

History of the South Carolina Department of Mental Health



In the 1800's a need was noticed for mental health care. Robert Mills, a renowned architect, was chosen to design a facility for mental health care in South Carolina. In 1822 the cornerstone was laid for the Mills Building, which took six years to complete. The building's many innovations included fire-proof ceilings, a central heating system, and one of the country's first roof gardens. South Carolina's facility was one of the first in the nation built expressly for the mentally ill and funded by a state government.

Despite its innovative architecture, many problems arose within a few years after the asylum opened. Complaints ranged from narrow halls and staircases and small activity rooms to flooding on the ground floor. Another issue was expansion of the facility onto other grounds of the property.

During the Civil War Dr. John W. Parker, the superintendent, opposed a plan to turn his complex into a prisoner-of-war camp. Although the Confederate Army did not get the facility, the grounds were used as a prison camp for Union officers from October 1864 to February 1865.

Despite worsening conditions late in the war, the facility became a refuge for many Columbia residents when the city burned during Union General William T. Sherman's occupation in February 1865. With dwindling provisions, Parker did his best to provide for his patients and for the destitute citizens. Like the rest of the South, the facility struggled to survive in the aftermath of the war.

Notable changes before 1900 included the founding in 1892 of a nursing school, which did not close until 1950.

With changes in how health care is provided the facility became increasingly outdated and less effective in meeting patient needs. Physicians found that patients treated in the community do much better clinically. People with mental illnesses need and require close family and community support. They get better faster and stay better longer when they receive services in their community, if such programs are reasonably funded, well organized and easily available. For these reasons this facility has been phased out and has been sitting vacant.

Adapted from: South Carolina Department of Mental Health <http://www.state.sc.us/dmh/history.htm>

