

Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) USA

“Mad” Women:

Gender, Madness, and Institutional Oppression in Mid-Nineteenth Century America

Submitted by: Claire Paley
Junior, History

Faculty Mentor: Elizabeth Mellyn
Professor of History

Research Locations: Dimond Library, UNH
Massachusetts State Archives, Boston

***The following example SURF proposal has been adapted from a longer original proposal written by Claire Paley/History (Faculty Mentor: Elizabeth Mellyn). The example has been modified and edited to fit the current, more concise SURF proposal guidelines.**

Proposal prompts in blue are included for instructional purposes only, based on the SURF proposal guidelines. Applicants should not include these prompts when submitting a final application.

Project Summary (one page maximum, single-spaced)

1. Abstract (200 words maximum): concisely summarize your project and its goals

Scholars have long studied insane asylums in the contexts of architecture, medicine, and political reform. However, scholarship on the gendered history of asylums is minimal, despite the existence of numerous, digitized historical accounts that depict the lived experiences of women forcibly incarcerated through purported “insanity.” These first-hand perspectives offer an invaluable perspective on the history of mental institutions and the consequences that came from a diagnosis of insanity. Analyzing the stories of women who endured physical, emotional, and sexual abuse behind asylum walls implores us to question why their institutional care perpetuated such trauma. The purpose of my study is to examine how gendered conceptions of madness characterized the experiences of forcibly institutionalized women in the early 1860s. My research will use the first-hand narratives of such women, annual reports, medical journals, and scholarship on women’s madness in history to pair the treatment of “insane” women with medical consensus of the period.

2. Outcomes (list 2-5, one bullet point each):

- Written analysis of primary and secondary sources relevant to women’s insanity and institutionalization in the 1860s
- Final paper to present at the URC in the spring, for consideration of a departmental undergraduate research award, and as a writing sample for my graduate school (M.A.) applications in history
- Improve my skills in analyzing, comparing, and explaining primary sources for a future career as a public school history teacher
- Deepen my understanding and knowledge of women’s diverse narratives and contributions throughout history, better equipping me to foster a more inclusive and empowering future learning environment where students can explore diverse gender dynamics and historical perspectives

3. Timetable (one line or row per week maximum):

- Week 1: Read/analyze secondary sources: *Women and Madness* and *Women’s Madness*
- Week 2: Read/analyze first-person narratives from *Women of the Asylum* and compare with analysis of secondary sources; read *Theaters of Madness* for references to the history of McLean
- Week 3: Read 1860-1866 articles in *American Journal of Insanity* for female patient cases and ideas about the conceptions and treatment of female insanity
- Week 4: Read/analyze *The Medicalization of Insanity* to compare the social history of McLean with first-person narratives
- Weeks 5-6: Read annual reports for McLean Asylum 1860-1866 and analyze how female patient cases were characterized, diagnosed, and reported; compare with secondary sources
- Week 7: Refine and re-organize research; sketch out conclusions
- Week 8: Develop thesis and outline argument
- Week 9: Write rough draft; submit to research mentor for review and editing
- Week 10: Revision of draft; finalize and submit paper

Project Background (two pages maximum, single-spaced)

1. Project History and Significance (one paragraph maximum, 1-2 sentences each):

- general problem, theme, or issue to be addressed
- most relevant previous research, scholarship, or artistry on this topic
- project's specific question, hypothesis, or objective
- wider implications of your project to the problem and field

Dozens of first-hand accounts of institutionalized women with no prior evidence of insanity or an audience with a judge speckle the history of madness and mental institutions. In the mid nineteenth century, women kidnapped by their husbands, brothers, and fathers experienced life in an asylum because of purported "insanity." Some stayed for six months, others for decades, with the women themselves speaking about varied conditions for their release. Most historians who have investigated institutionalized women have focused solely on the infamous case of Elizabeth Packard, who wrote numerous books detailing her experience that make her a notable subject. Few have mentioned other women despite the accessibility of dozens of first-hand narratives through both digital archives and print (Geller and Harris, 1994), though to date the narratives have been placed only within their generalized historical contexts. These narratives should be analyzed within the context of medical history and gender studies to see the influence both had on women's institutionalization. By doing so, I will generate some of the first scholarship on these women and the ways that gendered notions of madness characterized their experiences. As a result, this project will create a new narrative on the history of madness, one that focuses on women's experiences of institutionalization and how differences in gendered conceptions of insanity made these experiences distinguishable and worth considerable scholarship.

