

A Timeless Place

On the land beneath your feet...

Indigenous peoples traversed
and hunted for generations.

People who were enslaved
lived and labored.

Many were hospitalized
and treated for mental illness.

Here we remember them.

The history of Dix Park is important to acknowledge and understand as we shape the future of this space for generations to come.

It is the ancestral home of Native Americans, who used the land for over 14,000 years. From the mid-18th century, English colonists claimed the land and developed it as a plantation, relying on the forced labor of generations of enslaved Africans. During the Civil War, parts of the plantation were sold to the state of North Carolina to establish the first mental health hospital in the state. Dix Hospital operated on this site from 1856 until it closed in 2012. In 2015, the land was acquired by the City of Raleigh and transformed into a park.

Dix Park is a member of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, a global network of historic sites, museums and initiatives that strive to turn memory into action in ways that let us draw on the past to paint a better future.

This is just the beginning of uncovering and telling the history of Dix Park. We invite you to learn more about the history of this land and be a part of developing its next chapter.

Cover photo: A portion of Dix Park was intentionally left undeveloped as a therapeutic and natural space for patients to find peace in their surroundings. The Grove at Dix is pictured here in the 1990s.

Courtesy of the North Carolina State Archives

14,000 CE-Present
Native American Era



The village of Pomeioc, North Carolina, 1585. Courtesy of the British Museum.

Indigenous Communities: Generations of Stewardship

Indigenous people started hunting and gathering over the rolling green hills and rippling waterways of what is now Dix Park over 14,000 years ago. Native communities eventually settled in the area and cultivated crops.

They took care of the land, working hard to maintain ecological balance. On the eve of European arrival in the 1500s, approximately 100,000 Native Americans lived in modern-day North Carolina. The land and water features surrounding what would become Raleigh acted as the border between numerous native tribes.

Celebrating Ancestral Land Today

Dix Park has become the grounds for the Inter-tribal Pow Wow, an annual event for Native American ceremonies and gathering. The Pow Wow draws individuals of indigenous and non-indigenous descent from all corners of the state to celebrate the unique traditions of North Carolina's numerous Native American communities.

It's an opportunity to celebrate their heritage, reestablish their presence on ancestral lands, and welcome the greater community to engage and learn about American Indian tribes and communities.

Dancer at the 2023 Dix Park Inter-tribal Pow Wow.



Displacement and Determination

Native Americans maintained a presence in the area even as many lost their lives due to violence, disease, and displacement during European Colonization from the 1500s to the 1700s.

