

# The Lunatics, Mentally Ill, and Ghosts of the State Lunatic Hospital in Taunton

First off, let me clarify one thing: I am a skeptic, a humanist and thoroughly align 99% of my beliefs with science. I will cast aside a belief if science has proven something. That 1% is reserved for those areas science can't explain or has yet to and likely will eventually.

However, I do enjoy history, period. I can't get enough of ancient histories like Egypt, Sumer, Indus Valley, Mesoamerica, and of course, local history. So, this article is from the perspective and I am not going to make the case for the view that the Taunton State Hospital is haunted.



Having said that, I do not ridicule or disparage people who are religious or believe in the paranormal or supernatural. That is how they perceive the world and I don't doubt for a second that people don't see, hear, or feel the things that they believe. Our senses and mind color the world we see and our beliefs provide us with comfort, a direction in life, and are a source of happiness.

So while I am writing this from a scientific and historic

viewpoint, there will be those who think and believe differently that can benefit. In true American fashion, we can have a discussion even if we come from different places. We can share ideas, thoughts, and views. We can agree to disagree. We can do that in a civil and productive way that allows people of differing views to learn something from each other.

### **Architectural Beginnings**

The neo-classical Taunton State Hospital, originally known as the State Lunatic Hospital in Taunton, was designed and built by the Boyden & Ball company of architects in 1854. In fact, the hospital was their very first project and they did such a fantastic job that they went on to erect a fair number of buildings across the state throughout the next dozen years.

Incidentally, this was a year after New Bedford had been declared the richest city in America at the height of the whaling industry. “Neo-classical” simply put refers to the architecture style that is principally derived from the architecture of classical antiquity – a period between the 8th century BCE and the 5th or 6th century ACE centered on the Mediterranean Sea.



The original campus which encompassed 154 acres, would be expanded and enlarged upon over the years and eventually reach over forty buildings and structures. The campus was structured designed on the concepts proposed by one of the popular psychiatrists at the time Thomas Story Kirkbride (1809-1883). The system Kilbride advocated was called a Kirkbride Plan or Kirkbride design, and the structures themselves were often referred to as Kirkbride Buildings.

This concept utilized his theories on how to effectively and efficiently take care of the mentally ill and architecturally it meant the buildings would promote exposure to natural light and air circulation. Structurally the layout was that of a "bat-wing" style to make the most use sunlight and allow the best air circulation. Carla Yanni who wrote "The Architecture of Madness: Insane Asylums in the United States." said "The building form itself was meant to have a curative effect, 'a special apparatus for the care of lunacy, [whose grounds should be] highly improved and tastefully ornamented.'"

Apparently, the Kirkbride buildings were built so comfortably, pleasing and tastefully ornamented that Thomas Story Kirkbride himself lived right on the campus of one such asylum in Pennsylvania where he would eventually succumb to pneumonia in 1883.

### **Evolution of Mental Illness from Lunatics to Health Patient; How America looked at the Mentally Ill**

At the time the campus was erected the world and America had a pretty medieval perception on who was considered mentally ill and how it could be cured, if at all. Society generally wanted nothing to do with them and just wanted the mentally ill, children with birth defects or even learning disabilities to disappear. Either hiding them in a “Disappointments Room” – a practice still found in some countries today – or sending them off to a lunatic asylum were the two choices.



People in that time period were ashamed to have a mentally ill, or even a disfigured or disabled person in their family. They felt it reflected on them and their status. Kind of who

