

"Striking for the Patients: Medical Civil Rights and Labor Equity at the South Carolina State Hospital (1964-1984)"

Bradford Pelletier, PhD

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Studies of medical civil rights tend to focus on physicians and/or community activists, but nurses and other medical laborers were also on the front lines. While African American medical workers are underrepresented in the historiography of American medicine, their experiences in psychiatry remain more so. This is despite their deep knowledge of the race, class, and environmental issues facing their patients, which made them uniquely suited for activism. Examining state-run psychiatric care at the South Carolina State Hospital between

1964 and 1984, this history forum demonstrates that, in the absence of a federal mechanism ensuring Civil Rights Act compliance, labor organizing among southern medical workers in the 1970s directly stemmed from the desegregation efforts of the 1960s. By illuminating how a predominantly female group of nurses, in conjunction with local activists, fought to liberate themselves and their patients through collective action, this presentation shows that medical labor organizing was as much about patient conditions as it was about worker equity.

Bradford Pelletier, PhD, is a Mellon Race, Place, and Equity Postdoctoral Research Associate in the History of Nursing and Healthcare at UVA. His research examines the struggle for medical civil rights during the 20th century, with a particular focus on the influence of African American activism on American psychiatric practices in the South. Dr. Pelletier earned a PhD in history from the City University of New York; a master's degree in European history and literature from Columbia University; a master's degree in American history from the College of Charleston; and a bachelor's degree in history and French from Roanoke College.

We hope you'll join us!