The Lunatic Asylum
Lex in the Age of Cholera
By Terry Foody

Almost 200 years ago, citizens in Lexington envisioned a hospital to care for the poor, disabled and mentally ill. This Lunatic Asylum (Insane Refuge) has been a part of Lexington all this time, and is now Eastern State Hospital.

Cholera was the true grim reaper. When the Cholera Epidemics struck Lexington in 1833, and ’49, 100 victims were from Eastern State. Environment may have been a big factor. There was a mingling of the drinking water source with the common sewer under the building. Correction of this diminished mortality.

In the 1849 Lexington newspaper, the cholera deaths were divided into City Wards and then the Lunatic Asylum. Were these patients not seen as part of the general population? (They came from different counties and states.) Or were there so many deaths at the Asylum that it warranted a separate report? Who gets marginalized in a disaster/epidemic? In Katrina, it was the poor, old and chronically ill.

Recently there was a reburial at Eastern State of eleven bodies from an unmarked, unknown mass grave. How easy it would be to end up like this. Anyone can become indigent, alone, mentally ill, institutionalized. With a pandemic flu; mass, unmarked graves might be a possibility. Disease is a great equalizer.

We learned in 9/11 that every part of a person has dignity and importance. Identification of remains is crucial to survivors.

The scientists who studied the Eastern State bodies found clues about the person’s life from bones and fragments. What will happen if the property is developed with no thought to other possible graves? Is this really a safe refuge/resting place for the insane?

We are responsible to preserve graves and deceased information for those decedents who will seek and have no one to ask.

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Patients were occupied in domestic and farm labor. This would “arouse dormant or wayward energies to consistent and vigorous action”. (Dr. W.S. Chipley’s Report to the Commonwealth, 1858-9). “Command you your mind from play every moment in the day” * (UK Special Collections).

With a low cure rate, many patients admitted to the hospital eventually died there. “Acclimating disease” with symptoms of diarrhea and low grade fever was a chronic problem. But Asiatic

Notes: *handwritten quote on back of Chipley’s report.
Other sources: Lexington Observer & Reporter, Aug 18, 1849.
Ranck, George W. History of Lexington, KY, 1872.