

Image: Friends Hospital Patient Bedroom- 1896 Annual Report



Discrepancies in Pennsylvania Public and Private Mental Hospitals

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, patient care for mentally ill individuals differed widely between public and private hospitals and depended on one's social status. For those who could afford it, a private hospital offered a variety of amenities that were unavailable at public asylums.

One of the most crucial components was the built environment. Private hospitals like Friends Asylum prioritized space. Meant to be an escape from the hustle and bustle of daily life, the hospital sat outside of Philadelphia surrounded by broad expanses of forest and farmland. Patients could take walks through the woods and visit the asylum's deer park which also included lamb, chickens, rabbits, and pigeons.¹ In addition to sprawling outdoor space, private hospitals also prioritized patients' living spaces. By maintaining a cap on the number of patients, Friends Asylum could ensure that each patient felt comfortable rather than confined. At Friends Asylum, each patient received a bedroom, whose layout was thoughtfully planned by the founder's Building Committee. By placing patient rooms on only one side of the main building, the Building Committee's subcommittee on Light and Air ensured that each patient received light at all hours of the day.²

While spacious bedrooms were a requirement, the hospital also provided spaces for patients to entertain themselves. In 1889, Friends Asylum constructed a Gymnasium and

¹ Friends Asylum, "Events in the History of Friends Asylum for the Insane," 1913, Friends Hospital Records, Haverford College Quaker & Special Collections, Haverford, PA.

² Building Committee, "Building Committee Records Minutes Volume 1 1814-1817," 1813-1817, Friends Hospital Records, Haverford College Quaker & Special Collections, Haverford, PA, Second Month, 12th, 1814.

Employment Building. While the upper floor served as gym and auditorium space, the lower rooms on the first floor held workshops, and art rooms. In addition, a library provided books, magazines, and daily newspapers for patients to read.³ Patients were free to attend classes, go on walks, and read at their leisure.

In comparison, patients at public asylums in Pennsylvania were forced to perform specific tasks in much worse conditions. In 1907, a Pennsylvania Legislative Commission assembled to investigate the state's eight public mental hospitals. The committee found that all of the hospitals were over capacity.⁴ At the time of the report, the Pennsylvania State Lunatic Hospital (PSLH) had a normal capacity of 806 but had 1,006 patients.⁵ In addition to overcrowding, patient residences were outdated and often dangerous. In one case, the report detailed that a building at PSLH was so dangerous that "the patients were removed from the third and fourth stories."⁶ Public hospitals also had different philosophies about patient work. For Friends Asylum patients, art and gardening were recreational activities. However, working at public asylums was meant to benefit the asylum itself rather than the patients. Patients were ordered to create items to be used at the asylum or sold for profit.⁷ In their conclusion, the investigators commented that institution management had not "taken advantage of the opportunities offered them for extensive farming."⁸ Although the public asylums oftentimes possessed more acreage than Friends Asylum, ranging from 370 to 1,100 acres, the committee encouraged the asylums to take advantage of the land to become more self-sufficient.

Lastly, public hospitals lacked the financial capabilities to implement the newest advances in medical technology. The report implored the asylums to implement hydrotherapy, arguing that state institutions had "not kept apace with the highest medical skill and science."⁹ In comparison, after Friends Asylum superintendent Dr. Robert Chase asked for a hydrotherapy building in 1909, and received a newly furnished hydrotherapeutic building by 1911.

In conclusion, Friends Asylum's lower patient capacity and better nurse-to-patient ratio allowed the hospital to provide better care for its patients while allowing them the freedom to pursue activities that brought them joy. While the asylum began instituting "Free Beds" in 1897 that required no charge, the vast majority of patients paid for their stay.¹⁰ Ultimately, better care came with a price.

³ Annual report w/ newspaper stat

⁴ Report of Investigations, 1907, 3.

⁵ Report of Investigations, 1907, 11-12.

⁶ Report of Investigations, 1907, 14.

⁷ Report of Investigations, 1907, 75.

⁸ Report of Investigations: General Findings and Recommendations of the Legislative Commission to Investigate Various Charitable Institutions, 1907, at 125 (Pa. 1907), 65 .

⁹ Report of Investigations, 1907, 3.

¹⁰ Friends Asylum, "Events in the History of Friends Asylum for the Insane," 1913, Friends Hospital Records, Haverford College Quaker & Special Collections, Haverford, PA.