

Trouble in the Family: Researching Massachusetts Institutions for the Poor, Mentally Ill, Chronically Ill, and Disabled, Part 2

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Editor's Note: This is the second part of Ann Lainhart's essay on Massachusetts institutions. Part one was published on NewEnglandAncestors.org in January 2000, and an abbreviated version appeared in the Winter 2002 version of New England Ancestors magazine. Follow [this link](#) to start reading from the beginning of part one.

The Tewksbury Asylum for Chronic Insane kept records from 1866 to 1907, which are available at the Massachusetts State Archives or through the Family History Library. These registers include the patient's name, age, sex, civil condition (single or married), birthplace, residence, transferred from (usually from the almshouse), date of transfer, how supported by state or town, date of discharge, how discharged (usually by death), and remarks. When the asylum opened on October 1, 1866, thirteen of the first thirty-five patients admitted were males, twenty-two were females, and they ranged in age from fourteen to fifty-five (two had no age recorded). Nineteen of the patients were born in Ireland, while others were born in England, France, Scotland, Charlestown, Lynn, Cape Breton, Boston, and Lowell (four had no birthplace recorded). Thirty patients died while at the asylum, three lived into the twentieth century, and one was transferred to the Worcester Asylum.

The available records of the state almshouse at Monson contain admission records and case histories from 1854 to 1882. The State Primary School at Monson contain case histories from 1864 to 1895; boarding out registers from 1883 to 1892; placement registers from 1874 to 1890; hospital registers from 1854 to 1895; indenture agreements from 1854 to 1890; death registers from 1854 to 1895; birth registers from 1854 to 1885; and registers of weekly admissions and discharges from 1854 to 1895. This example from Great Barrington shows the basic form used by towns throughout Massachusetts when sending people to the Monson almshouse:

September 13, 1871, The Superintendent of State Almshouse, at Monson, Will please admit the following person from Great Barrington; name, Angeline Garrison, age 46, birthplace Hillsdale in State of New York, Came into State 1868, last time; this is signed by the overseers of the poor of Great Barrington.

Additional questions on this form show that Angeline's parents were Henry and Mary (Makeley) Garrison, born in New York; the father died in Austerlitz, New York, and the mother lives in Albany, New York; her grandfather was Jacob Makeley of Hillsdale.

On September 26, 1871, Worcester sent three-and-one-half-year-old Alexander Benton, born in Rhode Island, son of Alexander Benton, to Monson. The back of the form reads:

This child was brought to Worcester by His Father who states that the mother is dead; he was born in one of the Southern States and served in the Rebel Army during the war, and is now in Fitchburg Jail under sentence of one Year for Assault with intent to murder; he married an Irish woman in Worcester, and afterwards informed her he had another wife in Rhode Island, and all he wanted for her was to take care of the child - which she now refuses to do.

The admission forms to the State Primary School at Monson are on letterhead of the "State Board of Lunacy and Charity, Department of In-Door Poor." The form letter continues as in this example: "To the Superintendent State

Primary School, Dear Sir: Please receive and provide for Mary Godfrey, committed to the custody of the Board by Police Court at Springfield, on the third day of September 1882, for the offence of Neglected." At the bottom are explanations of how the children came to be sent to the State school, in the manner of the following examples:

- Mary Godfrey, of Sprague St., W. Springfield. Born Sept. 10, 1877 in Springfield. Fa. John [dead], Mo. Ellen. This girl's father is dead and her mother in jail, Springfield, for drunkenness. She has been arrested several times for this offence. There are two other children, John about 14 years old, is in the Hampden County Truant school, Charles, about 15 years old is at work for the M.U.Tel. Co. in Springfield and is self supporting. After commitment of the mother, this girl had no home. She is bright and attractive and should be placed out.
- John J. Connors. Father Michael Connors died in 1878. Mother Betsey died in 1879, soon after adopted by Patrick & Rose Keegan. Has had a good home, but disposed to take things not his own. On Friday stole a watch chain, rings & ball from a store on E. Main St., Fall River.
- Harry Sheldon of Curtisville, Stockbridge. Born Mch. 1880 in Chatham, N.Y. Fa. Horatio N. - Mo. Maria (dead). This boy with his older brother was before the Court at Lee last Jan. 9 as neglected children, but father said he was going to remove to N.Y. Instead he moved to Stockbridge. He keeps house himself & works out on a farm and locks the children out of doors day times. They are little thieves. Have been implicated before. Sat. Oct. 5th they broke into the house of a Mr. Clapper and stole a number of small articles and did quite an amount of mischief. The father is an old man and is said to have been in jail several times. He has very little control over the boys.
- Irene T. Chapman, of Main St., Natick. Born April 1, 1877 in Cochituate. Father Charles K. Mother, Margaret. The parents of Irene are dead. Father died 1885, Mother 1884. Since their deaths she has been living most of the time with her maternal grandmother, Mrs. Catherine Martin, 299 North St., Boston. Mrs. Martin keeps a house of ill-fame and dance hall at that place. On Sept. 15th Irene ran away from there and went to her paternal grandmother, Mrs. Lucy Chapman in Natick where she has since resided. Irene has a very bad temper and when asked to do anything replies with vile and abusive language. Has thrown knives and dishes at her grandmother and torn up her bed clothes. Mrs. Chapman being an old lady was in constant fear and for that reason had her complained of.
- John C. Rochford, born Feb. 23, 1882, Alice J. Rochford, born Feb. 24, 1884, and Mary E. Rochford, born Aug. 23, 1885, all born in Springfield. Fa. Geo. J., Mo. Mary [dead]. Family have been aided a good deal. About a year ago the father got drunk and smashed the furniture and turned his wife out of doors, though since there has been but little trouble. The mother died Dec. 7th and the children were found last Wednesday ragged and dirty at the home of their grandmother who says she can find places for them but could not show that she had found any suitable persons willing to take them.

The school made indenture agreements that placed many children with families throughout New England; sample indentures show placements in Massachusetts as well as Providence, Rhode Island; Hillsborough, New Hampshire; East Windsor, Connecticut; and a rare placement in Woodsdale, Butler County, Ohio. The boys were in most cases to learn agriculture or farming and the girls housekeeping. At the end of their indenture, when the boys were twenty-one and the girls were eighteen, they were to be given a certain sum of money - usually \$50 but sometimes as high as \$100 - two suits of clothing, one for the Sabbath and one for working days, and sometimes a Bible.

The registers of births contain records of many illegitimate children, but in most cases the names of both parents are given.

The registers of deaths contain the name of the deceased, age, death date, cause of death, parent's names, sex, and birthplace.

The records of the hospital at the State Primary School contain the name of the patient, age, birthplace, whether single or married, occupation, previous health, habits, color, date of admission, disease, result (whether they got well or died), and remarks. For example:

- Catherine O'Donnell, 3 1/2 months, born Boston, white, admitted 25 July, Diarrhea, died 28 July, mother had syphilis
- Primus Johnson, 100, born Connecticut, married, black, admitted 23 July, Diarrhea, got better
- John P. Hillman, 40, born New York, married, laborer, previous health good, habits bad, white, admitted 24 August, Fracture skull, comatose, died, injured on Railroad.

Monson was also home to the Hospital for Epileptics. The records contain the name of the patient, whether sane or insane, age, sex, civil condition, birthplace, residence, occupation, how committed, committed from, date of commission, how supported (by state, town, or private), date of discharge, how removed, and remarks. For example:

- Warren Edward Whitehill, sane, 16, male, single, born New Jersey, residence Springfield, no occupation, committed by District Court at Salem, 12 August 1898, supported by the town, died 29 May 1905 of pulmonary tuberculosis
- George Mullin, insane, 13, male, single, born Boston, residence Holyoke, no occupation, admitted from Northampton Hospital 25 February 1902, supported by the town, died 30 October 1905 from exhaustion from epilepsy.

