



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**CENTRAL STATE HOSPITAL MARKS 150 YEARS on JUNE 7, 2020**

*The state mental health hospital in Petersburg was the first psychiatric institution  
in the United States exclusively for African Americans*

**RICHMOND, VA** – The Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS) announced that on June 7, 2020, Central State Hospital in Petersburg will mark its 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. The hospital was founded in 1870 as the first psychiatric institution in the United States exclusively for African Americans. Its opening influenced other states to develop services for African-Americans. Central State remained segregated until 1968. This anniversary is an opportunity to recognize the important contributions and historic significance of Central State Hospital to the Commonwealth of Virginia and to the nation, including:

- **June 7, 1870** – the Commonwealth of Virginia accepted legal and medical responsibility from the federal government for administration of the “Central Lunatic Asylum for Colored Insane.”
- **1882** – Mayfield Farm in Dinwiddie County was purchased by the City of Petersburg, and the property was given to the Commonwealth of Virginia for developing the hospital.
- **1885** – the new hospital was erected on the 584-acre Mayfield plantation.
- **1894** – the hospital was renamed Central State Hospital.
- **1870 to 1968** – Central State Hospital remained segregated by race and was the only hospital in Virginia that accepted African American mental patients from throughout the state.
- **1968 to Present Day** – With the opening of the first locally-run community services boards (CSBs), Central State became an active participant in developing the community system that brought mental health services to people closer to where they lived and allowed state hospitals to concentrate efforts on individuals with serious mental illnesses who required intensive treatment.
- **Today** – Today, Central State houses the only maximum security mental health unit in Virginia and serves a major role in ensuring public safety throughout the Commonwealth. It also operates a civil unit. As of June 2 there are 229 patients at Central State Hospital and 829 full-time staff.
- **Future** – Plans are now underway to build a replacement Central State Hospital that will be safer, more secure and will incorporate special features that facilitate the delivery of highly-specialized, recovery-oriented treatment.

“Central State was the first hospital of its kind in Virginia dedicated to treating African Americans with mental illness until the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964,” said **Secretary of Health and Human Resources Daniel Carey, MD**. “The hospital has experienced a great deal of change in its long history, from being built exclusively for African Americans to evolving to be inclusive for all Virginians who need behavioral healthcare. This 150 year milestone reminds us of the importance of knowing our roots, honoring those that came before us, recognizing tremendous progress, and celebrating a bright future.”

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“On this historical anniversary, we recognize not just Central State’s past, but its present and future,” said **DBHDS Commissioner Alison Land**. “Virginia is on a path to transform the delivery of behavioral health care services. Especially with plans for a new hospital underway, Central State will be a significant part of this improved system, representing quality, state-of-the-art care, and helping thousands of people regain their lives in the community well into the future. I cannot be more grateful for the skilled and dedicated staff at Central State who have been going the extra mile to improve the lives of those in their care.”

Central State Hospital had planned an event in June to commemorate its anniversary; however, following the COVID-19 public health emergency, events have been postponed until the months of September and October as virtual events. The events will provide an opportunity to learn about and honor the complex and rich history of Central State with historians and subject matter experts. More details about the upcoming virtual events will be available in the coming weeks.

For decades, the belief of our society was to treat mental illness by institutionalizing people. People with mental illness were crowded into large institutions and were managed instead of receiving treatment. Like other state hospitals, history shows long-term commitments were common at Central State Hospital for people who were deemed to have an “unsound mind.” Yet, as advancements were made in medications and community services, Central State became a place where people can and do recover from mental illness, even serious mental illness.

The images below are historical images from Central State Hospital and include captions. **All of the images below are attached in higher resolution. They may be used with credit to Central State Hospital, except where other credit is noted on individual images below.**



***1. Louis Armstrong performance (1956) - Central State Hospital was host to numerous famous performers for patient’s enjoyment, including Lena Horne, Ella Fitzgerald, and pictured here, Louis Armstrong. (Photo credit: James W. Burke)***

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CHAP. 146.—An ACT to establish the Central Lunatic Asylum.

Approved June 7, 1870.

