
The Madness Multiplies: The Expansion of Kentucky's Early Lunatic Asylums

Miranda P. Smith

Miranda Smith is a junior from Highland, Illinois who is double majoring in History with Teacher Licensure and Math with Teacher Licensure. She wrote this paper for Dr. Curry's HIS 2500: Historical Research and Writing.

Public care of the mentally ill in America began in 1773 with the construction of Eastern State Hospital in Williamsburg, Virginia.¹ This was the first public institution in America created solely to care for and treat the “insane,” and it was a unique establishment for quite some time. The next state-funded psychiatric institution, which would be located in Lexington, Kentucky, would not be created until well after the American Revolution and over two decades into the nineteenth century. While this clearly demonstrates that the care of the mentally ill was still considered a private matter, in other words, the care of the person afflicted was the responsibility of their family or friends, the amount of time it took to create such an institution is quite surprising, considering there was certainly no shortage of ailments and circumstances that were believed to cause “insanity.” American doctors in the early nineteenth century recognized that there seemed to be a hereditary component to several cases, and even observed in some that the symptoms seemed to initially occur before or around a certain age.² However, other cases seemed to be brought about by illness, trauma, or “moral causes,” which could include anything from an inability to find work, gambling, “religious excitement,” or even “novel reading.”³ With so many ways that a person could be deemed “insane,” it is no wonder that the number of state funded insane asylums grew so rapidly in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The asylum in Lexington began this wave of construction aimed at helping the mentally ill, but America’s second asylum proved ill-prepared to deal with the many challenges involved in caring for its patients. Even its attempts at custodial care were impeded by a persistent issue of overcrowding.

Following the creation of the asylum in Williamsburg, it seemed that care of the mentally ill would continue as it had for years previously, remaining a private issue rather than a public responsibility. As historian David J. Rothman said, “The colonists left the insane in the care of their families, supporting them, in case of need as one of the poor,” and though Virginia endeavored to set a precedent by funding an asylum, it was destined to be the exception, not the rule.⁴ However, in 1792, the western portion of Virginia broke away, forming the new state of Kentucky, and thirty years later made the decision to follow the example of its eastern neighbor and founded its own asylum. In 1822, the Kentucky House of Representatives read and ratified “an act to establish a Lunatic Asylum,” by a vote 44 in favor, 43 against.⁵ While Kentucky’s asylum would not be the first asylum in the country, it is clear by the close vote that its creation was still a new and controversial idea. The science of psychiatry was still in its infancy, and few had considered questions such as how best to care for those affected by mental illness, and whose responsibility it should be to provide this

¹“Eastern State Hospital,” accessed 29 October 2018, <http://www.esh.dbhds.virginia.gov/>.

² Pliny Earle, “On the Causes of Insanity,” *The American Journal of Insanity* 4 (1847-1848), 186,191.

³ Earle, “On the Causes,” 193-96.

⁴ David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), xiii.

⁵*Journal of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, . . . 1822* (Frankfort, KY: Kendall and Russell, Printers for the State. 1822), 333.

care. Regardless, it was determined that this new asylum would be erected in Lexington, and a purchase was made of ten acres of land, boasting a freshwater spring and a “skeleton of a house, well-constructed for the purpose required.”⁶ This “house” had originally been Fayette Hospital, a general medical hospital connected to Transylvania University for which construction had begun in 1817, but, following the Panic of 1819, was never completed.⁷



Image from Richard Collins and Lewis Collin, *Collins Historical Sketches of Kentucky: History of Kentucky* (Covington, Ky: Collins & Co. 1874), 223.

