



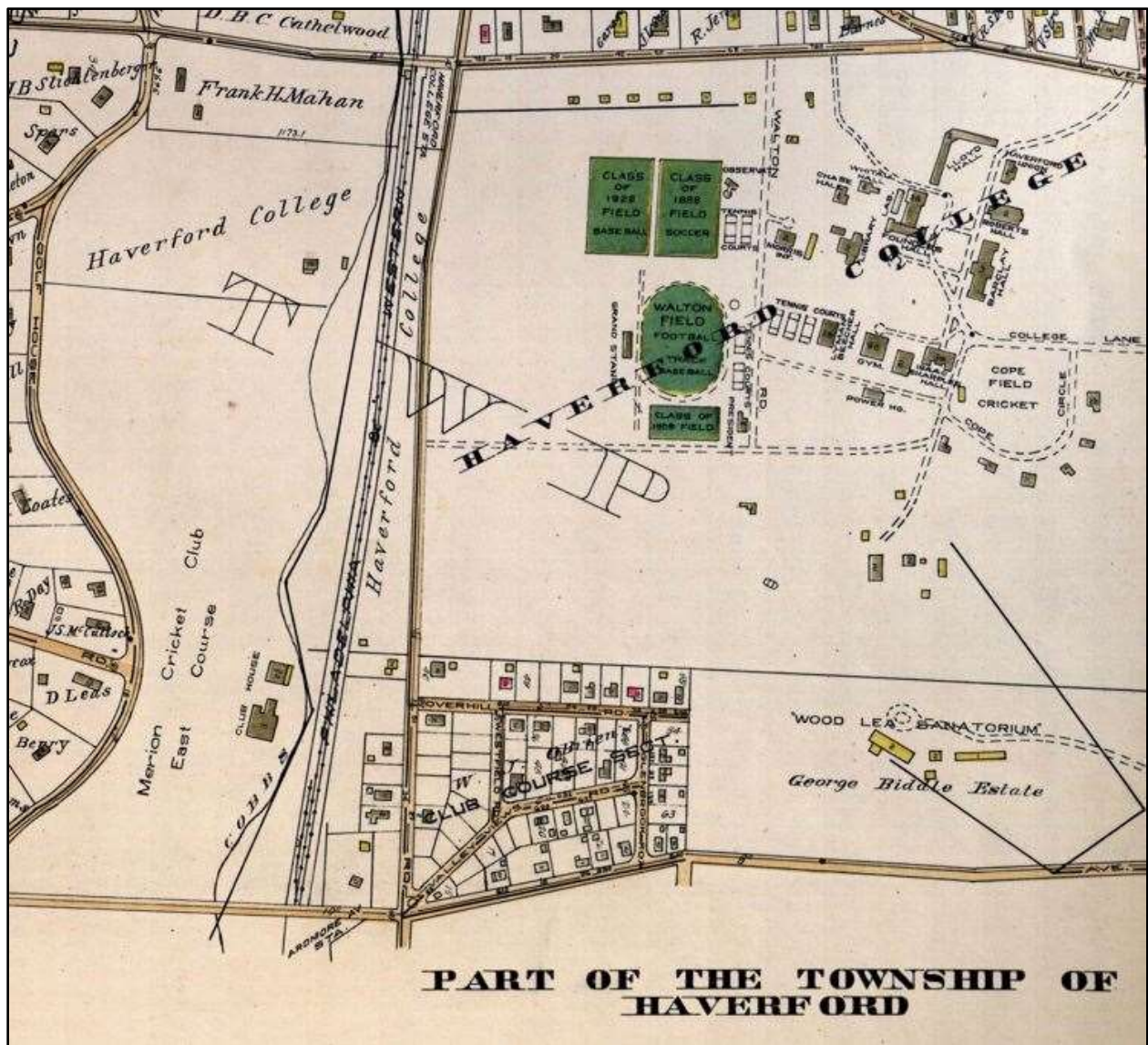
Haverford Township Historical Society



WOOD LEA SANITARIUM IN HAVERFORD TOWNSHIP

By Irene Coffey

A recent inquiry to HTHS led to the discovery of a private sanitarium in Haverford Township (on the George Biddle estate on the northwest corner of Ardmore Avenue and County Line Road) that was previously unknown to us. Interestingly, the question came from a woman who now lives in Provence, France. The inquirer's aunt had worked as a nurse at the sanitarium in the 1920s and 1930s.



The Wood Lea Sanitarium is identified (lower right) on the George Biddle estate in this portion of a map from the 1929 Klinge Atlas of Delaware County.

According to The Institutional Care of the Insane in the United States and Canada, edited by Henry M. Hurd in 1916:

“Wood Lea Sanitarium was organized September 1, 1908, by Dr. Grace E. White, for ten years assistant resident physician at the Friends' Asylum, Frankford, in partnership with Mrs. Elizabeth Chase McDaniel. In September, 1911, this partnership, by mutual consent and in accordance with an agreement entered into at the time of its formation, was dissolved and a new one formed, Dr. White remaining physician-in-charge and Elmer C. Rouband becoming business manager.

“The sanitarium is located at 300 Ardmore Avenue, Ardmore, Pa. It is surrounded by 30 acres of land, six of which are mature woodland, through which a small brook runs, adding to the picturesqueness of the grounds. Part consists of lawn and garden, part is under cultivation as an extensive kitchen garden, and part is under pasture.

“The house, a pleasant dwelling house of the old English style of architecture, is situated on a slight knoll, so that drainage and ventilation are satisfactory. It has accommodations for 10 patients. A stable is comprised in the group of buildings, and also an extensive chicken run. On the ground floor of the house, opening west and south, is a large assembly room, and connected with it is an indoor conservatory. Here the patients who are well enough to mingle with each other meet for entertainment and employment. A grand piano and victrola give opportunity for music; a well-selected library affords facilities for reading.

“Every effort is made to assist the patient to develop her resources for entertainment or by diversified occupation to enlarge them. Knitting, crocheting, basket-making, embroidery, dressmaking, indoor gardening, cards and other games have been found available, while in summer, tennis, croquet, outdoor gardening, walks and tramps over the surrounding country furnish entertainment.

“The special feature of the treatment method in use is the noninstitutional and truly homelike atmosphere provided for the patients, and the consistent and insistent appeal to the normality that is in each patient. The theory of the physician-in-charge is that nervous patients and those of abnormal mentality improve most rapidly in an environment where all that accentuates the deviation from the normal is minimized as far as possible, and where the regime approaches as nearly as possible to normal living. Such a course is made possible only by constant, direct association of the physician-in-charge with the patients, the intelligent and active cooperation of the attendant nurses, and the comparatively small number of patients.”

We don't know how long the sanitarium remained in existence. It doesn't appear in the 1940 U.S. Census. However, based on the 1910-1930 Census records the facility maintained an impressive patient/nurse ratio. In 1910 there were 2 “boarders” and 3 nurses; in 1920 5 “boarders” and 7 nurses; and in 1930 9 “inmates” and 8 nurses.

Our French inquirer also found a newspaper article from September 14 (no year given) reporting that a patient, Sarah Sentman, was found dead in a water-filled bathtub. The cause of death – drowning or a heart attack – was not known. Further, the inquirer reports that her great-grandmother had a nervous breakdown after ironing too many shirts!

Should you wish to know if your grandmother also ironed too many shirts, necessitating a stay at Wood Lea, or to look at the Census records and other information, they are available at the Historical Society's Nitre Hall headquarters.

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