



A Cathedral of Care: The Traverse City State Hospital

The Traverse City State Hospital tells a story of hurt and healing. It ignites conversation about the history of mental health treatment and represents the fallen ideal of a “cathedral of care.” Today, the hospital continues to reinvent itself with help from a new urbanism movement, which takes a stand to preserve one of Michigan’s breathtaking historical treasures.

The Traverse City State Hospital, also known as the Northern Michigan Asylum, was in operation from 1885 to 1989. The hospital was founded upon the ideals of the Thomas Story Kirkbride Moral Treatment mental health care movement, which suggested that clean air, sunshine, beautiful surroundings, healthy work, and humane treatment could provide healing for a person suffering from mental illness. During more than a century of operation, the asylum witnessed the swift evolution of mental health care through legislation that directly shaped both its practices and the fates of many of its patients.

Fated Beginnings

The Traverse City State Hospital’s story began in the early 1880s. At the time, two mental hospitals existed in Michigan—one on the west side of the state in Kalamazoo and another on the east side in Pontiac. The state government determined a strong need for a third mental institution to be established in Northern Michigan, where it could house individuals with mental illnesses in that region of the state.

Traverse City was a relatively small town with few employers. An ironworks, a small packaging factory, and the lumbering industry

employed the city’s few thousand citizens during the late nineteenth century. Perry Hannah, a millionaire lumber baron who was known to some as the “Father of Traverse City,” became a member of the Michigan legislative body in 1881. The exhaustion of pine wood was causing the lumbering industry to wane, which left him concerned for his city’s future.

Hannah was selected to serve on a three-member group of legislators tasked with finding the most convenient location to establish northern Michigan’s new mental institution. Though Greenville, Manistee, Big Rapids, and Reed City were also considered, Traverse City was finally chosen as the site of the new hospital, given its affordability and close proximity to Grand Traverse Bay.

Traverse City residents pulled together to make the hospital a reality by donating money and land. Many were motivated by the employment opportunities the hospital would provide and the commerce with local businesses it would foster. Construction of the Northern Michigan Asylum began in 1883, and the first patient was admitted on November 5, 1885.



First Buildings and Residents

From the time the Northern Michigan Asylum opened its doors, it was a beautiful place of healing for those suffering from mental illness and emotional distress. The hospital's first building, called Building 50, was constructed for \$400,000 to accommodate approximately 550 patients. A quarter-mile long and three stories high, it was built to last indefinitely. However, when a need for additional space arose just two years later, another \$450,000 was appropriated to expand the building.

Over time, smaller "cottages" were built on the grounds to accommodate patient overflow from the hospital's main building. Women's cottages were to the north of Building 50 while men's were to the south. Building 50 housed intake and administrative offices as well as rooms for the doctors, nurses, and their families who called the asylum home.

Underground tunnels were built to connect the buildings. Some tunnels housed large steam pipes for heating, while others were gateways for staff to move easily from one building to another in the midst of Northern Michigan's harsh winters.

Many of the hospital's first patients, who were known endearingly as "residents," were elderly people who suffered from illnesses known today as dementia or Alzheimer's disease. Though some residents who were admitted to the asylum suffered from severe and persistent mental illness in a time before the advent of psychotropic medication, others were referred for conditions that are much better understood and accepted today, such as depression and grief. In some cases, syphilis, tuberculosis, epilepsy, polio, blindness, or even menopause led to one's admittance to the Traverse City State Hospital.

"Beauty Is Therapy"

Dr. J.D. Munson, described as a "very gracious and gentle person," served as superintendent of the Traverse City State Hospital for 39 years, from the time the asylum was first opened in 1885 until his retirement in 1924. Munson's work centered around a theory that "beauty is therapy," which became the cornerstone belief of the Traverse City State Hospital.

