in precise detail, even down to the count of shrouds sewn. The occupations listed include blacksmiths, tinsmiths, carpenters, painters, upholsterers, cot and broom makers, tailors, stone cutters, yard and coal workers, and outdoor laborers.

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, Pan.