



A GUIDE TO HISTORIC NEW YORK CITY NEIGHBORHOODS

HART ISLAND BRONX





The Historic Districts Council is New York's citywide advocate for historic buildings and neighborhoods. The Six to Celebrate program annually identifies six historic New York City neighborhoods that merit preservation as priorities for HDC's advocacy and consultation over a yearlong period.

The six, chosen from applications submitted by community organizations, are selected on the basis of the architectural and historic merit of the area, the level of threat to the neighborhood, the strength and willingness of the local advocates, and the potential for HDC's preservation support to be meaningful. HDC works with these neighborhood partners to set and reach preservation goals through strategic planning, advocacy, outreach, programs and publicity.

The core belief of the Historic Districts Council is that preservation and enhancement of New York City's historic resources—its neighborhoods, buildings, parks and public spaces—are central to the continued success of the city. The Historic Districts Council works to ensure the preservation of these resources and uphold the New York City Landmarks Law and to further the preservation ethic. This mission is accomplished through ongoing programs of assistance to more than 500 community and neighborhood groups and through public-policy initiatives, publications, educational outreach and sponsorship of community events.



**Council on
the Arts**



The Six to Celebrate is generously supported by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council and by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature. Additional support is provided by New York City Council Members Margaret Chin, Robert Holden, Corey Johnson, Ben Kallos, Stephen Levin, and Keith Powers.



232 East 11th Street, New York, NY 10003 tel 212-614-9107 fax 212-614-9127

e-mail hdc@hdc.org www.hdc.org 6tocelebrate.org

HART ISLAND

Hart Island, located one mile east of City Island in The Bronx, is home to the largest municipal cemetery in the United States. It was part of the property purchased by the English physician Thomas Pell from Native Americans in 1654. On May 16, 1868, the Department of Charities and Correction (later the Department of Correction or "DOC," which split off from the Department of Public Charities in 1895), purchased Hart Island from the family of Edward Hunter to become a new municipal burial facility called City Cemetery. Public burials began in April 1869. Since then, well over a million people have been buried in communal graves with weekly interments still managed by the DOC. The burials expanded across the entire island starting in 1985. Over its 150-year municipal history, it has also been home to a number of health and penal institutions. The island is historically significant as a cultural site tied to a Civil War-era burial system still in use today.

During the Civil War, in April 1864, the federal government leased Hart Island as a training camp for the 31st regiment of the United States Colored Troops. For four months in 1865, Hart Island was host to a prisoner-of-war camp for 3,413 captured Confederate soldiers. Hart Island was also leased to the federal government for training and defense purposes during World War II and the Cold War. Following the Civil War, personnel from the U.S. Sanitary Commission were stationed at Bellevue Hospital and helped to establish a morgue for examining and identifying the dead. In 1866, the City Council passed new sanitary codes prohibiting new burial grounds from opening in New York City. The Potter's Field then in use on Wards Island (established in the 1840s) closed, and City Cemetery on Hart Island (then part of Westchester County) opened in 1869.

In 1872, a highly efficient grid system of burials began on Hart Island that is largely unchanged today. Trenches were laid out in three layers of 50 graves. In 1931, this system changed to sections of two across and three deep with 50 bodies per section. Each pine box is listed as a grave and recorded in ledger books. Consequently, the City's mortuary service, still operated by the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner at Bellevue Hospital, can readily disinter a body for further examination or return it to families claiming the deceased at a later date. In 1931, the City also began recycling graves, which is legal after a body has decomposed to skeletal remains. Due to these practices, City Cemetery is large enough to accommodate New York City's burial needs indefinitely, making it an important municipal resource.

In 2013, the New York City Council passed legislation requiring the DOC to post its database of burials online and to list its visitation policy. In 2013, a group of eight women working with a charity, The Hart Island Project (HIP), petitioned the City to visit the graves of their infants buried on Hart Island. In 2015, the New York Civil Liberties Union filed a class action lawsuit establishing rights for families to visit graves on Hart Island. Families are now able to visit once a month by appointment. HIP was founded in 1991 to provide public access to information about burials and, in 2014, launched The Traveling Cloud Museum, an online database with an interactive map for locating burial sites and collecting stories of the recently buried. These resources are intended to reconnect Hart Island with communities across the globe. Please visit www.Hartisland.net for more information.

