

ST. ELIZABETHS HOSPITAL, INCINERATOR  
(Building No. 123)  
2700 Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue, Southeast, Ash Street, Southeast  
Washington  
District of Columbia

HABS DC-349-BR  
*HABS DC-349-BR*

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

### ST. ELIZABETHS HOSPITAL, INCINERATOR (BUILDING 123)

HABS NO. DC-349-BR

- Location:** Ash Street SE, Washington, D.C., on the West Campus of St. Elizabeths Hospital
- Present Owner:** General Services Administration, United States Government
- Present Use:** Demolished (rehabilitation of St. Elizabeths West Campus in progress)
- Significance:** The Incinerator (Building 123) is not directly related to the historically significant function of the St. Elizabeths West Campus as a place for the treatment of mental illness. Although part of the campus as it existed from the 1950s to 2009, the Incinerator is considered neither to have individual historic significance nor to contribute to the historic character of the campus.
- Historians:** Mike Ford, Kenneth Itle, Tim Penich, and Deborah Slaton, Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, Inc.

## PART I: HISTORICAL INFORMATION

### A. Physical History

1. Date of erection: 1958<sup>1</sup>
2. Architect: Not known
3. Original and subsequent owners, occupants, uses: St. Elizabeths Hospital (then the Government Hospital for the Insane) was placed under the control of the Department of the Interior by an act of Congress on March 3, 1855. In 1940, St. Elizabeths was transferred to the Federal Security Agency. The Federal Security Agency was a new government agency that oversaw federal activities in the fields of health, education, and social insurance. In 1953, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare was created. At that time several of the functions of the Federal Security Agency, including control of St. Elizabeths Hospital, were transferred to the new department.<sup>2</sup> Thus, when the Incinerator was constructed in 1958, the hospital was under the control of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. In 1968, St. Elizabeths was transferred to the National Institute of Mental Health, an agency within the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. The Institute sought to demonstrate how a large mental hospital could be converted into a smaller, more modern facility for training, service, and research.<sup>3</sup> In 1979, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare became the Department of Health and Human Services with the creation of the Department of Education. The Department of Health and Human

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<sup>1</sup> *Historic Resources Management Plan*, 82.

<sup>2</sup> *Federal Register*, accessed at <http://www.federalregister.gov/agencies/saint-elizabeth-s-hospital>, January 5, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> 1970 *Annual Report*.

Services retained control of the Incinerator until 2004, when the property was transferred to the GSA.<sup>4</sup> The campus facilities were stabilized and the buildings were mothballed by 2005.

From its initial construction in 1958 until it was vacated in 2005, the Incinerator was used as an incinerator and asbestos storage facility.

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: Unknown
5. Original plans and construction: The Incinerator was constructed as a concrete masonry unit structure with flat roof and basement. The building was set into the slope of the hill and appeared as a one-story structure from the east and as two stories from the west. Two large metal-framed overhead doors flanked the central doorway on the east facade. Three eight-light industrial sash windows were centered on each floor level of the north and south facades. A free-standing, buff-colored brick smokestack on a concrete foundation was located on the west elevation.<sup>5</sup>
6. Alterations and additions: As part of the construction of a new headquarters for the United States Coast Guard on the St. Elizabeths West Campus, the Incinerator was demolished in late 2009 or early 2010.

#### B. Historical context<sup>6</sup>

In 1852, St. Elizabeths Hospital was established in large part through the efforts of Dorothea Lynde Dix, who led a national crusade for the ethical and humane treatment of the mentally ill. Under the direction of Superintendent Charles Nichols (1852–1877), the hospital endeavored to become a curative treatment center for the mentally ill of Washington, D.C., and the United States Army and Navy. Patients were grouped into wards by their perceived mental condition and emphasis was placed on creating a peaceful, healthy, and serene family environment in which to rehabilitate.

In 1877, William Godding became superintendent of St. Elizabeths Hospital and adopted the principles of his predecessor. Through the moral treatment of patients, it was believed that mental illness could be cured. During Godding's tenure (1877–1899), seventeen free-standing ward buildings were constructed on the St. Elizabeths campus. Infrastructure projects were aimed at developing St. Elizabeths Hospital as a self-sufficient campus.

Under the guidance of Superintendent Alonzo Richardson (1899–1903), the St. Elizabeths campus underwent an expansive building campaign to reduce overcrowding and improve infrastructure. Richardson's tenure was cut short by his untimely death; however, his successor, Superintendent William White (1903–1937), oversaw the completion of the expansion project.

After Winfred Overholser became superintendent in 1937, new development at the hospital was concentrated on the east campus, while west campus structures were maintained through a cycle of

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<sup>4</sup> *St. Elizabeths West Campus: Cultural Landscape Report*, Heritage Landscapes, Preservation Landscape Architects & Planners, and Robinson & Associates, Inc., prepared for the General Services Administration, April 2009, V.2.

