

“Lunacy and Asylums: Mental Health in the 19th Century”

Was an ancestor committed to an asylum? Was someone enumerated as ‘imbecile or incompetent’ on a census? Did soldiers suffer PTSD? Who was committed and why? Are there records you can access? Learn about mental health treatment in the 1800s.

- I. History of mental health treatment in 19th century
 - a. Lunacy – “intermittent insanity once believed to be related to phases of the moon” (Merriam Webster dictionary)
 - b. Religious view – satanic possession
 - c. First asylum in US in late 1700s – custodial, no treatment
 - d. Friends Asylum – 1817 in Philadelphia, focus on healthy life
 - e. Private or public?
 - f. Phillippe Pinel (early 1800s) and Dorothea Dix (mid 1800s) seen as reformers; push for humane treatment in asylum
 - g. Located far from others “put away”

- II. Causes for being committed
 - a. Main diagnoses – melancholia, mania, dementia
 - b. Women’s reasons for commitment – usually depression and anxiety
 - c. Suicidal
 - d. Generally committed against one’s will
 - e. Soldiers and war (trauma) – today’s PTSD

- III. Treatment in 19th century
 - a. Disorders treated differently
 - b. Leeching – suck out “bad blood”
 - c. Medications

- d. Hot baths or ice baths
 - e. Confinement
- IV. Finding records
- a. Location - Where committed – differing state record access
 - b. Court records
 - c. Censuses of inmates
 - d. Special census – “defective”
 - e. Death records – die at asylum? Burial at asylum cemetery or in nearby town?
 - f. Newspapers – behavior, commitment, suicide; obituary
 - g. Manuscripts – by staff and by those institutionalized
- V. Privacy and access to records
- a. Direct descendant may be able to get access through court

Resources

DeYoung, Mary. *Madness: An American History of Mental Illness and Its Treatment*. Jefferson (NC): McFarland and Company, 2010.

Jansson, Asa. *From Melancholia to Depression: Disordered Mood in Nineteenth Century Psychiatry*. McMillian, 2021 (reprint)

Torrey, E Fuller. *American Psychosis*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Whitaker, Robert. *Mad in America*. New York: Perseus Publishing, 2002

Ziff, Katherine. *Asylum on the Hill: History of a Healing Landscape*, Miami: Ohio University Press, 2018.