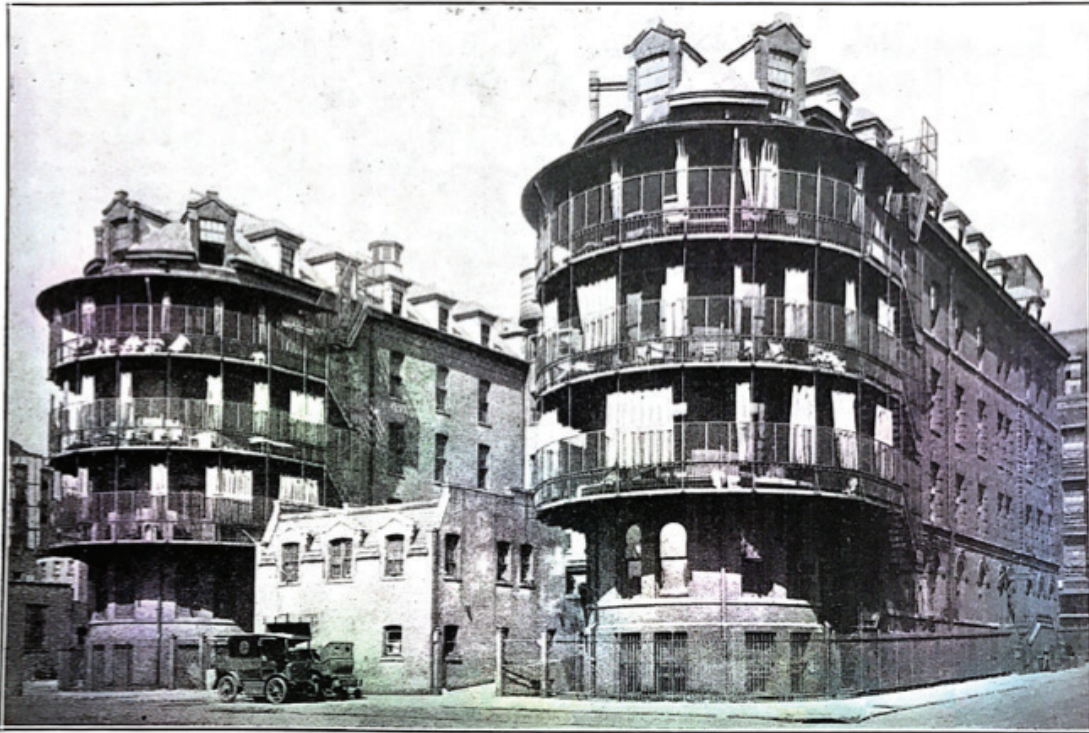


# A LES Hospital Turned Housing Project Serves the Underserved

This week, we continue our series of deep dives into the histories of storied addresses.



GOUVERNEUR HOSPITAL

*(Gouverneur Hospital pictured in the 1929 Department of Hospital First Annual Report )*

On a windy morning in February of 1905, Frank Riley jumped off a Nostrand Avenue trolley car crossing the Williamsburg Bridge to chase after the hat that blew off his head. The 21-year-old fireman lost his balance and fell into a snowbank 65 feet below. When the ambulance arrived, only his feet were visible above the snow's surface. Riley was taken to Gouverneur Hospital.

It wasn't the last time high drama would come to the U-shaped red brick building overlooking the East River. Thirty-six years later, on Aug. 20, 1941, a patient named Joseph Mandick spit in a detective's face rather than tell the officer who had shot him. "This is a private matter," Mandick said. "I'll get even in my own way."

Nineteen years after that, on Jan. 27, 1960, John Hirdt and Walter McDonald, two policemen from Queens, lost control of their car during a high-speed chase and drove into the East River. McDonald fired six shots of his pistol from the water, hoping to gain someone's attention. Charles Weller, captain of a Lehigh Railroad tugboat, heard the gunshots, found the men and pulled them aboard. To Gouverneur Hospital they went for treatment.

Gouverneur's Hospital served the Lower East Side's growing population until the early 1970s, when its lack of proper facilities forced it to close and change locations. It wasn't until 1994 that the building reopened as Gouverneur Court, a low-income housing facility.

Its evolution from hospital to housing project spanned over 90 years and included the first female ambulance surgeon; a collaborative protest that involved health workers, the Health Revolutionary Unity Movement, and the Young Lords; and a non-profit organization that wanted to serve its community.

