

Edgewood:

The Black Sanatorium for the White Plague

Sharon Folkenroth Hess, MA

Collections Manager/Archivist, Delaware Academy of Medicine/Delaware Public Health Association

On the first page of its 1947 anniversary program, Edgewood Sanatorium (see Figure 1) proudly claims to be the “first sanatorium in the United States to be used exclusively for tuberculosis Negros.” Piedmont Sanatorium in Lynchburg, VA, made a similar declaration, even though it opened two years after Edgewood in 1917 and six years after the Wilson, NC, facility. Pickford Sanatorium in Southern Pines, NC, wins the title of being the first, having opened in 1899. This bit of trivia, however, does not take away from Edgewood’s historical significance. As a segregated facility managed by a Black doctor, the sanatorium is simultaneously a celebration of broader access to healthcare for Black Delawareans and a representation of the disastrous impact of racism in healthcare.

Around 1900, while tuberculosis (TB) killed an average of 195 people per 100,000 nationally, the rate for Black Americans was 500-600 per 100,000.¹ Even though the microbial cause was discovered in 1882, heredity was thought to play a significant role in the disease well into the 1920s. Rather than attributing malnutrition and poor, overcrowded living conditions, White doctors pointed to Black bodies themselves as the cause of high mortality rates. In addition to being physically inferior and incurable, Blacks were considered too ignorant and slovenly to implement sanitation measures necessary for disease prevention.² In 1896, a leading doctor predicted that the “Negro tuberculosis problem” would wipe out the race entirely from the United States.³ This unfavorable prognosis was not universally accepted, although fewer public resources were used to care for Black patients suffering from the “white plague.”

In 1907, the president of the Delaware Anti-Tuberculosis Society, Emily Bissell, introduced the Christmas Seal Sale. By 1912, the Society collected approximately \$90,000 in donations to support the construction of the Hope Farm Sanatorium in Brandywine Springs. The State Legislature kicked in funding for the operation of the facility. Despite contracting TB at rates significantly higher than other populations, Hope Farm kept only a few beds in a separate unit for Black patients. In 1914, the State Legislature agreed to appropriate \$10k for establishing a separate facility only if the Anti-Tuberculosis Society could raise matching funds. Edgewood opened in 1915 with Dr. Conwell Banton, a Black doctor from Wilmington, as Medical Director for the forty-bed segregated sanatorium. Black men and women rallied behind Edgewood, forming the Edgewood Sanitarium Auxiliary to raise money for patients. In 1921, the Auxillary was 300 members strong.²

While Edgewood offered Black patients an alternative to the often undignified experiences with White doctors, it suffered from chronic underfunding. In the 1920s, Brandywine Sanatorium (formerly Hope Farms) received \$65,000 in annual funding, while Edgewood only received \$12,000 from the state.² This disparity had dire consequences. White patients at Brandywine measured their stay in years. Edgewood's average stay was measured in months. The facility was staffed by six nurses, with Dr. Banton visiting three times a week. Even after a new building was constructed in 1939, the additional eighteen beds did little to reduce the number of patients who spent years on the waitlist to get treatment at Edgewood. Many patients were already in the advanced stages of the disease when they were finally admitted. The lack of beds at Edgewood contributed to the spread of TB in Black communities. Cramped and overcrowded housing reduced opportunities for quarantine, thus increasing exposure to infection within communities and increasing the need for beds. The ramifications of this disparity were devastating. In 1946, deaths among the state's White population were 29.7 per 100,000 and 136.9 per 100,000 for the Black population. In Wilmington, the situation was even worse, with Black deaths from TB at 165 per 100,000.⁴

As if the staggering death toll of Black patients was not enough, the absurdity of segregation had negative consequences for some White patients as well. Since neither Brandywine nor Edgewood had equipment for major surgery, patients were taken to Memorial Hospital. However, only three beds were available for tuberculosis patients (dropping to two by 1950). With all the beds in the same room, patients had to be scheduled for surgery based on gender and race rather than need, creating a "terrific bottleneck of surgery piling up at the Brandywine and Edgewood Sanatoria."⁵ Despite the devastating and unnecessary consequences, the sanatoria were not integrated until 1957.

Edgewood may not have been the 'first' Black sanatorium in the country, but losing status as an answer to a question in trivia does not diminish the facility's significance in Delaware history.

Despite incredible hardships and severe limitations, Edgewood served tuberculosis patients that were otherwise excluded from medical care. While it is a painful reminder of the tragic effects of segregation and inequity, Edgewood should also be remembered for the heroic efforts of the staff and the community to keep the sanatorium open for over 40 years.

Figure 1. Exterior view of Edgewood Sanatorium in Marshallton showing Redcross nurses and patients standing outside, 1919. Image courtesy of Delaware Historical Society.



References

1. Merrill, R., Davis, S., Lindsay, G., & Khomitch, E. (2016, September). Explanations for 20th century tuberculosis decline: How the public gets it wrong. *Journal of Tuberculosis Research*, 4(3), 111–121. Retrieved from <https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation.aspx?paperid=70106>
<https://doi.org/10.4236/jtr.2016.43014>
2. Prus, D. (2021). “The white plague seems to love the black victim:” The racialization of tuberculosis in the anti-tuberculosis campaign and black resistance to the “Negro tuberculosis problem,” 1870-1930. Clark University. Retrieved from https://commons.clarku.edu/history_honors_papers/2
3. The Morning News. (1955, September 25). Dr. Banton is honored for fight on tuberculosis. *The Morning News*, 1, 9.
4. Bunn, N.A. (1947, Sep 14). Jim Crow TB sanatorium is modern, but inadequate. *The Sunday Morning Star*, 3.
5. The Morning News. (1950, Sep 14). State doctors to hear new trends in TB fight. *The Morning News*, 32.

Copyright (c) 2022 Delaware Academy of Medicine / Delaware Public Health Association.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>) which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.