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ARCHITECTURE AROUND US

By Lu Donnelly

Polk Center for the Feeble Minded

Driving west on Route 62 from Franklin in Venango County one sees, across a field, what appears to be a small college or perhaps an upscale retirement community. Instead it is one of architect Frederick John Osterling's largest commissions: the Western Pennsylvania State Institution for the Feeble Minded, later called Polk Center. More than a century ago, the commonwealth bought 773 acres of

Black and white image of
Polk Center Administration
Building, 2005.

Nicholas Traub.



Residential campus.

Lu Donnelly.



Architect Frederick J. Osterling, c. 1905.

Palmer's Pictorial Pittsburgh, 107.



Kerlin Hall, Polk Center.

Lu Donnelly.

farmland in what was once called the Waterloo Valley near the village of Polk. Ground was broken in 1894; a brick works on site supplied the raw material for most of the structures and the main buildings were completed within two years. The nearly level site, rare in Western Pennsylvania, also had three springs to supply the campus with water.

Osterling (1865-1934) founded his architectural practice in 1888 at the age of 23 and procured this large commission before his 30th birthday. Frederick's father, Philip Osterling, owned a lumberyard and planing mill in the fourth ward of Old Allegheny (Pittsburgh's North Side). Frederick was a gifted draftsman and he trained in local technical schools. After his official schooling he spent time in the office of architect Joseph Stillburg before traveling to Europe to inform his eye about the principles of architecture and the variety of styles. In 1892, Osterling designed his family's home at 3505 California Avenue (since demolished), a large stone Queen Anne house with Chateausque elements.

Osterling designs often have large rounded turrets and towers, steeply angled roofs, and handsome brickwork, as do the Polk buildings. The administration building at Polk Center looks like a county courthouse with a pedimented portico offset by large rounded-corner towers topped by conical roofs and a central six-sided tower with a cupola. In the original design long, three-story wings of red brick flank the administration building creating courtyards, and behind the administration building a whole quadrangle of dormitories and living spaces complete the original vision. Over the years more dormitories, a hospital, and utilitarian buildings continued to be added. The later designs were by architects Samuel D. Brady of nearby Franklin and Louis Stevens, who worked in Pittsburgh and Venango County.


The Polk complex was meant to be nearly self-supporting upon its completion and included barns and farm buildings, springhouses, a laundry, and a powerhouse. Patients often worked in these places until



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treatments for the mentally challenged changed to community-based care and the patient population dwindled.

Osterling had a long, illustrious career in the Pittsburgh region, with approximately 200 known commissions and probably many more. They range from single-family dwellings to large hotels, courthouses, schools, and buildings at Woodville and Dixmont hospitals

for the mentally ill. He is also credited, just after finishing Polk Center, with the 1898 design of the Chautauqua Lake Ice Company building, now the Senator John Heinz History Center. 

Lu Donnelly is one of the authors of *Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania* (University of Virginia Press, 2010), a book in the 60-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled *Buildings of the United States*. She has authored several books and National Register nominations on Allegheny County topics and organized an exhibition on the barns of Western Pennsylvania for the Heinz Architectural Center at the Carnegie Museum of Art.

Drawing by Frederick John Osterling, "State Institution for the Feeble-Minded of Western Pennsylvania," c. 1894.

*Polk State School and Hospital
75th Anniversary: 1897-1972, 16-17.*



Distant shot of Polk Center campus.
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