



Pennhurst State School and Hospital. Photo courtesy of www.opacity.us.

Pennhurst State School and Hospital East Vincent Township, Chester County

Significance

Opening its doors in 1908, the Eastern Pennsylvania Institution for the Feeble-Minded and Epileptic was later renamed The Pennhurst State School and Hospital. A model institution at the beginning of the century and into the progressive era, Pennhurst later became infamous for its treatment of the patients it was meant to protect. Situated on 1,400 acres of rolling hills overlooking the Schuylkill River, Pennhurst was the model mental facility of its time with a self-sustaining campus layout including administrative and medical facilities, dormitories, workshops, a firehouse, a general store, a barber shop, a greenhouse and a fully functioning farm. It became the most recognized mental institution in the United States with the groundbreaking 1968 NBC investigative report, *Suffer the Little Children*. This expose showed the squalid conditions under which the mentally and physically disabled of Pennsylvania were living, making Pennhurst a notorious example of a national trend. The institution again received widespread media coverage surrounding the 1978 Supreme Court case, *Halderman v. Pennhurst State School*, which Pennhurst ultimately lost. This ruling against Pennhurst established the foundations of later reforms in similar institutions across America, and the Supreme Court's decision became an historic milestone for upholding and safeguarding the rights of the mentally and physically disabled in the United States. The Pennhurst State School and Hospital opened America's eyes to an alarming trend in the care of the mentally and physically disabled and left an indelible print on the lives it changed.

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**Why save
a place like
Pennhurst?**

Because, perhaps more than any other place, Pennhurst is a visual record of our human journey in all of its fullness—good and evil.

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*Nathaniel C. Guest, Director,
Preserve Pennhurst*

Threat

The Pennhurst State School and Hospital closed its doors in 1986 and continues to remain vacant. Determined eligible to the National Register by the State Historic Preservation Office in 1984, the condition of the campus has suffered, falling into disrepair at the hands of time, vandals, and vagrants. Most recently, in October of this year, vandals damaged two Depression-era tile mosaics depicting the lives of slaves. Despite this danger of demolition by neglect, development is now the much larger threat.

In February 2008, a major developer acquired the majority of the Pennhurst campus. It should be noted that the property was transferred to the current owner by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania without being reviewed by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission as required by the History Code. An appraisal done by the developing firm concluded that the campus was incompatible with rehabilitation and would need to be demolished prior to its development. A local group of concerned citizens formed Preserve Pennhurst, which has spearheaded the effort to preserve the campus and history of the institution. Raising awareness in the local community, Preserve Pennhurst has built a compelling case for the former institution's preservation in the form of adaptive reuse. For the sake of the Pennhurst State School and Hospital—and its history—Preserve Pennhurst hopes to garner enough support to persuade the potential developer and the East Vincent Township Board of Supervisors that preservation is not only possible, but ideal.