Rikers –
The Unwanted Island
Of the Unwanted?

A presentation by CorrectionHistory.Org
webmaster Thomas McCarthy June 5, 2017 to
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DISCLAIMER:

Long retired from NYC DOC, I am no longer a spokesman for it. I receive no compensation whatsoever for historical services I freely provide while pursuing my avocation: wannabe historian. Any views on current Correction issues I inadvertently express would be my own, and not necessarily reflect any correction agency, the Correction History Org site, its Facebook page, or NYCHS. Rather than vent opinions, I’ll propose questions to consider.
My ‘Bible’ on pre-1884 Rikers Island is the book by 11th generation Rikers descendant Edgar Alan Nutt, an Episcopal Bishop.
Bishop Nutt begins with *The Annals of Newtown* by James Riker, adds research of his own, and notes role of Wm. Hallett in the matter of 1664 ownership of the island known now these more than 350 years as Rikers Island. Busy year 1664.

The Halletts, now mostly removed from this town, formerly composed here a very large and prominent family, and their history is closely interwoven with Newtown annals.

1. William Hallett, their ancestor, was b. in Dorsetshire, Eng., in 1616, and emigrating to New-England, joined in the settlement of Greenwich, Ct., whence he removed to Long Island, and acquired a large estate at Hellgate. (See pp. 29, 63.) In the fall of 1655 the Indians destroyed his house and plantation at Hallett's Cove, which induced him to take up his residence at Flushing. Here he was appointed sheriff in 1656,
1638 -- Arrives in New Amsterdam from Holland. 19.
   -- Settles first in ‘Lower East Side’ near river.
   -- Obtains land grant in Wallabout (Brooklyn).
1640 – Grant is formalize with detailed patent.
1654 – Gets Newtown farm land grant, with LaG site.
1664 – On 8/19 obtains from Peter Stuyvesant patent for Bowery Bay island near Riker’s farm.
   -- On 9/8 Stuyvesant forced to surrender New Amsterdam to British.
1667-- On 12/24 the British ratify Stuyvesant patent giving the isle to Riker, even though on 12/5 the Brits were satisfied Wm. Hallett had got much of what’s now Astoria from a Canarsee tribe by purchase 8/1/1664. Brits had a policy of recognizing Dutch colony patents. They OK’d much of Hallett’s land purchase but exempted the isle protected by Dutch patent.
Granting Riker the patent for the isle made sense due to its proximity to his farm. But Stuyvesant also had previously a run-in with Hallett whom he appointed as Flushing sheriff but then fired for letting a minister perform Baptist services. The dust-up in 1656 was a warm-up for the landmark colonial case in America’s struggle for religious liberty: the Flushing Remonstrance of 1657 over Quaker rites. A Flushing sheriff was part of that one too.
A map depicts East River from Ryker family perspective circa 1720, about 30 years after progenitor Abraham died at age 89.
Benson Jon Lossing, right, early U.S. historian, portrayed Richard Riker as a humane judge (1815-1838) who rescued a Negro family from a street mob, sheltering the victims in City Hall. More recent researchers, such as Leslie Harris, upper left; Graham Hodges, lower left, and & Eric Foner, lower right, paint him as downright hostile to Negroes, ruling repeatedly against them in Fugitive Slave Act cases.
E.g. Foner cites anti-slavery activists’ charges Judge Riker helped “Kidnapping Club” by not giving seized blacks chance to prove they weren’t fugitive slaves.
Foner’s book triggered a petition to remove the “historically disgraceful & despicable name of Riker” from the penal island. The petition errs on facts and makes “kickback” charges vs. Judge Riker attributed to the book but not found in it.

The petition asserts the island sale to NYC in 1884 was made by the Rikers family. It wasn’t. The isle passed out of Abraham Riker descendant hands in 1851-1855 in a sale to 2 Totten brothers.
The petition asserts “Richard Riker was the Patriarch of the Riker Family.” While he was perhaps then most publicly known individual Riker, Abraham’s kin (as the chart shows) were not one unified family, klan or tribe ruled by a head authority, but were several separate yet linked families.
The petition finds “nauseating” that Richard has “his name” on the island complex “that houses . . . primarily [incarcerated] Black and Hispanic Men. . . .”

But does the Riker name belong to him alone? Is it not also a name shared by literally hundreds of Abraham’s off-spring – some farmers, bakers, ironsmiths, druggists, carpenters, sextons, undertakers, inventers, doctors, mariners, civil servants, merchants, jewelers, ministers, etc.? 
Should the Rikers name be erased from the island because of this one man, for whom it wasn’t named; who never owned or was otherwise involved with it, and who never headed any of the Rikers families who were involved with it? Does he render as naught the service of those Rikers who fought for this country, some dying for it?
John (Jan) Riker (1736 – 1828) in French & Indian war, and the Revolution.

Gerardus Ryker (1740 - 1781) in the Revolution.

Abraham Riker (1740 – 1778) died at Valley Forge.

