

NEW YORK CITY'S POTTER'S FIELD: A VISIT TO HART ISLAND'S CITY CEMETERY IN BRONX COUNTY

by Leslie Corn, M.A.

Inmates in orange uniforms take a break from their duties of burying the dead in Potter's Field on Hart Island to play basketball behind a high metal fence. We're told by our Correction Department escorts not to speak with them or take their pictures.

These inmates, serving misdemeanor sentences in the city prison on Rikers Island, volunteer for burial detail on Hart Island in Bronx County. On most weekdays, they are transported first by bus to City Island, then by ferry or Correction Department launch, the only means of transportation across Long Island Sound to 100-acre Hart Island. Except for Correction officers and morgue and mortuary personnel, inmates are the only living human visitors to this otherwise deserted place with a history of war, incarceration, disease, and death.

Over the years, Hart Island has had prisons, a workhouse, a hospital, a Civil War interment camp for Confederate captives, a boys' reformatory, a Nike missile base, and other facilities. But now only the dead are regular residents of this barren place, under the aegis of the New York City Department of Correction.

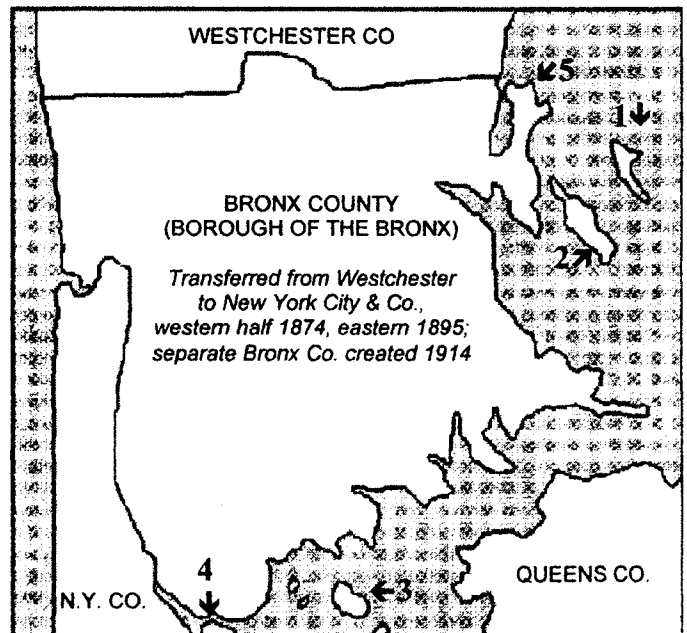
Tours of Potter's Field, Hart Island's public cemetery officially named City Cemetery, are rare. On June 15, fellow professional genealogist and NYG&B Education and Publication Committee member Anita Lustenberger and I joined other researchers, writers, and historians for one of the first tours sponsored by the New York Correction History Society. The visit was led by the Department of Correction's Director of Historical Services Thomas C. McCarthy. We were bussed to City Island, then slowly ferried, as if crossing a modern River Styx, to Hart Island. There, police Captain Eugene Ruppert, in charge of Hart Island operations, led us through Potter's Field and the surrounding structures.

Hart Island is a bleak place. Unlike its neighbor, City Island, Hart Island has no tourists, no pleasure boats bobbing at their moorings, no restaurants or souvenir shops. And unlike other cemeteries, Potter's Field offers no attractive shady lanes, no fragrant plants, no benches. No mourners come daily with flowers to decorate the graves of loved ones.

Here, there are rough dirt paths and scattered trees among the graves. Open vistas of grass are dotted every few yards with small white numbered markers sectioning plots of 150 graves, three adult coffins deep. There are no headstones for individual graves. Vegetation overruns the hollow ruins of nearby abandoned buildings that were once a reformatory, a hospital, an auditorium, the warden's house.

Prisoners, indigents, epidemic victims, orphans, infants, stillborns, and unknowns are buried in the 750,000–1,000,000 graves that have been dug here in Potter's Field since 24-year-old Louisa Van Slyke, an orphaned victim of yellow fever, was supposedly the first to be interred on April 20, 1869 (New York City Department of Health death certificate #31448, 1869).

In earlier times in New York City, there were various potter's fields, at least ten in number, some operating



Hart Island is marked no. 1 above, City Island no. 2, Rikers Island no. 3; Randalls and Wards Islands, no. 4. No. 5 is the former Hunter's Island, now attached to the mainland by landfill.

concurrently. Their histories offer a stunning variety of historical contexts.

From the close of the 18th century until 1826, when it was converted into a parade ground and then a park, Washington Square served as a potter's field. It was the site of approximately 100,000 burials, according to J.H. French's 1860 *Historical and Statistical Gazetteer of New York State*. Present-day Bryant Park, adjacent to what once was New York City's reservoir and is now the site of the main branch of the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue, was established as a potter's field in 1823. By 1847, this cemetery had also been converted into a park. Crystal Palace, the magnificent and ill-fated glass and steel exhibition hall, occupied the site from 1853 until it burned in 1858. The potter's field on Randalls Island, first used in the 1830s, later served as the site of an almshouse, a reformatory, and a hospital. In June, 1852, Wards Island became the new potter's field.

The City of New York purchased Hart Island from the estate of John Hunter on May 16, 1868 (see, in this issue, "A Short Genealogy of Hart Island," by Anita Lustenberger). From the time of Louisa Van Slyke's burial in 1869 to the present, City Cemetery has been the only potter's field in operation in New York City.

