

NYS Office For People With Developmental Disabilities

Putting People First

Courtney Burke, Commissioner



Special Centennial Edition
A Publication of the Hudson Valley DDSO ~ Michael Kirchmer, Director

Letchworth/Hudson Valley DDSO Turns 100!

Message from the Director



We have the distinction of being part of an historic event in OPWDD. This year, the Hudson Valley DDSO, which originated as Letchworth Village, turns 100! Each of us today is responsible to fulfill the commitment established many years ago of providing the best care possible for the special individuals we serve.

Though so much has changed over the years - the closure of the developmental center, a transformation to community-based services, and a merger with the Westchester DDSO - what has not changed is the responsibility that we have to ensure that all individuals in our care are treated with dignity, respect, and love. In other words, like family.

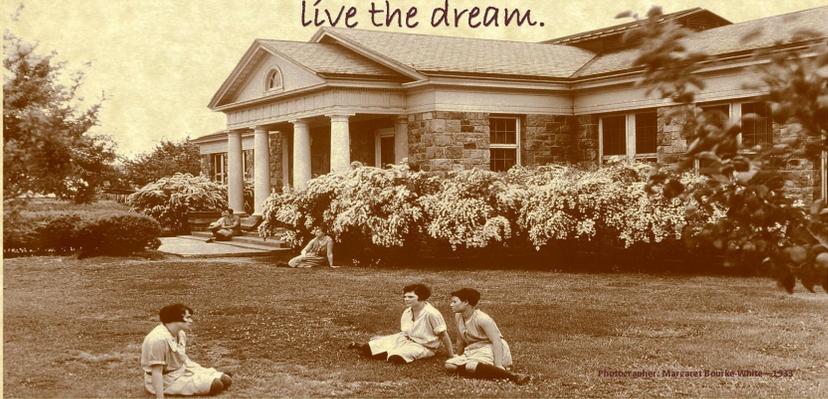
Thank you for your hard work, for your dedication, and for your commitment to ensure that every individual we serve has the opportunity to live a richer life.

Michael Kirchmer
 Director



Letchworth Village Centennial

On July 11, 1911 Letchworth Village opened with a new concept and a dream that would provide richer lives for people with developmental disabilities ~
 In 2011, Hudson Valley DDSO continues to live the dream.



Hudson Valley DDSO ~ OPWDD
Living The Dream



Dedication

This Special Issue of Valley Voice is dedicated to Gustave Jacobson, The first person admitted to Letchworth Village on July 11, 1911

Gustave Jacobson was the first of 63 boys to enter Letchworth Village on July 11, 1911. The youths were transferred from Randall's Island in NYC. They were brought to Letchworth to remove them from an unsuitable environment and to offer them training and a life more promising for people with developmental disabilities

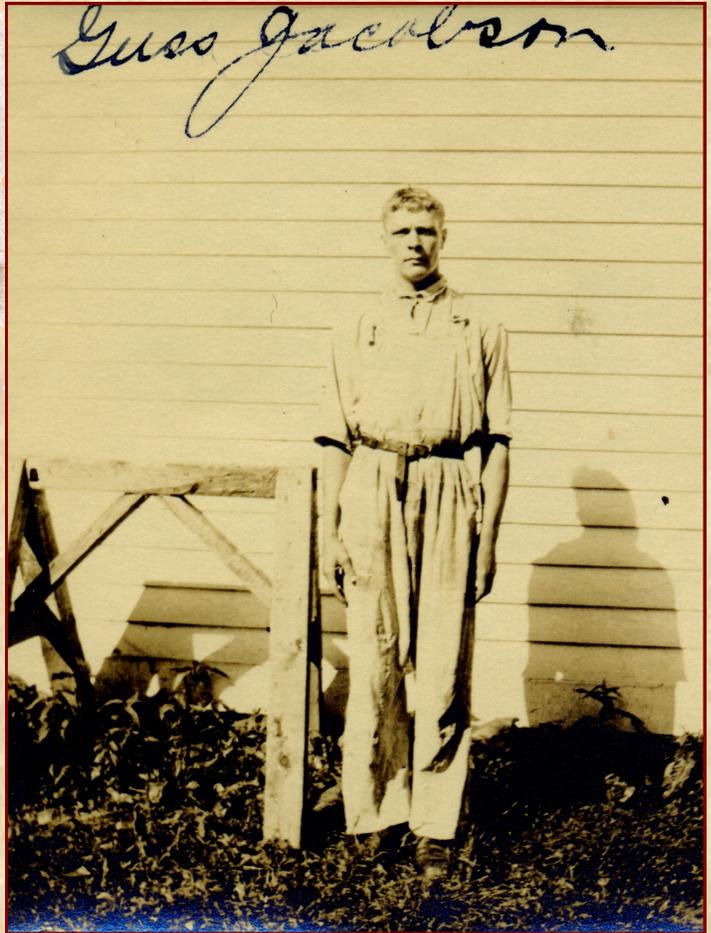
Randall's Island is located along the East River between Northern Manhattan and Queens. After its purchase by NYC, the city built a burial ground (Potter's Field) for the poor, a poorhouse, a House of Refuge for juvenile delinquents, an "Idiot Asylum", a homeopathic hospital, an Inebriate Asylum, and a rest home for Civil War veterans on the island. The physical isolation of the island provided distance between the public and the institutions for the sick and the poor. If this conjures up an image from a "Dickensian" novel it should come as no surprise. Charles Dickens was a visitor to the island.