Dr. John B. Riker (1738 – 1794) in Battle of Trenton saved life of future President James Monroe.
Samuel Riker (1743 – 1823) member of the Revolutionary Committee of Correspondence, Lt. of Light Horse Reg. in the War, member of Assembly, House of Representatives.

Abraham Riker (b.1734) killed in the Revolution.

John Lent (1735 – 1768) French & Indian war.

Tunis Riker (1770 – 1864) major in War of 1812.
Andrew Riker (1771–1817) captain of 2 ships during War of 1812.

Abraham Riker (1776–1821) captain of marines under kin Andrew.

John L. Riker (1787 – 1861) captain in 97th Inf. during 1812 war.

James Webber Lent (1761 - 1849) in Revolution, a county registrar.
Rikers Island has been a geographic & navigation landmark on maps for more than 3 centuries. That’s a lot of maps. Instead of changing the island’s map name, why not “top” it with the historically fitting name of NYC DOC’s first African American Commissioner?

Why not call the 10-jail campus the “Benjamin J. Malcolm Correctional Complex at Rikers Island”? 
Would not the name “Benjamin J. Malcolm Correctional Complex at Rikers Island” in itself be a positive statement supporting the still on-going struggle for equality?
Why do I devote a dozen slides to Riker name removal when the overriding issue is whether to close it? Because, while name removal petitioners seem few, its media coverage is huge. It introduces highly charged elements into the closure question, complicating efforts to find a solution that makes sense as penology. Even so, I too am outraged & disgusted at activities imputed by the abolitionists to the Kidnapping Club.
We would be remiss not to note in passing how during the Civil War the island gave sanctuary & security to Colored Orphanage children and other African Americans targeted by racist mobs roaming Manhattan streets, wreaking havoc for days in the 1863 “draft riot.”
Rikers Island in the Civil War was a camp where various Union regiments mustered in, organized, & received brief training before shipping out. Among them were the 20th and 26th United States Colored Troops. Above: the 20th USCT receives in 1864 its unit flags at Hq of its sponsor, Union League before B’way march to ship.
To plan Riker isle future, recalling how we got here may help. For why NYC bought it in 1884, look to the 1828 city purchase of Blackwell’s island. Charities & Correction Commissioners installed institutions for the neediest among the poor: the chronically ill, homeless and anti-social, all viewed as drains on NYC’s treasury.
Not just Penitentiary isle: 19th Century Blackwell’s Island was a mix of other penal & charitable edifices, including the Workhouse & its work shops (top left & right), Lunatic Asylum, almshouses, small pox hospital. Named Welfare island in 1921.
TO BUILD A BIGGER JAIL

SOME NEW GREAT WORKS OF THE CHARITIES COMMISSION.

MODEL PENITENTIARY, FARMS FOR THE INSANE, BELLEVUE'S VENTILATION, AND THE TRAINING SCHOOL.

The Commissioners of Charities and Correction, who have charge of the city's criminals, paupers, and sick, idiotic and insane persons, are preparing for some extensive and much-needed improvements. Two years ago, having in mind a project for the enlargement of the penitentiary, they bought Riker's Island for $180,000. They had long cherished a desire to draw a very distinct line of demarcation by territorial restrictions between the institutions for relief of the distressed and those for punishment of the guilty. So long, however, as both were upon the same island the distinction between them in the popular mind was rather nominal than actual, and by its association with crime in an official way a new disgrace was imposed upon helpless poverty and even some stigma cast upon the victims of physical suffering and mental alienation. The shadow of the penitentiary rested upon all the noble works of charity upon Blackwell's Island. From this, as it seemed manifest to the Commissioners, there could be no escape until the penal institution should be removed to some other place.
So long as both kinds of institutions are on same island the stigma of the convicts will carry over by association in the public mind to the victims of helpless poverty, physical suffering and mental alienation.

Also, something has to be done to relieve penitentiary overcrowding where 700 cells house 1,100 inmates by doubling up nearly half the population. No hope for reform.
DOC’s emergence as a separate agency in 1895-6 was tied into removal of Correction institutions from Blackwell. Reformers championing charities pushed a law that mandated removal & split PCC into two agencies. Convicts back then were seen as undeserving drains on public treasury vs. deserving poor. Now?
Is replacing Rikers Isle by scattering jails a step forward in penology or step backward to 19th Century to mid-20th when NYC had the district jail system?

1st, 2nd & 3rd District prisons respectively were the original Tombs, the Jefferson Market Prison, and the Essex Market Prison.

After PCC replaced Almshouse Dept. in 1860, other district prisons were added: Yorkville 1863, West Side 1865, Fordham 1875, West Farms 1915, and various others too short-lived to count.
The only district prison still standing is unused structure attached to the beautifully restored 1892-3 Harlem Court House at 121st St. & Sylvan Place, btwn Lex. & 3rd Aves. I’ve guided groups touring the still functioning court and ex-jail. But City Admin. Services stopped visits to the ex-jail. Another story for another day.