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Before it was a hospital, the lot of land that included 621 Water Street belonged to a loyalist of the American Revolution. When the Forfeiture Act was passed in New York in October of 1779, it included a list of names for those who remained loyal to Great Britain and provided that their land be confiscated by the Commissioners of Forfeiture. The earliest land records for this lot show that Isaac Stoutenburgh and Philip Van Cortlandt, the Commissioners of Forfeiture for the Southern Districts of New York, acted as the property's grantors, selling the land to Lewis Ogden in 1788.



*The original blueprint of Gouverneur Hospital's 621 Water Street location in 1896.)*

By 1897 the block of land between Gouverneur Slip East and West became the location for the new Gouverneur Hospital, a \$200,000 project that grew out of an urgent care facility near Gouverneur Slip. By the end of the 19th century population density in the neighborhood had grown to 330,000 people per square mile and the former urgent care facility's

39 beds were nowhere near enough to serve the community's sick.

Gouverneur Hospital's new location opened to the public in 1901 in a four-story building with four wards, 104 beds, an x-ray machine and a staff of six doctors and eleven nurses. And it continued to grow. The first annual report of the Department of Hospitals of the City of New York indicates that the cerebral meningitis epidemic in 1904 led Gouverneur Hospital to convert its Medical Board room into ward space for cerebral meningitis patients, a project completed by 1907. In May of that year, the hospital became a part of a larger citywide initiative to treat tuberculosis. The Committee on the Prevention of Tuberculosis announced a plan to add tuberculosis dispensaries throughout the city. To minimize overcrowding, TB patients were asked to go to their nearest dispensary for treatment and Gouverneur became one of nine dispensary locations.

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As the facilities grew, so did the staff. Emily Dunning (later Barringer), the hospital's first woman medical resident and the first female ambulance physician, joined Gouverneur Hospital. She graduated from Cornell University Weill Medical College in 1901 and began searching for a job shortly after. Most female physicians worked in clinics for women and children.

"I soon realized that I would not be satisfied to accept an appointment in one of the hospitals for women physicians, if there was any chance of my being able to obtain an internship at a general hospital," Barringer wrote in her autobiography, *Bowery to Bellevue: The Story of New York's First Woman Ambulance Surgeon*.

Barringer decided to apply to Gouverneur Hospital. All of its residents were required to take a hospital quiz, but only Barringer was told she needed permission to participate. "Having convinced the Medical Board that I should be allowed to take the examination, I now found that I must in addition call personally on each member of the Board of Trustees and get his consent," Barringer recalled.

After the extra efforts required of her, and after

passing the quiz with the highest score among her male colleagues, Barringer was still not appointed a position on staff. She accepted her defeat and decided to work as an assistant to her role model, Dr. Mary Putnam Jacobi, a children's physician.

In the Spring of 1902, Gouverneur Hospital had a new Board of Trustees which announced that the facility would open residency positions to female candidates. Barringer applied again and this time she was accepted into the program. She would be joining her male colleagues on the back of the horse and buggy ambulance that treated the neighborhood.



*Emily Barringer in a Gouverneur Hospital ambulance.*

In January of 1903, Barringer had her first day at Gouverneur Hospital. Her welcome? A first night assignment to catheterize the male patients. Barringer recalled that night: "We had started systematically on one side of the ward, working down toward the oval end. At last we reached it, turned the curve and started down the other side, and soon that dreadful ordeal was over."

The hazing raised her stature among her doubting male peers. The men she treated did not cry out in pain. "I had learned one great lesson that night, and that is that sex does not count when one is sick and in pain; the one who can bring the greatest help and skill is the one who is wanted the most. The problem of the men patients was solved for me that night."



The morning after the night of the catheters, Barringer thought back on all the challenges she was about to take on: "Objection on the part of the patients; especially the male patients; objection on the part of the nurses who were used to taking orders from male physicians; objection on the part of the ambulance drivers and helpers, and, lastly, objection on the part of the staff, obliged to work intimately with a woman physician."

Barringer completed her residency in 1904. During World War I, she was vice chair of a war-services committee of the National Medical Women's Association. Later, during World War II, she fought for a woman's right to serve as a physician in the Army and Naval Medical Corps. Nine years before her death in 1961, Hollywood released a film about her life, "The Girl in White," starring June Allyson.