In 1930 the Metropolitan Conference on Parks recommended that the island be cleared of its institutions and be used solely for recreation. In 1933 the state acted on the Conference's recommendation by transferring ownership to Parks & Recreation. This began the island's transformation into a recreational hub.

During his years at Letchworth, Gustave lived in the "Disbrow Colony". He worked on the farms at Letchworth and assisted with the construction of the buildings. One day in the 1920s, Gustave left the village, presumably to start a new life with

the skills he learned at Letchworth Village as a boy.

In 1980, the former Superintendent's Residence at Letchworth was renamed the "Gustave Jacobson Conference Center" in his honor. It remained so until the title was transferred to the Town of Haverstraw in 1997. Sadly, the building was destroyed by fire in 2010.



Gustave "Guss" Jacobson at Disbrow Colony circa 1917
Photograph courtesy of Katherine Bergen



1915 Letchworth Village postcard depicting the Superintendent's Residence which was constructed in 1910. Postcard courtesy of Katherine Bergen

LETCWORTH VILLAGE ***THE "VILLAGE"*** ***YEARS***



The men and boys of Disbrow Cottage circa 1911

On March 31, 1996, Letchworth Developmental Center, formerly Letchworth Village, closed its last cottage, ending a chapter in the history of institutionalization in the twentieth century. Most of the fieldstone buildings now stand vacant, hallways and cottages once filled with activity are today quiet in anticipation of what future use lies ahead for the picturesque former campus. If you listen very closely, you can still hear the footsteps of Dr. Charles Sherman Little, Letchworth Village's first Superintendent, walking the hallways and the grounds of the facility that was his, and W.P. Letchworth's, legacy.

But beyond the landscape and fieldstone buildings lies a rich history of humanity. It is important to us as a society to preserve this history, and to try to capture the story of those who formed Letchworth Village; those who worked there, and those who lived there. As the twentieth century came to its end, large institutions of this nature became a thing of the past. We need to understand why they were needed, how life has evolved over the century, and why large-scale institutions are no longer a viable option for the care of people with developmental disabilities.

To understand what Letchworth Village was, how it was conceived and what it represents historically, it is important to first have some understanding of William Pryor Letchworth, the noted philanthropist for whom the Village was named. Letchworth was born in 1823, one of eight children of a Quaker family. His father, Josiah Letchworth, was engaged in the saddlery business in Sherwood, N. Y., but found time to engage in social service work and was actively engaged in the schools, the Temperance and Anti-Slavery movements. Josiah Letchworth epitomized in himself all that is finest and most benevolent in the spirit of true Quakerism, a benevolence that would also mold the life of his son, William.



Wm Pryor Letchworth

At the age of 25, William moved to Buffalo and formed the firm of Letchworth and Pratt, a firm manufacturing saddlery and carriage hardware. In 1872, Letchworth was one of the founders of the Buffalo Children's Aid Society and served as its first president. At the age of 50, Letchworth retired from his business, resolving that "having

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acquired sufficient means, he would devote the remaining years of his life to philanthropic service." In that same year, Governor Dix appointed him to the newly formed State Board of Charities. He was responsible for the passage of the 1875 Children's Law, which strove to end the abuses suffered by children being reared in poorhouses and almshouses. The Act called for children from ages 2 to 16 to be removed from these institutions and instead be placed in asylums or families that could care for and educate them.

His humanitarian efforts and insights helped forge change in the treatment of the insane, "feeble-minded" and epileptics in New York State and the nation. In 1898, he was elected president of the newly formed National Association for the Study of Epilepsy and the Cure and Treatment of Epileptics.

