Blackwell's Island
1829

Everyone wanted to avoid the gridlock conditions that choked the City that crisp spring day in 1824, when roughly a third of the entire population of Manhattan crammed into Peter Stuyvesant's farm at Second Avenue and 13th Street. Even those who would have described themselves as good, or charitable, swarmed the field to see John Johnson hang. Johnson knew what he was in for. It could take him up to twenty minutes to die, and he was only too aware that he was likely going to feel every second of it. The doctor he'd begged for something to ease his suffering had been pitiless, refusing to provide any form of medicinal comfort. The last thing Johnson saw before his four foot drop into eternity, with clear eyes and nothing to mute the terror or the pain, was the "solid mass of living flesh—men, women and children, of all colors and descriptions" who'd come to watch. Afterwards, Stuyvesant demanded compensation for the damages to his property. The following year, only five days before sitting down to Thanksgiving dinner with their families, the masses came together again. Once more a wave of humanity surged towards the sight of one man violently squirming as the weight of his own body was used against him, and not even the 7th Regiment of the New York Militia, who'd been called in to preserve order, could quiet the viewing frenzy.

When Judge Ogden Edwards scheduled a double-execution for Thursday, May 7, 1829, authorities must have looked at each other and said, "We need a new judge." This time they kept the location a secret. Even if word got out, the mob would not be able to get to the spot they'd chosen: a narrow, two-mile long strip of pastoral terrain in the East River called Blackwell's Island. Purchased by the City for $32,500.00 the year before (although they would end up paying $20,000.00 more to settle a lawsuit), the City had big plans for the island.

Their goal was to relieve the crowded conditions at Bellevue, which in addition to being a hospital was also the location of the City's

Penitentiary, the Lunatic Asylum, an Almshouse for the poor, and a prison for people convicted of minor crimes called the Workhouse. Moving the poor, the criminal, and the insane away from the general population and into the more stress-free, and healthful environment of this lush island, thick with fruit trees, was the more humane thing to do.

The City wasted no time. Less than two months after money passed from the City to James Blackwell, the City's prison chaplain, John Stanford, who'd spoken at Johnson's hanging even though Johnson had asked him not to, stood on the site of the future penitentiary and delivered the cornerstone address. Only five sentences in—and to an audience which included the convicts who slept there in shanties until the intended prison was completed—Stanford brought up executions. After expressing the quick hope that "God forbid that it should ever be required for such a purpose," Reverend Stanford gazed northward and recalled how inconvenient it had been, finding a spot for this "mournful occasion," and how expensive it is to pay for the trampling of the mob. The far end of the Island however, was not only "sufficiently remote from the public eye," but safe from the costly "depredations of the crowd ..."

Afterwards, the prisoners were fed a cold lunch. Once again Stanford rose. "Great God, accept our thanks for the favour which these unfortunates have now received from thine indulgent hand. We render unto thee our praise, that thou has taught America, how to season justice with mercy."

But mercy had a price. Except for the crimes of treason, murder, and arson, imprisonment for the penitent had replaced capital punishment in New York City. Criminals that previously would have been either killed, put to work, or banished, had to go somewhere. It wasn't long before cells meant for one man were housing two, who would be unable to stand together side-by-side in the three and a half feet wide space. Administrators would keep adding cells, but they would never catch up to the need.

Judge Edwards apparently saw no irony in selecting New York's new island of reform as the site for the double hanging of murderers Catherine Cashiere and Richard Johnson. It would all take place on the quiet, solitary knoll at the northern end the island, the very spot that had loomed so felicitously to Reverend Stanford when he raised his eyes and looked out across the orchards, forests and quarries.

If you were a woman scheduled for execution in 19th century America, chances are you were not Caucasian. Catherine Cashiere was

black, although not so very black according to one reporter who was accordingly sympathetic. "She is a good looking young woman, with but a shade of the olive complexion, dark lustrous eyes, and rather an agreeable expression of countenance." She'd been accused of stabbing Susannah Anthony to death in a drunken rage at a card game in the Five Points. There'd been no quarrel between them, a friend testified at the trial, but they were both ladies of pleasure, he explained, and "It is a custom among the darker ones to swear against the lighter ones, because the lighter ones get the most custom [sic]."

Richard Johnson's face did not inspire pity; another reporter characterized him as "truly repulsive." He was on trial for putting eight bullets into Ursula Newman when she wouldn't acknowledge a child they'd had together, or that he was, for all intents and purposes, her husband. He had "a good reason for what he had done," he insisted, and he would "prove it to the public" at his trial.

The jury took only an hour and fifteen minutes to render a guilty verdict for Johnson and only fifteen minutes for Cashiere. The judge sentenced them to be hung together a month and a half from that day.

From then on Johnson acted like it was all a big misunderstanding that would be corrected any moment now. Whenever he spoke to his jailers or anyone else, he kept it light, as if he imagined they'd all be sharing a beer one day, laughing about how close he'd come. Cashiere, on the other hand, was more in touch with reality. She spoke little and cried frequently.

