



A Short History of Medfield State Hospital, 1890-2016

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The history of Medfield State Hospital actually began in 1890 when a state commission was appointed to acquire a site for the location of an insane asylum; the commission decided to purchase the estates owned by Judge Robert Bishop and Moses Bishop and the Morrill Farm, comprising about 316 acres in the north end of Medfield and included the famous Rocky Narrows in the purchase.

By 1895 most of the buildings were completed and the new “Medfield Insane Asylum,” as it was first called, was less than a year away from opening its doors. Total capacity was originally set for 1000. The asylum consisted of twenty-five buildings and a large barn. It was built in a “cottage” design on what had now grown to 425 acres of land. Of the brick buildings, 18 were for wards. In addition to the wards there were the administration building and a church, known as St. Jude’s Chapel, both of which played prominent background roles in the recent movie Shutter Island.

The 20 wells making up the water supply along the Charles River proved to be inadequate. Later it was decided to go to Farm Pond in Sherborn for the supply. A large pipe was laid from Farm Pond to the pumps and the water forced up to the large standpipe on the asylum grounds. For the next 13 years the hospital received its water

directly from Farm Pond. By 1910 water usage at the hospital was draining Farm Pond and new wells were sunk near the hospital that proved to be sufficient. A new water supply was found off Harding Street and wells were dug and a pumping station built. Supplied with current from the powerhouse, they were able to pump 200 gallons of water a minute without exhausting the supply. This was now giving them 300,000 gallons a day while the asylum was only using about 150,000 gallons a day.

On May 1, 1896 a proclamation was read by His Honor, Roger Walcott, acting governor, establishing the "Medfield Insane Asylum for the Chronic Insane." It was built to relieve the overcrowding of other state facilities. Only half of the buildings were totally completed when the first 120 patients arrived from the Taunton Insane Asylum, and later from Danvers, Northampton, Westboro and Austen Farms (Boston State).

The Medfield facility was the first state mental hospital in Massachusetts to be built on the "cottage plan," with individual buildings to allow for better light and ventilation. In order to make living conditions more home-like, sleeping quarters were on the second floor and sitting and work rooms were on the ground floor. The staff worked on the wards for 12 hours a day, six days a week and lived in the wards with the patients.

In 1897 the population reached the full capacity of 1000 and hit 1,554 ten years later. The death rate at the hospital at that time was averaging four per week, well above the town's death rate which, at the time, had a population only slightly larger than the hospital.

The year 1897 saw William Spearing, an inmate at the Asylum, die of shock from burns received when he was put into a bathtub of scalding water. The attendant F. Osmer Hill was immediately discharged. The Boston newspapers claimed that there was an attempt of a cover-up and that facts were being kept from the public. Later, on Christmas Eve, an inmate, Mary Fitzgibbons, escaped from the hospital. All possible efforts were made to find her tracks in the snow but they were lost when the tracks went into the plowed road. All area towns within a 20-mile radius were notified. The other state institutions and the town poor farms were notified by mail, offering a reward for her return. In February, her body was found in the snow near Castle Hill off North Street about one-mile from the hospital. The cause of death was ruled as exposure.

The name of the asylum was changed in 1905 from Medfield Insane Asylum to Medfield State Asylum.

Farming took place on the hundreds of acres of land surrounding the campus. A large barn was built across Canal Street (now Hospital Road) and opposite the hospital campus in 1895. (It burnt in the 1960s in a dramatic fire that could be seen for miles). A farmhouse was added near the barn in 1901. It served as living quarters for the head farmer and his family as well as fourteen farm hands and thirty patients. The farm played an important role in the lives of the patients and the economy of the hospital until farming was stopped in the late 1960s. Silos at the hospital stored hundreds of tons of corn and the herd of cattle which numbered more than 1,000 was called second to none in the state. To assist in the pasturing of the cattle, a herd house was located nearby in the area of present

day Copperwood Road. The Medfield farms, worked on by the patients, served much of the food needs for all the state hospitals in eastern Massachusetts. Root cellars were located in the back fields to hold carrots and other vegetables. In addition, the milk from the dairy herds supplied milk for the residents, not only at Medfield but for many of those surrounding state institutions as well. The chicken coops held more than 3,000 hens.

From 1911- 1916 “B1,” one of the original 1896 ward buildings, used for female patients, became the site of the dental clinic. It then became home of the electroshock unit. From 1950-1957 it was the site of the Insulin Shock Unit. In the 1970s “B-1” served as nursing home overflow when two nursing homes in Foxboro and Millis closed. It then served as an ecumenical chapel. In the late 1970s into the 1980s Keystone Program, an educational center with classrooms, held students up to age 20 with psychiatric problems that were referred by DYS. In the late 1980s it became a closure home for patients whose term of hospitalization was indefinite.

In 1916 Wesley Linton, an attendant at the hospital, pleaded guilty to the assault, beating and killing of a patient. He was sentenced to three years in the Dedham House of Correction. That same year an additional 167 acres of land was purchased by the hospital. This is the land lying to the west of the hospital and along the Charles River. The hospital now had a total of 609 acre of land, 184 of which were under cultivation. The Infirmary was built in 1916 and served as the laboratory, pharmacy, treatment clinic, dental clinic, X-ray, operating room (first operation ever performed on a patient on psychiatric grounds was performed here). The 2nd floor was for surgical recovery and the location for medical care beds.

