The Workhouse on Blackwell's Island.

Before Rikers, Blackwell's Was DOC's Island Home

Before Rikers Island became Correction's chief island base, Blackwell's Island filled that role. Blackwell's was the name that for nearly two centuries identified what is now Roosevelt Island, whose aerial tramway cable-cars glide over the East River can be seen from the Queensborough Bridge. The cigar-shaped 120-acre isle beneath the bridge extends 1,760 feet and is 750 feet across at its widest point.

Gov. Van Wyck reported obtaining it for New Amsterdam from native tribal leaders in 1637. Then the Dutch settlers put their pigs to pasture there, generalizing its early Colonial name of Hog Island. In 1652, a man named Flynn acquired the island but 16 years later a British military captain, John Manning, bought it. Unhappily for him, he presided over the surrender and brief return of the city to Dutch rule in 1673. For this, his sword was later symbolically broken in a City Hall ceremony of disgrace. Afterwards, Manning retired to his island refuge. His stepdaughter married Robert Blackwell who took title to it in 1717.

New York City acquired the island on July 19, 1828, through a foreclosure — later ruled to have been illegal. Total final price: $52,500. The facilities the city built there included a Charity Hospital, Penitentiary, Almshouse, Hospital for Incurables, Workhouse, Asylum for the Insane, among others — were built of granite in the fortress style from feudal times. But the walls were erected with convict labor as was the seawall around the island.

About the time DOC became a separate agency, Blackwell's housed a population of approximately 7,000 — inmates and patients. Visitors needed agency permits to come across by the ferry that made the round trip from East 26th St. twice daily. Department steamboats transported inmates between the Tombs and Blackwell's Island.

The Penitentiary stood 600 feet long with a projecting wing on the north side. The main building was constructed with gray stone taken from a quarry high in a castle-like design and had 820 cells in four tiers back-to-back in the center of the structure.

Scutials in the early 1900s, involving changes of inmate overcrowding, drug-dealing, and favoritism, prompted some reforms, including changes made by Alderman on April 12, 1921, to a more pleasant-sounding name: Welfare Island.

Nevertheless, the Penitentiary remained in place even though the language of the law creating DOC clearly said it had sought eventual removal of inmates from Rikers Island and Roosevelt Island. That transfer didn’t happen in earnest until scandals in the 1930s led to real reform during the administration of Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia.

In January 1934, LaGuardia’s reform Commission, Austin H. MacCormick, led a raid on the Welfare Island penitentiary to expose conditions. This brought about the removal of all inmates to Rikers Island, where new facilities were just being completed. Welfare Island then was turned over exclusively to the care of the aged and ill.

Inmate count

In 1895: 2,650

(Continued From Page 1) Inmates housed on Blackwell's Island, and Metropolitan Hospitals, the Insane Asylums, and Almshouse.

The Island was 2,650 at a time where the facilities were new and bright.

People who lived there were housed in the old buildings.

The buildings were replaced by newer structures.

Reform's Reasons Focused on Patients

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The State Charities Aid Association, whose leaders made clear their concerns at a hearing held by Mayor Strong Tuesday, May 7, 1895, in City Hall.

They noted the campaign for separation had begun a dozen years before, when the state legislature sent out a commission of proposed legislation that would create a separate system.

Leading social reformer, Mrs. Charles Russell Jowett, said: “Unfortunate men, women, and children, through accident or disease, are thrown upon city charity, should be removed from the stigma and contamination of association with criminals.”

Prof. Charles F. Post commented out that the bill did not go as far as reformers wanted in removing inmate medical details from the charity institutions, and that patients unable to meet the costs of maintaining themselves to be employed as nurses in the hospital. Their employment has always been a crying evil.”

Association Secretary Charles S. Fairchild noted that in all other cities in the state, jails and charitable institutions were operated separately. But separate superintendents of the poor. The association police warned against mixing patients and jails.

Inmates were thrown together under one manage- ment; the effort to separate them is a sin of civilization.”

DOC Real Both Penitentiary & Workhouse

As far back as 1796, the Speaker of the Assembly charged that one prison was in Albany, the other in New York City. The first such New York City-operated state prison was教ag, opened 1797 in Greenwich Village. In 1836, New York was placed by a penitentiary near Bellevue Hospital. In 1832, the main building of the Blackwell's Penitentiary was erected. In 1848 the Bellevue complex was divided, one reason being the intention to move all its inmates to Blackwell’s. A decade later, the north wing was added to Blackwell's Penitentiary.

The complete facility housed nearly a thousand inmates, most serving misdemeanor sentences but all were required to perform some daily labor, the tasks varying according to inmate skills and activities.

The Blackwell's Workhouse was built in 1852 to replace a century-old similar facility at Bellevue. Containing 221 cells arranged in tiers along the three-story walls of granite, the building functioned as an institution for punishment of petty violators, many of whom were classified as habitual "drunks and disorderlies." At one time, permanent residents even though the usual stays were counted in days. Most workhouse inmates were assigned work either in the workhouse shops or at other city institutions. However, the DOC-created institution specifically declared that workhouse inmates may work on Public Charities grounds and buildings, under the "sight of another each keeper, but no inmate shall be employed in any ward of any hospital."