W. P. Letchworth was also active in Indian affairs in New York State and was, in fact, adopted by the Seneca Nation and given the name, "Hai-wa-ye-is-tah," which means "The Man Who Always Does Right." Mr. Letchworth was a champion for the cause of ending "custodial care" and large impersonal institutions that prevailed in the state. He believed in providing a meaningful life for people living in institutions and asylums. He advocated for the use of advanced scientific treatment, proper and appropriate education and training, and smaller cottage-type housing. It was appropriate that in 1909, a year before Mr. Letchworth's death, the newly proposed "Eastern New York Custodial Asylum," the first such facility for the "feeble-minded" and epileptic to be conceived with his concepts and beliefs as its guidelines should instead be named Letchworth Village.

Letchworth Village, like many other great ventures, was born of necessity. The existing N. Y. State facilities were overcrowded. A great number of people who at the beginning of the twentieth century were called "feeble-minded" or "mental defectives" were on waiting lists for institutions of this type. Many of them were on the streets of New York City or inappropriately placed in poorhouses, insane asylums and almshouses in the city and across the state. In response to recommendations from the State Board of Charities, Governor Hughes appointed a commission to select a site in southeastern New York for the development of a "modern" institution to relieve this situation. The commission consisted of William Stewart, Alexander Proudfit and Franklin Kirkbride. Kirkbride would be a guiding force at Letchworth Village and remain an active board member for the rest of his life.



SITE COMMISSION AND FIRST BOARD OF MANAGERS
September 11, 1909

Left to right, standing: ALFRED HALL, Agent; LEOPOLD SONDRHEIM; FRANK A. VANDERLIP; WILLIAM R. STEWART; THOMAS J. COLTON; FRANKLIN B. KIRKBRIDE; DR. L. PIERCE CLARK; ALEXANDER C. PROUDFIT. Seated: MISS CASSITY E. MASON, MISS MARION K. TABOR

In 1907, after evaluating many locations, the Thiells site was selected as the optimal location, in part due to its proximity to New York City. They believed in time that with improvements in trans-

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portation, Letchworth would be "Forty-five minutes from Broadway," a pretty fair estimate considering at that time there were no bridges crossing Hudson River, no direct highways, and automobiles were still in their infancy. Other factors included the rural surroundings, the Erie Railroad ran through Thiells to deliver supplies, the abundance of good fertile farm land with existing houses and barns, the gravity-fed water supply from the mountain, and the Minesceongo Creek divided the land and hence could be effective in segregating the male and female units. At this point in history, the causes of mental retardation were unknown and it was believed to be predominantly hereditary.



Doctors and "experts" believed it was a serious societal issue and that justified such a drastic measure of prevention of the possibility of offspring. They didn't see this as an infringement of a person's rights; they saw it as a social responsibility. They purported it was their goal to insure the right of every child to be "well born" but for many the underlying goal was that of species purification. At the time, the Eugenics Movement was gaining momentum in this country. Many states had laws intact providing the endorsement of sterilization of "mental def-

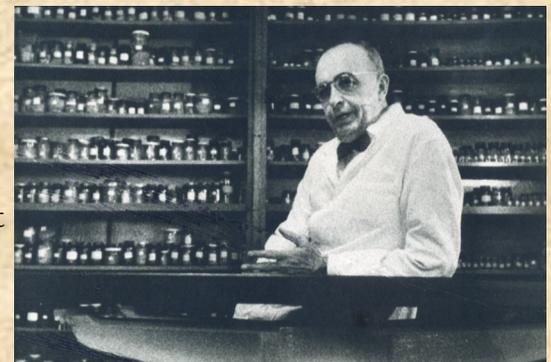


icients." One notable example of this was the Lynchberg Asylum in Virginia, which was the subject of a documentary film and today houses a unique museum. Happily, sterilization never occurred at Letchworth Village. Instead, Letchworth became the leading research center in its early years to study the causes and prevention of mental retardation. Dr. Little envisioned Letchworth as "a home, a school and a laboratory." Research into the causes and treatment of mental retardation began in 1913 through the efforts of Letchworth Board of Managers member Mary Harriman; however, no formal research department existed until 1921. Letchworth quickly became one of the leading research facilities in the world. Through the services of pioneers of research in this field, such as Dr. George Jervis, Dr. Bronfenbrenner and Dr. Edward Humphries, Letchworth Village Research Laboratory surfaced in the role of leader in the field of research. Many notable medical universities would send students to intern at Letchworth. In 1939, the research of



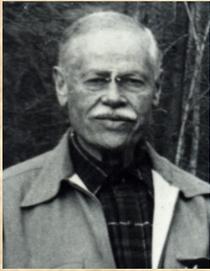
Mary W. Harriman

George Jervis of the Medical Research Department led to the discovery of the cause and treatment of Phenylketonuria, a metabolic disorder causing mental retardation now controlled by diet. It is interesting to note that this major research endeavor was spearheaded by the influence of Mrs. Harriman, a woman in a world where women still didn't have the right to vote.



