

Design Rationale

Summary:

The goal of my project is to frame an activity designed to teach beginning undergraduates the procedure of doing history by creating an online exhibit using primary sources. I have picked the topic of asylums or institutions for the disabled because there is a large amount of primary source material available and I think the topic will stimulate students' interest. At the same time, I wish to avoid sensationalism to reinforce the idea that the activity I am outlining is serious enough to be worthy of students' time and attention. I am looking to balance the creativity and imagination necessary to create a product of history with the seriousness that the subjects deserve and the work of history requires. As such I will be using mostly gray with purple and blue – used sparingly to emphasize important points. The site uses dark gray to white vertical gradient (hopefully underlying the point that we are seeking to illuminate the past without being painfully literate). Emphasis on the core concepts involved in doing history strikes me as a crucial goal. In reviewing RRCHNM Education Division projects like *Children and Youth in History* and *Making History in 1989*, I was struck by the excellent content, but also how the explanation for how to use that content was communicated in lengthy essays. My goal for my project is to communicate the main ideas succinctly and highlight these core principles via color and placement while at the same time providing the opportunity to delve further and learn more.

Color Palette:



#555555, RGB: 85, 85, 85



#cccccc, RGB: 204, 204, 204



#ffffff, RGB: 255, 255, 255



#eeeeee, RGB: 238, 238, 238



#999999, RGB: 153, 153, 153

Emphasis colors:



#890793, RGB: 137, 7, 147



#0000ef, RGB: 0, 0, 239

Typeface:



I chose the Google Web font Josefin Sans as my typeface for the logo. Josefin sans while rather simple and easy to read, still has enough of a stylistic quality that I hope reinforces the idea that history is at least partially constructed by historians. Further, to me Josefin Sans evokes an art deco design feel which is compatible with my early twentieth century time area of study. The logo was also influenced by looking at websites with similar subject matter. I really like this from an NPR site on disability history:



The colors did not work for me (the site is actually from 1998), but I wanted to keep the main title in bold with subtitle offset in a thinner weight font. I eventually settled on this:

LOOKING BEYOND GHOST STORIES
MAKING HISTORY IN THE ASYLUM

The color here is lighter than in the mockup only because I went with a darker background.

LOOKING BEYOND GHOST STORIES

DOING HISTORY IN ASYLUMS

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Danvers State Lunatic Asylum in 1893
(Wikimedia Commons)

While it does not receive coverage in U.S. history textbooks, the institutionalization of large numbers of disabled and mentally ill Americans nevertheless remains an important part of how people have historically responded to difference.

Many institutions began with the goal of treating individuals so that they could return to their communities. By the 1870s, however, this attitude became more pessimistic. Seen as easily led astray by criminals or as dangerous themselves, the disabled and mentally ill were committed to institutions for life.



Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas Island, Virgin Islands. An inmate of the insane asylum at the hospital.



The popular image of institutions and asylums most likely comes from movies and television where they are often presented as a place of horror. Many of these show the legacy of the different as dangerous although some also present the inmates as victims.

USING EVIDENCE TO DO HISTORY

This site helps students do basic historical research into asylums in America, learning about the skills historians use by using actual evidence from the past and creating a digital historical product.

Students will learn:

1. How to pose a historical question.
2. How to use evidence to address this question.
3. How to present their communicate their findings to a public audience.

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LOOKING BEYOND GHOST STORIES

DOING HISTORY IN ASYLUMS

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THE HISTORIAN'S SKILLS:

POSING QUESTIONS

To do history, the historian makes a series of choices informed by her training. First, the historian must select a topic -- in this case asylums -- then within this topic, the historian poses a particular question or problem that she feels needs to be addressed.

FINDING AND INTERPRETING EVIDENCE

A historian then seeks out evidence that might address their question. Below are some questions about asylums historians might be interested in along with sources that might be used to address them.

Who were the inmates in asylums?



Hank Hickory



Mother and son from a rural county in Ohio



Oscar Revinsky (?)

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What was asylum life like?



Plan for asylum, 1911



Advertisement, Journal of Psycho-aesthetics



Advertisement, Journal of Psycho-aesthetics

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