



New Beginnings: Celebrating the Future of Old Main

The “Old Main” building at Mohawk Valley Psychiatric Center had been closed since 1978. However, under Governor Pataki’s leadership, New York State has pursued a policy of reuse and revitalization of underused facilities and it is now reopening to organize and preserve the State records and artifacts related to the care, maintenance and recovery of individuals with mental illness. Renovation of the historic building’s first floor was determined to be a cost-effective solution to the Office of Mental Health’s (OMH) growing need for medical record and document storage. Renovations are complete, and OMH is establishing the Record and Artifact Center to safeguard medical records, documents and artifacts, and preserve New York State’s position as an innovative leader in mental health.

Work on the building’s renovation began in 2002. Most of the construction and renovation work was completed by an OMH Revitalization Special Project Crew, a team of OMH craftsmen assembled to complete a specific project in a time and cost-efficient manner. The project cost approximately \$900,000, and was partially funded by \$200,000 Federal *Save America’s Treasures* grant.

Earlier this year, the Preservation League of New York State selected the renovation of Old Main to receive an Award for

Excellence in Historic Preservation. The Awards Jury was particularly impressed by the care taken in restoring original features including the woodwork and antique lighting.

The new Record and Artifact Center will store documents and records currently kept by individual facilities, that must be retained for audits, operational history, and/or transfer to the New York State Archives. The New York State Archives and Records Administration has donated \$35,000 of high quality records storage shelving to the new facility, which will be open and staffed on a limited basis to accept records and artifacts from facilities, retrieve and return documents as necessary, and identify and retrieve documents for transfer to the State Archives or destruction. The new Center will free individual facility space currently used for record storage, making it available for treatment or other operational needs; reduce costs related to storage; and ensure preservation of documents until transfer to the State Archives.

It is anticipated that the building will begin receiving records from OMH psychiatric centers early this Summer. When the building re-opens, the center section will be used for record processing and meeting space, and the wings will hold OMH records and artifacts.

Looking Back: Celebrating the History of Old Main

The Old Main Building at Mohawk Valley Psychiatric Center is internationally recognized as a monumental example of the Greek Revival Architectural tradition. The huge size of the stone structure is perhaps its most significant feature; it is 550 feet long and averages 50 feet in depth. The projecting central portico is 120 feet long and is dominated by six limestone columns 48 feet high and eight feet in diameter at the base. "No European public edifice has a grander Greek Doric portico than that which dominates the tremendous four story front block..." architectural historian Henry Russell Hitchcock wrote in his definitive *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*.

The history of the building is equally significant; it opened in 1843 as the first New York State owned and operated institution to care for the mentally ill; it was also one of the first such institu-

tions in the United States. The story of Old Main actually began in 1836, when the New York State Legislature passed an "Act to Establish the New York State Lunatic Asylum." A commission was appointed to purchase a site and build the institution, and in 1837, 130 acres of land on the western boundaries of Utica were purchased for \$16,300; New York State contributed \$10,000 and the remainder was raised by citizens of Utica.

Architect William Clarke headed a Commission to supervise the construction of the facility, and his committee planned four identical buildings at right angles to each other, enclosing a center court or garden. The buildings were to be constructed of hammered limestone brought in from the Stittville Quarry by horse and wagon, and from the Little Falls Quarry via barges on the Erie Canal. Costs became prohibitive and it was then decided to complete just one building.

The mechanical systems of the original building incorporated the "latest improvements in construction." Thirty hot air wood

When the Old Main Building First Opened in 1843.....

- John Tyler was President of the United States, which at that time had only 26 states. William C. Bouck was Governor of New York State, and Frederick Hollister was Mayor of Utica.
- The Erie Canal had been completed in 1825, and by 1842 a series of short rail lines ran generally parallel to the canal, making it possible to travel from Buffalo to Albany by train. The cost of a train ticket from Utica to New York City was \$6.00.
- Charles Dickens published "A Christmas Carol" and "Martin Chuzzlewit" in 1843. Robert Browning wrote "A Blot in the Scutcheon," Tennyson wrote "Morte d'Arthur" and "Locksley Hall," and William Wordsworth was appointed English Poet Laureate. Noah Webster, who is famous for his "Webster's Dictionary," died in 1843.
- And many significant events were still to come, including:
- Elias Howe invented and patented the sewing machine in 1846; Charles Darwin published his theories of evolution in "Origin of the Species" in 1859; the Civil War began in 1861; Alexander Graham Bell had his first telephone conversation in 1876; and the Statue of Liberty was dedicated in 1886.

burning furnaces in the basement required two cords of wood per day to provide heat for the building. Ventilators opening from the rooms to flues in the walls allowed air to circulate continuously. Hot and cold running water was supplied to each floor, the cold water coming from the roof while the warm water was pumped by a steam engine from basement storage tanks.

The prevailing medical theory of the time advocated that patients be segregated by sex and type and degree of illness, with each group housed in a self contained unit. As far as possible, the interior layout of the building was arranged to provide optimum conditions for the patients. In 1850, a listing of accommodations noted: 380 single rooms for patients, 24 for their attendants, 20 dormitories, each accommodating from 5 to 12 persons, 16 parlors or day rooms, 12 dining rooms, 24 bathing rooms, 24 closets and 24 water closets.

New York State continued to operate the building as an inpatient facility for individuals with mental illness from its 1843 opening until it closed in 1978.

In 1971, the building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and in 1989 its status was elevated to National Historic Landmark.

**Reopening of the Old Main Building
at Mohawk Valley Psychiatric Center
May 25, 2005**

New York State
George E. Pataki, Governor

Office of Mental Health
Sharon E. Carpinello, RN, PhD, Commissioner