

Picnicking at the State Hospital: Treatment and Tourism at the Traverse City State Hospital

By Zoë Schwartz, July 2025

Disclaimer

In the following article, you will see the words like "insane," "asylum," "idiots" and "imbecile" that are regarded today as derogatory and antiquated. These terms reflect the scientific understanding of mental illness during the foundation and operation of the Northern Michigan Asylum and come directly from the historical sources.

With its beautiful grounds including an arboretum, hiking trails, and creeks, visiting the site of what was the Traverse City State Hospital remains a pleasurable experience. The former asylum/state hospital now houses people, who pay to live in the renovated wards once occupied by committed patients and a gallery of shops in the basement of Building 50 where people visit local stores or grab brunch. Eating your brunch or strolling around the green lawns comes with the strange consequence of enjoying oneself at a site that has a very complicated relationship with “moral treatment,” yet today’s Grand Traverse Commons makes the perfect stop for locals and tourists alike.



Figure 1. “Cottages "C" and "D" at Northern Michigan Asylum,” TADL Local History Collection, accessed June 6, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/16218>.

The Northern Michigan Asylum for the Insane opened its doors to 300 patients on November 30, 1885 and would later become the Traverse City State Hospital in July 1911 after Michigan state

legislature passed Act No. 21 of the Public Acts of 1911.¹ Later, before its closure, the facility would be known as the Traverse City Regional Psychiatric Hospital. Today the former hospital of many names is colloquially referred to as the Traverse City State Hospital. While technically referring to the same institution, this article will attempt to refer to the hospital as either the Northern Michigan Asylum (asylum) or the Traverse City State Hospital (state hospital) depending on the date(s) of the historical trends/subjects.

Researching and writing about a mental health institution, like the former Northern Michigan Asylum, which operated prior to contemporary medical paradigms, is riddled with pitfalls. How can we view the past without losing our empathy and exploiting the hardships of fellow humans?

As I began writing this article, I had to ask myself: “How I could respectfully share the history of the former Northern Michigan Asylum/Traverse City State Hospital?” Does one focus on the misdoings? On the successes? Or neither?

As a complicated subject, the history of psychiatric hospitals involves medical history, the history of hospital administration, i.e. everyday operations and the doctors and the employees, and, the history of the patients themselves. These are not insular sides of the story, they overlap and contradict one another. Furthermore, the history or narrative of the patients themselves is not necessarily ours to understand, nor can we truly know their perspective entirely from the extent of the primary sources. We can, however, peak into their experience through top-down channels, like the Board Reports, the joint proceedings, some photographs, and legal paperwork.

This article covers multiple subjects, but it will not cover the following topics: sterilization, self-harm or death, the closure of the Regional Psychiatric Hospital, or later treatment towards the psychiatric patients in the mid-twentieth century. While each subject is an important factor in the overall history of the psychiatric treatment and cultural heritage in Traverse City, they are not the focus. Instead, this article aims to provide insights into the inner workings of the former Northern Michigan Asylum and Traverse City State Hospital from the beginning to around 1918.

Recreation at the Traverse City State Hospital is unfolded through casual postcards, personal photographs and official reports. The grounds of the asylum and state hospital were intended for their role in the treatment of mental illness and their purpose expanded and attracted tourists, employees, and locals.

¹ “Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1910,” *TADL Local History Collection*, 9, accessed April 23, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/1900>; “Report of the Board of Trustees of the Traverse City State Hospital at Traverse City June 30, 1912,” *TADL Local History Collection*, 3, accessed April 28, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/1899>.

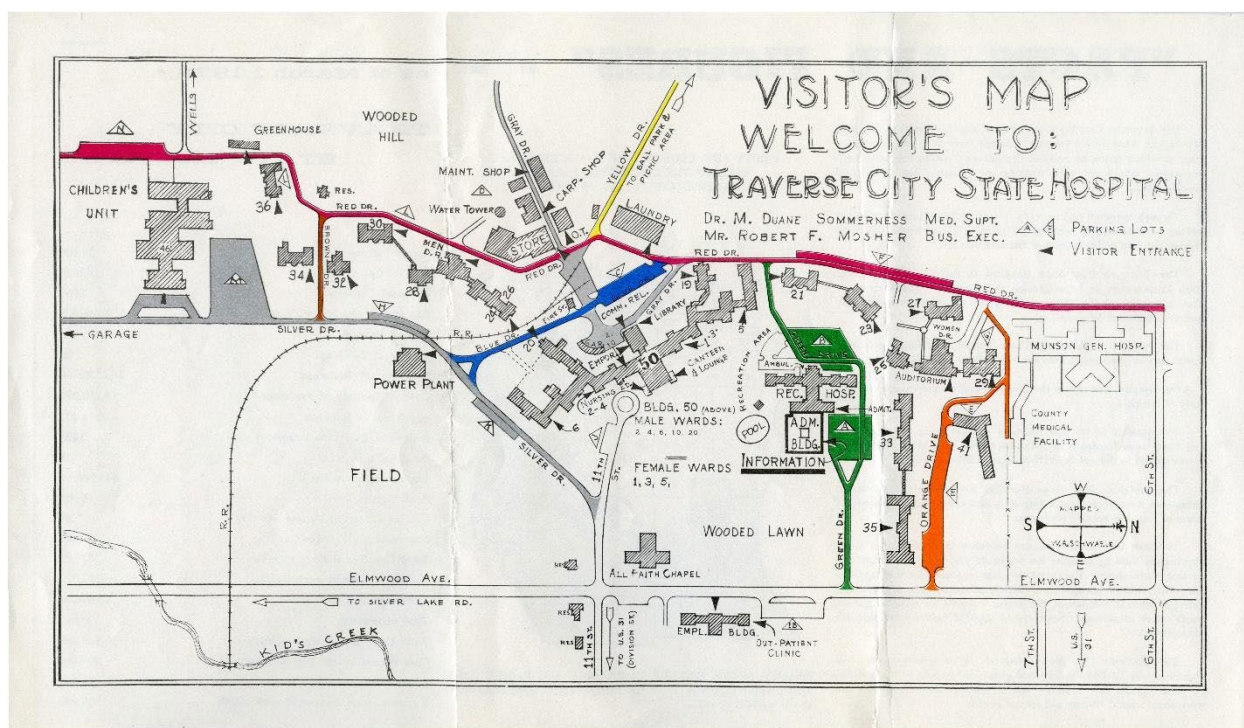


Figure 2. "Visitor's Map Welcome to: Traverse City State Hospital," c. 1956-1972, Dr. William Decker Donation, TADL Local History Collection.

Conditions for Treatment

The very first state hospital, which is a hospital that was maintained by the state of Michigan for the care of the physically or mentally ill, was the Michigan Asylum for the Insane. Later known as the Kalamazoo State Hospital, it opened its doors in 1859.² Overrun by patients, the state opened its second asylum for the insane, the Eastern Michigan Asylum for the Insane in Pontiac in 1878. Shortly thereafter, in fact only two months after the opening of the Eastern Asylum in September 1878, the Michigan state legislature asserted that "immediate steps be taken for the establishment, location and erection of an additional asylum."³ The actualization of this plan was delayed after the legislature claimed that it was too close to the opening of the Eastern Asylum

² Trustees of the Michigan State Asylums, "Biennial Reports of the Trustees of the Michigan State Asylums for the Insane, and for the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind, for the years 1855-1886," TADL Local History Collection, accessed May 19, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/1979>; Fred Peppel, "Kalamazoo Psychiatric Hospital: The Largest Mental Health Institution in Michigan," Kalamazoo Public Library, accessed May 19, 2025, <https://www.kpl.gov/local-history/kalamazoo-history/health/kalamazoo-psychiatric-hospital/>.

³ "Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Northern Asylum for the Insane at Traverse City, Michigan, from October 1, 1884, to the full completion of the work, November 10, 1886," TADL Local History Collection, accessed April 1, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/1896>.

for another asylum. Thus, two years later the legislature enacted Act No. 225 of 1881 “to locate, establish, and organize an additional asylum for the insane.”⁴

The locating board began examining sites for the asylum starting in September 1881 and landed with Traverse City as the location by November.⁵ Perry Hannah, E. H. Van Deusen, M. H. Butler were appointed to select a location and site for an additional asylum for the insane of the State of Michigan.⁶ After Traverse City, another asylum opened in Ionia in 1883, then Newberry in 1893, and the Michigan Home and Training School at Lapeer was established in 1895.