<sup>5</sup> *Historic Resources Management Plan*, Devroux & Purnell Architects-Planners, PC, with Betty Bird, Historian, and Rhodeside & Harwell Inc., Landscape Architects, prepared for the D.C. Office of Business and Economic Development and the Office of the Assistant City Administrator for Economic Development, Washington, D.C., September 1993, 82.

<sup>6</sup> A context history for the entire St. Elizabeths West Campus, as well as an overview history of the Systems and Infrastructure Group, is to be developed under separate cover as part of this HABS documentation project.

upgrades and repairs. The minimal new construction occurring on the west campus was focused on improving infrastructure. Starting in the 1950s, upgrades were made to the infrastructure throughout the west campus. Likely in connection with this work, new utilitarian structures, including the Incinerator, were constructed to provide for storage and disposal of waste.

## **PART II: ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION**

### **A. General Statement:**

1. Architectural character: The Incinerator is a simple, utilitarian concrete block structure set into a sloped site. It has a rectangular footprint and square massing that is two bays wide and three bays deep. The furnace is located at the basement level. The first floor is a double-height volume originally used for storage of debris before it was incinerated. A single smokestack is attached to the center of the south elevation and an exterior staircase abuts the north side of the building.

Character-defining features of the building include its double-height first floor space, exposed concrete masonry unit walls, steel-framed windows, and brick smokestack.

2. Condition of fabric: At the time of the field survey for the Historic Structure Reports/Building Preservation Plans project in 2009, the Incinerator was in fair to poor condition. The roof was severely deteriorated and missing the roof monitor. The interior and exterior face of the walls exhibited water staining and efflorescence. Most of the window glazing was broken and interior finishes were missing or severely deteriorated.

### **B. Description of Exterior:**

1. Overall dimensions: approximately 35'-0" by 30'-0" rectangular building, 40'-0" in height from grade at the basement level to the top of the roof parapet. The smokestack is 71'-0" tall.
2. Foundations: The foundation of the building and adjacent smokestack is concrete slab on grade.
3. Walls: The walls are constructed of concrete masonry units.
4. Structural system, framing: The upper level walls of the Incinerator are constructed of two-wythe concrete masonry units and are approximately 12 inches thick. The upper and lower level floor structures are cast-in-place reinforced concrete slabs and beams. The flat roof is constructed of reinforced concrete panels supported on flat steel beams and purlins.
5. Porches, stoops, balconies, porticoes, bulkheads: None present.
6. Chimneys: A clay masonry smokestack with circular plan and concrete foundation is attached to the south elevation of the building and serves as exhaust for the furnace.
7. Openings
  - a. Doorways and doors: The north facade has a centrally located metal-framed pedestrian door with a cast-in-place concrete header. The pedestrian door is flanked by two large metal roll-up doors.

- b. Windows and shutters: The building fenestration includes eight-light steel windows with center pivoting sash. The window openings have projecting concrete sills and cast-in-place concrete heads.

8. Roof

- a. Shape, covering: The Incinerator has a flat roof constructed of reinforced concrete panels.
- b. Cornice, eaves: The roof has a shallow parapet composed of shaped concrete masonry that projects from the wall plane and is flashed with sheet metal.
- c. Dormers, cupolas, towers: The roof originally featured a monitor, but it has been destroyed by deterioration or vandalism, leaving the first floor interior exposed to the elements.

C. Description of Interior:

- 1. Floor plans: The Incinerator has two floors: the basement and the first floor. The basement is a one-room space that houses a large furnace encased in brick masonry walls. A U-shaped corridor around the furnace provides access to other incinerator-related machinery. The first floor is a double-height interior space that is completely open with the exception of a mezzanine level toilet room.
- 2. Stairways: The building has a steel staircase along the east wall that provides access between the first floor and mezzanine level toilet room. An exterior concrete staircase abuts the north side of the building and provides access between the first floor and the basement level.
- 3. Flooring: The interior floors at both the basement and first floor levels are exposed concrete.
- 4. Wall and ceiling finish: The CMU is exposed on the interior walls. The cast-in-place concrete floor slab and beams are exposed to the interior at the basement level and serve as the finished ceiling. At the first floor level, the original interior plaster ceiling finishes have severely deteriorated and collapsed. The reinforced concrete panels and flat steel beams and purlins are exposed to the interior and form the finished ceiling at the first floor level.
- 5. Openings
  - a. Doorways and doors: One interior doorway was observed in the building and is located at the entrance to the toilet room at the mezzanine level. It is composed of a metal-framed opening with a flat-panel painted metal door.
  - b. Windows: Window openings have a concrete header beam exposed to view from the interior.
- 6. Decorative features and trim: None present.
- 7. Hardware: Hardware at the interior door consists of metal hinges, door handle, and a mechanical door closer. At window locations, hardware consists of steel window stays.

8. Mechanical Equipment

- a. Heating, air conditioning, ventilation: The building functioned as an incinerator. Ductwork and ventilation is associated with furnace equipment located in the basement. The upper level was heated by several gas-fired unit heaters suspended from the ceiling.
- b. Lighting: The interior is lit by high-efficiency fixtures mounted to the ceiling framing. Electrical power is supplied by exposed metal conduit mounted to the wall. Electrical boxes are mounted to the exterior walls at the basement and first floor levels.
- c. Plumbing: Plumbing pipes are cast iron. They are exposed to view and mounted to the CMU walls and concrete beam ceiling structure.