The year 1918 was the year the Great Influenza Epidemic that hit world-wide, including Medfield. Due to the large number of deaths at the hospital, the town of Medfield felt it could no longer accommodate patient burials at Vine Lake Cemetery and requested the state establish its own cemetery. This led to the establishment of the Medfield State Hospital Cemetery, located on hospital grounds near the Charles River. So many employees became ill during the September- October Epidemic that proper care could not be given the patients. On a single day over 75 employees would be sick. Graduate nurses were sent to Medfield from other area hospitals to help with the care. A total of 95 employees contacted the disease, of which five died—308 patients were sick with the influenza, of which 55 died (In Medfield proper, 17 people died in the one month period.)

During the 1930s-1940's the hospital continued to be overcrowded with the population climbing to over 2,300 patients. During this time Medfield had become a teaching hospital for Tufts Medical Center. Students from Tufts worked there for practical experience.

The year 1938 saw shock treatment began to be used for the first time at the hospital. That year also saw two patients killed as a result of being assaulted by employees. There was also a major investigation by state officials over the disappearance of a large supply of narcotics. During the 1930s-1950s the town of Medfield purchased all its water from

the state hospital and received all its water from the hospital wells until the town began to build its own wells in the 1950s.

In the 1940s complaints continued about overcrowded conditions and for the first time children were admitted, the youngest was 4 years old. As there were no separate facilities, the children were housed together with the adult population. With the outbreak of World War II and the number of men enlisting, there was a significant staff shortage. The better patients took up the slack, caring for other patients, even carrying keys. The patients looked after the laundry, food services, housekeeping, the farm and the grounds. They shoveled the coal and the snow and did an excellent job despite never being compensated for all their work.

In the 1950's new and revolutionary psychotropic drugs were introduced into health care, drastically changing the care of the mentally ill. The cold and wet sheet packs and constant baths were being done away with. Because of these new drugs, more patients were able to be discharged and the hospital was able to extend its care out into the communities. Such care facilities or clinics were established in both Wellesley and Quincy.

During the Kennedy Administration, in the early 1960s, Congress passed a law requiring that all mental health patients in the United States be housed or hospitalized in the least restrictive environment possible. By the mid-1970s most of the patients were moved from the hospital to community based halfway houses. From the 1970s until its closing, the population continued to drop until it was under 200. During these years, the R-Building, another of the original 1896 wards, became used for the criminally insane from Bridgewater State Prison. This caused much concern among Medfield town residents, especially those who lived near the hospital.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s rumors and plans were circulating that a number of the criminally insane from Bridgewater State Hospital would be sent to Medfield. That came true in 1990, when thirteen inmates from Bridgewater were located in a newly renovated and made secure "R" Building. In 1998 at the request of the Medfield State Hospital administration, the Town of Medfield agreed to supply Town water to the Hospital, when the Hospital wells were taken out of service.

In 1999 the town raised strong concerns to the state over the continued deterioration of the buildings at the hospital. Working with the Medfield State Hospital Preservation Committee and the local state representatives, the state appropriated \$500,000 to mothball the buildings at the hospital in the hope of stopping further decay of the buildings. In 2002 the town was officially notified that the hospital would be closing in 2003.

On April 13, 2003 Medfield State Hospital was officially closed to patients. The remaining patients at Medfield were transferred to Westboro State Hospital. The Medfield State Hospital Committee was now working with the Division of Capital Asset

Management (DCAM) in an attempt to identify a redevelopment plan for the State Hospital.

History of Medfield State Hospital Cemetery

When Medfield State Hospital opened in May of 1896, those residents who died at the hospital and who did not have another burial location were buried in Medfield's Vine Lake Cemetery on the knoll across from Cemetery Pond. Today, that knoll is the resting place for 520 hospital residents who died between the years 1896-1918. Hospital burials generally stopped in Vine Lake Cemetery in 1918 when Medfield and the rest of the world were hit with the Influenza Epidemic. Influenza swept around the world in several waves, killing at least twenty million people. It killed more people in less time than any other disease. In Medfield 17 residents died during the period from the end of September, 1918 to the end of October, 1918. At the state hospital the influenza had devastating effects; 73 employees were ill on one particular day. The superintendent and two assistants also contracted the disease. The disease spread to a total of 308 patients, with 55 dying in that one-month period. Suddenly the Town of Medfield was faced with mass burials. The town pressured the state to build their own cemetery and during the height of the Influenza Epidemic, the current state hospital cemetery was laid out with the first patients burials breaking ground in that north end of town location.

Current Status

The Town of Medfield purchased the property from DCAMM in December 2014. Prior to the purchase by the town, a mediation committee worked with DCAMM to complete the remediation of the former State Hospital landfill area adjacent to the Charles River. A \$5 Million Dollar cleanup restored the floodplain and capped impacted landfill material on site, converting the former power plant area into a public park. The town created a Master Planning Committee and has hired VHB of Waltham, MA to create a master plan for reuse of the property owned by the town. See: MSHvision.net for more information.