

65 The State Village, Part 4

An Outside View

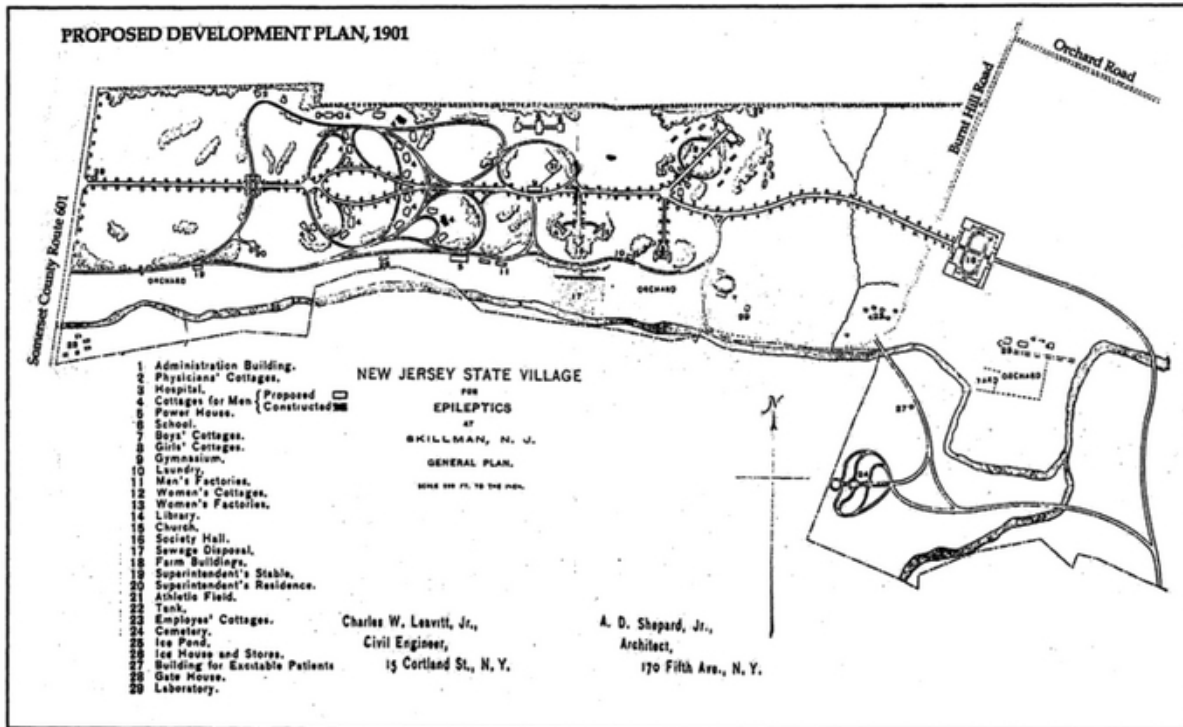
This is the final blog in a series about the NJ State Village for Epileptics, which later became NJ Neuropsychiatric Institute, and then North Princeton Development Center. These institutions were at the current location of Skillman Park for a combined 100 years. They started with just a handful of patients in a farmhouse in 1898 and grew to a facility that cared for 1600 patients at its peak.

In previous blogs, we shared the story of the beginning of the State Village and its link to the eugenics movement. We shared what it was like to live on the grounds of the State Village and NJNPI through the voices of those who grew up there. In this blog, we explore the memories of some people who didn't live or grow up at the State Village, but interacted with it in different ways.

It's always interesting to find out what people remember about a particular place that played a part in their personal journey. The State Village and its succeeding institutions played a prominent part in the local community, providing employment, recreation, and entertainment for residents.

Thanks to Ann Allen, Ken Chrusz, Larry May, Eric Perkins, Peggy Querec, Emma Tufano, Dick Van Zandt, and Bill Van Zandt for helping us frame an outside view of these institutions.

****Note:** These contributors were not associated with the State Village during the same period of time, so they may refer to the facility as the State Village, Institute, or NPDC.



The design of the State Village was created in 1901 by noted landscape architect/engineer, Charles W. Leavitt.

It might seem strange that the residents of Blawenburg would be attracted to an institution such as NJNPI. But as Eric Perkins said, "People congregated at the Institute because it was the closest thing we had to a community center."

Local folks worked at the Institute, coordinated local emergency services with them, played baseball on its fields, volunteered to help its patients, had social events at Smalley Hall, skated and fished on Sylvan Lake, and more.

