

A Guide to the Chesterfield County (Va.), Health and Medical Records, 1780-1904

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History

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Title Statement

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Descriptive Summary

Collection Number

0007770387

Language

English

Creator

Chesterfield County (Va.) Circuit Court

Extent

.225 cf (1/2 hollinger)

Repository

The Library of Virginia

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

Use Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

Acquisition Information

This collection came to the Library of Virginia in a transfer of court papers from Chesterfield County Circuit Court.

Preferred Citation

Chesterfield County (Va.) Health and Medical Records, 1780-1904. Local government records collection, Chesterfield County Court Records, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

Adjunct Descriptive Data

Related Material

Additional Chesterfield County court records can be found on microfilm and in the Chancery Records Index at the Library of Virginia. Consult ["A Guide to Virginia County and City Records on Microfilm"](#) and [The Chancery Records Index](#).

Historical Information

Mental Health Records may consist of a variety of documents that historically were referred to as lunacy papers in the courthouses of Virginia localities and municipalities.

A fiduciary is an individual who enters into a confidential and legal relationship which binds them to act on behalf of another. Guardians are legally invested to take care of another person, and of the property and rights of that person. Thus, some records referred to as insanity papers are housed with fiduciary records and not with mental health records.

By 1792, Virginia's General Assembly enacted very strict laws governing the practice of inoculation. The new act required a license from the county court to administer vaccinations. It also included a penalty of \$1,500 or six months of imprisonment for anyone willfully spreading smallpox in a manner other than that specified by the act.

During its session begun in November 1769, the House of Burgesses passed an act establishing a hospital in Williamsburg for the mentally ill. The Eastern Lunatic Asylum (now Eastern State Hospital) was the first institution in America constructed as a mental hospital. The first patients were admitted in October 1773.

In January 1825 the Virginia General Assembly passed legislation providing for the construction of an asylum in the western part of the state. The institution, which became known as Western Lunatic Asylum, was constructed close to the town of Staunton, west of the Blue Ridge Mountains, and was the second mental health facility built in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The buildings and surrounding gardens were designed to embrace the idea of "moral therapy" for mentally ill patients by providing an aesthetically pleasing and tranquil atmosphere in which patients lived comfortably, exercised and worked outdoors.

Western Lunatic Asylum opened in 1828, accepting both male and female patients suffering from a variety of mental disorders. It should be noted that the hospital underwent a short-lived name change between 1861 and 1865, when it was known as Central Lunatic Asylum. (It should not be confused with an asylum of the same name later built in Petersburg, Virginia to house African American patients). From 1865 to 1894 the name was again Western Lunatic Asylum. However, in 1894 the General Assembly passed legislation changing the name to Western State Hospital.

In March 1882 a 300 acre tract of land was purchased by the City of Petersburg and given to the state for the purpose of constructing a permanent mental health facility for African Americans. Construction of the new facility near Petersburg was completed in early spring 1885. This later included a special building to house the criminally insane apart from the rest of the hospital population. An early institutional history notes that treatment at Central Lunatic Asylum during the 1890s was humane and emphasized the value of work and the benefits of recreation. However, practices at the facility also included seclusion, mechanical restraints, and the administering of hypnotics.

In 1894, Central Lunatic Asylum was officially renamed Central State Hospital. This piece of legislation also altered the names of the other mental health facilities in Virginia in an attempt to inspire a more positive image of the institutions, and of mental health treatment in general. It is important to note that another state institution located in Staunton, Virginia went by the name Central Lunatic Asylum between the years of 1861 and 1865. Its name later was changed to Western Lunatic Asylum, and is a separate facility with no connection to the Richmond/Petersburg hospital for African Americans.

In March 1884 the Virginia General Assembly appointed a board of commissioners to select a site for a new lunatic asylum for white citizens to be built west of New River near Marion, Virginia. Dr. Harvey Black became the first superintendent of Southwestern Lunatic Asylum when it opened in May 1887. Dr. Robert J. Preston and Dr. John S. Apperson served as assistant physicians, and Mr. C.W. White was appointed as

steward to oversee the day-to-day business operations of the hospital. The patient population grew steadily and over time several buildings were added to the hospital's campus including a tuberculosis treatment building, a building for the criminally insane, the Davis Clinic, and the Harmon Building. For much of its early history, the hospital was mostly self-sufficient through the utilization of its own farm for meat, milk, and vegetables. Other early hospital superintendents include Dr. Robert J. Preston (1888-1906), Dr. Daniel Trigg (1906-1908), Dr. J.C. King (1908-1915), Dr. E.H. Henderson (1915-1927), and Dr. George A. Wright (1927-1937). The hospital has gone through two name changes in its history. In 1894 the General Assembly passed legislation changing the name from Southwestern Lunatic Asylum to Southwestern State Hospital. In 1988, the name was changed to Southwestern Virginia Mental Health Institute.

Chesterfield County was named for Philip Dormer Stanhope, fourth earl of Chesterfield, British statesman and diplomat, and was formed from Henrico County in 1749. The county seat is Chesterfield Court House. Part of Henrico County was added to Chesterfield in 1922.

