

## The Fergus Falls State Hospital



JUST NORTH of Fergus Falls stands the vacant Fergus Falls State Hospital. Although its formidable appearance may call to mind wretched stories of its inhabitants, the building originally symbolized humane treatment for the mentally ill and its presence helped grow the city. The Third State Hospital for the Insane was built between 1888 and 1907. Shortly after it was completed it reached peak capacity, employing 500 professionals who cared for 2,000 patients.

By 1885, overcrowded state asylums in St. Peter and Rochester had necessitated building a new hospital. Fergus Falls was chosen as the location in order to better serve the state's population north of the Twin Cities. Minneapolis architect Warren B. Dunnell based his design on the Kirkbride Plan, the most popular asylum layout during the late nineteenth century, grounded on the theories of influential Philadelphia asylum superintendent Dr. Thomas Kirkbride. Kirkbride believed in architecture's ability to influence people's psychological states and published a treatise containing detailed principles for asylum design, which incorporated openness, light, and privacy. His perspective came from the moral treatment philosophy that replaced prevailing practices of cruelty and brutality with a paternalistic code of ethics emphasizing kindness and compassion.

At the Fergus Falls State Hospital, corner towers flank a six-story administration hub. Two three-story wings containing patient rooms fan out to the sides and curve to the



*Fergus Falls State Hospital, approximately 1915. (MNHS COLLECTIONS)*

back, forming a U shape. Dunnell's Castle on the Hill, a local name for the Chateausque-style building, reaches 1,600 feet from one end of its U shape to the other. However, in spite of its vast size, over time the hospital became overcrowded, with chained restraints and lobotomies replacing calm activities.

The advent of psychotropic drugs in the 1950s and the cost of maintaining large institutions like the Kirkbrides led to decreased state and federal funding for inpatient facilities. By the 1980s, the emphasis was on complete deinstitutionalization. When the Fergus Falls Regional Hospital closed in 2005, only about 100 drug-rehab patients remained.

In 1986, Fergus Falls State Hospital, which in addition to the administration building includes

more than a dozen other freestanding buildings, was listed in the National Register of Historic Places, primarily for its significance as Minnesota's only extant Kirkbride building. For years the fate of the facility divided preservationists and city leaders, but a healthy compromise was achieved in spring 2018. Some buildings not visible from the primary façade were demolished, but two separate sections of buildings located at the ends of the U shape are slated for rehabilitation as rental housing, thanks in part to state and federal historic tax credits. The fate of the remainder of the massive vacant structure is still up in the air, but preservationists hope that as the current rehabilitation progresses it will be a catalyst for additional work.

—Anne Drolet



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