Tours cap NYCHS’ first year of activity

Tours conducted at historic Hart Island and Harlem Courthouse jail and a tour being planned for Rikers Island take center spotlight as the New York Correction History Society nears completion of its first year of activities. All tours conducted by the State Regents-chartered nonprofit society are provided without charge.

July 13, 2000 marks the first anniversary of the official founding of NYCHS at a formal organizational meeting held in the visit house of the Manhattan Detention Complex, better known as the Tombs.

Narrated visits to Hart Island took place:

- **June 15**, in coordination with the June 15-17 Conference on NY State History at Fordham University, and
- **April 27**, a tour that included a visit to the century-old former 5th District jail in East Harlem.

**Later this summer** a tour to various Rikers jails will be conducted to view paintings on walls and on canvas by inmates, the WPA and Salvador Dali.

The June 15th Hart visit, that drew more than 50 participants, was arranged to conclude during the noon hour so state history conferees among those on the tour could attend the conference’s registration and first session starting later that afternoon at Fordham’s nearby Bronx Rose Hill campus.

The first stop set for the tour bus returning to NYC DOC’s headquarters in Manhattan's Tribeca section...
emy in Middle Village. Miss Davis, who served as the first superintendent of Bedford Hills reformatory from 1900 before being named the first woman to head any major NYC agency, Correction, in 1914, was added March 14th to the State Senate Women of Distinction list, bringing the number to 39.

The Senate display write-up on Commissioner Davis was based on her biography by NY Correction History Society general secretary Thomas McCarthy. NYCHS also provided photos for the Davis display board. The full biography, New York City’s Suffragist Commissioner: Correction’s Katharine Bement Davis, is on NYCHS’ web site (www.correctionhistory.org) in the Chronicles section. Pages on the exhibition can be found in the About Us section.

State Senator Serphin R. Maltese, in whose Queens district the Academy is situated, assisted the NY Correction History Society’s initiative to have the exhibit shown there the last week of Women’s History Month. State Senator Frank Padavan, also from Queens, sponsored KBD’s inclusion on the list. Miss Davis lived in Jackson Heights, Queens, during the 1920s while heading the Rockefeller-funded Social Hygiene Bureau.

The Senate announcement concerning Miss Davis read, in part: "Katherine Bement Davis (1860-1935) was born in Buffalo, and spent much of her early life as an active suffragist, but it was her appointment in 1914 as NYC Correction Commissioner -- the first woman ever named to run a major municipal agency -- that first brought her international attention. . . She later became the first woman to run for statewide office as a then-major party (Progressive) candidate.” She couldn’t vote but she could run and did: for Constitutional Convention delegate-at-large.

‘Cage’ frees NYCHS to seek items to archive

At the request of the NY Correction History Society, the NYC Correction Dept. this spring installed floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall metal grill partitions sectioning off an area of its Academy’s large storage room for use as a secure archives. On the other side of the grill partitions -- unofficially called the Cage -- are storage cabinets containing drawers filled with old annual reports, newsletters, ledgers, news clippings, magazine articles, hundreds of photos and other memorabilia.

Most material relates to NYC DOC, but other agencies with some items in the collection include the city’s Board of Correction, Dept. of Juvenile Justice, and Probation Dept., and the state’s Dept. of Correctional Services.

The “Cage” enables NYCHS, in seeking more archival materials from these and other NY correctional agencies, organizations and individuals, to offer the assurance that all items placed with it will be stored securely under lock and key. NYCHS rules regulating researchers’ use and access to the materials had already stressed security and preservation.

Shortly after the Cage’s installation, NYCHS asked for and received from the Correction Officers Benevolent Association back-issues of its publication. COBA first vp Israel Rexach, shown right in photo, made the presentation to NYCHS board member CO Louis Cash. COBA Retiree Consultant Vincent Coppola donated a folder filled with old DOC newsletters and news clippings. COBA president Norman Seabrook is a NYCHS trustee and charter member.
Harlem jail, Hart & Rikers tours cap NYCHS 1st year

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After leaving the City Island/Hart Island ferry dock was Fordham’s McGinley Center where the state history conference registration was scheduled to take place from 12 to 1:30 p.m. The first session, an organizational meeting entitled "Looking to the Future," was to begin at 1:30 p.m.

Some tour participants drove their own vehicles to the City Island ferry slip on Fordham St. By special arrangement with NYCHS, the City Island Nautical Museum on Fordham St. was opened at 9:15 a.m. for tour participants who had driven to the ferry dock area in their own cars. Curator Virginia Gallagher gave an informal walk-through introduction to the museum for those awaiting arrival of the DOC bus with the other Hart tour participants. As she did with the April 27 tour, she joined the visiting group on Hart and talked about the intertwined histories of the “sister islands.”

As on the April 27 tour, the June 15 visitors also heard Hart tales from Capt. Eugene Ruppert, head of the island’s operations that include Potter’s Field burials by inmates from Rikers Island, and Correction Officer Samuel Perry, one of only two officers still with DOC who served on Hart when it housed inmates. Also escorting the April 27 tour was the other Hart veteran officer, Thomas O’Connor. Each has 41 years service and are still on the job.

Both Hart tour groups visited the Civil War Union soldiers and sailors’ burial site and its 1877 monument as well as the site of the Army Nike Ajax missiles poised at the ready on the island during part of the Cold War. The visitors saw dozens of abandoned structures from the 19th century and later eras when the island housed various classifications of inmates and patients. The group viewed Potter’s Field and the massive 30-foot high Peace monument build in 1948 by inmates for the unclaimed and unbefriended dead buried on the island. The April 27 tour takers also visited

Old records recently found in a long-forgotten attic storage area of the 1892 courthouse jail.

What the tour group in the front page photo was looking at: A Dept. of Public Charity and Correction building erected in late 1800s, one of the dozens of abandoned structures on Hart Island.

April 27 tour participants view some of the 40 cells in the multi-tiered 1892 Harlem Court jail.

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Each numbered stone marks the location of a Potter's Field burial plot of 150 coffins.

NYCHS officer now heads Sing Sing State Prison

Department of Correctional Services quarter-century-plus veteran Brian Fischer, elected NY Correction History Society executive board member at-large Feb. 16, was appointed in May by NYS DOCS Commissioner Glenn S. Goord as superintendent of New York’s best known prison that is also one of its most historic: Sing Sing. At the time of his election to the NYCHS executive committee, he was superintendent of Queensboro Correctional Facility in Long Island City. He remains supervising superintendent for all DOCS facilities in the NYC area.

Brandt Kehn, superintendent of DOCS’ Fulton CF, the Bronx, also was elected member at-large at the same meeting. It was held in the then newly-opened NY Police Museum. NYS Commissioner Goord also is a member of the NYCHS board of trustees.