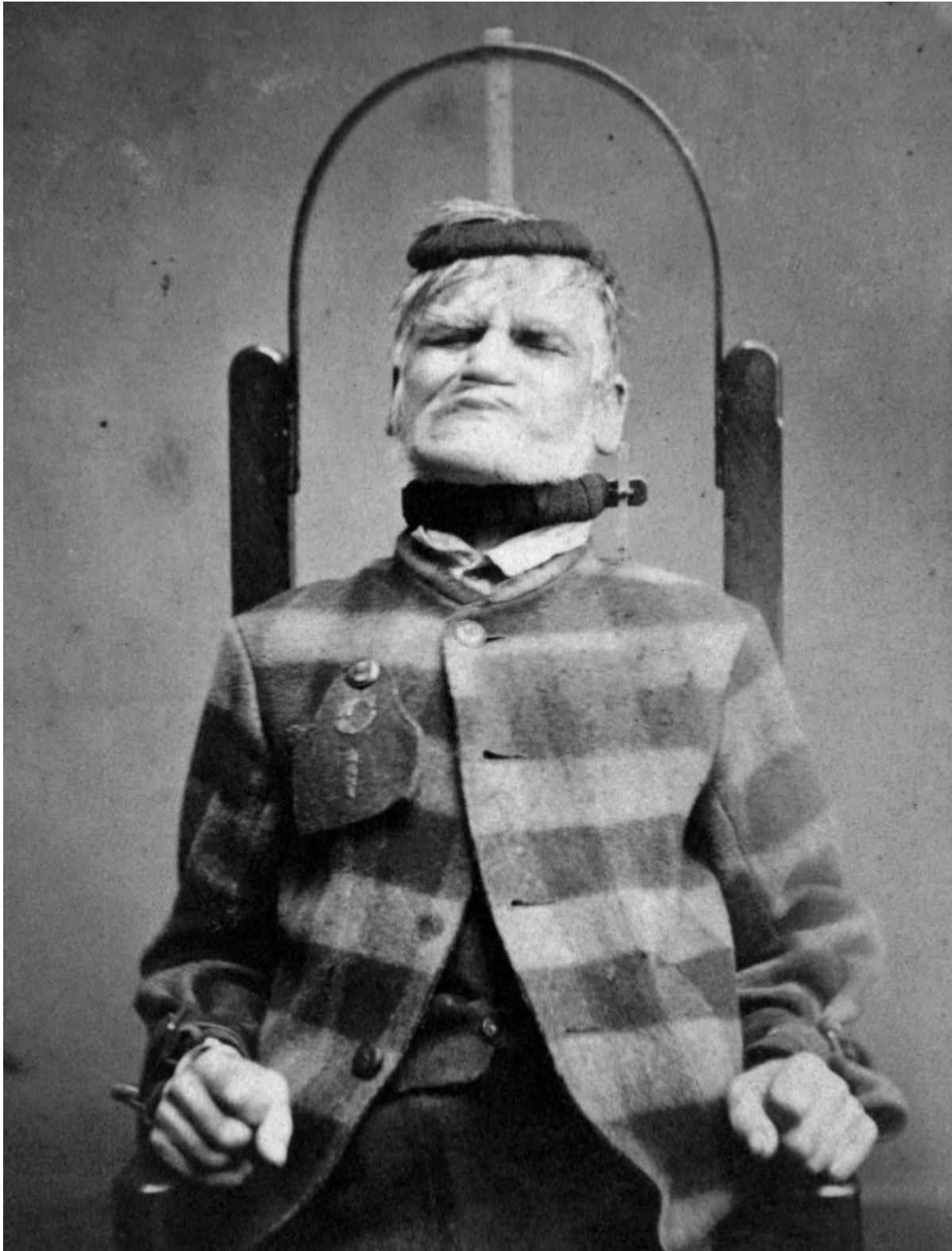
some people in their political cults will look at their relatives who are in opposing political cult – they are ashamed of them, have no problem avoiding them or disowning them. They definitely want them to go away.

Another aspect for this hiding or sending off was that most people just felt that doing this was for the good of the family and community. No one really cared much for what the “lunatic” thought or felt. Off you went.

The problem here was that the doctors, friends, family, local community and society dehumanized these people and devalued them. Once they had little value or humanity and were simply objects it would be easy to mistreat and abuse them, often in the name “scientific progress” but just as often in the name of “who cares?”

Like prisons and jails, once you were admitted you were locked up and not allowed to leave. All manner of abuse, cruelty and inhumanity were committed – pardon the pun. To be placed in these mental homes meant a life of floggings, beatings, solitary confinement, dietary neglect, being bound to shackles, the use of cures like electrical shock therapy, lobotomies and even some would consider sound therapy – using visiting Opera singers – to be especially inhumane and cruel. At one time injecting a person with malaria-tainted blood to induce a fever was even considered effective. Science has sure had its idiotic moments.





