

Roosevelt Island Historical Society

Newsletter

Winter, 2007

The Visitor Center

It has been an amazing few months since our visitor center opened unofficially on July 2nd. But, first a few details of getting the kiosk opened.

The project started in 2003, when we spotted a news article about the kiosk needing a home. After negotiations and fund raising the kiosk was moved to the island in January, 2005. It was in storage until in August of 2006 the kiosk foundation work was started. Immediately, the foundations from the old storehouse building were discovered exactly where the kiosk was to be sited.

After delays and many consultations the foundation was completed. Massive amounts of concrete, steel I beams, wheels and elevator cables all came out of the site. The foundation was finally finished in October. The big day went well as the skilled crews from Bay Crane lifted the kiosk onto a flatbed truck for the hundred foot trip across the street to the new site. Within a few hours the kiosk was on its foundation.

Soon the steps and ramp were installed. Oops, the inspectors and architect arrived and discovered the steps were too shallow and the path was too narrow. Back to the drawing board. The RIHS hired architect Laura Heim to oversee the NYC Dept. of Design and Construction (DDC) and their contractors. Laura redesigned the entrance and did away with the steps giving us a wide pathway to a graceful terraced entry.

By late spring we were trying to get the project finished, everything was a problem,. The electric box was in the wrong place, the storefront was not ordered, etc. Our May and June opening dates were postponed. We decided the only thing to do was tell the DDC that we were opening for July 2nd, ready or not. It worked.

Our muddy site, was transformed with sod laid and the kiosk stood proudly on the lovely lawn. On July 2nd, we opened with borrowed furniture, and temporary displays mounted. We welcomed many on the 4th. Though a rainy, misty day we had great fun and our staff was thrilled to greet visitors from all over.

Our map on the wall and pins to locate your hometown was an instant success. In a few weeks we had marked sites where our visitors came from all corners of the world! There were over 77 countries identified in a less than a month.

The summer proceeded and our official opening was on July 29th. A hot, humid and tropical feel was in the air as all gathered to welcome the visitor center. The red ribbon was cut and we were officially open for business.

Until November, we have been open every day. Our staff is wonderful and includes: Zakie Wazani, Pennie Cannon,. Deborah Dorff, Rebecca Dougherty, Carly Fraser, Katherine and Daniel Vithlani. They love to meet the visitors, answer the question and tell them about the Island. Our talent in foreign languages are tested daily. Luckily Spanish is very popular and Zakie is fluent in it.

November and December have been the months for deliveries. Our refrigerator was the first thing to arrive. Shortly after our display panels, file cabinets, sales desk, shelving, chairs, benches have been delivered. It is great to have real furniture inside the center. Today, Dec. 7th, with the temperature at about 30 degrees our two gorgeous out-of-door benches arrived. All our furnishings are part of our City funding. A few more things are to come including a wonderful light fixture, permanent sign on the lawn and flooring inside the kiosk. We will be installing our displays over the winter, so stop by and watch the transformation.

I must thank all our Island staffers who have been there to help us out at the kiosk. Armando Cordova and the tram staff lend us a hand and tools whenever needed. Fernando Vargas and the grounds crew watered the lawn almost daily all summer and kept it in great shape.. They have hauled our trash and packing materials away. Chris Baker and his crews have kept us mechanically functioning. Our bus drivers stop by and get a cold drink in the summer. All the RIOC administration from Mr. Shane down have been great boosters and supporters of the visitor center. Without their assistance we would not be in business.

Our RIOC public purpose funding has made the difference and we are spending it carefully. Our funding from the City of New York, the Mayor's office and our City Council Person Jessica Lappin have made this dream come true. Thanks also to John Catsimitdis, President of Gristedes, store manager Bob. Michael and the staff of Starbucks who have generously donated refreshments to our opening event. Thanks again to Gristedes for the delicious treats at our holiday celebration and sale.

We are now working on funding for more programs to be done from the kiosk and our Octagon office on the island.

Also, the major task of surveying the roof, installing a lawn sprinkler system, more interior lighting and a laundry list of small jobs are on the agenda for 2008. Hopefully, the kiosk will soon have a paint job and the terra cotta cleaned. It seems to be a never ending list of tasks to do. We are working with the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs to select preservation architects to plan this phase. Working on a 98 year old building is not a fast procedure.

Winter has come now and it is too cold to open daily. Our weekday visitors are few and our heating bill is large. Yes, we are a customer of Con Ed. Our electric heaters do a fair job, but cast steel, and a concrete floor do not make the kiosk easy to heat.

