What is Hart Island?

New York City purchased Hart Island in 1868 to serve as its Potter's Field—a place of burial for unknown or indigent people. It is the tenth Potter's Field in the City's history. Previous NYC Potter's Fields were located at the current sites of Washington Square, Bellevue Hospital, Madison Square, the NYC Public Library, Wards Island and Randall's Island. According to the New York City Department of Records and Information Services, the first burial records at Hart Island date back to May 1881 and continue to the present day (though there are several gaps during which no records are available).

A number of jurisdictions set aside public burial sites or "potter's fields" for individuals who cannot provide for their own burial, who have not been identified, or for those whose next of kin cannot be reached.

The Department of Correction is responsible for operating and maintaining NYC's Potter's Field. Our designation is set forth in the New York City Administrative Code.

Based on burial records, as many as one million people have been buried on Hart Island.

Who determines whether someone will be buried on Hart Island?
In New York City the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) takes custody of remains pending identification and claim by relatives. The OCME transfers unclaimed remains to the Department of Correction for burial on Hart Island. For additional information, please see the OCME website, www.nyc.gov/ocme.

How do I know if a loved one is buried on Hart Island?

Since 1977

The Department of Correction has created a searchable database of all Hart Island burial records since 1977. The public will be able to access it at www.nyc.gov/hartisland, and search for individuals using common information, such as name and date and place of death. The database is accessible directly at the NYC Hart Island website, or through links on the Department of Correction, Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and 311 websites.

Prior to 1977

Burial records from prior to 1977 are held by the Municipal Archives (LINK), except for those records that were destroyed in a fire in the late 1970s, including records from between 1956 and 1960 and several years of records during the 1970s. To prevent similar losses in the future, today burial records are carefully maintained in two separate and secure locations and are entered into the electronic database within thirty (30) days of burial. This database can be accessed on the Department of Correction's website at http://a073-hartisland-web.nyc.gov/hartisland/pages/search/search.jsf.

Additionally, burial information can be found on the death certificate, which will use the notation "City Burial" or "Hart Island" to indicate if the person was interred on Hart Island. Certificates for deaths from 1949 on are available from the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (www.nyc.gov/health). Certificates for deaths prior to 1949 can be obtained through the NYC Department of Records and Information Services (www.nyc.gov/RECORDS).

Visiting Hart Island

There are two types of Hart Island visits: general visits to a gazebo area on the island and burial site visits for family members of those who are buried on the island. Each type of visit takes place once per month and all visitors must be registered before the visit day. Details of each are below.

Monthly Gazebo Visits

The gazebo visits have been offered monthly since 2012 and on an as-requested basis since before then. During these visits, loved ones of the deceased (or any other interested parties) may spend time at a gazebo near the old visit house that was constructed specifically for this purpose.

Who may participate in these visits?
Anyone may register and attend a gazebo visit.

When do these visits take place?
The gazebo visits take place on the third Thursday of each month, at 9:00am.

How can visitors sign up?
At least two days before the scheduled visit, visitors must register with the Department. To register, please call (718) 546-0911. On the visit day, all visitors must arrive by 9:00am and have a valid, government-issued photo ID.[1] The visitors will travel together to the gazebo.

Monthly Gravesite Visits for Family

Starting in 2015, the Department is able to provide visits to burial areas for those who have family members buried on the island. Please submit a visit request at http://www.nyc.gov/html/doc/html/contact/hart-island-grave-visit-request.shtml, or call 718-546-0911.

Who may participate in these visits?
Gravesite visits are limited to those who have family members buried on the island, and the invited guests of those family members. "Family members" includes parents, step-parents, children, stepchildren, spouses, siblings, step-siblings, halfsiblings, grandparents, grandchildren, uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, first cousins, second cousins, legal guardians of the deceased, wards of deceased guardians, and domestic partners.

Each family member may be permitted to be accompanied on their gravesite visit by up to four other individuals (who do not have to be family members of those buried on Hart Island). Any family member wishing to bring a larger group to a gravesite visit may request such a visit, and the City shall make reasonable efforts to accommodate any such request

When do these visits take place?
The gravesite visits take place once per month on a weekend day. On each visit day, two visits are scheduled, each lasting for two hours, one at 9:00am and one at 12:00pm. The City shall provide ferry service for these visits to transport visitors to and from Hart Island.

[1] Visitors who are under age 16 do not need to have a government-issued ID, but they do need to be accompanied by an adult who has a valid government, issued ID.

The anticipated schedule includes visits on:

February 28, 2016 (Sunday)
March 12, 2016 (Saturday)
April 10, 2016 (Sunday)
May 21, 2016 (Saturday)
June 11, 2016 (Saturday)
July 17, 2016 (Sunday)
August 6, 2016 (Saturday)
September 18, 2016 (Sunday)
October 1, 2016 (Saturday)
November 13, 2016 (Sunday)
December 4, 2016 (Sunday)
January 7, 2017 (Saturday)
February 26, 2017 (Sunday)
March 11, 2017 (Saturday)
April 9, 2017 (Sunday)
May 20, 2017 (Saturday)

Please note that this is the anticipated schedule and that it is subject to change based on demand. Any changes will be made with written notice to plaintiffs' counsel in the lawsuit entitled Lusero v. City of New York, 14 CV 9533.

