

History of the Walter E. Fernald Development Center

By Marie E. Daly

The Fernald Development Center, located at 200 Trapelo Road, is the oldest institution that serves people with developmental disabilities in the Western Hemisphere. Founded by Samuel Gridley Howe as the Massachusetts School for the Feeble-Minded in 1848, the school was originally located in South Boston. Howe was an abolitionist and reformer, who also founded the Perkins Institute for the Blind. His wife, Julia Ward Howe, wrote *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. Howe and the second superintendent, Edward Jarvis, had a primarily moral / religious mission, i.e. to make clean, productive, responsible citizens of high-functioning disabled youths. The education included classroom training, manual training at shoe repair, broom making, rag rug making, weaving, knitting and sewing and housekeeping, music therapy, dancing and athletics. But by the 1870s under Jarvis, the school came under increasing pressure to accommodate adults with more chronic disabilities who required custodial care, and consequently the school needed more space.

In response to this pressure, the legislature appropriated in 1887 \$25,000 for the purchase of land in Waltham. The first purchase was the 18-acre Bird estate, located off Waverley Oaks Road, and in 1888, construction began for the school campus in Waltham. Before the school moved to Waltham, this was farm land belonging primarily to the Bird, Baldwin, Lawrence and Warren families. Although the school did grow a number of crops here, it was never intended as a hospital farm. Instead, another institution in Templeton was established to grow food. Nevertheless, aerial photos show that much of the western part of the campus was either wetlands or under cultivation. Indeed, there once was a cow barn here large enough for 50 head of cattle, and a horse barn. Land purchases continued into the twentieth century, so that the institution eventually encompassed 180+ acres of land between Trapelo Road and Waverley Oaks Road.



North Nurses' Home ca 1905

From 1889, the institution grew in size from 142 residents, to 494 in 1911, to 1,330 in 1926, to 1,890 in 1945, to its peak of 2,600 residents in the 1960s. The third superintendent (1888 – 1924), Walter E. Fernald became an internationally renowned authority on mental retardation. Under his administration, the mission of the school changed to a more scientifically based pursuit. But

underlying the early 20th century growth of the institution was the pseudoscience, *eugenics*, a misapplication of Darwinian principles and genetics. Its politically conservative adherents claimed that people of color, immigrants, Jews, southern Europeans, developmentally disabled people and the rural poor were “polluting the gene pool of society.” With widespread implementation of IQ testing, children who tested below normal were labeled as retarded, and in some cases taken from their families and institutionalized. Walter E. Fernald was on the board of the Eugenics Society, and had initially advocated the forced sterilization of people with developmental disabilities. He later renounced this idea, and instead promoted strictly enforced segregation into state-run institutions. The field of eugenics was deservedly discredited after World War II, when the world made the appalling discovery of the concentration camps – the Nazi’s ultimate application of eugenic ideas.

In America, the eugenics-inspired segregation of disabled people caused the rapid growth of institutions all over the country, including the Fernald. In addition, people who did not have developmental disabilities were virtually incarcerated at the Fernald and institutions like it. These included people who tested below average on IQ tests (termed “morons”), children from broken or disordered, poor families, and orphans in state foster care. Walter E. Fernald’s mission of scientific investigation and the inclusion of poor, delinquent, orphaned and epileptic people in the institution continued under the next superintendent, Dr. Ransom Greene. With the increased population, and subsequent decreased per-capita funding, the school needed the free manual labor of the non-disabled inmates to help run the institution. At one point, Dr. Greene stated that he needed a mix of 30% “morons” to keep the school operating. So there were powerful financial incentives to keep the non-disabled incarcerated. Furthermore the inadequate state funding resulted in lower staff-to-inmate ratios, and some overwhelmed staff resorting to abuse to manage their charges. Recent reports have highlighted the abusive care of the residents in the 1940s and 1950s.

In addition to being incarcerated, abused, poorly educated and malnourished, many of the Fernald residents were unwitting participants in medical experiments, such as the “Science Club” children who were fed radioactive isotopes with their oatmeal. While the doses were probably too small to harm the children, they had not given their consent, and had been given disproportionately large rewards for their participation. Consequently, these experiments violated the Nuremberg Code, ethical principles for medical experimentation established after the Nazi Holocaust.

But the reports of the conditions of the 1950s do not reflect the current care. In 1972, parents, guardians and advocates for the disabled sued the Commonwealth in federal court. The judge ordered increased state funding, and better treatment of the disabled. As a result of federal court order, many residents were placed in community residential facilities, and the care of the remaining residents was vastly improved. A sprawling, one-storey cottage complex was built to provide more intimate and home-like residences for those who remained. By 1979, the number of residents had decreased to 1,161. The Fernald Center now houses 248 [in 2005] residents, the majority of whom are profoundly disabled.

Most of the nineteenth century buildings were designed by one architect, William G. Preston, who advocated a cottage concept laid out, not in a “checkerboard” fashion, but rather dispersed amid a largely preserved landscape of rolling hills. Preston designed many of the buildings in a Queen Anne style with Romanesque or Craftsman overtones. The buildings have fieldstone foundations, red brick construction, sandstone trim, corbelled cornices, overhanging slate roofs and decorative brickwork. In the 1930s, another architect, Clarence P. Hoyt designed buildings in the colonial revival style common to state institutions of that era. Since the 1950s, construction at the institution has

possessed no architectural design of merit and has greatly disturbed the landscape. But with its tree-lined parks and hilly landscape, the oldest part of the campus has the ambience of a New England village. Candace Jenkins, the state consultant who nominated the campus for the National Register of Historic Landmarks, said "The Walter E. Fernald State School possesses integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and associations."



Aerial View of Fernald Center in 1952

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