

History of Riverview

Prior to European settlement, the Riverview Hospital site was of critical importance to the Kwitwetlem First Nation. While their winter settlement was located upriver where Cedar Creek flows into Coquitlam Lake, their summer camp was close to the mouth of the Coquitlam River where their existing Reserve Lands are located. During high water events, such as when the Fraser River flooded these lands, the band would seek dry land refuge on the slopes overlooking the lower Coquitlam River, including the slopes of the Riverview site. Their oral history also indicates that a gravesite was located on the Riverview Hospital Lands. In addition, this site was an important area where nuts, berries and other foodstuffs were gathered.

Dr. G. H. Manchester, who was the Medical Superintendent of the New Westminister Public Hospital for the Insane from 1901 to 1905, visited the area of the Riverview site and noticed the suitability of the site for a future hospital. He wrote that "it would be a wise policy for the Government to lay out plans for the erection of a complete modern hospital for the insane upon that property". In 1904, 1000 acres of land were set aside for a Psychiatric Hospital and Botanical Garden for BC. Since 1913 a hospital has operated on the site, and by 1951, Essondale (as it was then called), was a self-sufficient community with 4630 patients cared for by 2000 staff.

John Davidson, BC's first Provincial Botanist, established an office, a nursery to house his specimens, an arboretum and a botanical garden on the site. Much of Davidson's work was accomplished with the assistance of patients. Since Riverview's inception, the therapeutic value of having patients participate in outdoor physical activities was recognized and promoted. In 1916, Davidson moved the botanical garden to the newly-formed University of British Columbia, but the arboretum and nursery remained and flourished at Essondale. The nursery supplied trees and shrubs for public institutions and highways throughout the province until the late 1960s. The legacy of Riverview's tree nurseries can still be viewed in many parts of the province, including on the grounds of the Legislative Buildings in Victoria.

The Riverview lands today comprise the remaining 244 acres of the original parcel that once included the present Colony Farm, Riverview Forest, and the Riverview Heights subdivision. At present, the site still houses the Riverview Psychiatric Hospital but there has been a dramatic decrease in the number of patients with 204 patients now on-site. Many buildings sit empty and some have deteriorated. The Sheriff's department and SPARC antique radio museum now occupy old buildings, and film crews have made Riverview the most filmed location in Canada.

Each hospital building is a monument representing B.C.'s history of mental care:

- West Lawn (1913-1983), the first of the permanent buildings to be erected on the bench land to the north of Colony Farm, was originally called the "Hospital for the Mind at Mount Coquitlam". It was considered to be the most modern institution of its time when it first opened when 340 chronic male patients transferred from New Westminster.

- Centre Lawn (1924) was originally known as the Acute Psychopathic Unit. The top floor of the building was set aside as a psychopathic admission unit. All patients admitted to the hospital were received in this department where laboratory and medical examinations were done. Patients would then go to a staff clinic where their case was studied and recommendations were made by staff as a whole for further treatment. The patient would then be transferred to whatever department of the hospital it was felt best suited their patients needs and requirements.

- East Lawn (1930) was a unit for chronically ill female patients and a school for psychiatric nursing. The opening of this building eliminated the overcrowding at New Westminster with the majority of female patients being transferred from there.

- Crease Clinic (1934-1992) first opened as the Veterans' Unit. In 1949, it expanded to become Crease Clinic of Psychological Medicine. It met a full range of needs and contained dormitories, offices, physiotherapy and occupational therapy facilities. Riverview is now a well-known and treasured filming destination with filming mostly taking place in the old Crease Building.

- The Boys' Industrial School (1920) also housed the Home for the Aged after 1936. It was extended in 1959 and is now known as Valleyview.

- Pennington Hall (1950) was constructed to provide expanded recreational services for the patients. It contains a gymnasium, cafeteria, bowling alley, pool tables, a computer room, and remains very popular with the patients.

- North Lawn (1955) opened to accommodate patients with tuberculosis and other infectious diseases. It was the last major facility built until the construction of Connolly Lodge in 2001.