

PENNHURST: AN EXPLORATION OF EXHIBITION AND COLLECTION  
CARE INSIDE A HAUNTED ASYLUM

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study is an imaginative exercise which explores the use of historic artifacts at the haunted attraction Pennhurst Asylum in Spring City, Pennsylvania. It is understood here that the use of historic artifacts from the former Pennhurst State School within Pennhurst Asylum inevitably tethers the attraction to the difficult history of Pennhurst State School. This study explores the convergence of dark tourism, exhibiting difficult history, and performance as historical interpretation. Within the context of collections management and public history, Pennhurst Asylum acts as a case study exploring what can happen when difficult history is exploited and commodified.

I dedicate this thesis to the people who lived, worked,  
played, created, suffered, and died at Pennhurst State School.  
May we never forget and never stop fighting for civil rights.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  | Page |
|--|------|
| ABSTRACT .....   | ii   |
| DEDICATION .....   | iii  |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....   | iv   |
| LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS .....                                    | vi   |
| CHAPTER  |      |
| 1. INTRODUCTION .....  | 1    |
| 2. BRIEF HISTORY OF PENNHURST STATE SCHOOL.....                | 9    |
| 3. OBJECTS OF TERROR .....                                     | 21   |
| 4. PENNHURST AS A DARK SITE .....                              | 37   |
| 5. COMPARITIVE ANALYSIS - RECOMMENDATIONS -<br>CONCLUSION..... | 54   |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY .....   | 75   |
| APPENDICES   |      |
| A. NEXT STEPS FOR THE OWNERS OF PENNHURST ASYLUM .....         | 83   |
| B. NEXT STEPS FOR THE PMPA .....                               | 84   |

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

| Illustration   | Page |
|--|------|
| 1: Photo of Administration building, Summer 2016 .....   | 5    |
| 2: Illustrated map of Pennhurst State School .....   | 5    |
| 3: Screenshot of Pennhurst Asylum's website, March 2016 .....  | 7    |
| 4: Screenshot from Bill Baldini's, <i>Suffer the Little Children</i> , 1968 .....  | 14   |
| 5: Illustrated map of Pennhurst State School .....   | 14   |
| 6: Photo of Pennhurst Memorial & Preservation Alliance's traveling exhibit at the<br>National Constitution Center, Philadelphia, PA, August 2016 ..... | 22   |

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

According to the Pennhurst Asylum website, the haunted attraction is a hospital themed walk-through attraction "featuring many items and artifacts that were part of the original State School."<sup>1</sup> The advertising for Pennhurst Asylum, whether through radio ads or their website, is quite unabashed about the use of historic artifacts. In November 2016 Derek Strine, one of the members of the LLC that owns Pennhurst Asylum, confirmed the use of medical artifacts in the attraction, as well as objects like tables, desks, and office supplies.<sup>2</sup> Strine is also unaware of how many artifacts are used in the attraction, and he currently has no inventory of objects, props, or collection items.<sup>3</sup> The artifacts at the Pennhurst Asylum attraction are kept alongside a collection of reproduction props. Without access to the artifacts and without the ability to photograph the artifacts, what follows in this study must act as an imaginative exercise. My own observation of the objects at Pennhurst Asylum has lead me to believe that there are artifacts inside the attraction which could be labeled "high priority" to save in order to preserve the history of Pennhurst State School. For example, any object created at the institution by "patients" is a high priority artifact because of the opportunity to interpret both the institution's history as well as the history of institutional peonage and craftsmanship within institutions. Medical tools and ephemera would also be considered high priority artifacts

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<sup>1</sup> "About Pennhurst Asylum - Pennsylvania's Scariest Haunt," [pennhurstasylum.com/about](http://pennhurstasylum.com/about).

<sup>2</sup> Phone conversation with Derek Strine on November 4, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

because these types of objects can be used to interpret the history of psychiatry within institutions in the twentieth century, as well as the lived experience of the "patients" at Pennhurst State School.

There are indeed recovered artifacts being used in Pennhurst Asylum, but we must infer about the specific statistics of those objects. In this study, I argue that the use of historic artifacts in an attraction like Pennhurst Asylum exploits the evidence-based history of Pennhurst State School and the stories of those who suffered at Pennhurst while perpetuating damaging and negative stereotypes of the physically and mentally disabled. Here I offer recommendations for saving the artifacts at Pennhurst Asylum and interpreting the difficult history of Pennhurst State School.

I begin this study by giving a brief history of Pennhurst State School, and the intellectual climate surrounding mental and physical disabilities in America during the early twentieth century, when Pennhurst was built. By first understanding the history of Pennhurst and the environment residents were subjected to there, we are able to unmask the reasons why the performance and narrative at Pennhurst Asylum is damaging to the disabilities community. In Chapter Two, through my experience and research in museum collections management best practices, I discovered that the artifacts at Pennhurst Asylum are in grave danger. I argue that by advertising and using historic artifacts to perpetuate a damaging narrative, Pennhurst Asylum is exploiting the trust that Americans put in museums; institutions which interpret history using artifacts as evidence alongside peer-reviewed research, professional exhibit design, and expert visitor-research guidance. Next, in Chapter Three, I explore scholarship on dark tourism, and make connections between other dark sites and Pennhurst. By looking into American traditions of tourism,



haunted attraction attendance, and similar "haunted" sites near-by, I was able to make the case that Pennhurst is unique in its use of historic "difficult" objects in the attraction.

Finally, I conclude this study by offering recommendations for the future of the objects at Pennhurst Asylum in an attempt to answer the question, "what can be done to improve the conditions of the artifacts being used at Pennhurst?" My recommendations begin simply by proposing that the owners of Pennhurst Asylum change the attraction's name, narrative, and theme to something which does not play on the suffering of the disabled at Pennhurst State School. In addition, I recommend that Pennhurst Asylum partner with community groups, like the Pennhurst Memorial and Preservation Alliance (PMPA), to repair relationships with the community and set up a separate space for the professional exhibition of the history of Pennhurst State School. By accepting the best practices of public history and collection management, Pennhurst Asylum could transition from a seasonal attraction to a site which uses the principles of public history to promote the education and understanding of Pennhurst's difficult history with the disabilities community.

On a rainy Thursday evening in October 2016, I found myself driving on the heavily wooded back roads of northern Chester County, Pennsylvania. After being waved through an archway of trees I began driving through a wet field. A few months earlier, in February 2016, I had heard about Pennhurst Asylum from a classmate. The only other time I had heard about Pennhurst State School was while watching my guilty pleasure, *Ghost Adventures* on Travel Channel. Pennhurst State School and Hospital (which I will now refer to as "Pennhurst"; "Pennhurst Asylum" will refer to the attraction) was an

institution that housed and cared for Southeast Pennsylvania's mentally and physically handicapped or disabled children and young adults.

Located in Spring City, Pennsylvania, Pennhurst was built on remote farmland in the early twentieth century. The school gained notoriety through the exposure of the mental, emotional, and physical abuse of the "patients" throughout its nearly 80-year time of operation. The widely documented history of abuse led to a Supreme Court case which facilitated Pennhurst's closure in 1987. Although owned by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, between 1987 and 2008, Pennhurst stood nearly abandoned. Over this decade, many of its historic artifacts, patient files, and documents were stolen by urban explorers and local trespassers. As a result of such interest in Pennhurst, many administrative documents and records can be found online after being posted by urban explorers from the Philadelphia area.<sup>4</sup> These trespassers left behind graffiti, garbage, broken windows, and overall destruction.

Since then, Pennhurst has gained the reputation of being a "haunted" site, and has become a popular site for paranormal investigation TV shows and documentaries. I was

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<sup>4</sup> Urban Exploration is a hobby which rose in popularity in the early 2000s. It typically involves visiting abandoned urban/man-made structures and taking photos or just generally exploring. Though typically an underground hobby, recently urban exploration has been brought into the public eye through popular TV shows like: *ABANDONED* (2016) on Viceland, *Off-Limits* (2011) on Travel Channel, on episodes of Travel Channel's *Ghost Adventures*, and *Urban Explorers* (2005) on Discovery Channel. True urban explorers typically follow the rule "take nothing but photographs, leave nothing but footprints", however, many people take "souvenirs" from abandoned sites and leave much more than footprints behind. You can learn more about urban explorers by going to [Reddit.com /r/urbanexploration](https://www.reddit.com/r/urbanexploration). One anonymously-run website freely gives access to scanned and copied Pennhurst documents which were likely found while "urban exploring." "Pennhurst Documents," [www.elpeecho.com/pennhurst/documents.htm](http://www.elpeecho.com/pennhurst/documents.htm).

shocked to hear that the buildings had become a haunted attraction in 2010.<sup>5</sup> Not long after learning the fate of the buildings, I had to wait to visit the attraction until the October Halloween season. In the meantime I visited Pennhurst's campus with the Co-President of the Pennhurst Memorial and Preservation Alliance, Dr. Jim Conroy over the summer of 2016 and the campus looked much different in the sunlight and without any other visitors or decorations.<sup>6</sup> [IMAGE 1]. Dr. Jim Conroy graduated from Yale University in 1970 with a BA in Physiological Psychology, and received his MA in Sociology/Program Evaluation and Ph.D. in Medical Sociology from Temple University in 1992. Dr. Conroy began his career doing research on the impacts of the Developmental Disabilities Act of 1970, and while at Temple University, he was the Principal Investigator and designer of the Pennhurst Longitudinal Study, the largest study ever done up to that time on the topic of moving people with developmental disabilities from institutions to small community homes.

My first trip to Pennhurst was profound. Dr. Conroy and I drove past the Southeastern Veteran's Center; the buildings that make up the center were once the residence halls at Pennhurst. [IMAGE 2] We had to gain security clearance to pass through the gates to get onto the campus. As we drove down into the main campus, my first impression of the buildings was that they were beautiful, in a macabre and decrepit way. I noticed that the colossal buildings were in disrepair, and quite a few of the

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<sup>5</sup> Pennhurst Asylum opened in September 2010, despite significant community protest. See Anthony Wood, "Down to Wire Over Pennhurst: Barring a Last Minute Court Ruling, the Haunted-House Site will Open Friday," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 24, 2010; and Anthony Wood, "Judge Approved Haunted House: Handicapped-Advocacy Group Call for Boycotting Pennhurst," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 25, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> I met Dr. Jim Conroy after researching the Pennhurst Memorial and Preservation Alliance and reaching out to the organization for comments on Pennhurst Asylum.

buildings could not be saved. During the off-season, it was impossible to tell that there was a haunted attraction at the campus every fall. The decorations and props were kept inside the used buildings during the winter-summer months. Other than the disrepair and graffiti, the aspect of that first visit to the campus that will always stick with me is the silence. Many previous employees of Pennhurst, including Dr. Conroy, note the sounds they can never forget from their time at Pennhurst. Children screaming and banging cribs and chairs against the walls. But all that was left were the empty buildings and some forgotten artifacts like chairs, desks, and a broken single swing set in the middle of the courtyard, below the lifted paved walkways the residents and nurses used to go between buildings.<sup>7</sup>

Later in October, I found myself in rubber boots wading through mud and rain, boyfriend in tow, walking through a path in the woods lit only by the occasional fire in a rusty barrel. As we got closer to the buildings, I could see lights flooding the campus. After waiting a few moments to get our tickets from a trailer turned ticket booth, we were in. There was a waiting area set up between the buildings in the courtyard, and large tent that covered a small vending area, selling funnel cakes, and a DJ playing rock music. Before we were allowed in the building, we were required to have our photo taken in front of a Pennhurst Asylum backdrop. Later as we left, we could purchase the photo. The site had all the regular hallmarks of an amusement park.