Here are some random recollections from the days mainly from the period when it was NJ Neuropsychiatric Institute.

Sylvan Lake

Sylvan Lake was created by damming Rock Brook, which flowed from the Sourland Mountain (aka Zion Mountain). The lake provided many happy times and memories for the local kids, particularly in the winter. Many remember going there to ice skate. It must have been colder than it is these days because the skating season was longer and there was enough ice to harvest and place in the ice house to sustain the residents in the summertime.

Emma Tufano said that "Ice skating on the lake was a real treat for our family."

"If the lake was wide open," Bill Van Zandt remembered, "you could skate all the way down to the dam and then back. If it had snow on it, then you were restricted by what

got cleared. We skated there often. We had much more cold weather in those days than we do nowadays.”

There was a system for people to know whether it was safe to skate on the lake. According to Dick Van Zandt, Dr. Martin, who lived in a house at the lake, would test the ice and put up a red or green flag. Of course, skaters were eager to see that green flag go up.

Going to School

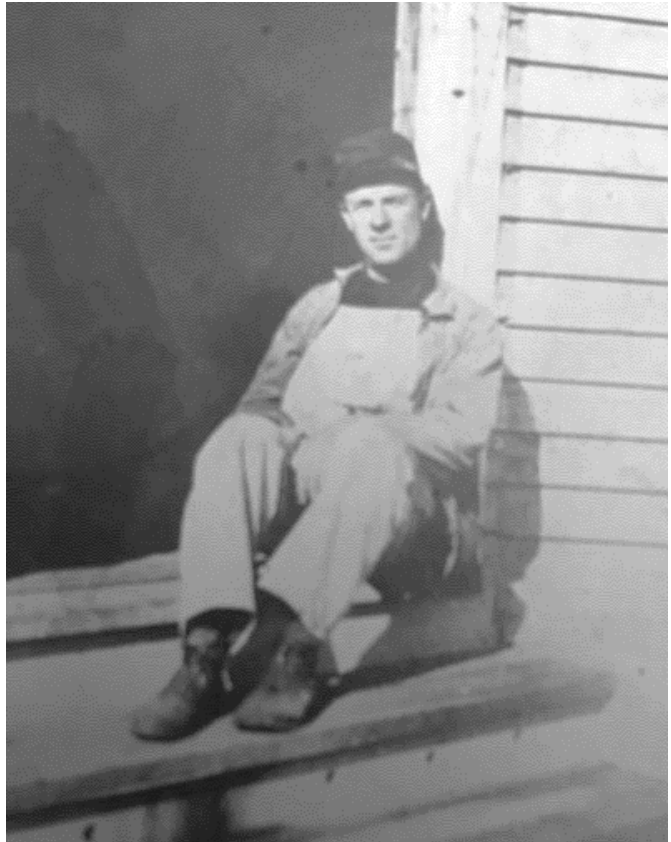
“Children whose parents worked and lived in the Village went to Montgomery Schools,” Emma Tufano said. “All the children from the Blawenburg and Skillman schools went to Harlingen School for 8th grade. That's where the principal was, and she taught 8th grade. I went to Harlingen School K-8. Montgomery had an 8th grade class of 23 students when I graduated. From there we all went to Princeton High. (In her working career, Emma was the secretary of Burnt Hill Road School for many years.)

Eric Perkins and Dick Van Zandt both played in the school band. “We used to practice for the annual Hopewell Memorial Day parade by marching from the school down Burnt Hill Road and through the streets of the Village,” Eric recalled.

The Power House

The Power House was an important part of the State Village infrastructure. It provided the heat for all the buildings and it included a water tower that distributed the water campus wide. Emma Tufano grew up on a farm on Sunset Road. “My dad, John Muentener, was an engineer at the Power House,” she recalled. “At that time, the patients that lived there had epilepsy. From time to time, they would wander off the grounds and find their way up Sunset Road. We would call the Village police, and they would come and get them.”

Peggy Querec’s grandfather, Steven Augustus Terhune aka Gus, pictured below, was in charge of the Power House. He lived across the street from Blawenburg Church and his wife, Mary Hoagland Terhune, was the teacher at Blawenburg School. A picture of her with some of her students appears on the home page of this blog. Gus’s children were Ed, Bill, and Doug Terhune and Frances Terhune Conover.



