

a
historical
resumé
of
potter's field



1869-1967

DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTION



CITY OF NEW YORK

Potter's Field

Hart Island

HON. JOHN V. LINDSAY
Mayor

HON. GEORGE F. McGRATH
Commissioner

There has been much written about The Potter's Field on Hart Island and the involvement of the Department of Correction of the City of New York in this important community activity.

The department's involvement results directly from the *Administrative Code of the City of New York*, wherein it specifically states that in accordance with...

**“ CHAPTER 24
DEPARTMENT OF WELFARE
TITLE A**

Section 603-10.0 *Potter's Field*. - The Commissioner shall have charge of the Potter's Field, and when the necessity therefor shall arise, shall have power to lay out additional Potter's Fields or other public burial places for the poor and strangers and from time to time enclose and extend the same to make enclosures therein and to build vaults therein, and to provide all necessary labor and for interments therein. *The Potter's Field on Hart's Island, however, shall remain under the control of the Department of Correction, and the burial of deceased paupers therein shall continue under rules and regulations established by the joint action of the Department of Welfare and Correction, or in case of disagreement between such departments, under such regulations as may be established by the Mayor.* (As amended by L.L. 1942, No. 50, October 29; as amended by L.L. 1953, No. 136, August 5.)”

While many other projected plans are being officially studied for the burial of indigents, this Department in the interim must maintain the present Potter's Field at Hart Island as mandated. While we perform this necessary service for the community, paradoxically, it provides a vocational activity for those inmates voluntarily participating. On release they are enabled to obtain employment in this area.

George F. McGrath
Commissioner
Department of Correction

POTTER'S FIELD

Historical Background

"Then Judas, which had betrayed Him, saw that he was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests . . . and they took counsel, and brought with them the potters' field to bury strangers in." This excerpt from the Gospel of St. Matthew is probably the origin of the name **Potter's Field**; certainly, even in pre-Biblical times, man felt the obligation to do justice and honor to the dead with proper burial.

The City of New York has undertaken the responsibility of laying to rest the bodies of those in the City who died indigent or unbefriended, since the early part of the 19th century, when they were interred at Washington Square in Greenwich Village. In 1823, these remains were removed to Fifth Avenue and 40-42 Streets, Manhattan. When this site was selected for a reservoir, the remains were again removed to Fourth Avenue and 50th Street, this ground being later granted to the Women's Hospital. In 1857, the remains of 100,000 paupers and strangers were transferred to Ward's Island, 75 acres of which were allocated for this purpose.

The laws of 1868 authorized the Commissioners of the New York City Departments of Public Charities and Correction to purchase and take title to any plot of ground, convenient and accessible to the City and large enough for a public cemetery, under custody and management of the Department of Charities. In the same year, the City of New York acquired Hart Island from John Hunter and son for \$75,000. During the yellow fever epidemic of 1870, the southern part housed diseased persons confined to isolation.

Forty-five acres on the northern tip of the hundred-one acre Island were designated as a burial site, or **Potter's Field**, on April 20, 1869. Louisa Van Slyke, an orphan who died alone in

Charity Hospital at the age of 24, became the first to be buried there.