Dr. George Jervis in the Research Laboratory

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Franklin B. Kirkbride

The first Board of Managers were determined that Letchworth would be a model institution and utilized the leading people in the field to plan and execute the development of the facility.

Franklin Kirkbride, who served on the board and alternately served as President, was considered a master of maneuvering through the bureaucracy that existed in Albany at that time, a necessary skill in the facilitation of such a large undertaking.

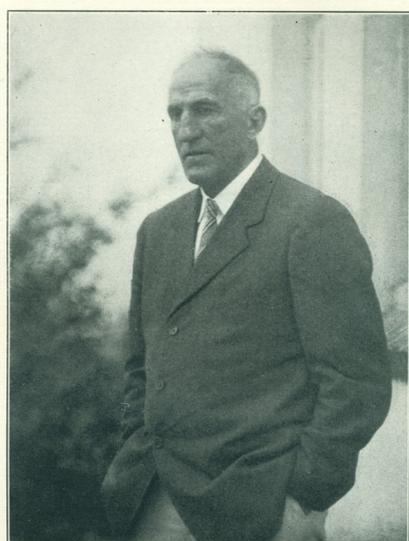
The services of Welles Bosworth, a world-renowned architect, were secured. His genius is evident in the architecture and landscape of the Village. Bosworth, one of the most sought after architects of his time, also designed the Rockefeller Estate.



WALTER E. FERNALD, M.D.

Dr. Walter Fernald served as an advisor. Dr. Fernald was considered the nation's foremost authority on the development of institutions for the developmentally disabled. He had successfully created a farm colony for this population. He was the first person to standardize manual labor according to intellectual levels. He excelled in finding work that could be adjusted to mental capacity, making work for the mentally retarded person enjoyable and educational.

Louis Bonnaud served as chief engineer and inspector, and was largely responsible for the physical development of the facility. Bonnaud employed the best technologies available at the time to make certain of the long term effectiveness of infrastructure of the facility. For example, the central Powerhouse which heated all of the buildings on the 2000 plus acre facility was still in operation when the center closed in 1996.



CHARLES SHERMAN LITTLE, M.D., Sc.D. *Doris U'mann*

In July 1910, Dr. Charles "Squash" Little was chosen (as recommended by Dr. Fernald) to be the Superintendent of Letchworth Village. Dr. Little, until his death in 1936, was to be the life blood of the facility. His vision and persistence was to form Letchworth into a model institution of international reputation. Dr. Little, upon arriving at Letchworth, lived for a period of time in a board and canvas shack near the home of Louis Bonnaud until such time that he could move into the house on Willow Grove Road purchased from the Rose family as part of the two thousand acres that the institution would cover. This house is still used today as one of Letchworth's community residences.

Construction of the facility began in 1911. The first buildings to be opened as cottages were the Secor Farmhouse on Willow Grove Road and the Disbrow Farmhouse on Thiells-Mount



Disbrow Cottage and Annex

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Ivy Road. The houses were renovated to house the employees and have two dining rooms for the staff and the "inmates." The "inmates" lived in a barracks style annex that was attached to each house. Each annex provided fifty beds and was heated by large wood burning stoves; each was supervised by a married couple. A spur track to Letchworth from the Erie Railroad was completed, and on July 11, 1911, the first "inmates" arrived. Letchworth Village had begun.



Disbrow / Secor Staff circa 1914

Sixty-three young men were admitted during 1911, they were transferred to Letchworth Village from Randalls Island. The renovated farm houses were to be used as temporary housing until permanent dormitories could be constructed.

In his report of January 1912, Dr. Little described the lifestyle of Letchworth's first inhabitants:



"Young Boy" from the 1st Annual Report-1912

"The life is made as nearly that of a normal boy as conditions warrant. The days are mainly spent in work on the farm, and the evenings in the dining rooms which are also living rooms, playing games, reading, popping corn, eating apples, telling stories, or listening to the victrolas. Saturday afternoons are given to out-of-door sports suitable to the season - such as ball playing, swimming, nutting, skating, sliding, etc."



