

Historic Garden Designed to Support Mental Health

by Carol Sobczak

Dr. Thomas Story Kirkbride had a plan to heal the mentally insane and it involved interaction with the natural world in the form of gardening and farm therapy. During the years following the Civil War on the outskirts of Buffalo, the State of New York sponsored the building of a Mental Health Facility to house people unable or too poor to cope with life on their own. Many were indigent, suffering from alcoholism, stress disorders or other mental incapacities that left them shunned and homeless.

Henry Hobson Richardson was an ambitious talented young architect selected to design the Buffalo State Hospital for the Insane to house the outcasts of the city. It would be his first major work. At the same time, **Frederick Law Olmstead** and his partner, **Calvert Vaux**, were in town designing the Buffalo Parks System. The participation of these four men created a property that set a grand standard in stabilizing mental health.



Richardson Olmsted
Complex Photo Credit:
Wikipedia.org

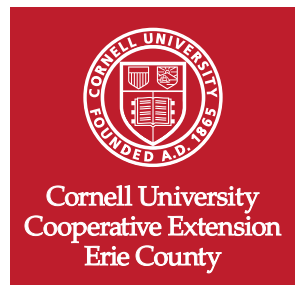
Fresh air, sunlight, healthy food, outdoor games and activities on the South Lawn were the basis of everyday treatment. Fresh flowers were placed in the rooms, patients were encouraged to work in the flower gardens, farm fields, orchards and greenhouse on the property. The North Lawn soil was refurbished, adding 3 1/2 inches of good topsoil to 50 acres of the farm fields bordering Scajaquada Creek. The hospital administration was serious about raising animals, farming and producing enough food to support the facility and have surplus as well. The paths from the dormitories to the farm fields were bordered in flowers encouraging strolls. The nearby kitchens prepared the fresh produce and stored the surplus in their large root cellar. The head gardener, an agronomist, kept copious notes on production methods,

his field hands, the participation of patients, and anecdotes about the farm. The returns in health and wealth were judged to be considerable.

Today the South Lawn gardens are being restored with native and compatible plants in the practical rain gardens originally designed by Olmstead and Vaux. The footprint of the North Lawn farm and barns that remain unused by Buffalo State College is being carefully preserved for future development. The Towers Building is being renovated to house The Henry, a state of the art hotel and convention center that is scheduled to open in the fall of 2016. Several types of restaurants will be open to the general public offering a respite after spending time enjoying the lawns.

“Hard Hat” tours of the grounds are being offered by the Richardson Olmstead Complex. To tour the towers and gardens and witness the rebirth of a grand piece of landscape and architecture, contact the office by phone at (716) 601-1150, or access their website at www.richardson-olmstead.com/visit.

It is an outstanding property with an incredible history. Witness the progress and realize another benefit of horticulture in our great garden city! 🍷



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