

Trouble in the Family: Researching Massachusetts Institutions for the Poor, Mentally Ill, Chronically Ill, and Disabled - Part 1

By Ann S. Lainhart

In my book [Digging For Genealogical Treasure in New England Town Records](#), I spent considerable space describing how the towns took care of their poor, disabled, or ill inhabitants. Into the twentieth century each town was responsible for the care of their "recognized inhabitants"; these included the needy people born to recognized inhabitants, the women who married recognized inhabitants, or those who lived in a town and paid taxes for a certain number of years. But by the nineteenth century there were a growing number of people, especially in the cities, who had no connection to any particular town, so state resources and some private organizations were formed to handle those who could not take care of themselves.

All of the records mentioned in this article are available at the [Massachusetts State Archives](#) and on microfilm through the [Family History Library](#). All of the institutions kept various kinds of registers that recorded basic information about the patients or inmates, such as name, age, town of residence, why they were in the institutions, admission and dismissal dates, etc. At the end of this article I will list those institutions that kept these registers, but first I want to discuss those institutions that recorded case histories - because such histories yield the most useful information.

In the course of doing research, you may find from family papers that a kinsman spent some time at one of these institutions. You may find a family member living in one of these institutions in a state or federal census, or you may find on a death certificate that your kinsman died at one of these institutions. Most of the registers and records of case histories that I examined were indexed either in the front or the back of the volume.

Several years ago while transcribing the 1855 and 1865 state censuses of Massachusetts, I discovered a man named Nothing Particular who was an inmate at the Ipswich Insane Asylum in 1855, and at the Tewksbury State Almshouse in 1865. I was not completely certain that these two entries referred to the same man until I consulted the register of weekly admissions and discharges at the almshouse. There it was reported that Nothing Particular, who was transferred to the almshouse from the Ipswich Insane Asylum on March 31, 1857, died September 7, 1895, at age 73.

One of the earliest of these organizations was the Boston Female Asylum, founded and run by society women in Boston. The available records cover 1800 to 1867. Many mothers and fathers in Boston who could not take care of their daughters voluntarily placed them in the Female Asylum. In order to do so, they were required to sign the following statement that gave up all their rights to these daughters:

We the Subscribers solicitors that our children should receive the benefits and advantages of the Boston Female Asylum, and the Board of Managers being willing to receive and provide for, and also place them out in virtuous Families untill the age of Eighteen years, Agreeable to the rules and regulations of the Society, provided we do severally relinquish our children to them, we do hereby promise not to interfere on the management of them in any respect whatever, nor visit them without their consent. And in consideration of their benevolence in the receiving and providing for them, we do relinquish all right and claim to them and their services, untill they shall arrive to Eighteen years of age. And severally engage that we will not ask or receive any compensation for the same, nor take them from, or induce to leave the Families where they may be placed by the Board of managers of the Asylum.

The registers of the children admitted to the Female Asylum record the name of the child, age or birth date, date of

admission, and when and where the child was placed. Some children were returned to their families, but most were placed with families both in Boston and outside the city.

Examples:

- Lucretia Cochran was admitted to the Female Asylum in October 1853 and turned over to her mother in April 1854
- Catharine Hall was admitted in March 1827, and was placed with her grandmother, Mrs. Mary Page, on October 27, 1841
- Mary Jane and Elizabeth Kelley, admitted in April 1844, were "Permitted to go under the care of Patric Nolan to their father James Kelley of Dublin Ireland - who sent for them" in March 1846.
- Clara Kingsbury was admitted in August 1860 and placed out in October 1864 with Mr. and Mrs. B. Howard of West Bridgewater
- Susan Rowson was admitted October 26, 1813 and placed out on January 21, 1821 with Mr. and Mrs. Cox of Portland, Maine
- Sarah McIntire was admitted July 31, 1810 and placed out in June 1816 with Eliphalet and Mary Dickenson of Deerfield.

Some siblings were split up, as in these examples:

- Arria Sargent Renott and Jane Flagg Renott, who were admitted on March 31, 1812. Arria was placed out in September 1815 with Seth and Ann Terry of Hartford, Connecticut, while Jane was placed out on March 30, 1819 with Rev. S. Swift and his wife of Nantucket.
- Jane Elizabeth King and Helen Josephine King were admitted in March 1857. Jane was placed out in June 1861 with Mr. & Mrs. N. Smith Jr. of Woodbury, Connecticut, while her sister Helen was returned to their mother in November 1862.

Inevitably, a few of the children died while in the asylum. Rosanna Kenney, who was six when she was admitted in August 1854, died January 21, 1857 of consumption. Grace McFarlane, who was three years old when admitted on January 24, 1804, died just a few months later on October 8. No cause of death is listed.