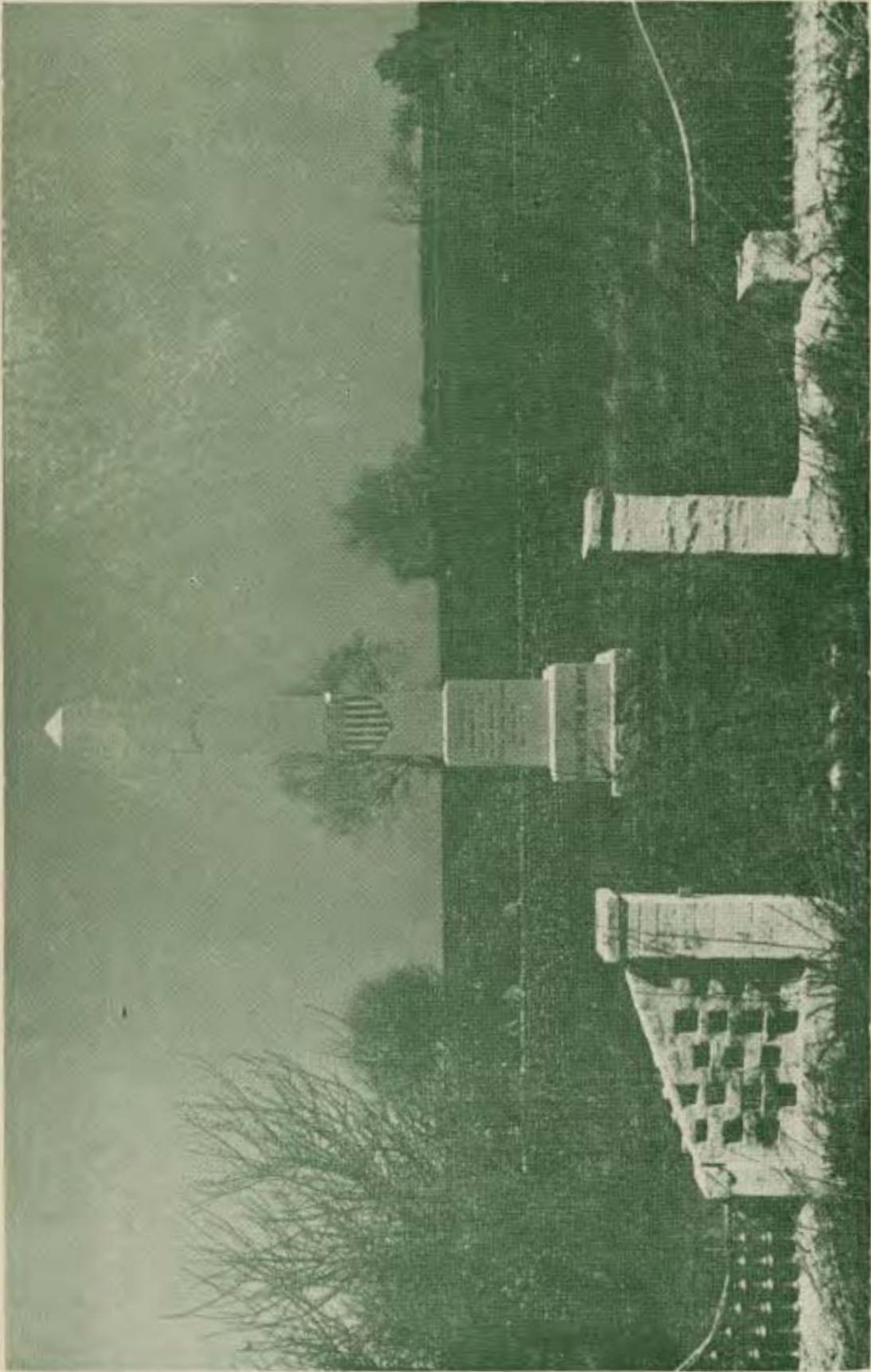
In 1895, the Department of Correction acquired the Hart Island institution and established a Branch Workhouse for aged and infirm men, narcotics addicts, and short-term inmates. In 1905, the Department also established a reformatory at Hart Island for young offenders known as a "Reformatory for Misdemeanants." This was transferred to another location off the Island in order to rectify the lack of segregation between adolescent and adult inmate programs.

In 1941, the bodies of the Civil War veterans who had been buried in the Civil War Cemetery on Hart Island were disinterred and removed to Cypress Hills National Cemetery. After World War II, the U.S. Army was allotted 10 acres of the City Cemetery to build a Nike base. This was abandoned by the Army on June 30, 1961, and returned to the City.

In 1950, the Board of Estimate adopted a resolution authorizing the release of Hart Island to the Department of Welfare to be used for the rehabilitation of homeless men, on the assumption that Rikers Island facilities would sufficiently accommodate the steadily increasing inmate population. During the early part of 1954, when increased inmate population made the capacity of housing on Rikers Island inadequate, custody of Hart Island was returned to the Department of Correction.

Departments Involved — Laws

Since 1941, New York State Social Welfare Law No. 141 (now called Social Services Law No. 141, as per 1967 amendment) has made it compulsory for the City to provide for the burial of the dead, or to reimburse friends or relatives of the deceased for the costs of the burial, in whole or in part, if legally responsible relatives of the deceased were not able to do so.



Monument erected by the New York City Army Reserve, on May 10, 1877, in memory of the Veteran Union Soldiers and Sailors buried at the Civil War Cemetery on Hart Island. The monument still stands on Hart Island, although the remains of these dead were removed to Cypress Hills National Cemetery in 1941.

