

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Department of Mental Health



MEDFIELD STATE HOSPITAL
45 Hospital Road
Medfield, MA 02052

A BRIEF HISTORY

Medfield State Hospital is situated on "Castle Hill," and covers 400 acres bordering on the Charles River. Initially built to relieve the overcrowding of other state facilities, in May of 1896, with only one half of the buildings completed, MSH opened its doors to receive the first 120 patients from Taunton. Later on, patients were transferred from Danvers, Northampton, Westboro and "Austen Farm" (Boston State); within ten years (1906) there were already 1,554 patients at MSH.

MSH was the first mental hospital in Massachusetts to be built on the "Cottage Plan," with individual and separate buildings that allowed better light and ventilation, easier classification of patients, and no underground tunnels to connect the buildings. In order to make the living conditions more homelike, sleeping quarters were on the second floor, with sitting and work rooms on the ground floor. Staff in those days worked on the wards for twelve hours a day, six days a week, and lived on the wards with the patients. With very limited transportation to the larger population centers, employees usually slept in the attics of the buildings where they worked. Separate housing facilities for employees (the Women's Home - "East Hall" - and the Men's Home - "West Hall") were built in 1903 and 1904.

In 1902 Medfield opened a two-year training program for nurses; in 1914 this turned into a three-year program with students affiliating at Boston City Hospital. It was in 1914 also that the hospital joined its sister facilities as an Admission and Treatment Center rather than simply a transfer institution to relieve the overcrowding of the other facilities.

By 1940 the trustees of MSH were complaining that it was overcrowded itself. Along with the increased census of adult patients, there were also admitted to the facility between 6 and 10 emotionally disturbed children, some with violently self-abusive behaviors -- the youngest about 4 years old. There were no separate facilities for the children; they were housed with the adult patients and must have presented staff with unique, very difficult management problems.

As a result of WWII the training school for nurses closed in 1943, never to reopen, and the residency program and medical rotation ended. Although the facility housed almost 2000 patients at the time, many of the employees enlisted, creating a significant staff shortage. So who took over to make the facility run? The "better" patients took up the slack until the end of the war: they cared for other patients (even carrying keys!); they looked after the laundry, food service, housekeeping, farm and grounds (there was a fully functional farm until the 1960's), shoveled coal and snow, etc.

