

# **Painful History Buried At Shuttered Vermont Institution**

by Sarah Yahm

September 29, 2013 5:02 PM

<http://www.npr.org/2013/09/29/227332034/painful-history-buried-at-shuttered-vermont-institution> (Go to NPR Site to listen)

When Gary Wade first started working at Vermont's state institution for people with developmental disabilities, it was already on its way out. The Brandon Training School had been in operation since 1915.

Before it closed for good in 1993, Wade was sorting through the paperwork and found letters written during the 1940s and '50s. One of his favorite clients, Flossie Howe, was asking to leave. "I don't feel like I belong here. I think I have a job in Pittsford," Flossie wrote.

"Forty years later, she died here," Wade says. "I think she was 92 or 93. Flossie had been here since she was like 16 or 17. She's buried across the street."

Across the street is the Pine Hill Cemetery, where Vermont hosted a Remembrance Day on Sept. 13 to commemorate the training school's former residents. The ceremony, in the town of Brandon, was part of a larger national movement to honor and mark the graves of people who lived and died as wards of the state.

## **Report: Vermont Agency Of Human Services**

### **"Closing The Doors Of The Institution"**

Although the day was cold and rainy, nearly 100 people gathered for the memorial. Among the crowd were former staff members, former residents and a younger generation of disability activists who came to pay their respects.

They unveiled a plaque and placed headstones on the graves of two former residents, Caroline Eastman and John Creighton, who stand for a whole generation of people who were labeled as mentally deficient and isolated from the rest of society.

"At the age of 7, Caroline was brought to Brandon by the overseer of the poor," former Brandon employee Joan Stephens told the crowd. "Was it because the family did not have the money to care for her? After all, it was 1939, and the country was in the midst of the Great Depression."

Even though Eastman left Brandon in the '70s and moved to a group home, she was buried here in this graveyard five years ago, because the state allows former residents who have no alternative to be buried at Pine Hill — free of charge.

**Although disability rights activist Nicole LeBlanc was just a kid when the training school closed for good, she feels a profound connection to Eastman and the others who are buried here. "In some ways, I almost feel like they're family in a way, like ancestors," LeBlanc says.**

**It pains her that they are stuck at a cemetery plot reserved for the training school, separated from the other graves as they were from the rest of society in life.**

**"I walked through the graveyard," she says, "and seeing it segregated like that is disappointing and it's painful and it's inhumane."**

The training school plot is pushed up against the highway, and faces the red brick buildings of the old state institution. Although more than 2,000 people lived at Brandon from 1915 to 1993, there are only 83 recorded graves.

**Some residents were back with their families when they died, but activist Karen Topper thinks there's more research that needs to be done and more graves to be found.**

**"It's just that the first people that were buried in this cemetery were in 1963," Topper says. "We have a little bit more digging to do here. ... Now I'm pretty curious. Where are the other people who were buried between 1920 and 1963?"**

**As Topper points out, this is only the beginning of a longer process. Across the United States, there are hundreds of former asylums, prisons, hospitals, reformatories and schools with thousands of undiscovered and unmarked graves.**

But slowly, town after town, people are beginning to match names to bodies, stories to stones.