Reading the first Board of Commissioners Report reveals that a lot of thoughtful consideration went into the foundation of the Northern Michigan Asylum. In determining the location of the asylum, the Board was largely influenced by the favorable climatic characteristics of the Grand Traverse region:

“These [conditions] have made Northern Michigan a popular and delightful summer resort, and no better evidence of the attractiveness and healthfulness of this region can be adduced than the fact that thousands resort there annually in search of health and recreation.”⁷

⁴ “Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Northern Asylum for the Insane, at Traverse City, Michigan, for the fiscal year, 1882,” *TADL Local History Collection*, accessed April 1, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/1897>.

⁵ “Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Northern Asylum for the Insane at Traverse City, Michigan, from October 1, 1884, to the full completion of the work, November 10, 1886,” 4.

⁶ “Report of the Board of Commissioners appointed to select a location and site for an additional asylum for the insane of the State of Michigan, 30 September 1882.”

⁷ “Report of the Board of Commissioners appointed to select a location and site for an additional asylum for the insane of the State of Michigan, 30 September 1882,” 4.



Figure 3. "Northern Michigan Asylum Under Construction," TADL Local History Collection, accessed June 4, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/11364>.

The working theory at the time for treatment of many illnesses (even insanity) suggested that the climate had a great impact on physical and mental health.⁸ The environment surrounding the future asylum in Traverse City was meticulously evaluated. They needed to have spaces for "open air, sunshine and shade" and elevation for "command of view."⁹ The view was essential for "attaining highest results of treatment."¹⁰ Described as "a fine view of the beautiful bay," the ideal view of the surrounding landscape determined the alignment of the buildings "to secure the full influence of this very attractive feature in the landscape by so arranging the several wards as to give to the occupants of each a full view of the bay."¹¹

Other factors reveal the concerns of operating an asylum near a civilian settlement. The location needed to be not too far from town (for those commuting to work and visitors) but far enough for seclusion and privacy, "rendering access to the grounds difficult to persons actuated by morbid

⁸ "Report of the Board of Commissioners appointed to select a location and site for an additional asylum for the insane of the State of Michigan, 30 September 1882," 5.

⁹ "Report of the Board of Commissioners appointed to select a location and site for an additional asylum for the insane of the State of Michigan, 30 September 1882," 5.

¹⁰ "Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Northern Asylum for the Insane at Traverse City, Michigan, from October 1, 1884, to the full completion of the work, November 10, 1886," 6.

¹¹ "Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Northern Asylum for the Insane, at Traverse City, Michigan, for the fiscal year, 1882," 5.

curiosity or vicious tendencies is essential to the quiet and welfare of the patients.”¹² The woods that surrounded the sight were perfect, as the wooded grounds were “broken and cut off with hills and ravines.”¹³ There also needed to be a sufficient water supply, good drainage and sewerage, the soil had to be healthy (as they planned on establishing a farm).¹⁴

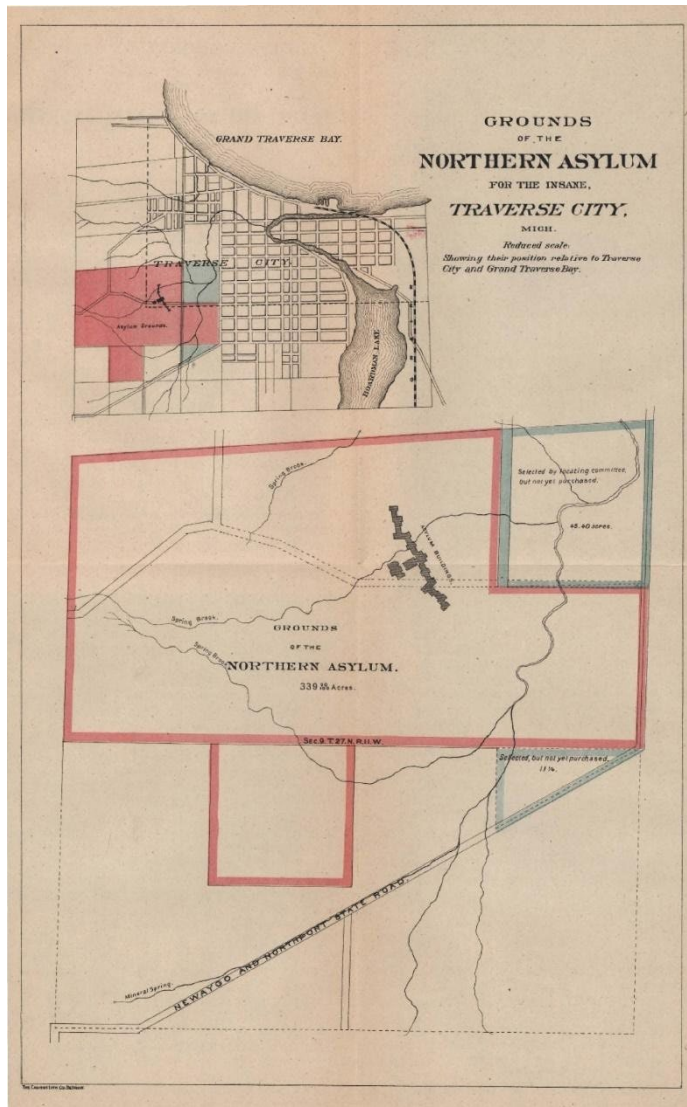


Figure 4. “Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Northern Asylum for the Insane, at Traverse City, Michigan, for the fiscal year, 1882,” 1, TADL Local History Collection, accessed April 1, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/1897>.

¹²“Report of the Board of Commissioners appointed to select a location and site for an additional asylum for the insane of the State of Michigan, 30 September 1882,” 5.

¹³ “Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Northern Asylum for the Insane at Traverse City, Michigan, from October 1, 1884, to the full completion of the work, November 10, 1886,” 5.

¹⁴ “Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Northern Asylum for the Insane at Traverse City, Michigan, from October 1, 1884, to the full completion of the work, November 10, 1886,” 5.

The site chosen by the board in Traverse City fit all of the requirements according the committee, with three brooks “free from vegetable impurities or deleterious mineral compounds,” 339 acres of wooded areas (consisting of maple, beech, some hemlock and cedar) and plenty of viable farm land (Figure 4).¹⁵

Introduction to Mental Health and the Asylum

In 1890, the Board reflected on the treatment of the insane in the past, distancing themselves from the antiquated medical treatment of the insane: “[t]he insane were often kept in dens of the vilest description, where vice, crime and misfortune flourished, and where disgusting diseases, filth and vermin, were not uncommon.”¹⁶ After four years of operation, the asylum felt comfortable claiming that “it is clearly evident that great advance has been made” in the treatment of mentally ill individuals, an improvement of “moral treatment.”¹⁷

The asylum’s self-proclaimed role in society was fulfilled by “holding in check the increase of mental disease; by relieving families and communities of distress and danger; by placing patients in comfortable homes; by caring for them at a constantly lessened expense—it would seem to the highest interest of the public, both from a humanitarian and economic standpoint, to continue it.”¹⁸



Figure 5. “Traverse City State Hospital building #29,” TADL Local History Collection, accessed June 5, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/20143>.

¹⁵ “Report of the Board of Commissioners appointed to select a location and site for an additional asylum for the insane of the State of Michigan, 30 September 1882,” 6.

¹⁶ “Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1890,” *TADL Local History Collection*, 12, accessed April 4, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/1912>.

¹⁷ “Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1890,” 12.

¹⁸ “Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1890,” 14.

The humanitarian side developed over the course of the turn of the century. For nurses, the asylum found that “the old of idea of repression, punishment, seclusion, etc.” gave away to “the care of the sympathetic, enlightened, and unselfish nurse” (Figure 6)¹⁹



Figure 6. Portrait of “Mimie” dressed in nurses garb standing outside in front of bushes. “Mimie,” 1915, Josephine Davis Photo Album, TADL Local History Collection.

