Architecture of an Asylum: St. Elizabeths
1852-2017

March 25, 2017 — January 15, 2018
Exhibition Entrance (Great Hall Arcade)

- Kirkbride plan, using architecture and grounds to heal mental illness
- Change over time (1852-2017)
  - Number of patients
  - Number and types of buildings on campus
Exhibition Entrance (Great Hall Arcade)

- Name—Based on the tract of land, which was named in the 1660’s. No apostrophe, not an error
- Walled complex, removed from the city
  - Protect the community
  - Protect the patients from the stresses of city life
  - Walls as a running theme
- Please note:
  - No food or drink allowed in the exhibition
  - Photography is allowed with the exception of one image of Dorothea Dix (marked)
Introduce the history & evolution of the Government Hospital for the Insane; St. Elizabeths
  - The architecture changed over time
  - The understanding & treatment of mental illness changed over time
- The sampling of objects & images in this gallery begin to tell the story of the thousands of patients & staff who lived, worked, & were treated, & continue to be on the campus
Transition Gallery: The Land Before The Hospital

- Farm land—passed down for generations & sold to become St. Elizabeths, with the strong Dorothea Dix
  - Land was not for sale until Dix approached the owners—Blagden family (Blagden Alley in D.C. named after them)
  - The campus is about 300 acres and was brought in several pieces
  - The site fit in with the ideas of treating mental illness at the time (Kirkbride plan, “moral” treatment)
    - Away from the city & neighborhoods
    - Lovely views
    - Ample green space for farming & recreation

Original Blagden house
Gallery—Historic Ideas about Mental Illness

- For a long time, mental illness was considered incurable.
- Sufferers, if they could not manage at home, often ended up in prison or poor houses.
- In the mid-18th century in the colonies there were some specialized mental health hospitals. Treatment was often cruel & neglectful.
- Causes of mental illness from a mid-19th century prospective: moral failings, martial problems, daily stresses of living in a city in an industrial society.
- Mid-20th century ideas: family history, alcohol use, sexuality, late stage syphilis (which caused deterioration in the brain).
Moral Treatment of Mental Illness (mid-19th cen.)

- Treatments continued to evolve: medication restraints, electroshock, hydrotherapy, lobotomy
- St. Elizabeths built special rooms for hydrotherapy, hot or cold baths/showers/wraps were used to shock the patient, temperature depended on symptoms
- Electroshock, or electroconvulsive therapy, was an attempt to manipulate the function & chemistry of the brain by inducing a seizure. It is still used today in certain cases—now anesthesia is used
- Art, dance, & theater therapy
  - Lace-work, patient art exhibition, dance with Marian Chase
Moral Treatment of Mental Illness (mid-19th cen.)

- Mental illness could be cured
- Remove people from the stress of the home environment or city
- Beautiful setting, carefully planned architecture & grounds
- Lots of fresh air, manual labor
- Kind treatment, attendance of religious services

St. Elizabeths Chapel
Moral Treatment of Mental Illness (mid-19th cen.)

- Lobotomy—Disrupts areas of the brain by damaging or removing tissue. Normally the prefrontal cortex or anterior frontal lobes
- Dr. Walter Freeman performed about 100 lobotomies at St. Elizabeths but 3,500 in his career
  - Most notable patient was Rosemary Kennedy (JFK’s sister). Not done at St. Elizabeths, but at Freeman’s DC office
- Lobotomies were thought to reduce the most difficult symptoms of severe mental illness, making the patient more manageable. Patients were often left with severe cognitive and emotion impairment. Many were unable to care for themselves.
- Freeman described it as “surgically induced childhood”
Dorothea Dix

