



PLAN FOR THE

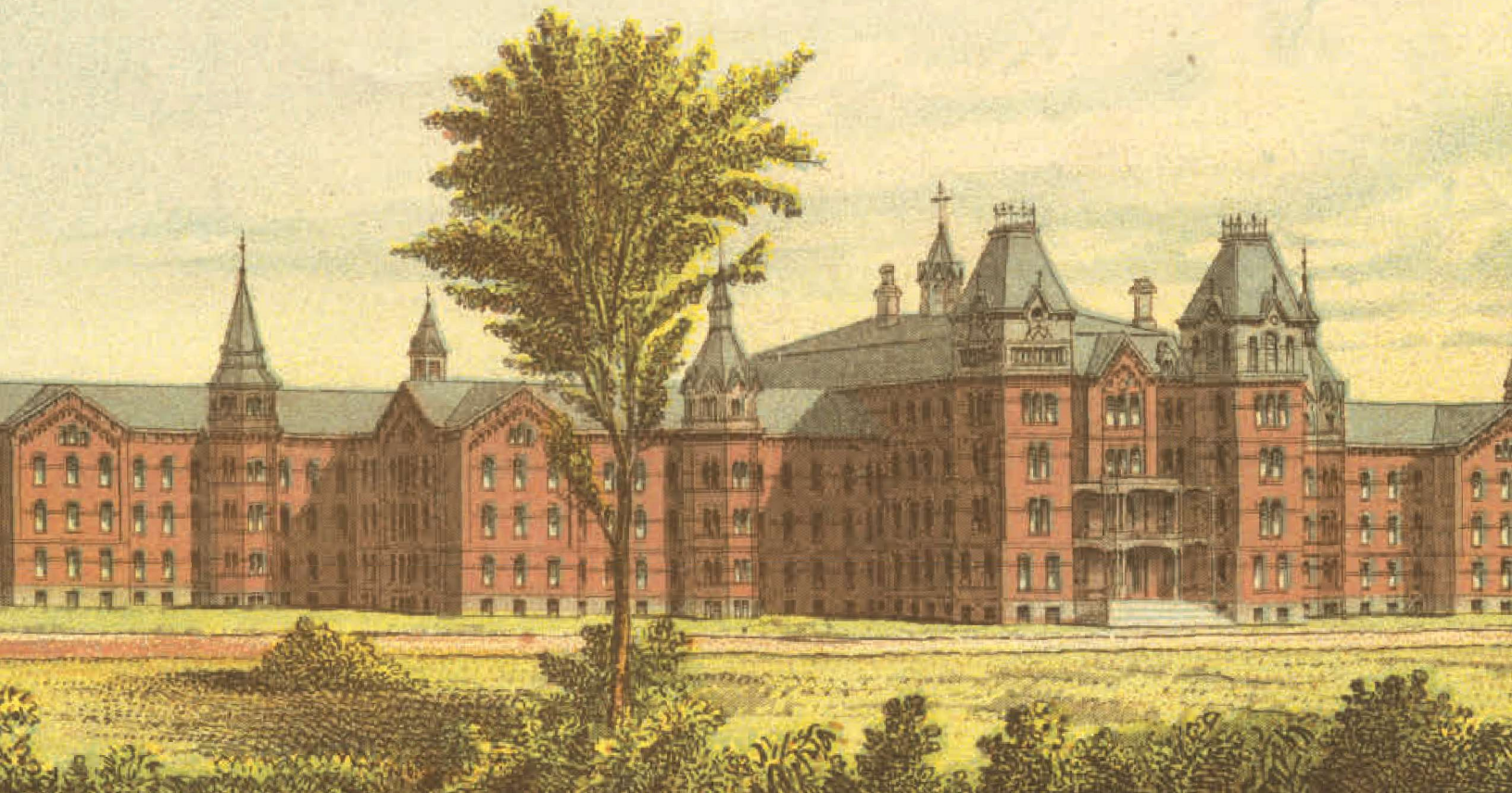
# LUNATIC ASYLUM

GROUNDS,


ATHENS, O.

**REFERENCES:**

- |                   |              |
|-------------------|--------------|
| 1. ASYLUM         | 4. STABLES   |
| 2. DOMESTIC DEPT. | 5. RESERVOIR |
| 3. SOLER HOUSE    | 6. ORCHARDS  |







Plan for the buildings and grounds of the Athens Lunatic Asylum, 1872.

# Revolution in Mental Health Care

THE ATHENS LUNATIC ASYLUM BY ALAN JOHNSON

**O**n Nov. 8, 1868, thousands of civic leaders, Freemasons and Athens townsfolk, accompanied by a brass band, paraded across a bridge over the Hockhocking River (now the Hocking River) and up the big hill to celebrate the cornerstone-laying for the Athens Lunatic Asylum.

No typical groundbreaking, this was a big day for the rural community in southeastern Ohio. The asylum—the fifth hospital to care for the mentally ill to be built in the state—promised an influx of jobs, an extension of utilities, hundreds of passengers flooding the local train station, income for local businesses and farmers, and political clout for the area.