Even earlier, Hart Island served as a cemetery, though not an official potter's field. At the close of the Civil War, Hart Island housed an internment camp for Confederate prisoners of war. Conditions were appallingly inhumane, according to reports of inmates. Some died and were buried on Hart Island.

NEW YORK CITY'S POTTER'S FIELD (continued)

Today, a large decorative obelisk erected by the New York City Army Reserve in 1877 still stands to commemorate the graves of twenty Union veterans, victims of disease, who were buried in the Soldiers Plot adjoining Potter's Field. In 1942, the veterans' remains were transferred to Cypress Hills National Cemetery.

In 1895, Hart Island was turned over to the Department of Correction. Burials continued in City Cemetery, while various institutions were established on Hart Island and later ceased operation or were moved to other locations. A workhouse, which existed until World War II, was created for drug addicts, elderly convicts, and petty criminals. In 1905, the Reformatory for Miscreants was set up for delinquent boys.

Later years saw Hart Island in use as a disciplinary barracks for the Navy, housing for the homeless, and a Nike missile base. There was even a failed attempt to create a privately-funded amusement park.

The earliest known interment register from Potter's Field on Hart Island documents burials during the years 1872-75 and is in the possession of the New York Correction History Society. The New York City Municipal Archives will microfilm the register and make it available to researchers in the near future.

With the exception of that register, volumes chronicling City Cemetery burials up to May 1, 1881 are missing. Later registers, beginning with Volume 5 in 1881 and ending with volume 93 in 1985, may be searched on microfilm at the NYC Municipal Archives at 31 Chambers St., New York, NY 10007. There are gaps in the records, including those caused by a fire on Hart Island in the 1970s.

Was an ancestor buried on Hart Island? If the name of the cemetery written on the person's Department of Health death certificate issued April 20, 1869 or later is City Cemetery, Potter's Field, or Hart Island, the answer is yes. It is also likely that someone was buried in City Cemetery if no cemetery name is noted on a death certificate issued after that date.

By law, a New York City Department of Health death certificate should have been issued for every burial on Hart Island—with one exception. Kenneth J. Cobb, Director of the NYC Municipal Archives, explains: "These records don't have more information than that found on Department of Health death certificates. But they do have something unique. Stillbirths are first shown in Department of Health death indexes in 1937. Before that, records of the burials of stillborns can often be found in City Cemetery registers."

There is no way to know exactly how many burials have taken place in City Cemetery, estimated between 750,000 and 1,000,000, as all the records have not survived, explains Thomas C. McCarthy. "No one has ever been able to do a definitive count. There are currently 2,500-3,000 burials per year. Approximately 1,500 are adults and the rest are stillborns and infants. There may have been thousands more burials in certain earlier years because of epidemics such as influenza."

Today, bodies are transported to Hart Island for burial from morgues in the different boroughs. Queens burials take place on Tuesdays, Brooklyn burials on Wednesdays, Manhattan burials on Thursdays, Bronx burials on Fridays. Staten Island

ships bodies to Brooklyn to be buried on Wednesdays. Disinterments take place on Mondays. There are approximately 150 disinterments each year, as relatives claim the bodies for reburial elsewhere.

Disinterment is possible for about ten years after a burial. The Department of Correction keeps registers of burials for at least that amount of time, then periodically turns the records over to the NYC Municipal Archives for researchers to access.

The contents of these registers vary by year, but typically include the name of the deceased, if known, permit number, section, plot, and grave number, age of deceased, date of the permit, date and cause of death, signature of the medical examiner, place of death, and date of burial. Earlier entries also include, if known, birthplace (usually state or country) and "how long in country."

Parents' names are not noted in these registers. Only entries for unnamed stillborns or infants may offer the mother's name, such as the stillborn "[female] C[hild] of Rosa Hastings" of 453 Pearl St., who was buried May 5, 1881, in trench 60, grave 2126 (Volume 5, p. 1).

The Municipal Archives generally will not conduct mail-order searches of the registers, but researchers are welcome to access all the microfilms on-site at 31 Chambers Street (Website: <http://www.ci.nyc.ny.us/html/doris/html/archives.html>).

Some of the records, *Hart Island (New York) City Cemetery Records, 1881-1931*, are available through the Family History Library on nine microfilm reels (first FHL film #1710909; last FHL film #1710973).

If you have evidence, such as a death certificate, that an ancestor was buried in City Cemetery, and wish to visit Hart Island, contact Thomas C. McCarthy, Director of Historical Services, City of New York Dept. of Correction, 60 Hudson St., Room 608, New York NY 10013 (Website: <http://www.correctionhistory.org>; e-mail: webmaster@correctionhistory.org).

Do not expect a graveside visit, Mr. McCarthy explains, but you may be taken to the cemetery. "I know of no one ever being turned down who established that a relative is buried there and requested a visit for the purpose of family closure and spiritual solace."

The New York Correction History Society will again sponsor historical tours of Hart Island in 2001. If you go, you may find as I did, that Potter's Field is a fascinating place to visit. And a relief to leave.

Leslie Corn is a NYC-based professional genealogist and member of the NYG&B Education and Publication Committee and Library Committee.

Why "Potter's Field"?

"They...bought...the potter's field to bury strangers." This verse from the New Testament (Matthew 27:7, King James Version) is the source of the name used in many English-speaking countries for burial places for the poor and unknown. The original field at Jerusalem presumably had belonged to a potter. *Ed.*