

***KBD* 13: The Lady Was a Scrapper**

During the first three months at DOC, Davis initiated, planned and successfully executed the transfer of adolescent male inmates from dingy Blackwell's Island housing to an airy farm in Orange County. Also early on, she pushed plans for an entirely separate facility for female inmates, a project in which she had been involved from inception even before she became Commissioner. But she was not to see that project become reality until many years later when she was no longer with the Department. When Mayor Jimmy Walker finally dug the first shovel of dirt at the Women's House of Detention groundbreaking March 29, 1932, she was an invited guest of honor.

As she had done as Bedford Hills warden, she did also as city Correction Commissioner — saw to the hiring of women physicians, a correctional innovation in its time. Indeed, innovation and reform were hallmarks of Davis' correctional career, both with the state and city. A typical assessment of her tenure at DOC came from the Herald Tribune: "She has brought the city's penal institutions to a stage of modernity in theory and practice hitherto unattended, and the public is the gainer thereby."

Dr. Davis served in city government all four years of Mayor Mitchel's one term in office, a term so full of innovation and reform that another fusion mayor, Fiorello H. LaGuardia, declared it his inspiration. During her city service, she did not escape criticisms at various junctures. But her critics were seen by many as motivated by their own political agendas, often aimed at Mitchel. Her occasional critics failed to diminish the high regard in which she was held by Mitchel, the press and the public. Indeed, because she proved ready and able to stand her ground and fight, Davis endeared herself to many New Yorkers who love a good scrapper.

1914 Depression Zinger

The ambitious Brooklyn County Judge John T. Hylan had her before a grand jury in December, 1914, supposedly to inquire about some prisoners awaiting trial not being fed, but he took the occasion as an opportunity to deliver himself of the opinion that many of Commissioner Davis' reforms were "fads."

With media in tow, Davis left the grand jury room, went to the court pens in the basement, found eight of 10 defendants there awaiting trial had bought sandwiches with their own money. She then went to the

Raymond St, jail to arrange procedures to ensure no one sent to court would go hungry if they lacked money to buy sandwiches at the court, the practice in those days. “Legally when prisoners are delivered to court, they are out of our custody, but I am willing to do anything reasonable toward their bodily welfare,” she told reporters, adding:

I have been 14 years in this work, and I am not so much a sentimentalist as to get worked up over the fact that a few prisoners lose their luncheon, when there are probably 100,000 worthy men out of work and going hungry in this great city.

Davis’ “100,000 hungry worthy men” zinger pulled the zipper on that contrived flap of the day. But Hylan had longer-range interests of his own. In 1917, with backing of Brooklyn political boss John McCooey, publisher William Randolph Hearst and Tammany Hall, Hylan would defeat Mitchel’s bid for re-election. Mitchel had won the 1913 mayor election in what was essentially a two-man race between his fusion candidacy and the Tammany candidate. In the 1917 election, the anti-Tammany fusion forces were less united. Socialist candidate Morris Hillquit drew more than 22 percent of the vote in what turned into a three-man race. Mitchel drew only 10,000 more votes than Hillquit. Hylan garnered 14,000 votes more than the combined Mitchel-Hillquit tally of 300,819. Hylan would remain mayor until 1925 when Tammany switched its backing to Jimmy Walker in the primary.

‘Wore Muckrakers to a Frazzle’

When an erudite writer criticized the Department’s operation, from the commissioner on down, Davis wrote a withering Letter-to-the-Editor response. She noted decades of neglect had created the conditions the new administration had been trying to correct in the 13 months since taking office. She cited a litany of statistics to back her point. But she saved her best shot for last:

The employees of a great department, who work regularly 10 and 12 hours a day and then take over care of 2,400 extra prisoners, with only 16 new assistants to help them, ought not be criticized so severely even if they do not have the time and the education to permit them to be as discerning as a man who has had [the critic’s] advantages.

When she and Deputy Lewis escorted a press group on a 1915 tour of DOC facilities, certain writers attempted to use the occasion as a forum on Sing Sing Warden Thomas Mott Osborne’s method of inmate

self-government, attempting to portray it as a new advance in penology and contrasting it with the city system lacking inmate self-rule. The “Post” summed up the “all-day debate” this way:

The party started at 9:30 in the morning; and at 10:30 last night, after hours of tramping institutions corridors, climbing stairs, talking, arguing and explaining, the woman Commissioner was apparently as fresh and vigorous as ever, while the muckrakers were worn to a frazzle. The Commissioner is one of those super-persons whose physical and mental energy never lessens while grappling with her life-work — penal administration and reform.