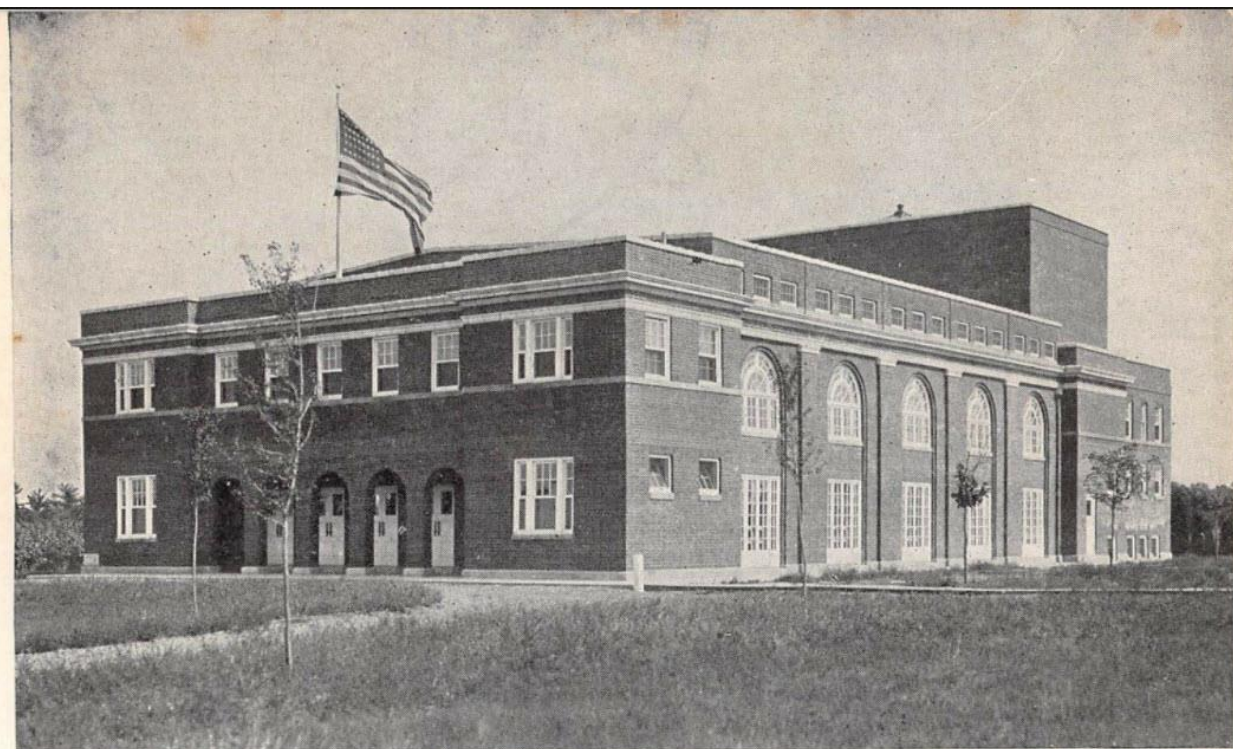
A Gathering Place

Smalley Hall was a multi-purpose building that was used by the Institute and community for many activities. Several people recalled that eighth grade graduations from Montgomery Township Schools were held there. At the time (prior to 1972), students went to Princeton High School, so a graduation from eighth grade signaled a passage to a high school in another town.

The hall had a full-sized gym, stage, and a balcony. Larry May and Dick Van Zandt played basketball there. "When I was in 6th grade, the only year that the school had interscholastic sports, we played our home basketball games at Smalley Hall," Larry recalled. Dick Van Zandt remembers that the out-of-bounds line was very close to the wall, so when the ball went out, it frequently bounced back into play.

Saturday afternoon movies were a big hit in the community. Local kids sat downstairs, and the patients were in the balcony.

On Saturday evenings, employees of the Institute and the people from the community would come to Smalley Hall for dances. Bill Van Zandt remembers going there as a child. "The kids would be in the balcony watching the adults dance downstairs. It was a gathering place where people could get together and just be joyful."



WILLIAM W. SMALLEY HALL
The New Jersey State Village for Epileptics at Skillman

An early postcard showing Smalley Hall

Farming

“The farm operation was significant,” Larry May recalls. “There was crop farming, a herd of milk cows and pigs, and a huge apple orchard. Labor for the farm was provided by prisoners that were brought out daily from the prison in Trenton. They were transported in an open bed truck.”

Emma Tufano remembers the apple orchards. “On the corner of Burnt Hill and Skillman Roads, where St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church is now located, they had a beautiful apple orchard. We were fortunate because my dad received a basket of apples every fall.”

