

He Died at a School for Disabled People. Decades Later, His Brother Sought Answers.

John Scott had a severe form of spina bifida. He was 18 days old when he was admitted to the Walter E. Fernald State School in Waltham, Mass.
Credit...Lucy Lu for The New York Times

John Scott was rarely spoken of in his family after he was placed in an institution. After a half-century, his youngest brother set out to learn who he was and what happened to him.

David Scott rose around 7 a.m. that day, as he did every day, and helped his son Michael get dressed and into his wheelchair. Then he found some free time to look at his phone.

It was March 2021. Sitting on his bed in Brockton, Mass., he typed in a search for the “Fernald school,” the state school for disabled people where his oldest brother, John, had lived and died decades earlier.

John’s name had rarely been spoken of in the Scotts’ household. To Mr. Scott, he was more of a specter than a brother. Now retired, Mr. Scott had questions, and time to look for answers.

He tapped on a link. Someone had listed the names of a few hundred people buried in unmarked graves near the Fernald campus. Mr. Scott swiped through the roster.

Ralph R. O’Connell. Gertrude Willwerth.

His fingers stilled. John Scott. C-154.

Finally, he knew where John was. Now he needed to know *who* he was. It would take three years, the generous help of a local historian and a personal appeal to the governor to find out.

Surrendering John

John Scott was paralyzed in both legs when he was born in June 1955. He had a severe form of spina bifida, a condition in which the spine and the spinal cord don’t form properly. At 18 days old, he was admitted to the Walter E. Fernald State School in Waltham, Mass.

The Fernald, as many locals refer to it, was one of hundreds of public institutions across the country for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. At their peak in the mid-20th century, these institutions held hundreds of thousands of people, some all but forgotten by their families. After reports of widespread abuses and an outcry from disability rights advocates, most of them were shuttered.

Image



The Fernald State School. John was living there when he died in 1973. He was 17. In Massachusetts alone, a special commission estimated there were at least 10,000 unmarked graves for people who had been in institutions like the Fernald.

Mr. Scott is 59. The youngest of seven children, he doesn't know whether his parents, now deceased, wanted to give up their firstborn child. At that time, it was common for doctors to pressure, or even force, parents to send their disabled children to institutions. Mr. Scott's parents, who were not highly educated, lived on government assistance and did not own a car, may not have known how to fight for John.

Looking back, Mr. Scott believes his parents were traumatized by losing not just one but two young children. Their second child, Cathy, was born with spina bifida one year after John, but she stayed at home with them and died at 13 months.

Growing up, David visited John once or twice at the Fernald, when a relative with a car was in town, but he does not remember anything about him. He said his siblings had a few faint memories of John but never got to know him because he was so young when he went to the Fernald.

In 1973, John died at the school. He was only 17; David was 7. He does not remember going to a funeral.

When David turned 14, his father died. Overcome with grief, he resolved not to say anything to his mother that could further upset her. She died in 2000.

As an adult, Mr. Scott stayed busy working 60-hour weeks as a garbage collector and raising his own family. John was rarely in the front of his mind.

That changed in 2001, when his youngest son, Michael, was born with cerebral palsy. When Mr. Scott heard the diagnosis, his first thought was of John. "Maybe this is God's calling for me," he surmised. He saw Michael's birth as a second chance for a family that once handed a child to the state.



David Scott with his son Michael at their home in Brockton, Mass. Michael's birth instilled new curiosity in Mr. Scott about his brother John.

After splitting with Michael's mother when Michael was little, Mr. Scott took custody of him and his two other sons. He resolved to give Michael the life he believed John never had. He moved into a single-story house and bought an accessible van. Michael lived at home, attended public school and went to summer camp. He loved watching sports and playing video games with his friends.

In time, Mr. Scott became increasingly interested in John and he Fernald. When he saw his brother's name online that morning in 2021, he immediately reached out to the person who posted the list of graves.

A Cemetery in Town

Alex Green, who owned a bookstore in Waltham and now teaches at the Harvard Kennedy School, became interested in the history of the Fernald after customers told him about a nearby cemetery, just up the road and through the woods. They said it was filled with hundreds of deceased from the school and the neighboring Metropolitan State Hospital, an asylum that housed people with mental illnesses.

