

A Guide to the Cumberland County (Va.) Health and Medical Records, 1770-1904

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History

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Descriptive Summary

Collection Number

1156173

Language

English

Creator

Cumberland County (Va.) Circuit Court

Extent

2 folders

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 Cumberland County Circuit Court.

Preferred Citation

Cumberland County (Va.) Health and Medical Records, 1770-1904. Local government records collection, Cumberland County Court Records, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

Adjunct Descriptive Data

Related Material

Additional Cumberland 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.

First known as commissions, the Justice of the Peace office originated with the county quarterly court in 1623. Commanders of Plantations (1607-1629) were predecessors of the commissioners, who since 1662 have been called justices of the peace. They have traditionally had both civil and criminal jurisdiction, and have served other functions, including performing coroners' and lunacy inquisitions. Until 1869 justices served both as judges of the county court and as individual justices; since then they have had only the latter function.

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.

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.

Cumberland County was named for William Augustus, duke of Cumberland, third son of King George II. It was formed from Goochland County in 1749.

Scope and Content

Cumberland County (Va.) Health and Medical Records, 1770-1904, consist of 2 folders of Mental Health Records and Smallpox Epidemic Records.

Mental Health Records, 1770-1904 contains one folder which includes warrants, orders, petitions, depositions, reports, etc. for or by justices of the peace, local sheriffs, 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. Fiduciary records such as estate inventories of a person judged insane and receipts for services transporting persons to hospitals may also be present. References lunatic hospital in Williamsburg in documents as early as 1806.

Smallpox Epidemic Records, 1829-1873, consist of one folder of documents relating to quarantines and hospitals for the containment and/or treatment of smallpox outbreaks in Cumberland County.

Index Terms

Corporate Names:

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

Subjects:

African Americans--Mental Health--Virginia--Cumberland County.
County courts--Virginia--Cumberland County.
Insanity--Jurisprudence--Virginia--Cumberland County.
Jails--Virginia--Cumberland County.
Medical laws and legislation--Virginia--Cumberland County.
Mental illness--Virginia--Cumberland County.
Physicians--Virginia--Cumberland County.
Psychiatric hospitals--Virginia.
Public health--Virginia.
Public health administration--Virginia.
Public records--Virginia--Cumberland County.
Quarantine--Virginia--Cumberland County.
Smallpox--Virginia--Cumberland County.
Smallpox prevention.

Geographical Names:

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

Genre and Form Terms:

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

Arrangement

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

Documents of Interest

Mental Health Records (selected)

James Stratten, 1848-1849.

Scope and Content

Documents pertaining to James Stratten who was sent from jail to Virginia Lunatic Asylum at Williamsburg, also referenced as Eastern Asylum. Correspondence indicates he was not accepted in Nov. 1848 but was remanded back to jail and released Jan. 12 1849, only to have been jailed by April 1853 as a lunatic again.

Elijah Pritchett and others, 1855-1858.

Scope and Content

Various documents regarding Eastern Lunatic Asylum and Western Lunatic Asylum not admitting certain persons confined to jail. These persons were not considered citizens in jail, even if jailed for lunacy. Thus, asylums would not admit them as patients.

Letter, Aug. 18, 1876.

Scope and Content

letter from James D. Moncure Superintendent of the Penal Hospital and Secretary of Board of Directors to Judge William Pope Dabney regarding a proposition to house white prisoners declared lunatics confined in jails with nowhere to go for hospitalization.

Johnny Holcombe, 1898.

Scope and Content

Record states he was to be sent to Central Lunatic Asylum, which was an asylum for African Americans.

Smallpox Epidemic Records (selected)

Court order, March 1829.

Scope and Content

Ordered the establishment of smallpox hospitals as necessary in the county's poor houses, with commissioners appointed and physicians and nurses to be employed.

Minutes and documents, 1837-1838.

Scope and Content

An outbreak between February 1837 and July 1838 led justices of the peace to establish a smallpox hospital on the plantation of J.C. Allen under the direction of Dr. Edward J. Erambert.

Minutes and documents, 1854.

Scope and Content

In April 1854 the justices responded to the report of Dr. John Miller and Dr. James Lyle, who declared the home of Rev. Olcott Bulsley to be quarantined and used as a smallpox hospital. The justices appointed seven men to serve as a "committee of vigilance" to enforce the quarantine.

Receipt, 1856.

Scope and Content

References the discharge of "Martha Jenkins & child" and "another free negro child".

Report, 1858.

Scope and Content

Report of Dr. Thomas L. Robinson and Peter T. Coleman in May 1858 diagnosed Meredith Mayo, free man of color, with smallpox.

Order, 1873.

Scope and Content

Establishing smallpox hospital at the home of Adam Wilson on Dr. Willis Wilson's plantation, as Dr. Wilson

was infected. Also orders the nearby families of Beverly Combs and Archer Wilson to be included and to be housed there also under quarantine.