At half past eight on the morning of the execution Cashiere and Johnson were placed in separate carriages. Crowds had been gathering since six o'clock that morning and now thousands of men and women thronged the route along Broadway. The Sheriff had planned to leave much earlier in order to avoid this very thing, but the troops assigned to accompany them had been late in arrival. As it was, the carriages didn't reach the steamboat that would take them across the river until nine. By now thousands more people lined the shore.

The boat ride to Blackwell's Island must have been its own special torture. It's so invigorating to leave the city and be out on the open water. On any other day the trip would have felt like a holiday. The wind whipping up the river, sometimes dousing everyone with a spray of water, the air thick with the smell of seaweed and fish. Johnson and Cashiere may have taken a few deep breaths as they pushed back stray hair. But the only people out on a pleasure cruise that morning were the rubberneckers who packed the steamboats and hundreds of smaller

boats out on the river, ghoulishly following along, as closely as they dared.

Johnson still couldn't accept what was coming. He'd even joked earlier that morning that it seemed silly to eat his last meal, as "It will only make more weight for the rope." He continued in this vein as they crossed the East River until the others in the boat begged him to stop. When they passed the site of the penitentiary at Bellevue, the one that would soon be replaced, Cashiere said in despair, "That place was my ruin ... I was sent to the Penitentiary many years ago, when I was quite a child, for some trifling offense, and the depravity I there learned has been the means of my appearing in this character." Her mother, who'd been sitting quietly beside her, agreed. "From the hour she was taken from me and confined to that place, I have never had any control over her."

They reached the Island at twenty minutes to ten. Johnson had learned that the Governor had recently arrived in the City, and so he stared at the gallows with curiosity, confident that a pardon would arrive in time to save him. The tiny island boasted 450 fruit trees, including apples, pears, peaches, plums, and cherries, many bursting and fragrant, and Johnson commented on the beauty of their surroundings. Meanwhile, the boats in the East River cruised back and forth, jockeying for position. The number of witnesses was later estimated at four to five thousand.

When they reached the scaffold just before 11am, Johnson still seemed to expect a reprieve. The Reverend Dunbar did everything he could to lead Johnson to abandon his delusion, but Johnson climbed the steps as if he was sure he'd soon turn around and walk back down. Catherine Cashiere, on the other hand, broke down and cried, "Oh God have I come to this?" Her executioners had the task of holding her up when she started to faint.

The ropes were adjusted around their necks. Immediately the waters around the northern tip of the island erupted as people on board the crowded vessels stood up and surged forward to get a better look. At least two boats capsized, and although unconfirmed, there were reports of people drowning. The execution continued. Caps were pulled down over Johnson's and Cashiere's faces. Birdsong could be heard as they climbed the steps.

Catherine Cashiere, they said, died instantly. But Richard Johnson went into violent convulsions that lasted four or five minutes. Authorities left them hanging for forty-five minutes, as was customary,

then they lowered the two young people into their coffins and took them away.

It would be one of the last public executions in the City of New York. Officials finally gave up on the idea that these gruesome spectacles were instructional, and served as a deterrent. Instead they seemed to feed the basest of emotions, with papers like the New York Post writing scathing reports of the gawkers "eager to witness the dying struggles of two of their fellow beings." The last public execution in New York City was pirate Albert Hicks, who was hung on the future site of the Statue of Liberty on July 13, 1860. Thereafter, executions were invitation-only events.

The spot that Reverend Stanford had envisioned as so perfect for the regrettable act of taking a life would soon be selected as an even more ideal location for the brand new, cutting-edge New York City Lunatic Asylum. "Why have we not establishments worthy of our city?" an expert they'd consulted later asked, summing up just what legislators had been thinking at the time. And what could be more restorative for the unfortunates of the burgeoning metropolis, it was reasoned, than the peaceful, verdant island in the East River, tucked safely away from vice and crime between two swiftly running channels, surrounded by picturesque sailboats, ferries and steamers, and the wooded reaches of upper Manhattan and Queens behind them?

One by one the City built hospitals, penal institutions, poorhouses and asylums. But only three years after the Lunatic Asylum opened, Charles Dickens visited and wrote that "everything had a lounging, listless, madhouse air ... The moping idiot, cowering down with long disheveled hair; the gibbering maniac, with his hideous laugh and ... vacant eye ... there they were all ... in naked ugliness and horror." The new Penitentiary, which was to make up for all the mistakes of the one that had doomed Catherine Cashiere, was so hopeless a later missionary who worked in all the island's institutions would declare that "Blackwell's Island, as a whole, is the cesspool of New York City."

Politics, corruption and misguided economies had replaced their plan for compassion and science, and the new Penitentiary was torn down in 1936 and once again rebuilt, this time on Rikers Island, eventually evolving into one of the worst jails in the United States.