Adapting to new treatments and scientific trends as well as maintaining the comfort, and economical benefits of the asylum feature most prominently in the board reports.

Foundation, goals, intents, reality

A significant factor and goal of the asylum was to establish a farm. The asylum’s farm would employ patients in fulfilling work, which according to contemporary thought was “the most remedial agency in the care and treatment of the insane.”²⁰ Work was predicted to restore “physical vigor” in the patients and helped by removing delusion and directing thoughts “into

¹⁹ “Report of the Board of Trustees of the Traverse City State Hospital at Traverse City June 30, 1916,” *TADL Local History Collection*, 9, accessed April 28, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/1901>.

²⁰ “Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Northern Asylum for the Insane, at Traverse City, Michigan, for the fiscal year, 1882,” 6.

healthier channels.”²¹ Furthermore, the demographics of the patients were considered, as the hospital largely received patients from “agricultural classes” very befitting for this kind of occupation.²²



Figure 7. Patients constructing the reservoir in 1892. “Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1892,” TADL Local History Collection, 14, accessed April 4, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/1>.

In 1898, after putting the patients to work for more than a decade, the hospital was close to clearing and developing all of the asylum’s land (Figure 7). They report that “out-door life of patients that is of highest importance outside healthful exercise” gives them a feeling of being trusted, and feelings of freedom, builds confidence, and “awakens an interest in the work of the institution that is tonic and often curative in effect.”²³ The board thus concluded that nearly all able-bodied patients can be “usefully and profitably employed.”²⁴

²¹ “Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Northern Asylum for the Insane, at Traverse City, Michigan, for the fiscal year, 1882,” 6.

²² “Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Northern Asylum for the Insane, at Traverse City, Michigan, for the fiscal year, 1882,” 7.

²³ “Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1898,” TADL Local History Collection, 47, accessed April 10, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/1908>.

²⁴ “Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1898,” 47.



Figure 8. “The most disturbed men were assigned the care of the lawns, and for two years past they have entirely done the lawn mowing.” Photograph of the manicured lawn and reservoir on asylum grounds with Cottage 25 shrouded in trees, a cottage for fifty patients built in 1892. “Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1892,” *TADL Local History Collection*, 4, accessed April 4, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/1911>.

The goals of the state and the goals of the appointed Board of Trustees for the Northern Michigan Asylum often aligned. However, the Board of Trustees, in the biannual reports, had to make a request for “appropriations,” i.e. funding for renovations, developments, and everyday needs. For example, the board requested in 1898 that the state legislature consider appropriating \$7000 to erect and equip two “modern” bathhouses (one for males and one for females) with light, ventilation, clothes and dressing rooms, and various baths. All of these amenities were for the “greater safety of patients and therapeutic value.”²⁵ In response to the latest treatment of the insane, hydrotherapeutics, the Northern Michigan Asylum felt that equipping the facilities to treat patients according to the latest scientific break-through was part of their “march in the procession of up-to-date asylums.”²⁶

A Comforting Concept

Almost from the beginning, comfort was considered an essential part of treatment for the insane, which led to a variety of developments at the asylum/state hospital. From the start, the asylum aimed to avoid the use of restraints: “[n]o restraints, seclusion, or anodynes are used...The

²⁵ “Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1898,” 12.

²⁶ “Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1898,” 12.

attendants have experienced little difficulty making the most excitable and nervous patients comfortable.”²⁷ After testing this theory, the asylum reported in 1888, “[f]rom our experience of the past three years, we believe with employment, plenty of open-air life, and varied but pleasing amusements, the necessity for strong rooms, restraints, etc., may be largely obviated in the treatment of the insane” (Figure 9).²⁸ In their official reports they uphold the idea that a successful method for treating patients lies in the “absence of all harsh authority.”²⁹



Figure 9. Patients sitting on benches on the lawn outside of Cottage 25, c. 1915. “Cottage 25. Patients,” Josephine Davis Photo Album, TADL Local History Collection.

²⁷ “Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City September 30, 1886,” 34.

²⁸ *Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City, June 30, 1888* (Lansing: Thorp & Godfrey, State Printers and Binders, 1888), 7.

²⁹ “Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City September 30, 1886,” 34.



Figure 10. "Women's Cottage 25, Traverse City State Hospital, ca. 1900," TADL Local History Collection, accessed June 6, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/13475>.



INTERIOR COTTAGE FOR WOMEN.



COTTAGE FOR WOMEN.

Figure 11- 12. Prints of photographs of interior and exterior of Cottage 25. "Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1892," *TADL Local History Collection*, 3, accessed April 4, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/1911>.

Restraints were considered uncomfortable, and what they represented as demonstration of harsh authority went against the asylum's idealist concern for the comfort of patients. The comfort of patients fulfilled the goal of the asylum—to successfully treat the insane in a humanitarian and effective manner. Comfort's role in the daily operation of the asylum was often boasted in the board of trustee reports. In 1888, when the visiting committee that inspected the institution reported that the patients were “quiet and comfortable, many of them enjoying the fullest liberty, its sanitary condition good, and neatness and order always prevailing.”³⁰



Figure 13. Unknown, “Traverse City State Hospital building #29,,” TADL Local History Collection, accessed June 4, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/20143>.

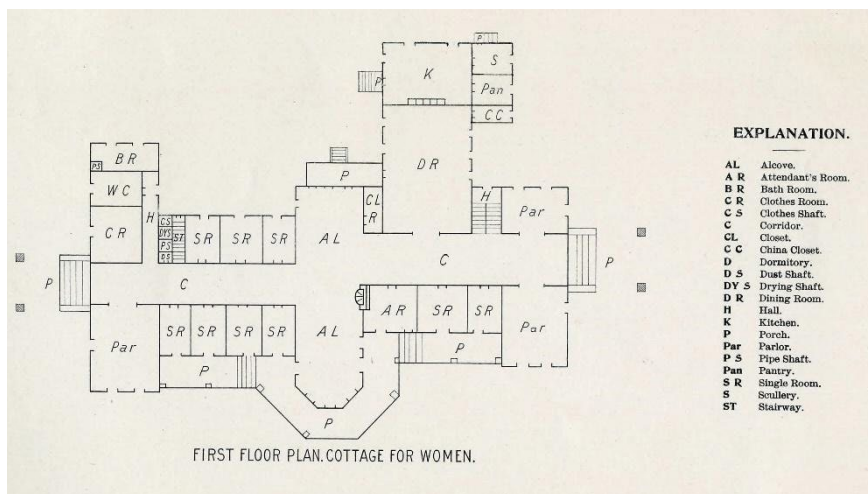


Figure 14. Plans of Cottage 29. “Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1894,” TADL Local History Collection, accessed April 8, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/1910>.

The cottage system involved constructing separate buildings away from the main building. The cottages were furnished with rooms for patients, dining rooms, etc. and each housing patients

³⁰ *Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City, June 30, 1888*, 5.

based on their sex and classification (Figure 14). This system was employed for a variety of reasons and was supposed to play a large role in treatment and the wellbeing of patients. Already in-use at the Kalamazoo and Pontiac Asylums before 1888, the cottages or detached buildings worked to decrease overcrowding while remaining close to the main building, “perfect for dealing with emergencies.”³¹ After the construction of the first cottage for fifty men in January 7, 1889,³² the Board argued that the cottage system affords “much more liberty and greater comforts to the patients.”³³ The asylum and state hospital in Traverse City would go on to build many more cottages for men and women over the course of the 1890-1910s (Figures 9-16).



Figure 15. Men’s cottage 23 constructed 1904 “Cotg. 23.” photograph, c. 1915, Josephine Davis Photo Album, TADL Local History Collection.

³¹ *Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City, June 30, 1888*, 6.

³² “Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1890,” 7.

³³ “Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1890,” 7.