“Vast Concourse of People,” the *Athens Messenger* reported on its front page a few days later. “1,000 Masons and 4,000 People Present.”

It took nearly six years and more than 18.5 million bricks—formed and fired on-site—to construct the massive hospital. On Jan. 1, 1874, the 544-bed asylum on the hill opened, beginning a 20-year period of what was known then as the “moral treatment” era for the mentally ill. It marked a dramatic departure from prior years when people with mental illnesses were thrown in poorhouses and jails, confined at home or left homeless.

The asylum was enormous, built in a style developed by Dr. Thomas Story Kirkbride, a Pennsylvania Quaker physician and “alienist,” as psychiatrists were first called, who strongly believed that mental illness should be treated with kindness and not shackles as had previously been the case.

The imposing Athens hospital, like all Kirkbride-modeled facilities, had a large front administration building with stepped-back wings for patient wards. It had 16-foot-wide tiled corridors, high ceilings, lavish woodwork, grand staircases and large windows allowing for abundant light and air.

*Left:* This lithographic drawing of the administration building and grounds was pasted into some copies of the first annual report of the Athens Lunatic Asylum (later Athens Hospital for the Insane, Athens State Hospital, and Athens Mental Health Center), issued in 1872. At the time, construction, which had begun in 1868, was drawing to a close. The first patients were admitted in 1874. Built according to the Kirkbride Plan, the 53,000-square-foot administration building was designed according to the “moral treatment” philosophy, which emphasized light, air and natural landscapes in patients’ rehabilitation.





The building required six coal-burning steam boilers for heat and had a small train-like conveyor system in the basement to accommodate delivery of meals via dumbwaiters to patient wards. Over time, patient cottages and service buildings were added.

### ABUNDANT NATURE AND LIGHT

Kirkbride's philosophy, as exemplified at Athens, was to "cure its patients with orderly routines, beautiful views of the countryside, exposure to the arts, a built environment with abundant nature and light and plenty of ventilation, outdoor exercise, useful occupation, and personal attention from a physician," wrote Katherine Ziff, an Athens clinician, artist and adjunct professor, in *Asylum on the Hill: History of a Healing Landscape*.

Kirkbride was the innovator of the moral treatment architecture, but Dr. William Parker Johnson made the Athens hospital a reality. Johnson, a country doctor from Athens, came home from serving in the Civil War infused with the idea of helping people with mental illness, including soldiers he'd treated during the war who suffered from what was called "soldier's heart," today known as post-traumatic stress disorder.

After Johnson was elected to the Ohio General Assembly, he sponsored a bill creating the state's fifth mental health asylum, which became law in 1867. A selection committee, nudged by Johnson, picked the Athens site from more than two dozen possible locations.

Members of the Athens Lunatic Asylum day shift staff posed on the steps of the administration building for this late 19th-century group portrait.

Cleveland architect Levi Tucker Scofield was 25 years old when he received the contract to design the building. The cost to the state in 1868 to build the hospital was \$621,000 (\$13.4 million in today's money).

The hospital was championed by Ohio Gov. Rutherford B. Hayes, a Cincinnati lawyer, who appointed Dr. Richard H. Gundry as the first superintendent.

### THE RIDGES

Not only was the building itself grand, but the natural ridges around it were as well. Herman Haerlin, a landscape architect from Cincinnati, and George Link, a gardener from Athens, developed the ridges into a park-like setting with four ponds, a waterfall, walking paths and a central fountain that at one time was home to a pet alligator.

Inside the hospital, patients had many activities and entertainment but limited treatment and medications in the sense embraced by modern psychiatry. For nearly 100 years, patients were kept busy as part of "moral treatment" by working jobs on the asylum farm, grounds and hospital.

Annual reports show expenditures and details such as crops produced on the farms around the asylum. In 1886, that included 11,000 heads of cabbage, 87

bushels of lettuce, 1,070 bushels of pumpkins and 254 bushels of tomatoes. The farm produced 262 gallons of apple butter and 30 gallons of tomato ketchup.

### MEDICAL ADVANCEMENTS

After the turn of the century, the moral treatment era ended, due in part to advances in medical care and medications, but also to critical overcrowding.

The asylum began offering training courses for hospital nurses to professionalize treatment in 1911. A notebook kept by nurse-trainee Netta Edythe Mapes outlined medications to be used, including cocaine, morphine, chloroform, nitrous oxide and cannabis. Nurses were guided in the use of leeches, which were kept in mud at the bottom of a jar, to reduce bodily inflammation; they were warned to never apply the bloodsuckers twice or to apply over a large blood vessel.

### 'WOMB TROUBLE'

Patients were committed to the hospital for a wide variety of reasons, many of them neither medical nor scientific. A large number of the first patients, who hailed from 28 Ohio counties, were farmers, miners or laborers, although they came from all walks of life. Women were often sent there by husbands for "womb trouble," what we now know as postpartum depression, or "religious excitement." Others came as a result of intemperance, jealousy, "disappointed love," grief, "nostalgia" and senility. Some arrived because of head injuries or epileptic seizures. One young man was hospitalized because he "punched a horse and was talking to animals," hospital records show.