The graves were marked with letters indicating the religion of the dead, and a number signifying the order in which they were buried.

Mr. Green began to take walks there, joined the city's historical commission and soon began his own personal research project on the Fernald. (He later helped create the commission that investigated the state institutions.) Through this work, he began teaching disability history at a high school near the cemetery.

He had an idea: What if he collaborated with students to identify the names of every person buried in the cemetery?

Strict state laws prohibited them from easily obtaining the names and medical records of those buried. But as word of their project spread through Waltham, a former Fernald employee asked him to meet her at a Dunkin' coffee shop. She handed him a handwritten register with the name of every person buried in the cemetery. Mr. Green and his students set to work.

Image



Alex Green going through slides that were found on the grounds of the Fernald. He was a bookstore owner when he learned of a cemetery near the institution and became interested in its history.

After they started posting information online, Mr. Green got a call from Mr. Scott. John's biography on the website, just a few sentences long, was already more information than the little Mr. Scott had.

"I can't believe you know so much about my brother," he told Mr. Green. "I don't know anything."

According to the scant records Mr. Green and the students collected, John was buried on March 20, 1973, five days after his death. He died of "congestion in his pulmonary artery" and "edema with insufficiency," or improper blood flow to his limbs and through his heart.

Many of the 296 people in the cemetery were immigrants, victims of institutional abuse or people whose families couldn't afford another burial option, Mr. Green explained.

Mr. Green told Mr. Scott that there was a chance the state archives held some of John's patient records. It might be difficult to get them, but Mr. Green would do everything he could to help.

In the meantime, he said, there was another way Mr. Scott could learn more. His students had interviewed a few former Fernald employees, and one teacher, Susan Weiner, spoke about John, who had been her student.



Susan Weiner, who taught at The Fernald, remembered John as “a ray of sunshine” but said all was not well at the school.

In conversations with Mr. Scott and an interview with The New York Times, she described John as “a little ray of sunshine” who was chatty and one of her brightest students. Ms. Weiner remembered an art lesson where the students created self-portraits. She could still picture John’s — he had drawn himself from the waist up.

She recalled attending a burial service for John with just a few other people present — a Catholic priest, a nurse who brought John home for Christmas, his physical therapist.

Mr. Scott told Mr. Green he would like to see John’s grave. Mr. Green said they could do better than that. He had arranged memorial services for other families of Fernald students. Why not have one for John?

A Proper Funeral Service

Mr. Scott pulled his white van into the parking lot on a sunny afternoon in May 2021, with Michael in the back. The dirt path leading to the cemetery was inaccessible for

Michael, so the state agency that maintained the grounds lifted his wheelchair into the back of a pickup truck. Mr. Scott, holding a bouquet of flowers in one hand and his Bible in the other, felt chills as he walked behind the truck.

A couple of dozen people — Mr. Scott's siblings and their families, Mr. Green and his students, Ms. Weiner and others from the community — were already gathered on the grass with red carnations in their hands.

Image



John's grave is marked C-154. The C is for Catholic.

Holding his breath, Mr. Scott said, he found his way to John's grave, a small concrete block sunk into the uneven ground. It was hidden by grass, and the etched "C-154" was fading. He pictured the place where his parents and his sister, Cathy, rested, with its beautiful, embellished gravestones, and felt almost sick.

"That's how much dignity they buried him with?" he recalls thinking. "That's all his life meant?"

John's memorial was a grand affair compared with what Mr. Scott imagined his first service was like. A Catholic priest presided, and someone played the cello.

But Mr. Scott was not at peace. The cemetery was on the bottom of a hill near a marsh, and most of the graves were filled with water. For all he knew, John's remains had long since been washed away.

There was much more he needed to know.

An Appeal to the Governor

Mr. Scott got nowhere at first. A lawyer for the state told him that the patient records from John's era at the Fernald had all been destroyed. Even if they existed, he was told, he would need to become the executor of his brother's estate to get them. It could be a difficult, expensive process.