Emergency Cooperation

Emergency calls were processed quite differently 60+ years ago in Montgomery Township. Larry May remembers how they did it. “The Institute had their own fire department and among the equipment which they had was the only aerial ladder truck available in the area. In those days, the Princeton fire departments would not respond to assist other departments outside of Princeton Township. Volunteers of Montgomery Volunteer Fire Co. No. 2 responded to fire calls when they heard the siren blow. For approximately 20 years, the siren was located atop two telephone poles at the rear of the firehouse on Route 13 (now Route 601) just north of the intersection with Route 518.

(Today, this location is behind New World Pizza on Rt. 601.) The dispatcher was the telephone operator at the Institute. People reporting an emergency called a local number that was routed to the Institute switchboard. The operator then hit the button, setting off the siren. The first volunteer to the firehouse had to answer the phone call from the operator/dispatcher to find out what and where the emergency was! The volunteer would then write the location on a chalk board for other volunteers who didn't make it in time to ride on one of the fire engines and had to drive to the scene in their personal car."

Bill Van Zandt was in the fire department as a teenager. "We did drills at the State Village/Institute all the time."



The Institute had its own police department, and Ken Chrusz, a retired Montgomery Township Police Officer, recalled how it operated. "It was headquartered in the building known as the Gate House at the intersection of Rt. 601 and the south entrance next to Sylvan Lake. The police officers were employees of the New Jersey Institutions & Agencies Police. In 1984, the name was changed to the New Jersey Department of Human Services Police. A New Jersey State Trooper was the commanding officer.

The patch for an Institute police uniform.

Baseball

Baseball was a big activity in Blawenburg. According to Bill Van Zandt, there was one ball field in Blawenburg, behind the 1923 Blawenburg School, now the Homestead business. Remnants of the backstop are still there today. But the Institute had more ball fields and was the place to go for games.

Bill recalls, "Before I was involved with the fire company, the fire company had a softball team that played at one of the ball fields at the Institute and the aides would bring some of the patients out to watch the game. Virtually every game, you'd see at least one episode/seizure of some kind. We just got used to it, and the aides knew how to take care of it. It was just part of their life, and we learned to accept it."

Serving others

There were many volunteer opportunities at the Institute. Peggy Querec has "lots of memories of doing Christmas candlelight services every year with Blawenburg Church Youth Fellowship." The church also caroled there at Christmastime.

Ann “Brownie” Allen remembers her mother going to the Institute as a Gray Lady, to help patients. These volunteers were affiliated with the American Red Cross and assisted as needed at the Institute.

Down in the Dump

What’s not to like about a dump! Larry May remembers the Institute dump that provided entertainment for him and his friends. “Near the farmhouse (north side of 601 near Montgomery High School) was the Institute’s dump. All manner of things were disposed of there. Ray Stryker, who lived across the field on the northeast corner of Route 13 (now 601) and Skillman Road, and I used to go to the dump occasionally just to see what we could find. Among the great finds were long fluorescent light tubes which made great javelins for throwing!”

Influencers

Sometimes other people come into our lives and influence us in unexpected ways. Bill Van Zandt remembers a State Village patient named Charlotte McCready, who was able to leave the Village and take a job working for and living with Bill’s family. “She lived at our house and stayed there until she died. She would help my mom in the kitchen and with cleaning.”

Larry May recalls a patient from the Institute who was well enough to leave the facility on his own. “There was a patient with physical deformities (I can’t remember his name) who, even though he walked awkwardly, could ride a motor scooter. Nearly every day he would ride up to Musselman’s General Store. He was a regular fixture, and everybody knew him. He was a friendly guy.”