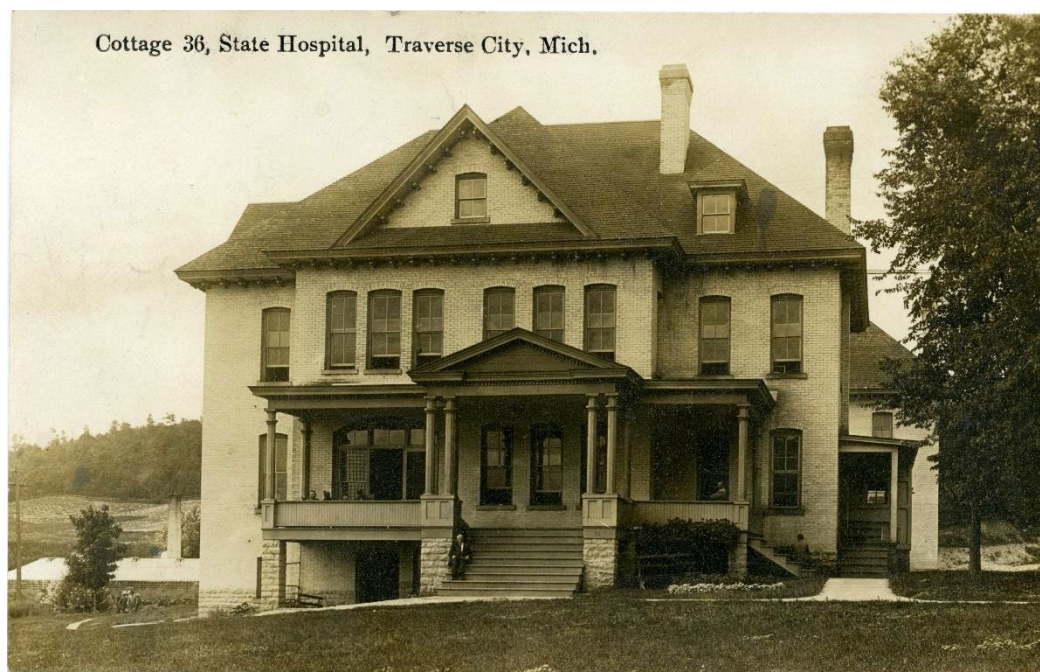


Figure 16. Blank photographic postcard of Cottage 36 at the Traverse City State Hospital, built in 1906. "Cottage 36, State Hospital, Traverse City, Mich.," postcard, n.d., Real Photos Vol. 1, Beckett Postcard Collection, TADL Local History Collection.

Comfort also appeared in regards to the classification and segregation of patients, like the separation of epileptics from rest of the patients, as proposed by assistant physician Dr. W. A. Stone.³⁴

Other amenities were considered important for the comfort and treatment of patients. In 1902, the board reported that the main hospital building had no porches that were suitable for exercise, pleasure or treatment of delicate, feeble patients in the open air.³⁵ Their recommendation was the construction of four new “capacious closed in porches” to be used as sunrooms during the winter months.³⁶

Intents and Reality

In 1900, the average duration of the asylum life of the insane individual is said to be about ten years.”³⁷ It is important to note that the asylum never indicated any cruel desire to retain patients, except for those who are deemed “incurable” or required further treatment, for example. In the reports, the board and the medical superintendent were happy to see improved cases, even happier about discharging recovered patients, as their jobs relied on the increase or consistency of the numbers proving the success of treatment.³⁸

Medical Advances and Treatment

Treatment involved not only comfort but also medical interventions. The medical practices at the asylum/state hospital depended on the most recent advances in the field. In 1890 the asylum asserted, “the State should foster the highest scientific treatment of patients.”³⁹ Reflective of this statement, the medical staff at the asylum attempted to be on the cutting edge of medicine. The medical superintendent’s report (i.e. Dr. James Munson’s biannual reports) would often share the results and techniques of various forms of treatments.⁴⁰

The early twentieth century was a time of rapid medical and scientific advancement in the fields of psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis (courtesy of psychologists like Freud and Jung).⁴¹ Medical advancements depended upon accurate and consistent data from asylums across the state, and by 1902, Dr. Munson explained that the asylums have a clearer comprehension of

³⁴ “Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1894,” *TADL Local History Collection*, 14, accessed April 8, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/1910>.

³⁵ “Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1902,” *TADL Local History Collection*, 13, accessed April 14, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/1906>.

³⁶ “Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1902,” 13.

³⁷ “Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1900,” 5.

³⁸ “Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1898,” 38, 44.

³⁹ “Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1890,” 6.

⁴⁰ See, Dr. James D. Munson’s description for the treatment of “Acute Delirious Mania” (Delirium Grave) “Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1892,” *TADL Local History Collection*, 47, accessed April 4, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/1911>.

⁴¹ “Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1910,” 7.

clinical forms.⁴² Beginning June 30, 1906, Emil Kraepelin's classification was the basis for the new classification table and adopted by all of the asylums of the state.⁴³

By the end of the 1910s, the perception by the board of the treatment of patients and mental health in general may be summarized as follows: at the beginning the hospital took care of the physical needs and the routine treatment of its patients. By 1916, however, "each patient is looked upon as a psychic problem deserving the most careful study to which is added the wider activities which aim at the scientific oversight of the mentally ill and mentally defective and of the general public health."⁴⁴

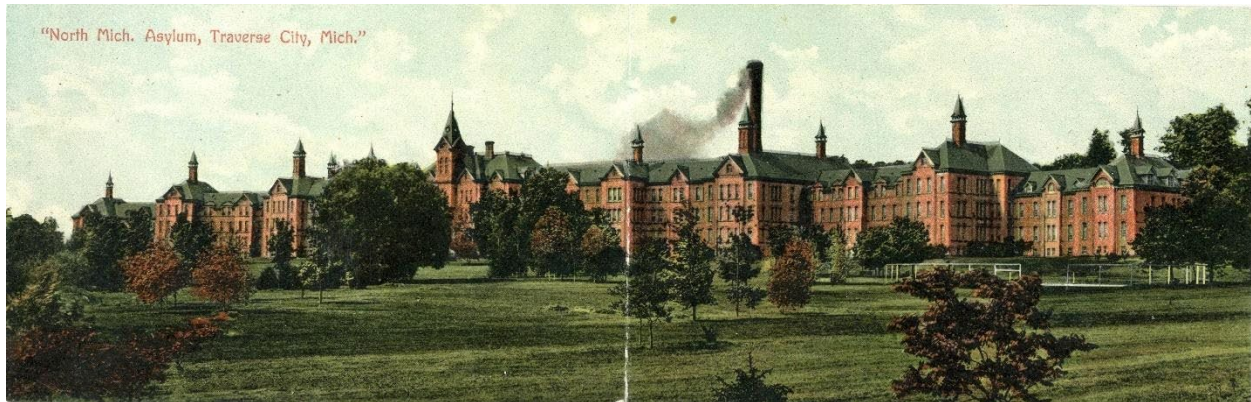


Figure 17. "Panoramic view of the Asylum grounds, Orson Peck double postcard, 1906," TADL Local History Collection, accessed June 4, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/10567>.

Diet

One particularly surprising element of the asylum's protocols, is an awareness of and medical treatment through diet and nutrition.

Diet and nutrition were always a concern for the asylum/hospital as early as 1886.⁴⁵ The key focus was on adapting to the newest and best standard of diet and nutrition, like the Atwater diet. While understanding that diet played a role in health and mental health, the 1914 explanation of dietetic treatment by Dr. Munson perfectly iterates the contemporary medical knowledge of the relationship of diet and health:

"The body metabolism is impaired in the majority of cases, and the patients are, by reason of their mental state, unable to cooperate with physicians in properly eating. We know in many cases without the utmost care in this direction patients go on to fatal exhaustion. Body metabolism is an extremely complicated matter in both health and disease."⁴⁶

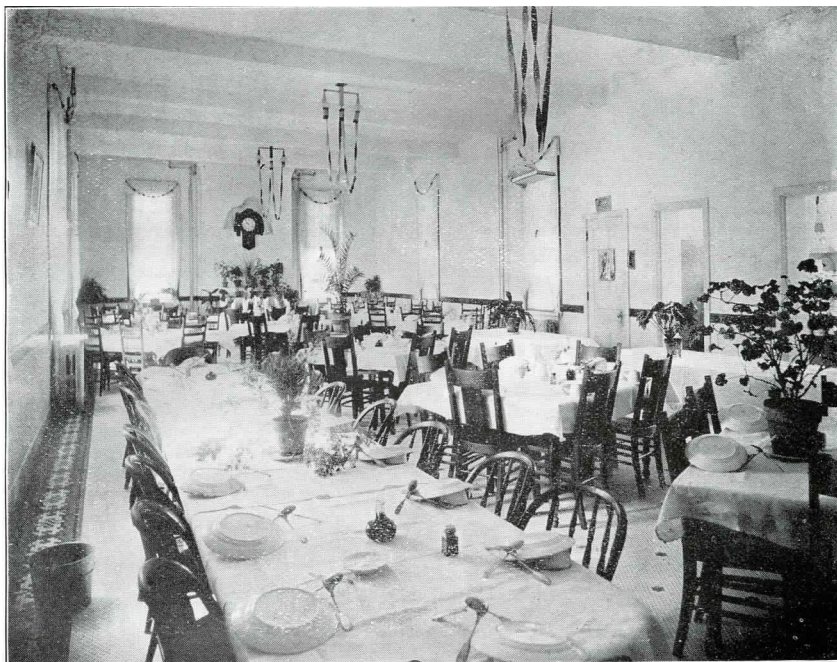
⁴² "Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1902," 39.

