Patterns of Pellagra: Dorothea Dix Hospital and the Pellagra Epidemic of the Early 20th Century
Abby Wooten

In the early twentieth century, the pellagra epidemic ravaged the most vulnerable populations of the American South, including those admitted to Dorothea Dix Hospital in Raleigh, North Carolina. Based on patient records at Dorothea Dix Hospital, there is a clear relationship between disease and mental illness, gender, and economic status. Pellagra rates were high in asylums due to poor conditions and the circumstances patients lived in both before and during their time as a patient. At Dix, pellagra rates were the highest among women, particularly those whose occupation was listed as “housewife.” As for men, mill workers faced the highest pellagra rates. In addition, the patient records at Dix Hospital revealed that a select number of patients likely contracted pellagra during their time at Dix, rather than having the disease upon admission. All of this combined demonstrates the intersections that existed in Dix Asylum between mental illness, gender and economic conditions—intersections that both caused admission to the hospital and disease within the hospital.