Going through the attraction was more interactive than I imagined; I did not realize how freely visitors could move through the buildings or how often visitors are

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<sup>7</sup> My visit to Pennhurst with Dr. Conroy took place Friday, August 12, 2016.

physically touched by actors. While inside the attraction, my group was made up of myself, my boyfriend, and 3 people we met in line. We were greeted inside the building by a woman in a 1960s era nurse's costume. She went over the rules of the attraction: no touching the actors, but they will touch you. No cameras or phones out at all, or the actors will take them away. We were urged not to touch the props, artifacts, or basically anything inside the attraction, and then the "nurse" pointed to the security camera in the corner and noted that there were cameras in every room. Pennhurst Asylum's website [IMAGE 3] explained that the attraction used real artifacts recovered from the different buildings on the campus, and this was validated during a conversation with one of Pennhurst Asylum's owners, Derek Strine. During that phone call, Strine Although the website mainly displays photos of actors dressed as nurses and photos of abandoned rooms in residence halls, I still expected the inside of the attraction to have themed rooms, or to involve monsters or vampires. Instead in the Administration Building, the first building opened for the attraction, the action was set in the historic Pennhurst State School. All of the actors portrayed doctors, nurses, or patients. Some actors were in cages, or tied to gurneys. Some were banging their heads in the corner, in straitjackets, or mumbling about soiling themselves. The portrayal profoundly disturbed me. I had never seen the use of historic objects as props for a performance like the one at Pennhurst Asylum. Restraints, antique gurneys, and other artifacts became the backdrop in a horror show that mocked the disabled and mentally ill. Visitors laughed, pointed, and screamed at the sight of "patients" in hospital gowns and straitjackets. The attraction might be fun on the surface for some - jump-scares in an old building with strobe lights, groups of friends and funnel cakes. But beneath all of the makeup and flashing lights, the message

being sold to visitors was that people with mental illnesses are scary – that they should be feared and that they could harm you if they got "loose."

After leaving the attraction I was left with some disheartening questions. Is Pennhurst Asylum perpetuating harmful stereotypes of mentally and physically disabled individuals? The entire attraction is themed around scary and dangerous mental patients; what does that say about the people who lived and suffered at Pennhurst State School? Is Pennhurst Asylum commoditizing the memory and history of Pennhurst State School? Are historic artifacts being used to promote a pseudo history - a version of Pennhurst State School that is acceptable to laugh at?

According to the American Alliance of Museums, "Americans view museums as one of the most important resources for educating our children and as one of the most trustworthy sources of objective information."<sup>8</sup> To me, this means that Americans trust museums as sources for accurate information about the past, and many museums rely on curated artifacts to convey a particular message which is supported by evidence. Do Americans rely on artifacts as a bridge between the present and the past? Perhaps, and if this is the case, then is Pennhurst Asylum, though not a museum, cashing in on that trust by using historic artifacts to promote a false narrative about Pennhurst State School?

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<sup>8</sup> American Alliance of Museums, "Museum Facts," AAM, Accessed Feb. 16, 2017. <http://aam-us.org/about-museums/museum-facts>.

## CHAPTER 2

### A Brief History of Pennhurst State School

Pennhurst State School and Hospital began as The Eastern Pennsylvania Institution for the Feeble-Minded and Epileptic, through an act of the Pennsylvania General Assembly.<sup>9</sup> The first buildings were constructed between 1903 and 1908, and the institution housed 547 patients by May 31, 1914.<sup>10</sup> Despite abuse scandals and public outcry, Pennhurst State School and Hospital remained operational until 1987.<sup>11</sup> Building upon a movement started by “devoted Quakers, abolitionists, and fierce individualists,” at the turn of the twentieth century, scientists, medical professionals, and educators began an effort to establish hospitals and indoor relief to help the people newly classified as “feeble-minded” or those with “mental defects.”<sup>12</sup> However, their method of

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<sup>9</sup> This act is an appropriations bill which allocated money to purchase the land on which Pennhurst was built and the cost of the first buildings. Act of May 15, 1903, General Assembly of Pennsylvania, P.L. 415.

<sup>10</sup> John Gregory Pirmann, *Pennhurst State School and Hospital* (Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia, 2015), 9. Gregory Pirmann was a Pennhurst employee from 1969 to 1986, part of a 38-year career in the field. Pirmann is also a founding member of the Pennhurst Memorial and Preservation Alliance (PMPA); a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting an understanding of the struggle for dignity and full civil rights for persons with disabilities, using the little-known history at Pennhurst. The PMPA seeks to educate citizens in local, national and international communities on the history of Pennhurst. I have worked with the PMPA board on both securing primary sources for this study, as well as working with their archival collection from Pennhurst State School. Many of the primary sources detailed in Pirmann's book can be found in the PMPA's archival collection upon request. Herman P. Miller, and W. Harry Baker, *Smull's Legislative Handbook and Manual of the State of Pennsylvania - 1914* (USA: WM Stanley Ray, 1914), 185.

<sup>11</sup> PMPA, “Pennhurst Timeline,” [www.preservepennhurst.org](http://www.preservepennhurst.org).

<sup>12</sup> George W. Paulson, *Closing the Asylums: Causes and Consequences of the Deinstitutionalization Movement* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 29.

classification, meant to reform and improve care, lead to the isolation of the physically and mentally disabled from the rest of society. This separation served the dual purposes of protecting the feeble-minded from society, and protecting society from what these professionals perceived as dangerous defects. According to *Smull's Legislative Handbook and Manual of the State of Pennsylvania*, the Pennsylvania assemblymen intended for Pennhurst to educate, house, and care for mentally and physically disabled children of the commonwealth,<sup>13</sup> seeking to remedy the fact that, for disabled children, "existing schools were insufficient in teaching the skills needed to fit into a changing society."<sup>14</sup>

Before continuing with the discussion of the history of Pennhurst State School or institutionalization in early twentieth century America, we must first discuss language and disability. When writing about people with disabilities, language can serve as a form of empowerment, or continued oppression. The language used to discuss disabilities in public, private, in schools and in politics has changed substantially since the opening of Pennhurst State School. Pennhurst pamphlets and documents referred to those who lived at Pennhurst as "defective children, children, and patients."<sup>15</sup> During this time, government agencies and policies regularly referred to people with disabilities as retarded, imbeciles, crippled, and defects.<sup>16</sup> This language has since been changed to

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<sup>13</sup> Herman P. Miller, and W. Harry Baker, *Smull's Legislative Handbook and Manual of the State of Pennsylvania - 1914* (USA: WM Stanley Ray, 1914), 185.

<sup>14</sup> Pirmann, *Pennhurst State School and Hospital*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> William A. Phillips, *Pennhurst State School - 1954 Parents' Informational Pamphlet* (Harrisburg, PA: The Telegraph Press, 1954), 26.

<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to note that in local newspapers, individuals at Pennhurst were referred to by different names in different reported scenarios. For example, in articles about the schooling of the children, they were called *pupils*. In reports of misconduct towards the individuals, they were called *residents* and *patients*. However, in reports of escapes or



reflect the current disabilities rights movement and our expanded understanding of the nature of human difference.<sup>17</sup> The term defective, and also disability, often connotes a medical-terminology connection which can demote people to merely patients, or merely medically flawed. The issue with conflating the term *disability* with a medical significance is that it casts human variation as “deviance from the norm, as deficit, and as an individual burden and personal tragedy.”<sup>18</sup> Medicalization of the term disability also connotes that a disabled person’s condition can be “treated” in a medical sense, when today, many in the disability rights movement and others believe that the social and cultural stigmas which constrict the lives of those with disabilities is what should be “treated,” and cured.

The idea of “deviance from the norm” is quite problematic for those with disabilities as it has been used to describe those *with* and *without* disabilities. In the social sciences, normal and abnormal are both terms which embed value.<sup>19</sup> Often, those deemed *abnormal* are devalued. For example, someone with a far below average IQ and someone with a far above average IQ are both technically not normal, but only one of those people is labeled *abnormal* and potentially disabled; they are dis- (not) able to process

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"patient on patient" abuse, they were called *inmates*. Perhaps the term "inmate" furthered the stereotype of the disabled as dangerous. "Escaped Patient Found Dead." *Daily Local News* (West Chester), February 23, 1909. "Facing Trial in Inmates' Escape." *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 5, 1949. "Newspaper Clipping Photograph. Residents... Watch Classmates Dance Around Maypole." *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, June 1, 1949.

<sup>17</sup> Michelle Diamant, "Obama Signs Bill Replacing 'Mental Retardation' With 'Intellectual Disability,'" *Disability Scoop*, October 11, 2010. Accessed March 01, 2017. <https://www.disabilityscoop.com/2010/10/05/obama-signs-rosas-law/10547/>.

<sup>18</sup> Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 11.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

information in the same way as the “average” person being measured for intelligence. In spite of this “measurable” medical model of disability, “in which the individual was often reduced to the sum of his or her dysfunctional parts, disability rights has been an identity movement.”<sup>20</sup> Because of this movement towards reclaiming the right of self-identification, whenever possible I will use the term “individual” when referring to those formerly reduced to “patients, children [adults were also characterized this way], and defects.” However, at times it is key to use the term patient in reference to those forced into institutionalization because the historical term “patient” gives insight into the way in which they were treated.

On the surface, the idea of an institution devoted to helping the "feeble-minded" was a significant shift in the mission of the previous century's almshouses and asylums.<sup>21</sup> The institutions that preceded it were meant for the poor, the sick, petty criminals, and others who were deemed outcasts often poorly served those who were deemed unfit elsewhere in society. However, as the century progressed, “State Schools,” as they came to be called, became overpopulated and the attention of the staff shifted from education to control and separation. It should be noted that institutions for the "feeble-minded" have had the reputation of housing abused and "forgotten children" since the beginning of the

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<sup>20</sup> Jay Timothy Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric*, (Syracuse University Press, 2016), 94.

<sup>21</sup> An interesting book which has informed this chapter as well as chapter 3 is *Prisons, Asylums, and the Public - Institutional Visiting in the Nineteenth Century* by Janet Miron. This book explores visitation and institutional conditions in Canada and the United States throughout the nineteenth century. This book was a great resource for learning about the culture of institutionalization prior to the period in which Pennhurst was operational. There is a difference between the treatment of patients prior to 1900 and after 1900 to about the late 1960s.

twentieth century.<sup>22</sup> In the words of Gregory Pirmann, a 17-year employee of Pennhurst State School and disability rights advocate, the mission of State Schools like Pennhurst was:

first to protect [those with disabilities] from those who would take advantage of them and then, more insidiously, to protect society from those who were seen as the cause of many problems of society. The so-called best minds of the late 19th century became convinced that poverty, crime, prostitution, and drunkenness were caused by "mental defect." Removing the "defectives" from society and preventing their procreation would certainly solve 'the problem of the feeble-minded' for all time and, while doing so, would also cure the ills of society for which they were being blamed.<sup>23</sup>

Pennhurst was built on isolated farmland, land that would be worked by the individuals who lived at Pennhurst. It became a self-sustaining campus, supported entirely by unpaid labor of its residents. By 1954, 85 boys were trained in this enterprise and farmed 360 acres of land with the aid of 12 Pennhurst employees; the farm consisted of a dairy, piggery, hennery, garden, orchard, and fields for wheat, barley, and corn.<sup>24</sup> The "employed" Pennhurst residents also participated in basket weaving, mattress making, and shoe repair. These products and services were sold on the campus without compensation for individuals' labor.<sup>25</sup> Although peonage was outlawed by Congress in 1867, institutional peonage, the unpaid or forced labor by "patients" or "inmates" in a

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<sup>22</sup>James W. Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Intellectual Disability in The United States*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 266.

<sup>23</sup> Pirmann, *Pennhurst State School and Hospital*, 7.

<sup>24</sup> William A. Phillips, *Pennhurst State School - 1954 Parents' Informational Pamphlet* (Harrisburg, PA: The Telegraph Press, 1954), 26.

<sup>25</sup> PMPA, "Pennhurst Industries," [www.preservepennhurst.org](http://www.preservepennhurst.org). See also, Pirmann, John Gregory. *Pennhurst State School and Hospital*. (Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia, 2015), 53.

state mental institution, was still legal.<sup>26</sup> The Pennsylvania General Assembly outlawed institutional peonage with the Institutional Peonage Abolishment Act of 1973.<sup>27</sup>

Pennhurst residents experienced isolation, alienation, and neglect within the institution. Individuals at Pennhurst dealt with restraints and punitive isolation, unsanitary and crowded living conditions, and virtually no privacy.<sup>28</sup> Today, Pennhurst has become widely known for the abuses that took place behind closed doors - made known through documentaries like *I Go Home* (2016) and TV specials like *Suffer The Little Children* (1968), and academic dissertations like *The Birth of a Haunted "Asylum": Public Memory and Community Storytelling*, by Kelly George.<sup>29</sup> [IMAGE 4]. Local newspapers like the *Spring City Reporter*, the *Phoenixville Daily Republican*, and the *West Chester Daily Local News* have been reporting on abuse and misconduct at Pennhurst since 1909, only months after the opening of the institution. [IMAGE 5]. There were reports of abuse, mysterious causes of deaths, "escapes," and even murders at Pennhurst during every decade the institution was open. In 1909 the Superintendent, Dr. Henry M. Weeks, was charged with misconduct and negligence after the scalding to death of a male "inmate"

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<sup>26</sup> *Peonage Abolition Act of 1867*, Public Law 187, 39th Cong., 2d sess. (March 2, 1867), codified at 42 U.S.C. § 1994 (2012).