Mr. Scott stayed up late into the night reading about how, in the 1940s and '50s, boys at the Fernald were unknowingly exposed to radiation in an experiment led by Harvard and MIT professors and sponsored by Quaker Oats. The research was meant to study how cereal affected the way the body absorbed minerals.

He also asked more questions of Ms. Weiner, the former teacher. She became more candid, telling Mr. Scott she hadn't believed her students were treated well.

Sometimes John came to class and "stunk to high heaven," she said, because his colostomy bag was overflowing and his clothes were soiled. Another student was sexually and physically abused by an attendant, she said, although that had not happened to John.

"Eighty percent of the stuff that I saw there, I wish I could erase from my mind," Mr. Scott said she told him.

Still hoping to find records, Mr. Scott hired a lawyer, chased down his siblings for signatures and raised money to help cover the costs. He waited and waited. Many of his emails were ignored.

Then, in early 2024, The Boston Globe [reported](#) that the Fernald had been vandalized. Thousands of private patient records were littered across the abandoned campus. Some were covered in graffiti or urine. Some were even popping up on eBay.

Mr. Scott was furious. He had spent thousands of dollars and countless months trying to get his brother's records from the Department of Developmental Services, and the same agency had proved unable to keep the documents safe. (In March 2024, the department [retrieved](#) most of those documents and placed them in storage).

He marched to the Boston Public Library, where Maura Healey, the governor of Massachusetts, was holding a public forum broadcast by a local radio station, GBH. Dressed in a red hooded sweatshirt, his hands clasped respectfully in front of him, [he told Ms. Healey about John](#). Michael was at his side.

"I am trying to gain the records for my brother," he began, his voice breaking. "I was 7 years old when he passed away."



Desperate to get records about John, Mr. Scott made a personal appeal to the governor of Massachusetts, Maura Healey. He soon got them.

“The atrocities that occurred at that school, what my parents had to endure by having him taken away, the whole thing, it’s really affected me,” he continued.

He implored Ms. Healey to release the records. “Please, please,” he begged. “For my brother and a lot of other families’ sake.”

Ms. Healey appeared to be touched.

“I want you to have closure,” she said. “I want you to have peace. Both in John’s memory and for your own self and your son.”

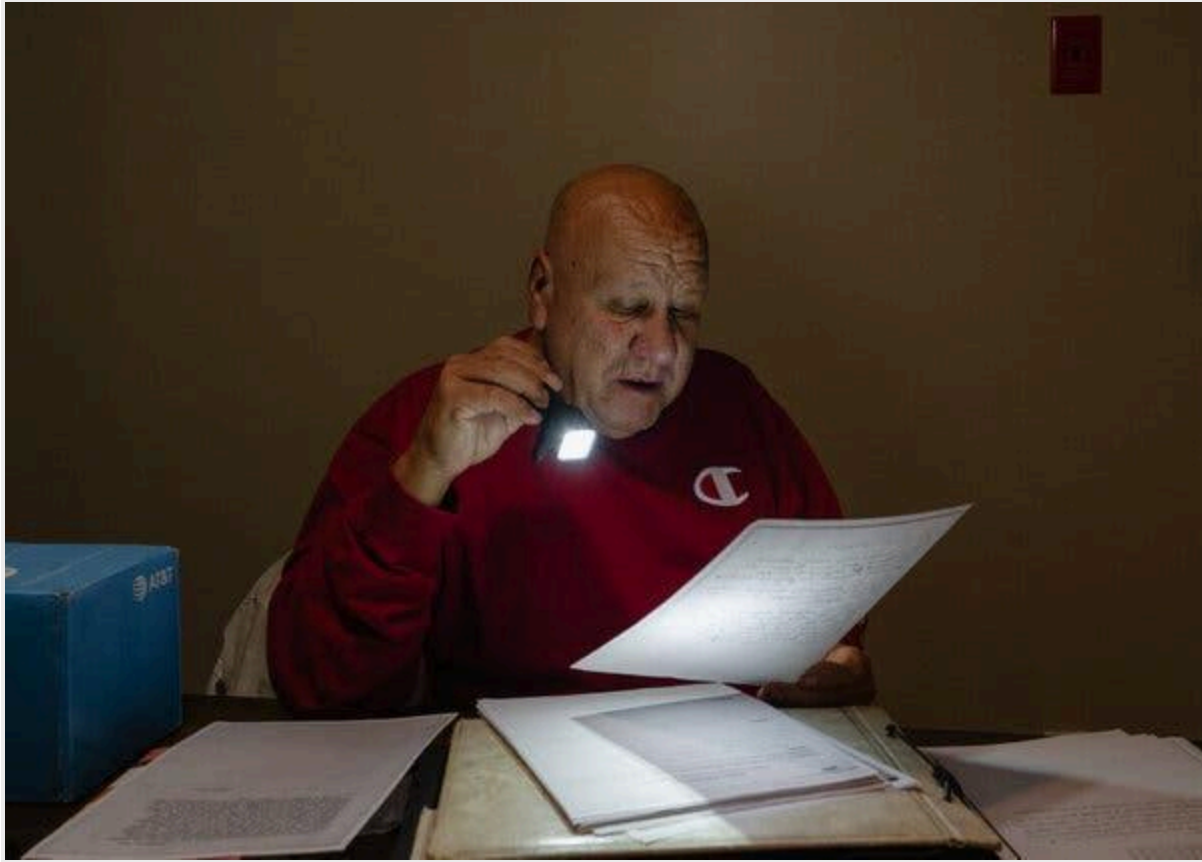
A few days later, he received an email from a lawyer with Developmental Services. John’s records existed, and Mr. Scott could have them.