Three years after Barringer's residency, in September of 1907, typhoid fever was spreading. Eight nurses had fallen ill, sparking fears that the bacterial infection would affect the 120 patients being treated at the time. The staff attempted to keep the outbreak a secret. The infection, caused by consuming contaminated foods, reflected badly on the level

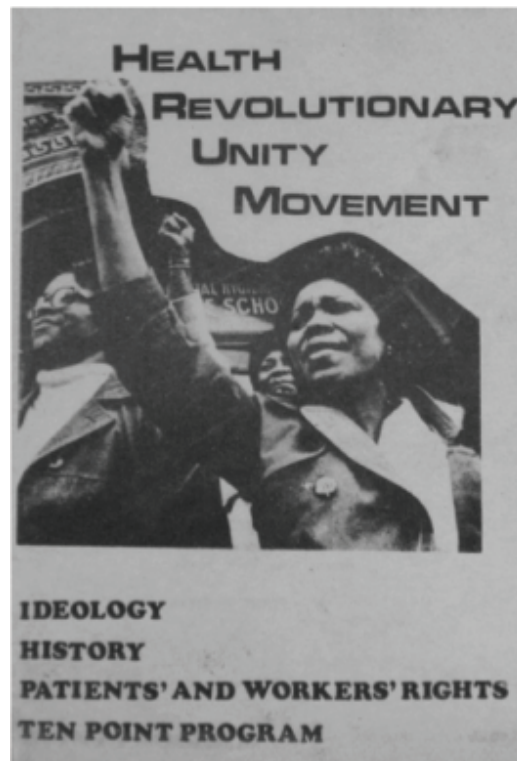
of sanitation at the facility. When the story leaked, Dr. S. T. Armstrong, the superintendent of Bellevue and allied hospitals, including Gouverneur, told the New York Times that he had asked the hospitals commissioner not to discuss it, having explained that “there was no use getting hysterical about it and to keep it to ourselves.” Armstrong was adamant that the outbreak was not due to the hospital’s cleanliness standards: “I am perfectly sure it hasn’t anything to do with the sanitary conditions at the hospital, as I have twice inspected them myself since, and so has the Board of Health.” This would not be the first time Gouverneur Hospital’s sanitation level would be questioned. Later in the 1960s, lack of cleanliness and improper facilities would lead to protests.

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Gouverneur Hospital lost its accreditation in 1959. The building was poorly equipped, with only 151 beds to serve the neighborhood’s large population. At the time, it was serving an average of 325 outpatients a day. Loss of accreditation led to talks of a shutdown. But at 10 a.m. on March 15, 1961, community members marched to City Hall, demanding that Gouverneur Hospital stay open until a new location was built. It remained in operation, but Gouverneur Hospital, along with other hospitals throughout the city, continued to come under fire for poor services.

Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx, Harlem Hospital, Metropolitan Hospital in East Harlem and Gouverneur Hospital all served minority communities. In 1969, a partnership between the Health Revolutionary Unity Movement, an organization of hospital employees referred to as HRUM, and the Young Lords, a Puerto Rican activist group similar to the Black Panthers, launched a 10-Point Health Program to address hospital shortcomings.

Members of the HRUM wanted better training and better working conditions and the Young Lords wanted better patient services. Cleo Silvers, a former co-chair of the HRUM, explained the group’s concerns in an interview with Jacobin Magazine. Speaking of Lincoln Hospital, Silvers said that conditions were “so bad that people would be left in the emergency room for seventy-two hours and not be seen. If you didn’t speak English it was almost impossible for you– they



Cover of a HRUM pamphlet.

didn’t have translators– it was almost impossible for you to speak to your doctor. A woman who came to the hospital for a saline abortion was killed on the surgery table. There were people who went in for surgery and had the wrong kidney extracted. The people felt in the community that they were being used as guinea pigs.”

Members of the Young Lords shared a similar perspective, as reported in *The Young Lords: A Reader*: “People dying because of ambulances that arrive late, or in emergency rooms of city hospitals while they wait for hours, happens often. The people have become used to butcher health care and resigned to the fact that they’ll never be decently treated by the health system.”