Sadly, innocent people like many Civil War veterans who sustained brain injuries or were shell-shocked (PTSD), those with Alzheimer's or Parkinson's, Tourette Syndrome, alcoholics, even epilepsy and those with eating disorders would be confined to these types of mental asylums. Even women who had panic attacks, bouts of post-Partum Blues, anxiety, Menstruation-related anger, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and get

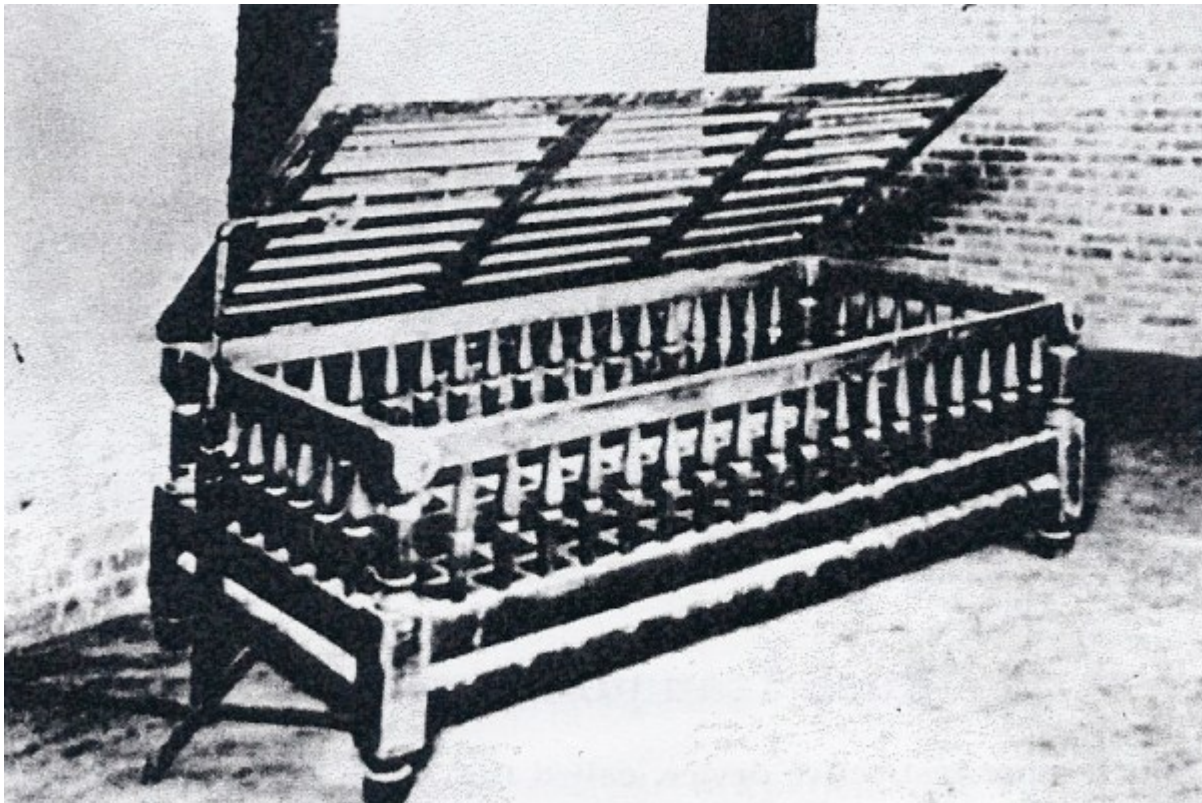
this one: "disobedience." You're not off the hook guys: you could be sent to an asylum for excessive masturbation.

Some of the absurd science used to cure people was extended to the methods of diagnosis which included pseudo sciences like Phrenology – the measuring of a person's skulls, dead and alive to find patterns the mentally ill shared. A particularly popular form of "cure" was named the Utica Crib after the asylum in Utica, New York that first utilized the marriage of solitary confinement and...babies.

