



Trail Of History



The Laurelton State School

by Charles McC. Snyder

Originally, the Laurelton Feeble Minded Home, later, the Laurelton State Village, and more recently, the Laurelton State School has been the largest employer in Hartley Township, absorbing some of the surplus of labor created by the demise of the lumbering era of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

It came about as a part of the American impulse to render help to the unfortunates in society. Dorthea Dix had led the movement for a more humane treatment of the insane, and state insane asylums had been the response throughout the country during the second half of the 19th century. Danville received such an institution here in the Susquehanna Valley.

In the post-Civil War era it was the orphans in the wake of the war who received public recognition and support. McAllisterville was the recipient of such a home and school, and the churches and "secret societies," such as the Odd Fellows, for example, later broadened the movement to provide institutions for needy orphans whatever the cause.

At the turn of the century, also, counties, cities and townships focused upon the destitute, who had been subsidized haphazardly in private homes, and created "poor houses" where families might be held together.

Prison reform was still another crusade reaching back into the early 19th century. Locally, Dr. Mary B. Harris of Lewisburg headed the new Federal Industrial Institution for Women in Alderson, West Virginia, which contained no walls, and where inmates were housed in cottages. The Northeastern Federal Prison in Kelly Township was designed to reform the convicts by educating them.



Mrs. George Earle, II, (Mother of Governor Earle and Dr. Mary M. Wolfe) at Cornerstone - laying ceremony at Laurelton State Village in the 1920's.

But the retarded or "feeble minded," had received little public attention until the study of psychology, a new social science in the late 19th century, came along to focus upon them. A theory that mental retardation was transmitted through heredity was popularized by a study of a Jukes family, living in the backwoods of New York by Richard L. Dugdale. And the need, it seemed, was the separation of the retarded from society by sexes, and placing them in institutions where they could not breed. Those intelligent enough to receive instruction would be trained, and when too old to bear children would be released in the care of families, who would obtain their labor in return for supervision.

sylvania and the Federation of Women's Clubs a bill providing for a "Pennsylvania Village for Feeble-minded Women of Child Bearing Age" was passed by the Pennsylvania Legislature in 1913, and a Board of Managers for it was named by Governor Tenor. Among the appointees was Dr. Mary M. Wolfe, a graduate of Bucknell University and the Medical School of the University of Michigan, and an administrator of the Norristown State Hospital for the Insane, who had worked actively to obtain the law. At the initial meeting of the Board she was named as Superintendent.

It next turned to the location of the institution, a matter avoided by the Legislature. The act, however, required that it be located on the State Forest Preserve, and Union County's legislators, and civic leaders of the West End, including Dr. O.W.H. Glover, D.R. Pursley and Harry Voneida, went into action, recommending state property on the north side of Route 15 at the foot of the Seven Mile Narrows, with a beautiful outlook over the valley and Jacks Mountain beyond, and well removed from centers of population. They strengthened their case by further designating farm land which might be purchased at reasonable costs.

Their proposal was accepted by the Board on August 5, 1914, and the piece by piece it shaped up there. A year later cottage 1 appeared, in 1917 numbers 2 and 3 were added, in 1924 number 4 came on line, 5, 6 and 7 followed in 1925, and 9 and 10 in 1927. Meanwhile, several farms were acquired for meat, grain and dairy products, and by 1938 the complex totaled more than 1400 acres.

1938 there were 710. Meanwhile there was employment for a medical and nursing staff, attendants in the dormitories around the clock, a steward, a supply and maintenance staff, summer employees consisting of young women from high schools and colleges to accompany the inmates to the fields to hoe the crops, and farmers to tend the fields, stables, and pig farm.

Dynamic and dedicated, Dr. Wolfe ran a "taut ship," dealing not only with personnel, buildings and grounds, but also with discipline and many more details. She was efficient, and at times, formidable.

Politics inevitably entered into decision making, and the Board became increasingly politicized. When the Democrats elected George Earle, III, as Governor in 1934 Republicans who had heretofore monopolized the appointments were replaced by Democrats, and Dr. Wolfe changed her registration to survive. In a dramatic turnabout in 1940 the Board finally maneuvered her into retirement.

In time the doctrinaire approach of management yielded to a greater emphasis upon the well-being of the interne or "student," and emphasis upon heredity yielded to a concern for the social environment of the handicapped. A program of training and parole was initiated, and the enrollment turned downward. The trend has continued.