

Mental Health In Victorian Red Hook

By Sarah K. Hermans, May 9, 2022

In recognition of Mental Health Awareness Month this May, Hermans explores the experiences of Red Hook residents with treatment and medical institutions in the nineteenth century. *Please note that this article may contain difficult historical topics regarding mental health and illness.

In the Victorian Era and Gilded Age of the mid- to late- nineteenth century, the term “mental health” was practically unheard of. If a person needed help or exhibited behaviors that didn’t mesh with society, there were few options for them. Those who were seen by a doctor were sometimes prescribed rest, isolation, confinement, or a slew of somatic (physical) treatments that did not actually help, such as trepanning, bloodletting, purgatives, and the infamous lobotomy. The idea



Postcard featuring the Hudson River State Hospital in Poughkeepsie, NY

Home and Vicinity.
—o—
Pine Plains has a library containing 1,000 volumes.
Work on the Po'keepsie bridge has been suspended for the season.
The State Hospital at Po'keepsie has two hundred and fifty inmates.
Sleighting parties are now in order and will be fashionable while the snow lasts.
Dr. M. H. Wygant, dentist, will be at his office in this village, Friday and Saturday, Feb. 15th and 16th.
It doesn't pay to prophesy; if you get it right nobody remembers it; if you get it wrong nobody forgets it.
It is said that the proposed fast mail train will commence running on the Hudson River Railroad some time during the present week.

of treating troubling thoughts and moods with non-invasive therapy or drugs that pin-point neurological issues only gained traction in the greater medical community in the 20th century.

In the past, there was debate as to whether chronic conditions were even treatable. Some believed that mental illness was inherited or a condition gained through giving into vice and immoral habits. Some nineteenth-century people subscribed to the idea of Social Darwinism and viewed the chronically mentally ill as not just untreatable, but also genetically inferior. They thought that those with mental illness, more than needing to be helped, needed to be locked away for the sake of public safety. In 1875 in New York State a bill was put forth to commit “any insane person accused of arson, murder, or highway robbery” acquitted due to insanity to a state hospital for life.(1)

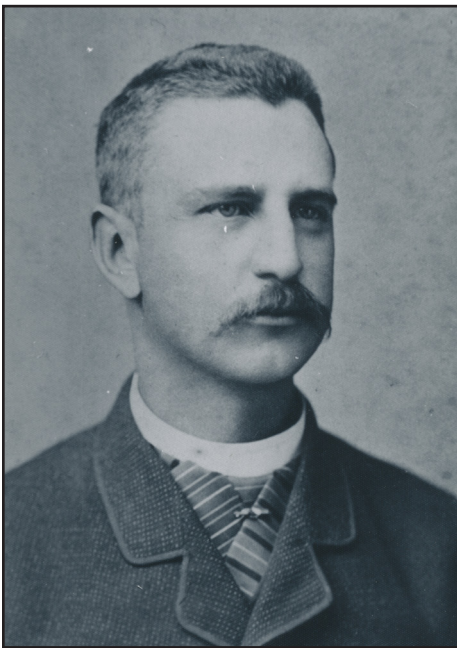
Medical professionals in the not-so-distant past were for the most part incapable of properly treating common chronic conditions such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, or bipolar disorder. Unable to find beneficial treatment, many people suffered in silence all their lives with such issues. Due to the stigma associated with them, people were discouraged from even admitting there was a problem in the first place.

*“The State Hospital at Po'keepsie has two hundred and fifty inmates”
Red Hook Journal, 15 Feb 1878*

Upsettingly, we are still struggling with being open about our mental health issues, but it is significantly easier for people to do so now than in Victorian times.

In the late nineteenth century, for those whose depression (for example) caused them to act in an atypical manner, there were few options for relief. The wealthy could pay to be sent to a private “hospital” (often simply a doctor’s home) for long-term care. The wealthy were also some of the first patients to receive treatment via more advanced (less harmful, more helpful) psychological techniques. Those that could not afford such expensive treatment were often involuntarily committed to a state-run asylum such as the former Hudson River State Hospital in Poughkeepsie, or (as was too often the case) suffered untreated. Those that could not find respite from a troubled mind often took their own lives. Those not so bad off that the asylum was required but unable to integrate into society and support themselves could find themselves in the Dutchess County Almshouse, for years if not for the rest of their lives.

