

Abandoned Asylums

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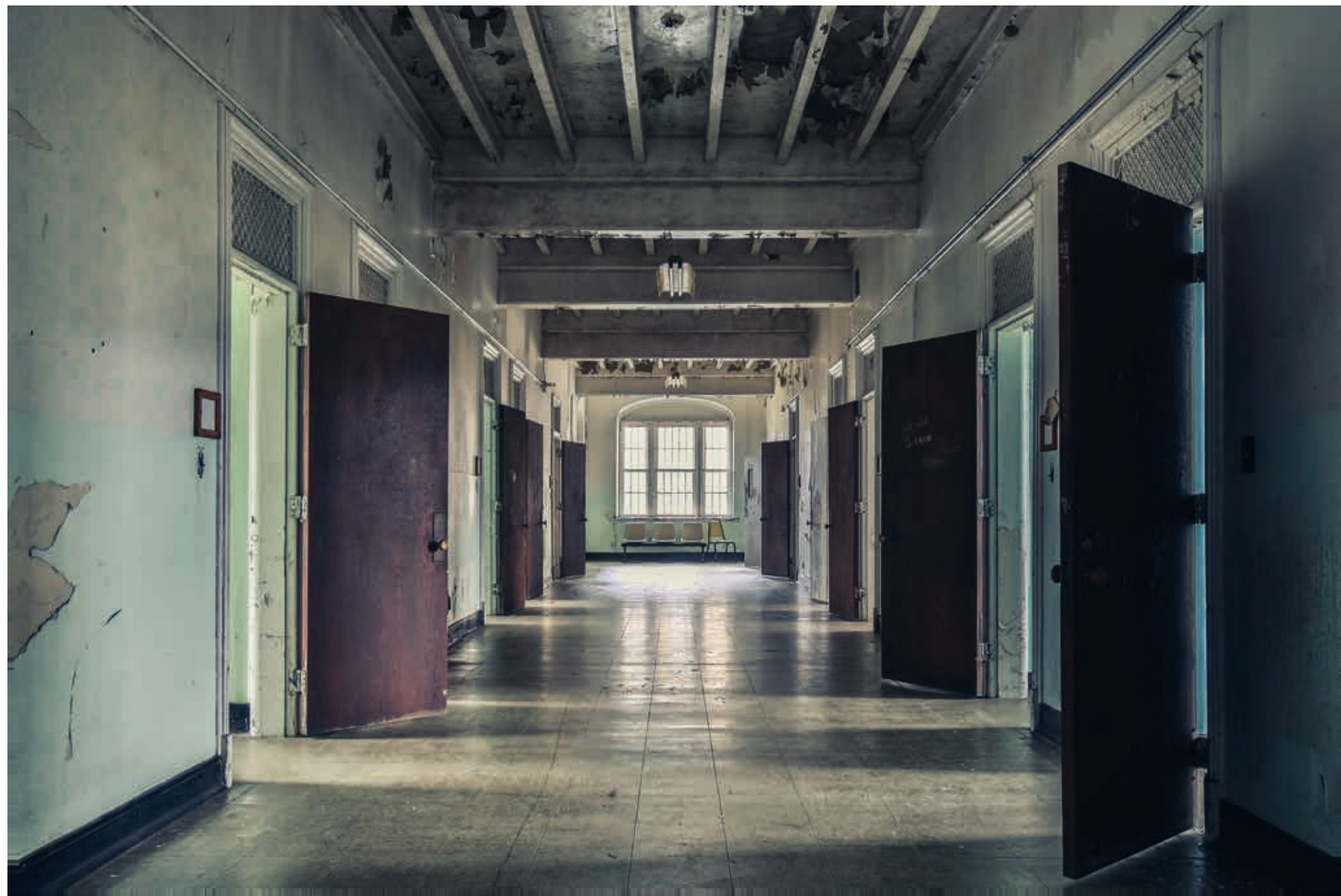
Walter Freeman's Blackburn Laboratory autopsy theatre

While some people consider Dr Walter Freeman a revolutionary, others see him as an infamous medical practitioner. The ethics involved in his work are no doubt controversial. However, his research and the time he spent at St Elizabeths have proved invaluable in our current understanding of the human body. His was a time when the desire for knowledge far outweighed the technology available for non-invasive surgical procedures. Institutions latched on to any procedure that might help with the problem of over-population and the overall decline of the institutions.

Today, there are major schemes to repurpose and stabilize the abandoned structures standing on the vacant parts of the St Elizabeths East Campus. Since 2010, only the part of the East Campus operated by the District of Columbia Department of Mental Health provides hospital facilities. (John Hinckley, Jr, who in 1981 attempted to assassinate Ronald Reagan, has been incarcerated at St Elizabeths ever since.) The remainder of the East Campus is slated for redevelopment by the District of Columbia, which owns the site. The West Campus is owned by the Federal government and is also being redeveloped.

Phase 1 at the East Campus is already under way: the aim is to create a vibrant, mixed-use development, with community amenities, that will also function as a marketplace for ideas, innovation and commercial activities. There are plans for an entertainment center; a sports arena serving as the new home of the NBA's Washington Wizards; a large residential neighborhood; and possibly a university campus. This will serve as the catalyst for economic development and growth, while also embracing the architecture and history of what was once a monument to civic pride.