<sup>27</sup> S.B. 731, 1973-74 Reg. Sess., Gen. Ass. (Pa. 1973).

<sup>28</sup> *Halderman v. Pennhurst State School & Hosp.*, 446 F. Supp. 1295, 1308 (E.D. Pa. 1978).

<sup>29</sup> *I Go Home*, (2016), Retrieved January, 2017, from <http://video.witf.org/video/2365712709>; Bill Baldini, *Suffer the Little Children* [Television Special], NBC 10, 1968. Kelly George has written a profound dissertation on Pennhurst's role in disability politics and the creation of community memory. For more information about Pennhurst State School within the fields of Memory Studies and Disability Studies, see: Kelly George, *The Birth of a Haunted "Asylum": Public Memory and Community Storytelling*, PhD diss., Temple University, 2014, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Libraries, 2014. 1-243.

and a diphtheria outbreak during which over 40 patients were stricken with the disease.<sup>30</sup> Dr. Weeks was also charged with intoxication while at the hospital, and turning a blind eye while attendants whipped and beat patients. In 1937 an attendant was charged with manslaughter after beating a fifteen year old patient to death.<sup>31</sup> In 1956, the body of a seventeen year old male resident was found after he drowned in the Schuylkill River, a short distance from Pennhurst.<sup>32</sup> In 1969, the death of a patient was investigated after she died from being plunged into a scalding hot bath tub by another patient.<sup>33</sup> These are just a few of the reported incidents at Pennhurst State School, which make the attraction at the school that much more shocking.

This notorious history of abuse also became well documented within the legal world. In a way, the abuses at Pennhurst can also be credited for breaking new ground in disability advocacy through court cases which resulted in changing public policy regarding the treatment of people with disabilities. Court cases involving abuse at Pennhurst have even reached the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1974, the civil rights case *Halderman v. Pennhurst State School* was filed in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania by a the mother of a Pennhurst resident. The case was tried in

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<sup>30</sup> "Beatings Are Charged," *Daily Local News* (West Chester), September 17, 1909. Chester County Historical Society Library, E. Vincent Twn. Institutions Newspaper Clippings File.

<sup>31</sup> Newspaper Clipping, *Daily Republican* (Phoenixville), January 7, 1937. Chester County Historical Society Library, E. Vincent Twn. Institutions Newspaper Clippings File.

<sup>32</sup> Newspaper Clipping, *Coatesville Record*, June 11, 1956. Chester County Historical Society Library, E. Vincent Twn. Institutions Newspaper Clippings File.

<sup>33</sup> Newspaper Clipping, *Daily Local News* (West Chester), April 17, 1969. Chester County Historical Society Library, E. Vincent Twn. Institutions Newspaper Clippings File.

1977 and resulted in a ruling that argued that the forced institutionalization of persons with disabilities is unconstitutional. "The District Court determined that Pennhurst provided 'such a dangerous, miserable environment for its residents that many of them actually suffered physical deterioration and intellectual regression during their stay at the institution.'"<sup>34</sup> The case eventually reached the United States Supreme Court in 1981, and led to the closure of Pennhurst in 1987.

For the purpose of this study, it is important to note that many of the abuse cases at Pennhurst have a common theme of objects and tools being used to carry out the abuse. Individuals were attacked by other patients, and were hit using belts and restraints. Even a rare visit from the dentist could result in extreme pain for the patients (many of whom were nonverbal), especially considering the poor oral hygiene found with many patients.<sup>35</sup> Two particular objects, which play a large role in the imagery at Pennhurst Asylum, are cuff restraints and straightjackets. The following is excerpted from the complaint in *Halderman v. Pennhurst*, the District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania case:

At Pennhurst, restraints are used as control measures in lieu of adequate staffing. Restraints can be either physical or chemical. The physical restraints range from placing the individual into a seclusion room to binding the person's hands or ankles with muffs or poseys, and binding the individual to a bed or a chair. Chemical restraints are usually psychotropic (i. e., tranquilizing) drugs. An extreme example was a female resident who, during the month of June 1976, was in a physical restraint for 651 hours 5 minutes; for the month of August, 1976, was in physical restraints for 720 hours; during September, 1976, was in physical restraints for 674 hours 20 minutes; and during the month of October, 1976, was in physical restraints for 647 hours 5 minutes. (Matthews, Deposition at 64-68). This

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<sup>34</sup> *Halderman v. Pennhurst State School & Hosp.*, 995 F. Supp. 534 (E.D. Pa. 1998).

<sup>35</sup> First Amended Complaint at \*8, *Halderman v. Pennhurst State School and Hosp.*, No. CIV. A. 74-1345, (E.D. Pa. July 29, 1974).

resident was so extremely self-destructive she totally blinded herself. She was not enrolled in occupational therapy until early 1977. Once initiated, her programming has apparently been quite successful, and she is now able to be out of restraints for as much as four hours per day. (Foster, N.T. 23-43). Had this programming been initiated earlier, her self-inflicted injuries might have been avoided or at least lessened.<sup>36</sup>

The use of restraints as abuse played a large role in the *Halderman v. Pennhurst* case and was unfortunately just one of many accounts of abuse at Pennhurst. After the abolishment of institutional peonage via the Institutional Peonage Abolishment Act of 1973, new psychiatric medication, and more academics calling for deinstitutionalization, Pennhurst's numbers dwindled.<sup>37</sup> Residents were accepted in smaller numbers and others were slowly transferred to other institutions or were released to the care of group homes or family members. Pennhurst did not receive enough state or federal funding to cover the expenses of the institution, and without the unpaid labor of the residents the campus could not sustain itself.

While Pennhurst remained abandoned, a local non-profit preservation alliance was formed in 2008 with the mission "to promote an understanding of the struggle for dignity and full civil rights for persons with disabilities, using the little-known history at Pennhurst."<sup>38</sup> This preservation alliance, the Pennhurst Memorial and Preservation Alliance (PMPA), has had two main goals from its beginning: "to remember the people of Pennhurst and to encourage the preservation and reuse of the campus."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *Halderman v. Pennhurst State School & Hosp.*, 446 F. Supp. 1295, 1308 (E.D. Pa. 1978)

<sup>37</sup> S.B. 731, 1973-74 Reg. Sess., Gen. Ass. (Pa. 1973).

<sup>38</sup> PMPA, "About Pennhurst State School and Hospital," [www.preservepennhurst.org](http://www.preservepennhurst.org).

<sup>39</sup> Pirmann, *Pennhurst State School and Hospital*, 127.

Today, the PMPA has a six year plan to restore the superintendent's residence and transform it into a research center and museum. To reach this goal, the PMPA members have taken on graduate level interns to tackle their archival collection, are taking the necessary steps to acquire the deed to the Superintendent's House, and are currently in discussion with state legislators to ensure that they will get the votes needed to take ownership of the house. The PMPA also regularly works with other professionals in the field about topics like fundraising, grant writing, and strategic planning. For example, at the October 2016 board meeting, public historian, author, and museum consultant, Brent Glass, met with the PMPA to discuss next steps with public relations, the possible ownership of the superintendent's house, and collection management best practices. Currently, the PMPA has a traveling exhibit about the history of Pennhurst and Disability Rights Advocacy and has been displayed at over thirty-five colleges, universities, professional conferences, historical societies and museums. Most recently, the exhibit was at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia in June 2016, and was also exhibited at the Russell Senate Office Building rotunda in Washington, D.C. during the same month.<sup>40</sup> [IMAGE 5].

The PMPA board is an impressive collection of professionals in the fields of psychology, history, public history, museum professionals, disability rights advocacy, and local government. Many members of the board and its advisory council have a long

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<sup>40</sup> The PMPA graciously provided me with their verified Google Calendar which documents the previous and future sites where their traveling exhibit is displayed. Unfortunately I cannot cite their private document here, but all information regarding the PMPA's calendar of events and exhibits can be requested through their website: <http://www.preservepennhurst.org>. I have also attached an image I captured myself of the PMPA traveling exhibit when it was at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia over the Summer of 2016. [IMAGE 5].



and personal connection to Pennhurst; among them are former employees and family members of former Pennhurst residents. Additionally, Pennhurst holds the title of an International Site of Conscience through a membership in the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, "a worldwide network of historic sites specifically dedicated to remembering struggles for justice."<sup>41</sup> The PMPA would like to see Pennhurst's campus used as a community-centered historic site as well as a memorial to those who suffered, lived, and died there.

In 2007, the state approved the division of the property for private sale. As a result, the entire "Lower Campus" of Pennhurst was next sold to a private buyer in 2008. The private buyer opened the "Pennhurst Asylum" haunted attraction in 2010.<sup>42</sup> Pennhurst Asylum was designed and constructed by Bates Motel Productions, LLC, a company by Randy Bates of the nearby and highly successful The Bates Motel & Haunted Hayride Halloween attraction in Glen Mills, Pennsylvania.<sup>43</sup> Bates and former owner Tim Smith "preserved" Pennhurst by replacing the roofs of many buildings, adding new flooring, new windows, and "preserving" the walls of Pennhurst by coating them with a barrier sealant.<sup>44</sup> Bates and Smith also added animatronics, flashing and colored lights, speakers, new wiring, and smoke/fog machines. It is possible that this type

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<sup>41</sup> Sites of Conscience, "Pennhurst Memorial and Preservation Alliance (USA)," Accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.sitesofconscience.org/en/membership/pennhurst-memorial-and-preservation-alliance>.

<sup>42</sup> PMPA, "About Pennhurst State School and Hospital," [www.preservepennhurst.org](http://www.preservepennhurst.org).

<sup>43</sup> Anthony R. Wood, "In Chester County, suit seeks to stop 'Pennhurst Asylum'," *Philadelphia Inquirer* [Philadelphia, PA], September 22, 2010, *Biography in Context* (accessed March 20, 2017). [http://link.galegroup.com.libproxy.temple.edu/apps/doc/A237578077/BIC1?u=temple\\_main&xid=eb86105a](http://link.galegroup.com.libproxy.temple.edu/apps/doc/A237578077/BIC1?u=temple_main&xid=eb86105a).

<sup>44</sup> "History - Pennhurst Asylum," <http://pennhurstasylum.com/history>.

of alteration might be detrimental to the preservation of a historic building. In mid-2016, Pennhurst Asylum was purchased by a new company headed by Derek Strine. Under these owners since 2010, each fall the Pennhurst Asylum has featured actors in costumes and makeup portraying nurses, doctors, and psychiatric patients.

### CHAPTER 3

#### Objects of Terror

According to the Pennhurst Asylum website, the attraction is a hospital themed walk-through attraction "featuring many items and artifacts that were part of the original State School."<sup>45</sup> The advertising for Pennhurst Asylum, whether through radio ads or their website, is quite unabashed about the use of historic artifacts. In November 2016 Derek Strine, one of the members of the LLC that owns Pennhurst Asylum, confirmed the use of medical artifacts in the attraction, as well as objects like tables, desks, and office supplies. The haunted attraction includes a "museum" housed in one a separate building, and it is only open during the same fall season. This museum houses objects that are similar to the objects used within the attraction: medical instruments, equipment, and office furniture and equipment. Quotation marks are being used around "museum" to draw attention to the use of the term museum; I believe the "museum" area of Pennhurst Asylum does not fit the definition of a museum due to the lack of professional care or interpretation of the artifacts on display. The site's managers have placed investing in a professional exhibition low on the list of their priorities, falling well below the task of stabilizing additional buildings for use and general operational expenses.

