

Letchworth Village: The Newest State Institution For The Feeble-minded And Epileptic

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This paper, from 1912, describes what is viewed as the finest institution of its time. Consider how attitudes have (or haven't) changed in under 100 years.

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SUPERINTENDENT LETCHWORTH VILLAGE
- 2 Letchworth Village is situated in the town of Haverstraw, on the west side of the Hudson river and three miles back from it. Its 2,000 acres stretch away to the west, climbing the Ramapo hills to a height of 1,100 feet. The farm and building sites comprise about 1,300 acres and include a tract of land bounded on the west and north by the Ramapo hills, on the east by the highway running through Thiells, and on the south by farms. The Minnisceongo creek, like the flat side of a broad blade, cuts the territory in two with its forty feet of average width. To the east of this stream is a broad ridge, rising abruptly and again dipping rapidly toward the main line of the Erie railroad and the highway. The best farming land of the village is located on this ridge. Between the Minnisceongo creek and the Ramapo hills on the west extends a broad valley, running almost the entire length of the improvable land. Here will be located the groups of buildings for girls and women. This region is a natural fruit country. Scattered over the farm is an abundance of small fruit and grafted apple trees. A second growth of chestnut and oak covers the hills.
- 3 During the past year an important piece of work has been accomplished, when it is considered that we are planning for a very large institution. Plans have been prepared for buildings which may be administered economically and which at the same time will present architectural beauty. Several principles laid down in the beginning have been rigidly adhered to. Some of the ideas were obtained in a personal interview with that student of institutional conditions and noted philanthropist, William Pryor Letchworth, whose name the village bears.
- 4 The first was that the line of segregation between the sexes should be firmly drawn. Dormitories for girls are to be separated from those for boys by a stream running through the middle of the grounds. Other decisions were that buildings should not be more than two stories high, nor should they contain more than seventy inmates; that the basements should not be used for purposes other than storage; that the dormitories should be at least two hundred feet apart, with sufficient space for each to have its own playgrounds; that there should be such separation of groups that inmates of one grade could not come in contact with those of another grade; and that in locating the buildings advantage should be taken of the natural beauty of the place. With these principles in view, we have planned an institution with six separate groups, each distinct and complete in itself and so far removed from the others that it may be considered as a small institution by itself. That is, each group will consist of a certain number of dormitories, varying in size to accommodate from sixteen to seventy inmates, arranged in general like a horseshoe. In the center of each group is to be located a kitchen and dining-room building and a hall which will be used for gymnasium, dances, entertainments, and Sunday school. In those groups which are designed for improvable cases there will be a school and industrial building. Slightly removed from each group is an attendant's home and doctor's house, for each group is to have a doctor and matron in charge who will be responsible to the superintendent. In this manner three groups are planned for each sex; one for the young and improvable; one for the middle-aged and industrious; and one for the infirm and helpless.
- 5 The other buildings necessary to make a complete institution are also provided for in units. The administration group will consist of an office building, cottages for men and women officers and a library and fire station. The hospitals for acute cases and the laboratory for scientific purposes constitute still another group. A tuberculosis hospital is hidden away among the cedars on an adjacent hill. In the center of the main tract are grouped the boiler house, laundry, refrigerating plant, bakery, store-house, and workshops. There will also be observation buildings where inmates may be carefully classified before being transferred to the various sub-groups. A club house is planned where all the officers of the institution may meet for social purposes. It is hoped that a community provided for in this way may give the personal touch of a small institution, but at the same time have the advantages of classification and economic administration of a large one.

- 6 As the law provides that we are to care for epileptic and feeble-minded persons, and as the training for both is along similar lines, it has been thought advisable to classify both feeble-minded and epileptics into groups, separating them only with distinct and suitable buildings.
- 7 The purpose of an institution of this nature is four-fold. First, it is a home where the feeble-minded and epileptic of all ages may be given the pleasures and comforts of the ordinary home. To this end our day rooms will be provided with games, colored pictures, flowers, music, etc. Each dormitory will have its own playgrounds where base-ball, football, basket-ball, croquet, etc., may be played by the children. Swings, hammocks, and picnic grounds will be provided for in a grove. Holidays will be celebrated in an appropriate and American fashion. A birthday party will be given each month for those having birthdays that month, making a gala evening for all. Inmates and employes will join in a weekly dance. There will be Sunday services appropriate to the condition and belief of the various inmates.
- 8 The second purpose of the institution is to be a school where suitable training will be given to all of school age. By suitable training is meant training that will eventually be of the most benefit in aiding the graduates to self-help, and that will at the same time provide them with mental and manual discipline calculated to increase their enjoyment in their enforced mode of life. It has been abundantly shown in older institutions that the wise teaching of the feeble-minded has been a profitable investment for the state from an economic point of view.
- 9 The training of the lower grades of both feeble-minded and epileptics should consist in a variety of active gymnastic exercises, planned to stimulate their mental processes as well as their physical development. In training defectives there should be a routine of work and play so arranged as to occupy all the hours not needed for sleep. Just what is done is not so important as the life and enthusiasm with which it is done. It must be borne in mind that many will be the rough workers of the institution after they pass the training period.
- 10 The higher grades receive education along the same lines, except that they are trained to be the finished workers for the state. It is essential for this group that, school-room work be prescribed combining a minimum of mental with a maximum of hand work. Live gymnasium classes, military drills, and industrial work in shops devoted to a variety of hand training are also necessary. What is produced is a by-product and is not to be considered the primary object.
- 11 An institution for the feeble-minded should be looked upon as a great school where everyone is teacher and where the personality of the highest as well as the lowest employe should be made most of. The cook, the laundress, and the laborer who come into most intimate relations with these unfortunates have more influence on their lives than those farther removed.
- 12 The third purpose of the institution is coming to be recognized in every well organized plant of this kind. It is the laboratory purpose. When we realize that our institutions are filled with groups of from four to six children from single families which extend back beyond the reach of obtainable histories, we see that scientific study becomes imperative. Just how these studies shall be conducted is beyond the scope of a superintendent to direct. It is to be expected that much experimenting will be done before we find the right way, but only thus can advance be made. It is our purpose, however, to aid and stimulate in every way the workers in this field.
- 13 The fourth purpose can best be understood when we stop to think that this vast amount of energy must be kept by the state and utilized in such a way that its charges shall be happy and society protected. The institution should be a work-shop. The best work-shop for excess energy of this kind is the land. There is no reason why men and women not needed in the routine of an institution should not be busy out-of-doors, raising everything, if possible, that is consumed by this segregated community.