⁴³ "Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1908," 44.

⁴⁴ "Report of the Board of Trustees of the Traverse City State Hospital at Traverse City June 30, 1916," 7.

⁴⁵ "Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Northern Asylum for the Insane at Traverse City, Michigan, from October 1, 1884, to the full completion of the work, November 10, 1886," 23.

⁴⁶ "Report of the Board of Trustees of the Traverse City State Hospital at Traverse City June 30, 1914," 8.



GENERAL DINING ROOM, MALE DEPARTMENT

Figure 18. General Dinning Room for Men, "Report of the Board of Trustees of the Traverse City State Hospital at Traverse City June 30, 1912," TADL Local History Collection, accessed April 28, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/1899>.



Figure 19. "Baking at the Traverse City State Hospital, ca. 1900," TADL Local History Collection, accessed June 8, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/20059>.

In 1890, Dr. W. A. Stone mentions that "essential to the well being of epileptics is a careful regulation of their diet."⁴⁷ At the turn of the century, in 1896, after hiring a new chef, the asylum adopted a new standard for diet based on rations of "proper amounts of protein, fat and carbohydrates."⁴⁸ In 1898, patients' diet was added as a part of the asylum's new "clinical treatment", involving the "examination of the blood, urine, sputum, etc., investigation of the psychical functions, and the adaptation of the medical, moral and dietary treatment suitable for each individual."⁴⁹ The asylum understood that diet was related to comfort. Thus in 1910 and 1912, food preparation was directed by a dietician according to the Atwater standard and individualized in order "to meet the conditions of each patient, and the patient is no longer compelled to adjust himself to the food that is sent to him, whether suited to his needs or not."⁵⁰

⁴⁷ "Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1890," 62.

⁴⁸ "Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1896," 8.

⁴⁹ "Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1898," 39.

⁵⁰ "Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1910," 12; "Report of the Board of Trustees of the Traverse City State Hospital at Traverse City June 30, 1912," 8.



Figure 20. “Down where the little fishes grow, Trout Creek, Asylum Grounds.” “Photographs from S. E. Wait Album,” TADL Local History Collection, accessed June 6, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/14425>.

Phenomena of Visiting Asylums

The idea that people would willingly and recreationally visit an operational asylum seems foreign to modern sensibilities. Today, visiting an operational psychiatric facility does not involve a leisurely drive through the grounds, a walking tour around the building, nor is it treated like a tourist destination. Yet, since its opening, the asylum became an essential “must-see” location in Traverse City. People visiting for conferences, meetings, weddings, and the like, were often treated to a drive through the asylum and/or a tour of the grounds from Dr. James D. Munson himself. But, who can blame them. Between the architecture, farm, and well-kept grounds and gardens, if one ignored the patients, the asylum grounds were akin to a recreational park.

The following are some examples that record the various tourist visits to the Northern Michigan Asylum from 1895-1900.

In May 1895, at the close of the first day of proceedings of the State Firemen’s Association, which was hosted by Traverse City that year, ended with a “visit [to] the asylum for insane persons.”⁵¹

⁵¹ “State Firemen’s Association Proceedings of the Twenty-First Annual Convention at Traverse City, Mich., 1895,” TADL Local History Collection. Also see, “Traverse City is on Fire!” (blog) TADL, <https://www.tadl.org/posts/traverse-city-fire>.

The guests at Kate Steinberg's most extravagant wedding at the Steinberg Grand Opera House in June 25, 1895, were treated to an elaborate dinner and for entertainment “a ride around the city and visit to the Northern Michigan Asylum.”⁵²

In the summer of 1897, the dedication ceremony for the Temple of Court Traverse included a tour of the asylum by Dr. Munson.⁵³

That same summer saw the deputy oil inspectors of Michigan visiting Traverse City, “they came for business, and incidentally a little outing.”⁵⁴ State Oil Inspector Smith and deputies met the prominent business and professional men of the city and sailed on Frank Friedrich’s yacht, before visiting the asylum: “Munson displayed very courteous attention, and showed them over the institution, explaining the entire perfect system of operation and care of the one thousand patients. This practically closed the most happy and successful meeting every enjoyed by a body of oil inspectors.”⁵⁵

In June 1897, Baptist clergymen, who were in town for the Annual Meeting of Grand Traverse Baptist Association, were entertained during their conference by a visit to the asylum.⁵⁶

In February 1900, the Boston Symphony Orchestra visited the city and asylum “and other points of interest.”⁵⁷ Later that year, the physics classes of the Traverse City High School visited the asylum’s “lighting plant,” before visiting the bakery (Figure 19) and laundry buildings.⁵⁸

Furthermore, even if not physically, the public still gained intimate insight into the everyday operations of the asylum, sometimes with surprising transparency (Figures 21 and 22). The newspaper would often report the admission of patients, occasionally identifying them and sharing their diagnosis.⁵⁹

⁵² See, “Julius Steinberg, the Bargain Giver: From Peddler to Opera House Proprietor and Beyond,” (blog) TADL, <https://www.tadl.org/posts/julius-steinberg-bargain-giver-peddler-opera-house-proprietor-and-beyond>; *Grand Traverse Herald*, June 27, 1895, 5, CMU Digital Michigan Newspapers, <https://digimichnews.cmich.edu/?a=d&d=GrandTraverseGTH18950627-01.1.5>.

⁵³ *Traverse City Evening Record*, August 13, 1897, Newspaper Archive.

⁵⁴ *Traverse City Evening Record*, July 6, 1897, 2, Newspaper Archive.

⁵⁵ *Traverse City Evening Record*, July 6, 1897, 2, Newspaper Archive.

⁵⁶ *Traverse City Evening Record*, June 22, 1897, 2, Newspaper Archive.

⁵⁷ *Traverse City Morning Record*, February 4, 1900, 2, Newspaper Archive.

⁵⁸ *Traverse City Morning Record*, March 22, 1900, 4, Newspaper Archive.

⁵⁹ *Traverse Bay Eagle*, January 7, 1898, 5, Newspaper Archive.

**Sheriff J. E. Dutton and Mrs. Swartz
of Alpena, arrived in the city yester-
day with a patient for the asylum.**

Figure 21. Traverse City Evening Record, June 17, 1897, 2, Newspaper Archive.

Brevities.

**Sheriff Nungesser, of Manistee,
brought two patients to the asylum
yesterday.**

Figure 22. Traverse City Record Eagle, June 24, 1897, 1, Newspaper Archive.

Besides those who visited the asylum for recreation, entertainment, or edification, those who worked at the hospital enjoyed the grounds as well. In the “Josephine Davis” Scrapbook, there are plenty of pictures of young people, mostly nurses/attendants enjoying themselves on the grounds, working, cleaning, and learning (Figure 23). Employees working at the hospital had the opportunity to experience the grounds more frequently and their excitement for the surroundings are shown in many photographs taken by nurses over the years.



Figure 23. An entire page of the Josephine Davis Photo Album, TADL Local History Collection.