We will return to daily hours in the spring. We are open every Saturday and Sunday thru December. We have a wonderful selection of holiday gifts for all.

Our lovely invitation and holiday card was designed by our Goldwater resident Yvonne Smith. The original oil painting is on display inside the kiosk. The cards are available and perfect to use to send your holiday greetings.

Other News and Notes:

Trolley Car #601

Late this summer we visited the NY Trolley Museum in Kingston, NY. There we saw Queensboro Bridge Railway Trolley #601. It is the last trolley that rode over the Queensboro Bridge and also the last trolley that operated in the City of New York. We are working with the Museum and RIOC to see if there is a way we can adopt it and home it on Roosevelt Island. It is in very poor condition, but there is a certain charm to having the trolley return to the City.

Roosevelt Island Bridge

We are seeking a way to preserve the vintage 1955 General Electric control panel from our bridge. This spring it will be replaced and we hope to preserve parts of the equipment.

Queensboro Bridge 100th Anniversary

2008 and 2009 will be centennial anniversary years for 8 East River bridges including the Manhattan and Queensboro. Judith Berdy is a member of the commission planning celebrations to commemorate the anniversary of our Queensboro the week of June 12th, 2009. Save the date!

Images of America-Queensboro Bridge”

Our second book, published in conjunction with the Greater Astoria Historical Society will be released in March, 2008. Judith Berdy and Ursula Beau-Seigneur worked with the GAHS on this project.

“The Encampment” and Open House New York

One of our busiest weekends this autumn was October 6th and 7th, with Tom Sokolowski's “Encampment” Tent project at Southpoint and many island sites open for Open House New York. Just in case there were not enough activities, Saturday was the date of the wonderfully successful Fall for Arts Celebration. Records indicate that that weekend attracted 5,000 visitors to the island.

We met with our new **Riverwalk** neighbors in November to introduce them to our island and its history .We had a great evening in the lovely rooftop room at 455 Main Street.

Preserve New York Conference was held in Albany during the week of November 15th. Judith Berdy had the opportunity to attend and participate in a group of excellent presentations on New York history. The visit also gave her an opportunity to visit the New York State Archives. There she discovered copies of the prisoner newspaper from the Blackwell's Island Penitentiary from 1916. We now have copies of two issues in our archives. These papers offer a wonderful insight into prison life on the island.

Staffing the Visitor Center

If you would like to have a fun job next spring and summer, put your name on our list of prospective staff for the kiosk visitor center. Our current staff is wonderful and we look forward to welcoming new members next year. This is a paid position, perfect for a college student. A basic knowledge of the island is necessary. E-mail your brief resume to our address rooseveltislandhistory@usa.com.

Our Octagon Office

is complete and furnished beautifully. We do not have enough staffing to open it weekly, but it is a project for the coming year. The office is a generous donation of Becker+Becker Associates. Barbara Clarke, the building manager and her staff are very helpful to our needs. We will be holding our annual meeting in the Octagon office on **Thursday, January 10th**. Join us for holiday cheer and a fun time discovering our archival collection and artwork.

**Annual Meeting and Election
Will be held on Thursday, January 10th at the
RIHS office at the Octagon at 7:30 p.m.**

from the desk of.....

Judith Berdy

It has been a wonderful and exciting year. The kiosk which was a dream for 4 years is now a reality.

Our political and governmental friends have been most generous to us.

Now it is time for our members and friends to help us fulfill our year end goal of adding to our supporters of the RIHS and its activities.

We are offering these special gifts for your year end donations:

- \$25- Lanyard and bracelet set
 - \$50- 6 cards and envelopes of the kiosk designed by Yvonne Smith
 - \$100- RIHS Tote Bag
 - \$150- Copy of "Images of America-Roosevelt Island"
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Enclosed is my tax deductible year-end donation to the RIHS in the amount of \$_____.

Name _____

Address _____

Phone _____ e-mail _____

Annual Meeting and Election of Officers

Will be held on
Thursday, January 10th
at the RIHS office in the
Octagon
888 Main Street
at 7:30 p.m.

SPECIAL PROGRAM

“HOLIDAYS IN THE BIG HOUSE”

READINGS FROM
“THE PRISON OBSERVER”
published by
The League for Social and Moral Advancement
December, 1916

**This was the newspaper for the
prisoners and staff of the
Blackwell's Island Penitentiary**

Enjoy a new view of life on the island!!

Refreshments will be served!