Cover Image ©2017 Alon Sicherman I-vision courtesy The Hart Island Project



I

HART ISLAND NATURAL ECOLOGY

Hart Island is a saltwater, non-barrier island whose 131 acres include areas of woodland, scrub, vineland and closed forest. A saltmarsh occurs on its west side. Visitors arriving by boat at either the coal dock or the ferry dock will notice a small lagoon that is part of

an expanding wetland area being naturally reclaimed. Formerly known as Spectacle Island, there were two land masses joined with a bridge of land in the middle similar in appearance to eyeglasses. Landfill added in the 1880s has been washing this fill away, recreating a lagoon. In addition to the saltmarsh, Hart Island has several wildlife habitats consisting of abandoned buildings, high bluffs, successional forests and a riprap shoreline. It is home to 28 species of wildlife and 65 plant species. The buildings and roads are deteriorating and earlier landscaped areas are succeeding to meadow. Institutional structures are being removed to provide new burial space, a process that is disruptive to the natural ecology due to the industrial scale of the graves that stay open for long periods. Erosion is a problem in areas close to the burials along the shoreline. Mitigation is expected to begin in 2019 with funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

©2004 Melinda Hunt courtesy *The Hart Island Project*

LEGEND OF DESIGNATIONS

National Historic Landmark:	NHL
National Register of Historic Places—District:	NR-D
National Register of Historic Places—Property:	NR-P
New York City Historic District:	NYC HD
New York City Individual Landmark:	NYC IL
New York City Interior Landmark:	NYC INL



2

GAZEBO (2006)

Arriving on Hart Island, visitors are directed by Correction officers to a wooden gazebo enclosed by a white picket fence. This is as far as the vast majority of visitors – the general public – can go on the island. In 2006, the DOC erected this shelter for the Interfaith Friends of Potter's Field, a prayer group organized by the nonprofit Picture the Homeless. DOC agreed that the group could assemble at the gazebo on a bi-monthly basis, but access to gravesites was still prohibited. In 2013, a group of eight women, working with the Hart Island Project, organized and petitioned New York City to visit the mass graves of their infants buried on Hart Island. On March 14, 2014, Elaine Joseph was the first woman to be permitted to walk to an infant burial site. In December 2014, the New York Civil Liberties Union filed a federal class action lawsuit demanding gravesite access for relatives of the buried. Those who are not relatives are only permitted to visit the gazebo, which is open to the public on the third Thursday of each month.

©2017 Alon Sicherman I-vision courtesy *The Hart Island Project*



3

BALL FIELD
(1960-c.
1992)

On May 26, 1960, roughly 600 grandstand seats from Ebbets Field (home of the

Brooklyn Dodgers), which had been demolished a few months before, were dedicated for use at the workhouse prison ball field on Hart Island. The ball field was named Kratter Field after its donor Marvin Kratter, the developer who acquired Ebbets Field and donated the seats. The workhouse "All Stars" played against an Army unit stationed at the Nike missile battery on Hart Island (see site 8). On opening day, The New York Times reported: "A standing-room crowd of 1340 – all but fifty-three of the prisoners on the island – was present." Unfortunately, the ball field and the seats are no longer extant. Many of the seats were stolen over the years, but in the early 1990s, the DOC removed the rest and the ball field was mowed. The photo above was taken before the seats were removed.

©1991 Joel Sternfeld courtesy The Hart Island Project



During the Civil War, ships transporting Union and Confederate troops anchored in the Long Island Sound east of Hart Island. This carriage house built in 1910 likely replaced an earlier structure at this location, close to the beach, where supplies came ashore. Later, docks were built on the western shore, closer to the city. A building similar in scale and location appears in an 1865 engraving published in the Illustrated London Times. This building was subsequently used as a morgue to hold disinterred bodies awaiting pick-up by a funeral director or the Medical Examiner.

©1999 Melinda Hunt courtesy The Hart Island Project

4

CARRIAGE HOUSE
(c. 1910)