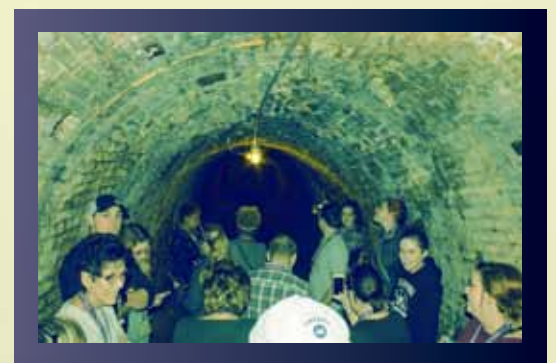


Contrary to the public assumption that mental institutions were like prisons, Munson created a healing atmosphere of beauty and activity at his hospital. Natural light poured through the wards, with each patient room having a large window. The buildings' intricate ventilation systems provided a continuous flow of fresh air through ornately gated vents in each hallway.

Many patients lived in "open wards" with unlocked doors, where they could come and go on the grounds as they pleased. Resident areas were well-furnished and beautifully decorated with plants, artwork, and inspirational anecdotes that enriched the morale of both patients and staff. Lovely outdoor spaces, including a unique arboretum ornamented with many varieties of trees and plants brought back from Munson's travels across the country, allowed patients to enjoy a gorgeous natural setting.

Work was a sometimes controversial but still a crucial factor of the hospital's treatment model. Munson, who grew up on a farm, believed that laboring was an excellent therapeutic program that could take one's mind off of problems. His patients were thus involved in the hospital's daily operations, with many able-bodied male residents assisting

Previous page, above: The Northern Michigan Asylum as it appeared in the early twentieth century. Previous page, below: The Northern Michigan Asylum had a herd of prize cows during the early twentieth century. Top: Traverse City State Hospital Superintendent Dr. James D. Munson, fifth from left, and the Michigan State Hospital Board of Directors. (All three photos courtesy of the Traverse Area District Library and Historical Society.) Below: Today, the underground tunnels connecting Building 50 and patient cottages can be explored on group tours. (Photo courtesy of David Artushin.)



in land-clearing for agricultural purposes or in preparation for building construction. Patients aided farmers in producing food for hospital meals, shoveled snow in the winter, and sewed clothes for fellow residents. Work experiences offered opportunities for skill-building, socialization, physical activity, and the development of self-efficacy and purpose.

The treatment of mentally ill persons at the Traverse City State Hospital during that period was arguably the most enlightened, progressive, and humane approach that existed at the time. Restraints were not allowed at the Traverse City State Hospital, and residents were treated with dignity and respect in the early years of the institution.

Many patients thrived in such a caring environment. The Traverse City State Hospital seemed to aim to not only provide revolutionary humane care for the mentally ill but also break stereotypes about mental illness and focus on rehabilitating as many residents as possible.

The Asylum's Self-Sufficiency

In addition to assisting in the rehabilitation of mental health patients, the work component that Munson championed for his hospital also aided in keeping it running. With insufficient allocations from the state for ongoing operations, self-sufficiency became crucial to the asylum's continued success. The hospital's grounds eventually spanned nearly 1,600 acres, containing a diverse neighborhood of farms, greenhouses, gardens, lawns, and

marvelous architecture, all of which needed to be maintained.

The Traverse City State Hospital was also the first of the three state mental institutions in Michigan to possess its own electrical power plant on the grounds. In 1914, the hospital obtained its own railroad track that greatly reduced shipping costs for coal to heat the buildings throughout the winter. By the 1950s, the Traverse City State Hospital was almost completely self-sufficient, due in large part to the efforts of its patients.

In addition to offering patients work-based therapy, the Northern Michigan Asylum also quickly became Traverse City's largest employer. Countless jobs were created for administrative staff, nurse aids, farmhands, maintenance workers, electricians, and more. The hospital inhabited a struggling Northern Michigan community and made it thrive again, igniting economic growth and commerce in Traverse City.