It is important here think through the reasons the attraction uses recovered historic objects. Many of the popular haunted house attractions in the Philadelphia area were built with the intention of being a haunted house. Sites like Bates Motel in Glen Mills, Jason's Woods in Lancaster, and Horrorfest in Yardley are seasonal haunted attractions that are

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<sup>45</sup> "About Pennhurst Asylum - Pennsylvania's Scariest Haunt," [pennhurstasylum.com/about](http://pennhurstasylum.com/about).

essentially temporary and are taken down during the rest of the year. These attractions use props and actors, and set up a fictitious theme with no real local or historical connections. Although this is the norm, there are also attractions which attempt to make deeper connections to local history. These include Eastern State Penitentiary and the Fright Factory, both located in Philadelphia city limits.<sup>46</sup> Eastern State's *Terror Behind the Walls* transforms a nineteenth century prison into a haunted attraction during the Halloween season, but goes to great lengths to disconnect from the history of the prison itself. The attraction does this by avoiding prison themes and using only fake props. Fright Factory plays up the fact that the attraction is situated inside a 105 year old warehouse in the city, but also sticks to typical Halloween and horror themes inside the attraction.<sup>47</sup><sup>48</sup> This stands in stark contrast to Pennhurst Asylum's approach and underscores the extent to which Pennhurst strays from the local norm of haunted attractions. Pennhurst Asylum uses this unique aspect (using real artifacts inside historic buildings) to attract patrons. By using historic objects recovered from the campus, using the historic buildings, and keeping the name "Pennhurst" for the attraction, Pennhurst Asylum intentionally engages with the history of Pennhurst State School. [IMAGE 6].

The interpretation at Pennhurst Asylum begins with the use of artifacts recovered from the campus in the attraction. The use of historic artifacts in non-museum spaces,

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<sup>46</sup> According to The Fright Factory's Facebook page, the attraction opened in 2001. [https://www.facebook.com/pg/FrightFactoryPA/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/FrightFactoryPA/about/?ref=page_internal)

<sup>47</sup> Fright Factory, "Fright Factory FAQ," <http://frightfactory.tv/faq>.

<sup>48</sup> For more information about the "theme" of Eastern State Penitentiary's *Terror Behind the Walls*, consult their website at <https://www.easternstate.org/halloween>, or see Seth C. Bruggeman, "Reforming the Carceral Past: Eastern State Penitentiary and the Challenge of the Twenty-First-Century Prison Museum," *Radical History Review* 113 (2012).

such as bringing together art and historic objects or theatrical performances at historic sites, can be thought-provoking and complex. Pennhurst Asylum offers experiences with historic objects while uncritically calling upon the objects and the history of the site at the same time. By creating an attraction that connects with and plays off of the real horrific events at Pennhurst State School, Pennhurst Asylum equates the suffering of the individuals at Pennhurst with entertainment. Similarly, Pennhurst Asylum draws on local and national urban legends about asylums, popular horror TV shows like *American Horror Story: Asylum* (2012), and stereotypes of the mentally and physically disabled to make a profit.

The placement of objects into museums usually means that the objects are to be protected both physically and ideologically. They are physically protected through professional preservation and conservation efforts, and ideologically protected through the standards and best practices of collections managers, curators and historians alike. Objects are powerful; they have the ability to convey messages and emotions through their display and interpretation. The work done by museum professionals acts as a mediator between the objects themselves and the viewer. The messages conveyed through displayed objects can be changed and curated in new ways at different times and at different institutions. This shows the importance of institutional best practices and standards like those outlined by the American Alliance of Museums and museum accreditation programs. Context matters when displaying objects and the narrative, signage, setting, and groupings of the objects can completely change the message being conveyed by an exhibit space.

If we imagine Pennhurst Asylum as the exhibit space, the historic objects there are not the centerpiece, but they help to convey a fictional message invented by the creators of the attraction. Pennhurst Asylum could be imagined as an exhibit space because it is a place where historic objects are indeed displayed and interpreted through the performance happening around the objects; a space can be considered an exhibition even when the information being conveyed is not backed by historical evidence. Pennhurst Asylum presents historic artifacts without context and promotes an inaccurate historical understanding of both Pennhurst State School and institutionalization in the 1950s and 1960s. By reducing the historic objects to props, the objects become a mere means to an end. Judging from the decor, costumes, and props within Pennhurst Asylum, the chosen “period of significance” for the attraction is the 1960s. Notably, this is a significant period in Pennhurst State School's history and is perhaps the period for which it is most widely known. In 1968 Philadelphia reporter Bill Baldini premiered his expose *Suffer The Little Children* on NBC10; the groundbreaking report exposed the horrendous conditions and abuse at Pennhurst. Today at Pennhurst Asylum, medical instruments from the campus are placed in torture rooms, office supplies are placed in a doctor's office, and 1960s decor appears throughout the attraction.

The first building open for the attraction and arguably the most popular, is the Administration Building; this building houses the main Pennhurst Asylum walk-through attraction. Aside from the historic artifacts displayed throughout the main attraction, there are also artifacts housed in other buildings on the campus. Some buildings remain closed because they are beyond repair and unsafe for visitors and others are slowly being stabilized and opened for visitors. In total, the Pennhurst Asylum haunted attraction

includes: Pennhurst Asylum, a walk-through haunted house inside the Administration Building, The Dungeon of Lost Souls inside a separate building, The Tunnel Terror located in underground tunnels which connect multiple buildings on the campus, and Ghost Hunt inside the Mayflower building.<sup>49</sup> According to Pennhurst Asylum's website, "Ghost Hunt is a self guided tour of the Mayflower Building, featured on *Ghost Adventures* and *Ghost Hunters*. Armed with only a flashlight, visitors wander through the dormitory, left just as it was 26 years ago, and search for spirits on their own."<sup>50</sup> The information offered on the website about the Ghost Hunt makes no mention of the "museum" inside the building.<sup>51</sup> Based on what is in the Administration Building, the historic photos of Pennhurst State School, online reviews of the site, and knowledge of the types of workshops and medical care that was provided at Pennhurst, the assumption can be made that the museum holds medical devices, equipment like wheelchairs and restraints, and office equipment like desks and typewriters.<sup>52</sup> Using the term "museum" plays off of visitors' prior knowledge of what museums are and do. By borrowing this term, the space at Pennhurst Asylum takes on the authority of a professional institution

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<sup>49</sup> "About Pennhurst Asylum - Pennsylvania's Scariest Haunt," [pennhurstasylum.com/about](http://pennhurstasylum.com/about).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> There are no signs for the museum at the attraction, and no trace of it on the website. Because of the lack of advertisement for the museum area, I unfortunately did not buy a ticket for the Ghost Hunt attraction at Pennhurst Asylum. I have only heard about the museum from Pennhurst Preservation and Memorial Alliance co-President Jim Conroy, and from owner Derek Strine. Because I have not visited the museum room myself, I can only make an educated guess as to what is housed there.

<sup>52</sup> For instance see Oni Hartstein's review, "Spring City, Pennsylvania Haunted Attractions: Pennhurst Asylum 2014 review Pt. 1 – The Pennhurst Museum," *Oni Hartstein*, September 30, 2014. <http://www.onezumiverse.com/2014/09/spring-city-pennsylvania-haunted-attractions-pennhurst-asylum-2014-review-pt-1-the-pennhurst-museum/>

without any of the work. This means that the visitors assume the objects are taken care of in best practice standards and that they are curated with careful thought. Although many scholars would not consider the room of objects inside Pennhurst Asylum to be a museum, there are examples of assumed non-museum spaces acting as exhibit spaces; this goes beyond a discussion of accredited museum vs. non accredited museums.

There is indeed a world of thoughtful and intelligent exhibitions beyond professionalized history museums. Historian Tammy S. Gordon's book *Private History in Public: Exhibition and the Settings of Everyday Life* explores the exhibit of cultural artifacts in places that are accessible to all Americans: exhibitions of photos and artifacts on the walls of mom & pop restaurants, showcases and models in firehouses and small businesses, and tiny local heritage museums and house museums. Gordon categorizes these spaces as "vernacular exhibitions," "entrepreneurial exhibitions," and local heritage museums. Gordon writes that visitors like the honest and local perspective behind these exhibitions, and they don't mind interacting with history without all the Disney-style high-end deliverables.<sup>53</sup>

Small community history interpretations have their place within the exhibition world, a place that is appreciated by the visitor and seems to give a less-mediated interpretation of the past. While there may be room for such vernacular displays, historians must take a stand against exhibitions like those at Pennhurst Asylum. Pennhurst Asylum and its "museum" go beyond the vernacular exhibit, in which, as Gordon explains, the visitor does not break with his or her everyday life in order to experience the exhibit. Nor does the site present an academic exhibition, or an

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<sup>53</sup> Tammy S. Gordon, *Private History in Public: Exhibition and the Settings of Everyday Life*, (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2010), 77.



entrepreneurial exhibition.<sup>54</sup> Owner Derek Strine has even expressed interest in one day keeping the Pennhurst Asylum “museum” open year-round, but for now it remains just another aspect of the Halloween-centric Pennhurst Asylum.<sup>55</sup> Whether this happens or not, currently the objects used at each of the buildings at Pennhurst Asylum are subject to what most collections managers would consider terrible conditions for museum objects.

Once an object is accessioned into a professional museum's collection, it is placed in conditions that are considered standard for all objects in the museum. When it comes to best practices of exhibition, this encompasses best practices in care and in interpretation. Best practices in interpretation and display are discussed throughout this study, but it is important to highlight some key issues in exhibiting psychiatric materials within this best practices section. A key text which explores this issue is *Exhibiting Madness in Museums: Remembering Psychiatry through Collections and Display*, edited by Catharine Coleborne and Dolly MacKinnon. In the piece *Remembering Goodna: Stories from a Queensland Mental Hospital*, by Joanna Besley and Mark Finnane, the role of visitors and former patients alike are explored within the exhibition process. By partnering with former Queensland Mental Hospital patients for artifacts and their stories, the Museum of Brisbane was able to use the Community Collections approach to bring together a unique first-person perspective with the professional museum exhibition process.

While it is innovative to work with former patients on an exhibit about the hospital they stayed in, it is important to remember that for the former patients, reliving

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Phone conversation with Derek Strine on November 4, 2016.

their experiences may result in re-traumatisation through the reliving of difficult and painful memories. Displaying psychiatric materials may be triggering for some viewers and community members; because of this, it is essential to sensitively display these materials and to also place signage for mental health, suicide prevention, and psychiatric care hotlines in the museum or exhibit brochure if possible. Despite the difficulty in reliving painful pasts, many of the participants at the Museum of Brisbane acknowledged that this project allowed for an opportunity for mourning in a context of public acknowledgement.<sup>56</sup> They felt that they were speaking not only for themselves, but also for "previous generations who were silenced in the historical record."<sup>57</sup> Wherever the artifacts at Pennhurst end up, it is important to be aware of what has and has not worked for other institutions and museums when displaying psychiatric artifacts.

The way museum professionals are trained in the best practices for physical collection care varies slightly at different types of museums; but basic safety requirements for the objects' environment are fairly uniform. The nature of Pennhurst Asylum presents some challenging preservation issues. The care of the collection seems to go hand in hand with the narrative at Pennhurst Asylum. The historic artifacts (the props), the condition of the buildings (the set), and the narrative (the performance) all work together to create Pennhurst Asylum. While it is pressing to discuss the issues with the use of historic artifacts to perform an inaccurate historical understanding of Pennhurst State School, it is even more urgent to discuss the physical condition of those artifacts.

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<sup>56</sup> Joanna Besley, and Mark Finnane, "Remembering Goodna," In *Exhibiting Madness in Museums: Remembering Psychiatry through Collections and Display*, 116-36, New York, NY: Routledge , 2011. 124.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 125.

The artifacts at Pennhurst Asylum remain as some of very few objects left from the facility; in many ways, these artifacts act as a final connection to the history of Pennhurst, which grows more and more distant. Reviewing best practices for object storage, display, and handling will give context for the preservation issues at Pennhurst Asylum, and will also provide educational resources for Pennhurst Asylum.