The Kentucky Lunatic Asylum opened its doors and accepted its first 33 patients in November 1824—over fifty years after the opening of the first state funded asylum in Virginia.⁸ Surely its creators intended for the asylum’s patients to be cared for in the best way they and the doctors of the day knew. However, as scholar T.O. Powell points out, “The prevailing ideas were altogether custodial. Restraint was common, and violent methods of repression were in vogue, such as shower-baths, tranquillizing [*sic*] chairs, bleeding and vomiting.”⁹ This reflects the primitive state of

the science of psychiatry in the early nineteenth century, and, regardless of how well-intentioned they may have been, lawmakers and doctors alike were still unsure of the best ways to care for those afflicted with mental illness.

Though Kentucky’s first lunatic asylum started off small, it grew rapidly, reaching a patient population of ninety by December 1830 and having 285 patients throughout the year of 1845.¹⁰¹¹ While a substantial amount of this growth was due to new patients being admitted, what made the population explode was that so few were being released. For example, as seen in Table 1, in 1845, of the 285 cases to pass through the asylum during the year, only 28 recovered. In particular, out of the 153 patients still in the asylum from the previous year, only six recovered.¹² Two years later, in 1847, there were 311 patients throughout the year (225 from the previous year and 86 new patients), only

⁶ *Journal of the Senate of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, Begun and Held in the Town of Frankfort, on Monday, the Third Day of November, in the Year of Our Lord 1823, and of the Commonwealth the Thirty-Second* (Frankfort, KY: Amos Kendall and Company, Printers for the State, 1823), 120.

⁷ Ronald F. White, “Custodial Care for the Insane at Eastern State Hospital in Lexington, Kentucky, 1824-1844,” *The Filson Club Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (July 1988), 309-310.

⁸ White, “Custodial Care for the Insane,” 310.

⁹ T. O. Powell, “A Sketch of Psychiatry in the Southern States,” *The American Journal of Insanity* 54, No. 1 (July 1897): 21-37.

¹⁰ *Journal of the Senate of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, . . . , 1830* (Frankfort, KY: Dana and Hodges, Printers for the State, 1830), 154.

¹¹ *Journal of the Senate of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, . . . , 1830* (Frankfort, KY: Dana and Hodges, Printers for the State, 1830), 154; *Annual Report of the Directors and Physician of the Kentucky Lunatic Asylum, . . . , 1845*, (Frankfort, KY: A. G. Hodges: State Printer, 1846), 17.

¹² *Annual Report of the Directors and Physician of the Kentucky Lunatic Asylum, . . . , 1845* (Frankfort, KY: A. G. Hodges: State Printer, 1846), 16.

29 of whom recovered, 14 of which were new cases.¹³ This, combined with patient statistics from other years, shows a general trend that the majority of patients admitted were afflicted with a chronic illness, or, as the reports put it: “Prospect: Incurable.” The number of patients remaining outnumbered the patients recovering and being released, thereby dramatically impacting the population growth.

Table 1. Patient Population and Recovery, Kentucky Lunatic Asylum

Year	Total Number of Patients	Patients from the Previous Year	New Patients	Recoveries	Recoveries in Old Patients (% of total recoveries)	Recoveries in New Patients (% of total recoveries)
1845	285	13	32	28	6 (21.43%)	22 (78.57%)
1846	302	22	0	32	14 (43.75%)	18 (56.25%)
1847	311	25	6	29	15 (51.72%)	14 (48.28%)
1848*	345	27	8	25	5 (20%)	20 (80%)
1849	366	20	6	32	10 (31.25%)	22 (68.75%)
1851	336	23	33	1	13 (31.7%)	28 (68.29%)

Source: *Annual Reports 1845, 1846, 1847, 1848, 1849, 1851*. Frankfort, KY: A. G. Hodges: State Printer. HathiTrust.