Evolutions in Mental Health Care

The Traverse City State Hospital witnessed and embodied the evolution of mental health care over its 100 years in operation. By 1936, there were about 2,700 patients residing at the asylum, and treatment primarily consisted of psychoanalysis. Meals, work hours, and recreational activities were strictly scheduled.

In the late 1950s, legislation was passed that forced the hospital to pay all of its patients the minimum wage for their work on the grounds. Pharmaceutical companies, medical doctors, and local farmers losing profits from the surplus of products generated by the mental asylum all contributed to the legislation.

Because it was financially impossible to pay the nearly 3,000 residents for their work contributions, the hospital had no choice but to end that aspect of patients' therapeutic programs and schedule more sedentary hours indoors. Patient rooms measuring 96 square feet, once used only for sleeping, were now where residents spent most of their days, and with the advent of psychotropic medications, many were usually heavily medicated.

Eventually, the original intent of the Traverse City State Hospital—to facilitate healing in a beautiful environment—slowly decayed and

Below: Traverse City State Hospital staff and patients pictured together. (Photo courtesy of the Traverse Area District Library and Historical Society.) Next page: Today, renovations continue to be made on the former hospital grounds. (Photo courtesy of David Artushin.)



succumbed to modern legislation that led the Northern Michigan Asylum to embody the prison-like stereotype it had tried to overcome.

In 1963, President John F. Kennedy passed the pivotal Community Mental Health Act (CMHA), which provided grants to states allowing for the establishment of community-based outpatient mental health centers. The legislation was meant to phase out institutionalism and reduce federal mental health costs. Though deinstitutionalization continued to accelerate after the adoption of Medicaid in 1965, only half of the proposed mental health centers were ever built and the CMHA provided no concrete plans for long-term funding.

The State of Michigan announced plans to close the Traverse City State Hospital by October 1989, proposing a move to community mental health treatment. Patients were discharged to the streets, and Traverse City's homeless population skyrocketed. In the hospital's final year, its patient population had dropped to only 140 individuals. The last patient was discharged in August 1989, and the Traverse City State Hospital closed its doors for good the following month. With nowhere else to go, some patients returned to the hospital even after its closure, banging on the doors and begging to be re-admitted.

Today, the “beauty is therapy” ideal eludes society, where mental institutions are scarce and many individuals facing mental illness are left to suffer on their own with limited community services. The Traverse City State Hospital remains in people's memories as an old “cathedral of care,” where mental health patients could be surrounded by beauty, equipped with skills, and rehabilitated in an environment filled with light, inspiration, and hope.

Preserving the Beauty

The Traverse City State Hospital was dormant for 13 years. It wasn't until the 1990s that a serious conversation began about what to do with the historic buildings and grounds. Finally, Ray Minervini Sr., a preservationist, threw his hat in the ring as a potential redeveloper of the property. He formed the Minervi Group, which developed a vision to adapt the historic buildings and grounds into



a mixed-use neighborhood—inspired by the recent urbanism movement—where shops, restaurants, workspaces, and homes could be arranged in a walkable community space. The Minervini Group purchased the old Traverse City State Hospital property for only \$1, with the agreement to immediately replace the roof on Building 50, a \$1.5 million investment.

Today, renovations continue to be made to the property's old cottages, which are accessible to visitors through a historical tour. Building 50 has been transformed to include condos, professional offices, and an indoor marketplace. The Minervini Group continues to forge ahead with restoring and adaptively reusing the old hospital by seeking community input and inspiration from potential buyers about the possibilities for the next chapter in the historical asylum's story.

The renovated Traverse City State Hospital holds the city's past, present, and future in its magnificent structure, bridging the gap between the lives touched by its beauty as the Northern Michigan Asylum and the people who now live, work, and enjoy spending time at the Village at Grand Traverse Commons, the property's new name. The Traverse City State Hospital made a powerful impact on the community by providing employment, commerce, care, and a sense of community. As a historic site, it now brings the same healing beauty to Traverse City. ☒

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