‘John Discovered Girls This Year’

In April 2024, in a state office in Boston, Mr. Scott signed a form and someone handed him a rust-colored accordion folder. Just like that, John’s records were finally in his hands. Seventeen years of life laid out in 70 documents.

Mr. Scott, Mr. Green and Michael went to a cafe next door and pored over them. They were all out of order, but as Mr. Scott flipped through the pages, a faint picture of his brother started to emerge.

The first pages were math worksheets and spelling tests that showed what John’s handwriting looked like. Mr. Scott noticed some of the tests had perfect scores.



Mr. Scott examining John's file from his time at the Fernald. "He was a typical boy," Mr. Scott said.

A doctor's report detailed how John was speaking in full sentences at age 4 and knew the name of every employee in the building. "I have high hopes for his future," John's nursery teacher wrote in another letter.

But other records painted a picture of a mental decline, attributing the "depression" of his I.Q. score to "his deprived life circumstances."

"As long as he remains in this present environment his mental and social development will remain stunted," a 1967 progress report read. One teacher wrote that John should be transferred to another school before his skills were "lost completely."

John had health problems that included a severe kidney infection and a deep, open sore on his left knee, the records showed. Mr. Scott tried to piece together how those conditions might have contributed to his death.

There was also a neurological report from 1967, when John was about 12.

“He does not know where he was born,” it said. “He knows that his mother’s name is Mrs. Scott; however, he does not know her first name. He knows that he has three brothers and one sister. He does not know their names.”

Mr. Scott felt guilty reading that. And it broke his heart to see a note saying, “John discovered girls this year and can be quite a flirt.”

“My brother could have had a relationship,” Mr. Scott said. “He was a typical boy.”

Another note said John could catch and throw a ball well. Mr. Scott thought of Michael, who enjoys playing baseball, and imagined his brother and son playing catch in the backyard.

Sometimes he thinks of moving Michael to a group home or residential care facility because he is tiring as he gets older and knows he won’t be around forever. But he always comes back to John.

“I can’t,” he said. “Not after what happened to my brother.”

Sonia A. Rao reports on disability issues as a member of the 2025-26 Times Fellowship class, a program for early-career journalists.

Sonia A. Rao

Reporter covering disability issues

I am eager to hear what you would like to read in The Times about America’s large and diverse disability community. What is our coverage missing? Do you have a personal story to share?



[Please send me your thoughts.](#)