The objects function together as a collection and serve the purpose of continuing and pushing forward the narrative set by the creators of Pennhurst Asylum. The environment the artifacts are housed in is subject to temperature change, humidity change, and plenty of dust and vibration. These are just some of the preservation issues within the historic buildings that the collection is kept in, and each of these issues cause different problems for the preservation of historic artifacts. In order to meet museum standards, the first thing Pennhurst Asylum would have to work toward is gaining intellectual control of their collection.

Pennhurst Asylum's current owner, Derek Strine, is unaware of how many artifacts are used in the attraction, and he currently has no inventory of objects, props, or collection items.<sup>58</sup> Unfortunately, many small museums and historical societies do not know the full extent of their collections or have a backlog of objects to accession and catalog. Gaining what collections managers call “intellectual” control is all about accountability. "Accountability includes knowing every object in a collection, including its exact legal status, location, condition and history, how it is researched and how it is to

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<sup>58</sup> Phone conversation with Derek Strine on November 4, 2016.

be stored or exhibited."<sup>59</sup> The first step in gaining intellectual control over a collection is to find out exactly what the institution has and whether the organization has either legal ownership or stewardship over its collection items.

The cornerstone of museum collections management is accessibility. According to the American Alliance of Museums, "collections are held in trust for the public and made accessible for the public's benefit. Effective collections stewardship ensures that the objects the museum owns, borrows, holds in its custody and/or uses are available and accessible to present and future generations."<sup>60</sup> Without first knowing the full extent of an institution's collection, there cannot be accessibility within the institution. Once an institution, or Pennhurst Asylum, gains intellectual control over their collection, they can then assess the next steps towards preservation and conservation efforts, and then take on exhibition design and research for a museum, which is perhaps the most common way to make the collection as accessible to the public.

Once Pennhurst Asylum gains intellectual control over their collection of found artifacts, the next issue to address is the environment in which the objects are housed. If the objects are stored in the same buildings where they are displayed during the open season during the off-season, this would mean that they are exposed to problems like extreme fluctuations in temperature and humidity during weather and seasonal changes. The most important - and the most variable - factors at Pennhurst are light, temperature, humidity, and vibration levels. Starting with temperature and humidity, it is important to

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<sup>59</sup> Rebecca A. Buck, and Jean Allman Gilmore, *Collection conundrums: solving collections management mysteries*, Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 2007, 79.

<sup>60</sup> American Alliance of Museums, "Museum Standards and Best Practices," <http://www.aam-us.org>.

understand why these factors can be detrimental to historic objects. According to the National Park Service (NPS)'s *Museum Handbook*, "biological activity increases at warmer temperatures. Insects will eat more and breed faster, and mold will grow faster within certain temperature ranges. At high temperatures materials can soften, wax may sag or collect dust more easily on soft surfaces, adhesives can fail, lacquers and magnetic tape may become sticky."<sup>61</sup>

The same issues apply to relative humidity. Increased humidity can cause warping of objects and the spread of mold. In exhibit and storage spaces, where the institution must consider both the safety of the objects and the comfort of visitors and employees, the NPS recommends: "18-20° C (64-68° F). Temperature should not exceed 24° C (75° F)."<sup>62</sup> The agency urges institutions to keep temperatures as level as possible, and to avoid large fluctuations in temperature. "Fluctuating temperatures can cause materials to expand and contract rapidly, setting up destructive stresses in the object. If objects are stored outside, repeated freezing and thawing can cause damage."<sup>63</sup> Without careful monitoring of these issues, the objects found at Pennhurst State School may be rapidly deteriorating.

To monitor these environmental factors, museums use HVAC systems and "Tinytags," which are physical data loggers attached to collections items that alert the

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<sup>61</sup> National Park Service. "The Museum Collections Environment." *NPS Museum Handbook 1* (1999): 1-54. Accessed Nov. 28, 2016. <https://www.nps.gov/museum/publications/MHI/CHAPTER4.pdf>. 10.

<sup>62</sup> National Park Service, "The Museum Collections Environment," *NPS Museum Handbook 1* (1999): 1-54, Accessed Nov. 28, 2016. <https://www.nps.gov/museum/publications/MHI/CHAPTER4.pdf>. 10.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

system if there are any variations from the set temperature and humidity used most often in display cases or other storage areas. These systems are installed to prevent deterioration of historic objects. Although Pennhurst Asylum is an attraction, it would be possible to install these systems and to regulate some of the environmental factors affecting the objects at the attraction. Heavy visitor traffic and displaying artifacts in old or unstable buildings are issues that frequently affect successful small and large public museums.

In addition to humidity and temperature issues, another problematic environmental factor at Pennhurst Asylum is vibration. Vibration and movement can harm objects which are particularly fragile. Vibration can weaken already fragile joints on objects, loosen paint pigments or rust, and can cause an object to topple - which could damage an object itself or objects around it.<sup>64</sup> Vibration is a serious concern for the objects at Pennhurst Asylum because it is a walk-through attraction, with both the visitors and the actors on foot in the buildings. The visitors and actors run and jump throughout the attraction on a mix of new and original flooring. Historic wooden floorboards become weak and pliable under foot, making vibration that much more common within the buildings. Vibration is an environmental problem which can be solved through purchasing archival quality storage or display cases for artifacts housed within the buildings. Though there is a relatively easy solution for vibration issues at Pennhurst Asylum, there are type-specific issues that should be addressed. By understanding

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<sup>64</sup> Anna Serotta, and Andrew Smyth, "Managing Construction-Induced Vibration in the Museum Environment," *Objects Specialty Group Postprints* 21 (2014): 263-79, *Vibration Mitigation and Monitoring: A Case Study of Construction in a Museum: Journal of the American Institute for Conservation: Vol 55, No 1*, The American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works. Accessed Feb. 17, 2017. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/ref/10.1080/01971360.2015.1106817>.

collections management best practices for specific categories of museum objects, it becomes easier to assess solutions for the artifacts at the attraction.

Though collection care is something that requires knowledge about different materials and chemicals within the museum field, best practices are often decided on a case-by-case basis. For example, not all preservation issues with plastics or metals can be solved using the same methods. Metals are common materials to find within a museum, as well as within a state school or other industrial environment. Common objects which possess metal components that could logically be found at Pennhurst Asylum include: combs, shelves, keys, desks, chairs, bed frames, restraints, and medical tools or instruments. Two of the most detrimental issues that could cause the deterioration of metal artifacts are mishandling and a metal object's proximity to other metal objects. When two metal objects are placed in direct contact with each other, there is the potential for not only a chemical reaction which could result in corrosion, but also an electrical circuit which could cause a fire under the right conditions. Metal objects are also susceptible to damage from exposure to salt, oils, dirt, and moisture from handling. "Careless handling can lead to scratching, denting, bending, or breaking of metal artifacts. It is best not to overestimate the strength and resiliency of metal pieces; they are often weaker or more brittle than one anticipates."<sup>65</sup> Artifacts inside Pennhurst Asylum like typewriters, desks, or personal objects may be weaker than expected; weak metals paired with vibration problems could result in permanently damaged historical pieces. It is important to wear proper gloves while handling metal objects and to maintain a clean storage environment.

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<sup>65</sup> Brent A. Powell, *Collection Care: An Illustrated Handbook for the Care and Handling of Cultural Objects*, 126.

Plastics are also likely one of the most common materials found at Pennhurst, because there were many innovations with commercially produced plastics during Pennhurst's operational years. Some examples of objects which contain plastics which may be found at Pennhurst include: combs and brushes, mirror backings and handles, toothbrushes, desks, medical tools, chairs, and cooking utensils. "Plastic" is a term which can be used to describe any type of synthetic material. Some varieties of plastics include Bakelite, PVC, Lucite, Polythene, and many others; each of these varieties of synthetic materials requires different care. Plastics do have some things in common, and require careful handling and storage care. It is important to wear gloves whenever handling plastics, even museum objects that are or were common household plastic items. Oils and moisture from hands can stain and weaken plastic materials. Plastics become brittle with age and exposure to the elements thus is it important to carefully assess the object before attempting to move or handle it. Plastics should be kept in cool conditions to defend against their adhering to each other, and never kept in sealed environments for long periods of time.<sup>66</sup> All plastics will off-gas, creating a dangerous corrosive micro-environment for the object itself, and any other plastic objects sealed with it. Plastics are also susceptible to damage from light exposure. Light can fade plastics and cause them to become brittle with time. Fortunately, the objects at Pennhurst Asylum are mainly shielded from natural light. However all light sources can cause fading in plastics, therefore the strobe and colored lights at Pennhurst Asylum present problems for the display of artifacts containing plastic. A quick fix would be to position the objects out of

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<sup>66</sup> Yvonne Shashoua, "Conservation Perspectives - Conservation of Plastics," *The Getty Conservation Institute Newsletter*, 15.1 (2014): 1-64, GCI, Accessed Feb. 21, 2017. 13. [https://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications\\_resources/newsletters/pdf/v29n1.pdf](https://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/newsletters/pdf/v29n1.pdf)



direct contact with the lights, and to house them in a display cabinet lined with UV-protective film over the glass.

Because Pennhurst Asylum takes place inside the former buildings of Pennhurst State School, there is a high possibility that hazardous materials or objects make up part of the collection. The state school had both medical tools and pharmaceuticals stored on campus and likely also had cleaning fluids, medical liquids, and other chemicals on site. Common items which are considered hazardous if not handled properly include: cellulose nitrate film, broken artifacts, historic pharmaceuticals, unknown liquids, or chemicals. The Pennhurst Asylum collection is in need of care from a professional, and the best next step may be to look into object marking. If medicine collections are found at Pennhurst, proper diagnostics and marking will be a key safety priority. Marked objects tell the handler exactly what is or was formerly inside unknown liquids or bottles. Knowing the chemical composition of hazardous collections is imperative for safe handling, storage, and displaying of museum objects. Marking objects requires special museum materials as well as a trained professional who knows the proper placement of the accession number and the proper accessioning process.<sup>67</sup> Historic medicine and liquid collections have the potential to be leaky, weak, or harmful; thus marking the collection could prove to be difficult. However, it is important to continue on in the pursuit of an organized collection and to work towards gaining full control of hazardous objects.

The most common marking method is called Barrier Coat with Ink.<sup>68</sup> But no matter which method is chosen, it is important to make sure that all marks can be

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<sup>67</sup> Rebecca A. Buck, and Jean Allman Gilmore, *MRM5: Museum Registration Methods*.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

reversed by a conservator. The barrier method involves painting a liquid barrier onto the object, writing the accession number on the barrier, and then sealing the number with a top coat. The museum products available for this method are easily removed by a conservator. The next method is marking a tag and attaching the tag with a natural cotton string. Tags can be dangerous because they are easily detached or lost from the object. However, they are the least damaging to leaky or weakened collections. If either of these methods fail, or if the barrier method does not work for cardboard or paper-sealed bottles, marking the object, or the storage box holding the object, lightly with pencil is also reliable and removable. Again, marking your collection is an important step towards an organized and well-documented collection.

All of these best practices are important to review in relation to Pennhurst Asylum because many of them could be implemented at the attraction, which would prolong the life of the artifacts housed there, and in turn, would prolong the memory of those who lived at Pennhurst State School. These steps toward an organized and properly stored and displayed collection for Pennhurst Asylum have the power to determine the future of both the physical remnants of Pennhurst State School, and the memory of the people who lived there.

## CHAPTER 4

### Pennhurst as a Dark Site

Travel to sites of death, disaster, or the macabre is a long tradition in the United States. Sites like Pennhurst Asylum have been drawing audiences from afar for over 200 years.<sup>69</sup> In order to understand why dark sites draw so much attention, it is important to first explore America's long history of tourism. The development of American tourism can be broken down into two major eras, both marked by consumerism and leisure time of White/European Americans. First, the search for culture and the "sacred places" of America by the elite (1790-1850) and second, an era of mass distribution and a new middle class which led to a new national market for tourism (1880-1940).<sup>70</sup> Tourism emerged in the United States at a time when Americans were developing and defining their national identity. Prior to 1800, much of American culture was imported from European countries like England and France; this included art, furniture, music, and fashion. Travel for leisure in America at this time was influenced by the European Grand Tours of the elite. However as new American artists emerged and were interested in painting the ideal image of American scenic landscapes, wealthy Americans began

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<sup>69</sup> Prisons and Asylums had a long history of being visited by the upper class of society on holiday. Historians like Janet Miron argue that visitation to asylums in the nineteenth century had complex motivations, and prevented the "complete isolation of the insane and criminal from greater society."

