

Mass. failed to properly preserve records for thousands of former residents at state-run institutions, report says

By **Jason Laughlin** Globe Staff, Updated June 3, 2025, 5:00 a.m.



David Scott has been searching for years for records about his brother, John, who died at the Fernald School 50 years ago. John had spina bifida and spent most of his life at the facility. David is among those cited in a new report detailing the state's failures to keep records from state hospitals. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

David Scott's recollection of his older brother has faded over some five decades, leaving him with little more than impressions.

He can picture an adolescent boy in a wheelchair, his legs atrophied by spina bifida. Just 5 at the time, Scott, now 59, recalls being nervous during the only visit he can remember to the [Walter E. Fernald Developmental Center](#), an infamous state home for disabled people in Waltham where his brother John spent his entire life; just days after John's birth, state officials determined his parents couldn't take care of him because, Scott said, they were poor and didn't own a car.

Scott was 7 when his brother died at age 18. Now, after a half-century and a long fight, Scott is learning more about his brother through the 100 or so pages of records he has pried from the state. He has also been able to identify his brother's final resting place: an unnamed grave at the cemetery for Fernald residents in Waltham.

"My parents never had a proper service for him," Scott said.



The MetFern Cemetery served the Metropolitan State Hospital and the Walter E. Fernald Developmental Center, with 310 burials from 1947 to 1979. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

John Scott was one of thousands of people institutionalized in state-run facilities whose stories are in danger of being obscured because Massachusetts has failed to properly

preserve their records, according to a [nearly 300-page report](#) commissioned by the state Legislature.

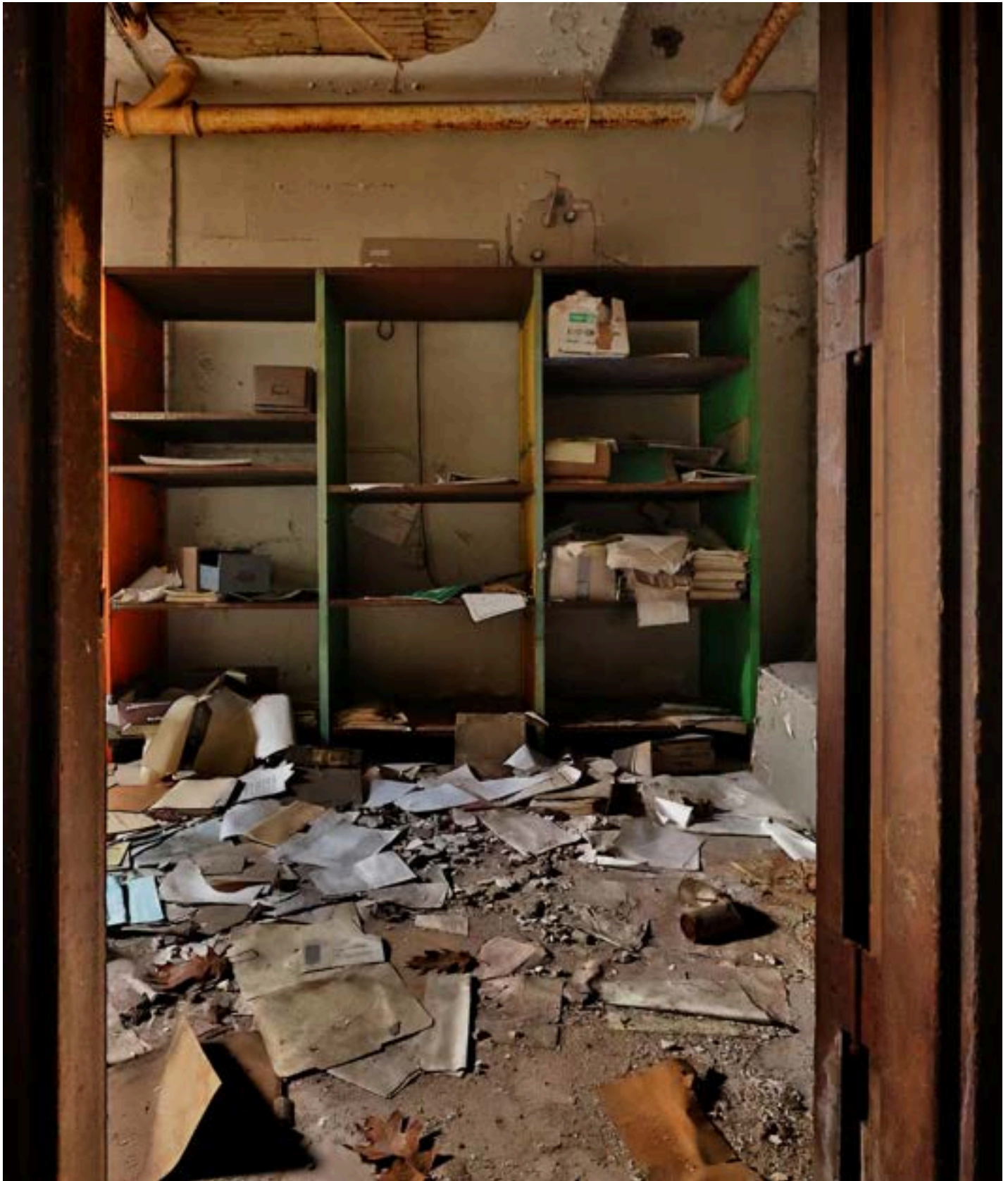
Roughly 10,000 former institution residents are interred in nameless graves in poorly maintained burial grounds; most graves at the time were marked with a number, and sometimes the letters C or P, for Catholic or Protestant. At the Fernald cemetery, John Scott is among 298 people in unnamed graves, his brother said.

