

Public Health Museum

Background Notes

Tewksbury State Hospital (1852)

Tewksbury State Hospital has significance for everyone interested in public health and public welfare history. The hospital was established in 1852 as one of three state almshouses, resulting from an unprecedented influx of immigrants at the time. The almshouses were the commonwealth's first venture into care of the poor, previously handled by the towns and cities. Opened on May 1, 1854, with a capacity for 500, the population grew to 668 by the end of the first week, and over 800 on May 20th. By December of that year, 2,193 paupers had been admitted; many of whom had fled hard times in Europe. The almshouse reported having 14 employees and spent 94.5 centers per capita per week for the paupers.

In 1866, the almshouse began accepting the "pauper insane," becoming the state's first facility to accept case of chronic insanity specifically. By 1874, it contained 40% mental wards, 27% hospital department, and 33% almshouse. The chronic population grew steadily, and programs for alcoholics and therapeutic industrial and occupational therapy were added in the 1870's. A Home Training School for Nurses was established in 1894, becoming a three-year program in 1898.

The most famous patient of the 19th century was Anne Mansfield Sullivan (later to become the tutor of Helen Keller), who spent four years at Tewksbury Hospital (1876-1880) before being transferred to the Perkins Institute for the Blind in Watertown, Massachusetts. One of the buildings on today's campus is named for her.

Reflecting its changing mission...

...the Tewksbury Almshouse became Tewksbury State Hospital in 1900, the Massachusetts State Infirmity in 1909, and Tewksbury State Hospital and Infirmity in 1938. Over the years, Tewksbury added facilities for treating tuberculosis and other contagious diseases, such as small pox and typhoid fever. Meanwhile, it continued to serve as a "last resort" for patients in need of shelter and supervised care, especially during the late 1920's and 1930's. Throughout the 20th century, it has served as the State Hospital and Infirmity, playing a major role in the care of patients with infectious and chronic diseases. It is probably the preeminent historic example in Massachusetts of a public health institution developed and operated by the Commonwealth.

Old Administration Building (1894)

The Queen Anne-style Old Administration Building stands at the head of the former original main entrance drive on East Street, marked by a circa 1900 gate. The building was designed by Boston architect John A. Fox as part of a major effort to upgrade the old almshouse by replacing the early wood-frame buildings with more durable and fireproof masonry ones. The building is a three and a half story, redbrick building with a steeply pitched slate roof defined by bridged end chimneys, roof dormers, and a beautiful copper-clad clock tower rising from its center. The original core was enlarged with lateral wings (ca. 1920) and a one-story rear addition (ca. 1930).

The Public Health Museum in Massachusetts is located in one-half of the first floor, with additional space available for its use at the top of the building and in the basement. Prior to opening the museum, a concerted effort was made to restore the space to its appearance in the earlier years of the 20th century.

The Murals in the Museum (1930's)

These murals, in excellent condition, are good examples of murals painted under the auspices of the Federal Art Project, part of the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.) during the Great Depression of the 1930's. Dozens of painters, with financial support from the W.P.A., painted hundreds of murals in public buildings throughout the U.S., often incorporating local scenes or socio-political motifs in their works. The Museums' murals are attributed to W. Lester Stevens, born in Rockport, MA in 1888; Maurice Compris, born in Amsterdam, Holland, in 1885; and Samuel F. Hershey, born in Peru, IN in 1904. All three men were active in the New England art scene for most of their lives. Mr. Hershey, last of the three died in 1987.

