

OCTAGON TOWER

This crumbling gray gneiss ruin belies its rich past. The erstwhile corridors bore the footprints of Charles Dickens and Nellie Bly. Its grand rotunda once held the blue ribbon in interior beauty. The Octagon Tower's beauty was once a mask for an institution of despair, the New York City Asylum for the Insane.

The lonely Octagon Tower once had the company of the Asylum's two projecting wings. The Octagon was the Asylum's administrative center and main entrance hall. When the facility opened in 1839, it was a much-needed relief to the overcrowded wards of Bellevue Hospital. The building was designed by noted architect Alexander Jackson Davis, credited in New York with Wall Street's Federal Hall. The final structure only sparingly followed Davis' blueprint. One of Davis' designs which fortunately was followed is the east iron spiral staircase with wood Ionic columns inside the Octagon Tower. According to architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock, this rotunda was the "grandest interior in the city, dating from before the Grand Central Concourse."



New York City Asylum for the Insane, 1859



Metropolitan Hospital, 1900

The Lunatic Asylum's objective was not confinement but treatment. Therapy often consisted of entertainment, activity, and physical labor. Men worked on the seawall and in the vegetable gardens, while women served as housekeepers and seamstresses. The Asylum did, however, go through its infamous phases. Until 1850 most of its staff were inmates from the Blackwell's Island Penitentiary. (Male inmates were supervisors, female inmates "nurses.") Many sane immigrants were committed simply for speaking unfamiliar languages. After his 1842 visit, Charles Dickens wrote in his *American Notes* about the "lounging, listless, madhouse air" that prevailed. Diseases such as scurvy, typhus, and cholera all took their turns. Overcrowding and financial difficulties were practically givens.

Even with added buildings, conditions ten years later were not at all better. In a famous undercover operation for the *New York World*, journalist Nellie Bly (real name Elizabeth Cochrane) feigned insanity and was sent to the Asylum. In 1887 after a *World* attorney obtained her release, she gained national recognition, writing a series of front page articles detailing her harrowing experiences. With the reforms that followed her reports, the Asylum facility was deemed insufficient, and in 1894 patients were transferred to a new Wards Island facility. Thereafter this building was occupied by Metropolitan Hospital.

Metropolitan Hospital joined this island's City Hospital as two of the world's largest medical institutions. Accommodating nearly 1,400 patients, Metropolitan held general medical facilities but specialized in tuberculosis. (From 1902 to 1921, it also housed a leprosy ward.) In 1955 Metropolitan abandoned these buildings for new quarters on First Avenue and 97 Street.

Now, only the Octagon Tower stands. In 1975 it was designated a city landmark and was partially restored. As a ruin, however, this structure has suffered the pangs of vandalism. In 1982 vandals torched its roof, and for the next ten years, the interior was battered by the elements. Over Labor Day weekend 1999, a fire obliterated much of the building's upper portion and caused extensive damage to the interior.

To continue the tour, return to the Manhattan-facing seawall and proceed north (that is, away from the Queensboro Bridge). Follow the white and green "Roosevelt Island Historical Walk" signs.



The abandoned interior, ca. 1969