Present laws of the City of New York authorize joint jurisdiction over Potter's Field by the Department of Correction and the Department of Welfare. Section 603-10.0 of the Administrative Code states that "the Commissioner of the Department of Welfare shall have charge of the Potter's Field and power to lay out additional Potter's Fields when the necessity shall arise, and from time to time to enclose and extend the same, to make enclosures therein and to build vaults therein, and to provide all necessary labor and for interments therein. The Potter's Field on Hart Island, however, shall remain under the control of the Department of Correction, and the burial of deceased paupers therein shall continue under rules and regulations established by the joint action of the Departments of Welfare and Correction, or in case of disagreement, under such regulations as may be established by the Mayor."

Records and Burial Procedure

Any citizen who becomes aware of the death of any person is required by law to report the death to the local Police precinct, who notifies the Chief Medical Examiner. If a person dies in a City hospital or institution, and his body is not claimed within 24 hours from the time mailing notice of his death is received, the Department of Hospitals is authorized to allow his burial at Potter's Field.

The body of a deceased pauper is sent to the county morgue of the county in which he dies, and the medical examiner applies to the Board of Health for a burial permit. If the body is unclaimed, the burial permit and the deceased are sent to the central morgue at Bellevue Hospital on East 29 Street, Manhattan.

There, services are said for the deceased by a Catholic or Protestant clergyman. Rabbis do not say services, because indigent members of the Jewish faith are not taken to Potter's Field.

The Hebrew Free Burial Society provides for their interment. In 1960, two Catholic societies began to do the same thing. The Chinese also usually provide for the private burial of their own people. Actually, no one knows the religion of many of the strangers buried in Potter's Field, but the authorities do their best to notify the proper agencies when a member of one of these groups comes to their attention.

At the morgue, the bodies of the deceased are wrapped in shroud paper and sealed in pine coffins which are lined with waterproof paper when necessary. Unknowns are fingerprinted and photographed, and are interred with all their clothes and belongings, so that they can be identified later. Inside the coffins and on top of them are placed the duplicate and triplicate, respectively, of the burial certificate, chemically treated so that they are legible even after 25 years.

The bodies of the deceased are then taken to the City Cemetery at Hart Island via a Department of Hospitals morgue wagon, which operates twice weekly. It is transported from the Bronx to the Island by a ferry run by the New York City Department of Marine and Aviation.

The morgue wagon driver is stopped at the entrance to the Island and checked in by the dock security officer. During the rest of his drive, along the bumpy country road to the cemetery, he passes fields of high grass and blue asters in the summer. No one else stops him until he reaches the burial site; there are no living persons at Potter's Field except for the inmate burial detail and the correction officers. At the burial site, the driver presents the burial certificates to the officer in charge. A team of inmates, dressed in gray, remove the coffins and inscribe them with the names of the deceased in indelible crayon.

The coffins are placed in trenches 15x40 ft. dug 7 to 8 ft. deep. The adults coffins are piled in stacks of three deep;



Ferry carrying Department of Hospitals morgue wagon approaches Hart Island after its 1/3 of a mile trip from Fordham Street, City Island, the Bronx.



Captain-in-Command Theodore A. Flynn glances through an old interment register. Records have been retained since 1869, when the wife of Fred Bartels, the first cemetery warden instituted the bookkeeping system. Present records are maintained by a clerk paid by the City of New York.





Coffins of infants and limbs are unloaded by inmates at burial site. These are lined up in alphabetical order and interred at foot end of the trench.



Morgue wagon is then moved to other end of the trench, where inmates remove the rough pine coffins of deceased adult to be interred.





Inmates line up coffins to be put in trenches, check that they are properly sealed, and inscribe identifying information, under the direction of the correction officer.



Coffins are carried into trenches. Inmates on level ground pass the coffin to inmates in the trench.



Trenches are seven to eight feet deep and a hundred and fifty feet long. Inmates climb into the trenches on wooden ladders, and are watched over by correction officers. The Long Island Sound keeps a lonely, constant watch over the entire Island.

the babies, children and limbs are placed in rows according to alphabetical order. Although the entire burial ground is consecrated, Catholics were buried in a separate section prior to 1960, when they ceased to be buried in the City Cemetery. There are no individual tombstones, but plot and section markers indicate the location of the coffin, by a numerical system.

Necessary data pertaining to the deceased has been recorded in the interment registers since the first burial at Potter's Field. The individual record books now in use contain 400 pages and last for about six months each. They are divided into three categories: Adults, Infants, and Limbs. The entry for each body includes permit number, section number, plot number, grave number, age of the deceased, date the permit was issued, date of death, cause of death, signature of the medical examiner, place of death, and date of burial. Careful records are also kept of disinterments, of which there are about 150 a year.