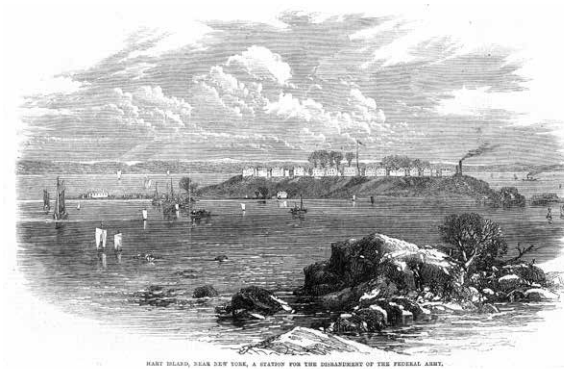


5

**HART ISLAND
SOLDIERS
CEMETERY**
(c. 1860)

Although Hart Island is usually synonymous with "potter's field" to most New Yorkers, City Cemetery was not the beginning of tax-funded burials. During the Civil War, both Union and Confederate soldiers encamped on Hart Island. At least three dozen units of Union Soldiers mustered in, trained or were discharged on Hart Island while a total of 3,413 Confederate POWs were incarcerated on the island in 1865. A total of 20 Union soldiers who died before June 1865 were interred in a small burial ground on the island. Burial records indicate that one Confederate soldier, A.W. Bennett of the 10th Alabama Cavalry, was interred on Hart Island before being removed to Cypress Hills National Cemetery. The other 217 Confederates who died on Hart Island while imprisoned were buried directly at Cypress Hills. However, most of the active duty military interments on Hart Island took place following the Civil War due to a cholera epidemic in July 1866. Upon acquiring Hart Island in 1868, New York City began preparations to open City Cemetery and the U.S. War Department arranged for the removal of soldiers to Cypress Hills. Unclaimed veterans who died following discharge from the army were buried by the City in a separate "soldier's plot" on Hart Island. They were later disinterred and moved to West Farms Soldiers Cemetery in The Bronx starting in 1916; others were removed to Cypress Hills in 1941. While all of the remains were moved, an obelisk constructed in 1877 by the Army Reserves to honor soldiers and sailors, as well as fragments of cast-iron fencing, mark the location of Soldier's Plot.

©2004 Melinda Hunt courtesy The Hart Island Project



6

CIVIL WAR PARADE GROUND

During the Civil War, this area served as a parade ground for the 31st regiment of the United States Colored Troops, which had consolidated with the 30th Connecticut Colored Volunteers and a number

of black Canadians and other foreign-born people of African descent who also served in the New York regiments. From Hart Island, the 31st regiment, under the command of Colonel Henry C. Ward, departed for Virginia, where it was active in several battles, including the siege of Petersburg. The Hart Island regiment was present at the Battle of the Crater and later fall of Petersburg, Virginia, to Union troops on April 2, 1865. It pursued Lee's Army from April 3 through April 9 and was at Appomattox before, during and after the Confederate surrender on April 9, 1865.

Image: Illustrated London News, August 12, 1865

7

EPISCOPAL CROSS (1907)



In 1907, the City Mission Society of the Episcopal Diocese of New York and a member, Mrs. William Greer, raised \$600 to commission and erect a granite cross bearing the inscription “He Calleth His Own By Name” on the base. Manufactured by the Harrison Granite Company, the base is four feet by four feet and the foundation is six feet by six feet deep. In his dedication later in 1907, Bishop Doane declared: “in putting this cross here, among these graves of the nameless and unknown children of men, that it shelter their dust in its sacred shadow.” The cross overlooks the burial sites of generations of New Yorkers.

©1992 Joel Sternfeld courtesy *The Hart Island Project*

8

NIKE MISSILE BATTERY LAUNCH ADMINISTRATION, MESS HALL AND STORAGE FACILITY (1954-1969)



These are the only remaining structures from the Nike NY-15 Launch Site, which is emblematic of the development of military protection for the former New York Defense Area from enemy attack during the Cold War period. The Hart Island site is also significant as one of the first Cold War-era sites built in defense of the New York Metropolitan Area, as well as the first Nike missile battery to be located on two separate islands, with the control site at the former Fort Slocum on David’s Island and the launch site with underground missile storage magazines on Hart Island (site 9). All other buildings from this period have been razed. The DOC housed a small contingent of inmates here from 1982 to 1991 and continues to use the compound as a base for operations on Hart Island.

©2017 Alon Sicherman I-vision courtesy *The Hart Island Project*

9

NIKE MISSILE NY-15 LAUNCH AREA UNDERGROUND STORAGE MAGAZINE (c. 1950s)



During the late 1950s, the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers was tasked with construction of the nation’s first anti-aircraft missile defense, the Army’s Nike System. The weapon itself, the Nike Ajax, was the first surface-to-air guided missile placed into service in the United States when it became operational in 1953. The missile was named after Nike, the Greek Goddess of Victory, and Ajax, a fleet-footed hero of the Trojan War, and was characterized as “a finned cylinder 12 inches in diameter and 20 feet long, fired by a booster rocket that could travel at supersonic speed for a range of approximately 25 miles.” The Launch Area included two underground storage magazines with elevators to lift the missiles onto launching racks, a fueling area, a missile assembly building, a generator building and various ancillary support and service buildings. Precast concrete planks now cover the remaining elevators and a concrete plug was recently installed over the hatchways to prevent access to the underground magazines.

