

Sketch: Insanity - The Williamsburg Hospital

What was it like to be “an insane” at the beginning of nineteenth century in Virginia? This question begged to be answered when I discovered my 4xgreat-grandfather’s name on a list of patients of the Williamsburg Public Hospital.

John Markham was the son of Bernard Markham and Mary Harris of Chesterfield county Virginia. He was just past his thirtieth birthday when he was committed to the Lunatic Hospital at Williamsburg Virginia. He was a married man, a father, a planter in Goochland county Virginia.

In 1980 the “Virginia Genealogist” published a list of Patients in the Hospital at Williamsburg, 1800-1837. Further description was given: *A List of Patients received into the Lunatic Hospital from 1800 to 1815 who have estates sufficient to reimburse the Commonwealth for expenses incurred* . . . John Markham’s name appears twice on this list. He was first received on the 25th of September 1801 and discharged on the 29th of June 1802 (9 months). His family paid for removal \$28.80, and he was given an allowance of \$6 on discharge. He was again received on the 7th of July 1806 and discharged on the 14th of July 1807 (1 year). This time his family paid \$35.35 for his removal, and he was returned and allowance of \$10.



The Public Hospital at Williamsburg

The identity of John Markham was confirmed by evidence in the Court Orders of Goochland county Virginia:

23 Aug 1801; Col William Fleming and Bernard Markham of Chesterfield and Thomas Harris of Maidens Adventure in Powhatan are by the court appointed a committee to manage the estate of John Markham, an insane, and it is ordered that they be summoned to appear at next court to enter into bond according to law. An inventory of the estate of John Markham, an insane, is presented in court and ordered to be recorded.

What brought John Markham to the hospital in Williamsburg? No evidence has surfaced to give a definitive answer to that question. Speculation, based on what is known, will have to suffice.

Shomer Zwelling's, "Quest for a Cure: The Public Hospital in Williamsburg, Virginia 1773-1885" becomes extremely helpful at this point. When the Williamsburg Hospital first came into being in 1773, the governing body, ". . . declared that the hospital was to admit only such persons who were judged to be either curable or dangerous." Zwelling goes on to explain,

Shortly after the hospital opened the Court of Directors published an announcement in the Williamsburg newspaper – the Virginia Gazette – explicitly declaring that they would not admit several classes of people, including Alcoholics who were a nuisance to the community, the indigent who were more appropriately the responsibility of local parishes, and chronically disturbed persons who were not considered dangerous.

So, John Markham was probably not admitted to the hospital only to treat alcoholism. The duration of his stays demonstrates lengthy rehabilitation.

Zwelling defines the two broad categories of mental illness at the beginning of the 19th century:

Mania, a condition indicated by violent, restless and frenzied behavior.

Melancholia, a disposition in which the person tended to be inordinately depressed, listless, and grief-stricken.

John Markham may have moved back and forth between states of mania and melancholia. Today we refer to this as bi-polar disorder, or manic-depressive illness. It causes shifts in mood, energy, and ability to function. This seems to fit with the known pieces of John Markham's life – that he was in constant dispute with his neighbors and employees (shifts in mood), that he was husband and father to a large brood of children over a twenty-five year span (energy), that he needed a "committee" to oversee his family and property (ability to function).

Melancholia, or depression, is associated with today's Major Depressive Disorder, or MDD. Studies indicate that genetics do play a role in this disease. A look at John Markham's descendants reveals several sad occurrences of depression and suicide.

What was life like for John Markham at the Williamsburg Public Hospital? When John Markham arrived in 1801 the hospital had been in existence just over twenty-five years. The Galt family of Williamsburg had been the primary overseers of the hospital since its inception, and carried on that tradition for more than eighty years, serving as keepers and doctors. At the time of John Markham's incarceration William Galt was the Keeper of the Public Hospital, and Alexander Dickie Galt was the visiting doctor. He saw patients upon their admission, and then visited them once weekly.

Relying on the detailed research and writing of Shomar Zwelling and Norman Dain (reference below), I can give a brief description of the hospital conditions, and likely medical treatments of the period 1800-1808.

The Williamsburg Public Hospital was originally constructed with twenty-four cells. These remained as the patient “rooms” in 1800. Each cell had a thick wooden door with a barred window that looked into a hallway. The cell had only a straw mattress with blanket, a chamber pot, and an iron ring in the wall for chaining the occupant. There is no indication that more comfortable chambers were available for “wealthier” patients.

Zwelling gives more detailed description:

Although patients were supplied with basic clothing and an adequate diet, rooms were spartanly furnished and organized activities were virtually nonexistent. Each patient seems to have spent most of the day and the entire night confined alone in a secured cell measuring approximately eleven feet square. Meals, too, apparently were taken in the cells, but convalescing patients were allowed to spend some daylight time in an outdoors exercise yard, call the “mad yard.”

In 1805 a Convalescing House was built on the property. Perhaps John Markham spent some time there on his second stay.

John Markham was probably considered “a curable insane person”. In the early 19th century mental illness was considered a disease of the brain, and medical staff generally acted on the idea that the mentally ill person chose to be irrational. Available records make it clear that the patients at the Williamsburg Public Hospital did receive regular medical attention.

Treatments varied. Bloodletting and blistering were sometimes employed, but Dr Galt seemed to prefer the use of drugs. He most commonly used drugs to induce vomiting or defecation. He also called upon Calomel, mercury, and jalap.



Plunge baths and “shock” water treatments were evident treatment methods. “The cold baths or showers that were recorded, sometimes daily for a particular patient, must have been ordered for punishment as well as for therapy and sedation; the occasional warm baths were probably for calming and cleaning patients.” (Dain)

Forms of restraint were also used:

During the eighteenth century manacles were used, a Williamsburg blacksmith being called to the hospital to put them on and take them off. The English camisole, also known as the strait waistcoat and later referred to as

the straitjacket, came into vogue in the early nineteenth century. It was considered a marked improvement over the more confining and chafing manacles. Sometimes patients were bound to chairs with leather or iron straps for long periods. (Zwelling, interpreted from the Galt Family Papers)

What was John Markham's response to this spartan, confining lifestyle, and severe medical treatment? Was he "cured"? Well, we know that his first nine-month confinement didn't cure him. He returned four years later for a second incarceration that lasted a full year. After his release in 1807, things were quiet for a time. But, by 1810, his personal affairs were returned by the court to a "committee". He was continually in debt. John Markham lived for about fifteen years after his hospital release.

Gradually theories and practices evolved at the Williamsburg Public Hospital. After 1835 they moved into the "moral management" period. In 1885 the original Hospital building was completely destroyed by fire. New residential halls were built and the facility purpose became primarily long term care of the chronically ill.

One hundred years after the fire, in 1985, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation reconstructed the original Hospital building. Visitors to Colonial Williamsburg can visit the Public Hospital (also known as the Eastern State Hospital of Williamsburg), and enjoy the interpretive exhibit. My own pilgrimage there in 1995 was a thought-provoking experience. As I looked into the early day cell, I asked myself, "Grandfather, what was it like for you?"

Do you want to know more?

[Bio: John Markham](#)

[Link for John Markham](#)

Further Resources:

Quest for a Cure: The Public Hospital in Williamsburg, Virginia 1773-1885; Shomer S Zwelling, 1985.

Disordered Minds: The First Century of Eastern State Hospital in Williamsburg Virginia, 1766-1866; Norman Dain, 1971.

Galt Papers (I), Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William and Mary.

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Straight Jacket; Colonial Williamsburg exhibit; photo submitted to flickr.com by Stuart Newsom; Creative Commons License.

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