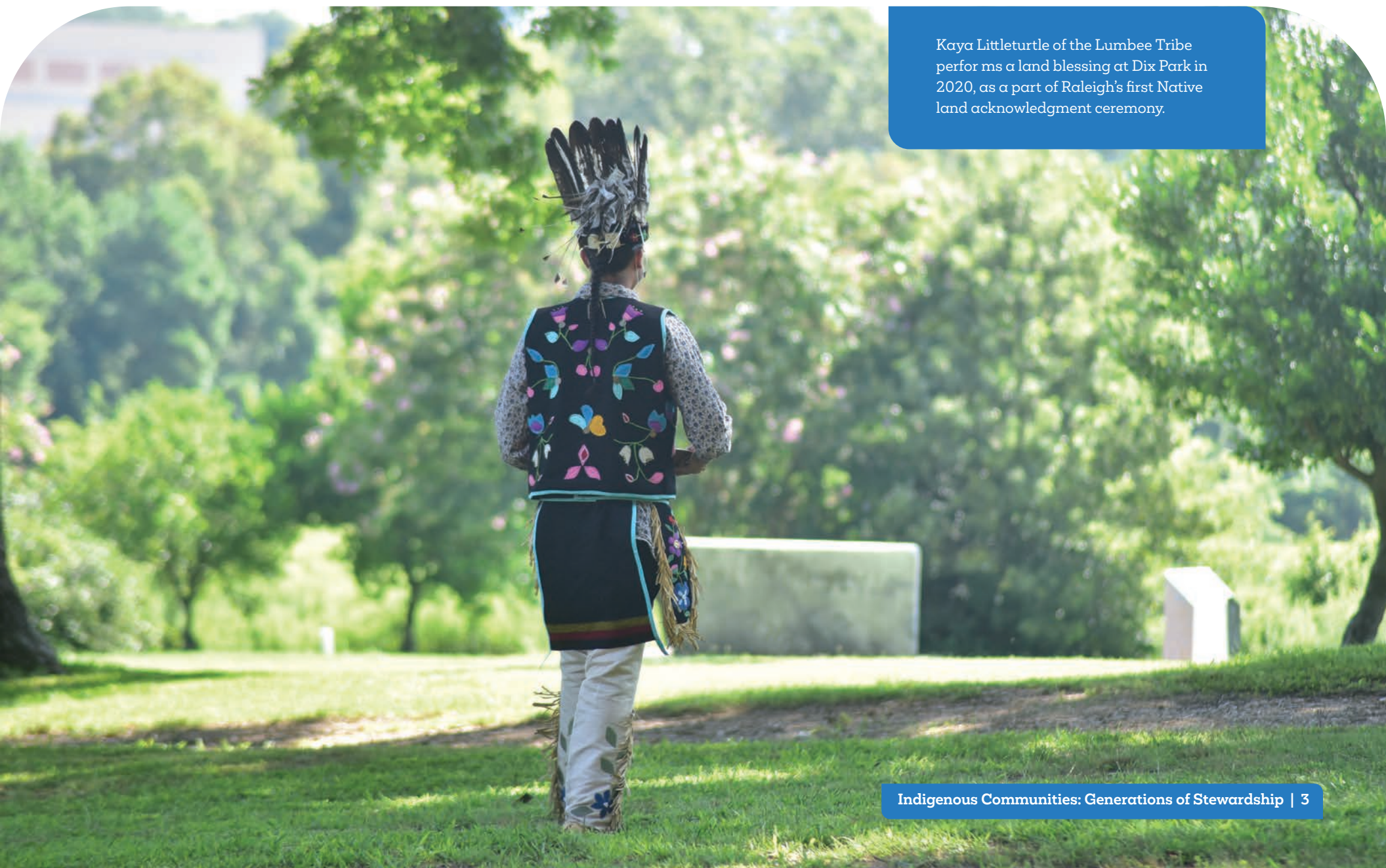
After decades of adversity, many Native American people were forced to leave their ancestral lands and move to different parts of North Carolina and beyond. In spite of this, American Indian communities have continuously lived in the area surrounding Dix Park from the distant past to today.

Throughout the 1800s and 1900s, Native Americans continued to face discrimination, but worked hard to hold onto their culture and celebrate their identities.

Today, North Carolina is home to the largest tribal community east of the Mississippi.

