

## THE NORTHAMPTON LUNATIC ASYLUM ON HOSPITAL HILL



VILLAGE HILL is built on the site of the Northampton State Hospital. When it first opened in 1858 as the Northampton Lunatic Asylum, the Hospital was at the forefront of moral and humane treatment of the mentally ill. It aimed to provide rest, nutrition, fresh air, recreation, attentive staff, physical activity, and intellectual stimulation in a scenic landscape so that mentally ill persons could regain their physical and mental health. The Hospital was built with high ideals. The hope was to get the insane out of jails, poorhouses, cellars, and attics in order to offer institutional care and Moral Treatment of kindness and compassion.

But the optimism was short-lived. Within two years, the hospital was 25% beyond capacity. During the remainder of the 19th century, the patient population continued to increase, and long-term care became the norm. In the first half of the 20th century, the Hospital expanded on Hospital Hill and across Prince Street (Route 66) until the patient population peaked at 2,500 in 1955.

As severe overcrowding and lack of funds to maintain staff, services, and infrastructure became chronic, and as cures continued to be elusive, custodial care was the dominant treatment. The development of psycho-pharmaceuticals and the emergence of forms of community-based treatment laid the foundation for the deinstitutionalization of patients. By 1975, the patient census had been reduced to fewer than 700. When the Hospital finally closed in 1993, the ability to adequately care for patients had been deteriorating for decades.



**THIS IMAGE OF NORTHAMPTON STATE HOSPITAL** is from 1909, after expansions of the original building to the north and south. The south wings were for female patients and the north wings for male patients. The fountain is in front of the main entrance. The central tower/cupola was open to the public on Sundays for viewing the surrounding area. The cupola was removed in the mid-20th century when the central rotunda was floored over on all three levels.

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

**INSIDE THE MAIN ENTRANCE**, visitors and patients were greeted by a formal space with a central rotunda. Until 1940, the superintendent lived upstairs. The plan for the main building—offering lots of light, fresh air, and single rooms for patients—was devised by Dr. Thomas Kirkbride, superintendent of the Pennsylvania Hospital for the Insane. Kirkbride wrote: “The building should be in good taste, and it should impress favorably not only the patients, but their friends and others who may visit it.”

*Photo: Sherer & Moore. The Life and Death of Northampton State Hospital (Historic Northampton, 1994)*

**IF THIS WERE 1858**, you would be standing near the entrance to the new Northampton Lunatic Asylum, the largest and most impressive building for miles around. From this hilltop you could see Northampton, the Holyoke Range, the Connecticut River Valley, and Hadley. This was the third asylum in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, after Worcester (1833) and Taunton (1851).

The original plan for the building was devised by Dr. Thomas Kirkbride, who wrote: “The removal of a person from home and the associations with which their excited, depressed or perverted feelings have arisen, is often nearly all that is required to restore the healthy balance of the faculties.” Approximately 50 other mental hospitals in the U.S. were built on this “Kirkbride plan.” The building, designed to house 250 patients, was later nicknamed “Old Main.”

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