This sort of pseudo-science, barbarity and ironically craziness that was used to diagnose and cure the mentally ill was continued well into the 1940s when many of these abuses which general society didn't know about, were exposed leading to widespread reform on the psychiatric industry. Sigmund Freud may be considered an eccentric with some odd psychological theories about the mind, but in the 1930s he changed the paradigm on what would be considered mental illness and who should be locked away. The public exposure of cruelty and this shift in paradigms eventually led to deinstitutionalization in the 1950s and then again in the 1970s and ended the "locking away and throwing away the key" style of admission along with the inhumane practices.

### **The Downfall and Demise Taunton State Hospital**

It was around this time – 1975 to be exact – that the main part of the hospital would be closed down and completely abandoned leaving small sections functioning. Sometime in the early 1990s the state a \$19 million improvement plan to improve these unabandoned sections of the campus. In 1999, the dome above the administration section of the building collapsed and there the ruins sat until a huge fire broke out there in 2005 and the state decided to demolish the original complex leaving only the decrepit wings of the Kirkbride Building.



The historic sections – those “bat-wings” – were demolished in 2009, but not before the aforementioned tastefully ornamented aspects of the building were sold and auctioned off. The neo-classical and Italianate iron gates, granite, plumbing, lighting fixtures, timbers and furniture were sold to anyone and everyone until there was nothing left by 2010.

The death knell would finally come in 2012 when the last remaining parts of the facility in use were officially closed by the state and it would no longer be a “mental home” but used as a Women’s Recovery from Addiction Program administered by High Point Treatment Center housing up to 40 patients. As part of the recovery, the patients manage the campus greenhouse and sell the harvest of plants and produce to the community. A far cry from how previous patients were housed and cured.

### **The Paranormal, Supernatural and Tall Tales**

The urban legends, myths, folktales, and other stories had their roots in the cruel methods used by the staff, by the deaths that their from natural and unnatural causes, and by the inmates and/or patients themselves some of which were



criminals, murderers, and rapists.

As with any building where people have been tortured or died, especially over the course decades, beliefs of ghosts haunting the structures began to sprout up. This would grow exponentially after many people would explore the ruins (sometimes code word for "hang out, get drunk, smoke weed") and share their haunted experiences.