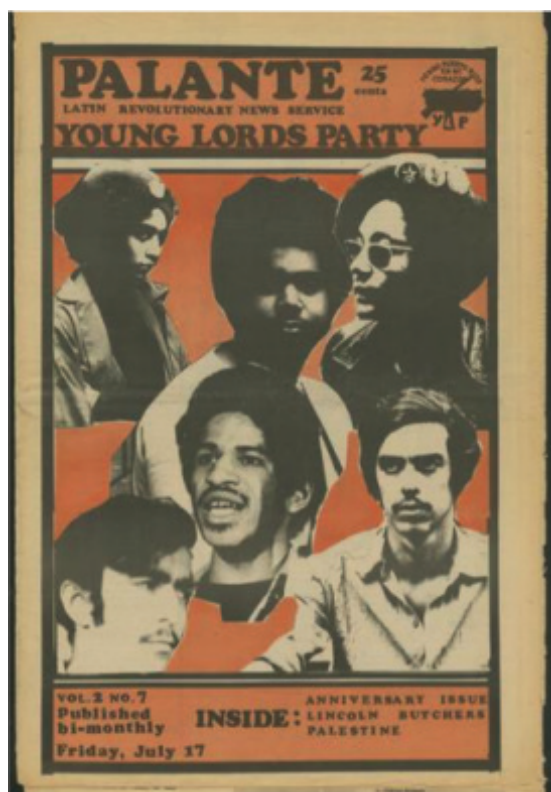
The collaborative 10-Point Health Program called for integrating a community-staff governing board at all hospitals, replacing government administrators with community-appointed people, an immediate hold on construction of all new hospital facilities until such a board was in place to approve it, hospital employment filled by members of the community, free health care treatment and prevention programs, decentralization of hospitals, “door-to-door” prevention health services, health education programs, total control of budget allocation and hospital HR services by the new governing board, and compliance with the 10-point

program by all union or workers organizations involved.

“We were young. We knew that we were right. We knew that what we were fighting for was something that was going to be positive for the community,” Silvers said. “It was going to be positive for our class, for the young people coming up behind us, because we were fighting for better conditions.”

On June 24, 1970, the HRUM and the Young Lords took “the first step in bringing the hospitals back to the people” by setting up patient-worker tables at Lincoln and Metropolitan hospitals and collecting reports of the grievances of employees and patients.

“This table came from a cry of all Black, Puerto Rican, and Asian people that know or that have seen relatives and friends slaughtered or die needlessly in



Cover of the July, 1970 Palante newspaper.

these butcher houses,” members of the Young Lords wrote in their monthly newspaper, Palante.

The collaborative movement for improved health services started with hospitals throughout the city but gained the most coverage on the morning of July 14, 1970 when 150 people took over Lincoln Hospital, walking into the building at 5:15 a.m. and holding a press conference to demand their concerns

be heard and asking for new hospitals throughout the city. Mayor John Lindsay sent his assistant, Sid Davidoff, to negotiate, keeping the police from entering the building and getting the Young Lords to exit the premises. By 5:30 p.m. that same day, the Young Lords agreed to leave the hospital in exchange for a safe exit, free from police brutality.

Gouverneur Hospital was the first of the targeted health facilities to open a new location. In 1972 the 14-story building opened on Madison Street, first to outpatients in July and later admitting inpatients in August. Gustavo DeVelasco, the hospital’s executive director, was fluent in English, Spanish, Chinese, and Portuguese, and was committed to serving the diverse communities of the Lower East Side.

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The doors of 621 Water Street were closed to the public for nearly 20 years. In 1982 the building was added to the National Registry of Historic Places. Ten years later, a project to turn the former Gouverneur Hospital into the new Gouverneur Court low-income housing was under way.

The building was purchased in a partnership between NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development, National Equity Fund, and Federal Home Loan Bank of New York for the non-profit organization, Community Access, to provide housing for people living with psychiatric disabilities, HIV/AIDS, and low-income individuals. The \$13.3 million project began in October of 1992 and officially opened its 123 units to residents in 1994.

In addition to providing low-income housing to people with mental health concerns, Community Access, established in 1974, provides its residents with education and job services, health and wellness service, advocacy and awareness initiatives; and an art collective that includes free lessons and work spaces, and that helps residents display and sell their artwork.

The red-brick building at 621 Water Street began as part of a solution to serve the underserved. Its function has changed, but its mission is not all that different.