At Rutland, the State Sanatorium kept records from 1898 to 1918, also available at the Massachusetts State Archives or through the Family History Library. The detailed patient registers contain the date of admission, name and address of patient, sex, age, married or single, religion, occupation, place of business, dependents, trial, date of discharge, who is paying for the hospital, family physician, friends, place and date of birth, and mother's and father's names and places of birth. Other registers in the sanatorium also included length of stay and result.

- On 30 January 1900 Chas. T. Crook of Attleboro was admitted; he was male, 16, single, Protestant, worked in a jewelry shop, dependent was his father, send bill to father, physician was Dr. A.A. Amsden of Attleboro, friends were his father A.W. Crook of Attleboro and his mother S.W. Crook of Plainville; he was discharged on 5 May 1900 after a stay of 96 days but was not improved, in fact worse.
- On 1 May 1905 Frederick E. Marsh of 380 Court St., Ware was admitted; he was male, 48, married, Protestant, a self-employed silver plater, had a wife and 4 children as dependants; he was discharged 31 August 1905; he was paying for his stay himself; his physician was Dr. Pearson of Ware; his friends were his wife Mrs. Frederick Marsh Mr. E.N. Lyman of Ware; he was born at Ware on 18 September 1856 to Wm. C. Marsh born Hardwick and Delia B. [Comsear?] born Ware.

There are three institutions in Boston for which records are available: the Boston Insane Hospital or Lunatic Hospital (records available from 1855 to 1907 at MSA or through FHL); the Hospital at Rainsford Island (1854-1866); and the Massachusetts School for Idiotic and Feeble-minded Youth (1864-1909). All records can be accessed at MSA or through the FHL. The registers of the Boston Insane Hospital contain the name of the patient, age, sex, civil condition, birthplace, residence, committed by, committed from, committed on, discharged on, removed by, and remarks. For example:

- Wm. E. Foley, age 30, male, born Boston, residence Boston, committed on 7 Jan. 1880, discharged on 23 Feb. 1911, removed by the Board of Insanity to Medfield Hospital
- Maria F. Dennis, age 69, female, widow, born New Hampshire, residence Boston, admitted by probate court 7 Dec. 1903, died 3 Jan. 1904 from exhaustion of Melancholia

The registers of the Hospital at Rainsford Island contain the name of the patient, age, birthplace, marital status, occupation, previous health, habits, color, date of admission, disease, duration before admission, condition, result, departure, and remarks. Many of the patients were recent immigrants, as in the following examples:

- John Kerrigan, age 22, born Ireland, married, tailor, poor health, irregular habits, admitted 19 August 1854, Phthises for 1 year, very feeble, not improved, departed 13 October 1854, sent to Ireland
- Mary Manning, age 24, born Ireland, married, housewife, good health, admitted 3 April 1855, Parturition for 4 hours, favorable condition, had child 4 April 1855

The hospital also took in Civil War soldiers:

- Sergt. Wm. Griffen, late of Co. I, 2nd N.H. Vols., Fever and Ague, married to Abigail Brown at R.I. Hospital
- Wm. Parker late of Co. L., 1st Ky. Arty., Loss of Leg, Died August 8th 1865.

Finally, registers were kept by the Massachusetts Commission on Mental Diseases of patients in private hospitals from 1843 to 1917. In the register that covers from 1884 to 1914 there are listed forty-two private asylums or doctors licensed to take mental patients. Information contained includes the name of the patient, age, sex, civil condition, birthplace, residence, committed by, committed from, committed on, discharged on, removed by, and remarks. The residences of the patients are from all over New England and beyond.

The stories found in these case histories, and to a lesser degree in the registers, provide not only a glimpse into the life of a particular individual, but also a window onto how the state took care of the poor, mentally ill, chronically ill, and disabled in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.