Auburn historian’s archives items going on-line at NYCHS site

On Dec. 7, 2009, the first item from the archives of the late Auburn prison historian John N. Miskell, made available by his family for use by the NYCHS website, went on-line.

Entitled Better Than Hanging, it became the seventh Miskell monograph on the site, the other six having been personally contributed by him for use on the site even though he didn’t have a computer. This, like the six

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CorrectionHistory.Org
Into Its 2nd Decade as Major Web Resource

As the 21st Century nears the start of its second decade, the web pages of NYCHS (that already is in its second decade) continue to serve as a note-worthy resource for bringing correction history to the attention of New Yorkers from one end of the state to the other; i.e., from Brooklyn to Buffalo.

The Times’ Fort Hamilton and Clinton Hill blog The Local Dec. 4 and the paper’s Sunday Metro section Dec. 6 picked up on NYCHS web story about NYS’ last hanging execution that took place at the Raymond Street Jail 120

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monographs posted earlier on the site, had been produced on a typewriter. The manuscript was found among the scrapbooks, albums, photos, clippings and other historical materials filling a half dozen cardboard boxes that John’s son, Jim, had helped load into the trunk of the NYCHS webmaster’s car during the latter’s visit to the Miskell home in Auburn Nov. 21st, 2009.

By happenstance, the subject matter of the monograph -- the world’s first execution by electricity Aug. 6, 1890 at Auburn -- made it a logical follow-up to a presentation that had been unveiled on the website for the 140th anniversary of the state’s last hanging execution which had taken place Dec. 6, 1889 at the Raymond St. Jail in Brooklyn.

The 24-page manuscript was dated March 27, 1990. But unlike other Miskell monographs this one had not been printed on special paper with openings that permitted insertion of spiral plastic binding. A metal paper clip held these sheets together.

The second item from the Miskell archives posted on the website was a 24-page booklet distributed at the 1970 state fair in Syracuse and celebrating the Centennial of the American Correctional Association (ACA). Entitled “100 Years of Progress,” it contrasted how NY state prisons were in 1870 when the ACA began, with strong NY leadership, as the National Prison Association with the way they were as of August 1970, the booklet’s date of publication. Highlighted were NY correctional education programs.

John, who retired from DOCS in 1980 after 33 years, had been director of the prison’s Osborne School and in charge of inmate programs.

He had BS and Masters Degree from SUNY Oswego and taught criminal justice at Cayuga Community College as an associate professor both before and during retirement.

Miskell collected historical materials, researched Auburn prison history, wrote and lectured about it both before and during retirement.

Years before his death Nov. 16, 2006, he turned over to the NYCHS website for posting his writings that he had placed in soft-covered books with plastic spiral binding.

So far, six of those writings have been posted on site:

- Medal of Honor inmate
- Copper John
- The Bell
- Seminary & the Prison
- Executions: 1890-1916
- Why Auburn?
NYCHS in 2nd Decade as Major Web Resource

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years ago. German immi-
grant John Greenwall, a tai-
lor by trade and a thief by
rap sheet and reputation,
was hanged for the murder
of Manhattan hat firm se-
nior staffer Lyman Smith
Weeks during a burglary of
the victim’s DeKalb Ave.
home March 15, 1887. Af-
fter Greenwall’s hanging
Dec. 6, 1889, all capital
sentences in the state were
carried out by electrocution.

To note that date marking
the transition from “the
noose” to “the chair” in
capital punishment history,
www.correctionhistory.org
website unveiled a 2-Part

NYCHS research undertaken
in observance of that Buffalo
region county’s centennial.

To mark this December month of
Cattaraugus County’s Bicentennial, the
website of the New York Correction History
Society (NYCHS) is unveiling a multi-page
timeline presentation on the executions of
12 men convicted of murder in
that “Enchanted Mountains County” of
southwestern New York.