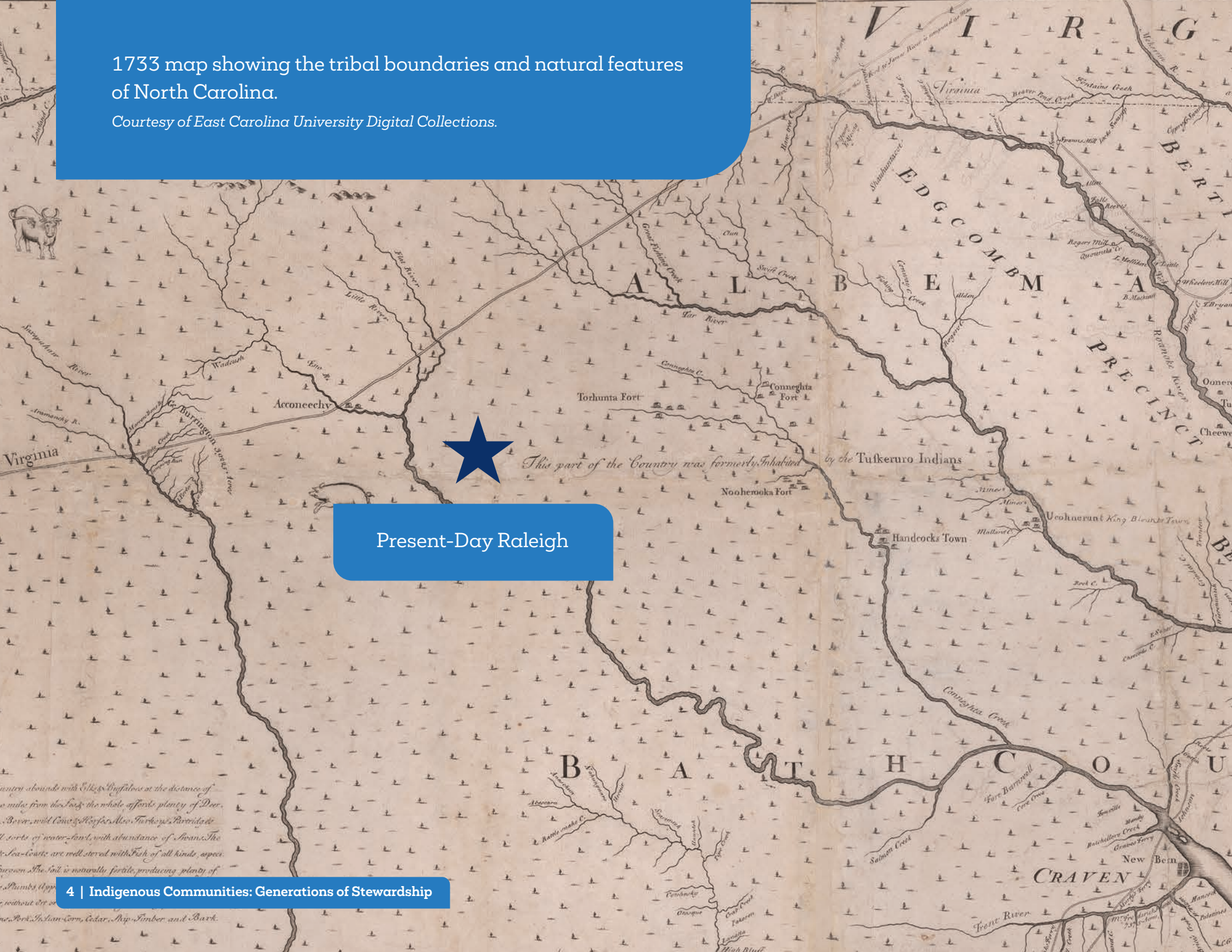
Dix Park lies on the contemporary Indigenous land of the Coharie, Cherokee, Haliwa-Saponi, Lumbee, Meherrin, Occaneechi, Sappony, and Waccamaw-Siouan American Indians.

Kaya Littleturtle of the Lumbee Tribe performs a land blessing at Dix Park in 2020, as a part of Raleigh's first Native land acknowledgment ceremony.



1733 map showing the tribal boundaries and natural features of North Carolina.

Courtesy of East Carolina University Digital Collections.



Present-Day Raleigh



Courtesy of the North Carolina State archives



Spring Hill Plantation: A Changing Landscape

In the 1760's, this area was purchased by Colonel Theophilus Hunter Sr. The name of the property, Spring Hill, refers to a spring of water that was at the foot of the hill on which the plantation house was erected.

After the death of his father, Theophilus Hunter Jr. expanded upon his inheritance. As a result of this land acquisition and the labor of the enslaved, the Hunters became one of the wealthiest families in Wake County.

Above: Colonel Theophilus Hunter Sr. (c. 1727-1798) was a city founder, colonial officer, Justice of the Peace, revolutionary leader and one of the largest enslavers in Wake County.

Courtesy of City of Raleigh Historic Resources and Museum Program

Below: Spring Hill plantation house in 1960.

Courtesy of the North Carolina State Archives

Connecting With Hunter Roots

City staff and volunteers have conducted research for **The Hunter descendant project**. This project is a genealogical research effort which connects the descendants of people enslaved at Spring Hill and the Hunter family who enslaved them. Like many families who descended from plantations, the family trees of the enslaved people and enslavers are woven together; this project has enabled descendants to explore their shared past with each other.

Below: The descendants of John Hunter, a laborer on Spring Hill plantation; and the descendants of Issac Hunter, a shoemaker who purchased his and his family's freedom, traveled to Raleigh in 2019 and 2023 respectively.

They met the descendants of Ned Hunter, who remained at Spring Hill plantation. The descendants shared stories of their families and are helping preserve contributions of their ancestors. They are continuing to research their genealogy and create real connections with each other and the past.

Courtesy of Ernest Dollar



Living Legacies: Many descendants of people enslaved at Spring Hill plantation have connected over their common lineage. Here are photos from several reunions with descendants of John Hunter, Isaac Hunter, and Ned Hunter.