The state once operated two dozen schools, hospitals, and other residential facilities for people who were considered intellectually or mentally disabled according to 19th- and 20th-century medical standards. Many were notorious for squalid conditions; residents subjected to mistreatment, malnourishment, and abuse.

Today, only about a half-dozen state-run facilities remain; most closed between the 1990s and 2010s following the disclosure of those horrific conditions amid a philosophical shift to treating people with disabilities in their community.

The report urged Massachusetts to better care for and preserve the neglected institutional burial grounds and provide proper identification for the people interred there.

The state has records that link names to the numbers on grave markers. But that information isn't public, and a thicket of bureaucratic and legal obstacles often prevents family members from getting information about their relative's grave: They must prove they are the deceased's legally designated next of kin, said Alex Green, vice chair of the commission that authored the report and a lecturer at the Harvard Kennedy School on disability rights.



Assorted patient and employee records were left in Waverly Hall, in the Fernald's original administration building. BRYAN PARCIVAL

The commission also focused on abysmal record-keeping that makes it difficult for relatives and even former residents to obtain documents on the lives, treatment — and

mistreatment — of state institution residents. Millions of pages are kept by the Department of Mental Health, the Department of Developmental Services, and the state archives.

“They may not be aware of everything that they have and how to get a hold of it,” Green said. “It’s just scattered everywhere.”

A member of the archives staff helped write the report, and William F. Galvin, who oversees the archives as Massachusetts’ secretary of the commonwealth, said he supports making records easier to access while still respecting privacy concerns.

Other records have been found in decaying condition in abandoned state buildings; some of those were pilfered by trespassers, with a few even ending up for sale online.

Today, most of the former institutions are either unused, decrepit, or simply gone. The Globe reported last year on [reams of records](#) dumped at Fernald, and more recently, the opening of a recreation space there drew criticism from people who felt it was an inappropriate use of the site.



Aerial image of the Fernald School property in Waltham. DANIELLE PARHIZKARAN/GLOBE STAFF

For its part, the commission recommended a museum, memorials, and education to preserve the experiences of institutions' residents.

There are 27 burial grounds associated with the state institutions, but only a third of them are restored and maintained. Contributing to their decline, the commission found, was a lack of leadership and dedicated funding. The commission called for a perpetual care fund to support upkeep.

The report was compiled over two years by a panel of 17 members, many of whom have some form of disability. Some, like Reggie Clark, 71, lived in state institutions. He is hopeful the report can spur action to make records easier to obtain.

"I think if you were me, you'd want to know why things happened," said Clark, who lived at Fernald from early childhood to 1969.



Reggie Clark was a patient at the Fernald School in the 60's. LANE TURNER

The Massachusetts institutions became notorious dumping grounds, not just for people with disabilities, but for some who were poor or abandoned. Abuse and neglect were commonplace. Clark recalled being put in a solitary room if he didn't make the beds of 24 patients every day.

Pat Vitkus's husband, Donald, was a resident of the Belchertown State School from the age of 6 to 18 after being left there by a foster family. When he died in 2018, at 75, his family honored his request to be interred alongside his "brothers and sisters" at the school's cemetery. When he lived there, a low IQ score got him labeled a "moron," once a [diagnostic term](#) with links to eugenics for a person with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities.

"He fought his whole life to prove he was not a moron, which he never was," his wife said.

In the 1940s and 1950s, children at Fernald were subjected to an unethical Massachusetts Institute of Technology [experiment](#) that tracked the path of nutrients through their bodies by adding radioactive material to Quaker oatmeal.



Quarters at the Fernald School in 1962, showing the narrow spaces between beds. BOB DEAN/GLOBE STAFF/FILE 1962

The children involved received a \$1.85 million settlement from MIT and Quaker Oats.

Fernald closed in 2014.

Though President Bill Clinton [issued an apology](#) in 1995 for the MIT experiments, Massachusetts' government has never formally apologized for conditions at the state institutions. The commission wants Governor Maura Healey to issue one. It also urged the state to take steps to recover records that should be archived but are not in its custody.

A spokesperson for the administration did not answer whether the governor would issue that apology, though issued a statement that acknowledged Massachusetts' legacy of institutionalization as "tragic and deeply disturbing."

"Over the past few years, we've redoubled our efforts to work with families, advocates, and others to improve access to records and honor the memories of those who resided at state institutions," spokesperson Caroline Whitehouse said.

Two state agencies have worked to make an inventory of all records in their possession, Whitehouse added, including those in now vacant former institutions, and are working with families to make it easier to access records.

Under consideration in the Legislature now is [a bill](#) that would make records from state institutions public after 75 years if those documents are in the custody of the state archives.

"If we lose sight of these stories people are going to grope their way toward reinstitutionalization," said state Senator Mike Barrett, a Lexington Democrat and sponsor of the legislation.



John Scott with his father, James Scott, outside the Walter E. Fernald Developmental Center. John died as a teenager at the institution. Now his brother, David, is seeking records in an effort to understand his older brother's life.

Through records he's obtained so far, Scott discovered his brother, John, had a sense of humor and flirted with girls. Among the most shocking documents: a teacher's report that said John, then a teenager, had the capacity to hold down a job. She urged Fernald to discharge John, or "he will lose his talents forever."

Father to a son with cerebral palsy, David Scott wants all the records detailing the lives of his brother and others at the state institutions made available, both to reveal who they were and to ensure people are never similarly warehoused again.

"I don't want to see history repeat itself," Scott said. "I want to see these children and adults with disabilities who can't care for themselves be treated better."