

Women and the Insane Asylum

When researching our women ancestors, one place is often overlooked: the insane asylum. Some of the reasons our grandmothers were institutionalized are quite unbelievable. In the early 1800's wives and daughters were often committed for not being obedient enough to their husbands or fathers. Women were expected to be homemakers and not much was given to their education. If a woman spoke out and went against the "norm" she could be committed. When children were committed, oftentimes the families would tell others they had died.

This is confusing, because they may even have published an obituary, yet they were much alive at the asylum. If they were released and moved on, the researcher would find them alive years later, even though their death had been pronounced years earlier! Some children were committed for unwanted pregnancies, disobedience or illness such as Down's Syndrome or Autism.

I first became aware of this a couple of years ago. I was visiting a court house and noticed the term "lunacy" on a lot of the women's forms. I asked the court aide about this. She showed me where a woman could be quite often divorced for reasons of lunacy. Her husband would put her in the insane asylum and then file for divorce. A few months later, his marriage records to a younger bride usually showed up. This was very sad for this woman committed, who did nothing but grow older. All the years of being a wife and mother were not appreciated. She was just sent to the insane asylum. I found several cases where this appeared to have happened. I was told this was very common in the early 1800's.

Other reasons to be "put away", were depression, alcoholism, just being a little different from the norm, and even going through menopause! Doctors just did not know how to deal with mental issues and the result was to put their patients in the asylum. I am sure the women who were sane had a hard time. They were put in the midst of the ill and treated as if they were there for the same problems. These women were locked up and forgotten by their loved ones. The fathers/husbands often forbid the family members to visit. It was as if they had died. Most of them did stay at the insane asylums until their death.

Some of these asylums were built next to, or a part of, the prison system. This was to help cut back costs of care, food and facilities. Some of the well patients were at times able to work the local farms for a very low wage. Patient labor laws soon stopped this practice. The asylums usually provided only the basic necessities of life. Food was poor, cleanliness was not stressed and the rooms were often very cold. Diseases were quick to spread among the asylums.

Where can we go to try to locate our ancestors who may have been committed? Some states have posted their patient listings for the mentally ill on the genealogy county sites. The US census has a place on some of their census, example 1850, that has a place to mark if deaf, dumb or insane. The probate section may carry Lunacy Record Books at the county courthouses. Some wills will declare if someone is insane or having lunacy; thus the person's Will declared to care for the person committed or does not include them in their estate.

While sane or insane, using the records of lunacy may help us locate our women ancestors. Ask questions at your particular courthouse where these records may be kept. If someone just seems to have disappeared, they may have just been "sent away"!

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