Images Courtesy of Yvonne Sanders



Working the Land

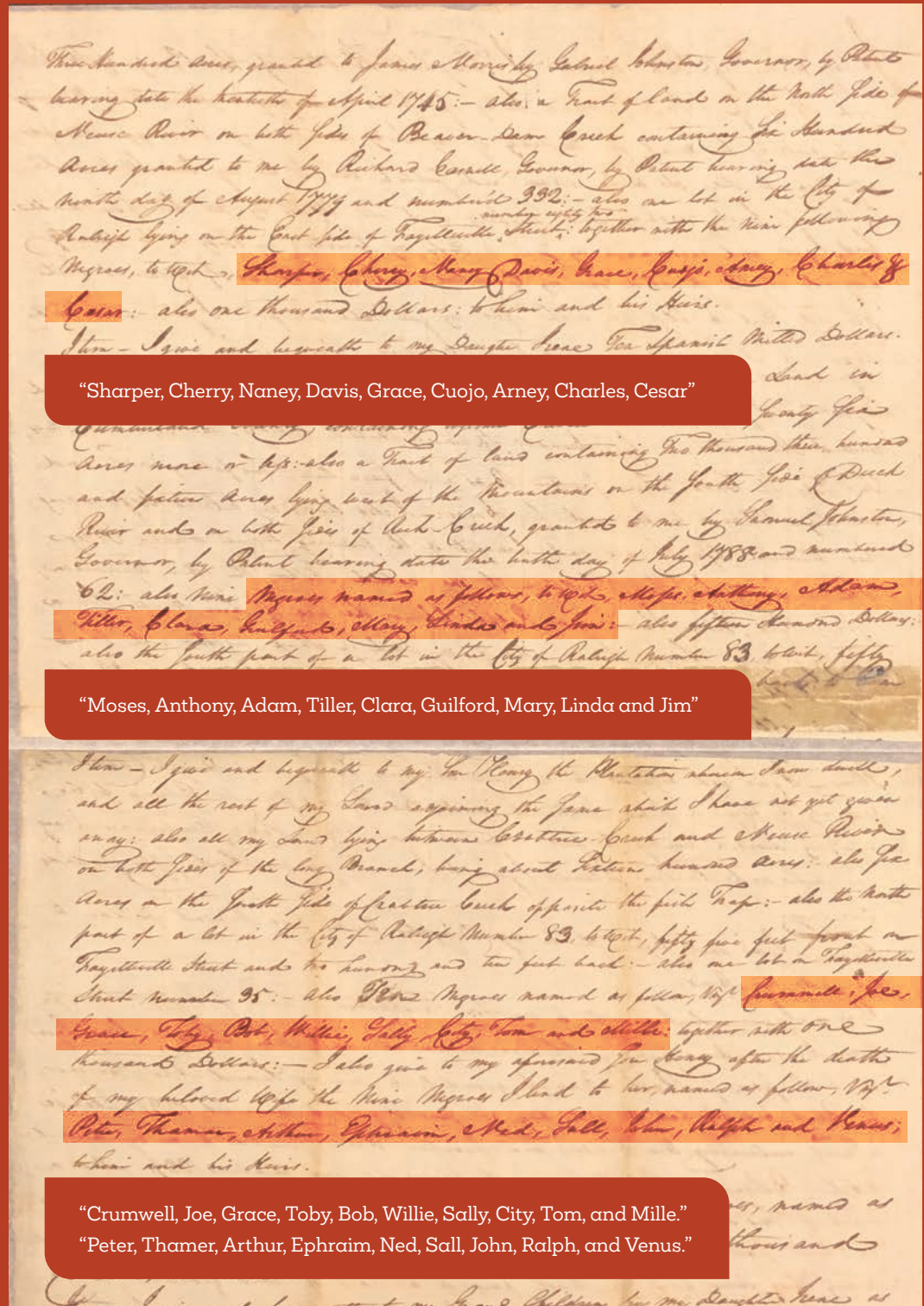
During the Hunter family's 100-year ownership of Spring Hill, enslaved men, women, and children worked on the plantation which measured 5,000 acres at its largest size. They cleared forests, raised hogs, and grew crops including cotton, corn, wheat, potatoes, beans, oats, and flax.

Other enslaved people worked as craftspeople, fixing and constructing plantation infrastructure, or in the home as housemaids and cooks. No matter their work, enslaved individuals often experienced physical and psychological abuse.