"Old Man" from the 1st Annual Report-1912

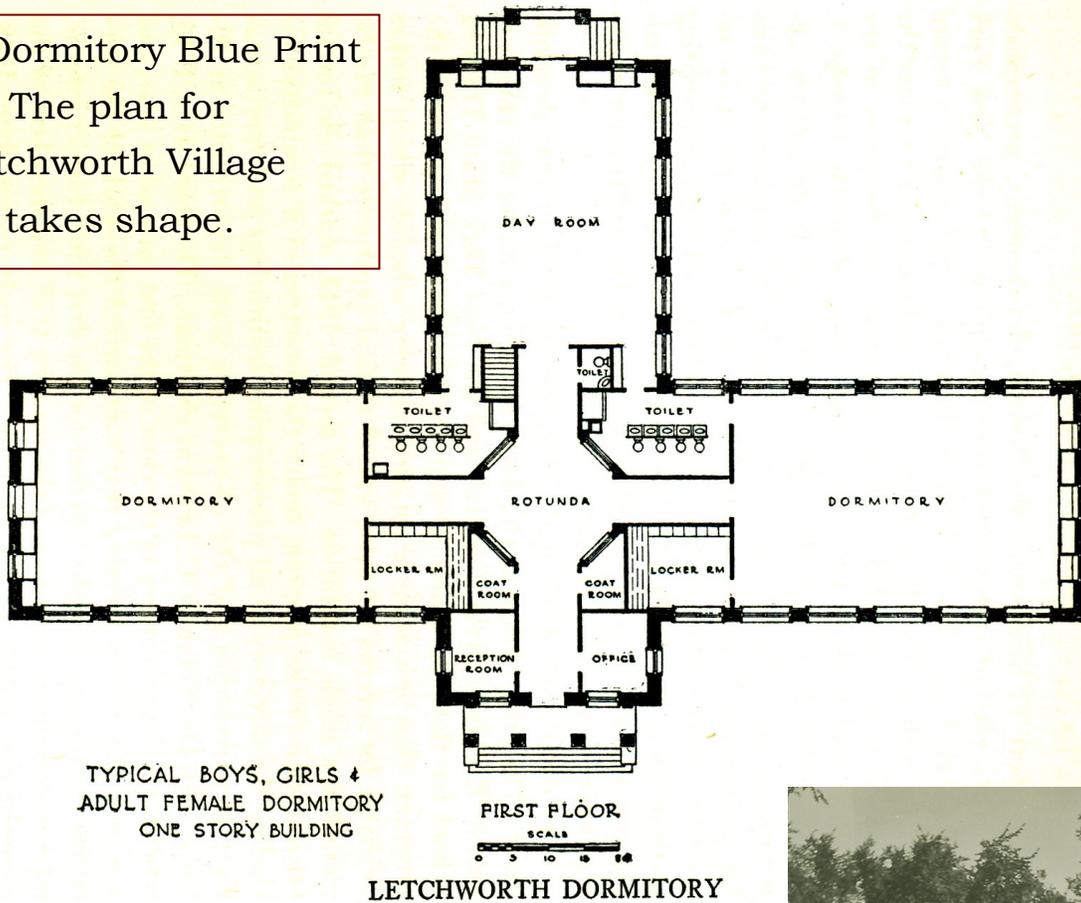
"There is no question but that one hundred working boys can be of great service to us in carrying on the farm, clearing the land, grading about the buildings, etc. In order to appreciate this value, it is only necessary for one to inspect the colonies at any time, except on Saturday afternoons."



