



Preface

I first learned about the Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum in Weston, West Virginia a couple of years ago when I was browsing the web. At the time I had completed my second trip to North Dakota to photograph abandoned farms and other abandoned places. I was looking for photography projects a little closer to home.

In August of 2011, I was driving home from a short trip to southern West Virginia and decided to stop in Weston to see what was there. Although I had seen some photographs on the Web, none of them even came close to doing the place justice.

Following the signs from Interstate 79 that pointed to “Historic Asylum Tours”, I turned a corner in the middle of the town of Weston and before me was a most amazing building to be located in the middle of a small town in rural West Virginia.



At that point I was hooked.

I noticed that the driveway was open and there were cars parked in front of the building so I drove in, parked, and found the front entrance open. They were getting ready to start a tour of the facility so I signed up for it and followed along. I brought my camera and took some hand-held shots along the way, mostly just to record what was there.

Once I got home and looked through the casual images I decided I wanted to make an effort to do some more serious photography in the building, and to try to capture the feel of the place.

This body of work is the result of that effort.

Rip Smith, September 2012

A Bit of History

Up to the early part of the 19th Century, little was known about mental illness and as a result, the treatment of mentally ill people was generally barbaric. Different types of mental illness were generally lumped together as being “insane”. Insanity was often attributed to some moral failing or even the work of the devil. Because insane people were often disruptive, threatening, or at the very least exhibited behavior that was strange, they were isolated as much as possible from the community at large. Many “lunatics” were placed in jails or almshouses and kept in horrific conditions. Often they were chained to the wall in cold, damp basements. If they were fortunate to have some family to look after them, they were still often hidden away in attics or cellars so as not to be an embarrassment to the family.

Things began to change in the 1840s, partially as a result of the efforts of Dorothea Dix, a New England schoolteacher. Dix travelled widely to expose the plight of the insane and convince state governments to fund asylums for the mentally ill. Her first success was the establishment of the New Jersey State Lunatic Asylum in 1848.



New Jersey State Lunatic Asylum, Trenton
Drawn and engraved by J.J. Pease from a daguerreotype by J.X. Mason.

The Kirkbride Plan

In the mid-nineteenth century, the dominant school of thought was that the insane could be cured by being treated in specially designed buildings. It was believed that the architecture of the building itself would have a curative effect.

It was also thought that insanity could be caused by the stresses of modern life so locating these asylums in beautiful rural environments and away from the cities and commercial/industrial centers added to the overall curative benefit.

The New Jersey asylum followed a plan developed by psychiatrist Thomas Storey Kirkbride. In the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, the Kirkbride plan was considered the most advanced approach to medical architecture in general and the treatment of the mentally ill in particular. The basic design featured pavilions that were connected and arranged in a shallow V in order to maximize the sunlight and fresh air for the patients.