The labor of those enslaved at Spring Hill plantation and their descendants contributed substantially to Raleigh's growth by building the foundation for the city's agricultural legacy.

Right: Theophilus Hunter's will describing the division of his property and the individuals he enslaved amongst his family members upon his death in 1798.

Courtesy of the North Carolina State Archives.





Dorothea Dix (1802-1887) was an activist for reform in the fields of mental health treatment and nursing. She campaigned on behalf of the mentally ill across the United States.

Images Courtesy of City of Raleigh Historic Resources and Museum Program



An illustration of Dix Hospital as it would have appeared in 1860.

The Founding of Dix Hospital: A Haven on the Hill

In 1848, Dorothea Dix arrived in Raleigh advocating for a place where those with mental illness could receive medically-informed treatment and care. The idea that mental illness could be improved or cured was revolutionary; at that time, people with mental illness were often confined at home, or in jails and poorhouses. Dorothea Dix believed that outdoor landscapes could have a rehabilitative effect and that recovery could be achieved through fresh air, sunlight, and other therapies.

In 1850 the Hunter family sold 53 acres of their plantation to the state for North Carolina's first mental health care facility. Enslaved craftsmen and laborers helped build the hospital.

In February 1856, the North Carolina Insane Asylum opened to serve only white patients. Black patients were admitted in 1865 due to pressure from Union troops. Integration of the hospital lasted until 1880, when North Carolina opened a separate facility in Goldsboro for Black patients. Native Americans, specifically the Lumbee, were granted permission to be admitted to Dix Hospital in 1899. In the 1920s, a separate ward was established for American Indian patients from the Lumbee and Coharie tribes.

Remembrance in Dix Park

Inside the park there is a three-acre burial ground for hospital patients, established soon after the hospital was founded. It contains more than 900 graves, most of which are unmarked. Little is known about people in the cemetery. We are aware that Black soldiers and Dix Hospital patients from the Lumbee tribe are amongst those buried there.

Many patients were buried in the hospital cemetery because of social stigma; they were abandoned by their families who did not arrange for them to be buried with family members. Efforts to restore the cemetery grounds and commemorate those buried there are underway.

The Community on Dix Hill

The hospital campus, often called “Dix Hill,” was largely self-sufficient, with its own water supply, a farm, dairy, icehouse, and boilers to heat the buildings with steam.

