

Colonial Williamsburg



DBHDS
Virginia Department of Behavioral Health
and Developmental Services

Colonial Williamsburg and Eastern State Hospital commemorate 250 years of mental healthcare



Images courtesy of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Download high-res images [here](#).

WILLIAMSBURG, Va. (Oct. 3, 2023) – When The Public Hospital of Williamsburg opened its doors in 1773, it became the first inpatient facility in America devoted exclusively to treating individuals with mental disorders. Known today as Eastern State Hospital and located outside of the Historic Area of Colonial Williamsburg, the hospital continues to provide mental healthcare for individuals throughout Virginia 250 years later.

In honor of 250 years of mental health history and the tens of thousands of patients and staff whose stories are intertwined with the hospital, Colonial Williamsburg, in partnership with Eastern State Hospital and the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, will host a series of public events on Thursday, Oct. 12 - Saturday, Oct. 14. including tours, theater programs, lectures and presentations.

“Mental health plays a profound, though often poorly understood, role in the ongoing story of our nation,” said Ron Hurst, Colonial Williamsburg’s chief mission officer and senior vice president for education and historic resources. “Colonial Williamsburg is honored to partner with Eastern State Hospital to commemorate the anniversary of the Public Hospital of 1773 and to invite the community to better understand this complicated aspect of our collective history.”

Event highlights include [tours of the reconstructed Public Hospital](#) on Thursday, Friday and Saturday from 3 – 4:15 p.m. and [a presentation by Dr. King Davis](#) on Eastern State Hospital’s influence on the development of other hospitals and policies throughout the South on Oct. 13 from 4:40 – 5:30 p.m. in the Hennage Auditorium. The commemoration will culminate with [an event](#) on the front lawn of Colonial Williamsburg’s reconstructed Public Hospital of 1773 on Francis Street on Oct. 14 at 2 p.m.

“We are deeply grateful for Colonial Williamsburg’s partnership in commemorating Eastern State Hospital’s legacy of caring for individuals who are living with mental illness,” said Daniel Herr, Eastern State Hospital’s CEO. “Since its inception as the first Public Hospital in the

nation, we had a formative role in shaping the understanding of, and public policy around, treating mental health disorders. In keeping with this robust tradition, this commemoration will also highlight Governor Youngkin’s key mental health initiative, Right Help, Right Now.”

“This anniversary, and Eastern State Hospital’s unique place in our country’s history, offer us a chance to reflect on the past, present, and future of behavioral health care in Virginia,” said Nelson Smith, Commissioner of the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services. “We look forward to joining our partners at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation for a series of events that can help us better understand our history and honor the work of the incredible staff at Eastern State, and across our behavioral health care system, as they strive to get Virginians the right help, right when they need it.”

The Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg will be free and open to the public from Thursday, Oct. 12 – Saturday, Oct. 14 to promote broad access to a wide array of programming related to mental health. For a full listing of events, visit colonialwilliamsbrug.org/hospital.

History of mental healthcare at Eastern State Hospital

Mental healthcare has evolved significantly over the past 250 years. When an act establishing a public hospital was first passed by colonial legislators in 1769, it was driven primarily by a concern for public safety rather than a concern for the welfare of the patients.

The hospital became a trailblazer in the field of mental health in the 19th century under the leadership of superintendent Dr. John Minson Galt II. Galt implemented many of the components of modern psychiatric hospitals over a century before they became widely accepted, including a belief in human dignity for the mentally ill, therapeutic activities, talk therapy, calming medication, in-house research, deinstitutionalization and community-based mental health care. Dr. Galt’s legacy continues today at Eastern State Hospital where a staff of over 800 people partner with patients to empower them in their recovery and promote personal independence.

For a video tour of the Public Hospital of 1773 and an interactive timeline of the history of the Public Hospital, visit colonialwilliamsbrug.org/hospital. For additional information about Eastern State Hospitals’ history, visit dbhds.virginia.gov/facilities/esh/esh-history/.

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About The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation preserves, restores and operates Virginia’s 18th-century capital of Williamsburg. Innovative and interactive experiences highlight the relevance of the American Revolution to contemporary life and the importance of an informed, active citizenry. The Colonial Williamsburg experience includes more than 600 restored or reconstructed original buildings, renowned museums of decorative arts and folk art, extensive educational outreach programs for students and teachers and 18th-century inspired culinary options from historic taverns situated along historic Duke of Gloucester Street. Colonial Williamsburg Resorts complement the experience, offering guests five unique hotel properties including the iconic Forbes Travel Guide Five-Star, AAA Five Diamond Williamsburg Inn, newly renovated Williamsburg Lodge-Autograph Collection, Williamsburg Woodlands Hotel and Suites, the Griffin Hotel, and authentic 18th-century Colonial Houses. The resort offers a range of events and amenities including four historic taverns, 15 food and beverage outlets providing exquisite culinary experiences from casual to elegant dining, the Golden Horseshoe Golf Club featuring 36 holes designed by Robert Trent Jones Sr. and his son Rees Jones, a world-class full-service spa and fitness center, pools, meeting and flexible event spaces, and scenic gardens providing the perfect venue for weddings and special events. Merchants Square, built alongside the Historic Area in 1935

as one of the first planned shopping districts in the United States, features more than 40 specialty boutiques with products ranging from apparel to fine jewelry, art, specialty foods and gifts. Philanthropic support and revenue from admissions, products and hospitality operations sustain Colonial Williamsburg's educational programs and preservation initiatives.

About Eastern State Hospital

Eastern State Hospital, located in Williamsburg, Virginia, was founded in 1773 with a well intentioned emphasis on community focused mental health care. The Hospital is situated on 500 acres and consists of 2 patient care buildings, and a staff of over 900 to care for the 300 patients. Eastern State Hospital is part of The Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services system and is accredited by the Joint Commission.

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