2. Approach and Methodology (two paragraphs maximum):

- methods, theories, procedures, or lines of thinking and/or creating you will use to address the topic
- material and sources needed to pursue your project, and overcome any foreseeable challenges
- how you will analyze, interpret, and/or evaluate your findings

I will use a mixture of primary and secondary sources and comparative analysis to accomplish my research objectives, focusing on how gendered notions of madness shaped women's experiences of forced institutionalization at the McLean Asylum from 1860-1866. This will be done through the comparison of the first-hand narratives to the annual reports from McLean, publications from the American Journal of Insanity, and secondary scholarship on women's madness to reveal the influence of gendered ideas of insanity on the diagnosis and treatment each woman experienced. My research focuses on women from the McLean Asylum due to its proximity to UNH and my potential access to its archives. Though the historical accounts from multiple institutions range from 1845 to 1940, my research will focus on those from the McLean Asylum from 1860-1865, when they first appeared.

The annual reports are vital to the project because they provide information on inmate demographics, list the percentages of diagnoses, provide treatment details, describe notable or peculiar cases, and contain emerging medical ideas of madness. I will compare the findings from the annual reports to the narratives to see if the treatment of these women aligns with the medical

approach to insanity at the time. I will devote two weeks to reading the reports from 1860–1866, which aligns with the dates of institutionalization of most of the narratives. Furthermore, because they are available on Hathi Trust, my ability to search within the text for keywords will allow me to go through them carefully and quickly. I will employ a similar approach for reading publications from the American Journal of Insanity. The journals contain detailed essays on emerging methodologies for treating insanity, new definitions of insanity, unique cases from multiple institutions, and statistics on national cases of insanity. I will use them to construct a detailed medical context of female insanity, and I will compare them to secondary sources to trace gendered ideas about insanity in the period of 1860–1866 (Chesler, 1972; Goldner, 1980; Reiss, 2008; Ussher, 1992). Again, because they are available on Hathi Trust, I anticipate using the search within text function to direct my reading and extract the most pertinent information.

3. My Role/Preparation/Experience (one paragraph maximum, 1-2 sentences each):

- your preparation and qualifications to undertake the project (e.g., previous coursework, jobs, extracurricular experiences, other research or training)
- your plans for further preparing yourself before undertaking the project, prior to the start date
- your unique role in the project as compared to the role of your faculty mentor and others (graduate students, technicians, collaborators), including your plan for regular communication with your mentor
- if a group project, the unique role of each student on the project (use an additional paragraph if necessary for this question)

This project builds upon a research paper I wrote in my sophomore year in Professor [A]’s HIST 690: “Madness and Mental Institutions in America” class. The preliminary paper offered a cursory overview of this topic, focused on three women from the Jacksonville Insane Asylum in Somerville, Illinois. The background I have on female insanity and institutionalization provides me with the scholarship needed to conduct this project. To prepare for this project, I will review some secondary sources from which my research will commence. Though this project requires me to read and analyze primary and secondary sources diligently, my workload as an honors student and a history major has more than prepared me. My ability to strategically read, synthesize, and extract information offers a unique skill set that makes this project manageable. My faculty mentor, Professor [A], will work with me to locate and interpret the primary source materials from digitized collections. Our collaboration will be characterized by regular biweekly meetings, during which I will present my thoughts, findings, and ideas. In turn, my mentor will offer valuable insights, steer the direction of my research, and offer constructive feedback to refine project drafts.

Appendices

Works for Reference*

Chesler, Phyllis. *Women and Madness*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1972.

Geller, Jeffrey L, and Maxine Harris. *Women of the Asylum: Voices from Behind the Walls, 1840-1945*. New York: Anchor Books, 1994.

Goldner, Nancy L. *The Medicalization of Insanity: A Social History of the McLean Asylum for the Insane, 1811-1856*. 1980.

<https://www.proquest.com/docview/303111781?parentSessionId=jjNNziXy9dD%2BuqWoO65k7o1vuN16lcivSDIbiW1tGI%3D&accountid=14612&sourcetype=Dissertations%20%20Theses>

Reiss, Benjamin. *Theaters of Madness: Insane Asylums and Nineteenth-Century American Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Ussher, Jane M. *Women's Madness*. Financial Times/Prentice Hall, 1992.

*The annual reports and publications from the American Journal of Insanity are not cited in the bibliography due to the number of citations this entails that would exceed the two-page maximum for the appendices. Both sources are available on HathiTrust and have already been accessed.