Scope and Content

Chesterfield County (Va.) Health and Medical Records, 1780-1904, consist of .225cf of Mental Health Records and Smallpox Epidemic Records.

Mental Health Records, 1780-1904, n.d. consists of 4 folders, and may include warrants, orders, petitions, depositions, reports, etc. for or by justices of the peace and others regarding the mental condition of individuals who were released to the recognizance of a family member or who were committed to a mental hospital. Includes references to several mental hospitals. Fiduciary records such as estate inventories of a person judged insane may also be present.

Smallpox Epidemic Records, 1829, 1836-1837, consist of three folders relating to smallpox hospitals and expenses associated with them regarding treatment of smallpox outbreaks in Chesterfield County. Minutes of a meeting of justices of the peace in 1829 provide details of establishing a makeshift hospital at the home of Mr. Frances Watkins, appointing a physician and manager and outlining their duties, fees to be assessed to patients, and proposals for universal vaccination. A hospital near the town of Manchester was established to house patients during an outbreak between Nov. 1836 and April 1837. In addition to several bills and receipts related to hospital supplies and patient treatment are two reports and a letter from the physician to the justices near the close of the outbreak. One detailed hospital statement lists names of patients admitted, the majority of whom were enslaved or free African Americans, and includes the number of days hospitalized and whether a patient survived. Another report lists payments to be made to various personnel, as well as bills to be paid by owners for enslaved people treated, including the number of days treated and burial expenses if applicable. One physician's report also included payments to five free African American nurses, including Katy Cheatham, whose petition to remain in the Commonwealth was granted in 1840 largely due to her commendable service during the 1837 outbreak.

Index Terms

Corporate Names:

Chesterfield County (Va.) Circuit Court.
Central Lunatic Asylum for Colored Insane, Virginia.
Central State Hospital (Petersburg, Va.).
Eastern State Hospital (Va.).
Southwestern Lunatic Asylum (Marion, Va.).
Southwestern State Hospital (Marion, Va.).
Western State Hospital (Va.).

Subjects:

African Americans--Mental Health--Virginia--Chesterfield County.
County courts--Virginia--Chesterfield County.
Insanity--Jurisprudence--Virginia--Chesterfield County.
Jails--Virginia--Chesterfield County.
Medical laws and legislation--Virginia--Chesterfield County.
Mental illness--Virginia--Chesterfield County.
Physicians--Virginia--Chesterfield County.
Psychiatric hospitals--Virginia.

Public health--Virginia.
Public health administration--Virginia.
Public records--Virginia--Chesterfield County.
Slaves--Virginia--Chesterfield County.
Smallpox--Virginia--Chesterfield County.
Smallpox prevention.

Geographical Names:

Chesterfield County (Va.)--History--18th Century.
Chesterfield County (Va.)--History--19th Century.

Genre and Form Terms:

Health and Medical--Virginia--Chesterfield County.
Local government records--Virginia--Chesterfield County.

Arrangement

Chronological by year, then alphabetically by last name of individual.

Cases of Interest

Joseph S. Dudley, 1847

Scope and Content

Estate inventory includes valuations of five enslaved people: George, Davy, Bill, Johnson, and Robert.

Edward Wren, 1856

Scope and Content

The board of Eastern Lunatic Asylum determined that he was not ill and rejected him.

Charlotte Christian, 1880

Scope and Content

Justices ordered that she be sent to the Lunatic Asylum at Richmond.

Sarah A. Rowlett, 1884

Scope and Content

She was declared a lunatic in November 1883 and taken into custody by the sheriff. She petitioned the court for her own release. In January 1884 the executive committee at Eastern State Lunatic Asylum in Williamsburg declared her to be of sound mind, and did not accept her.

John T. Cottrell, 1889

Scope and Content

Includes a letter to Virginia Governor Fitzhugh Lee from R.J. Preston, Superintendent of Southwestern Lunatic Asylum (Marion, Va.), regarding this patient, but in which he writes primarily of the crowded conditions of the hospital and the types of rooms and patients they can accommodate.

Buck Ford, 1892

Scope and Content

Includes a postcard to the sheriff from Randolph Barksdale, Superintendent and Physician of Central Lunatic Asylum (in Petersburg, for African Americans).

Unknown, 1894

Scope and Content

This file only includes a postcard from Randolph Barksdale, and documents the name change of Central Lunatic Asylum to Central State Hospital, also noting that the hospital is crowded.

Mrs. L. Baker, 1894

Scope and Content

Includes letter from superintendent of the Eastern Lunatic Asylum informing the Sheriff that they have no room, and suggests they apply for Mrs. Baker at Staunton.

Tom Watts and Winston Staten, 1900

Scope and Content

Includes letter and postcard from Superintendent William F. Drewry of Central State Hospital explaining that these two people (most likely African Americans) cannot be admitted due to overcrowding. Unlike postcards from just a few years prior, the postcard is pre-printed with text regarding reasons for being unable to admit patients, and has blanks on which to enter information.

William Garthright, 1900

Scope and Content

Includes a handwritten statement signed by forty neighbors asserting that Garthright has recovered and that they fear no harm from him.