How can visitors sign up?

At least 12 business days before the scheduled visit, visitors must register with the Department. To register, one can submit a visit request at http://www.nyc.gov/html/doc/html/contact/hart-islandgrave-visit-request.shtml or call (718) 546-0911. On the visit day, all visitors should arrive at 30 minutes before the start of the visit and have a valid, government-issued photo ID.[2] The visitors will travel together to and from Hart Island and groups will be escorted separately to the area of they island they are visiting. The groups will be able to get as close to the burial area as possible while keeping visitors safe.

Within five business days of a request for a visit, the City shall contact the requestor to confirm the request, modify the request, or seek to reschedule the request. Visits shall be scheduled for the requested date unless accommodating a request is not feasible due to the inability to locate gravesites due to the age of gravesites; the proximity of a gravesite to open, active gravesites; weather conditions; a lack of availability on the date requested due to the maximum number of visitors being reached; and any other factors beyond the City's control, in which case the City shall make reasonable efforts to reschedule the visit for the next date requested by the requestor. If a deceased person's specific gravesite is either unidentifiable or is otherwise inaccessible for reasons that cannot reasonably be remedied before the date of the requested visit, the City shall so advise the requestor in advance of the requested visit and shall, at the requestor's option, permit a visit to an alternate gravesite or other location reasonably proximate to the requested gravesite. There shall be no limit on the number of times a person is permitted to visit.

In the event that demand for visits exceeds capacity, the City reserves the right to give visit priority to family members. No non-family member visitor whose visit has been confirmed shall have that confirmation rescinded with less than three business days' notice.

By submitting the visit request form, a requestor will affirm that he or she has a family relationship with the deceased. The City will not require documentation of a requestor's familial relationship to the deceased unless the City has a reasonable basis for concluding that, not withstanding the affirmance, no family relationship exists between the requestor and the deceased, in which case the City may require documentation if it has been unable to confirm the relationship through other credible means.

Prior to visiting, each family member or guest should sign and submit a liability waiver (http://www.nyc.gov/html/doc/downloads/pdf/hart-island/hart-island-waiver.pdf) by emailing a signed copy to HartIsland@doc.nyc.gov, or mailing it to the New York City Department of Correction, Office of

[2] Visitors who are under age 16 do not need to have a government-issued ID, but they do need to be accompanied by an adult who has a valid government, issued ID.

Legislative Affairs, 75-20 Astoria Boulevard, East Elmhurst, New York 11370 so that the Department receives the waiver prior to the date of visit. A visitor may also provide a signed copy in person on the day of visitation, and blank copies of the liability waiver will also be available at the City Island dock on the day of visitation. Upon arrival at the City Island dock, please present a valid photo identification, and sign the Hart Island Visitors' Book.

Additional information

For each visitation period, the City shall provide for a maximum of twenty-five visitors to be escorted to visit their requested gravesites. The City will seek to accommodate as many visitors as it can, up to the twenty-five visitor limit. At its discretion, the City may provide for additional visitors beyond the maximum of twenty-five.

The City reserves the right to search visitors consistent with its legitimate security concerns. Department of Correction employees, attired as required by DOC rules and regulations, will escort visitors to gravesites, and shall maintain a respectful distance while visitors are present at a gravesite consistent with legitimate security concerns. The City may require visitors to surrender electronic devices, which the City shall safeguard until returned to the visitor at the conclusion of the visit.

Visitors shall be permitted to leave the following mementos at gravesites: flowers without vases, small stuffed animals, photographs, prayer cards, small flags, and blankets. When requesting a visit, requestors may seek permission to bring other mementos, which the City will consider on a case-by-case basis.

IMPORTANT NOTE FOR ALL VISITORS – GAZEBO AND GRAVESITE:

There is no parking on the dock and area parking is extremely limited. All visitors are strongly encouraged to take public transportation; the Bx29 bus stops at the end of Fordham Street. If taking public transportation is not possible, visitors should carpool when possible. All visitors are reminded to follow all local parking regulations.

How can I have a loved one disinterred to be reburied?

After confirming that a loved one is buried on Hart Island, the family may request a disinterment and reburial elsewhere, such as in a private cemetery. Although DOC does not charge for locating and disinterring a body, you must first contact a licensed funeral director, who will charge a fee for its services. The funeral director will help you obtain a Disinterment Permit from the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene's Office of Vital Records. Once you have the permit, the funeral director must mail the following documents to the Department of Correction:

1. The original Disinterment Permit and
2. A formal request for disinterment on letterhead from a licensed funeral home.

The address to mail these two documents is:

Facility Maintenance and Repair Division
NYC Department of Correction
13-07 Hazen Street
East Elmhurst, NY 11370

The Department of Correction will schedule the disinterment and coordinate with the funeral home for transfer of the remains.