- Dix founded St. Elizabeths in 1852 by seeking an appropriation by Congress for $100,000
  - The desk that she signed the bill on is on view in the exhibition (desk originally was used in the superintendents apartment)
- First became an advocator for helping the mentally ill when she was teaching Sunday school at the East Cambridge jail. Dix noted the filthy and unsanitary conditions along with how many ill people were locked up. In total, she visited 300 suffering people in jails and 500 in almshouses.
- At the outbreak of the Civil War, Dix was assigned to the post of Superintendent of Womens Nurses—the highest office held by a women during the War
  - Her responsibility was to select and assign which nurses went to which hospitals/sites
Superintendents

Charles H. Nichols (1852-1877)
- Previous work: Physician at the State Insane Asylum in Utica, NY and at Bloomingdale Asylum in NYC
- Friend of Dorothea Dix and was co-overseer of the construction Dix wrote: Nichols has “a taste for architectural arrangements and a practical knowledge of what is required in the planning, construction and general arrangements of a Hospital”
- Investigated for poor living conditions, patient neglect, and staff pay

William W. Godding (1877-1899)
- Introduced the cottage plan
- Expanded medical services: hydrotherapy, opened nursing school, and hired Isaac Blackburn (hospital’s first neuropathologist)
- Advocator for the hospital’s farm.
- His son, Alvah, set the groundwork for the gardens as he found trees and plants from all over the world
Superintendents

Alonzo B. Richardson (1899-1903)
- Richardson was credited for overseeing the vast expansion
  - Received government funding for new buildings
  - Added 1,000 more bed to St. Elizabeths
  - Died before he saw the result of his work

William A. White (1903-1937)
- Expanded the campus along the East side of Nichols Ave
- Increased the scientific research at the Hospital
Superintendents

Winfred Overholser (1937-1962)
- Focused on scientific research to help with outpatient care
- Introduced new treatments to the Hospital such as: psychodrama, dance, and art therapy
- Overholser was the last superintendent to live on the St. Elizabeths campus
The Age of Asylum / Institutionalism (approx. 1840s-1940s)

- Creating specific places, thoughtfully designed to care for people with a variety of ailments or disabilities (or some that just flouted societal norms)
- Examples include: orphans, people with tuberculous, the blind, elderly, disabled, & mentally ill
- Asylums could be private, state, or government run. St. Elizabeths was federal.
Kirkbride & the Kirkbride Plan

Thomas Story Kirkbride
1809-1885

- Graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1832
- In 1840, he began work in the office of Physician-in-Chief and Superintendent of the Department for the Insane at Pennsylvania Hospital
- Kirkbride also had his own surgical practice in Philadelphia
- Founding member of the Association of Medical Superintendents of American Institutions for the Insane (AMSAII)

“There is no reason why an individual who has the misfortune to become insane, should, on that account, be deprived of any comfort or even luxury...”

THOMAS KIRKBRIDE
Kirkbride Plan

Left: Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital; NJ (demolished)

Right: Buffalo State Asylum; NY (no longer a mental hospital; renovated into a cultural center)

Below: South Carolina Insane Asylum (abandoned)

Below: Danvers State Lunatic Asylum; MA (now a residential building)
Kirkbride Plan

- Characterized by the shape of the building—’bat like’
  - Made up of one central building in the center along with two wings on either side
- Kirkbride emphasized picking an area of land that was in a calm setting along with having buildings that had ventilation for clean air
- At St. Elizabeths, the Center Building was used as rooms for the subdued patients along with administrative offices, the superintendents office and kitchen/laundry services. Severe patients were held in either of the wings
Center Building

- Architect—Thomas U. Walter (commonly known for his work on the U.S. Capitol dome)
- Center tower for offices & superintendents residences
- Building was originally intended to house 250 white patients, but it quickly became overcrowded
- Wings were leveled to provide light, air, & views for all rooms
- Patients were separated by severity of symptoms—the mildest being closer to the center (but also wealth)

- The center building had all facilities in one building: food, staff lodgings, laundry, dayrooms as compared to later cottage plans where facilities were kept separate
Center Building