Janet Miron, *Prisons, Asylums and the Public: Institutional Visiting in the Nineteenth Century*, (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2011), 6.

<sup>70</sup> Richard H. Gassan, *The Birth of American Tourism: New York, the Hudson Valley, and American Culture, 1790-1830*, (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008) 5-6.

traveling to these natural wonders - like the Hudson Valley and Niagara Falls.<sup>71</sup> This type of travel can be described as cultural and literary pilgrimage; the travelers were seeking the serenity from the increasingly modern world, they read guidebooks and followed the same paths as their favorite travel writers and friends. Inventions like wellness spas with hot springs, passenger steamboats with entertainment and refined decor, and a new style of resorts like Saratoga Springs drew more than just the super-elite, they appealed to most of the literate upper class.<sup>72</sup> By creating tourism advertisements and souvenirs that were uniquely American, spas and resorts in the Northeast created a movement that only expanded throughout the nineteenth century.

By the 1880s, industrialization and advances in medical care led to the emergence of a new middle class with more time and money to spend on activities like travel for leisure.<sup>73</sup> Historian Marguerite S. Shaffer compares the tourism industry after 1880 with industry and consumerism - tourism helped define a national market which was available to more than just the elite. Tourism acted as a "rite of passage" of sorts for American citizenship; tourist destinations were quintessentially American and promoted as such by the Government and the new market. "Commercial clubs, railroad corporations, the National Park Service, guidebook publishers, and a wide array of tourist advocates and

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<sup>71</sup>See Dona Brown's *Inventing New England: Regional Tourism in the Nineteenth Century*, (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Press, 1997), 41-52.

<sup>72</sup> Richard H. Gassan, *The Birth of American Tourism: New York, the Hudson Valley, and American Culture, 1790-1830*, (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008) 5-6.

<sup>73</sup> Marguerite S. Shaffer, *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880-1940*, (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 3.

enthusiasts defined the tourist experience in national terms."<sup>74</sup> Railroads made the West more attainable to visit, and gold-rushes beckoned more and more Americans to move further from the East Coast than prior to 1880. Americans' national identity was being formed around a new consumer culture. The idea of consumerism without tangible goods, put emphasis on marketed *experience*. During this time, as Americans began to visit nature parks instead of solely developed spas or resorts, they also began visiting more macabre sites. Just as Americans were visiting landscapes and natural wonders that they read about in guidebooks and saw in popular art, they were also visiting places they read about in newspapers and books. Many popular sites that were becoming tourist destinations were actually dark sites. Although they were not referred to as "dark tourism sites" at the time, many Americans began visiting battlegrounds, sites of disasters, and even prisons.

Since the beginning of tourism in America, tourists have been visiting dark sites; though these sites were often less "developed" than they are today. In fact, tourists have had an interest in visiting sites of torture, death, and disaster for hundreds of years. It wasn't uncommon for people to visit battlefields, prisons, asylums, and even hospitals to admire the architecture of the buildings or gawk at the "patients" and prisoners. Overseas, tourists traveled to the Tower of London, which reached record numbers of visitors in the 1850s; by the end of the century, over 500,000 people were visiting the Tower of London each year.<sup>75</sup> Guidebooks and newly popular postcards and souvenirs encouraged American tourists to visit large institutions like Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia,

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<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>75</sup> Geoffrey Parnell, *The Tower of London: Past and Present*, (Stroud: Sutton, 1998), 111.

or the Bloomingdale Asylum for the Insane in Manhattan, NYC. Asylums were popular sites to visit primarily because of the "patients," but also because of the shift in institutional architecture later in the nineteenth century. According to psychologist Jennifer L. Bazar, PhD, as medical treatment of mental disabilities and illnesses shifted towards treatment rather than just confinement during the late nineteenth century, asylums often began to include large gardens and manicured lawns as part of the treatment for patients.<sup>76</sup> These areas were integral to the treatment of the "patients," and were often included in tourist guidebooks like *Miller's New York*.<sup>77</sup> Sites nearby Pennhurst State School were also highly visited in the nineteenth century: Eastern State Penitentiary opened in 1829. Charles Dickens even came to visit Eastern State Penitentiary during his 1842 visit to America, and wrote about his experiences in his travelogue *American Notes*. He wrote, "the system here, is rigid, strict, and hopeless solitary confinement. I believe it, in its effects, to be cruel and wrong."<sup>78</sup> This report did not drive tourists away. In fact by 1858, over 10,000 visitors came to see Eastern State Penitentiary's massive facade in one year.<sup>79</sup> The nearby Mutter Museum of The College of Physicians of Philadelphia was also established during this time. "The first building to

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<sup>76</sup> Jennifer L. Bazar, Ph.D., and Jeremy T. Burman, MA. APA, "Asylum Tourism," American Psychological Association, Feb. 2014, Accessed Feb 7, 2017. <http://www.apa.org/monitor/2014/02/asylum-tourism.aspx>.

<sup>77</sup> James Miller, *Miller's New York as it is, or Stranger's guide-book to the cities of New York, Brooklyn and adjacent places*, (New York, NY: James Miller, 1880).

<sup>78</sup> Charles Dickens, "American Notes for General Circulation," *The University of Adelaide*, The University of Adelaide Library, 07 Mar. 2014. Accessed, Feb. 7, 2017. <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/d/dickens/charles/d54an/complete.html#chapter7>. Chapter 7., NP.

<sup>79</sup> "Eastern State Penitentiary," Timeline - Eastern State Penitentiary, Accessed March 15, 2017. <http://www.easternstate.org/learn/timeline>.

house the Museum was completed in 1863 and was located on Locust and 13<sup>th</sup> Streets. When The College of Physicians built its current home at 19 South 22<sup>nd</sup> Street in 1909, the Museum relocated with its original cases."<sup>80</sup> The Mütter Museum has become a famous Philadelphia dark tourism site due to its comprehensive historic medical collection, and because the museum does not shy away from the macabre. With artistically arranged exhibitions and exciting displays of medical oddities, the Mütter Museum has continued to draw crowds for over a century.

Upon understanding America's history with dark tourism, perhaps it is not surprising that many people still choose to visit dark sites each year. One of the most popular times of the year for ghost tours and tourism to dark sites is during October - the Halloween season. "Haunted" Halloween events and attractions are not new to American audiences, but the way scholars investigate and interpret these sites is novel. Viewing the situation at Pennhurst through the lens of dark tourism may shed new light on the motivation to visit this attraction, despite community protests.

The term "dark tourism" was first used by tourism studies scholars Malcolm Foley and John Lennon in 1996; they defined it as "the presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real and commoditized death and disaster sites."<sup>81</sup> It is important to note the use of the word *commoditized*; the experience of Pennhurst Asylum is commoditized through the sale of tickets, photos, and souvenirs. Philip Stone from the Institute for Dark Tourism Research at the University of Central Lancashire has characterized dark tourism

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<sup>80</sup> "History," About / History - Mütter Museum of The College of Physicians of Philadelphia, Accessed March 15, 2017. <http://muttermuseum.org/about/history>.

<sup>81</sup> Philip Stone and Richard Sharpley, "Consuming Dark Tourism: A Thanalogical Perspective," *Annals of Tourism Research* 35:2 (April, 2008), 577.

as that which is "concerned with ... spaces of death or calamity that have perturbed the public consciousness, whereby actual and recreated places of the deceased, horror, atrocity, or depravity, are consumed through visitor experiences."<sup>82</sup> Again the use of the word *consumed* connects to an experience has been commoditized like a good or service. Stone also points out the circumstance of *recreated* places of horror or atrocity. Pennhurst Asylum meets each of these definitions of a dark tourist site as a "commoditized experience of a recreated site of atrocity." Perhaps what makes Pennhurst interesting is that it is both a recreated place, and an "actual" place, using Stone's wording. The attraction is fictional, but it is housed inside a real former "asylum."

While waiting in line to enter the Administration Building, many visitors take photos of the large doors and the "Pennhurst State School" sign above them.<sup>83</sup> Some posed for pictures in front of the signs; other opted to take "selfies" with anything and everything that looked like an original part of the campus. Why are these visitors so interested in documenting their visit to Pennhurst, and would they have been taking so many photos if Pennhurst Asylum was a warehouse-style attraction, such as Bates Motel in Glen Mills, PA? Many times visitors to memorials and other sites of tragedy do not know how to cope with what they are seeing, yet they want to validate their feelings in some way. A well-documented example of this phenomenon is at the 9/11 Memorial Museum, in New York City.

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<sup>82</sup> Philip Stone, "Dark Tourism Scholarship: A Critical Review," *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research* 7:3 (August 2, 2013), 307.

<sup>83</sup> This observation is based both on my own experience at the site on October 27, 2016 and the many images you can find on Tumblr or other social media sites that show "selfies" with the asylum.



The 9/11 Memorial Museum was built to commemorate not only the lives lost on September 11, but also the compassion and service in the aftermath. The mission statement states that "the Museum attests to the triumph of human dignity over human depravity and affirms an unwavering commitment to the fundamental value of human life."<sup>84</sup> The museum houses artifacts from the twin towers, as well as from fire trucks and police cars. It has photos and videos, and goes underground to show the "foot prints" (the foundation) of the twin towers. The museum also houses a memorial section with pictures of people who lost their lives and unidentified human remains. Perhaps the presence of human remains in the museum pushes this site into the realm of dark tourism. Often when human remains or burial grounds are involved at a historic site, visitor behavior is monitored. Visitor behavior is an important area of study when it comes to understanding museum and tourism because it can act as a guide for improvements. Visitor behavior can show where a site, museum, or exhibit needs to change based on such reactions. Some tourists and community members show anger towards visitors who do not show proper "etiquette" when visiting a site of death or tragedy.

In 2013, Jason Feifer, a journalist from New York, began re-posting tourists' distasteful self-portraits, or "selfies," on the Tumblr account: *Selfies at Serious Places*. "I think most people are going to these places with a purity of curiosity," says Feifer. "I work opposite Ground Zero and I watch tourists taking photos. People take selfies there. It's funny. People just want to capture a moment down there and they don't know how to

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<sup>84</sup> "911 Memorial," <http://www.911memorial.org/mission>.

do it.”<sup>85</sup> This begs the question, what is appropriate? For Mark Watson, executive director of ethical travel campaign group Tourism Concern, there is not a clear answer to whether dark tourism is right or wrong. “People go for a huge variety of reasons, so it's very difficult to assess their motivations.” “At places like Auschwitz and the Rwandan Genocide Memorial, people go to really understand what happened and are genuinely moved by it.” But Watson also points out that tourists, like those that he manages, need to “look at the impact on the communities and understand the local sensitivities. It shouldn't be a case of blundering in and taking some photos.”<sup>86</sup> Indeed, this resonates with visitors to Pennhurst Asylum. For some visitors, taking photos is the only way they understand how to be present at the site and participate in the experience. Perhaps visitors *need* to take pictures and buy souvenirs, for they act as representations of self-validation.

Halloween-centered haunted attractions in America date back to the early nineteenth century and Pennhurst Asylum follows in the footsteps of these attractions that came nearly a full century before. Around the late 1930s, Halloween had become a secular, community-centered holiday in many American neighborhoods, as opposed to the Day of the Dead (Dia de los Muertos) or other non-secular traditions; much of the festivities were stimulated by commercialism.<sup>87</sup> While no scholarly account of the history of haunted houses has yet been written, freelance journalist Chris Heller in the popular *Smithsonian Magazine* has started piecing together a fascinating origin story for this

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<sup>85</sup> Will Coldwell, "Dark Tourism: Why Murder Sites and Disaster Zones Are Proving Popular," <http://www.theguardian.com/travel/2013/oct/31/dark-tourism-murder-sites-disaster-zones>.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Jack Santino, "Halloween in America: Contemporary Customs and Performances," *Western Folklore* 42.1 (1983): 18.

