

ON THIS DAY IN WEST VIRGINIA HISTORY FEBRUARY 16



The West Virginia Colored Tuberculosis Sanitarium was established on February 16, 1917. The West Virginia Board of Control purchased 185 acres of land and several buildings at Denmar in Pocahontas County, and the facility opened in January 1919.

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Investigate the Document: ("Deaths at the West Virginia Colored Tuberculosis Sanitarium at Denmar." *West Virginia History*, Vol. 56, 1997)

1. Were black West Virginia citizens afforded the opportunity to be admitted to the Tuberculosis Sanitarium at Denmar? If so, what was required for admission?
2. When was the sanitarium converted into a state hospital for the terminally ill? What was the rationale for the decision?
3. What did the West Virginia Archives and History discover when conducting a search of the state death records regarding the sanitarium patients believed to be buried on site?

Think Critically: Does healthcare discrimination still exist? Is there equal access to healthcare in the United States? What does discrimination in healthcare settings look like? Does tuberculosis remain a present-day health concern? What are a few healthcare issues facing West Virginians today?

WEST VIRGINIA HISTORY

Deaths at the West Virginia Colored
Tuberculosis Sanitarium at Denmark

The West Virginia Legislature created the State Colored Tuberculosis Sanitarium in 1917. The Maryland Lumber Company sold 185 acres of land and numerous buildings in Denmark, Pocahontas County, to the West Virginia Board of Control. According to the 1918 *West Virginia Legislative Hand Book*, black tuberculosis patients, who were West Virginia residents, were eligible for admission to the sanitarium provided they could pay for their care. The *Hand Book* noted: "The reasonable expenses of poor persons admitted at the request of the authorities of any municipal corporation or county, shall be paid by such municipal corporation or county." The sanitarium admitted its first patients on January 31, 1919.

In 1937 the legislature appropriated funds for a new hospital building at Denmark, which was completed in 1939. By the 1950s, medical science had developed more effective means to diagnose and treat tuberculosis and, in 1957, Denmark was converted to a state hospital for the chronically ill. The hospital closed in 1990 and the legislature appropriated funds for its conversion to the Denmark Correctional Center in 1993.

In 1995 Warden Stephen Yardley and his staff at the Denmark Correctional Center compiled a list of 277 names of sanitarium patients believed to be buried on site. William P. McNeel and members of the Pocahontas County Historical Society scoured the county death records from 1923 to 1946 and made many corrections and additions to the original list. Staff at the West Virginia State Archives conducted a search of the state death records from 1919 to 1946 and discovered several hundred names that did not appear in either hospital or county records. The following lists were compiled from these sources—hospital records, Pocahontas County death records, and state death records. The first records those who are known to be buried at Denmark. The second, taken from county and state records, lists those who died at Denmark but were buried elsewhere or whose burial places are not known. These lists do not represent a verbatim transcription of any of the records used. In some cases, place names have been corrected.

Some interesting patterns emerge from these lists. Many of the patients originally came from the South and may have been part of the Great Migration of blacks to the North in the early twentieth century. While all regions of West Virginia are represented, many of the patients resided in the southern coalfields. This raises questions about poor sanitary conditions in coal towns, which may have contributed to the spread of tuberculosis. The large number of miners at Denmark also raises speculation about the possibility of black lung disease.