- Bricks were made by able patients who dug clay on the grounds. Over 9 million bricks were made by 1860 (about 10 years)
  - Dog print: Dogs were on the grounds. Working with animals was considered therapeutic. Today service dogs are often used to treat mental illness such as PTSD
- Segregation by race—African Americans were housed in one wing & eventually their own buildings (Howard Hall / criminals being somewhat of an exception). Segregation remained in place well into the 1950s.
Military & St. Elizabeths

- Official mental health hospital of the Army & Navy from when it opened until 1946—the VA started taking over treatment in the 1920s
- Like many sites & buildings in the DC region, St. Elizabeths served as a military hospital during the Civil War. This caused patients to be shuffled around; different uses for buildings & tents on the grounds
- Prosthesis company on campus where soldiers would come for fittings & to learn how to use their new limbs
Most prominent surgical patient at St. Elizabeths during the Civil War was Union General Joseph Hooker who was recovering from a gunshot wound. He was personally attended by Superintendent Nichols in the Center Building.
Cemeteries

- Two on campus: smaller on the west side (approx. 500 graves) and larger on the east (approx. 5,000 graves)
- Graves include: military, Civil War (Union & Confederate), Native Americans, indigent or ‘friendless’ people, & many unmarked graves

Civil War cemetery
A Century of Expansion at St. Elizabeths

- 1850-1950: St. Elizabeths grew as a treatment and research facility
  - Late 19th century: cottage plan introduced housing geared toward specialized treatment
  - Mid-20th century: focused on scientific research (not so much on farming)
- Model originally prepared for the St. Louis World’s Fair in 1904
  - Revised in 1935 to show to expansion of multiple buildings
A Century of Expansion at St. Elizabths

- **Important buildings:**
  - **Dix Building 1, 2, & 3:** 1 & 2 housed white women with epilepsy; 3 housed African American women. Named after Dorothea Dix.
  - **Howard Hall:** Housed ‘insane criminals’ both white and African American. Wall surrounded the building.
  - **Atkins Hall:** First cottage plan building. Intended for white, working class, quiet males. Named for John DeWitt Clinton Atkins—Congressional representative from TN who helped to fund the structure.
  - **Burroughs Cottage:** Funded by the family of Sarah Borrows (name changed over time) and housed Sarah, her mother, and their private nursing staff. Other affluent female patients were also housed here.
  - **Tuberculosis Cottage:** TB was rampant in the US before the vaccine was created. In response, St. Elizabths had five cottages (three for men; two for females) dedicated to treating this disease. These cottages had benches in front as fresh air and sunlight were thought to cure the disease.
A Century of Expansion at St. Elizabeths

Left: Howard Hall
Right: Burroughs Cottage
Below: Atkins Cottage

Below: Tuberculosis Cottage
Prominent Patients

Richard Lawrence (1835)
One of the first patients to St. Elizabeths admitted after an assassination attempt on President Andrew Jackson

Charles Guiteau (1881)
Assassinated President James Garfield as an ‘act of necessity’. After Guiteau’s death in 1882, an autopsy found that he had been suffering from neurosyphilis prompting Superintendent Godding to hire a neuropathologist

Ezra Pound (1945)
Poet found guilty of treason after recording pro-Fascist radio broadcasts. Lived in Howard Hall until he was moved to the Center Building. Released in 1958

Known for his assassination attempt on President Ronald Reagan which he was found not guilty due to insanity. Worked in the St. Elizabeths library and was released in 2016
On The Farm

- St. Elizabeths sought to be self sufficient for food & energy (had their own power plant)
  - Pigs (about 600!), horses, a dairy, lots of canning, and a greenhouse
- They produced most of their own food onsite until about 1900 and many patients helped to tend the fields
- 1891: Godding purchase Oxen Hill Farms in now Prince George’s County, MD
  - Nicknamed Godding Croft until 1959 (photo below; left)
- Had a preserves farm—canned fruit grown on the farm for winter usage (phot below; right)
Daily Life