"The Ole Swimmin' Hole" Circa 1916

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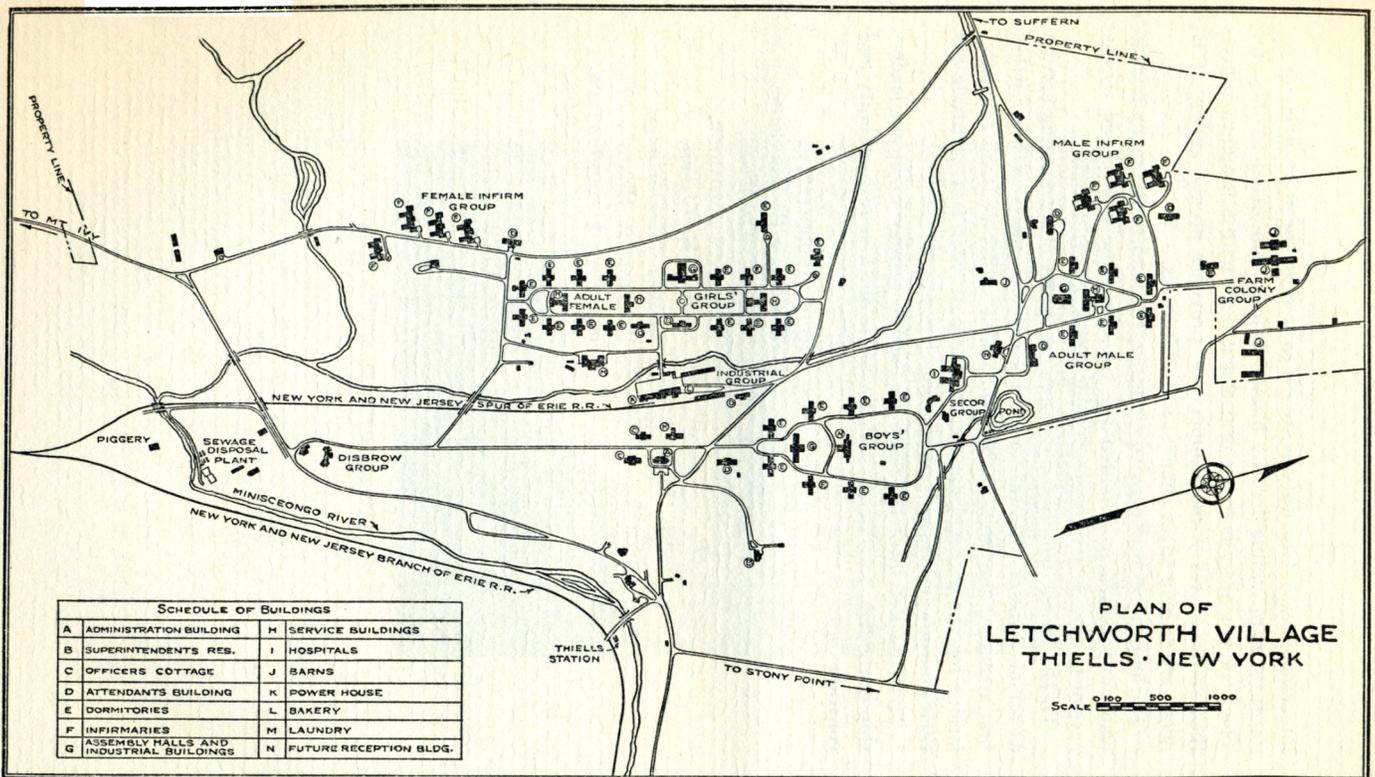
1912 Dormitory Blue Print
The plan for
Letchworth Village
takes shape.



Dirt roads and rocks
ruled the terrain in 1911

So, how are we going to do this? There were few cars and trucks available in the early days. The most reliable source of transport was horses and oxen. Dr. Little, prompted by a fondness from his early days in New England, bought these oxen for use in building Letchworth Village. They were reportedly the last oxen in Rockland County. On what is now Veterans Drive, the entrance to the current DDSO office, if you look to the right side of the road you can still see a concrete watering trough remaining from the turn of the 20th century.

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In 1912, the final developmental plan of Letchworth Village was complete, largely due to the efforts of William Bosworth and Dr. Fernald. The standards for the development and operation of the facility were set by Dr. Little and the board, based in part on Dr. Little's interviews with William Pryor Letchworth. It was designed to be economically administered and architecturally beautiful. Its design would be that of six separate groups of buildings with enough space between them as to distinguish them as six different institutions, each with a specified population and independent staff. This created a more personalized environment than that of other large institutions. By



Boys gathering stones - Circa 1912



Men and boys building the roads—circa 1914

1915, the first cottage construction was completed. The buildings were constructed from fieldstone gathered from the fields and farm walls by the men and boys residing at Letchworth and cut by construction craftsmen. The campus we know as Letchworth quite literally was raised from the soil of Thiells. The men and boys living in the institution were also responsible for laying the roads of Letchworth, the roadbeds made from the fieldstone not suitable for building construction. The construction called for in the original 1912 design was interrupted by the First World War and the onset of the Depression in 1929 and would not be completed until 1933.

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Letchworth Village represented a complete change from the custodial "warehouse" conditions that were in place during the centuries that preceded. Little's vision of a "Home, School and Laboratory" took form, and the word "Village" was aptly applied. It functioned as a community unto itself. In many ways it mirrored the surrounding communities. Rockland County at that time was a farm community

Designed to operate as self-sufficiently as possible, everyone residing at the facility had some hand in its operation. It operated a large and profitable farm; two schools for boys and girls, ages 16 and younger, would focus on academics and industrial classes supportive of the facility operation.



Gov. Franklin Delano Roosevelt laid the cornerstone of Letchworth Theta Building in 1930. Over the shoulder of the NY State Trooper escorting him is his wife, Eleanor Roosevelt. Eleanor Roosevelt would also be the Keynote speaker at a Letchworth Village Welfare League luncheon in the 1950s. The Welfare League, a parent advocacy group formed at Letchworth in 1939 is the oldest advocacy group remaining in the country. The highlight of their annual luncheons, usually held at The Waldorf Astoria Grand Ballroom, was always a staged musical featuring the residents of Letchworth Village.



