

## WORKING AT NORTHAMPTON STATE HOSPITAL



**NORTHAMPTON TOWNSPEOPLE** are said to have looked down on the people of Hospital Hill, as the shame toward those treated at the Hospital extended to those working there. While mental institutions held a poor reputation in society at large, the employees didn't see it that way. They formed a strong community and were proud of their work, even if some avoided telling people where they were employed.

Until the mid-1980s, most staff lived on the Hospital grounds in buildings such as the Male Attendants Home, the Nurses Home, and the South and North Employees Homes where North Commons now stands.

Living and working together, the Hospital staff became a tight community set apart physically and socially from the rest of Northampton. It was common practice to hire relatives of existing staff. While underperforming employees might be set straight by a watchful relative, some patient abuses went unreported to cover for friends and family. When the Hospital closed, employees lost their jobs, a way of life, and part of their identity.

Years after the Hospital closed, former employees recalled the social activities—the bowling leagues, baseball teams, dances, and shows—that cemented their community. Close friendships made here didn't end once the Hospital closed. Many staff members also kept in touch with former patients.



**THE HOSPITAL'S NURSES TRAINING PROGRAMS** were an attempt to improve the quality of patient care. But retaining nurses was a challenge in the face of low pay and difficult working conditions. This photo shows graduates of the program in 1907.



**WARD ATTENDANTS** waiting for the change of shift in 1936. The Hospital was constantly short of attendants. One estimate is that in the period 1900-1950 between 60-70% of attendants had been on the job less than a year, and 40% of positions might be unfilled.



**THE MALE ATTENDANTS HOME** was the last major residence to be constructed in 1932. It held 100 single rooms for men and a smoking and card room in the basement. In 1990 it was renamed after Dr. Shirley Gallup, Northampton State Hospital psychiatrist from 1958 to 1993.



**THE HOSPITAL'S EMPLOYEE BASEBALL TEAM** posed for this early 1930s photo. They played local teams from businesses, other state hospitals, and even the Springfield Police Department. In 1939, they played 47 games with an average attendance of 475 patients.

*Photos: Moore & Schuleit Haber. Images of America: Northampton State Hospital (Arcadia Publishing, 2014)*

### THESE QUOTATIONS DEMONSTRATE THE RANGE OF FEELINGS OF HOSPITAL EMPLOYEES:

“I was very proud to work here. I really was. And a lot of people were proud to work here.”

“People in the community just thought that anyone who was up here was crazy and violent, and that just was not true. Our society at that time thought that if people are mentally ill, you put them away somewhere and forget about them. But there were other people. I remember on Friday nights the families would come and take their patients home, and back on Sunday night.”

“Of course, this was a community all by itself—the hospital. I never felt it was part of Northampton. And there was a very bad stigma.”

“We were nothing but a group of down-to-earth people having a hell of a good time, taking care of some people that nobody else wanted.”

“It's not easy taking care of mentally ill people. There's a lot of rewards, but there's a lot of difficult times. It's tough. And it's sometimes really scary. In my experience over the years, the majority of the staff here will never get the rewards they should get. And they're not really looking for them.”

“There were a lot of caring people at the State Hospital . . . Usually people of this nature saw the system for what it is—really messed up—but they had a sense that they're going to go in there and do the best they can. Even though they know everything is screwy, they will try to make their little corner of it the best they can make it and do the best they can within the system.”

