Spring 4-1-2007

Stockton State General Hospital and Insane Asylum: Documented

Michael J. Wurtz

University of the Pacific, mwurtz@pacific.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/libraries-articles

Part of the Archival Science Commons

Recommended Citation


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Libraries at Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in University Libraries Librarian and Staff Articles and Papers by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact mgibney@pacific.edu.
"Are we to stand by helpless, while our plans are destroyed, our city become the butt of mockery in California?" cried the citizens of Stockton in 1853 when the state legislature met to discuss building the state Insane Asylum in “our” city.

By Michael Wurtz, Archivist

That is how John Dennis interpreted that meeting in his play A World We Made. Dennis (Cop ’41) wrote the play to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the mental health care facility in Stockton. This play is one of about a dozen different sources available for research in the Holt-Atherton Special Collections Department that document the Stockton State Hospital that existed in Stockton until it closed in the 1990s.

The history of the institution begins in 1852 when it came to the attention of the California state legislature that the state hospital in downtown Stockton was particularly adept at handling “insane” patients. The legislature ordered all mentally ill patients in California (mostly in hospitals in Sacramento and Stockton) be taken to the Stockton State General Hospital and Insane Asylum. The following year new grounds for the Insane Asylum were established near the corner of California and Park streets. Encompassing more than 100 acres, the facility eventually included a greenhouse, library, broom factory, garden, and dairy. The Hospital also managed 1000 acres of farmland where San Joaquin Delta College is today. Part of that farmland was developed as the Stockton State Hospital Annex, which had more than 20 buildings when it closed in the late 1960s. The main facility closed in the mid 1990s and is now the site of California State University Stanislaus-Stockton campus.
Initially used as a very productive farm for the Hospital, the Annex eventually had more than 20 buildings. Today, it is the site of San Joaquin Delta College.

A female department was added to the grounds in 1874. In 1875, the top known "supposed cause of insanity" for patients was intemperance followed by masturbation for men and "domestic trouble" for women.

The Oullahan Family Papers includes this account of a reporter who pretended to be "mad" so he could observe the inner workings of the asylum.

John Wilson, a patient at the Hospital in the early 1930s, documented his inventions, and supposed abuses by staff, in scrolls.

An "Insane Asylum" in downtown Stockton is a very provocative subject. For a sanitary account of the Asylum's management, Holt-Atherton Special Collections has over a dozen reports produced between 1869 and 1928 that document conditions, statistics, and budgets.

One of Holt-Atherton's smaller collections documents the Ryer-Langdon duel in 1857. The story begins almost a year earlier in April of 1856 when first superintendent of the Hospital, Dr. R.K. Reid, was unexpectedly not reinstated as superintendent. Instead, the governor appointed Dr. Samuel Langdon amid allegations of misconduct by Reid. During an investigation of the matter launched in early 1857, Dr. Washington Ryer testified in defense of Reid. Ryer, a known abolitionist, questioned Langdon's motives for an investigation of Reid. Langdon was a southerner with pro-slavery sympathies. On the day following Ryer's testimony, Ryer and Langdon happened to see each other on the street. There was a scuffle. Afterwards, Ryer "felt his honor and reputation were at stake" and challenged Langdon to a duel.

Almost a month later on Feb 24, 1857, after two failed duels, the two exchanged fire. Both had sensitive pistols and it took three shots before Ryer hit Langdon, non-fatally, in the knee. There is much more to this sidebar than can be explained here, so take a look at a full account of the duel's story in the Spring 1981 Pacific Historian.

At least two personal accounts from the inside of the Hospital are available for research at Pacific. The Oullahan Papers include an 1888 story from a reporter for the San Francisco Examiner, who had himself checked into the Asylum with a fake diagnosis of "lunacy." He observed the patients: "[There is a man who] imagines that his head is made of glass and is in constant fear that by some unhappy movement he may break it. In walking he always carries his head in a very erect manner." He also observed the staff: "I found [the management] far superior to what I expected, considering its overcrowded condition, and am satisfied that the prejudice against insane asylums largely arises from the garbled statements of the patients, nine-tenths of whom believe that they are incarcerated wrongly and that the doctors and attendants are members of a conspiracy against them."

The most remarkable resource about the Hospital in the Special Collections is the John Wilson Papers. Wilson gives a patient's view of life at the Hospital in the early 1930s. "I am falsely imprisoned in this hospital on a false charge of insanity and under false pretenses... and whereas I am being tortured and restrained weak and insane in both body and mind with a special kind of wireless electricity, all by you, and all contrary to law." Describing himself as an important inventor whose patents have been stolen, his papers include patent level sketches of his inventions.

The compelling history of the Hospital may have affected the history of University of the Pacific. For years, newcomers to Pacific have been told the student-spun story that SouthWest Hall is haunted because it had been used as an insane asylum. The main pieces of evidence for that story were the sinks in the rooms (something one would not expect to find in older dormitories), and the rumor that West Hall was a hospital.

Cursory research in the University Archives dispelled this story. An infirmary was built on the campus grounds shortly after the college moved from San Jose in 1924. The infirmary, operated like a hospital for students, was named for the West family and was located in what is now the Finance Center. South Hall was first built as a women's dormitory in 1926 and included sinks in every room — a luxury compared to the men's dormitory that only had washbasins. West Hall, so-named because it was west of South Hall, was built in 1946. In 1956, the two halls were linked and eventually renamed SouthWest Hall. For over 10 years there were two buildings on campus named West. This confusion and possibly Stockton's long connection with Stockton State Hospital might have contributed to the long-standing story.

Anyone interested in looking at these resources is welcome to visit the Holt-Atherton Special Collections Department in the basement of the library. The department is open from 10-5 Tuesday-Friday. Additional information about the Stockton State Hospital is scattered throughout California's archival institutions. Since the Hospital was a state agency, the bulk of material can be found at the California State Archives in Sacramento.