Queering The Medical Model
St. Elizabeths Hospital
Washington, DC

FETISHISM
St. Elizabeths Hospital is a psychiatric hospital in Southeast, Washington, D.C.

It opened in 1855 under the name Government Hospital for the Insane, the first federally operated psychiatric hospital in the United States. Housing over 8,000 patients at its peak in the 1950s, the hospital had a fully functioning medical-surgical unit, a school of nursing, accredited internships and psychiatric residencies.

Its campus was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1990.

What started as a well-intended mental health facility, became a place of extreme pain for tens of thousands of the LGBTQ+ community.

Patients were treated for “sexual deviance” under The Sexual Psychopath Act of 1948.
Vergangenheitsbewältigung
Pyromania on an emotional sexual basis
Where are these men?
Asleep beneath their grounds:
And strangers, fond as they, their furrows plough.
Earth laughs in flowers, to see her boastful boys.
Eventually, the process was modified so that patients were assessed within forty-eight hours. If the process took longer, the patient had to stand before a judge and jury and have his or her illness the subject of public inquiry. Families and friends of the patient were called to testify about the behavior and mental fitness of the “accused” in the open court. The rationale for the law stemmed from a fear that without such a thorough public review insane persons could be forced into mental institutions for nefarious reasons. But Overholser dismissed the notion of “railroading” people into institutions completely. The committee therefore determined a patient to be insane, the patient was sent to Gallinger Hospital for a ten-day assessment period to confirm the ruling before being committed to St. Elizabeths. In 1939, the commission disposed of 1,060 cases with only thirty-two requests for trial, far less than expected by the committee.

The treatment that provided a real long-term breakthrough was the use of the tranquilizing drug. Although the drug was available in the United States from 1927, it was not until 1952 that it was introduced into psychiatric practice. The drug was used to induce coma, and the patient was left in a state of semi-consciousness for several hours. The drug was later used to induce convulsions, which were thought to be beneficial in the treatment of psychiatric disorders.

In June 1940, St. Elizabeths was transferred from the Department of the Interior to the Public Health Service (PHS), a division of the Depression-era Federal Security Administration (FSA). The FSA had been created by “group together those agencies of the government whose major purpose was to promote social and economic security, educational opportunity, and the health of the citizens of the Nation.”21 Other offices created under the FSA included the Social Security Board, the Office of Education, and the federal functions of the American Printing House for the Blind, the Freedmen’s Hospital, Howard University, and the Columbia Institution for the Deaf.22 In 1946, an executive branch reorganization further changed the administration of St. Elizabeths by abolishing the board of visitors, which had been overseeing the hospital since 1855.

Affiliation with the PHS afforded St. Elizabeths the opportunity to relieve some of its overcrowding by transferring patients to other PHS facilities in other parts of the country. In 1943, the hospital reported transferring 950 white male patients to hospitals in Ft. Worth, Texas, and Lexington, Kentucky. Those transferred were most likely military patients, rather than civilian residents of the District of Columbia.23 St. Elizabeths also provided temporary space for insane soldiers from Walter Reed Army Hospital until a new psychiatric building was opened there in 1941. Arrangements were made with the War Department to admit 188 soldiers to wards in the new continuing treatment buildings on the east campus. The army assigned three medical officers to St. Elizabeths to oversee the care and treatment of the soldiers.24

In 1949, the hospital was transferred from the Department of the Army to the U.S. General Services Administration.25 This change in administration was intended to improve the management of the hospital and to ensure that it was used for the purposes for which it was intended.

Insulin-induced shock treatment was generally used for patients suffering from dementia praecox, or premature dementia. The patient was given a dose of insulin so that he or she went into a hypoglycemic coma. When slowly brought out of the coma with glucose injections, his or her personality would be temporarily “readjusted and his attitude toward himself and the outside world becomes more normal.” During that brief period, the doctors could discuss problems with the patient in an attempt to “banish his delusions.” Doctors noted that some patients who were prone to daytime delusions didn’t benefit from the therapy because they would find the psychosis more comfortable than reality. The therapy was also found not to be effective on patients who had been ill for more than a year.27

The drug metrazol was used in a similar way, but instead of putting the patient into a coma, it induced convulsions.65 Like the chemically induced shock therapy, the convulsions were thought to be beneficial in the treatment of psychiatric disorders. The convulsions were induced by an injection of the drug, and the patient was left in a state of semi-consciousness for several hours. The drug was later used to induce convulsions, which were thought to be beneficial in the treatment of psychiatric disorders.

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Exhibitionism
Frottage

Assault and Robbery
of Homosexuals
A special thank you to The Mattachine Society of Washington DC

Artist Zine & Short film created by Wes Holloway - 2022