Besides detailing the 12 murder cases
individually, the timeline presentation also
serves as a vehicle to explore interesting
historical developments that provide wider
context to the cases. These include looking at
the histories of the county jails, sheriffs,
and courts as well as at execution methods and at other Cattaraugus-related
murder case convictions not resulting in
executions. The timing of
the presentation’s unveiling -- mid-December 2008 --
was appropriate because the
first and the last Cattaraugus
murders resulting in executions took place during
Decembers 70 years apart.
The first happened Dec. 18,
1869; the last, Dec. 9, 1939.

The Olean Times Herald
gave the story front page
spotlight while The Buffalo
News gave it a three-col-
umn spread on Page 3.

Historian Jack Warren
devoted his Dec. 18, 2008
entry to it on his New York
History blog. Cattaraugus
County Historian, who as-
sisted NYCHS with the
project, promoted it from
the county museum during
the centennial.

Yet another NYCHS re-
search project initiated in
the preceding 12 months
has drawn interest from
other historians and muse-
ums: the previously untold
story of Hart Island’s re-
form school ship Mercury
as NYS/NYC’s first nautical
training vessel, an ancestor
of SUNY Maritime College.

The director of the campus
Maritime Industry Museum
at Fort Schuyler has invited
the NYCHS webmaster to
write an article about the
Mercury for the museum
newsletter.

The two-day Researching
NY 2009 history conference
held last month at SUNY
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Excerpt
Chaplain’s
Rikers Book

Among NYCHS website
additions during the pre-
ceding 12 months was pre-
sentation of extensive ex-
cerpts from former Rikers
chaplain Pierre Raphael’s
book God Behind Bars that
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Chaplain Book Just 1 of Website Additions in 2009

Fingerprint historian Michael Harling, in an essay especially written for NYCHS, updates his “Origins of the New York State Bureau of Identification” with “Loose Ends and Coincidences,” tying up the former and connecting the latter.

Text of Dr. Dora B. Schriro’s appointment as NYC Correction Commissioner.

A Mighty Outraged Woman examines Anna M. Kross’ career as lawyer, judge, and NYC DOC commissioner.

The teaser “Mystery of how ‘same’ 2 JATC inmate murals could appear at same time in both mess hall and corridor” explores artwork in a Robert DiNero - Billy Crystal movie.

The excerpts presentation is the NYCHS website’s second sampling of a book by him, now Spiritual Director of Abraham House, an alternative-to-incarceration residence in the South Bronx. The first was his Inside Rikers Island which remains on site and can be accessed from the God Behind Bars presentation as can pages about Abraham House.

The excerpts presentation is only one of several additions to www.correctionhistory.org made during 2009. Elsewhere on this newsletter page are images and captions about some of the others that have been added. Clicking an image will access its linked presentation.

correctionhistory.org
A Major Resource

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Albany included a NYCHS slide presentation about the Mercury. Key figures in the City Island Historical Society and Nautical Museum and in the East Bronx History Forum have also indicated interest in scheduling such a presentation.

Reflect on the Lord’s Prayer from the prison perspective and on prison life from the Lord’s Prayer perspective. Inserted in the excerpts web pages are digital images of the remains of the chapel inside Rikers Penitentiary aka House of Detention for Men aka currently James A. Thomas Center.

The seldom mentioned history of NYC reformatory and NYS prison forestry projects is spotlighted in ‘Ernest Blue Vistas in the Trees Beyond Prison Bars’ which tells stories associated with the life and times of Ernest W. Blue. Complied by his son, Allan G. Blue, in collaboration with NYCHS.

Rikers Island – Bd./Dept. of Ed. Schools’ 50th Anniversary: 2009 touches on the history of the the two agencies’ cooperation to educate inmates. It includes text from the printed program for graduation exercises and photos of the ceremonies during which 2 DOCers were honored. It links to the Hart Island reform school history that resulted from NYCHS research initiated originally in connection with the Rikers schools’ 50th anniversary

Mid-1930s Rikers Island Penitentiary photo montages

Son seeks to ID Clinton inmate who painted mom’s portrait. A PowerPoint presentation of 60+ photos.

A full-page feature about Hart Island from the Sun of Dec. 13, 1908, is made readable in 13 close-up images of the text and photos.

8 photos saved during move of NYC DOC hq from 60 Hudson St., Manhattan. Viewers invited to help ID those in the pictures.