Josephine Davis (March 1889-November 24, 1962) graduated from Traverse City High School and attended the University of Michigan. It is unclear the exact connection between Josephine Davis and the Traverse City State Hospital and the Training School for Nurses, however, Davis' familial association likely played a part in Davis' acquisition of this photo album. Davis' father, Harry C. Davis, was an Attorney at Law practicing in Traverse City, who joined the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum in 1892, and continued to hold an office there at least until 1918 (which marks the end of the sequential reports from the Board of Trustees of the Asylum and the State Hospital held in the Local History Collection).⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Traverse City, Michigan, City Directory, 1913, 87, Ancestry, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/search/collections/2469/records/426167701>; "Report of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Michigan Asylum at Traverse City June 30, 1892," *TADL Local History Collection*, 3, accessed April 4, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/1911>; "Report of the Board of Trustees of the Traverse City State Hospital at Traverse City June 30, 1918," *TADL Local History Collection*, accessed April 28, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/1898>.

Some pages in the album are dated 1915, and we know from the 1920 census that Josephine was living at home with parents, Harry and Mary Davis, and sister Katherine Davis (who worked at the library).⁶¹ Josephine's occupation at the time was listed as "social" and the industry as "settlement."⁶²

From scenes of nurses lounging on and exploring the grounds (Figures 24-25, 27), climbing trees (Figure 28), working outdoors (Figures 30-31), we get the idea that the grounds were in actuality, not only for the treatment of patients. Rather, the grounds were perfect for both practical and recreational use by employees as well.



Figure 24. "Regina, Summer Time at 25." Josephine Davis Photo Album, TADL Local History Collection.

⁶¹ 1920 United States Federal Census, Michigan, Grand traverse, Traverse, District 0027, sheet 9B, Ancestry, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/search/collections/6061/records/17738442>.

⁶² 1920 United States Federal Census, Michigan, Grand traverse, Traverse, District 0027, sheet 9B.



Figure 25. Right: “Apple Blossom Time,” Left: “Supt. Of Nurses; Profile East Bay, 1915.” Josephine Davis Photo Album, TADL Local History Collection.

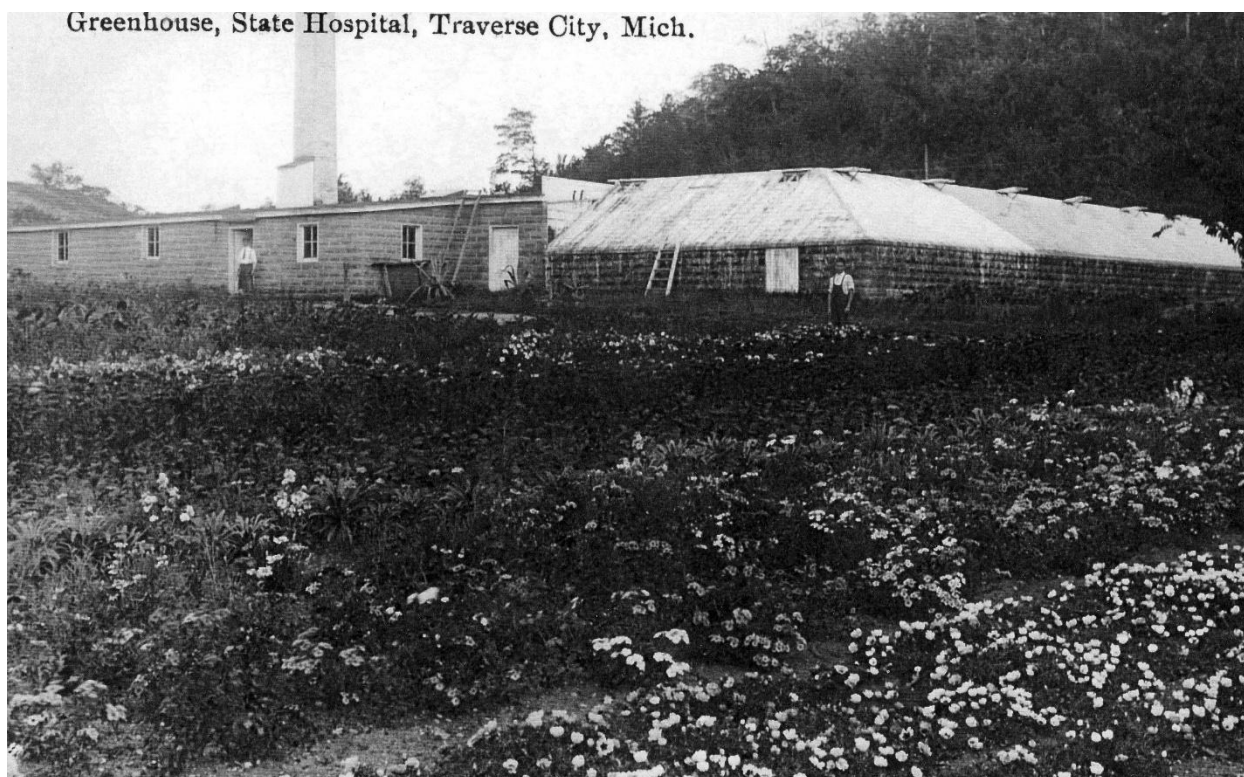


Figure 26. “Greenhouse and gardens at the Traverse City State Hospital farm,” TADL Local History Collection, accessed June 6, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/14130>.



Figure 27. "Broke Parasol; Clara at the Greenhouse" Josephine Davis Photo Album, TADL Local History Collection.



Figure 28. "Nettie" Hospital Employee/nurse climbing a tree near Willow lake on State Hospital Grounds. Josephine Davis Photo Album, TADL Local History Collection.



Willow Lake, North Michigan
State Hospital,
Traverse City, Mich.

Figure 29. "Willow Lake, North Michigan State Hospital, Traverse City, Mich. Postcard," TADL Local History Collection, accessed June 6, 2025, <https://localhistory.tadl.org/items/show/15596>.



Figures 30-31. Outdoor laundry and cleaning scenes, Josephine Davis Photo Album, TADL Local History Collection.

Postcards

To document one's own experiences and share with others is the purpose of postcards. The postcards, of which there are many, of the Northern Michigan Asylum or Traverse City State Hospital in the Local History Collection may be grouped into three categories. The first, strictly ephemera. These are postcards that are blank, unposted, and a keepsake (Figure 16). The second, are the related postcards (Figure 32-34). These are postcards that reference directly the asylum/hospital in the correspondence on the reverse. They were mailed out to family or friends and they provided interesting insights into both everyday life, those seeking or receiving medical treatment and those visiting the grounds. One example of a related postcard was likely written by an attendant on Hall 8, posted in 1909 to Miss Florence Earl in Glen Arbor (Figure 32).



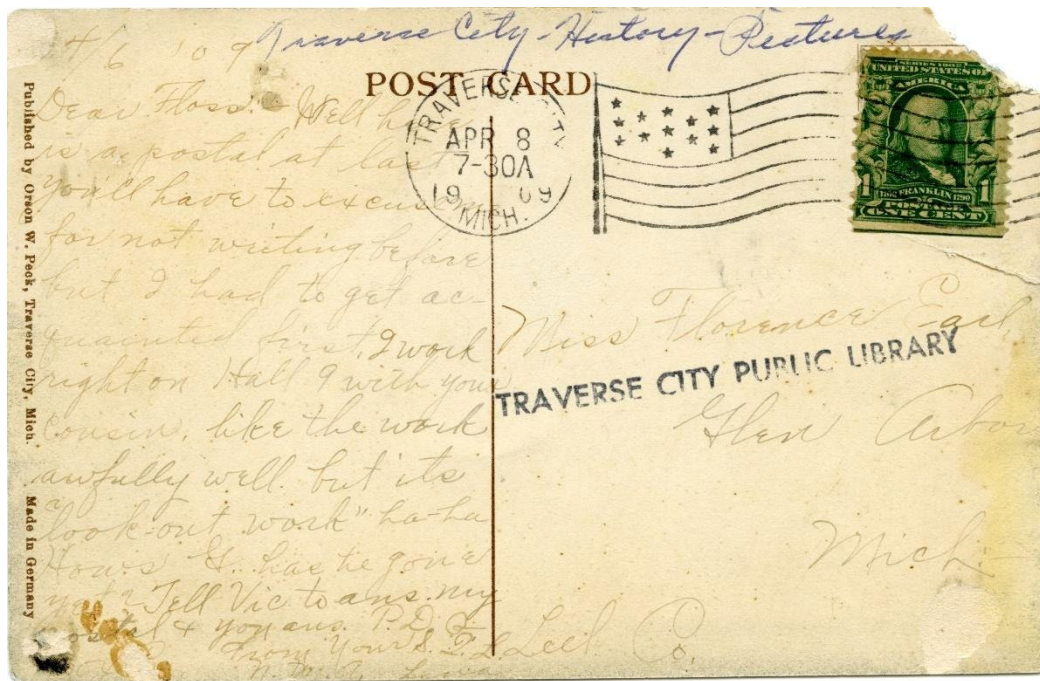


Figure 32. Local History Postcard Collection, TADL Local History Collection.