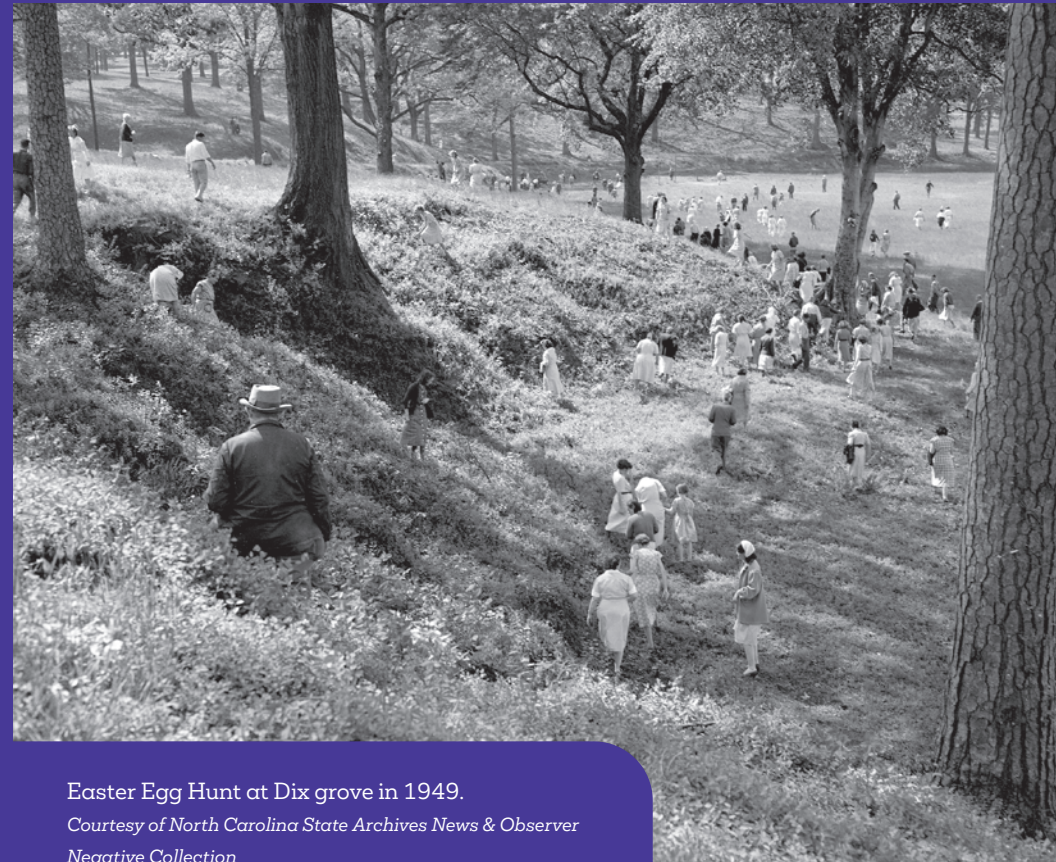
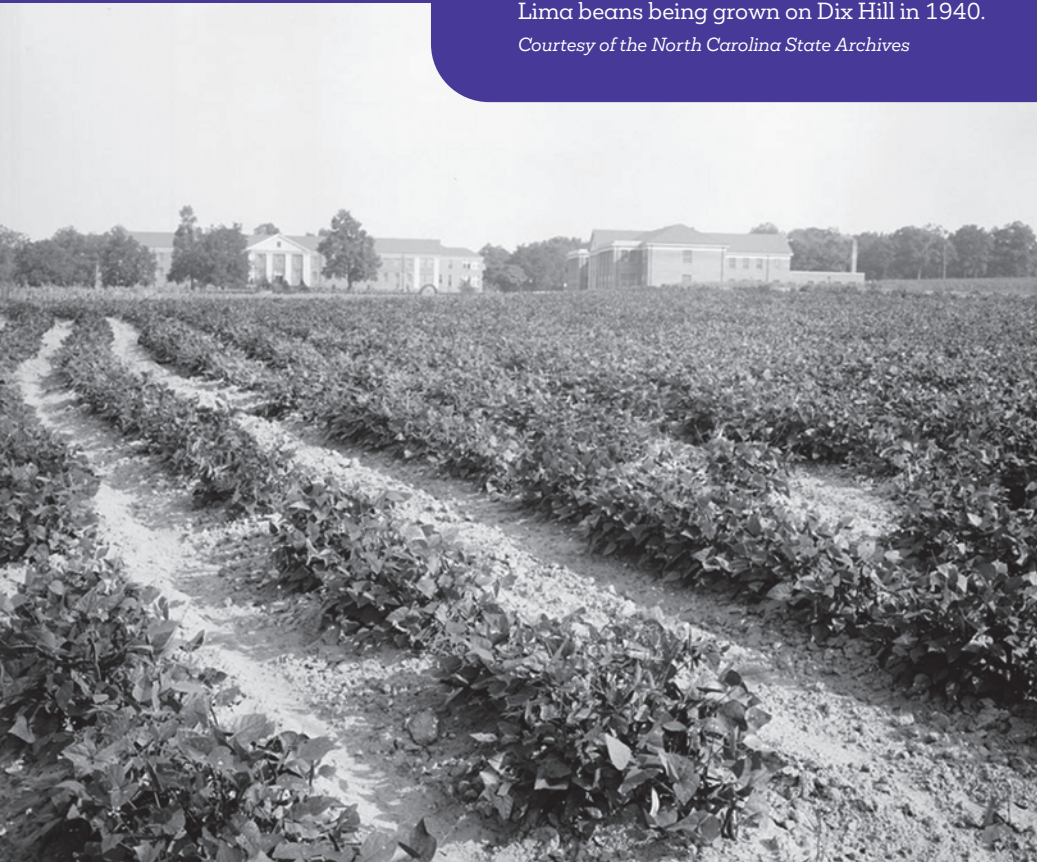
The campus included grounds for gardening and farming – with fresh air, connection to nature, and work thought to be central to patient wellbeing. Hospital patients worked without pay in the fields and buildings, providing economic self-sufficiency for the hospital. The hospital was also supported by thousands of staff members, including groundskeepers, cooks, pharmacists, nurses, radiologists, and other medical personnel.