Whereas, it appears to the general assembly that the present Preamble lunatic asylums, for persons of unsound mind, are insufficient for the reception and care of all such unfortunate persons; and whereas, there now exist at Howard's Grove, near the city of Richmond, several lots of land, with suitable buildings thereon for the reception and care of such persons, to the use of which the state of Virginia is entitled for the term of ten years next ensuing, from the first day of January, eighteen hundred and seventy, under a lease made and entered into with Bacon Tait, the owner thereof:

1. Be it enacted by the general assembly, That a lunatic Lunatic asylum is hereby established, to be located temporarily at established at Howard's Grove, near the city of Richmond, which shall be for the reception and treatment of colored persons of unsound mind; and the governor shall forthwith appoint a court of directors, consisting of eleven persons, as convenient to the said Howard's Grove as may be; and they are hereby constituted and appointed, with their successors, a body politic and corporate, to have perpetual succession, by the name of The Directors of the Central Lunatic Asylum; and by that name may sue and be sued, and may and shall have and use a common seal; and are authorized to take any estate, real or personal, given or to be given to said hospital, or to themselves, for the use thereof, so as the annual income of such donations shall not exceed the sum of three thousand dollars.

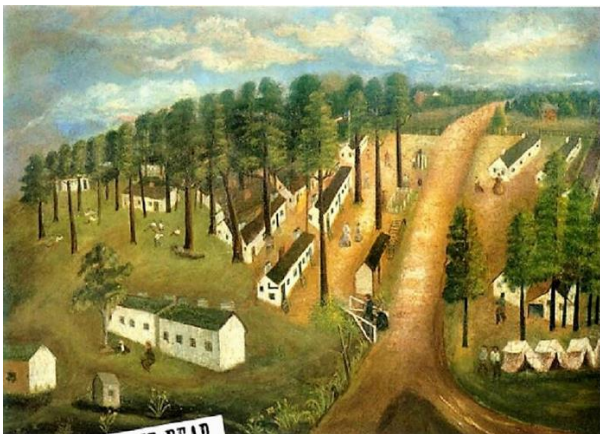
2. The expenses of said asylum shall be provided for and paid in the same manner that the expenses of similar institutions in this commonwealth are now provided and paid.

3. The said lunatic asylum is hereby invested with all the rights, powers, and privileges conferred, and made subject to the rules, regulations, and restrictions imposed, by the eighty-fifth chapter of the Code of Virginia.

4. This act shall be in force from its passage.

Commencement

**2. General Assembly Act of 1870** - On December 17, 1869, acting military Governor of Virginia, Union Army General Edward Canby declared Howard's Grove Hospital as a state asylum for the care of African Americans with mental illness. Prior to that time, it was the commonly held belief that enslaved African Americans were immune from mental illness and that only white landowners were at risk. Howards Grove Hospital was maintained by the Freedman's Bureau until February, 1870. On February 1, 1870, the State of Virginia assumed control of the hospital which by then housed "123 patients and 100 paupers", including 30 individuals transferred from Eastern Lunatic Asylum in Williamsburg. Then, on June 7, 1870, the General Assembly Signed into law an act incorporating the Central Lunatic Asylum at Howards Grove. Its purpose was declared to be the reception and treatment of colored persons of unsound mind, making the facility the first of its kind in the nation and the world.



**3. Howards Grove** - On June 7, 1870, the Virginia General Assembly established an act that incorporated the Central Lunatic Asylum at Howards Grove. Located just outside of Richmond (off of what is now called Mechanicsville Turnpike), Howards Grove was formerly a Confederate army hospital. (Photo credit: Chicago Museum of History)

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**4. General Kitchen** - The Original Kitchen was built in the late 1800s and many patients had jobs working there over the years. Dr. William Francis Drewry, superintendent from 1896 to 1924, opposed “the placing of persons in cells or strait jackets” and instead placed emphasis on “healthy food, recreation, work therapy and a friendly homelike atmosphere.”



**5. Building 1 (1904)** - Constructed in 1885, the original building at Central Lunatic Asylum (pictured here in 1904 as viewed from atop the stack to the pump house), would eventually come to be known known as the “Old Administration Building”. With a four story center wing for administration and offices, it had three story wings on either side with six wards each for patients and attendants.



**6. Building 1 exterior – meeting (1908)** - Picture taken in 1908 in front of Building #1 - National Conference of Charities and Corrections

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**7. Field Day (Date Unknown)** - Individuals competing in a sack race as part of a Field Day activity.



**8. Crowded Ward (Date Unknown)** - Records indicate that in 1917, Central State Hospital had approximately 1700 individuals in its care and by 1948, that number grew to nearly 4000. By 1950, a ward in a building known as East View is said to have housed more than 300 persons in one room. Pictured here is an example of one such overcrowded ward.

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The Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS) seeks to promote dignity, choice, recovery, and the highest possible level of participation in work, relationships, and all aspects of community life for individuals with mental illness, developmental disabilities or substance-use disorders. DBHDS operates 12 state facilities and partners with 40 locally-run community services boards and over a thousand private providers statewide. For more information, please visit [www.dbhds.virginia.gov](http://www.dbhds.virginia.gov), [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#).