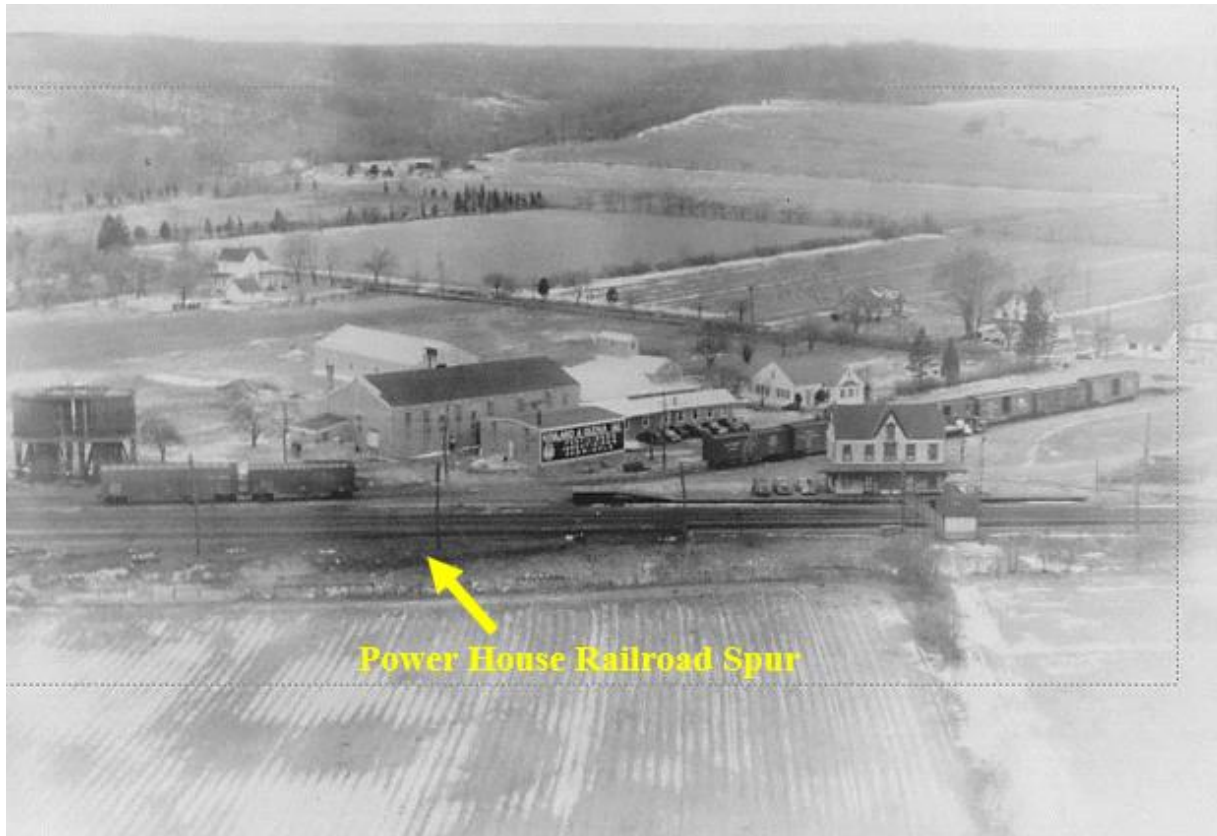
A male African-American nurse from the Institute named Ellis Cooper had a strong influence on Dick Van Zandt’s life. Ellis worked there as a full-time nurse. Following his shift, Ellis drove a short distance to work for J. Percy Van Zandt Co. on Route 518, where he changed tires on cars and trucks for another shift. Dick was assigned to work with him. “He had a work ethic unlike anybody I’ve ever seen, never complained a spec about anything. I took a lot away from that man. He was quite a person, and I always remember him as a one of the tremendous people in my life.”

As all these recollections show, the State Village and its succeeding iterations had an impact on the community in a variety of ways. Besides providing jobs, it also provided opportunities for community volunteerism, entertainment/recreation, and more. There is little at Skillman Park to recognize the 100-year history of the three institutions that populated its grounds. We hope that over time, a more permanent memory of these institutions that played a significant role in Montgomery Township’s history will be created.

Do you have other memories of the State Village, NJNPI, or NPDC? Feel free to share them in the Comment section at the bottom of this blog.

Interesting Facts

1. The railroad spur from the Skillman Station to the Power House at the State Village was about a mile long. In the picture below, we see the Skillman Station and surrounding buildings and farmland. The picture below, taken in 1947, shows the railroad spur, which was removed in the 1950s when the Power House was converted to oil, making coal deliveries unnecessary.



2. The 1917 Manager's Report of the State Epileptic Village notes the opening of Smalley Hall. They named it for the late Somerset County Senator, the Hon. William W. Smalley.

Sources

Information

Information was provided by Ann Allen, Ken Chrusz, Larry May, Eric Perkins, Peggy Querec, Emma Tufano, Dick Van Zandt, and Bill Van Zandt.

Pictures

Design of the State Village—Wiley Online Library

Gus Terhune (2)—Peggy Querec, Gus's granddaughter

Smalley Hall—postcard

Institute police patch—Ken Chrusz

Railroad spur—Ken Chrusz

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