Written on back of this postcard: "Sadie Starr." Starr (right) and another woman sit on the grass in front of a building on the grounds of the Athens State Hospital. They are wearing the uniforms of nurses or attendants but do not have a ribbon around the brim of their caps, indicating that they are not graduate nurses. In the background, several women, likely patients, sit beneath the trees and on the steps of the building.

In 1913, hospital superintendent O.O. Fordyce reported the hospital had an average daily patient count of 1,385, more than twice the original design capacity, with 14% diagnosed with "senile psychoses." He said 39.4% of all patients recovered. Fordyce noted he'd created an eight-piece orchestra and bought a Victrola record player to entertain patients.

Nurse Mapes, who graduated in 1912 from the second nurse training class, had a hospital career spanning 45 years. When she retired as a nursing supervisor in 1954, a newspaper article chronicled changes she saw in mental health care over nearly a half-century. The hospital had become a place where "patients return to their home greatly improved or cured. Their surroundings are home-like as far as it is possible to make them so. ... The word 'asylum' is obsolete."

### END OF AN ERA

The hospital underwent nine name changes from 1874 to 1993, when it closed as the Athens Mental Health Center.

While treatment gradually became more professional, one dark chapter of the hospital's history involves Dr. Walter Freeman, a physician who developed the process of "trans-orbital lobotomies," in which a sharp instrument like an icepick was inserted through the eye into the patient's brain.

During the 1950s, Freeman came annually to Athens, where he performed hundreds of lobotomies, sometimes more than 20 a day. From 2 to 5% of patients died, but hospital officials claimed many patients were "cured" by the procedure and were allowed to return home.



Two women lie in beds in a small room. A nursing student stands at the foot of one of the beds; she appears to be checking a thermometer. A nurse standing at the head of the bed appears to be offering the woman lying down a spoonful of medicine. A nurse watches them in the background as another nursing student sits at a side table with a telephone receiver to her ear.



The change from moral treatment to overcrowded custodial care eventually spelled the demise of the Athens hospital, hastened by the deinstitutionalization movement in the 1980s that was aimed at treating patients in the community rather than in large institutions. Nearly all the Kirkbride-style facilities nationwide were abandoned and demolished.

Fortunately, Athens didn't suffer that fate. Ohio University purchased the property and buildings, and preserved and repurposed much of the 150-year-old space. The majestic administration building now houses the Kennedy Museum of Art, the dairy barn was converted for use by a nonprofit community arts organization, several buildings make up the George V. Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Service, and a variety of university departments occupy other space.

**Alan Johnson** is a former journalist who spent 44 years with Ohio newspapers, including 33 years at *The Columbus Dispatch*, where he reported on politics, mental health, human trafficking and capital punishment as a media witness at 21 executions. He's the author of *Death and Forgiveness, My Capital Punishment Witness*. He has a doctorate and master's degree in ministry from Ashland Theological Seminary.



**LEARN MORE**

*Asylum on the Hill: History of a Healing Landscape* by Katherine Ziff is "the story of a great American experiment in psychiatry, a revolution in care for



Ohio University student Luella Pearl Pemberton took this 1921 snapshot of an alligator in the fountain in front of the Athens State Hospital. It lived in the fountain in good weather and had special indoor accommodations in winter.

those with mental illness, as seen through the example of the Athens Lunatic Asylum." When the Ohio University Press published the book in 2018, Samuel T. Gladding, past president of the American Counseling Association, wrote that it was "more than a history of a time, a place, a movement, and a people. It is instead a sensitive and centered examination. ... (Ziff's) portraits of people who influenced the asylum are wonderfully rendered ... alive and moving."

Ohio University Libraries has a digital archive drawn from its Athens Mental Health Center Collection, which you can visit at [ohiohistory.org/Asylum](http://ohiohistory.org/Asylum).

*The 1900: Voices of the Athens Asylum* is an hour-long documentary that "tells the story of how patients landed at the psychiatric hospital in Athens, now known as The Ridges, and how a group of people helped identify those patients buried under numbered graves." Watch the documentary, produced by WOUB public television, at [ohiohistory.org/Asylum2](http://ohiohistory.org/Asylum2).



**COWS TO QUILTS**

One of the first historic preservation success stories involving the former Athens Mental Health Center was the adaptive use of its 1914 dairy barn. Built at a cost of \$10,000 as a center for cows, it's been a center for arts since 1979. Open to visitors as the Dairy Barn Arts Center, it offers a menu of changing exhibits, notably its signature biennial show of contemporary quilts, *Quilt National*. See the cows and learn more about the Dairy Barn Arts Center at [dairybarn.org/about/history](http://dairybarn.org/about/history).

**Left: Dairy Barn Arts Center**



A1—Administration Building, Athens State Hospital, Athens, Ohio



75811-N

ONE OF THE LAKES ON  
ATHENS STATE HOSPITAL GROUNDS,  
ATHENS, OHIO—20



**WATCH**

Scan the QR code to watch behind-the-scenes interviews and more about the story of the Athens Lunatic Asylum in the newest episode of *Echoes Extras*.