

Quarry Hill Park: A Reflection of the Social Definition of Health

Driving west on highway 14, I leave the town of Rochester, MN behind, and the road ahead opens into an agricultural heartland with cornfields and grazing lands for farm animals. A left turn onto county road 22 brings the Rochester Area Community College into full view on the left, while in stark contrast, looking to the right I am humbled by the vast plains of the Gordy Yeager Wildlife Management Area. Taking another left turn I pass several cornfields before entering into a forest which envelopes the road within its cool pines. A clearing ahead reveals a sign: "Quarry Hill Nature Park, A service of Rochester City Parks and Recreation." The 314-acre site features characteristic park attributes such as a hands-on learning center, countless trails for hiking, a newly built jungle gym, a scenic pond, restored prairies, a picnic pavilion, and a vast oak savanna. Upon walking through the park, I am led to believe this land has always been this healthy, this vibrant with biotic diversity. Today, Quarry Hill fosters an avid learning community in cooperation with Rochester Public schools. However, upon my casual walk through the park, the paths reveal artifacts in the land that contest this park's seemingly rosy past. The presence of an old quarry, several closed down and banned caves, a rock crusher, and a vast cemetery all lead to me to the question, what happened here? Exploring Quarry Hill's history, I find a story filled with a sense of gross misunderstandings and exploitations of both human and natural resources. The driving force behind changes in the Quarry Hill landscape from 1875 to the present can be linked to an ever-changing cultural and social definition of health.

An 1873 proposal declared to use the land on which Quarry Hill is now based to build a hospital specifically for alcoholics titled the "Minnesota Inebriate Society." Upon committee approval, over 1,500 acres were purchased from various owners in preparation to build such a facility. In 1878, the hospital's care-taking abilities were expanded to address mental health issues

as well, and the hospital became a local insane asylum (*Rochester Post Archives*). By 1880, the hospital was a thriving independent community with over 2,000 people either living at or working in the asylum. The hospital had its own agricultural fields filled with crops, an independently run slaughterhouse, and small shopping area for patient and employee needs. Caves were dug in the park for cool storage of foods during the hot summer months. The land also had its own mining division, as the ground was rich in limestone rock (Munson). The demand for limestone was high at the time of this mining due to the rapid growth of Rochester and the ongoing construction of the Mayo Clinic campus. Despite being a medical association with the purpose of healing those with mental illness, the state hospital was able to grow fresh fruits and vegetables as well as sell limestone rock in order to make a profit. In fact, the state hospital ran more like a small town than a healthcare facility. How was the hospital able to be such an independently sustainable, economically successful institution?



Current photos of the quarry and a gated entrance to the caves (Quarry Hill Park).

Social and medical understanding of mental health around 1880 was governed by the idea that mental illness was a result of idleness, with physical labor as a sure way back to good health (Munson). Because of this, the workers who farmed the fields, mined the quarry, and built the intricate caves were all patients of the hospital and suffering from mental disease. The land was thought to be a means back to sanity; by forcing patients to extract needed resources from the land, doctors were in firm belief that the hard, physical labor would send their patients back to their former sane selves.

Today, despite many landscape changes since the time of hospital ownership, the past is evident in the terrain. As I walk down the trail deeper into the park, I pass the remnants of two giant rock-crushing towers. Although mostly destroyed today for safety reasons, they were used to convert the mined limestone rock into gravel (“State Hospital’s...”). Walking further, I reach the quarry edge. Mostly flat and filled with gravel, hardly any plants grow in this area as a result of the intensive mining. In the middle of the quarry is the base of a compressor, used to pump water out of the quarry when it rained (Quarry Hill Park). To the south of the quarry’s edge I find a stone building holed into the edge of the hill, and upon approaching it I discover it is the remnants of a storage building for blasting dynamite. These artifacts all show the industrial motivations of the hospital, and the intense focus of the institution on forcing labor on the patients in hopes of curing their mental illness.

Inside the caves, I can still see remnants of past workers. Caves built during the hospital’s operations were created for the purpose of storing food and also for storing dead bodies in the winter to be buried after the spring thaw. A team of six patients built the intricate caves, and leading the construction was a schizophrenic named Thomas Coyne. Inside the caves, Coyne carved poetry into the soft limestone walls that can still be seen today. He signs his work “Coyne

the Prophet.” He writes, “Come tell me blue-eyed stranger, say whither dost thou roam?/ O’er this wide world a ranger, has thou no friends or home?/ They called me blue-eyed Mary when friends and fortune smiled./ But says blue-eyed Mary, now I am sorrow’s child...” (Quarry Hill Park).