American pastime. According to Heller, haunted houses were meant to deter groups of young people from vandalizing homes and harassing strangers by keeping them busy with community activities during Halloween. Likewise, Heller sees for-profit haunted houses getting their start as rides and side-show attractions at traveling carnivals and fairs. Rides like the "Tunnel of Love" were altered to show scary scenes and riders were surprised by loud horns or sirens. The "dark rides" were the precursor to what is now known as "the start of the haunted attraction industry." Walt Disney's Haunted Mansion.<sup>88</sup>

Heller sees Disneyland's Haunted Mansion, which debuted in 1969 and wowed audiences with complex technology and realistic scares, as the first of its kind. In a single day shortly after opening, over 82,000 people passed through its doors.<sup>89</sup> After the success of the Haunted Mansion, the 1970s saw the spread of haunted houses all over the U.S. and horror movie hits like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *Carrie* (1976), and *Halloween* (1978). As haunted houses became part of the Halloween tradition for many American teenagers, pop-up haunted houses proliferated in many towns and cities. In keeping with the tradition of carnivals and traveling freak shows, haunted houses could also be assembled and taken down for the holiday.

Historian Tiya Miles, author of *Tales from the Haunted South: Dark Tourism and Memories of Slavery from the Civil War Era*, argues that the new attention ghost tours bring to historic sites may in fact be damaging all that historians have been working toward. Ghost tours focus on "characters" which are often left out of daytime tours or the

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<sup>88</sup> Chris Heller. Smithsonian Magazine, "A Brief History of the Haunted House," [www.smithsonianmag.com](http://www.smithsonianmag.com)

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

"main" narrative of a historic site. Ghost tours often tell stories about women, the mentally ill or disabled, and people of color.<sup>90</sup> While it is true that maybe ten years ago these "new" narratives inside ghost tours were seen as finally writing marginalized groups back into history, do these narratives send the right message?

Miles maintains that many ghost tours in the South and ghost stories are centered on the history of slavery. Although it can be argued that fostering discourse about slavery among new audiences is a good thing, ghost tours often depict slaves as non-human. A narrative of slaves-as-ghosts, or slaves-as-spectacle, continues to keep them as "others," or separate from "real" American history. Slaves become objects of fantasy by association with ghosts; their stories can be denied or cast off as fiction.<sup>91</sup> When the only narratives about slavery are in the context of a ghost tour, the history of slavery can be overshadowed by the entertainment value of ghosts. Their stories become one-dimensional, and consist primarily on the tropes of tragedy and horror, rather than acknowledging any notion of individual agency. "The recuperated black slave in the form of a ghost is presented in caricature...positioned outside black cultural contexts, and stripped of the historical realities of American slavery."<sup>92</sup> In addition to denying slaves agency, these tours implicitly endorse purely commercial motives as acceptable reasons for discussing slavery. Rather than confronting commercialism and the economic motivations giving rise to the American slave trade, ghost tours continue to use the lived

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<sup>90</sup> Tiya Miles, *Tales from the Haunted South: Dark Tourism and Memories of Slavery from the Civil War Era*, (NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 124.

<sup>91</sup> Tiya Miles, WBUR Podcast, "How Ghost Tours Often Exploit African-American History," [www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2015/10/30/ghost-tours-african-american-history](http://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2015/10/30/ghost-tours-african-american-history).

<sup>92</sup> Tiya Miles, *Tales from the Haunted South: Dark Tourism and Memories of Slavery from the Civil War Era*, (NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 123.

experiences of slaves to earn a profit. In Miles's words, the plantations continue to make money "off the backs of slaves."<sup>93</sup>

Similarly at Pennhurst Asylum, the stories and suffering of a silenced group are being used to make a profit. The residential halls have become the backdrop to a "fictional" horror show and their abuse has become the plot line of a scary story. Expanding Miles's conclusion that "the merger of dual primal fears - the human fear of death and the southern (indeed, American) fear of blackness - makes dark tourism in the South all the more potent," it appears that Pennhurst Asylum exploits this same fear of death with the fear of the stigmas associated of mental illness and physical disabilities.<sup>94</sup>

If we continue to put history in the same arena as ghost stories, will the value of our most sacred historic institutions decrease? In her article "Embodying Value in Harrowing Times," curator Deborah Emmons-Andarawis makes the case that investing in ghost tours and supernatural attractions at historic sites decreases the inherent value of those sites. She claims that ghost tours diminish the credibility of historic sites by equating history with make-believe. Historic sites should invest in sound, reliable, and unbiased work; investing in the paranormal compares history with something that "cannot be proven or perceived as reliable evidence."<sup>95</sup> Historians base their work on evidence; they follow sources and attempt to conduct clear and thorough investigations of the past. Ghost tours often boast about hearing the supernatural sounds of the past and seeing

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<sup>93</sup> Tiya Miles, WBUR Podcast, "How Ghost Tours Often Exploit African-American History," [www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2015/10/30/ghost-tours-african-american-history](http://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2015/10/30/ghost-tours-african-american-history).

<sup>94</sup> Tiya Miles, *Tales from the Haunted South: Dark Tourism and Memories of Slavery from the Civil War Era*, (NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 118.

<sup>95</sup> Deborah Emmons-Andaraw, "Embodying Value in Harrowing Times," *History News* 67.3 (2012): 22.

historic figures through apparitions. Genuine historical work provides a chain of references to primary and secondary sources that enable historians and the public to achieve the same understanding of the past. Historic sites can inspire us and connect us by fostering empathy for the lives of others. In the words of Emmons-Andarawis, "you don't need electronic voice phenomena to hear messages from the past."<sup>96</sup> The true value of history is that it gives context to our lives and helps us understand how we got to where we are today. While historic sites can be entertaining, the value of history is that it does so much more than that. While something can be said for historic sites which have mastered the balance of edutainment, ghost tours often fail to meet the standards of education in the form of entertainment.

Eastern State Penitentiary (ESP) takes "edutainment" seriously. ESP, located in Philadelphia, PA, is a former prison that according to the history on its website "broke sharply with the prisons of its day, abandoning corporal punishment and ill treatment."<sup>97</sup> The prison opened in 1829 and known for its distinctive penal philosophy of reforming prisoners and using solitary confinement to generate penitence in those imprisoned there. It was one of the most technologically advanced prisons in America at the time, and featured heated cells and flushing toilets. The prison closed in 1971 after over 140 years of operation, and then sat abandoned for two decades. During the latter half of those twenty years, the future of the prison became a hot topic among Philadelphia

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>97</sup> "Eastern State Penitentiary," [www.easternstate.org](http://www.easternstate.org).

preservationists and investors.<sup>98</sup> In 1991, the Eastern State Penitentiary Task Force hosted the first annual Halloween celebration, which in 1995 evolved into the haunted attraction featured there today: "Terror Behind the Walls."<sup>99</sup>

The original Halloween celebration was hosted at Eastern State in order to raise funds for the task force, which had discovered in 1989 that stabilizing the entire penitentiary complex would cost upwards of \$2.5 million.<sup>100</sup> The task force had hopes of opening the historic site for tours during regular business hours and further interpreting the history of the prison. From 1991-1995, Eastern State ran their annual Halloween fundraiser tours, continued to earn a profit, and opened a museum within the prison in 1994. However in 1996 Sean Kelley, Director of Programs, made significant changes to the lucrative tours. The Halloween tours were proving to be detrimental to the institution overall; actors were sensationalizing the site's history in efforts to scare visitors, causing Kelley to end the use of what he deemed a damaging narrative.<sup>101</sup> Kelley developed the tours into what is now *Terror Behind the Walls (TBTW)* - a haunted house style attraction within the prison that runs in the evenings during the fall. *Terror Behind the Walls* is devoid of historic or educational content; it is simply a haunted house fundraiser within the prison. "References to Eastern State history - and to prison operations generally -

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<sup>98</sup> Seth C. Bruggeman, "Reforming the Carceral Past: Eastern State Penitentiary and the Challenge of the Twenty-First-Century Prison Museum," *Radical History Review* 113 (2012): 177-178.

<sup>99</sup> "Eastern State Penitentiary," [www.easternstate.org/learn/research-library/history](http://www.easternstate.org/learn/research-library/history).

<sup>100</sup> Seth C. Bruggeman, "Reforming the Carceral Past: Eastern State Penitentiary and the Challenge of the Twenty-First-Century Prison Museum," *Radical History Review* 113 (2012): 178.

<sup>101</sup> Margaret W. Hughes, "Bridging the Divide: Mission and Revenue in Museum Programming," *The Journal of Museum Education* 35.3 (2010): 282.

have not only been removed, but are forbidden topics for the haunted house actors."<sup>102</sup>

This change in operations has benefitted both the museum and the attraction, as both have seen increased attendance over the years. The haunted house at Eastern State is so successful that it actually drives daytime tours as well. Additionally, "all visitors to *TBTW* receive \$5 off a daytime tour ticket with their *TBTW* ticket or ticket stub."<sup>103</sup>

Eastern State is not alone in using ghost tours to fund or attract visitors to responsible and thought-provoking historical programming.

While many historic sites treat ghost tours as part of their public outreach, Eastern State maintains that their haunted house program does much more than that. The profits from *Terror Behind the Walls* fund Eastern State's museum programming and daytime tours. Without the haunted house, the prison may not be a museum today at all. Through this funding Eastern State, which is a nonprofit organization, sponsors resident artists, performances, scholars, and research on the impact of the modern-day prison system. The museum uses the funds from *Terror Behind the Walls* to tell the history of marginalized groups without exploiting those groups in the haunted house. By having a policy which restricts the use of prison-themes or Eastern State history in the haunted house, the museum is able to avoid confusing their history with fiction.

As seen in Mile's critique of Southern ghost tours and ghost stories, historians have not been shy in their uneasiness about using ghosts in programming for historic sites. For example, Carol Kammen's article "Out of the Box and into the Fray" was published in *History News* in 2010, coinciding with the year that Pennhurst Asylum

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<sup>102</sup> Margaret W. Hughes, "Bridging the Divide: Mission and Revenue in Museum Programming," *The Journal of Museum Education* 35.3 (2010): 282.

<sup>103</sup> "Terror Behind the Walls," [www.easternstate.org](http://www.easternstate.org).



opened. Kammen, a Senior Lecturer in History at Cornell University, writes that many ghost tours are plagued by uninformed tour guides and cheap thrills with little historical education provided. She believes history institutions have a duty to do more than simply rely on ghost tours for revenue - she finds the "blatant commercialism off-putting."<sup>104</sup>

As institutions like Eastern State Penitentiary begin to lead by example, more historians are choosing to stand behind ghost tours and macabre programming; whether they follow Eastern State directly by thoughtfully *not* including their site's history in the scares, or by implementing ghost and dark history tours that are both entertaining and full of historical research. In an editorial response to Carol Kammen's critique of ghost tours "On Doing Local History," Katherine D. Kane, Executive director of the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, and Jeffrey L. Nichols, then Executive Director of The Mark Twain House & Museum, called Kammen's piece "shortsighted."<sup>105</sup> Kane and Nichols both oversaw successful historic sites which used ghost tours to engage with new audiences and explore topics of spiritualism and tragic loss through professional and scholarly research backed by historical evidence. The extensively researched tours were a response to frequently asked questions from visitors. In response to that interest, The Mark Twain House & Museum was featured on SYFY Channel's hit TV show *Ghost Hunters* in 2009. The episode of the popular television show provided the museum a positive opportunity for public relations and advertisement. Kane and Nichols conclude by explaining that "the tours have been an overwhelming success. We are doing exactly as we should -

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<sup>104</sup> Carol Kammen, "On Doing Local History: Out of the Box and into the Fray," *History News* 65, no. 1 (2010): 3-4. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42654244>.