©2017 Alon Sicherman I-vision courtesy *The Hart Island Project*

10

PEACE MONUMENT (1948)



During World War II, Hart Island was used as a disciplinary camp for Navy, Coast Guard and Marine personnel. Three German prisoners of war captured from a U-boat that surfaced in the Long Island Sound were imprisoned on Hart Island. After the war, ten acres at the northern end of the island were taken over by the U.S. Army. The DOC simultaneously used the area for burials, and inmates petitioned for permission to build a peace monument at the island’s highest point. In 1948, they built a 30-foot reinforced concrete memorial with the word “peace” written on one side and a simple cross on the other. The monument is elevated on a stepped base decorated with planters. This area was previously the location of Civil War-era barracks that were repurposed as prison facilities by the City. These structures are long gone except for a cistern exposed in 2012 as a result of Superstorm Sandy on a steep bank northeast of the Peace Monument.

©2004 Melinda Hunt courtesy *The Hart Island Project*



II

**MERCURY SCHOOL SHIP
MEMORIAL**
(c. 1878)

When the City purchased Hart Island in 1868, part of the property was to be used for a workhouse and industrial school for delinquent boys from the House of Refuge on Randalls Island. Additionally, a commercial ship, the Mercury, was to be converted to a naval vessel and used as a nautical school or “school ship” to teach the boys navigational skills.

The school was managed by the Department of Charities and Correction from 1869 to 1875. The short-lived program ended in part due to lack of funds following the financial panic of 1873 and following the drowning deaths of two boys just off Hart Island, for which this memorial, the oldest on Hart Island, was dedicated. The memorial is located on the rise of “cemetery hill” overlooking the oldest part of City Cemetery. It was described in 1878 by The New York Times as “a shapely cross made by laying upon the ground white pebbles from the sea-shore...On each side of the stone cross is a little grave...In each of these lonely graves lies a little sailor boy. When the school-ship Mercury lay off Hart’s Island, not long ago, two of her little sailors died, and they were laid, messmates on ship-board, side by side in the grave, as if they had gone into that dismal pit hand in hand...” The cross now has white painted boards within the outline of white painted river stones. The memorial stands as a reminder of both the workhouse and the Mercury school ship program, and illustrates the connection between the burial process and the young men required to work in custody of the DOC.

©2004 Melinda Hunt courtesy The Hart Island Project



I2

**CITY
CEMETERY**
(est. 1869)



The first municipal burial on Hart Island took place on April 20, 1869, and was performed by a team of convicts from the Blackwell’s Penitentiary Workhouse on present-day Roosevelt Island (Blackwell’s Penitentiary closed after Rikers Island opened in 1927). Nearly 150 years later, the burials on Hart Island are still performed by inmates assigned by the DOC. After the Civil War, Thomas Brennan, Commissioner of the Department of Charities and Correction and Warden at Bellevue Hospital, set up the first municipal morgue in North America and adopted the Civil War practice of photographing bodies not identified by a medical examiner. Families could review photographs at Bellevue and identify their relatives and request return of their remains. At first the “unknown” were buried in individual graves and the “unclaimed” in large trenches. The enormity of these common graves made disinterment difficult, so a grid system was introduced in 1872, which is largely unchanged today. Each plot is numbered and marked, now using GPS, but previously with wood or cast concrete markers. The system was developed on battlefields during the Civil War, allowing for later disinterment should a family come forward to claim a body. In 1931, New York City began recycling graves over 50 years. This was later changed to over 25 years old, at which point the City is no longer obligated to return remains to family members. Because the graves can be reused, New York City has a sustainable system with no shortage of space for public burials. In May 1989, public burials expanded to the southern part of Hart Island formerly reserved for penal and healthcare facilities.

left: Jacob A. (Jacob August) Riis (1849-1914) / Museum of the City of New York.
0.13.1.86 right: ©2010 Melinda Hunt courtesy The Hart Island Project



I3

**THE
PAVILION**
(1885)

When the Department of Charities and Correction was formed in 1860, it greatly expanded the city’s healthcare- and reform-oriented penal institutions. The Pavilion on Hart Island was one of several lunatic asylums and charity hospitals at

various locations in the greater New York area, and today it is the only 19th century building still standing on Hart Island. It was one of the first asylums constructed during Thomas Brennan’s time as Commissioner after he opened the morgue at Bellevue Hospital. Thus, the structure stands as a reminder of the island’s relationship to Bellevue Hospital. At the time, there was precedent for institutions relating to the healthcare and penal systems to be positioned in proximity to one another and to places of burial. In the 18th century, City Hall Park in lower Manhattan was host to an almshouse, gaol, workhouse and dispensary, as well as a burial ground.