In many regions of the US in the nineteenth century and earlier, prisons housed convicted mentally ill criminals who suffered horrific and inhumane degradations (significantly worse than they do today) with the general population. In the 1840s, Dorothea Dix, when asked to teach Sunday school at a prison in Cambridge, MA, found these conditions unacceptable. She then spent the next 40 years of her life trying to do something about it and helped to establish 32 state hospitals in the US. This was an improvement; however, patients who were involuntarily committed to a state hospital for the insane were often violent or suicidal, and it wasn’t long before such institutions became overcrowded and underfunded. These places were often dirty, prison-like facilities with unkind, poorly-paid and overworked staff. Before the Hudson River State Hospital was established in the 1870s, there were only two other such institutions in western New York state that served 100% of the state’s population. It was thought that Hudson River State Hospital would serve about 60% in 22 counties in our region (over about 40% in the west).(2) In 1878 the *Red Hook Journal* reported there were 250 “inmates” at Hudson River.(3) In the 1890s “patients”



Legrand Beaumont Curtis

were transferred to Poughkeepsie from other institutions, and by 1906 the Journal noted (though some were transferred out to another location), it was still crowded with 2,225 patients.(4)

So what options were there for treatment or relief for a Red Hook resident in the mid- to late- nineteenth century with mental illness? Thanks to the newspapers unabashedly reporting on what would today be considered incredibly private details, we have some idea. If people (male or female) were deemed “of unsound mind,” they could be involuntarily committed to the Hudson River State Hospital. This vague phrase is repeated in many cases as seen below, but is generally not more specific than that. One man, Thomas Monahan of Barrytown, was sent there from the county jail. There was no mention of a crime, only that he was “very excitable.”(5) Legrand B. Curtis of Red Hook was examined and committed by Dr. Carroll and Dr. Cookingham in 1890 because “he labors under the delusion that he is bankrupt and it

is feared that he will harm himself or others.”(6) His second wife Mary Alice Massoneau was also committed for a time in 1892 when the paper reported it was “the painful duty of (her) friends” to do so.(7) One can imagine that the stress of her husband’s mental illness, his business being taken over by his brothers, and his departure for Poughkeepsie for what would become the rest of his life took a toll on her own health. STOP In the 1860s, Curtis’s aunt Martha Ann Beaumont was committed to the New York State Lunatic Asylum at Utica—one of the more infamous of such institutions—where the “Utica crib” was developed to tightly contain unruly inmates in a short, bed-like cage. The Poughkeepsie facility was not opened until 1873. She had exhibited a series of episodes recorded in her brother-in-law John Curtis’s diary in the 1850s. At that time he had her examined and it sounds like the doctor determined that her illness (whatever the cause) was chronic and perhaps incurable. Martha Ann had periods of relative sanity where she was able to live normally and eventually went back to work as a servant in a widow’s home in Poughkeepsie. In 1866 she had an episode where she physically attacked her invalid employer. If she wasn’t immediately committed, she was an inmate of the Utica Asylum by 1870 where she is found in the census of that year. It’s not clear if Martha died at the hospital in 1878, but she may have spent a decade or more in the facility.



Martha Ann Beaumont

For those who were not convicted of a crime or whose relatives did not allow them to be sent away, or who were in denial about how much help they needed, there was nothing to do. Eventually, if the illness was bad enough, this could result in violence towards themselves and/or others such as the case with Mrs. Mary Smith of Jackson Corners. After several gruesome attempts, Mary succeeded in taking her life in a horrific manner in August of 1902.(8) Her husband would then do the same in 1915, perhaps after receiving a cancer diagnosis.(9)

It’s becoming more acceptable to openly speak about our afflictions, but mental illness needs to be something that we can talk about as easily as we do cancer so that we can more easily seek relief from all around us, unlike our less fortunate neighbors of over 120 years ago.

We learn that Mr. Benj. Cotting of Upper Red Hook, has been taken to the Hudson River State Hospital at Poughkeepsie, for treatment, having been declared of unsound mind.

- *Red Hook Journal*, 14 Dec 1883

Mr. L. B. Curtis, of this Tillage, having been declared of unsound mind, was on Thursday taken to the Hudson River State Hospital, at Po’keepsie, for treatment. He was accompanied by Drs. Cookmgham and Carroll. The Curtis hardware store is at present in charge of Mr. E. F. Massonneau.

- *Red Hook Journal*, 5 Dec 1890

It was the painful duty of the friends of Mrs. L. B. Curtis, of this village, to remove her to the Hudson River State Hospital for treatment on Saturday last, she having been declared of unsound mind.

- *Red Hook Journal*, 1 Apr 1892

We are informed that Al Showerman of Upper Bed Hook, having been declared of unsound mind has been committed to the asylum.

- *Red Hook Journal*, 1 Jan, 1892

Mrs. James Kavanagh, of this village, having been declared to be of unsound mind, was taken to the Hudson River State Hospital on Friday last.