Construction is also ongoing at the West Campus site (home to the original Kirkbride building). The Department of Homeland Security will set up their new national headquarters inside the halls of this historic institution. The US Coast Guard has also taken a large section of the property for their new headquarters. One of America's great institutions will be brought to life again and given a bright future – another Kirkbride scheme saved for the nation.





Ward murals hand-pointed by patients





Not long after its closure, a discovery was made that would propel Willard into the spotlight, attracting much public attention and allure. Some 400 suitcases were found untouched in a locked and sealed attic. Each piece of luggage served as a time capsule of a period from approximately 1910 to 1960, offering a heartbreaking glimpse into the daily existence of Willard's patients. Photographer Jon Crispin was commissioned to document each and every artifact found inside the cases and penned a book entitled *The Lives They Left Behind*. Crispin's photographs offer the curious an open window into the lives – and the minds – of so many that entered Willard, tragically never to leave. Upon their arrival at the asylum, all patients' belongings would be stored and never seen again.

In a suitcase owned by a patient and US Army Veteran named Frank, Crispin found a pristine military uniform, sewing and grooming kits, a toy pistol, food ration cards, and several photos of Frank and his family. Another suitcase owned by a woman named Anna revealed the memories of a socialite fond of attention. Her luggage included a pair of stylish heels, hats, sequined gold belts, brushes, combs and a written inventory cataloguing her glamorous clothing.









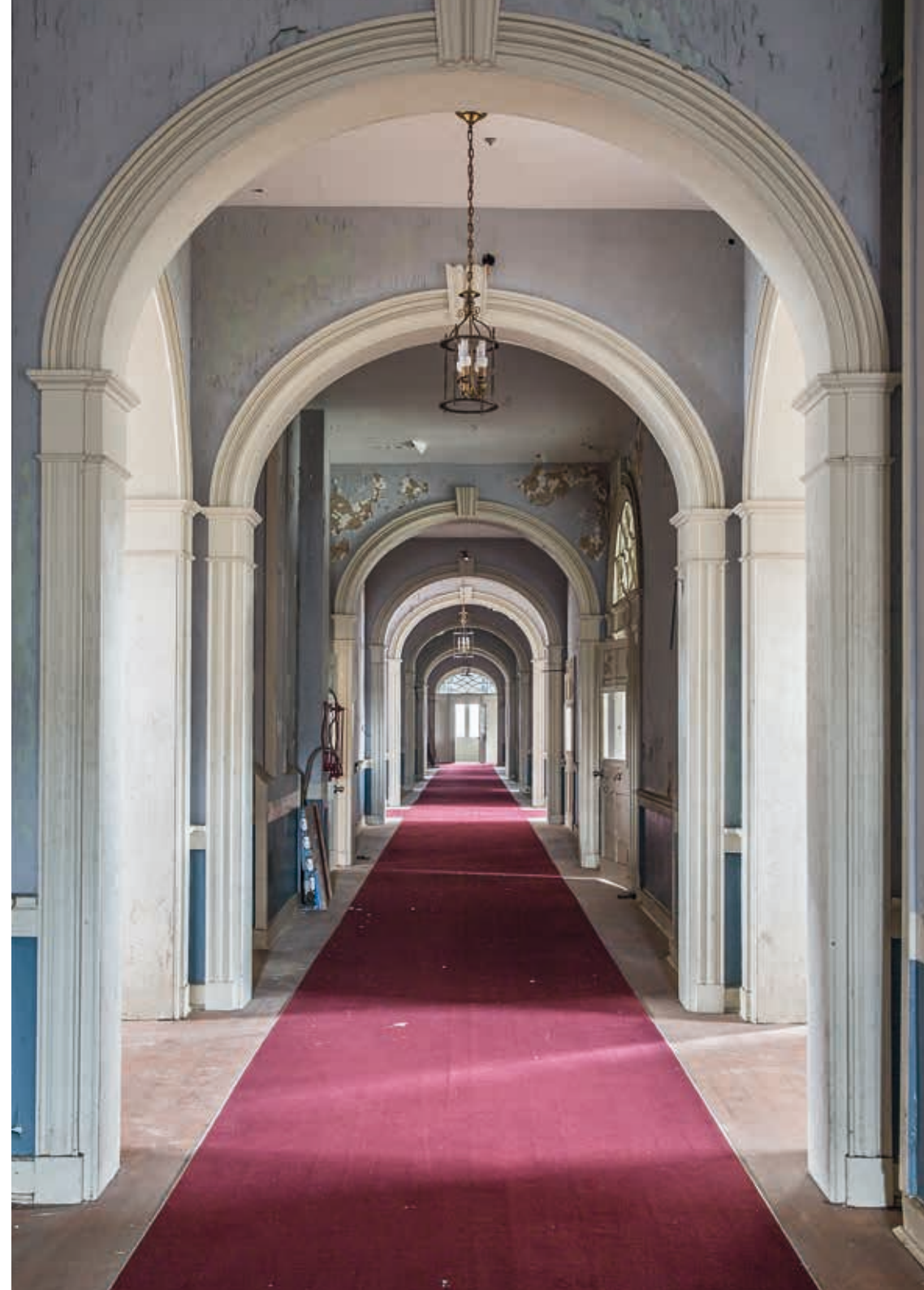
















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