D. Site:

1. Historic landscape design: Documentation of the landscape of the west campus of St. Elizabeths Hospital can be found in Historic American Landscape Survey documentation submittal DC-11.

The Incinerator is located in the south central portion of St. Elizabeths west campus, just south of the Power House (Building 56/57). A dirt road, now overgrown with brush and saplings, connects the building to Ash Street. A leveled area of approximately 30 feet by 50 feet in front of the north facade allows truck access to the building. The terrain slopes steeply to the south so that the first floor is at grade at the north facade, while the basement level is at grade at the south facade.

**PART III: SOURCES OF INFORMATION**

- A. Architectural drawings: None available.
- B. Early Views: Copies of selected early and historical views of the Incinerator Building are included in the attached Supplemental Material. The original photographs and other archival photographic documentation are in the collection of the General Services Administration, the Library of Congress, the National Archives, College Park, Maryland, or the St. Elizabeths Hospital Health Sciences Library archives on the St. Elizabeths east campus.
- C. Interviews: No oral history interviews were performed for this documentation project.
- D. Selected Sources:

*Condition & Reuse Assessment: St. Elizabeths West Campus (draft)*. Oehrlein & Associates Architects. Prepared for the General Services Administration, January 4, 2006.

*The DHS Headquarters Consolidation at St. Elizabeths: Final Master Plan*. Oehrlein & Associates Architects and Robinson & Associates. Inc. Prepared for the General Services Administration. November 10, 2008.

*General Correspondence and Other Records of the Federal Board of St. Elizabeths Hospital*. Records of the Office of the Superintendent, (1855-1967), Record Group 418.

*Historic Preservation Report: St. Elizabeths West Campus*, John Milner Architects. Prepared for the General Services Administration. December 7, 2005.

*Building Preservation Plan: Incinerator (Building 123), St. Elizabeths West Campus, Washington, D.C.* Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, Inc. Prepared for the General Services Administration, March 12, 2010.

Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.: Geography & Maps Reading Room. Collection contains various topographical maps for the District of Columbia and St. Elizabeths campus from 1855–1985.

National Archives and Record Administration. Textual Documents Division. Washington, D.C. Record Group 418, Records of St. Elizabeths Hospital. Entry 20, Records of the Superintendent, Annual Report of the Subordinate Units, 1919–1966.

National Archives and Record Administration. Textual Documents Division. Washington, D.C. Record Group 42, Records of St. Elizabeths Hospital, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

National Archives and Records Administration at College Park, Cartographic and Architectural Drawings Division, College Park, Maryland. Record Group 418, Records of St. Elizabeths Hospital, National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.

National Archives and Records Administration at College Park, Cartographic and Architectural Drawings Division, College Park, Maryland. Record Group 48, Records of the Secretary of the Interior.

*Photographs of Structures at St. Elizabeths Hospital, Washington, D.C., 1968.* Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Public Health Service, Health Services and Mental Health Administration, National Institute of Mental Health, Saint Elizabeths Hospital, Office of the Superintendent (04/01/1968–07/01/1973). Records of St. Elizabeths Hospital, 1820–1981. Record Group 418, National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.

*St. Elizabeths Hospital Historic Resources Management Plan.* Devroux & Purnell Architects-Planners, PC, with Betty Bird, Historian, and Rhodeside & Harwell Inc., Landscape Architects. Prepared for the D.C. Office of Business and Economic Development and the Office of the Assistant City Administrator for Economic Development, Washington, D.C., September 1993.

*St. Elizabeths West Campus: Cultural Landscape Report.* Heritage Landscapes, Preservation Landscape Architects & Planners, and Robinson & Associates, Inc. Prepared for the General Services Administration. April 2009.

*St. Elizabeths West Campus Preservation, Design, & Development Guidelines.* Oehrlein & Associates Architects and Robinson & Associates, Inc., Architectural and Historical Research. Prepared for the General Services Administration. November 10, 2008.

E. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated: Extensive research on the history of the Incinerator Building has been performed for this and other studies, as documented in the publications and other sources listed above.

F. Supplemental Material:

1. GSA archives, image DC0147SE0P001.
2. St. Elizabeth Hospital Health Science Library archive, May 22, 1958.

#### **PART IV: PROJECT INFORMATION**

This historical narrative was prepared by WJE in conjunction with Mills + Schnoering Architects, LLC, who prepared the measured drawings, and Leslie Schwartz Photography, who prepared the photographic documentation. The HABS documentation was completed for the General Services Administration.

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

### SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

INCINERATOR (Building 123)  
St. Elizabeths West Campus  
Ash Street SE  
Washington, D.C.

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*Figure 1. Incinerator in 2003. Source: GSA archives, image DC0147SE0P001.*



*Figure 2. View of Incinerator, May 22, 1958. Source: St. Elizabeth Hospital Health Science Library archive.*