

A WALKING TOUR OF HOSPITAL HILL



When the Northampton State Hospital first opened in 1858 as the Northampton Lunatic Asylum, it was at the forefront of humane treatment of the mentally ill. It provided rest, nutrition, fresh air, attentive staff, physical activity, and intellectual stimulation in a scenic landscape so that patients could improve their mental health. By 1900, however, the hospital was overcrowded, insufficiently resourced, and short-staffed. Custodial care had become the norm. Two World Wars and a Great Depression severely restricted mental health care funding. When the hospital finally closed in 1993, having housed 65,000 patients, the conditions had been inadequate for decades.



THE NORTHAMPTON STATE HOSPITAL BURIAL GROUND, 1858 – 1921

IN THIS HAY FIELD, known as “Cemetery Hill,” at least 181 former patients of the Northampton State Hospital are buried in unmarked graves. From 1858 through 1921, patients who died at the hospital and who did not have family to claim them were buried on the hospital grounds. This hay field overlooking the Mill River was the primary site for these burials. In addition to the 181 confirmed burials here, records indicate that another 400 patients were buried nearby or at other sites in Northampton.

As was customary for the time period, the hospital ran its own farm, in an effort to be as self-sufficient as possible. This hay field and the surrounding land represent the legacy of that farm. The hospital’s second superintendent, Pliny Earle, was a dedicated and experienced practitioner who believed that regular exercise on the farm was beneficial to the patients’ well being and state of mind.

**Please be respectful, stay on the paths,
and walk around this field.**



“It seems poignant that this burial ground for people whose lives were filled with struggle is now a place that people seek out to take care of themselves. They are actually putting sanity in their lives by exercising, walking their dogs, strolling with friends or in solitude, engaging in nurturing and healing activities. The signs of life somehow seem a proper tribute to the souls buried here.”

– Laurie Loisel, Daily Hampshire Gazette reporter, 2003



Photos: Courtesy of Historic Northampton