

Westtown & Epilepsy in the 1900s: The Pennsylvania Epileptic Hospital and Colony Farm

On South Concord Road, next to the grounds of Oakbourne Mansion, stretches a long driveway with a bright green Gaudenzia sign. Currently serving as a center for addiction and recovery, these grounds once housed the Pennsylvania Epileptic Hospital and Colony Farm.

In the early 1900s, hundreds of patients traveled down this drive not knowing what awaited them. When the hospital was built, there was no cure for the sudden, intense seizures and loss of consciousness many patients experienced. The diagnosis for these patients was often isolation in an institution far away from friends and family.

The Pennsylvania Epileptic Hospital and Colony Farm was built in 1886 on the outskirts of Philadelphia in the small community of Westtown. It was accessible via the Pennsylvania Railroad at Oakbourne Station. More than 140 acres were set aside to provide for the care of men, women, and children afflicted with epilepsy.

A brother and sister named Rebecca and Eckley Coxe, Jr. donated the first ten acres. The Colony was not a state institution, but it did receive an annual subsidy from the state. It was primarily supported by private donations, as wealthy donors contributed "beds" for patients. A Board of Managers ran the Colony with the support of a Ladies Aid Committee.

In February, 1898, the Colony officially opened with 30 patients - 12 men and 18 women. The staff consisted of a superintendent named Dr. J.F. Edgerly, a matron, two nurses, two night attendants, an engineer, a farmer and his assistant, a night watchman, laundress, cook, and maid. The hospital began with three buildings: an administration, women's cottage, and men's cottage. Eventually, a children's dormitory, church, central kitchen, powerhouse, laundry, and farm buildings were erected.

At that time, epilepsy was widely considered to be a mental disease. Women diagnosed as insane by epilepsy were usually admitted after experiencing a seizure. Many patients were also incorrectly diagnosed with epilepsy and ended up living at institutions for years.

Although these hospitals were a social concern for the community and often supported by donations and volunteers, the mental treatment and attitude towards epilepsy patients in the 1890's was very different than it is today. Epilepsy was seen as a social stigma and mental deficiency. There were even laws passed against people suffering from the disease. In 1896, Connecticut became the first of many states banning anyone who was "epileptic, imbecile, or feeble-minded" from marrying.

NEEDS

Additional Endowment

The income from the Endowment Fund falls far short of our expenses each year.

Improvement

There is pressing need of more beds for women patients. The capacity of the East Cottage could be increased by 10 beds at the very moderate cost of about \$7000. The cost of maintaining these additional patients would be small.

A contribution of Five Thousand Dollars will endow a perpetual free bed.

A contribution of Three Thousand Dollars gives the donor during his or her lifetime, the right to nominate the occupants for a bed.

A single subscription of Fifty Dollars constitutes a *Life Member* and a subscription of Five Dollars an *Annual Member* for one year.

GIFTS, BEQUESTS or LEGACIES should be accompanied by a statement of the object to which they are to be applied—MAINTENANCE, ENDOWMENT, BUILDING or any other SPECIAL PURPOSE, and the name of the Institution and its LOCATION should be clearly stated—thus: "Pennsylvania Epileptic Hospital and Colony Farm Oakbourne, Chester County, Pennsylvania."

PENNA. EPILEPTIC HOSPITAL AND COLONY FARM,
FIDELITY-PHILADELPHIA TRUST Co., *Treasurer*
135 S. Broad Street, Philadelphia, Pa.

Enclosed please find the sum of \$..... for

}	ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP (\$5)
	LIFE MEMBERSHIP (\$50)
	ENDOWMENT IMPROVEMENT

Name.....

Address.....

The Colony depended on donations from generous benefactors. A contribution of \$50 made the giver a Life Member.

Many hospitals for epilepsy sufferers preceded the Westtown facility. In 1903, the Pennsylvania Legislature authorized the creation of the Eastern State Institution for the Feeble-Minded and Epileptic in Spring City, Chester County. It was later named Pennhurst, a notoriously corrupt and brutal institution that led to institutional reform in the 1970's. The hospital housed more than 3,000 patients from insane asylums, reformatories, prisons, and hospitals. Patients suffering from seizures were housed next to those with serious mental health problems.



Women's Cottage No. 2

Eventually, a superintendent reported to the Board of Trustees that it was “without question absolutely wrong to place the feeble-minded and epileptic in the same institution,” and

epileptic patients were treated at another facility. It is believed that a few patients from Eastern State found their way to the Colony, where it was hoped they were treated with more experience and compassion regarding their condition.

In 1916, author Henry Mills Hur visited the Colony grounds and reported there were 115 patients. The male patients worked in the farm and helped build additional structures, while the females did the housework and gardening. Children attended school until eighth grade. The colony also raised sheep as a way to bring in money.

The Colony President was quoted as saying: “the home was not merely a place for the indigent and neglected epileptics, but a place for those suffering from a disease that is chronic in character and by which they are debarred from their usual occupations and employment.”

The Colony staff believed that providing work for the patients helped improve their mental and physical condition. Athletics were encouraged. Many patients played baseball, tennis, croquet, and billiards. Other activities included singing and dancing. There was also a well-stocked library. The Ladies Aid Committee provided embroidery and books for the women, as well as excursions to nearby areas. In the summer, patients enjoyed ice cream once a week, a rare indulgence at the time.

An annual report written in 1940 stated that the Colony admitted 39 men, 73 women and 23 girls the previous year, a total of 135. Of those, two died and 131 were discharged. There was no reason given for the deaths. The report indicated that since inception, 843 patients had been treated at the facilities. That year, they had established a *Colony Press* newspaper for the hospital and were attempting to organize an orchestra for patients. A modern infirmary was also built with a “state of the art X-ray room.”

The colony experimented with a wide range of treatments, including rattlesnake venom injections, sodium diphenyl hydantoinate and phenobarbital. The use of Vitamin C was also closely monitored. These controversial treatments were considered extremely “avant-garde” for its day.

The hospital was in high demand. There were not many institutions catering to epileptics at the time. During the early 1900s, more than six times the number of candidates applied to live at the Colony than spaces were available. Applications came in from New Jersey, Delaware and Maryland.

Despite its popularity, advances in the field of epilepsy treatment led to the Colony's Board decision to change the hospital charter. They voted to make the Colony into a hospital for mentally ill children. Renamed Oakbourne Hospital, it served from 1947 to 1965 as a home for children with serious emotional disturbances.



View of the Institution from an airplane, 1960.

The former hospital grounds continue hosting those in need of treatment, now serving as a Gaudenzia Center for Addiction Treatment and Recovery. A few of the original buildings remain today. The farmhouse and creamery,

privately owned, still stand on the south side of E. Pleasant Grove Road, and the foundation of the former barn contains a public basketball court by the athletic field parking lot. These structures, next to the Oakbourne Mansion, serve as a reminder of those who came before.