

# The Lunatic Asylum

Lex in the Age of Cholera

By Terry Foody

**A**lmost 200 years ago, citizens in Lexington envisioned a hospital to care for the poor, disabled and mentally ill. This Lunatic Asylum (Insane Refuge) has been a part of Lexington all this time, and is now Eastern State Hospital.



The treatment of the mentally ill in the 1800s was limited by the theories and practices of the time. There was a tendency to institutionalize those with birth defects, epilepsy, dementia and old age feebleness. Many of the patients were indigents with no family or friends.

**[In Lexington] the cholera deaths were divided into City Wards and then the Lunatic Asylum. Were these patients not seen as part of the general population? (They came from different counties and states.) Or were there so many deaths at the Asylum that it warranted a separate report? Who gets marginalized in a disaster/epidemic? In Katrina, it was the poor, old, and chronically ill.**

Patients were occupied in domestic and farm labor. This would "arouse dormant or wayward energies to consistent and vigorous action". (Dr. W.S. Chipley's Report to the Commonwealth, 1858-9). "Command you your mind from play every moment in the day" \* (UK Special Collections).

With a low cure rate, many patients admitted to the hospital eventually died there. "Acclimating disease" with symptoms of diarrhea and low grade fever was a chronic problem. But Asiatic

Cholera was the true grim reaper. When the Cholera Epidemics struck Lexington in 1833, and '49, 100 victims were from Eastern State. Environment may have been a big factor. There was a mingling of the drinking water source with the common sewer under the building. Correction of this diminished mortality.

In the 1849 Lexington newspaper, the cholera deaths were divided into City Wards and then the Lunatic Asylum. Were these patients not seen as part of the general population? (They came from different counties and states.) Or were there so many deaths at the Asylum that it warranted a separate report? Who gets marginalized in a disaster/epidemic? In Katrina, it was the poor, old and chronically ill.

Recently, there was a reburial at Eastern State of eleven bodies from an unmarked, unknown mass grave. How easy it would be to end up like this. Anyone can become indigent, alone, mentally ill, institutionalized. With a pandemic flu; mass, unmarked graves might be a possibility. Disease is a great equalizer.

We learned in 9/11 that every part of a person has dignity and importance. Identification of remains is crucial to survivors.

The scientists who studied the Eastern State bodies found clues about the person's life from bones and fragments. What will happen if the property is developed with no thought to other possible graves? Is this really a safe refuge/resting place for the insane?

We are responsible to preserve graves and deceased information for those decedents who will seek and have no one to ask. ■

(Terry Foody, RN, MSN Certified Clinical Research Coordinator)

Notes: \*handwritten quote on back of Chipley's report.  
Other sources: *Lexington Observer & Reporter*, Aug 18, 1849.  
*White, Ronald F. Dialogue on Madness: Eastern State Lunatic Asylum and mental health policies in KY 1824-1883. UK Thesis, 1984.*  
*Ranck, George W. History of Lexington, KY, 1872.*

## The Research Update

By Mary Hatton

The Fall of 2006 I joined the ESH Cemetery Club. Being a retired Registered Nurse with 20 years of patient care at Eastern State Hospital and a researcher. I decided the most productive way to help the ESH Cemetery Club was by researching for names of patients who lived, died, and buried at ESH or were buried elsewhere.

Research has been made possible through the efforts of many people, such as patient relatives, friends, and other interested persons who want to see the cemetery and building on the historic register preserved. The Eastern State Hospital research was taken public on the Fayette Co. KYGenWeb because Eastern State Hospital is located in Fayette County.

In December 2006, **Naming the Forgotten - The Eastern State Hospital Project** began as a special project within the KYGenWeb (<http://www.rootsweb.com/~kygenweb/esh/>). Working with various records, our goal is



Bruce Burris's son placed the dove next to this marker last summer.

to identify those who lived and died at the hospital before 1956. Prior to the state mandated registration of deaths in 1911, records pertaining to these individuals are scarce.

**Naming the Forgotten - The Eastern State Hospital Project** is assisting the Eastern State Hospital Cemetery Club by sharing information found regarding persons interred at the hospital cemetery.

Research is being conducted using public records such as death certificates, newspaper obituaries, newspaper court commitments, census, mortality indexes, circuit court commitments, letters, Find-A-Grave, ESH annual reports, ESH deeds, pictures, and medical records given by families. Also, found on the website are Eastern State Hospital Tables and Statistics 1907-1909 & 1958 Division of State for Asylums.

Sometimes items are discovered by accident. I was in Fleming Co. at the courthouse getting circuit court commitments when the resident genealogist brought out two books that she saved from the trash. One book contained the Legislative Annual Report from the State of Kentucky ending October 10th, 1879 & the second book contained the Legislative Annual Report from the State of Kentucky ending March 31st, 1881. Both books had the names of all patients who were in ESH, their usual residence, and means of support. Court Commitments have been found in both circuit court and county court offices in Bourbon and Harrison Counties.

Relatives and interested persons now have a website: (<http://www.rootsweb.com/~kygenweb/esh/>), a contact, and a means to obtain medical records. Relatives can contact me for information to obtain medical records for both ESH & the Old Kentucky State Hospital that closed in 1977.

One relative added the ESH Cemetery to Find-A-Grave. There have been 295 patient names added to Find-A-Grave to date. ■