Forced to work as labor to serve the hospital’s needs, Coyne left poetry on the walls of the caves as a cry for help. Stuck within a social structure where he could not receive proper treatment for his mental illness, Coyne lamented his sadness through his poetry.

About fifty years ago this concept of work as a cure for mental illness came under attack in the medical community, and the development of a system of ethics banned “physical labor treatment” for mental disease. This, too, is reflected in the landscape as a map of the area made in the 1960s reveals an outdoor fireplace, several baseball fields, an ice rink, and recreational fields (“New Park Plans...”). Although no longer present at Quarry Hill today, the existence of such outdoor recreational vehicles indicates an enthusiasm for leisurely outdoor activities in replacement of the previous labor treatment. This movement towards outdoor recreation for patients indicates a new concept of mental health, embracing the romantic notion of a return to nature in exchange for a return to sanity.

According to the hospital staff, the land was seen as a vast resource capable of curing mental illness, yielding valuable limestone rock, and producing foods in amounts large enough to sustain the hospital population of over 2,000 people. The notion of environmental health had yet to evolve in the minds of these people. Rather, environmental health was simply seen as a reflection of the human benefits yielded by that land.

With the close of patient labor and subsequent downsizing of the hospital, surrounding lands were sold off piece by piece starting in 1965. For \$100 an acre, the City of Rochester purchased 212 acres from the Rochester State Hospital, and the beginnings of Quarry Hill Park were formed.

The Minnesota DNR and private contractors also purchased lands, and a large sect of the property was commissioned for the creation of a community college (Munson). Aiding such divisions of the land, a highway was build directly through the former hospital property. The current use of these lands is evidence of how the definition of health has changed since the time of hospital ownership.

Today, Quarry Hill Park is a 314-acre natural area filled with trails, bike paths, and an educational learning center. Quarry Hill staff actively participates in nature restoration. In cooperation with the Minnesota DNR, naturalists take part in prairie burns and aggressive removal of the invasive species buckthorn from the oak savanna (Munson). According to Quarry Hill staff, a healthy natural area means restoring the land to a condition similar to pre-human contact. In sharp contrast to past images of landscape health as resource extraction, today's view of environmental health is putting resources back into the earth.

Lands owned by the DNR surrounding Quarry Hill Park are actively farmed to this very day. However, the products of this farming suit a very different need than the crops of the 1800s. The DNR farms corn that is specifically used to sustain the winter geese population in a large downtown lake in central Rochester (Munson). This type of distanced outreach for sustainability indicates a new evolution in ecological concern: community health. Whereas farmed lands in the 1800s benefited the immediately present populations, current DNR lands are used to promote populations often a great distance away, demonstrating local commitment to community health.

Quarry Hill Park is also used as a community center for nature education. In affiliation with Rochester Public Schools, Quarry Hill offers several activities and programs for all ages as well as sponsors international trips for young naturalists. Additionally, public school children visit Quarry Hill with their classes to participate in special educational programs as part of their curriculum. The integration of natural education into public schools and the subsequent local popularity of Quarry

Hill programs indicates a new concept of personal health: interaction and education with nature as a way to personal well-being. Whereas the 1930s hospital map hinted at this romantic ideal of returning to nature for personal health, Quarry Hill Park today is used for the healthy goal of education and self-exploration.

Today, Quarry Hill's land is permanently scarred with physical clues of the landscape's past, and the art of weaving of these artifacts together into a historical story is left up to the curious visitor. The active exploration of the caves, quarry, and other rock artifacts triggers important questions about how people have manipulated the land to achieve specific goals. Ideally, the story of this park's past can be used as a tool to understand the way in which our cultural and scientific understanding of both human and environmental health has shaped the way we use the land.

Walking through Quarry Hill, I cannot help but admire the prairie and oak savanna. The flourishing bird populations sing as if in testimony to the health of this nature park. From the top of the oak savanna, I peer through a clearing of the trees down into the valley below. From here I should be able to see the pond and prairie beneath my perch but I can't—the dynamite shack is blocking my view.

Works Cited

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Additional articles used from the *Rochester Post* were undated, unsigned, and taken from archives of Rochester Historical Society. They are cited as “*Rochester Post Archives*”.