A close-knit community formed as many workers and their families lived on the hospital campus. Many staff members celebrated holidays together, met for meals in the staff canteen, and attended picnics along with their patients. A deep connection to the hospital, its grounds, and its legacy was formed through shared experience.



The Community on Dix Hill

Lima beans being grown on Dix Hill in 1940.
Courtesy of the North Carolina State Archives

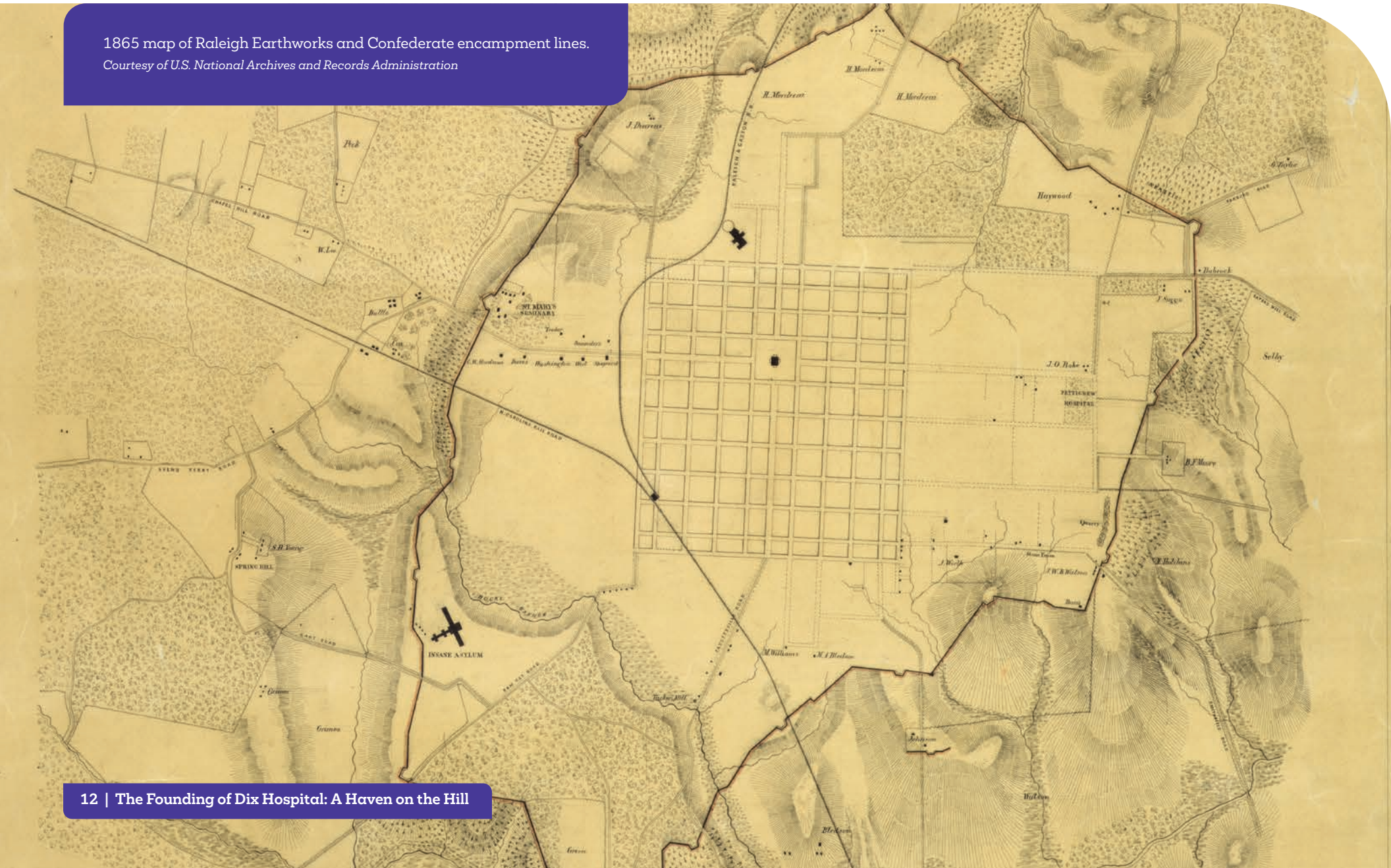


Easter Egg Hunt at Dix grove in 1949.
*Courtesy of North Carolina State Archives News & Observer
Negative Collection*

The Civil War on Dix Hill: During the Civil War in April 1865, 89,000 Union soldiers of Maj. General William T. Sherman occupied Raleigh. Men camped on the hospital's grounds and interacted with patients.

