

A Brief History of the Syracuse State School

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Valdosta State University

Events that occurred on September 8 in the history of psychology

1854 (chosen event)

The cornerstone was laid for the State Asylum for Idiots in Syracuse, New York, the first building in the United States expressly built for the care and training of people with mental retardation and developmental disabilities. The program itself, directed by Harvey B. Wilbur, had begun in Albany in 1851. The institution's name was later changed to the Syracuse State School.

1878

Joseph Peterson was born. Peterson did early work in auditory and visual perception, learning, intelligence testing, and the transfer of training. APA President, 1934.

1932

The journal Character and Personality was first published by Duke University. The title was later changed to the Journal of Personality.

1938

The APA voted to apply for membership in the Inter-Society Color Council, a group concerned with color perception and industry standards. Clarence Ferree, A. T. Poffenberger, and Forrest Lee Dimmick were the first APA representatives on the Council. Their first informal report to the APA was made on September 8, 1933, and their first formal report was made on August 25, 1934.

1938

The APA voted to provide a subscription to Psychological Bulletin for each member. Seventy-five cents of each member's dues was allocated for this purpose. The action took effect on January 1, 1939.

1947

The APA Committee on Scientific and Professional Ethics was established. This was the APA's first group to deal with professional ethical issues, but it used unwritten, informal procedures to handle incidents that were brought to its attention. Robert S. Sessions chaired the committee.

1960

The manual for George K. Bennett, Harold G. Seashore, and Alexander G. Wesman's Differential Aptitude Test was published.

1964

The Pennsylvania Psychological Association was incorporated.

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In 1846, New York State legislature approved construction plans for what would become “the first building in the United States expressly built for the care and training of people with mental retardation and developmental disabilities” (Koch, 2018). Construction of an experimental location for the New York Asylum for Idiots began in Albany, New York, in 1851 (Syracuse Developmental Center). Soon after the school began admitting students under its first superintendent, Hervey B. Wilbur, M.D., “prominent Syracuse citizens successfully petitioned the trustees to accept donated land near Syracuse as the site for a permanent institution” (Syracuse Developmental Center). The cornerstone for this new building was laid on September 8, 1854 (Koch, 2018).

Wilbur was, in part, inspired by Édouard Séguin, who had opened a school for the mentally disabled in Paris (Brown, 1886). Wilbur admired Séguin’s confidence in those with special needs, stating at Séguin’s funeral, “[U]p to a very recent time the class in question had been regarded as beyond the reach of any efforts for their improvement. But here was one who had overleaped the barriers of this outcast class...” (qtd. in Brown, 1886). One of Séguin’s students, Maria Montessori, based much of her famous educational method (the Montessori Method) on observations she made at Wilbur’s school in Syracuse (A Short History).

In 1855, the school transferred its 50 students to the new building in Syracuse, which had a capacity of 100 students (The State Idiot Asylum, 1855; Syracuse Developmental Center). However, the trustees had underestimated the growth of the school; as the first of its kind, it quickly attracted those in need, growing to 435 students by 1887 (Smith 1888). The needs of the mentally disabled were not as culturally salient at this time in history; as a writer at the New York Times noted, “The number of children in this State for whom such an institution will be

useful is much larger than is commonly supposed” (The state idiot asylum, 1855). For this reason, the school found itself under constant construction; by 1888, a hospital building, a laundry building, an extension to the boy’s building, and a new barn, stable, and wagon-house had been added (Smith, 1888).

The purpose of the New York Asylum for Idiots was to educate children who would not be able to keep up at a regular school. The school accepted students who were deficient in intelligence but capable of education, with the goal of helping them achieve independence and integration into the community (Smith, 1888).

After the death of Dr. Wilbur in 1883, leadership was passed from Dr. G.A. Doran to Alvira E. Wood, “matron of the institution since it opened,” and finally to Dr. James S. Carson, who served for 27 years after his appointment on October 8, 1884 (Syracuse Developmental Center; Hill, 1903-1904).

To further the goal of fostering independence in their students, the school purchased farmland in the nearby town of Fairmount in 1883 for the older students to cultivate: “the first of many ‘colonies’ established” (Syracuse Developmental Center). All students were employed: the boys as farmhands, and the girls as domestic servants in homes around Syracuse (Syracuse State School, 2016). Wages went toward room and board, but any surplus was for students to keep (Syracuse State School, 2016). The living quarters held about 20 students each; the boys’ colonies were on the school farm, and the girls’ colonies were scattered around Syracuse (Syracuse State School, 2016).