In the minutes of the Female Asylum meetings one will often find stories describing why children were placed in the institution. Here are several examples:

Mrs. May repeated the following representation of a woman from whose lips she had a few hours before received it. She was born in Tewksbury, left that place on her marriage, and has since resided in Boston; her husband some months since died at sea, leaving her entirely without means of support, with one child, and in daily expectation of giving birth to the infant which was now in her arms. Her parents were dead, nor had she any friends in her native town able to contribute to her relief. This statement was confirmed by the woman at whose house she had lived, and who joined in soliciting for her oldest child, a daughter five years old, admission into the Asylum. Adeline E. Nelson be admitted.

A child named Caroline Scholtz, was recommended to the notice of the Board...Her situation was thus represented by Mrs. M.L. Smith. Her parents had lived in very comfortable circumstances untill they became impoverished by the extreme intemperance and improvidence of her father. The exertions of her mother, on whom the care of his business and of their numerous family entirely devolved, were their only support. She died during the last winter, leaving seven children to poverty and

wretchedness. The charity of friends was exerted in their behalf, and the child for whom admission into the Asylum was not solicited, set to a relative, who herself in indigent circumstances, consented to keep her untill the next August, in consideration of receiving from her father some articles of old furniture as a compensation. At the expiration of the next month she would be thrown on the protection of a grandmother, who, at the advanced age of eighty two years, procured subsistence by keeping a small shop; and who already had the charge of two of these orphan children. These circumstances, and the strength and fervency of the expressions of gratitude, with which this aged and unfortunate woman received information of the probability of her grandchild's admittance into the Asylum, were a very powerful and efficient appeal to the feelings of those, who, unanimously acknowledging the claims of age and poverty of childhood and helplessness.

The mother of Selina Sargent died about two years since, leaving five children to the care of an indigent and intemperate father, who was utterly incapable of performing this duty. The three oldest girls were placed at service in respectable families; the fourth, a boy, is a wretched wanderer about the streets. Selina, the youngest, being, from her extreme youth, incapable of performing the service required in a situation like her sisters', remained with her father, exposed to all the hardships of poverty and all the contagion of vice. The house in which he lived was occupied by other boarders, of similar grade and character to his own. One apartment only was appropriated as the bed-room of the whole, and one bed contained the little Selina and her abandoned father. She has two aunts whose characters render their interposition on her behalf much more to be dreaded than wished. Her father is willing to give her up to this charity, and the yet uncontaminated child may now be saved from the destruction to which her present situation seems so inevitably to lead.

Mrs. Codman said she had on the preceding afternoon received the following account from a young woman whose very apparent wretchedness gave painful testimony to its truth. She has been left a widow with one child; had again married and again became a mother. An illness which prevented her husband from continuing his accustomed employment, brought its usual effect to those whose daily support depends on their daily labour. Unable to raise ten dollars for the payment of a debt he had contracted, he was threatened with imprisonment; to avoid this, though hardly recovered from sickness, he left his family and fled. His wife, deserted and in want, is now in daily expectation of giving birth to another child. For her oldest girl, the orphan child of her former husband, she seeks the protection of this society. The name of the woman is Brown, that of the child, Mary Grant.

The Committee reported that three children had been admitted. The first, Georgianna Conn, was the daughter of a poor widow who was going to support herself at service if a home could be given to her child. The second, Eliza Howe Smith, was brought by

her mother, an American woman. Her father had belonged to the Navy and had been lost at sea, leaving his widow with five little ones to care for. Her friends were unable to aid her in the support of all these children and she asked a place in the Asylum for her little girl. The third child, Sarah Alice Holbrook, was the daughter of a poor American widow with four children and no means of support. These circumstances being heard, it was Voted That the admission of these children is sanctioned by the Board.

Two little girls whose case had been mentioned at the last meeting, had been admitted. Their mother, Mrs. Kirk, had not heard from her husband since the battle of Gettysburg, and wished a home for the children whom she felt unable to support herself. The admission of Mary Parker and Maria May Kirk was approved by the Board.

State almshouses at Tewksbury and Monson began operation in the second half of the nineteenth century. The available records for the Tewksbury Almshouse include children's records from 1855 to 1869, inmate case histories from 1860 to 1896, and weekly returns of admissions and discharges from 1894 to 1918. People were sent there from across the state and, depending on when they were admitted, their case histories contain varying amounts of information as these examples show:

