

Sailors' Snug Harbor on Staten Island was a self-contained community with its own administrators, cooks, matrons, hospital, dormitories, chapel, and music hall.

Staten Island's Snug Harbor

BY MARGARET STOCKER

A captain's last wish was to establish a "Snug Harbor" for elderly sailors.

On his deathbed in 1801, Captain Robert Richard Randall signed his will. After modest bequests to family and friends, he bequeathed his real and personal property to the eight most powerful men in the state of New York as a trust to build "an Asylum, or Marine Hospital, to be called 'The Sailors' Snug Harbor' for the purpose of maintaining and supporting aged, decrepit and worn-out sailors ... in perpetuity." The asylum opened on Staten Island, New York, in 1833 and operated there for 143 years. It relocated to Sea Level, North Carolina, in 1976. The Trust has served over 16,500 merchant mariners regardless of age, nationality, rank, or religion.

The Trust survives today as the Trustees of the Sailors' Snug Harbor in the City of New York. Since 2009, its primary mission has been to provide financial support to needy retired merchant mariners living in their home communities, under the Mariners Outreach Assistance

Program. The Trust also retells the stories of the mariners who spent their last years on dry land in the "Harbor" by preserving original documents, making them available for educational use, and helping to preserve the asylum's art collection and cemetery on Staten Island.

Randall's will created America's first facility for retired and disabled seamen. The will stipulated that the asylum be built on his twenty-one acre property, Minto Farm, in Manhattan north of today's Washington Square, as soon as leases of the property had accumulated sufficient capital. Robert's inheritance came from his father, Captain Thomas Randall: merchant, ship owner and privateer before and during the American Revolution. His eldest son had died at sea. By the time lawsuits with Randall's heirs were settled by the Supreme Court of the United States (*Inglis v. Trustees of Sailors' Snug Harbour*) in 1830, the Manhattan property had increased substantially in value. With the aid of compound interest and good management, the Trust was able to purchase 150 acres of farmland on the Kill Van Kull on Staten Island. Retired mariners lived there on the waterfront in buildings designed by Minard Lefever that opened in 1833. By the end of the nineteenth century, there were 900 "Snugs" in the "Harbor," a self-contained community with its own administrators, cooks, matrons, hospital, dormitories, chapel, and music hall.

The lawsuits also tested the legality of Randall's will as a corporate trust. Stephen Baker, president of the Bank of the Manhattan Company, writing in the *Industrial Digest*, January 1926, outlined the solution Randall and his lawyers used to create a perpetual trust. Randall "dared not name specific individuals as his executors and trustees." He wanted his snug harbor "to live long after any individuals he might name had passed away ... to be undying." The trustees, deemed the "body politic," were the Chancellor of New York State, Mayor and Recorder of New York City, President of the Chamber of Commerce, senior ministers of the Episcopal and Presbyterian churches, and the President and Vice President of The Marine

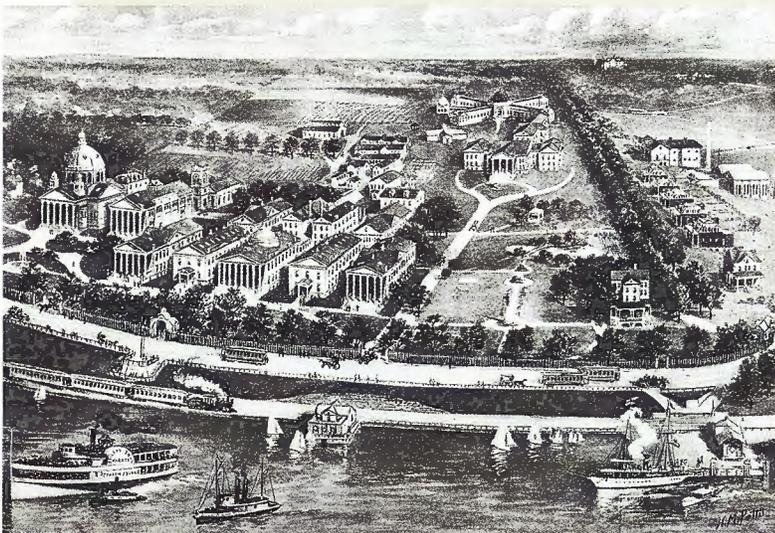


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE NOBLE MARITIME COLLECTION



Daily life at Sailors' Snug Harbor could include time in the reading room.

