

MARGARET PERRY

Mental Wellness in Times Past

By Narielle Living



Murawski Photography

Above the apothecary in Colonial Williamsburg is an office that appears to have at one time been an apartment. Somewhat sparse, this is where Margaret Perry, apothecary assistant, conducts research and digs into what healthcare and mental wellness might have looked like for Williamsburg residents in centuries past.

“Over the course of a regular day, I’m usually here,” she says. “We interpret in shifts, so I’m downstairs interpreting for anywhere from two to three and a half to four hours a

day, depending on how many other staff are here.” She spends a good amount of time interpreting to the public the general history of medicine for the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, depending on what people want to know. “The rest of the time I am at my computer researching, transcribing or translating a lot of primary source medical documents.”

Margaret attended William & Mary, and when it came time to choose a college major, she realized she didn’t want to settle for just one. “What I wanted was really interdisciplin-

ary,” she says. “They have a program that lets you put together at least three different disciplines, or three different majors, into a cohesive major through interdisciplinary. So, I cobbled together biology and sort of tweaked it to focus on human bio, combined that with kinesiology Health Sciences and with anthropology.”

Eastern State Hospital on Ironbound Road is devoted to psychiatric care and has been in existence for 250 years. Originally, Eastern State was known as The Public Hospital of

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Williamsburg and was the first psychiatric facility in America. Margaret notes that there was a strong relationship between the apothecary and the hospital. “We know that John Minson Galt I is involved with the public hospital pretty much from its beginning. Dr. John de Segueyra was the first physician appointed to the hospital, and we have an invoice to Dr. Galt for an actual supply of medication.”

Today, having someone admitted to a mental facility for treatment is a complicated process. There is insurance to deal with and doctors who have to administer tests and sign papers stating this is necessary. In previous centuries, Margaret says, it was a court-initiated process. “It would involve someone going to the county court and saying, Hey, there’s this person, or this family member, who needs help. The court would order a warrant to pick that person up and bring them in for a verbal examination. And they would also coordinate depositions from witnesses and family members. They would examine all of those in context, make a decision as to whether that person would be best served by the hospital, and then sign another order saying that they were coordinating transport and admission. And then, especially in the 18th century, there was another step entirely on the Williamsburg side, where typically a sheriff or deputy would show up with the person and all the paperwork. The board of directors would meet at the hospital, and then they would decide based on all the evidence and the second critical examination whether the person would be admitted.” Margaret notes there were some cases where a person made it all the way to Williamsburg only to have the court of directors meet and decide there was no benefit to hospital admission. “There’s one man who is not admitted on the grounds that he is ‘harmless and inoffensive,’” she says. “There’s a social aspect to it where the grounds for admitting someone is double sided. It’s to protect them. It’s to keep them safe, it’s to help them get better. But there’s an element to it where it’s also about the larger community.”

Her research is derived mainly from court records, county records and doctor’s records, all of which highlight people who were in the process of being admitted to the hospital.

Margaret is careful in her research, because, she says, even today families may feel a stigma attached to the mental illness of an ancestor. “It’s tricky because there’s a modern stigma. Even looking into 200 years ago, I have to be careful because it’s something that people might not want to know about their ancestors.”

Hopefully, that attitude and the stigma attached is shifting. “I think the tide is turning somewhat,” Margaret says. “I was on a panel for the commemorative anniversary programs with modern psychologists and people from community service boards. One person said that the fact that teenagers seem to be very open nowadays versus a couple generations ago is helping a lot. It opens the door to talk about stuff like that.”

Margaret notes that even centuries ago, there are hints that people wanted help dealing with mental illness. “There are some indications in records that people at least may have been agreeable to the idea of being admitted,” she says. “That institution is unique in that it is public. It’s court ordered, it’s funded. So, it has that very particular admissions process, but I can think of a few people who are noted at least in the early 19th century, when we get day-to-day clinical notes, as

being pretty content with their surroundings and with their situation and sort of optimistic about what the hospital would be able to get them. So potentially, they had a voice in that process.”

It’s easy to dismiss any notion that mental health care was addressed in previous centuries. Many people have the idea that everyone who struggled with mental wellness was branded as crazy, as a witch or simply ignored. “I’ll bring up the idea of the public hospital or the idea of mental health care historically, pre-civil war, and people scoff and say oh, they dealt with it? They talked about it? It’s been really useful to be able to say yes, on different levels, they were talking about it.”

When asked if the same level of stigma about this topic was felt in the past, Margaret says yes, she believes it was. But she qualifies that statement. “It depends on who in a community you’d ask. It depends on how disruptive someone’s symptoms were, which is not like today. There are different levels of stigma. Someone experiencing psychosis goes through a lot of different things. Then someone ex-

periencing mild anxiety or depression, that’s always tempered by things like class and race and housing status.”

We have come a long way in our approach to mental health care, according to Margaret. On October 12, 1773, the public hospital received their first patient. “He was the first male patient and was brought to Williamsburg on February 16, 1773.” Unfortunately, when he was brought to Williamsburg, they had not yet completed the building that would become the public hospital. It took eight more months to complete, and during that time, he was housed at the local jail.

Margaret’s job allows her the opportunity to dig through source material and clarify what the public hospital and healthcare consisted of in the past. “I think the public hospital is a unique place because there’s no centralized ledgers on patient admissions. There are not a lot of centralized invoice books. It’s a lot of loose leaf [papers]. I keep saying it’s a unique institution, but it’s unique also in that for about 89 years, it’s run by one family, and they keep all their correspondence and writ-

ings with the hospital.”

Colonial Williamsburg, Margaret says, offers her the ability to focus on exactly the type of work she was meant to do. “It’s a wonderful synthesis of all the interests I’ve held over the past couple of years. This is a side of science communication as a field. From a historical perspective, it seems like there’s a gap in what the public knows about medicine and about pharmacy and about the business side of things. And so, it’s the idea of getting to bridge that gap and be an educator, but also, I can talk to people candidly about medicine and about their experiences with it.”

In her spare time, Margaret focuses on her artistic pursuits. “I’m a linoleum printmaker. I like to carve relief blocks.” Referred to as lino printing, the artist carves a design on material with a linoleum, rubber or vinyl surface, then uses that design to make prints. “I also like to hike in the woods.”

Although Margaret Perry has lived in a wide variety of places, she says she’s been in and out of Williamsburg her entire life. “This is always home.” NDN

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