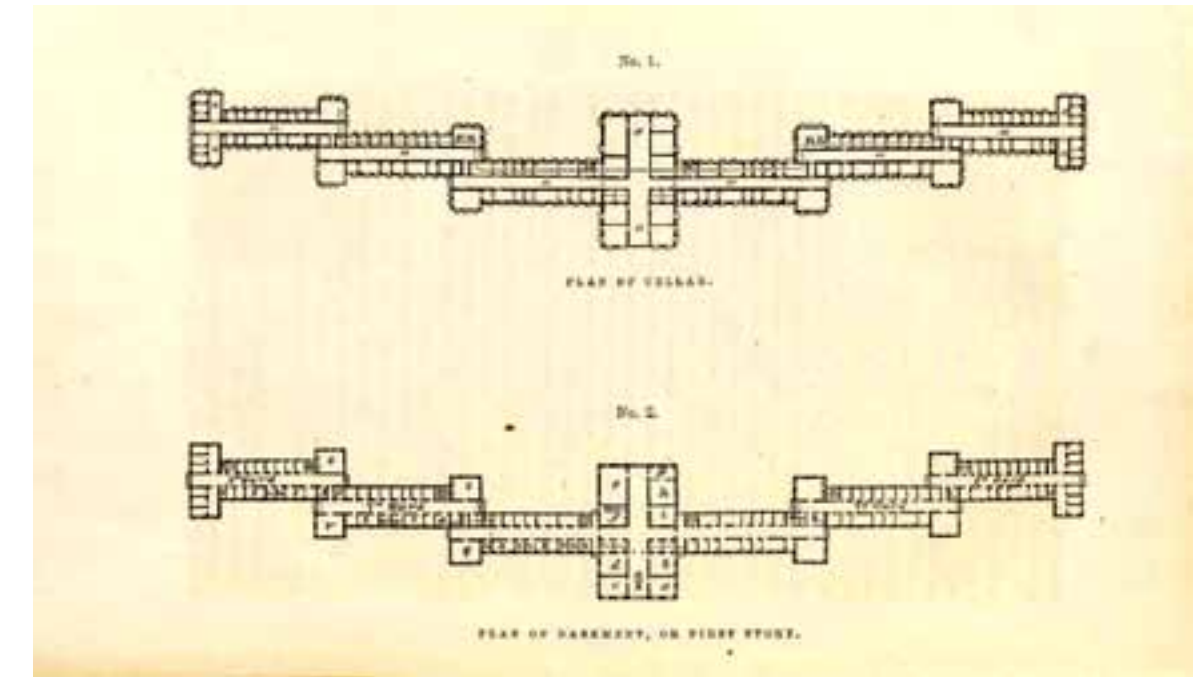


Plate No. 1 and No. 2 from Thomas Storey Kirkbride’s “On the Construction, Organization, and General Arrangements of Hospitals for the Insane,” Philadelphia, 1854. p. 40.
(Wikipedia Commons)

Integrated into the Kirkbride Plan was the concept of “moral treatment”, which encouraged a generally healthy lifestyle, healthy eating, exercise, and other positive activities within the context of a highly controlled environment. Patients who behaved well were allowed outside to walk around the grounds and were allowed other privileges. Patients who behaved badly were often punished by being denied privileges or isolated from the other patients. Violent patients were often locked in “seclusion rooms.”

Ultimately the Kirkbride plan was used in the design of dozens of asylums in the United States.

The overall treatment of the patients was greatly improved over early 19th century standards, but some of the treatments today would still be considered barbaric. The “ice-pick lobotomy” stands out as being particularly horrific.

Still, the development of these asylums at least represents an acknowledgement that mentally ill people deserved some effort by a trained medical community to understand and treat mental illness.

A fascinating and detailed historical discussion of the history of architecture in the treatment of the mentally ill is *The Architecture of Madness: Insane Asylums in the United States* by historian Carla Yanni. Paper bound hard copy and Kindle versions are available from Amazon.com.



The Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum

The Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum, later known as the Weston State Hospital for the Insane, is the largest hand-cut stone masonry building in the Western Hemisphere, second in the world only to the Kremlin in Moscow. It was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1990 and is one of the best examples of the Kirkbride Plan that is still intact.

The Virginia General Assembly authorized the asylum in the early 1850s after consultation with Thomas Kirkbride. At the time, Kirkbride was the Superintendent of the Pennsylvania Hospital for the Insane. The asylum was designed in the Gothic Revival and Tudor Revival styles by architect Richard Snowden Andrews, who had designed the Maryland Governor's residence in Annapolis and the southern wing of the U.S. Treasury Building in Washington, DC.

Construction began in Weston, Virginia in 1858, primarily by prison laborers. Later, skilled stonemasons were brought in from Germany and Ireland. Construction was interrupted by the outbreak of the Civil War. When the war started, the southern wing was completed and the central structure partially complete.

On the morning of June 30, 1861 elements of the Seventh Ohio Infantry under the command of Colonel Erastus Tyler, having marched all night from Clarksburg, entered the town and rounded up those suspected of having Confederate sympathies. Tyler's mission was to seize some \$30,000 in gold (well over half a million dollars today) that had been deposited by the Virginia State government to pay those working on the new asylum, before it could be returned to Richmond and used to support war effort. The banker, Robert McLandish, relinquished the gold after offering token objections. The gold was taken to Wheeling, which eventually became the first capitol of the new state of West Virginia.

The partially built asylum became Camp Tyler and was used throughout the war as a Union base, although the camp changed hands several times during the conflict.

Funding was restored for construction of the asylum, which was renamed the Weston State Hospital for the Insane in 1862 by the Reorganized Government of Virginia, which eventually became the new state of West Virginia. The first patients were admitted in 1864 while construction continued until 1881.



The hospital complex was designed to be self-sufficient, with a farm, dairy, water supply and even a cemetery located on the grounds.

This hospital was consistent with other Kirkbride facilities being originally designed to provide “refuge” for 250 patients. But the population of this hospital, as with the others, could not be controlled to that extent. According to wikipedia.org, the patient population grew to 717 by 1880 to its peak at about 2,600 in the 1950s in serious overcrowded conditions.

Eventually, due to changes to the treatment of mental illness and other reforms, the population of the hospital declined. The construction of the William R. Sharpe Jr. Hospital began in 1986 and the old Weston State Hospital was closed in 1994.

The building and complex including a medical hospital, and other buildings were closed and vacant until 2007 when it was purchased by Morgantown contractor Joe Jordan. With some government funding and private donations, Jordan has begun maintenance and restoration projects in and around the main building.

As of this writing (September, 2012) Joe Jordan's organization has restored parts of the main building and offers regular guided historical tours, nighttime ghost hunts and tours, photo tours and other special events to raise money. The following is from the asylum's web site (<http://trans-alleghenylunaticasylum.com/>):