As for inmate self-government, Davis viewed attempting it worthwhile in suitable situations with appropriate inmates, done gradually and with adequate advance preparations and education. She had tried it at Bedford in the honor cottages, with some good and some mixed results, but didn’t think the Blackwell’s setting conducive to getting good results with it.

Opposed Racial Segregation

Headlines on a story of Commissioner Davis’ appearance at a state hearing on Bedford reformatory practices cited her intimation that “all-block people,” the makers of cell-block equipment, wanted to discredit the facility because it housed inmates in cottages. One headline deck alluded to her stand against racial segregation. (*Tribune clipping copy courtesy of Special Collections, Vassar College Libraries, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.*)

Another excellent example of Davis critics who unintentionally enhanced her stature was Robert Heberd, secretary of the State Board of Charities and chairman of a state commission probing placement and



treatment of “mental defectives.” Many long months after Katharine had left the Bedford superintendency to assume her duties as city Correction Commissioner, board investigators reported problems at the state facility. They alleged, among other things, that the inmate population included a large number of “feeble-minded” and that “unfortunate attachments [had been] formed by white women for the negroes.”

Typical hearing headline.

At hearings in late December of 1914, Heberd repeatedly went after Davis on her refusal to follow racial segregation practices common-

state's lack of adequate alternative facilities to which those women on the mental borderline could have been sent, Bedford's refusal to accept them would have condemned them "back onto the streets." Any state facilities of the kind that might have admitted them were already overcrowded. The *Tribune* quoted Davis testifying:

"However, if there is no other place, I would rather have the girls remain at Bedford where there is a possible benefit. If they have to go out, they go back to the streets. I could tell you some stories that would make your hair curl."

Davis' own innovations to identify and remove the serious mental cases from the reformatory were too well known for Hebbard to make any points against her on that score. Not lost on observers with memories was the irony that his board's investigators accepted the mental case findings of the Elizabeth Fry Hall inmate screening laboratory, the very lab Davis had set up with the help of Rockefeller Jr. to deal with those and other problems.

A *Post* editorial the following March made this assessment on the board's report and Davis' formal response:

Commissioner Davis' reply . . . rebuts the two essential charges against her administration [at Bedford]. These are that her undiscriminating admission of all women committed to the reformatory was contrary to the law and overcrowded the institution; and that her refusal to segregate white and negro inmates resulted in evils. .

New York State is still without proper provision for the feeble-minded, and had she turned back the defectives they would again have been lost in the streets.

As for segregation . . . Degrees of crime are not marked by color, and division of the vicious from the comparatively harmless must be on principles that cut across race.

Correction Commissioner Davis took a similar approach on racial matters with city inmates, occasionally becoming target of criticism that she was "mixing the races." On this issue, she was one of the most advanced public officials of her era. Grandma Bement would have been proud of her!

NOTE: The failure to capitalize "Negro" in the cited quotations is as printed in those newspapers, a common but unthinking practice of the time, even among Northern publications.



Blackwell Women's Workhouse

place in institutions around the country and throughout American society generally at that time. News accounts in the *Tribune* and *Times* and an editorial in the *Post* make that clear. Under a headline declaring Dr. Davis “Opposes Segregation of Negro Inmates,” the *Tribune* on Christmas Eve, 1914, reported:

The hearing in the Board of Charities office, at 105 East 22nd St., was full of contention. Mr. Hebbard and Miss Davis clashed frequently. One of

the things Mr. Hebbard dwelt on particularly was the fact that the white and negro girls were allowed together in Bedford. This was a feature of the hearings.

Miss Davis said in answer to questions that she was a New Englander and came from an Abolitionist family, and that she thought an institution such as Bedford should be conducted on the ‘character, conduct and needs’ of the inmates, not on their ‘color, race or religion.’

She went further, saying she was ‘very much opposed to the segregation on the basis of color,’ and that, while the worst girl she had ever known at Bedford was a negro, on the other hand the president of the honor cottage had been a negro girl. In addition, she said she considered that the negro girls were no greater offenders than the whites when it came to the question of morality at Bedford.

Under a headline declaring, Dr. Davis “Stands by Bedford; Assumes Responsibility for Race Mixing and Other Rules Now Under Attack,” the *Times* reported on Christmas Eve, 1914:

Dr. Davis said she assumed full responsibility for the rule mixing white and negro women. She could name no other institution in which negro and white women were kept together.

The hearings also addressed the issue of the high percentage of Bedford inmates with mental problems. Their admissions appeared to have violated the reformatory mandate. But Davis pointed out that the actual language of the law on Bedford inmate admissions allowed otherwise eligible misdemeanor women “not mentally or physically incapable of being substantially benefited by the discipline.” In view of the