- James Carney, 26, from Boston 17 January 1868, born Ireland Co. Roscommon, laborer, landed in Boston 1 1/2 years ago per the "Delivan," there 6 months, then to Brookline 6 months, no relatives, in no other institution, frozen thumb, discharged 18 February 1868.
- Bridget and Sarah Mulhearn, 33 and 8, from Boston 18 January 1868, born in Ireland Co. Galway, husband Michael dead 2 years, landed Boston 18 years ago, there most of time since, no relatives but sister Mrs. Wm. Boyle in Amesbury - sister-in-law Mrs. Murphy 46 Athens St. South Boston, and Mrs. Rowley in 5th St. South Boston, no other relatives, in no other institution, sprained foot.
- William Thompson, 51, from Boston 29 January 1868, born St. Johnsbury VT, married wife dead, turner, went to Sharon VT when 3, there 14 years, then to Bridgeton VT where father died, enlisted 1842 in Albany in 7th Regt. Infantry served 11 years, enlisted 32d Mass. Co. I July 1862, lost eye at Antietam, then enlisted in 2d Vet. NY Cavalry, served 1 year, then to Hartford VT, came from Keene NH to Lynn 16 days ago, don't know how, wants to go to Keene, lived Attleboro 2 months before enlisting in 32d, in Boston before that, no relations, in no other institutions, bruised chest and face.
- Simeon Ford, colored, 30, from Charlestown 13 February 1868, born NY, single, laborer, came to MA from NY 2 years ago via O.C.&N.R.R., in state prison for horse stealing since, no relations in MA, mother Mrs. Frances Bird in NY, in no other institutions, well.
- Frank Silva, 5, from Boston 13 February 1868, born Boston, mother arrested, father off, sent from Little Wanderers Home.
- Mary Curtis, 18, from Boston 2 August 1867, born Deerfield, single, domestic, lived in Deerfield most of life, mother died when she was young, father Charles died 6 years last September in Deerfield, never owned property, don't know where born always lived in Deerfield, no relatives living, never in institution before, father of child Frank Steele, saw him last in Deerfield 8 months ago, he a hard drinker and gambler, left there now, sick soon, Grandfather Gibben - farmer, mother Lucinda Smith of South Hadley.

- Honora Sullivan, 35, from Boston 3 August 1867, born Ireland, married husband John, off 2 weeks, landed NY per "Wm. Tapicott," direct to Boston, 1 year to South Natick, then to South Natick 5 years, then to Boston since, husband never in service, no relatives, never in institution before, well, couldn't take care of family. [with her were] Margaret Sullivan, 10, born South Natick; Daniel, 8, born South Natick; Timothy, 7, born Boston; Michael, 15, born London, England; and Jeremiah, 12, born South Natick.

The children in the State Almshouse were often put to families throughout Massachusetts; the follow-up visits until they were of age (eighteen years old for girls and twenty-one for boys) can provide a glimpse of their lives. Margaret Donovan was admitted from Boxford August 9, 1860 at age ten, she had been born in Lowell. She was taken by William Stevens, Jr., of Marblehead in September 1860. A visit on November 20, 1867, to Stevens revealed that she had stayed with him for four years when he transferred her to his father William Stevens, Sr., where she had been about a year. She was reported to be " 'below par' in intellect, not capable of taking care of herself, untruthful & careless about her person, rather given to lewdness." On November 6, 1868, Margaret was returned to the Almshouse on account of mental disability. In January 1869 she was taken on trial by Henry E. Worcester of Tewksbury and a visit on March 9, 1869 found "Margaret happy & contented, likes her place well."

These records also contain the extraordinary story of George G. Leaverns, born in England, who came to Massachusetts in 1844 and was admitted from Lowell on January 10, 1856. He was taken by Mrs. Nathaniel Lowe of Tewksbury on June 24, 1856.

[emphasis in original] *A remarkable case of self education & perseverance under difficulties.* George was with the Lowes about 4 years - previous to his going there, while at the almshouse, had the *fingers of his left hand cut off* in a hay cutter; in the army, at *battle of Fredericksburg*, was shot in the *right arm which was amputated at the shoulder*; returned to Maine, after leaving hospital, *fitted himself for College; went to college, & is now holding high position as a teacher at Rochester N.Y.*

*Universal...*It appears that his family had originally occupied a good position in society, but the father died; hard times came upon them, the mother & boy had to go to the Almshouse; the mother died there, & on her death bed got a pledge from the boy that when out of the institution, he would so act all thru life so to gain an honorable name; well has George kept his pledge.

Not all of the children's stories turn out so well. Timothy Keenan was put out to William Babb of North Barrington, New Hampshire, in 1864. When representatives of the almshouse visited in August 1868, they were told that Timothy had been with Babb only three or four months when he was returned to Dr. McDaniel, who then put him out to George Ham of Stafford, New Hampshire. In September, the representative "on my way to Stafford to see Mr. Ham, met a gentleman...who told me that the boy was not there; had left about 2 years before & that it was a hard place for a child...Mr. Hamm is represented as being not a good master to send children to; he works them too hard & does not school them as he ought."