There are about 600,000 dead buried at Potter's Field, approximately two thirds of them infants and stillborn. Of the 8,000 burials a year, 1,500 are infants. Because interments are made on the mass level of approximately 125 a week, there can be no rites said over the dead at the grave sites. Despite the large number of burials, the 45-acre area of the cemetery is in no danger of being exhausted. Custodial forces are authorized to reuse burial ground after 25 years, sufficient time for the complete decay of the original remains. Currently, they are using ground which has not been used for forty years.

Costs

The cost incurred by the Department of Correction for the maintenance of the City Cemetery on Hart Island for the year 1966, when forty inmates were assigned to cemetery detail, were as follows:

Custodial salaries for two correction officers assigned to cemetery detail ...	\$18,020.00
Food for inmates (five days per week)	7,787.52
Clothing for inmates	4,000.00
Miscellaneous supplies such as chlorinated lime, cement for ground markers, tools, as well as depreciation for gasoline pump used for draining graves	285.55
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TOTAL	\$30,093.07

The cost to the City for the burial of an adult is \$75.00, and of an infant or fetus, \$29.00. Only half of this amount is reimbursed by New York State, except in the cases of State charges and Social Security collectors, for whose burial the City is reimbursed by the State and Federal governments respectively.

Inmates and Custodial Staff

In 1966, the inmate census decreased sharply as a result of changes in the penal code, and Hart Island was no longer required for housing of short-term prisoners. Hart Island has been utilized by the Office of the Narcotics Administrator during 1967 as a rehabilitation center for narcotics addicts.

Thirty inmates from the N.Y.C. Reception and Classification Center for Men, who come to Hart Island to work during the day, are charged with burial



Inmates lower coffin into place using two wooden planks and round pointed picks. Coffins are carefully lined up in two rows along the length of the trench, in columns three coffins high.



The inmates begin to cover the coffins with soil. When the job is completed, ground covering the trench will be level with the background.

and upkeep of the entire cemetery at present. *Assignments to Hart Island are made on a voluntary basis.* Many of the inmates consider work there desirable, because it affords them the opportunity to be in the open air and away from the prison proper, and because it gives them job experience in a well-paying field. They are carefully interviewed to ascertain that they can perform these services without becoming emotionally upset.

The inmates remove the coffins from the morgue wagon and inter them, make road repairs, spray the ground to control vermin infestation, and take charge of the general upkeep. Six of the inmates disinter the remains on occasions when it becomes necessary to do so.

On one such occasion, a man had been buried for 33 years, when his son suddenly hit oil millions and wanted to give his father a private burial. Another time, an unknown buried there was later found to be an American veteran of World War I. Until shortly before his death, he had sent small donations to a group of French nuns who had nursed him back to health during the war. When his letters and contributions stopped coming, the nuns investigated to find out what had happened to him. They learned that he had died penniless and been buried here.

They paid to have his remains brought to France and buried in their convent.

The inmates are under the custodial charge of two correction officers assigned permanently to Hart Island, and Captain Theodore A. Flynn, who is in command of the Hart Island security, maintenance, and burial detail. Captain Flynn has been with the Department of Correction for almost 30 years.

Inmates Pay Tribute to Unbefriended and Indigent Dead

Because of the massive number of interments made at Potter's Field weekly and the great expense to the City, burials must be un-elaborate. Primarily, those interred on Hart Island are not vagrants and alcoholics from Skid Row, as hearsay has it, but people who worked hard during their lifetimes just to "keep their heads above water," and could not afford the expenses of private funerals.

The inmates on Hart Island, many of whom are without friends and families, appealed to the Warden and offered to build a monument to the unbefriended dead. This was accomplished in 1948 when, in cooperation with the custodial staff, they erected a 30-foot high monument in the center of the burial site. On one side is engraved a simple cross, on the other the word "Peace."

"There is a good chance that relief clients in New York City who die penniless will no longer be buried in Potter's Field. Welfare Commissioner Mitchell I. Ginsberg told the News he is 'tending toward' allowing \$250 for the funeral and burial of a person on welfare rolls who dies destitute. Experts say this amount will provide services and a grave in cemeteries outside the city limits. . . ."

— Daily News, New York, N.Y.
Monday, August, 1966



Concrete section markers indicate the locations of coffins within the trenches. There can be no individual head stones, because coffins are piled one on top of another. Mass burial on the Island has given rise to the ironic remark, "In death, they are not alone."



The above monument was erected by inmate volunteers of the department in memory of the communities indigent who are buried in Potters Field.

Copy prepared by Gail Silver
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City of New York

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*Printed at the Rikers Island Print Shop
Inmate Vocational Training Program*