## **Jane Toppan, Murderess, Dies At Taunton Insane Hospital**

**Lowell Nurse, Convicted in 1902, Had  
Spent 36 Years in State Institution;  
Once Admitted Poisoning 100 Persons**

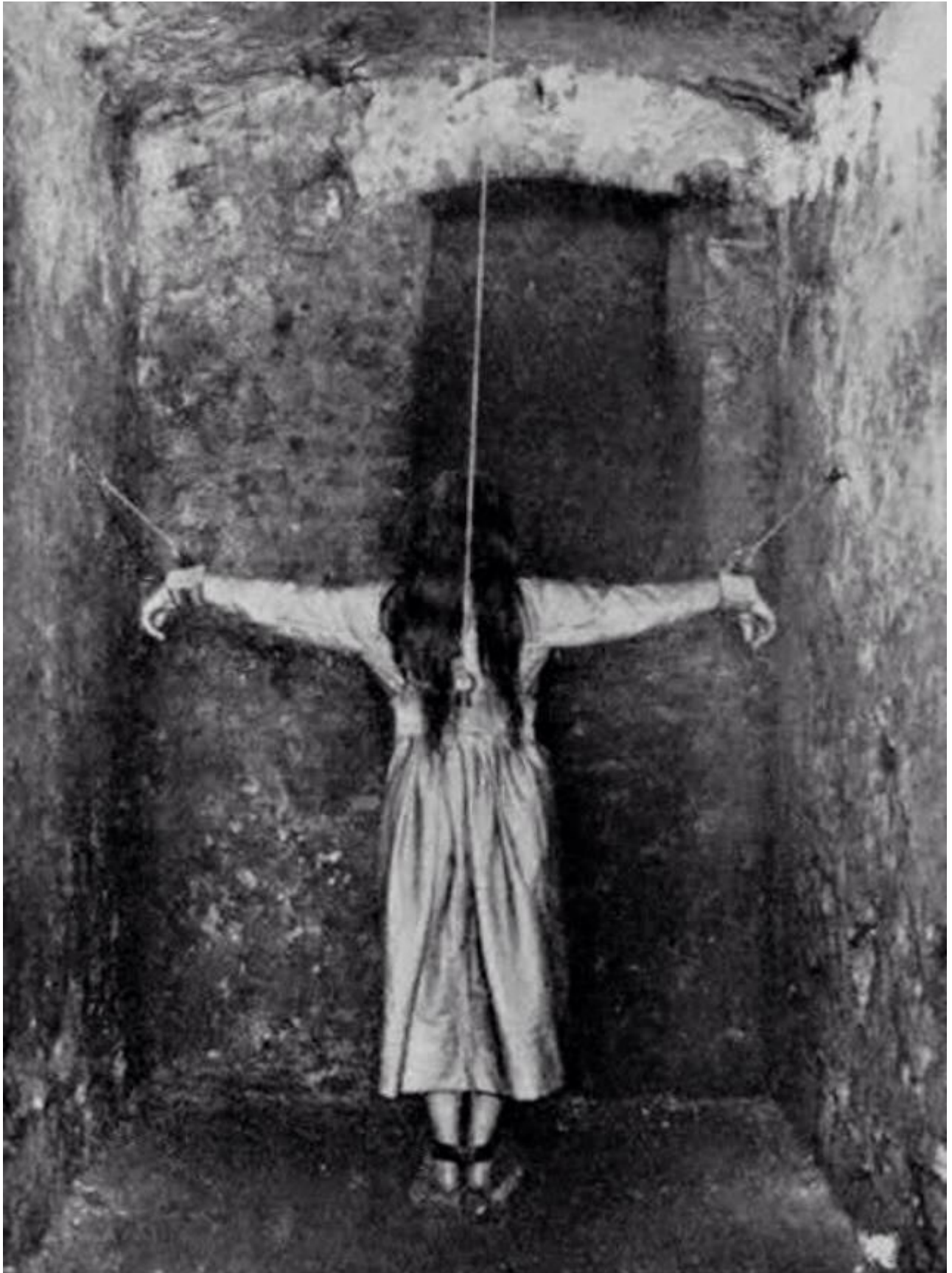
Credited by her own admission, no trouble and calmly awaited with the murder by poisoning of at her end least 100 persons, Jane Toppan, a Among her victims were Capt. and former resident of the Christian Hill Mrs Abner Toppan of Lowell, who

Inmates like the murderess serial killer Jane Toppan who confessed to killing 31 souls certainly contributed to the stories and the creep factor was elevated when you read her life story or her most infamous quote "My desire is to kill more people, more desperate people, from every man and every woman who has lived to this day." Geez, lady. By the way, those 31 poor people were patients she poisoned under her care as a nurse.

Another infamous woman who helped contribute to the fear factor was Lizzie Borden who stayed at a jail right next door. Of course, as with all wild tales, facts just get in the way but she was close enough to the lunatic asylum to have her name attached to it.

Any time the hospital is brought up you will hear mention of ghastly screams, apparitions, unexplained noises, the practice of Satanic rituals, bloodstained handprints, cries for help and these stories are not limited to the buildings, but naturally the on-campus cemetery. These anecdotes have even extended to the surrounding woods. There are so many of these stories – projections of peoples' own fears – that the hospital is often referred to as "America's Most Haunted Asylum" and that "The Devil himself is still there..."

If you are curious about what the building looks like today you should visit Abandoned America's Website which features some absolutely fantastic photographs. There is also some video footage.



---

*What are your thoughts about this slice of America and Massachusetts history and how these facilities were*

*administered in their heyday? Do you believe the paranormal stories to be true? Have you ever explored the grounds or had a personal paranormal experience? Think I am completely wrong about these tales being "tall" or mental projections? Leave a comment under the article, New Bedford Guide's Facebook or inbox us at [info@newbedfordguide.com](mailto:info@newbedfordguide.com).*