*Total recoveries for the year listed as 30 in the Superintendent’s Report, but only 25 recoveries found in the table showing patients

With this growth in population came growing costs to maintain the asylum. From 1845 to 1851, the amount of money appropriated by the state of Kentucky in order to maintain the Lexington Asylum more than doubled, increasing from \$12,000 to \$26,000, respectively.¹⁴ However, it was not only the general increase in patient population that contributed to the ever-increasing costs of maintaining the asylum. Each year a greater portion of the patients were also supported by the state. As seen in Table 2, the number of patients supported by the state had been very high in 1845, 209 of 285 patients, or 73.3%, were supported by the state.¹⁵ By 1851, this number had increased to 279 of 336, or 83.04%.¹⁶ With such staggering numbers, it is little surprise that some compared the asylum to something akin to an almshouse or, as another put it, “a mad-house for the safe-keeping of lunatics rather than an asylum for their care.”¹⁷

¹³ *Twenty Fifth Annual Report of the Board of Directors of the Kentucky Lunatic Asylum*, 1847.

¹⁴ *Annual Report of the Directors and Physician of the Kentucky Lunatic Asylum, . . . , 1845*, 6; *Annual Report of the Directors of the Lunatic Asylum, at Lexington, Kentucky, for the Year 1851* (Frankfort, KY: A. G. Hodges & Co.: State Printers, 1852), 6.

¹⁵ *Annual Report of the Directors and Physician of the Kentucky Lunatic Asylum, . . . , 1845* (Frankfort, KY: A. G. Hodges: State Printer, 1846), 7-14.

¹⁶ *Annual Report of the Directors of the Lunatic Asylum, at Lexington, Kentucky, for the Year 1851* (Frankfort, KY: A. G. Hodges & Co.: State Printers, 1852), 7-16.

¹⁷ Gerald Grob, *Mental Institutions in America: Social Policy to 1875* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 343; Powell, 98.

Table 2. Annual costs, Kentucky Lunatic Asylum

Year	Annual Costs	Amount Appropriated by State of Kentucky	Percent of Expenditures Paid for by the State	Number of Patients (Total)	Number of Patients Supported by the State (% of Total Number of patients)
1845	\$23,228.12	\$12,000.00	51.66%	285	209 (73.3%)
1846	\$19,268.55	\$12,500.00	64.87%	302	229 (74.11%)
1847	\$26,080.74	\$15,000.00	57.51%	311	224 (72.03%)
1848	\$28,547.02	\$18,500.00	64.81%	345	248 (71.88%)
1849	\$27,347.08	\$18,500.00	67.65%	361	293 (81.2%)
1851	\$42,258.87	\$26,000.00	61.53%	336	279 (83.04%)

Source: *Annual Reports 1845, 1846, 1847, 1848, 1849, 1851*. Frankfort, KY: A. G. Hodges: State Printer. HathiTrust.

For years, the asylum’s administration pleaded with Kentucky’s state legislature for funding to provide adequate accommodations for their growing number of patients with little success.¹⁸ While the state senate did finally agree to provide funding to build a second Kentucky Lunatic Asylum in 1848, its neglectful delay had proved detrimental for many of the souls inside the Lexington Asylum.¹⁹ Another cholera pandemic was brewing, and just as it had seventeen years before, the pestilence swept from India, across Europe, and found its way to American shores on ships coming across the Atlantic in late 1848.²⁰ By 1849, the disease was at the asylum’s doorsteps, and its effects can be seen in the Manager’s Report for the year. While the report explained that many of those affected by the disease recovered, of the 366 patients that had been in the asylum over the course of the year, 98 died. Sixty of these deaths were attributed directly to cholera, and an additional 12 were victims of “Fever, sequel to cholera,” and four died as a result of “Dysentery, sequel to cholera.” This means that approximately 77.6% of the patient deaths in the year, equivalent to about 20.8% of the patient population, were linked to the cholera epidemic.²¹ In their annual report, the managers of the asylum even went as far as to assign blame for the outbreak:

Yet we must say, that the extremely crowded state of our buildings was well calculated to invite its appearance. For two years we had assured your honorable body that our present buildings were entirely inadequate to provide proper accommodations for the number of patients admitted to our care, and our suggestions were not adopted. We saw that these helpless and unfortunate beings were crowded upon us in far greater numbers than could be comfortably kept within our walls, but we had no resource; the law was mandatory.²²

¹⁸ *Annual Report of the Managers of the Lunatic Asylum . . . 1849* (Frankfort, KY: A. G. Hodges: State Printer, 1850), 4.