Society of the City of New York—and their successors. Today three elected (*ad personam*) trustees serve instead of the Chancellor, Recorder, and President of the Chamber of Commerce.

Stephen Baker stated that Alexander Hamilton and Daniel D. Tompkins were Randall's lawyers and credits Hamilton with the idea of the Trust. There is no proof except Hamilton was at one time part owner of the Minto Farm and had provided the family with legal advice before Captain Robert Richard Randall died.

By the mid-twentieth century, Social Security, Medicare, and pensions helped support retired mariners. More seafarers wished to live with their families in retirement. The 1830s buildings needed major upgrades to continue as an asylum. In 1976, when the remaining inmates moved to new facilities in North Carolina, the Trustees of the Sailors' Snug Harbor placed its archives on permanent loan to the State University of New York Maritime College, where future mariners learn the ropes.

Three large sea chests, which had long been in the attic storeroom of the administration building at the Staten Island facility, contained records of the Harbor's daily activities from 1833 to the 1930s. There was also correspondence to and from the Governor's office; inmate letters; letters from physicians, treasurers, comptrollers; account books with the butcher, baker, and shoemaker; farmer's diaries; business invoices; and visitor's registers. Richard H. Corson, librarian, and Carol Finerman, archivist, with the help of a grant from the National Historical Records Preservation Committee in 1977, prepared a Finding Aid (<https://snugharbor.archivesblog.wordpress.com/>). Part of the NHRPC grant funded microfilming the Trustee Minute Books and those of the Executive Committee at Yale

University in 1978. A second loan, including Captain Randall's manuscript will and thirty-nine boxes of minute books, inmate records, and death records came to SUNY Maritime College's Stephen B. Luce Library in 2008.

In 2017, Luce Librarian Kristin Hart and Archivist Annie Tummino digitized a portion of the inmate records (register pages and photos) for the Digital Culture of Metropolitan New York site.

In 2009, after the North Carolina asylum closed, the Trustees placed 105 oil paintings, 33 ship models, and 80 maritime artifacts, including Captain Randall's cane, on loan at the Noble Maritime Collection, now occupying part of the former Staten Island asylum. "Treasures of Sailors' Snug Harbor" is an ongoing exhibit there in one of the Harbor's Federal era landmarked buildings.

Noble Maritime Collection is one of the cultural institutions under the umbrella of the Snug Harbor Cultural Center and Botanical Garden, established after the City of New York purchased the property in 1976 and the Landmarks Commission designated five of the Greek Revival buildings and the chapel. The eighty-three acre grounds and twenty-six significant nineteenth century buildings comprise a US National Historic Landmark District—Staten Island's "crown jewel." Captain Randall created a perpetual trust for the care of aged mariners, but he did not foresee changes to the maritime and healthcare industries. His will also did not support the preservation of outstanding architecture, which is today's challenge. ■



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Captain Robert Richard Randall

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Trustees of the Sailors' Snug Harbor in the City of New York

<http://www.thesailors.snugharbor.org/Pages/default.aspx>

The Digital Culture of Metropolitan New York

<http://dcmny.org/> (hosted by the Metropolitan New York Library Council (METRO). To schedule a visit: library@sunymaritime.edu or 718-409-7231

"Treasures of Sailors' Snug Harbor" Exhibit

<http://www.noble.maritime.org/home>

Snug Harbor Cultural Center and Botanical Garden

<http://snugharbor.org/about-us/history/>