



Stephen C. Hartigan

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Among the remarkable figures in the history of the New York City Correction Department, few have left a legacy as lasting as that of Stephen C. Hartigan. Hailing from County Cork, Ireland, Hartigan transitioned from an immigrant laborer, Correction Officer eventually Captain, becoming one of the most significant labor leaders to advocate for New York City's correction workforce.

Born on Christmas Day, December 25, 1902, in County Cork, Hartigan spent his formative years on his family's farm. In pursuit of greater opportunities, he emigrated to the United States in 1922, joining the influx of Irish immigrants who played a crucial role in shaping New York City's civil service throughout the twentieth century.

Hartigan arrived in New York during a time of economic instability and aimed for a career in public service. He successfully passed the entrance exams for both the Police and Fire Departments. However, the harsh realities of the Great Depression significantly hindered hiring. Confronted with lengthy waiting lists and limited job offers, Hartigan seized an opportunity with the New York City Correction Department, commencing his career as a Prison Keeper (Correction Officer) on May 1, 1929. This pivotal choice would transform the landscape of correction labor history in New York City.

When Hartigan joined the Department, correction personnel were still striving for recognition as a professional uniformed service. The foundation of organized representation dates back to 1901, when the Prison Keepers Association was established. In 1939, the title of Prison Keeper was officially changed to Correction Officer, and the original Certificate of Incorporation for the Correction Officers Benevolent Association (COBA) was filed. These milestones marked the dawn of the modern correction profession.

Shortly after becoming part of the Department, Hartigan actively engaged with COBA. Starting as a delegate, he gradually gained the trust and respect of his fellow officers through his intelligence, integrity, and steadfast dedication to their welfare. By 1950, he was elected President of the Correction Officers Benevolent Association, a role he would hold for over a decade. During this time, he emerged as the principal spokesperson for New York City's correction officers and one of the most prominent labor leaders within the City's uniformed services.

Hartigan took office at a time when New York's correction system was grappling with unprecedented challenges. Overcrowding, understaffing, and deteriorating facilities jeopardized both employee safety and effective inmate management. Hartigan candidly voiced concerns to city officials, highlighting the perilous conditions prevailing in the jail system. He painted a picture of facilities operating well beyond capacity and argued that correction officers were being tasked with performing impossible duties amid inadequate staffing and resources.

Unlike many labor leaders of his time, Hartigan combined advocacy for his members with a more comprehensive vision for correction reform. He believed that adequate staffing levels, professional training, and humane treatment of inmates were interrelated objectives. He contended that first-time offenders could often be rehabilitated through proper supervision and guidance instead of mere incarceration.

Hartigan's most notable achievements were in the realm of employee benefits and retirement security. Through relentless legislative advocacy and political involvement, he helped secure landmark reforms that granted correction officers benefits equal to those enjoyed by police officers and firefighters. Most importantly, he was instrumental in obtaining retirement rights that allowed correction officers to retire after twenty years of service with a pension. This accomplishment fundamentally transformed the profession and established a standard that continues to benefit correction personnel today.

During Hartigan's tenure, the Department of Correction underwent significant expansion, leading to substantial improvements in the salaries, benefits, and professional standing of correction officers. At a testimonial dinner held in his honor on Wednesday, October 24, 1962, at Mayer's Parkway Restaurant on E 233rd Street, Bronx, NY, COBA members specifically credited his administration with guiding the organization through one of its most prosperous periods. The association acknowledged not only his labor leadership but also his recent promotion to Captain.

In 1962, after thirty-three years of distinguished service, Hartigan was promoted to Captain. He subsequently became President of the Correction Captains Association and later the Superior Officers Council, continuing his advocacy for supervisory personnel. The Correction Captains Association, formally incorporated on February 25, 1959, emerged as a respected voice in municipal labor relations under his guidance.

After thirty-six years of service to the City of New York, Hartigan retired in 1965, having become one of the most respected figures in the history of the Correction Department. His influence reached far beyond contracts and legislation; he played a crucial role in establishing correction officers as recognized professionals who deserved the same respect afforded to other uniformed services.

Outside of work, Hartigan was dedicated to his family. He and his wife, Bessie Nolan Hartigan, raised their family in the City Island section of the Bronx. Their son, John Hartigan, continued the legacy of public service by joining the New York City Police Department, where he retired as a Deputy Chief, while their daughter, Catherine, pursued a successful career in banking.

Today, Stephen Hartigan is remembered as one of the pioneering figures in COBA and CCA history, whose advocacy significantly contributed to the professionalization and recognition of New York City correction officers. His life's journey—from a farm in County Cork to the forefront of New York City's correction labor movement—serves as a testament to the values of service, perseverance, and dedication that have long characterized both the Irish-American community and the New York City Correction Department.

“Few individuals did more to improve the lives of New York City's Correction Officers than Stephen C. Hartigan. Through his vision, determination, and leadership, he helped build the foundation upon which labor relations stand today.”