

## A Timeline of Institutions in Vermont History and Social Policy

This summary provides a brief description of some institutions in Vermont that housed people with disabilities between 1836 and the present. Additional information is available at some of the archives included with this timeline.

1836: The first patient is admitted to the privately funded Vermont Asylum for the Insane in Brattleboro, Vt. The institution was created with a legacy from Anna Marsh, who wanted to help create a more caring and humane institution for individuals with mental illness. It was the first and only institution for the insane in Vermont until 1890. The institution still operates today as the Brattleboro Retreat.

1890: The state Legislature authorizes a Vermont State Asylum for the Insane, later renamed the Vermont State Hospital. It was intended to provide for "the care, custody and treatment of insane criminals of the state." In the mid-1930s the state hospital had a population of 1,728. Residents included both children and adults with mild to severe mental disabilities and Vermonters with conditions such as epilepsy, depression, medical alcoholism or senility. It closed in 2011 after Tropical Storm Irene damaged many of the buildings. By the time it closed VSH had become a much smaller institution with many more individuals served by Vermont's community mental health system and related peer support and advocacy organizations.

1912: The Legislature authorizes construction of a State School for the Feebleminded in Brandon, Vt., to house children between the ages of 5 and 21. The intent was both to provide training to children considered "feebleminded" and to separate these children and adults from the community. The school was later renamed the Brandon Training School. Opened in 1915, by 1919 the school was allowed to house children and women up to 45 years of age. Records of "inmates" were studied as part of eugenics research. Towns were required by law to identify and submit the names and ages of children believed to be feebleminded for commitment to Brandon. A "Rutland Colony" was established in 1925 to train "feebleminded" girls and women as domestic servants who could be hired out to bring money back to the institution. The Brandon Training School was closed in 1993, following several years of legislative, legal and policy work by families, individuals with disabilities and the state to create community alternatives. At one time BTS housed 2,324 Vermonters.

1865: The Vermont Reform School is established by the State Legislature to provide a separate correctional facility for children up to age 18. In 1866, its mandate was amended to serving youths up to 16 years of age. Previously, youth offenders were housed with and treated as adults. The school was used to house both children believed to have engaged in criminal or inappropriate behavior and other children who needed custodial care. The school moved from Waterbury to Vergennes in 1874 and was renamed the Vergennes Industrial School. Though not founded as school for children with disabilities, its history is connected with both eugenics history and disability policy. During the eugenics period, Henry F. Perkins, a leader in the eugenics movement, began

genealogical research of “degenerates” with studies of the children at the Vergennes Industrial School. In 1937 the school was again renamed, becoming the Weeks School, in recognition of former Gov. John E. Weeks. The school was closed in 1979 after many of its services had been moved to more community-based settings.

## Vermont Resources on Institutions

The video life histories for this lesson as well as other stories about life in and beyond institutions can be found at Life Histories, Center on Disability and Community Inclusion: <http://www.uvm.edu/~cdci/lifehistories>

Other video interviews that challenge old stereotypes and assumptions behind institutions and intellectual disabilities can be found on the websites of both Green Mountain Self-Advocates and the Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council. Find them at: [gmsavt.org/stories/](http://gmsavt.org/stories/) and [vtddc stories](http://vtddc.org/stories/).

The Vermont Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living now has a website to commemorate the history and closing of the Brandon Training School (BTS). Visit it at: [vermont.gov/ddas-projects/bts/brandon-training-school](http://vermont.gov/ddas-projects/bts/brandon-training-school).

Vermont institutions are included in the Asylum Project, an international registry of historical information on institutions. Go to: [asylumprojects.org](http://asylumprojects.org).

“Vermont Eugenics: A Documentary History” collection at the University of Vermont is an educational archive of the history of eugenics and related social practices in Vermont, which includes related histories of the Brattleboro Retreat, the Vermont State Hospital, Brandon Training School and other institutions mentioned in this summary. Visit the site at: <http://www.uvm.edu/~eugenics/> and specific pages on particular institutions at:

- Vergennes Industrial School: <http://www.uvm.edu/~eugenics/vis.html>
- Vermont School of the Feebleminded: <http://www.uvm.edu/~eugenics/vssf.html>
- Vermont State Hospital for the Insane: <http://www.uvm.edu/~eugenics/vsh.html>

The collection includes the correspondence and pedigree research by a social worker, Harriet Abbott, of a boy, Louis S., who lived at VIS and was believed to be from one of the “degenerate” Vermont families. His letters to the social worker present a very different personal picture than the one presented in the eugenics research. The letters and other documents can be found at: <http://www.uvm.edu/~eugenics/louisf.html>.

It also includes, "The Rutland Colony for Girls at the State School for the Feebleminded." Unpublished report of National Committee of Mental Hygiene Vermont Survey, Chamberlain, Dr. Herbert C., August 17, 1927, archived at: [eugenics/primarydocs/RutlandColony](http://www.uvm.edu/~eugenics/primarydocs/RutlandColony).

The Vermont Secretary of State's Archives of state documents includes historical documents and images related to institutions in Vermont as well as other historical information. The collection is located at its Middlesex office and information is available on the website at: [www.sec.state.vt.us/archives-records.aspx](http://www.sec.state.vt.us/archives-records.aspx).