

History Note: Parallels in Time offers fascinating history of disability

by [Access Press Staff](#) // January 10th, 2017

In commemoration of the 45th Anniversary of the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities in 2016, the council has released a revised *Parallels in Time*. It combines the original *Parallels in Time*, documenting the history of disabilities from 1500 B.C to 1950 published on the 25th anniversary of the Council, and *Parallels in Time 2*, continuing the history of disabilities from 1950 to the present issued on the 35th anniversary.

The history is fascinating to read and is broken down into distinct eras. According to *Parallels in Time*, the year 1552 B.C. marks the first recorded reference to mental retardation, described in an obscure document called the Therapeutic Papyrus of Thebes. Unlike today, the ancient era had no one documenting the lives of persons with disabilities.

The Greeks and Romans, in particular, held a very narrow sense of self-image, believing they exemplified the ideal human type. With their contributions to art, philosophy, literature, and science, they viewed themselves as superior to all other races. Physical difference, in the form of a different ethnicity or disability, was seen as a mark of inferiority.

While the start of Christianity ushered in a time of more compassion, people with disabilities were sometimes viewed as objects of derision in the era Before Christ and during the Middle Ages. Many readers may have heard the phrase "the ship of fools." Some persons with disabilities, particularly those considered unproductive dependents, were "shipped off" to other lands. Communities paid sailors to take such individuals away so they would no longer pose a burden. This practice led to the "Ships of Fools," the boats that would sail from port to port, charging admission to view their human cargo. Eventually, the ships would abandon their "passengers" at another port, forcing them to fend for themselves.

But the Middle Ages also marked the start of more benevolent measures. There is a shrine in Belgium dating from 1215 and dedicated to St. Dymphna, patron of the mentally afflicted. This is considered the beginning of family care and foster care. People with disabilities were brought here because of the belief that madness could be cured at the shrine. However, the motivation was mainly religious, i.e. "if we take care of these people and treat them as family members, we will be rewarded in the hereafter."

Historical tidbits about the treatment of people with disabilities around the world are featured in *Parallels in History*, showing gradual changes in attitudes and treatment. It covers events from the modern era, including the rise of institutions, and the self-advocacy and independent living movements.

All videos have been updated to current technology standards. *Parallels in Time* has also been converted to a responsive design format. They can be found [here](#).

Access Press is interested in reader submissions for the monthly History Note column, to complement the articles. Submissions must center on events, people and places in the history of Minnesota's disability community. We are interested in history that focuses on all types of disability topics, so long as the history has a tie to Minnesota. We are especially interested in stories from Greater Minnesota. Please submit ideas prior to submitting full stories, as we may have covered the topic before. Contact us at access@accesspress.org or 651-644-2133 if you have questions. The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, www.mnddc.org or www.mncdd.org and www.partnersinpolicymaking.com.