Union commanders required hospital doctors to treat Union soldiers and newly freed Black North Carolinians. This started with a Wake County man named Isaac, who was admitted with the cause noted as 'the war.'

1865 map of Raleigh Earthworks and Confederate encampment lines.
Courtesy of U.S. National Archives and Records Administration





Patients at Dix hospital were given multiple creative and meaningful outlets to help empower them in their healing. Patients are pictured here in the sewing room of Dix Hospital in the late 1800s.
Courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina.

Patient Life at Dix Hospital

People came to Dix Hospital for treatment of mental illness disorders and other conditions including epilepsy, substance-abuse, developmental disabilities and dementia. Many of these illnesses were and still are heavily stigmatized by society: some patients were rejected by their communities but found acceptance, respect, and care at Dix Hospital.

While many people have therapeutic and healing memories of being at Dix, others experienced harm and trauma during their time there. Like many other hospitals at the time, prejudicial understandings of race, gender and sexuality shaped admittance, diagnosis, and treatment at Dix Hospital.

Doctors tried to help and heal patients using treatment methods that would be considered inhumane by today's standards. Staff members also faced challenges presented by underfunding and by providing care for patients with unpredictable and sometimes violent behavior.



The End of an Era

When the hospital closed, many former staff members lost their jobs and their community as they scattered to look for work elsewhere.

Promises of community-centered care have fallen short of expectations. Former patients, families of patients, and staff members have expressed strong feelings of loss and lack of support and services for those living with mental illness.

Today, we hold Dix Park as a place of respite and acceptance. While there are no longer inpatient services at Dix Park, we recognize the power of parks to provide health and wellness benefits to the community.



Inspiration and Impact: Dix Hospital served as a site for education and innovation as a learning institution. Many mental health care professionals were trained in the hospital, while elsewhere on campus students at the

Dix School of nursing were given the tools to help patients and advance the profession during its operation from 1905-1951.

Image Courtesy of the North Carolina State Archives.



The Closure of Dix Hospital

At the height of its operations in the mid-70s, Dix Hospital treated over 2,500 patients annually and had nearly 1,300 employees. Its grounds included 2,500 acres with farmland, 282 buildings and a cemetery.



Shared experiences on Dix Hill bonded staff members together and created a community of people who came together for holidays, reunions, and other celebrations. Hospital staff members are pictured here at a gathering in the 1960s.

Courtesy of the City of Raleigh.

Over the next two decades, the patient population at the hospital declined as the federal government cut financial support for large mental health care centers in favor of community-based health care.

In 2012, Dorothea Dix Hospital's last patients were transferred to other facilities or released to live on their own, and the state closed the hospital.



An empty Dix Hospital shortly after its closing in 2012.

Courtesy of Ernest Dollar.



Hospital to Park: A New Terrain

In early 2015, after years of community-driven advocacy and negotiations with the state, the City of Raleigh purchased 308 acres of the former hospital campus and initiated planning for a destination park.

The City of Raleigh worked with community members and landscape architects Michael Van Valkenburgh and Associates to develop a Master Plan for the park. In addition to imagining spaces for play, recreation, connection, celebration, and performance, the Master Plan proposes improving the ecosystems across the park.

Over many years, generations of people have lived on the land we now call Dix Park. Today, we remember and honor their experiences.

We invite you to join us in preserving our history, celebrating resilient descendant communities, and writing the next chapter for Dix Park.



Learn more here:
dixpark.org/history

Sprouting Sunflowers

A portion of Dix Park was used as a municipal landfill from 1957-1972. The city is seeking ways to heal the local ecosystem from years of pollution and remediate this area. One example of this effort is the annual planting of several acres of sunflowers. The flowers use a process called phytoremediation to break down and remove contaminants in the soil, water, and air.

Dix Park
A Park For **Everyone**

 **Dix Park
Conservancy**

Dix Park Conservancy
P.O. Box 28575
Raleigh, NC 27611

919.987.1380
info@dixparkconservancy.org
dixparkconservancy.org

© 2024 Dix Park Conservancy