Due to the cyclical nature of terms for intellectual disability, the school underwent numerous name changes over the years. The first of these was the change from “New York Asylum for Idiots” to “Syracuse State Institution for Feeble-Minded Children” in 1891 (A Short

History). Then, in 1919, the name was changed to the “Syracuse State School for Mental Defectives,” and shortened in 1927 to “Syracuse State School” (Syracuse Developmental Center).

The school continued to grow, adding colonies, libraries, and, in 1942, a hatchery unit (Syracuse Developmental Center). By 1946, there were a total of sixteen colonies (Syracuse Developmental Center). However, in the 1960s, the school began to lose traction: “In 1964, five colonies were turned over to the Syracuse Psychiatric Center for the training of blind and emotionally disturbed children. Other colonies closed in the mid-1960s, and placement into group homes increased” (Syracuse Developmental Center).

With the 1970s came the normalization movement, which emphasized integrating people with disabilities into society instead of isolating them in their own programs and institutions (Syracuse Developmental Center). Because of these cultural changes, the city decided to downsize the school, and the cornerstone for a new, smaller building was laid in 1971 (Syracuse Developmental Center). It opened in 1972 and was renamed the “Syracuse Developmental Center” in 1973 (Syracuse Developmental Center). In 1976 and 1977, the old colonies were repurposed as community residences (Syracuse Developmental Center). The SDC’s Children’s Fundamental Learning Program ceased in 1982 as local school districts began to provide similar services (Syracuse Developmental Center.) Finally, “Closure plans were developed in 1995, when, in February, Governor Pataki announced reduction of the number of Developmental Disability Services Offices (DDSO) statewide and merger of the Rome and Syracuse districts” (Syracuse Developmental Center). After some delays involving the transference of residents with serious medical needs, the SDC closed on June 17, 1998 (Syracuse Developmental Center).

The original building, presumably defunct since 1972, was sold to Syracuse Resort Development, Inc. for \$2.2 million in May 2008, “over the objections of Syracuse officials” (Dunbar, 2013; Knauss, 2012). However, Syracuse Resort Development neglected to pay taxes or develop the land and filed for bankruptcy in 2010 (Dunbar, 2013; Knauss, 2012). In order to liquidate the assets and pay creditors, an auction was held in April 2013, and the former SDC was purchased by a mysterious investor: “After the winning bidder was awarded the bid, he immediately covered his face, ran out of the courthouse, and continued running for a few blocks. When reporters finally caught up with the man, he would only say he was an ‘agent’” (Knauss, 2012; Dunbar, 2013). Later, a Jewish technical college and high school based in California claimed the purchase, saying that they planned to use the building as a new school site (Dunbar, 2013). The mysterious bidder was identified as Felix Sater, “Russian born ‘two-time ex-con turned government informant, and at least one-time adviser to Donald Trump’” (Hall). It is not clear why the Jewish Educational Trade School chose him to do their bidding. Either way, since 2013, no progress on an East Coast campus has been made, and ownership of the property was never actually transferred to the school—rather, “Syracuse Center LLC is listed as the official owner...according to Onondaga County property tax records” (Hall, 2017). Syracuse Center LLC sued the city for pricing the land incorrectly, but the city is owed “more than \$343,000 in back taxes” (Hall, 2017). The building has fallen into disrepair: “Vandals have broken many windows and thieves have stripped the building of valuables” (Hall, 2017). Pictures of it are even featured on abandonedbuildings.net, a website for the photography of abandoned buildings (Cahal). It seems that the fate of the historic building is uncertain.

I found no reports of abuse or inhumane conditions throughout the functioning years of the Syracuse State School, although that doesn’t mean that they never existed. However,

disability historian Laurie Block wrote fondly of its founder, Dr. Hervey Wilbur, saying, “I like the man and feel assured, after reading nearly thirty years of his remarks, that his interests squarely focused on the wellbeing of his charges” (2002). Dr. Wilbur’s founding of the Syracuse State School paved the way for many more of its kind, leading to further research and discussion on the topic of intellectual disabilities. This inscription used to grace a marble tablet within the entrance to the school and probably remains, collecting dust:

Hervey Backus Wilbur, M. D., the first in America to attempt the education of the feeble-minded, and the first superintendent of this asylum. By his wisdom, zeal and humanity he secured its permanent establishment. (qtd. in Brown)

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