A Sesquicentennial Moment

January 11–17, 1863

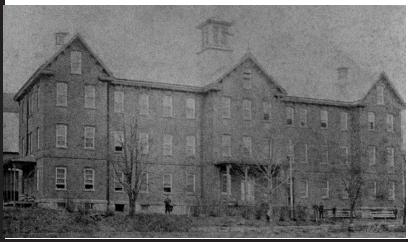
On Jan. 13, 1863, Restored Government of Virginia Gov. Francis Pierpont asked lawmakers for money to care for "that unfortunate class" of mentally ill residents "found in almost every community."

"They demand our warmest sympathy, and modern civilization … has conceived the noble idea of Asylums, in which, alone, that attention can be given them which their situation demands."

The governor said deplorable conditions at the Eastern Lunatic Asylum in Williamsburg left "inmates suffering for the necessaries of life. Many of them had been confined for months without being permitted to enjoy the healthful influence of fresh air, or even sufficient water to quench their thirst."

Construction of the Lunatic Asylum West of the Allegheny Mountains in Weston was under way when the war broke out in April 1861. Two months later Union troops seized nearly $30,000 worth of gold deposited in the Weston Branch of the Exchange Bank of Virginia to pay construction workers.

In 1863, lawmakers met the governor's request by allocating operating funds for the asylums.



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