Ohio institution was forerunner in humane treatment of the mentally ill

By Margaret Quamme
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For years, Athens, Ohio, was dominated by two institutions: Ohio University and the Athens Lunatic Asylum.

The university is the larger presence now — and has, in fact, taken over many of the buildings and grounds of the asylum — but, for many decades, the asylum was a much larger presence in the town and its surroundings. With thousands of inmates and hundreds of staff members, it was the major economic influence on the area and the largest building for 100 miles in any direction.

Katherine Ziff’s fascinating Asylum on the Hill concentrates on the first 20 years of the institution, from 1874 to 1893, when it was a cutting-edge example of progressive care for the mentally ill.

The asylum, built on the model of “moral treatment” of the mentally ill developed by Dr. Thomas Kirkbride of Pennsylvania, proposed to “cure its patients with ordinary routines, beautiful views of the countryside, exposure to the arts, a built environment with abundant natural light and plenty of ventilation, outdoor exercise, useful occupation and personal attention from a physician.”

This marked a break from the past, in which custodial or punitive care for the mentally ill had been the norm.

The asylum, which had one wing for men and another for women, treated both long-term and short-term patients with a variety of problems: Civil War veterans suffering from what we would now call post-traumatic stress disorder, women worn down by childbirth, Alzheimer’s patients, the homeless, victims of seizure disorders, those who had attempted suicide, victims of abuse, those depressed by tough economic conditions and people suffering from delusions.
After the first golden period of well-intentioned treatment, the asylum became severely overcrowded, and beatings and mistreatment by untrained attendants became more common.

Ziff’s detailed research into patient records and letters yields tantalizing glimpses into the lives of those taken into the asylum, as well as those of staff members, including an attendant who wrote many letters home, the cook responsible for supervising the preparation of three meals a day for 1,000 people, and Dr. Agnes Johnson, the first female asylum physician in the United States.

The book provides an absorbing account of the logistics of building and running such a large, complex institution, which required 18.5 million bricks (manufactured on the site), and the invention of a filtration system to deal with the “chocolate-colored” water from the Hocking River. It even lists the output of the asylum garden: In 1886, for example, the garden produced 3,026 dozen cucumbers, 21 barrels of sauerkraut, 106 gallons of spiced cherries and much more.

The volume is amply illustrated with period photographs, reproductions of letters, maps, tables and postcards.

The Asylum on the Hill goes beyond local interest to provide insight into the successes and failures of an early attempt to deal humanely with the mentally ill.