©2004 Melinda Hunt courtesy The Hart Island Project

I4

LAUNDRY, BUTCHER,
DYNAMO BUILDINGS
AND SMOKE STACK
(1912)



Following a review in 1904, the City Council passed legislation to build a new reformatory for “youthful offenders,” young men ages 16-30. This measure involved removing older male prisoners from Hart Island and erecting new buildings unlike conventional prison structures, as well as remodeling existing structures using inmate labor. This group of buildings, completed in 1912, provided power and a source of employment for young men living in the reformatory. They worked shifts in the laundry, cared for farm animals and harvested food grown on Hart Island that was consumed locally and distributed to City Hospitals. There was shoe making and ironwork training. Hart Island depended on coal deliveries by boat and water piped in from the mainland but was otherwise self-sufficient. This physical plant operated until 1976, when drug treatment center Phoenix House (see site 17) was ordered to vacate Hart Island.

©1992 Joel Sternfeld courtesy *The Hart Island Project*



I5

CATHOLIC CHAPEL
(c. 1935)

Regarding a new chapel on Hart Island, *The New York Times* was quoted on October 26, 1931: “The cornerstone of the new Catholic Chapel at the Hart’s Island prison, the only separate

prison building set aside for Catholic services, was laid yesterday afternoon...prisoners numbering about 1000 were grouped at the rear of the crowd...The new chapel will cost about \$60,000, which is being raised by voluntary subscription under the direction of Cardinal Hayes and Father Zema.” By the time it was completed, the Hart Island Chapel cost Catholic Charities roughly one million dollars, a large sum in the Depression years. The one-and-a-half story, red brick building was abandoned in 1966, when the Hart Island workhouse closed. The stained glass was removed by the Catholic Diocese and the church bell was stolen by vandals, but the structure itself still stands in surprisingly good condition.

©2004 Melinda Hunt courtesy *The Hart Island Project*



I6

PRISON RECORD
REPOSITORY & REFORMATORY
(c. early 20th century)



Early in the 20th century, these red-brick buildings replaced the Civil War-era barracks where

workhouse inmates resided. The buildings were designed without bars, offering an alternative approach to that of Blackwell’s Penitentiary on Roosevelt Island. Young men convicted of misdemeanors who resided on Hart Island were required to work as part of their rehabilitation. They were instructed in “useful trades” such as ironwork, shoemaking, landscaping, agriculture and burying the dead. Workhouse records were kept in a guardhouse facing a U-shaped cell block. The facility closed in 1966 and the inmates moved to Rikers Island, but in 1982, Mayor Koch re-opened a work camp on Hart Island of about 50 inmates who were tasked with restoring the buildings damaged by vandals. They resided in the Nike base military barracks (site 8). In 1985, residents of City Island filed a lawsuit preventing the DOC from reopening a prison on Hart Island, so the inmates left and the land formerly reserved for institutions became burial grounds.

©2017 Alon Sicherman I-vision courtesy *The Hart Island Project*

©2018 Greg Gulbransen courtesy *The Hart Island Project*



17

HART ISLAND HOSPITAL

(date unknown)



The first burial on Hart Island was that of Louisa Van Slyke, who died at age 24 from tuberculosis. In the 20th century, this building housed tubercular and chronically-ill patients. Starting in 1950, it was used to house homeless men suffering from alcohol addiction. The Committee on Alcoholism of the City's Welfare and Health Council set up a clinic to provide physical and mental rehabilitation as an alternative to multiple short stays for disorderly conduct on Rikers Island. The clinic had space for 2,000 patients plus medical staff. In 1952, the City set up a court for alcoholics on Rikers Island and sentenced men to undergo treatment for one to six months on Hart Island. From 1967 to 1976, the building was used by Phoenix House for drug treatment under the Rockefeller Drug Laws. Judges could commit addicts to medical treatment on Hart Island for up to five years. A phoenix can be seen painted on the side of the building. Phoenix House was ordered to vacate Hart Island in 1976 after ferry service was reduced during the city's fiscal crisis.

