POLK STATE SCHOOL & HOSPITAL
(Polk Center)
Main Street at School Drive
Polk
Venango County
Pennsylvania

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001
Location: Main Street at School Drive, Polk, Venango County, Pennsylvania.

Significance: Polk State School and Hospital is a collection of approximately ninety structures on a pastoral campus. It was opened in 1897 by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Handsome red brick buildings housed developmentally disabled citizens of the northwestern part of the Commonwealth and a large staff.

Description: The oldest buildings at the Polk Center demonstrate a remarkable consistency in design, with the common use of red brick, round arch windows, and thick turrets with conical roofs. They typically have steeply pitched hipped roofs and a combination of Queen Anne, Romanesque, and Colonial Revival decorative details indicative of a late-nineteenth-century eclectic approach. For example, the administration building features an elaborate pedimented portico and a central clock tower topped by a lantern with a bell-shaped roof. Large round turrets with conical roofs at each corner of the main elevation add to the eclectic collection of design elements. The campus included a series of large residential buildings arranged around a lawn, hospital, school, and support buildings such as a power plant, sewage plant, greenhouse, laundry, garage, and farm structures.

History: The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania began caring for its mentally ill citizens on a large scale in the 1850s. In 1893 the Commonwealth commissioned a large residential campus for the “feeble minded” to serve the fourteen counties in the northwest portion of the state. The site was approximately 773 acres of farm land in the borough of Polk. This flat property had the advantages of two nearby creeks for a good water supply and close proximity to a rail line. Architect Frederick J. Osterling of Pittsburgh designed the first generation of red brick buildings for the campus. Samuel D. Brady of nearby Franklin was the associated architect for School Hall, the 1912 auditorium, and present Murdoch Hall (built 1902-03 as a hospital and nursery).

Polk State School and Hospital was first occupied in 1897. The campus was nearly self-sufficient with a power generation plant, sewage plant, laundry, garage, and farm. Residents were trained in various skills including sewing and shoe cobbling. The peak of occupancy was 1953, with 102 buildings, 3,490 residents, and a staff of nearly 2,000. In the
1970s the name was changed to “Polk Center” to reflect a shift away from residential to community-based treatment for the developmentally disabled. In 2000 there were just 478 residents at the campus, with a staff of 1,137.

Source:  

Historian:  

Project Information:  
This short form history was prepared to supplement photographic documentation of western Pennsylvania for the *Buildings of Western Pennsylvania* publication, part of the *Buildings of the United States* series published by the Society of Architectural Historians and the University of Virginia Press. Large-format photography was sponsored by the Historic American Buildings Survey through a cooperative agreement with the Society of Architectural Historians. Historical information was provided to the HABS office prior to publication of the book.