

Tab 1

Asylums and Psychiatric Hospitals

Teaching Disability History Student Research Guide

A project of Keene State College and Emerging America

Overview

Today there is greater societal awareness and acceptance of people who experience mental illness than at any time in American history. Yet people with mental illness still face stigmas and misunderstanding.

In the 18th century, people with mental illnesses, like those with other disabilities, got basic care at home and in their communities. Cities began to set aside private wards in almshouses and hospitals for people with mental illness.

Early-nineteenth-century proponents of “moral treatment,” like [Dorothea Dix](#) believed that mental illness could be cured with kind treatment and a highly structured environment with fresh air, exercise and quiet. Asylums that implemented moral treatment ended harsh restraints and long periods of isolation which had been commonly used to manage behaviors of mentally ill individuals.

Yet such early asylums only treated a fraction of those with mental illness. In the 1840s, Dix investigated conditions at poor houses and prisons where most insane men and women were held. In 1843, her [Memorial to the Massachusetts Legislature](#) called successfully for treatment in a state asylum. In 1854, Congress passed Dix’s Land-Grant Bill for Indigent Insane Persons. However, President Franklin Pierce vetoed the bill.

By the late nineteenth century, state-run and private mental asylums expanded across the United States. Most were overcrowded and underfunded. Whistleblowers—patients, journalists and hospital workers—publicized the poor conditions of many



institutions. Clifford W. Beers, who experienced bipolar disorder, exposed the horrors of psychiatric hospitals in his 1908 book *A Mind That Found Itself* and co-founded the [National Mental Health Association](#), to improve conditions in

asylums and better understand social factors on mental health. A mental hygiene movement, which believed that mentally ill people were best treated with community services, not institutions.

During the early twentieth century, physicians also explored brain pathology as a cause of mental illness and treated patients with insulin and electric shock, psychosurgery ([lobotomies](#)), and different medications. Deinstitutionalization began in 1955 with the widespread introduction of chlorpromazine, which offered hopes of curing persistent and severe psychiatric symptoms, though over time patients and physicians became aware of negative effects. In 1955, there were 558,239 severely mentally ill patients in the nation’s public psychiatric hospitals. By 1994, this number had been reduced to 71,619.

Today, most psychiatric care is delivered through community services and outpatient clinics. Organizations like Mental Health America continue to support individuals with mental illness and to fight stigmas. In the US, [Mental Health Awareness Month](#) is celebrated every May.

Image: [Mental Hospital](#), 1953. Film by the University of Oklahoma. Library of Congress.

Guiding Questions

How has treatment of people with mental illness changed across the centuries? • How do those changes reflect changes in society's understanding of disability? • What motivated the founders of early asylums and treatment hospitals? • What has been the link between treatment of mental illness and schooling? • What was mental health care like before the disability rights movement? • How are mental health needs supported today? • What is sane? What is insane? • How have people with mental illness become civic advocates?

Topic Ideas

Investigate the story of advocates or asylums/psychiatric hospitals in your state or nationwide. Focus on how views of mental health have changed. Trace a change in the experiences of persons with mental illness. Compare exposés of abuse and neglect at institutions holding people with psychiatric disabilities, starting with the work of Dorothea Dix. Examine the campaigns to reform or to close public asylums and hospitals.

Selected Digital Collections of Primary Sources

- [Asylums: Topics in Chronicling America](#) - [Search Strategies & Selected Articles](#). Library of Congress.
- Key word search the [Disability History Museum](#). The DHM has Isaac H. Hunt's [Astounding Disclosures! Three Years In A Mad House](#), a 1851 exposé of the Maine State Hospital, [Senate Debates On The Land-Grant Bill For Indigent Insane Persons](#), February 21, 1854, and Frank L. Wright, Jr's [Out Of Sight, Out Of Mind](#) (1947), which was published by the National Mental Health Foundation.
- Nationwide institutional reports in [The Asylum Reports Collection](#), 1834-1967, University of Akron
- [Honoring the Dead: A Digital Archive of the Insane Indian Asylum](#), Canton, South Dakota, 1903-1934.
- Albert Maisel's [Bedlam 1946](#), which exposed conditions at state hospitals.
- [Only Human](#) (1971) film by the National Association for Mental Health (U.S.) aired on more than 150 television stations, to improve public understanding and acceptance of people with mental illness.
- [National Library of Medicine Digital Collections](#).
- State and local historical societies. Search holdings related to local psychiatric hospitals and asylums.

Secondary Historical Resources

- D'Antonio, Patricia. [History of Psychiatric Hospitals](#). *Nursing, History, and Health Care* website. (2011) Nursing Department, University of Pennsylvania.
- Frontline, The New Asylums [documentary](#) (55 min.), [website](#), and Special Report: ["Deinstitutionalization: A Psychiatric Titanic."](#) (2005). PBS.
- [Government Hospital for Insane Soldiers](#), online exhibit How the Civil War Transformed Disability, Reform to Equal Rights K-12 Curriculum. Emerging America.
- Paranick, Amber. ["Behind Asylum Bars:" Nellie Bly Reporting from Blackwell's Island](#). (November 8, 2022), Library of Congress blog.
- PBS Online, People and Discoveries Database, [Drug for treating schizophrenia identified 1952](#). [Antidepressant Prozac introduced 1987](#). (1998). WGBH.
- Rothschild, Dagmar. [The Past, Present, and Future of Mental Health Treatments in Six Retro Report Videos](#). (April 16, 2024). Retro Report. Essays and videos related to mental health and treatment.
- Trent, James W. Jr., ["Moral Treatment,"](#) Disability History Museum.
- Walker, David Edward. ["A Living Burial": Inside the Hiawatha Asylum for Insane Indians](#). (November 9, 2015) ICT News.

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Search Terms

Mental health, mental hygiene, lunatic asylum, insane asylum, psychiatry, psychiatric hospital, feeble-minded, insane. (Many historical terms for disabled people are offensive today. Use them with great care and respect.)

Glossary

Moral treatment = perspective that a highly structured and peaceful environment would help to facilitate a cure for mental illness; Deinstitutionalization: process of closing public psychiatric hospitals that began in the 1950s; Psychiatric drugs = medication that treats mental illness by interacting with brain chemistry.

Bibliography

- “The Struggle for Disability Rights,” National History Day 2026 [Theme Book](#).
- Cahalan, Susannah. *The Great Pretender: The Undercover Mission That Changed Our Understanding of Madness*. Grand Central Publishing, 2019.
- Carroll, Dillon. *Invisible Wounds: Mental Illness and Civil War Soldiers*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2021.
- Summers, Martin Anthony. *Madness in the City of Magnificent Intentions : A History of Race and Mental Illness in the Nation's Capital*. Oxford University Press, 2019.
- Gonaver, Wendy, and ProQuest (Firm). 2019. *The Peculiar Institution and the Making of Modern Psychiatry, 1840-1880*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- [ER&M 332: Cultural and Racial History of Mental Health: Primary Sources beyond Yale](#).

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