

**HIS 398.01**  
**The History of the American Mental Hospital**

Satisfies: STAS

Thematic Categories: "Health, Science & Environmental Change,"  
"Law, Politics & Social Justice," "Race, Religion, Gender & Sexualities"

MWF 11:00-11:53AM

Professor Nancy Tomes

This course traces the history of American mental hospitals from their optimistic beginnings in the early 1800s through their widespread closures starting in the 1970s and the shift of care (or more accurately confinement) to jails and prisons. We will study the evolution of the mental hospital as a reflection both of changing medical theories and of cultural attitudes toward mental illness. We will explore the complex dynamics of institutionalization (why mental hospitals came to be seen as the best way to help people with severe mental illness), de-institutionalization (why closing them seemed to be a good solution), and transinstitutionalization (why jails and prisons became the hospital's default replacement.) While broadly surveying the mental hospital's rise and fall, we will use the Kings Park state hospital as a case study. Students will have streaming access to the recent film "Kings Park: Stories from an American Mental Hospital," made by documentarian (and SBU alum) Lucy Winer. Readings will include selections from books such as Gerald Grob's *The Mad Among Us*. Students will be asked to write one 3-5 page paper and one 7-10 page paper.