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# Exercising Towards a Cure: The Gymnasium of the Friends Asylum, 1889-1893

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# Exercising Towards a Cure: The Gymnasium of the Friends Asylum, 1889-1893

Ellen Kim, University of Pennsylvania College of Arts & Sciences  
Honors Thesis in Health & Societies, Spring 2015

## QUESTION

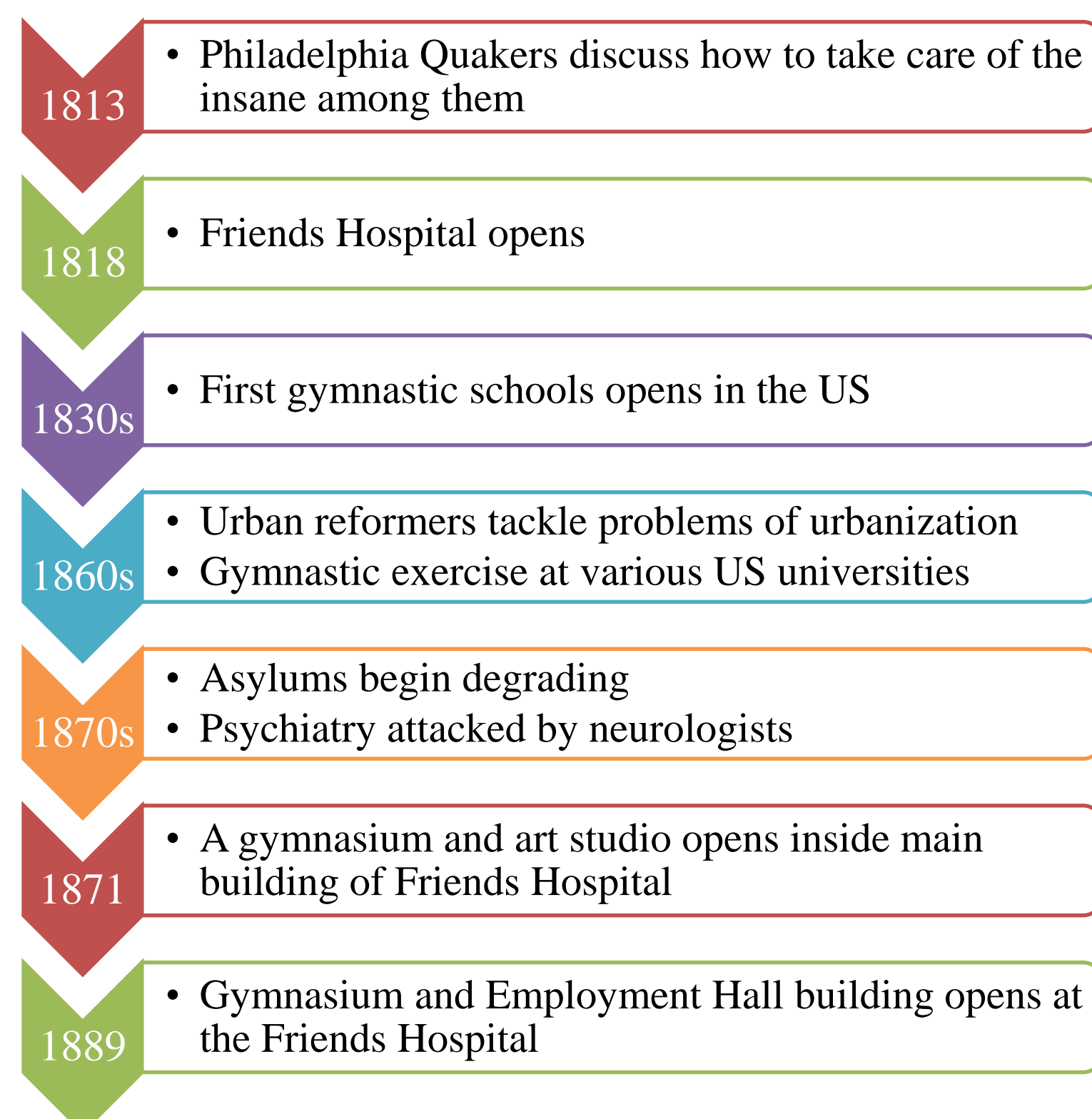
- ❖ How did the construction of a free-standing gymnasium reflect the changing ideas of medical treatment, and how were these changing ideas accommodated within the existing framework?

## BACKGROUND

- ❖ Field of psychiatry underwent enormous changes from 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century. Large private and public psychiatric institutions were built and torn down.
- ❖ Moral treatment assumes that insanity is curable with proper treatment, abandonment of restraint, and encouragement to adapt values of normal society
  - Based in rational humanitarian philosophy in Enlightenment (England & France)
  - Linked the physical structure of an institution with treatment
  - Introduction of “architecture as a cure”
  - No longer accepted by the medical community
- ❖ Friends Asylum (now Friends Hospital)
  - First American institution dedicated solely for the treatment of the mentally ill
  - One of the first gymnasiums within a mental institution, during a time when free-standing gymnasiums gained popularity within higher education

## SOURCES

- ❖ Archival materials of the Friends Asylum are located at the Haverford College’s Quaker & Special Collections
  - ❖ Annual Reports, Manager’s Minutes, Superintendent’s Diary
- ❖ Historical literature discussing gymnasium and exercise in psychiatric treatment, from American Journal of Insanity journals



GYMNASIUM BUILDING



GYMNASIUM



ART AND CRAFT ROOMS

## FINDINGS

1. Physical Space
  - ❖ Gymnasium & Employment (or Industrial) Hall – the first of its kind in the century – an example of the ways asylum sought to adapt and try new modes of treatment
  - ❖ Its symmetry and plainness reflects Quaker aesthetics of plainness and domesticity
2. Therapeutic Exercise
  - ❖ Emerging psychiatric theory focused on physical factors that could lead to insanity, reasoning that insanity is attributable to a physical cause rather than the environment
  - ❖ Incorporation of exercise as a form of treatment: used dumbbells, indian clubs, and chest weights
3. Social Movements
  - ❖ Gymnastic movement aligned with social motivations of the Jacksonian upheaval and responded to social changes brought by urbanization
  - ❖ Urbanization spurred urban reformers to respond to ‘moral challenges’ through the YMCA movement and playground movement
  - ❖ *Mind-body rhetoric*: while education trains the mind, physical exercise should train the body – a form of preventative medicine
    - Physical training of the insane reflected similar ideals, where psychiatrists aimed to repair the body to bring about moral improvement
4. New Psychiatric Order
  - ❖ Overcrowding, failure of work therapy, increased use of restraints and harsh punishments, and growing chronically insane population degraded asylums into custodial, not curative, institutions
  - ❖ Field of psychiatry questioned, especially by neurology (more scientifically and biomedically based)

## CONCLUSION

- ❖ During a period when mental institutions were rapidly degenerating away from moral treatment, the Friends Asylum endured as an operational institution because of its ability to adapt to new forms of medical treatment, especially physical exercise
- ❖ The Gymnasium and Employment Hall represents the Asylum’s ability to innovate and apply new ideas to treatment of the insane by looking to other social movements and institutional forms for inspiration

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