- *Red Hook Journal*, 3 Sep 1897

Frank Shoemaker, son of Mr. Geo. Shoemaker, of Barrytown, having been examined by Drs Barton and Losee and declared of unsound mind was taken to the Hudson River State Hospital on Thursday last.

- *Red Hook Journal*, 27 May 1887

Mr. Electrus Teats, of this village, having become of unsound mind, was taken to the Hudson River State Hospital on Thursday.

- *Red Hook Journal*, 24 Jun 1898

Keron Quirk, having been declared of unsound mind, was taken to the Hudson River State Hospital on Saturday.

- *Red Hook Journal*, 10 Mar 1899

Thomas Monahan of Barrytown, was committed to the Hudson River State Hospital Wednesday afternoon from the county jail, where he was taken several days ago. He is thirty seven years old and very excitable.

- *Red Hook Journal*, 2 Aug 1901

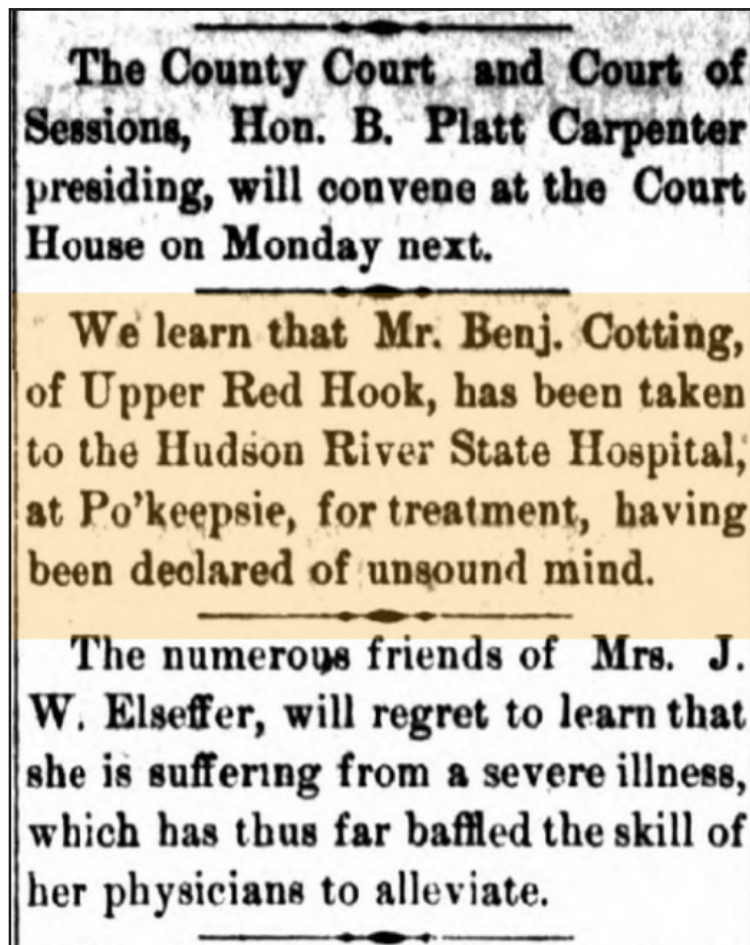
Footnotes:

1. *Red Hook Journal*, 14 Jan 1875
2. "Hudson River State Hospital for the Insane." *New York Times*, 27 Dec 1872
3. *Red Hook Journal*, 15 Feb 1878
4. *Red Hook Journal*, 3 Feb 1906
5. *Red Hook Journal*, 2 Aug 1901
6. *Rhinebeck Gazette*, 13 Dec, 1890
7. *Red Hook Journal*, 1 Apr 1892
8. *Pine Plains Register*, 29 Aug, 1902
9. *Pine Plains Register*, 5 Aug, 1915

Sources:

- The *Red Hook Journal*, *Pine Plains Register*, and *Rhinebeck Gazette* newspapers

- "Hudson River State Hospital for the Insane." *New York Times*, 27 Dec 1872
- "From Quackery to Bacteriology: The Emergence of Modern Medicine in 19th Century America," Barbara Floyd, University of Toledo
utoledo.edu/library/canaday/exhibits/quackery/quack-index.html
- "A Home Away From Home: Luxurious accommodations were the staples of America's Gilded Age asylums, which offered state-of-the-science treatment — for the rich only." By Dr. Ellen Holtzman, *American Psychological Association*, March 2012, Vol 43, No. 3
apa.org/monitor/2012/03/asylums
- "The Surprising History of Mental Illness Treatment," Baton Rouge Behavioral Hospital [undated, no author named]
batonrougebehavioral.com/mental-health-statistics-mental-illness-in-2020
- *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry for Dorothea Dix
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Red Hook Journal, 14 Dec 1883