4/6 1909

Dear Floss:- Well here
 is a postal at last
 you'll have to excuse me
 for not writing before
 but I had to get ac-
 quainted first. I work
 right on Hall 9 with
 your cousin, like the work
 awfully well. but its
 "look-out work" ha-ha
 Hows G. has he gone
 yet + tell Vic to ans. My postal + you ans.
 From Yours
 N. M. A. Lena

The second is this interesting postcard posted on September 9, 1926 and addressed to Miss Eileen Brown in Kalamazoo, Michigan. The sepia toned photographic postcard describes a lecture given by Bishop Fredrick Fisher at the Methodist conference in Traverse City in 1926.⁶³ The author drew an “X” on the administration building’s first floor window, signifying the location of their room while visiting Traverse City. (Figure 33).

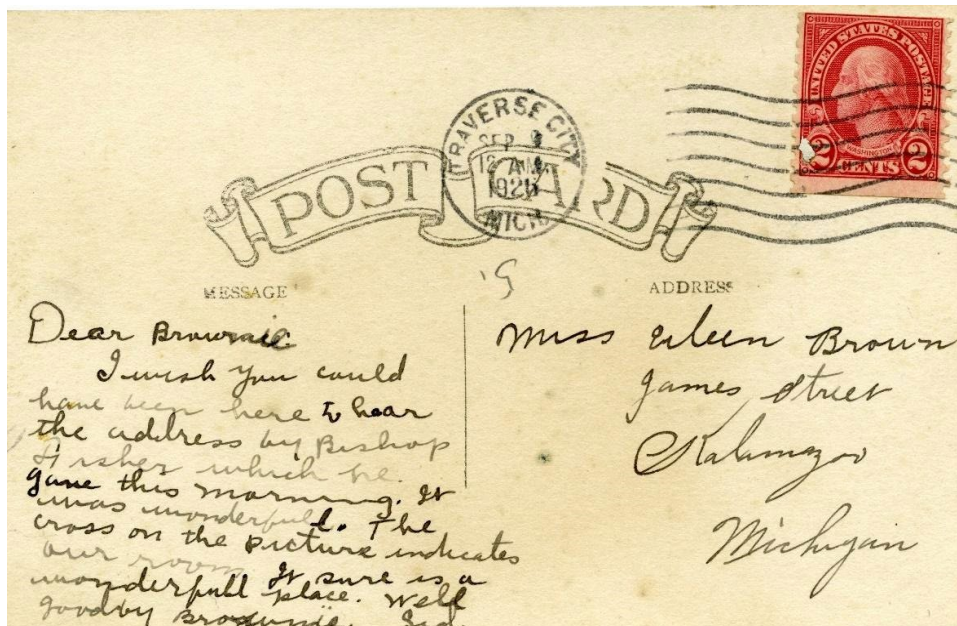


Figure 33. “Traverse City State Hospital,” postcard, 1926, Real Photo Vol. 1, p. 43, Beckett Postcard Collection, TADL Local History Collection.

⁶³ Traverse City Record Eagle, September 9, 1926, 1-4, Newspaper Archives.

Dear Brownie,
I wish you could
have been here to hear
the address by Bishop
Fisher⁶⁴ which he gave
this morning. It
was wonderful. The
cross on the picture indicates
our room. It sure is a
wonderful place. Well
goodbye Brownie. Sid.

Another found in the Local History Collection is dated October 9, 1907 and addressed to Mrs. Minnie Williams in Centerville, New York. The author discusses the treatment of “Mary” after an operation. This postcard was written earlier than the establishment of the general hospital department in 1913, which likely meant that Mary was a patient at the Northern Michigan Asylum (Figure 34). The author, Wallace, writes:

⁶⁴ Bishop Fredrick Fisher gave an excellent address on “Christ and the Races of Men” in the church at Methodist conference in Traverse City. Traverse City Record Eagle, September 9, 1926, 1-4, Newspaper Archives.



Figure 34. "North Michigan Asylum-Traverse City, Mich.," postcard, 1907, Old Publishers, Vol. 7, p. 6, Beckett Postcard Collection, TADL Local History Collection.

Dear Cousin

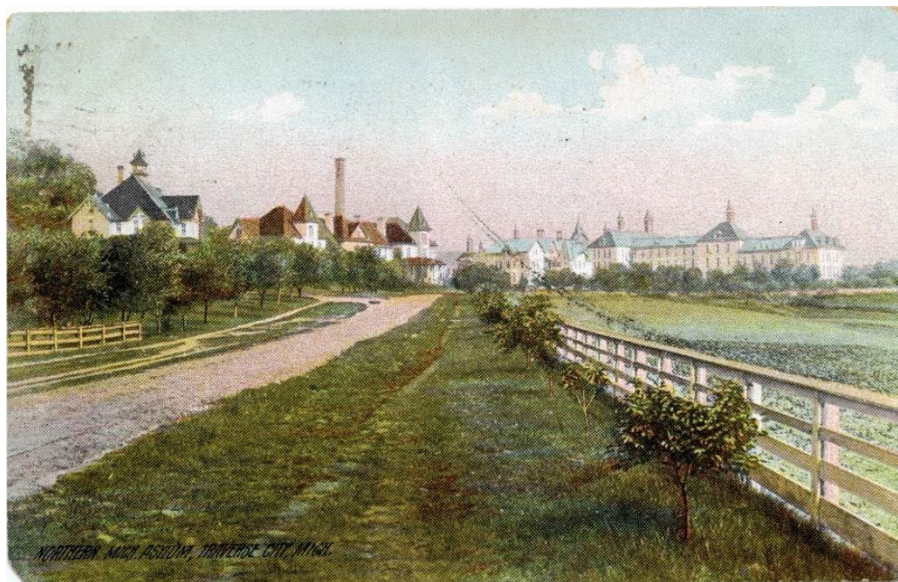
Your letter came today.

Mary is improving

slowly, but is getting
along good considering the
severe operation. will be 3
or 4 weeks before she can come
Home. Will write you the
particulars in a few
days. Sincerely Wallace

The other category of state hospital postcards, are those that act as souvenirs of a visit to the area. These are correspondences in which the asylum or state hospital is merely a backdrop or snapshot of Traverse City. Sent to family and friends as correspondences discussing unrelated family matters, events, and news. In this way, the Traverse City State Hospital postcards were used to ground the postcard sender's location/experience in Traverse City, so that when the recipient receives the postcard, the asylum greets them as a souvenir of Traverse City.

