

# **HISTORY NOTE: Fergus Falls buildings' demolition could mark end of an era**

by [Access Press Staff](#) // February 10th, 2018

A decision to tear down most of the buildings at the old Fergus Falls State Hospital/Regional Treatment Center marks the end of many years' efforts to preserve the campus. If City of Fergus Falls officials are successful in seeking \$8.9 million in state bonding to demolish the buildings, only one iconic, vacant tower building would be left standing.

City officials will find out this spring if their efforts for demolition funding are successful. Various developers and disability advocates have suggested saving all or some of the buildings, but with no solid plan, city officials have said they have no choice. Costs to rehabilitate and reuse the buildings are estimated at \$60 to \$80 million.

The Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office would have to approve the demolition. The buildings were vacated in 2005 and the city took ownership two years later. Only city-owned structures would be demolished. Three buildings are already slated for demolition, which could start this winter.

Parts of the property are owned by Otter Tail County for its Government Services Center. Campus Development Group, which is affiliated with Fargo-based real estate developer Jeff Schlossman, opened apartments in 2015 in two renovated buildings.

According to the history website MnOpedia, the institution opened its doors on July 29, 1890, it became the first state institution in northern Minnesota for patients considered insane. It was built in response to overcrowding at other state facilities. The hospital had a sprawling campus and large stately buildings, built according to the influential asylum plan developed by Philadelphia physician Thomas Kirkbride in the 1850s.

“Kirkbride believed that building design was an important part of patient treatment programs. The typical Kirkbride structure consisted of a central administrative structure in the middle, with long, straight wings that radiated from it,” said MnOpedia. “Patients lived in the wings, which were uniform, precise and austere. The bare façade was supposed to bring discipline into patients' lives.” The institutions designed by Kirkbride were meant to provide what he described as to provide “moral treatment.” Patients engaged in a wide range of activities, including exercise, the growing of crops and caring for livestock. Patients learned how to read and write. Other skills, such as sewing, were also taught. It was an early form of occupational therapy.

Entertainment deemed suitable for the patients was provided.

Kirkbride's plans were used by other architects. Designed by architect Warren B. Dunnell, the Fergus Falls State Hospital was one of the last Kirkbride structures built in the United States. It opened in 1890, but only the west detached ward was completed in time for the hospital's opening. The other wings and the main building were finished by 1912.

The very first patients came from Otter Tail County, according to institutional histories. Eighty more patients came from the state hospital in St. Peter the very next day. During the first few years, all the patients were men. Women weren't admitted to the Fergus Falls facility until 1893, when 125 women were relocated there from St. Peter.

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*Access Press is interested in reader submissions for the monthly History Note column, to complement the articles written by Luther Granquist and other contributors. 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](mailto: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.*