¹⁹ *Journal of the Senate of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, . . . 1848* (Frankfort, KY: A.G. Hodges: State Printer, 1848), 202.

²⁰ Rosenberg, 101.

²¹ *Annual Report of the Managers of the Lunatic Asylum . . . 1849* (Frankfort, KY: A. G. Hodges: State Printer, 1850), 18-19.

²² *Annual Report of the Managers of the Lunatic Asylum . . . 1849* (Frankfort, KY: A. G. Hodges: State Printer, 1850), 4.

Patient deaths were by no means uncommon in the first several decades that the asylum was in operation. In fact, between the years 1824 and 1843, of the 1,048 patients that passed through the asylum, 402 died, which calculates to a 38% mortality rate.²³ The managers' grief permeates the *Report*, but at times this sadness is overcome by a tone of outrage. While the report's authors claimed to be disinterested in assigning blame for the disease's appearance, they clearly had suspicions about what made them vulnerable to the epidemic, as seen in the passage above and their plans for improvements. At times, it is as though, in their eyes, this tragedy could have been prevented if the Kentucky legislature had only listened to their pleas during the past several years. In the same report, the managers of the asylum, asked for money to erect more buildings to house the growing number of patients as they had in reports past, but this time they emphasized that this sum would be necessary to relieve them "from the unpleasant but inevitable necessity of using basement rooms, which are unfit for human habitation."²⁴ This shows just how big of an issue the overcrowding at the asylum had become—the managers were clearly aware that the rooms in the basement were not the ideal place to keep their patients, but were left with no choice. While it is uncertain if the effects of the cholera epidemic would have been less catastrophic if the legislature had taken action sooner, it is clear that the directors of the asylum could see that their requests were not considered to be a terribly high priority.

Unfortunately, conflicts similar to this were not uncommon between state legislatures and asylum administrators. By the 1840s, those involved in the study of psychiatry and care of the mentally ill recognized that, while they might occasionally receive some form of support from legislation, it was unlikely that they would become a priority anytime soon. In the 1847-48 volume of *The American Journal of Insanity* (now called *The American Journal of Psychiatry*), the superintendent of another mental hospital in Rhode Island wrote, "We hardly expect that legislation for the insane will become, in our day, precisely what it should be...It presents to the Solons of the times, no other claims than those of suffering humanity and hence is too often allowed to go its way until a more convenient season."²⁵

While Kentucky's first lunatic asylum was hardly the ideal treatment center by today's standards, it was far from a failure. The asylum may have had a difficult start, struggling not only with the underdeveloped ideas of psychiatry, but also the lack of aid, particularly financial, from their state legislature. However, its progress opened the door for other states to follow suit and its opening showed changing attitudes towards mental health. People were beginning to believe that rather than leaving the "insane" to be cared for privately by whoever could afford to do so, the care and treatment of these individuals should instead be a public responsibility. The opening of Kentucky's first asylum, only the second in the nation, created a chain reaction that would not end until the deinstitutionalization movement in the mid-twentieth century and the development of modern psychiatric facilities. Though they have changed greatly over the years, modifying and improving treatment of patients as the field of psychiatry expanded, both the first and second Kentucky asylums are still standing and in operation today using the names Eastern State Hospital and Western State Hospital, respectively.

²³ White, 321.

²⁴ *Annual Report of the Managers of the Lunatic Asylum . . . 1849*, (Frankfort, KY: A. G. Hodges: State Printer, 1850), 4.

²⁵ I. Ray, "Legislation for the Insane in Maine," *The American Journal of Insanity* 4 (1847-1847): 211.