The beauty of the grounds and architecture was attractive, as it was specifically designed to be for the treatment of patients. This beauty, however, was open in certain ways to the general public who could enjoy the grounds as casual tourists, as reflected in the following color postcard dated 1909 (Figure 35 & 36):



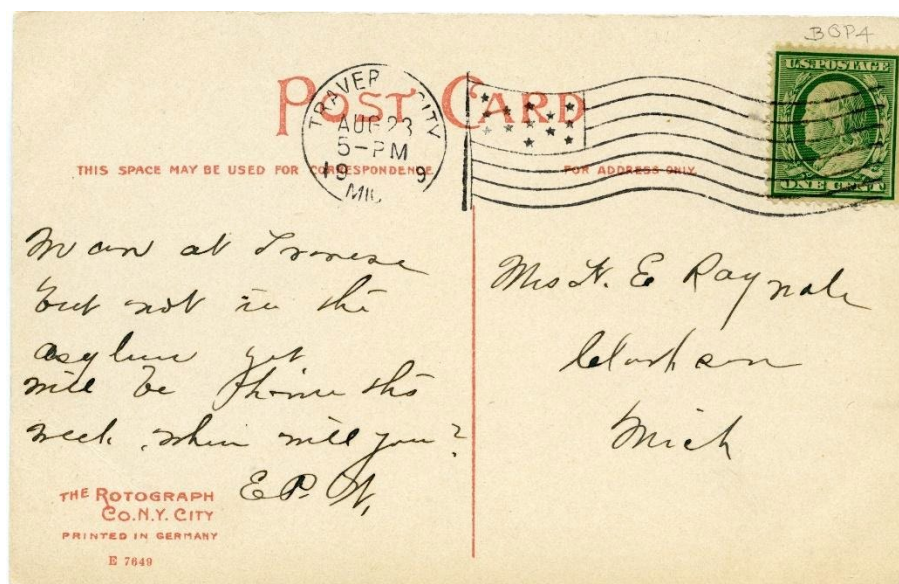


Figure 35. "Northern Michigan Asylum, Traverse City," postcard, 1909, Old Publishers Vol. 4, p. 36, Beckett Postcard Collection, TADL Local History Collection.

August 23, 1909,

"We are at Traverse

but not in the

asylum yet.

Will be home this

week, when will you?

E. P. W.

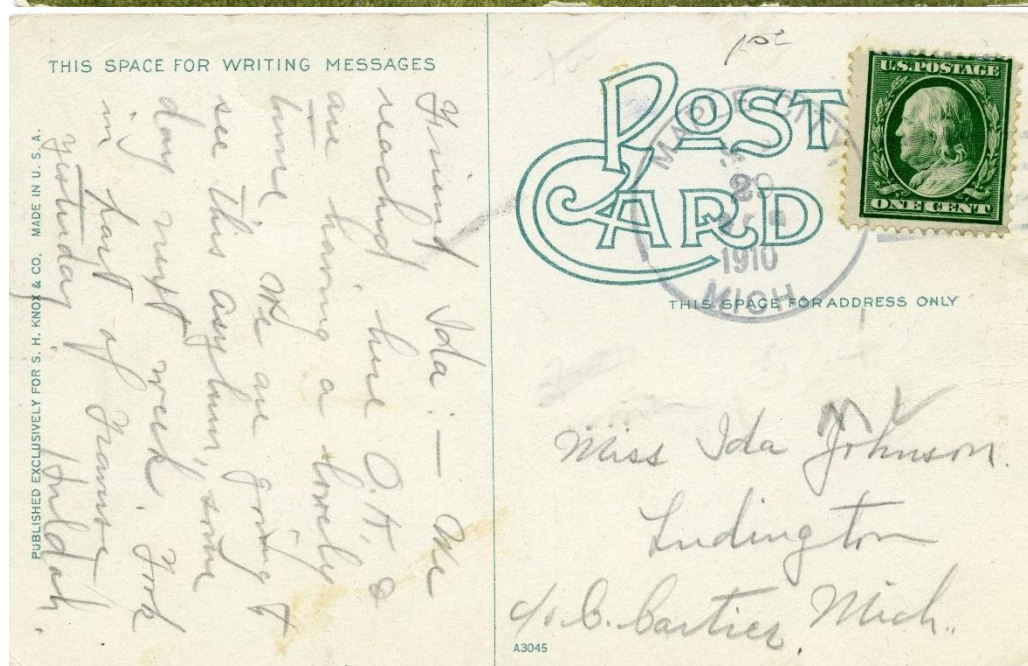
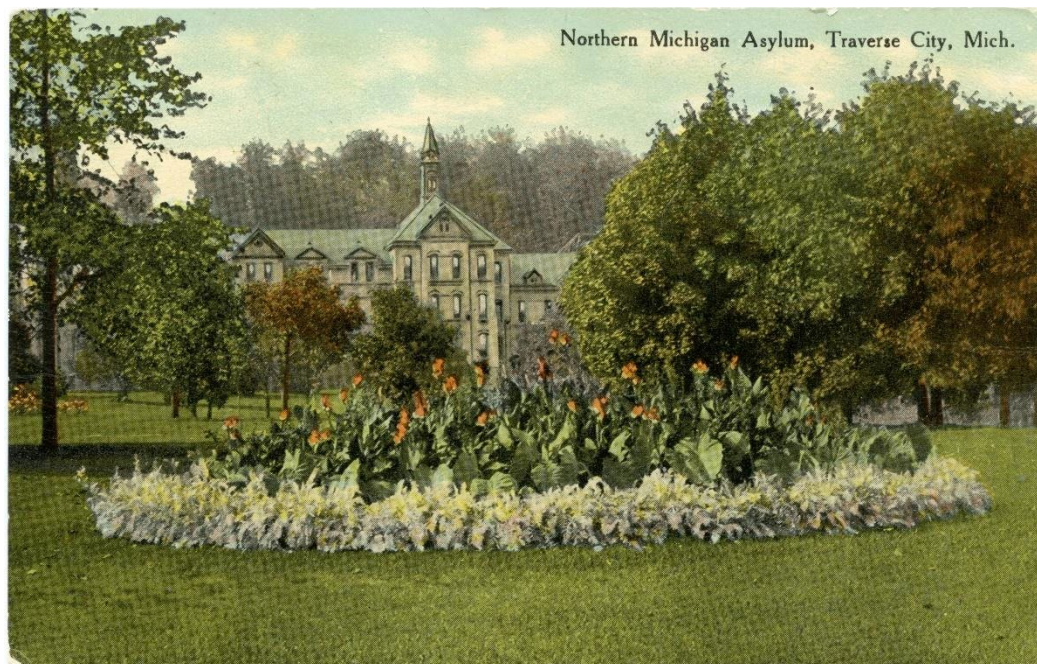


Figure 36. "Northern Michigan Asylum, Traverse City, Mich.," postcard, 1910, Old Publishers Vol. 4, p. 43, Beckett Postcard Collection, TADL Local History Collection.

Miss Ida Johnson in Ludington Mich. Posted in Maple City September 29, 1910.

Friend Ida:-- We
reached here O.K. +
are having a lovely
time. We are going to

see this asylum, some
day next week. Took
in part of Traverse
yesterday! Heldah.

The final postcard was posted on August 8 1910 in Traverse City (Figure 37). This “humorous” postcard is addressed to the writer’s brother, J. J. Stonek in Detroit. The hand drawn asylum and fleeing patient were intended to be humorous and that humor is reflected in the postcard’s written contents:



Figure 37. Orson Peck Traverse City Asylum, postcard, 1910, box 1, folder 13, Traverse City State Hospital Collection, TADL Local History Collection.

Dear Brother: - I intend to
write you a letter but there is
but little going on, so I think
a card will do! Well I will wind

up here Thur. or Friday, and
so will be in need of a hundred
and 1 things before I am ready
for Det., as a little donation
from you would be appreciated
that is if you can spare it.
Have a little girl over to Mary's
Everything is coming nicely.
Ans soon F. E. S.

Conclusion

Traverse City's complicated spatial history (a study of the use, politics, and transformation of space over time)⁶⁵ of the grounds of the former state hospital was further complicated with the closing of the Traverse City Regional Psychiatric Hospital in October 1989. By examining the biannual Board of Trustee reports, local newspapers, photographs, and postcards, one can trace today's use of the grounds as a recreational site and better understand the context of picnicking at a former psychiatric hospital, perhaps making the idea of the activity less strange than originally perceived.

Article available online at <https://www.tadl.org/posts/picnicking-state-hospital-treatment-and-tourism-traverse-city-state-hospital>.

⁶⁵ See, Charles W. J. Withers, "Place and the 'Spatial Turn' in Geography and in History," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 70, no. 4 (October 1, 2009): 637–58. doi:10.1353/jhi.0.0054.