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## Belchertown State School Friends Association Records

1841-1876

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The Belchertown State School was formally opened in 1922 as an institution to train children with developmental disabilities and prepare them for integration into society. By the 1960s, conditions at the school had deteriorated to a degree detrimental to the

residents, precipitating a string of lawsuits, beginning with Ricci v. Greenblatt in 1972, eventually leading to closure of the facility in 1992. The School's Friends Association was established in 1954 to promote improved conditions at Belchertown State School and better treatment of "retarded" or "mentally challenged" citizens in Massachusetts more generally.

The bulk of the Belchertown State School collection consists of records of court appearances, briefs, the consent decree, and related materials, along with reports and correspondence relating to Massachusetts v. Russell W. Daniels, Ricci v. Greenblatt (later Ricci v. Okin), and other cases. Accompanying the legal files are clippings and photocopied newspaper articles; speeches; newsletters; draft of agreements; and scrapbooks.

See similar SCUA collections:

Disability

Massachusetts (West)

Medical

Social change

Social justice

## Background on Belchertown State School Friends Association

The Belchertown State School for the Feebleminded was founded in Belchertown, Mass., in 1922 to provide long-term care for persons with developmental disabilities. Years of growing concern over the conditions at the School and a series of lawsuits brought by Benjamin Ricci, the father of a patient at the school and a Professor of Kinesiology at UMass Amherst, the School was closed in 1992.

The product of a Progressive-era concern with developmental and psychiatric disability, the Belchertown State School began as part of a humane project to create institutions that would house and train the "mentally deficient" separately from the mentally ill and prepare them for integration into society, rather than segregating them permanently. Preceded by the Walter E. Fernald School (founded 1848) and Wrentham State School for the Feebleminded (1906), Belchertown was the only school for developmentally disabled children in western Massachusetts.



'Our first students,' 1921 from the Aubrey Lapolice Collection

Construction at Belchertown was authorized by the General Court in 1915 with an appropriation of \$50,000 to purchase land. From 1918 to 1922, it operated as a farm colony of the Wrentham State School, opening formally in November 1922 with the transfer of nearly 200 boys from the older schools. Typical of the period, the school was originally built as dispersed cottages centered on a farm operation, growing into a campus of over 845 acres and at least 57 buildings with a total population of nearly 750 by the end of its first decade.

For decades, the school operated with little public scrutiny, however changing attitudes toward disability and exposes of abhorrent conditions in psychiatric institutions gradually shifted the terrain. The Mental Health and Retardation Services Act in Massachusetts (1966) marked the beginning of a systematic effort to shift away from institutionalization as a response to developmental and psychiatric disability toward community-based care. At Belchertown, the process was accelerated after reports of "deplorable conditions" appeared in a series of articles in the *Boston Globe* and other newspapers resulted in the formation of a special legislative commission to inquire into conditions at the State Schools at Monson and Belchertown. The first report from the commission in March 1971 was scathing:

The deterioration of Belchertown State School speaks for itself - a departmental inability to face up to the facts to accept the idea that there are alternatives to custodial methods of care, the resistance to the development of standards, the unclear and undefined lines of authority and responsibility in the department, the absence of management systems and management control, the severe lack of administrative coordination, the unrealistic emphasis on promises and not performance, the low esteem for the dignity and the potential rehabilitation of the individual residents, the misuse of available resources at Belchertown, and the negative and obstructionist attitude of the administration at the school." (*Boston Globe*, Mar. 26, 1971.

On behalf of his son, Robert Simpson Ricci, and others at the school, Ben Ricci filed a class action suit in the U.S. District Court for Massachusetts on February 7, 1972 (Ricci v. Milton Greenblatt et al.), asserting that conditions at the school violated the statutory and constitutional rights of its residents, including the right to minimally adequate care and treatment. Parallel suits were soon

filed against four other state schools. These five suits were eventually consolidated by the court and in 1978, a consent decree was issued against the defendants mandating a host of improvements. When the defendants notified the District Court that they intended to reduce staffing further in 1981, however, further litigation ensued to prevent the reductions, with the court again finding in favor of the plaintiffs.

In 1986, the Court stepped away from overseeing compliance with its decrees, ordering the establishment of an independent Office of Quality Assurance to ensure continued compliance. Belchertown State School formally closed in 1992.

The Belchertown State School Friends Association was established in 1954 to promote improved conditions at Belchertown State School and better treatment of "retarded" or "mentally challenged" citizens in Massachusetts. Benjamin Ricci served as President of the Association during the time of his lawsuits, 1970-1977, and as Chairman of the Board thereafter, 1977-1992.

## Scope of collection

The bulk of the Belchertown State School collection consists of records of court appearances, briefs, the consent decree, and related materials, along with reports and correspondence relating to *Massachusetts v. Russell W. Daniels*, *Ricci v. Greenblatt* (later *Ricci v. Okin*), and other cases. Accompanying the legal files are clippings and photocopied newspaper articles; speeches; newsletters; draft of agreements; and scrapbooks.

## Series descriptions

### Series 1. Organizational materials

1954-1979

1 box

Materials on the founding and operations of the Belchertown State School Friends Association.

### Series 2. *Commonwealth v. Russell W. Daniels*

1973-1983

1 box

Records pertaining to the case of Russell W. Daniels, a man with a second-grade reading ability and IQ of 53, who was convicted of murder solely on the basis of a confession while under custodial interrogation.

### Series 3. Court appearances and related records

1972-1984

8 boxes

Records of Ricci's court appearances relative to his lawsuits against the Belchertown State School, including affidavits, responses, motions, supporting documents, and court orders.

### Series 4. Reports and correspondence

1970-1983

6 boxes

Materials relating to the

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1972-1984

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The Developmentally Disabled: Civil Rights Issues, Final report of the Mass. Comm. on the legal and civil rights of the developmentally disabled

1976 May

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The Mass. Consent Decrees for Mentally Retarded Citizens: Produced by the Dept. of MHD of M Retardation office of training and resource Dev.; also included is a cover letter from W. Jones

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Tenth Quarterly Report on Occupational Therapy Initiatives in Higher Education and Related Areas

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School; hosted by Dave Scott.

undated

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"Human Policy, A Paper from the Center On"

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Narrative portions of the Department of Public Health Fire Safety Evaluation System surveys for Fernald, Monson, and Belchertown. Also attached is correspondence to the state school superintendents requesting details of their plans to accommodate residents in response to the DPH findings

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## Administrative information

### Access

The collection is open for research.

### Provenance

Gift of Benjamin Ricci, 1980-1990.

### Related Material

SCUA also houses a small collection of photographs from Aubrey Lapolice, a maintenance superintendent at the Belchertown State School for forty years.

The collection of the photojournalist Jeff Albertson includes a series of photographs taken of the conditions at Belchertown State School in Dec. 1972.

### Processing Information

Processed by I. Eliot Wentworth, Dec. 2015.

### Language:

English

### Copyright and Use (More information )

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## Search terms

### Subjects

Belchertown (Mass.)--History  
Belchertown State School  
Persons with mental disabilities--Institutional care--Massachusetts  
Ricci, Robert Simpson

### Contributors

Belchertown State School Friends Association [**main entry**]  
Ricci, Benjamin

### Genres and formats

Maps

### Link to similar SCUA collections

Disability  
Massachusetts (West)  
Medical  
Social change  
Social justice