Stewart Hall Boys' School—1916



The schools at Letchworth Village operated on a ten month schedule, with summer vacation as important to the residents as it is to students everywhere. The boys' and girls' schools offered all the Kindergarten through twelfth grade classes as any other school. The educational process was tailored to the individual's abilities. It was said to teach the "three R's" - reading, writing, and arithmetic, and a fourth "R" - for "relationship." In the afternoons, students would be involved with industrial training. The male children would work on the farm, furniture shop, broom shop, and shoe repair shops. Female students also worked on the farm. Their industrial classes included weaving on the looms, "home ec," rugmaking shop, sewing shop, embroidery and lacemaking. The items produced in these industrial classes were used at the facility. Often, they had the opportunity to sell them to the local communities.



Vanderlip Hall Girls School 1941

Photographer: Dr. Arnold Genthe

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In Letchworth Village's early years, those residing at Letchworth played an active role in developing the facility, working on tasks assigned by their skill levels. Everyone had a part in making this facility thrive, and a purpose in life. The residents of Letchworth cleared the land, assisted in constructing and maintaining the buildings and worked the farm. At the end of the day, they ate the food they raised, on furniture that they made, cleaned the dorms with the brooms that they made from the straw that they grew. They washed with soap that they made and dried with towels woven on their own looms.



Photographer: Dr. Arnold Genthe
U.S. Camera Magazine—1941



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Letchworth had its own social network for residents and employees alike. One condition of employment at Letchworth was residency. Until the post WWII era, to work at Letchworth meant you had to live at Letchworth. Everyone was a citizen of the "village" whether by appointment or commitment, this was your community. Letchworth was a self-sustaining community. It had its own barber shop, beauty parlor, post office and newspaper. The newspaper, originally called the "Hudson Magnate" became the "Village Views." It covered all the events and "happenings" at Letchworth as well as social news including births, marriages, visitors to the village, where people were vacationing and even "who was dating who." It remained in publication from 1927 to the early 1990s—minus the gossip, of course.

Frequent dances and gatherings would occur at the three assembly halls, and any holiday was cause for a celebratory parade. In fact, Letchworth was famous



throughout the Rockland communities for the Letchworth Village Band. Under the direction of Mr. Strangland, the band consisting of Letchworth



boys, would frequently be featured at community parades and events. The Girls' Orchestra would entertain visitors at Letchworth gatherings and community events. During the 1930s through



Kirkbride Hall 1941

1950s Kirkbride Hall at Letchworth Village was one of the largest gathering places in Rockland County. It hosted a number of large social events held by the surrounding communities, including the Annual Policeman's Ball. Many of our people would attend or work at these events, it was kind of the precursor to community inclusion. Other events also brought people from the community at-large into the village. Carnivals, craft sales that sold items made by our people, parades and of course, the annual 4th of July fireworks drew a large turnout. This helped effectively familiarize local communities with the developmentally disabled population. Dr. Little's goal was always to ready

people to return to their communities. He soon recognized that in order to do so, communities would also need to be readied to receive them. This was a



Dr. Little inspects parade—4th of July 1923

task that would still be addressed, on a larger scale, during the community residence development process that gained momentum in the 1970s.



4th of July 1916—Float advocating voting rights for women. Cottages would spend months preparing floats for parades

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During the period from 1907-1950, those residing at Letchworth Village were considered "inmates," and while there were no locked doors, they were, in fact, committed, and not free to leave the facility. Those considered "improvable" were trained and educated with the intent of discharge. Many of these people went through Letchworth's "Parole Program" and were taken in by families in need of live-in servants, housekeepers and other like employment. For their services, they would receive room and board and a small salary. They were known as Letchworth Parole Boys and Girls. Many residents of the North Rockland area still recall utilizing their services through the 1950's, and also purchasing furniture, rugs, and other craft items from the school's industrial classes.

"Parole Boys" (above) and "Parole Girls" circa 1925



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After age 16, those remaining at the institution would be engaged in farm operations, gardening, laundry, and any other aspect of sustaining a "Village" that their abilities would allow. The farm was praised as

one of the finest, often winning awards for productivity. Surplus food was stored in icehouses, with ice harvested during the winter from Secor Pond. The canning factory at Letchworth was in constant operation, canning food to carry them through the winter. Often, surplus was sent to support other facilities or sold to make purchases of items not manufactured at Letchworth Village. Care of the animals and crops offered those residing at Letchworth the opportunity to contribute positively and directly to their lives. Everyone, young and old, had some responsibility in running the farm, a responsibility which gave them great pride. Planting and harvesting season, as in any farming community, shifted priorities and schedules. Their lives were marked by the accomplishments of the farm, and their sense of self reflected these accomplishments. "A time to reap, a time to sow"



Due to labor laws and changes in the care of people with developmental disabilities, the farm at Letchworth Village was closed in the early 1960s by Governor Nelson Rockefeller. This ended Letchworth's history as a farming community, a decision that elicited a mixed reaction from employees and the "residents" residing at the village. Again, this mirrored what was happening in the surrounding region. Rockland county was shifting from a sleepy rural farming community to a suburban existence.