©2018 Greg Gulbransen courtesy The Hart Island Project

©2017 Alon Sicherman I-vision courtesy The Hart Island Project



18

SITE OF NEGRO CONEY ISLAND & AIDS BURIALS

*(1925 and 1981-85,
respectively)*

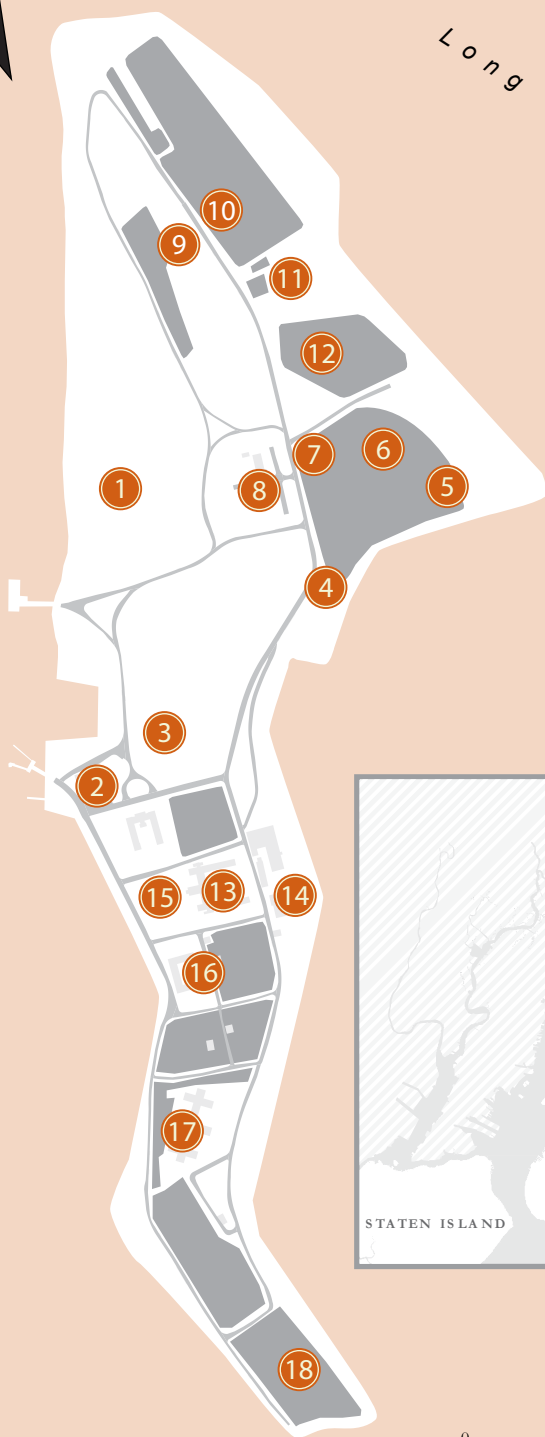
In the early 20th century, the City owned all but four acres of Hart Island. Those four acres on the southern tip of the island belonged to John Hunter, a member of the same family that sold the larger portions of the island to the City in 1868. Hunter offered to sell the four acres to the City in 1922, but the City passed on the offer, so he sold the acres to Solomon Riley, a millionaire and Harlem developer, for \$35,000 in 1924. Riley announced plans in

1925 to open an amusement park on Hart Island for Harlem blacks, who were not permitted to visit amusement parks in nearby Rye and Dobbs Ferry. The planned amusement park became known as "Negro Coney Island." According to The New York Times, "Mr. Riley's workers constructed a dance hall, eight boardinghouses, and a 200-foot boardwalk, and converted an old ice boat into a bathing pavilion. In June, Mr. Riley announced plans to buy a fleet of 60 motorboats to ferry customers from the mainland. Corrections officials cringed, suddenly afraid that the park would invite escape attempts, smuggling and unrest among the prison population..." So, to prevent Riley from progressing further, the City acquired the property by condemnation and purchased it from him for \$144,000. The City then demolished the buildings and used the land for a sewage treatment facility. The location later became the burial site for sixteen AIDS victims who died in 1985.

©2017 Alon Sicherman I-vision courtesy The Hart Island Project



Long Island Sound



**Shaded areas represent past and present burial sites*

