Historic Hospital

East Louisiana State Hospital an outstanding example of Greek Revival architecture

In the late 1840s, Louisiana became a pioneer in the treatment of mental illness when it opened the Esplan Asylum of the State of Louisiana, one of the first 10 mental hospitals in the country.

The building, still in use today as the East Louisiana State Hospital in Jackson, is considered one of the state's most outstanding examples of Greek Revival architecture.

The west wing of the hospital was built in 1847 followed by the east wing in 1848. The identical three-story wings each contained 30 single apartments with six dormitories on the third floors. These wings were built for "state patients," indigents who were unable to pay.

The four-story center building was begun in 1853 and completed in 1856. Made of locally produced brick, the center building connected the two wings. The architect on the three buildings was a Mr. Gibbens (probably C.N. Gibbens), who had been given instructions to design a building that did not look like a prison.

On Nov. 21, 1848, the asylum accepted its first patients, the entire mentally ill population of Charity Hospital in New Orleans. The group of 85 patients traveled by steamboat up the Mississippi River to Bayou Sara and from there by ox cart to the asylum.

New Orleans had been hit with epidemics of yellow fever, smallpox and cholera in the first half of the 19th century. The hospitals were full of ill patients. Few beds were left for the mentally ill.

"The patients who came here were welcomed to have come from jail," said Mamie Rouzan, who has studied the history of the hospital for many years. "In those days, mentally ill people were kept either in homes or in jails."

Historical documents from 1848 describe the location of the hospital as "within convenient distance of the business part of the pretty village of Jackson and at all times of easy access to same, but separated from the noise and hustle of the village by a small stream which renders it secluded to protect patients from the annoying gaze of the idle and curious."

The center building has a Greek temple-style portico front with six large Ionic columns with cast-iron bases and caps. The wing sections have massive rear colonnades with three-story columns. At the top of the center building is an octagonal cupola with one of the earliest Seth Thomas tower clocks.

The center building was never completed according to the architect's plans. The rear of the building was to have extended another 100 feet, but the Legislature never provided the additional funds.

The center building contained living quarters for the superintendent and his family, a grand staircase, a chapel, offices, six dining rooms, parlors, reception rooms and accommodations for paying patients. The finest accommodations — a bedroom, bath and dressing room on the ground floor — cost $40 a month.

In the 1890s, little was known about mental illness, and patients were hospitalized for many causes. A hospital record book from...
Patients at the hospital worked in facilities on the grounds as shown in this file photo of workers caning.

Many of the old brick buildings at East Louisiana State Hospital were torn down to make way for modern buildings.

"Because of the architectural significance and the fact that the building has been in constant operation all these years, said we'd be a strong contender for National Landmark status," Guttzeit said.

Rouzan works on the historic building, which is in desperate need of repair. "Lots of ramshackle buildings were torn down to build those tacky buildings," Rouzan said. "These buildings would have been treasured in the extreme if they were in New Orleans or St. Francisville."