



HART ISLAND

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS - PAGE 1 OF 3

Q. What is the history of 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.

Q. Are Potter's Fields common throughout the United States?

Yes. 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.

Q. How many people are buried on Hart Island?

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

Q. Who is in charge of Hart Island and overseeing burials?

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.

Q. 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.

Q. Is Hart Island open to the public?

Hart Island is open to members of the public on a limited basis. The Department strives to provide loved ones with access to Hart Island where there is an area set aside for reflection. DOC also facilitates visits throughout the year by community groups and religious organizations requesting to pray for and honor the memory of the deceased.

Q. Why is Hart Island only open on a limited basis?

Unfortunately, greater access on a regular basis is not possible at this time. There is no public transportation; the only access to Hart Island is by a boat from City Island that is operated on a limited schedule by the NYC Department of Transportation. The boat is not a passenger ferry; its primary purpose is to transport vehicles used by the OCME to carry the deceased to Hart Island for burial. On Hart Island, there are no utilities; therefore, amenities such as restrooms and water fountains are not available.

Q. I am a member of the press. Can I visit Hart Island?

If you are a member of the press, please contact the Department's Office of Public Information at 718-546-0631.



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Q. How do I find out if a family member or friend has been buried on Hart Island?

The Department of Correction has created a searchable database of all Hart Island burial records since 1977. The public can access it at www.nyc.gov/hartisland to search for individuals using common information, such as name and date and place of death.

Q. What if the deceased was buried prior to 1977?

Although information about burials prior to 1977 is not included in the database, it 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).

Q. What if I find my family member or friend is buried on Hart Island and I want to visit?

Once you have determined that a loved one is buried on Hart Island, call the NYC Department of Correction's Office of Constituent Services at 718-546-1500. If you wish, we will begin the process of arranging a visit for you to Hart Island.

Q. Do I need to provide any documentation about my loved one to the DOC?

No.

Q. How long should it take for the DOC to arrange a visit?

The DOC will try to arrange at least one visit a month to Hart Island, weather permitting, most likely on the morning of the third Thursday of each month. Space is limited and is reserved on a first-come, first-serve basis.

Q. What if I am visiting from out of town and cannot visit on the next scheduled trip?

The DOC will do its best to accommodate visit requests on another day that the ferry operates.

Q. Can I visit my loved one's grave?

Regrettably, visitors cannot go directly to the gravesite. There are no individual graves on Hart Island. Nearby the dock on Hart Island, there is an area with a gazebo for reflection.

Q. Can I visit more than once?

DOC will do its best to facilitate subsequent visits to the memorial on Hart Island.

Q. How do I get to Hart Island?

The only way to get to Hart Island is by a ferry operated by the Department of Transportation from City Island in the Bronx. The ferry operates Tuesday through Friday morning, weather permitting, excluding holidays. City Island is accessible by MTA bus service or car. The department does not charge for transportation to and from Hart Island.



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Q. How can a family member arrange to have a body disinterred from Hart Island?

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. A copy of the death certificate
2. The original Disinterment Permit and
3. A formal request for disinterment on letterhead from a licensed funeral home.

The address to mail these three documents is:

Warden, Support Services 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.

Q. How far back do the Hart Island records go?

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 with several gaps during which no records are available.

Q. I understand that over the years some records were destroyed by fire. Are there years for which there no longer any records?

A fire on Hart Island in the late 1970s destroyed some records both between 1956 and 1960 and several years of records during the 1970s. Today, burial records are carefully maintained in two separate and secure locations.

Q. Where can I get additional information about Hart Island?

Persons interested in the history of Hart Island will find a wide variety of factual and pictorial information on the websites of the New York Correction History Society, at www.correctionhistory.org and the City Island Nautical Museum, at www.cityislandmuseum.org.