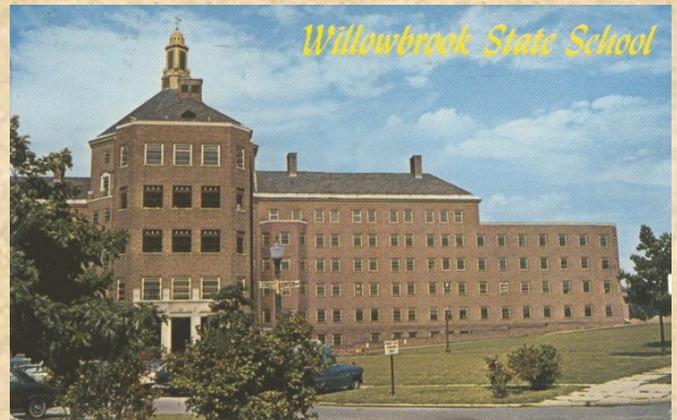
THE "VILLAGE" YEARS



Scenes from the farm, Margaret Bourke-White

Photographer Margaret Bourke-White was hired by Board of Managers member Mary Harriman to photograph Letchworth Village in 1933.

The 1940's saw severe overcrowding conditions at Letchworth Village and the other existing state facilities. To alleviate this condition, the Willowbrook State School was constructed in Staten Island. The outbreak of World War II added greatly to the overcrowding problem when, in 1942, the nearly completed Willowbrook was designated for use as a military hospital for the duration of the war. The expense of the war also put on hold all plans for construction for new cottages and dormitories at the Village. In 1943, Letchworth Village, designed to serve as home to 2500 people, had more than 4000



residing there. Two hundred children slept on mattresses on the floors, in the hallways and living rooms of the dormitories. Letchworth also suffered from a severe staffing shortage during this time due to the manpower needs of the war effort and the low pay scale offered to institutional employees.



Senator Robert F. Kennedy declared conditions at state facilities as "bordering on snakepit."

Even with the post-war construction at Letchworth during the late '40's and the opening of Willowbrook in 1951, overcrowding conditions worsened at Letchworth. In 1951, Letchworth's population skyrocketed to 4350 patients. Overcrowding was a problem that plagued Letchworth and the other state institutions through the 1970's.

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By 1967, the former charm of the "Village Years" had lost its luster. The population of Letchworth Village had grown to nearly 6000 and there was a steadily growing waiting list needing to be placed at the facility. Letchworth had become the most overcrowded institution in the State of New York. Staffing shortages, space problems, and insufficient funds led to a less than adequate environment.

The period following this could be entitled "The Age of Enlightenment" for it was during this time period that Letchworth confronted its severe overcrowding. In 1970, Letchworth opened its first community homes. This endeavor has successfully provided individuals with mental retardation and developmental disabilities a less restrictive environment and an opportunity to thrive as members of the community. The Geraldo Rivera expose in 1972, a graphic depiction of conditions and overcrowding at Willowbrook State School and Letchworth Village, brought national attention to the plight of the mentally retarded. The eyes of the television camera would not allow the people to turn their backs on this population anymore; people with mental retardation and developmental disabilities were no longer the unseen.



Geraldo Rivera at Willowbrook

No other period saw as many humanitarian changes as did the 1960's through the 1980's: human rights, mainstreaming, advocacy, individual plans, normalization, developmental models, and deinstitutionalization. New supports were provided by local, state and federal government through executive, legislative, and judicial actions. People with mental retardation benefited from opportunities never before available. The development of community residential options increased to provide an opportunity for a community-based life for all people with developmental disabilities. Individualized residential alternatives, new community supports and Family Support projects have been developed to ensure the success of the individual with developmental disabilities in a community setting. Today, Hudson Valley Developmental Disabilities Service Office operates 130 homes in the community and oversees the placement of disabled individuals in family care environments.

In 1997, a proposal was put before the New York State Legislature which formally changed the name of Letchworth D.D.S.O. to Hudson Valley D.D.S.O., representing an end to the legacy that was the glory of the "Village" and the misfortune of institutionalization.

Where are we now? We are everywhere. We are in homes in every community, we are in every school system. We are in the stores and businesses and we are good neighbors. But that's another story, for another time, to be viewed by another's objective eye.

Hopefully, we will be thought of as the new pioneers, who, like William Pryor Letchworth and Dr. Little one hundred years before us, "do the right thing."

~ Kerwin McCarthy
Hudson Valley DDSO