- Entertainment in the form of: theater; performances by patients & visiting performers; band with both patients & staff
- A variety of activities including: baseball; boxing; croquet; a beauty shop; library; puzzles; horseshoes; dances; & more
- Religious services were considered important, but there wasn’t a separate chapel until the 1970s

Patients playing catch with a nurse

Patients boxing to get rid of aggression
Medical Care—Nursing Staff

- 20th century saw scientific approaches to asylums as technologies and treatment began to change
- 1894 to 1952: Nursing school established—nurses received training on day-to-day patient care and medical supervision
- 1905: St. Elizabeths hires its first female doctor to treat the women’s wards
- 1920s: Became the first public mental health hospital to train medical interns

Nursing Handbook

1. You are responsible for making your bed and keeping your room neat at all times.
2. The beds and linen are to be kept away from electrical outlets.
3. Pictures should not be pasted on the walls or window blinds.
4. When out of the residence on a late leave or overnight, the windows must be closed. During the day the windows may be open three inches.
5. Only panties and stockings may be dried in the bedroom. These should be hung on towel racks. The floor should be protected when drying clothes.
6. Laundry racks are to be placed on the closet shelf when not in use. Nothing may be left on the floor of the closet.
7. Food kept in rooms must be in tightly covered containers. Hot plates can be used only in the kitchen.

Radios, TV and Record Players

Radios, televisions, musical instruments and record players may be played softly until 11:15 p.m. Note that all electrical appliances, such as above, must be checked by the hospital electrician before being used. The personnel in Barton Hall will make arrangements for these to be checked after you submit a list of the articles and your room number.

Consideration for Others

When in the residence you are expected to sleep in your own room. You should be in your room and quiet by 10:10 p.m. Lights should be out by 11:15 p.m. If you take late leaves in the residence you should turn out your lights by 11:55 p.m. When returning from late leaves outside the residence, you may take showers quietly and have your lights out by 12:30 a.m.
St. Elizabeths had one of the first psychology labs

A pathology lab was established in 1884 to study the brain as Superintendent Godding thought that it would lead to developments for the treatment of mental illness

In 1884, the Blackburn Laboratory was established

- Specialized in autopsies (over 15,000 were done at St. Elizabeths between 1880-1980)
- Mid-20th century, an ‘autopsy gallery’ was added so that medical students could observe
- Until it ceased operation in 2010, the Blackburn Laboratory was the longest running laboratory in a US mental institution
Medical Care—Research

Exterior of the Blackburn Laboratory
De-Institutionalization began in the 1960s and continued into 1980 when federal spending cut back on mental health care. Architecture of mental health care facilities shifted from large campuses to small outpatient clinics, chronic illness hospitals, halfway houses, etc. 1970s: Residential care greatly diminished. Staff no longer lived on campus and many patients were discharged or transferred to other clinics.

- Patient size shrank from 8,000 to 1,500
- The hospital established a program for youth, alcohol, drug addiction, and suicide prevention to help residents of southeast D.C.
1987: DC government took over the management of St. Elizabeths Hospital and the East Campus

The US General Services Administration is transitioning the West Campus into the site of the Department of Homeland Security (Coast guard moved to the site in 2013)

Goal of GSA is to preserve as many National Historic Landmark’s as possible

- Example: the Center building—GSA wanted to save the whole structure, but due to poor conditions, the whole interior was gutted leaving only the skeleton
St. Elizabeths East

- 2010: All hospital functions are now transferred to one building on the East Campus
- 2016: Interior demolition ripped apart the inside of the Center Building. Contractors removed architectural details such as wall coverings, flooring, and ventilation grilles and HAS plans to reuse some of the features in a renovated structure
- 2016: Two Mid-20th century buildings are demolished to make way for 4,200 seat sports facility set to open in 2018 (home for the Washington Mystics and practice facility for the Washington Wizards)
View From St. Elizabeths Then...
View From St. Elizabeths Now...

You are here