<sup>105</sup> Katherine D. Kane, and Jeffrey L. Nichols, "Letter to the Editor: Out of the Box and into the Fray," *History News* 65, no. 3 (2010): 2, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42654270>.

providing as many conduits for people to learn about the houses and the history as we possibly can."<sup>106</sup>

The next generation of young historians is also embracing the use of ghost tourism in programming and find its commercialism less off-putting. The National Council on Public History's (NCPH) Annual Meeting in 2016 featured a session titled "More than Dark: The Diverse Application of Ghosts in Public History."<sup>107</sup> During this session, Maria Eipert and Amanda Zimmerman from American University in Washington D.C. presented on their public history project titled *The Spirits that Linger: Haunted History in Lafayette Square* that they created in partnership with The White House Historical Association. In this project, Eipert and Zimmerman created a "ghostly" walking tour of Historic Washington using evidence-based historical research; they also created the design for a self-guided walking app.<sup>108</sup> They believed that the allure of ghost and macabre stories drew in audiences, and the historical education kept those audiences entertained. There are similar examples of historic sites in the Philadelphia area doing good public history work while still embracing ghost stories, haunted tours, and even paranormal investigations. Historic house museums like the Powel House and the Physick House have been featured on similar paranormal investigation TV programs, and have also been involved with externally organized ghost tours. Increasingly though there

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<sup>106</sup> Katherine D. Kane, and Jeffrey L. Nichols, "Letter to the Editor: Out of the Box and into the Fray," *History News* 65, no. 3 (2010): 2, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42654270>.

<sup>107</sup> 2016 NCPH Annual Meeting Program, <http://ncph.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/2016-Annual-Meeting-Program-Final-Web.pdf>

<sup>108</sup> American University, "Public History Student Projects," Accessed Feb. 14, 2017, <http://www.american.edu/cas/history/public/projects.cfm>.

are pitfalls when using ghost tours in programming, pointed out clearly by Miles and Kammen.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Comparative Analysis - Recommendations - Conclusion**

The use of historic artifacts as props aids in the telling of a damaging and hurtful story about the people who once suffered at Pennhurst State School. The individuals at Pennhurst State School dealt with incredible adversity, worked to find meaning in their confinement, created art, perfected crafts like weaving and agriculture, sang and danced, and told stories. The current use of the objects at Pennhurst Asylum does not help to tell a complete story about the former patients' lives at Pennhurst. The narrative at Pennhurst Asylum shows the worst of times for individuals at Pennhurst, displaying abuse alongside the laughter and heckling of actors portraying nurses and doctors. The individuals' stories are much bigger than what's portrayed at Pennhurst Asylum, and it is a disservice to their memory to present their lives this way. The people who lived and died at Pennhurst State School cannot be separated from the attraction at Pennhurst. The use of the original artifacts, the buildings, and the keeping of the name "Pennhurst" inevitably tethers them to the hurtful narrative at Pennhurst Asylum.

Reducing historic artifacts to props is an unfortunate side-effect of the narrative which already proves to be damaging to people with disabilities. With newspaper headlines like "Thrills or exploitation? Pennhurst Asylum open for haunting season," "Pennhurst Residents, Advocates Tell Their Story in Traveling Exhibit," "Haunted House Has Painful Past As Asylum," and "Pennhurst's true story needs to be told," it is apparent that the community surrounding the attraction acknowledges the harmfulness of

the narrative told there<sup>109</sup> These local paper headlines indicate that Pennhurst may be just as contested now as it was in 1968, when *Suffer The Little Children* first premiered. Now is the time to reevaluate how the artifacts at the attraction are being used to tell a fictional story.

From the standpoint of collections management, the most significant issues at Pennhurst Asylum are the care and contextualization of the objects on display there and the narrative told at the attraction resulting from the treatment of the site. There are additional options for the future of the objects at Pennhurst Asylum, such as removal of the objects or the addition of a professional historian or curator. Ultimately, it is only through the professional management, preservation, and care of the objects that an institution will be able help the owners of Pennhurst create a historical narrative that is supported by historical evidence.

The objects at Pennhurst and the narrative conveyed at the attraction are inherently intertwined. Using the study of material culture as a historical method of analysis, historians can piece together a narrative of the past through close investigation of objects. Curators and museum professionals also use material culture to convey a narrative that is supported by archival record and other evidence. When archival records,

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<sup>109</sup> See: Justine McDaniel, "Thrills or Exploitation? Pennhurst Asylum Open for Haunting Season," Philly.com, 13 Oct. 2015, accessed Apr. 6, 2016. [http://articles.philly.com/2015-10-13/news/67344986\\_1\\_haunt-richard-chakejian-pennhurst-asylum](http://articles.philly.com/2015-10-13/news/67344986_1_haunt-richard-chakejian-pennhurst-asylum); Kaitlyn Foti, "Pennhurst Residents, Advocates Tell Their Story in Traveling Exhibit," *Dailylocal.com*, Daily Local News, 18 Sept. 2015, accessed Apr. 6, 2016. <http://www.dailylocal.com/article/DL/20150918/NEWS/150919748>; Jamie Tarabay, "Haunted House Has Painful Past As Asylum," *Npr.org*, NPR, 29 Oct. 2010, accessed Apr. 6, 2016. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130840594>; and "EDITORIAL: Pennhurst True Story Needs to Be Told," *The Mercury*, 21 Sept. 2015, accessed Apr. 6, 2016. <http://www.pottsmmerc.com/article/MP/20150921/NEWS/150929977>.

court documents, local news film and oral histories are paired with the recovered objects at Pennhurst, a more scholarly and reliable narrative can be constructed about Pennhurst's past. Radically changing the way the objects are displayed and cared for presents an opportunity to correct the current damaging narrative. In order for Pennhurst Asylum to become more sensitive to the past of the campus, the owners and operators could follow the example of numerous other attractions that deal with a "dark," or difficult history; such as the 9/11 Memorial Museum or the Jim Crow Racist Memorabilia Museum. There are other examples of best practices within collections management which could also be a guideline for reworking the attraction.

Within the discipline of history and public history, the term "dark tourism" is sometimes met with disapproval due to its perceived paranormal connotations. Many historic house museums and smaller institutions like local historical societies make connections to dark tourism especially during the Halloween season. It is common to embrace some of the more macabre historical stories during this time or to promote ghost tours and ghost stories to attract visitors.<sup>110</sup> Conflation of ghost tourism - which is already a contentious subject within public history circles - with dark tourism makes the term more provocative. Within memory studies, a field which has largely informed my work on dark tourism, the term dark tourism is still considered problematic despite its long history. For example, in the introduction to the collection *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Spaces*, authors/editors Lehrer and Milton contend that using the descriptor "dark tourism destination" is a limiting way to frame a site. Using the term to

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<sup>110</sup> <http://www.philalandmarks.org/single-post/2016/08/13/Welcome-to-the-Sick-Room>. This is an example of engaging with some of the macabre history in a historic house museum for a special exhibition.

describe a historic site prescribes what visitors should expect to feel and requires making implicit assumptions about why visitors come to a place. Lehrer and Milton claim that "while visits to sites of former atrocity raise concerns about voyeurism and crass commercialism, they may just as often draw people earnestly seeking to meditate on peace, imagine common futures, and even forge these through dialogue or political action."<sup>111</sup>

Lehrer and Milton prefer to use the terminology "difficult knowledge and difficult pasts." These terms are used to describe knowledge or history that was both painful at the time and that continues to affect the world today. They also use the term to describe how the public engages with this type of knowledge. For instance, they offer that "more difficult than regarding other people's suffering may be scrutinizing our own habituated responses to it."<sup>112</sup> Following Lehrer and Milton's example, I will refer to objects/artifacts associated with "dark sites" as "difficult objects," rather than "dark objects" due to their connection with difficult history of the site. However, as Lehrer and Milton's lexicon may be preferable for some historic sites and museums, "dark tourism" still remains a suitable term for *visitation* to Pennhurst Asylum. Perhaps Pennhurst Asylum aims to attract a similar audience to established macabre and dark tourist sites. The attraction exists, after all, under the auspices of a for-profit LLC with no concern for professional standards of museum care.

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<sup>111</sup> Erica Lehrer, and Cynthia Milton, "Introduction: Witnesses to Witnessing," *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Spaces*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 5.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

When a space *does* intend to follow the best practices of collections management or museum curation, exhibiting difficult objects can prove to be a harrowing task. Many of the recommendations made here for the treatment of the collection at Pennhurst Asylum can be applied to other collections dealing with difficult objects. These objects can be problematic to curate for many reasons. Objects associated with a tragic event or difficult history can be evocative and emotional for the visitor. To make the reasoning behind the recommendations clear, it is germane to discuss the actions museums have taken to ensure the responsible and successful exhibition of difficult history. Explaining how the following institutions have developed their own methods of dealing with difficult history is useful to the owners of Pennhurst Asylum, regardless of if Pennhurst is a museum itself or not because they represent the best practices in working with historic artifacts which represent difficult history - which Pennhurst Asylum participates in. These methods of interpreting difficult history *can* be implemented at Pennhurst.

As museums have shifted away from exclusively bearing authority for interpreting the past, they have instead worked towards something called "new museology." Facing declining visitation and increasing visitor diversity, which demands more diverse programming, museums have shifted away from being a temple or "shrine" to history. Museums are no longer maintained by the authority of select experts, for elite audiences. Today, museums view their interpretive authority as being shared with the public; they have established "more inclusive and inviting forums for learning, dialogue and exchange."<sup>113</sup> This "new museology" ideology prescribes a new objective for

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<sup>113</sup> Monica Eileen Patterson, "Teaching Tolerance through Objects of Hatred: The Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia as "Counter-Museum"," *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Spaces*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 55.



museums: to include underrepresented groups in museum collections, exhibits, and staffrooms. Pennhurst presents the opportunity for the museum community to embark on a journey of acceptance and inclusion for the disabilities community and difficult history in general. Monica Eileen Patterson, a postdoctoral fellow in the History departments at Concordia University and Université de Montréal, presents some important questions to consider in her essay "Teaching Tolerance through Objects of Hatred: The Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia as "Counter-Museum."" When Patterson considers how difficult history is presented within the museum space, she asks:

How can experiences of brutality and suffering be presented without minimizing, sensationalizing, or reigniting the sentiments behind them? Should painful materials be dutifully relegated to the dustbins or dark drawers of museums' storage facilities? If not, how can museum practitioners confront or display such content in ways that serve to diffuse or allay the divisions between people rather than reifying and perpetuating them?<sup>114</sup>

Museum facilitators should encourage visitors to share their own thoughts, knowledge, and impressions, as well as their reflections on the exhibit and experiences with the content in their own lives.<sup>115</sup> Museums should act as safe spaces for learning, discussing and sharing knowledge. Creating a sensitively curated space leads visitors to feel safe to speak freely and discuss the exhibits. This is especially important for museums which exhibit difficult objects and curate exhibits about tragic events. Though it is important to remember, Patterson argues, that "while creating space for dialog is often celebrated as a way of democratizing museums, this goal is constrained by a challenging reality: in any

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 55-56.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 57.

given social situation, not everyone feels equally free or comfortable to speak."<sup>116</sup> In the case of Pennhurst State School, many community members who would be affected by an exhibition of their own difficult history lack a voice at all.

Museums have a unique responsibility when it comes to exhibiting difficult history. Many times, the events represented in museum exhibitions are cultural wounds that have yet to heal. Unfortunately, those with mental and physical disabilities are not strangers to this environment of misunderstanding and social stigmatization. The deep cultural wounds faced by those with disabilities have not healed because their community is still rarely acknowledged. At Pennhurst Asylum visitors confront difficult history – and for many, difficult *local* history - without truly understanding the history acknowledging those with disabilities. From a "distance," visitors feel comfortable to engage with the narrative through the objects on display, without meaningfully engaging with or appreciating the reality for those who lived at Pennhurst State School.

An effective exhibit interpreting the history of Pennhurst would set an example for the use of difficult objects to teach a difficult narrative. Museums around the world are pushing the boundaries of exhibiting difficult history by using the discomfort of the visitor to break through to genuine emotional responses to art and artifacts. Emotional responses are often the first step in looking inward and opening a dialogue about difficult history. For example, the Jim Crow Racist Memorabilia Museum ("JCM") at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Michigan focuses on self-reflection and viewer participation to create a space in which some of America's most difficult history becomes accessible. JCM displays overtly racist ephemera and trinkets to open a dialogue about racism and

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 62.

the lived experience for Black Americans. Monica Eileen Patterson calls the JCM a "counter-museum" to bring attention to the staff's use of products of intolerance to teach understanding and to "provoke visitors to examine the lasting ways in which images of racist and anti-Black ideas have permeated American culture and beyond."<sup>117</sup> By facilitating dialogue with visitors about a topic which is rarely discussed out in the open, JCM uses the discomfort of the visitor to break new ground. The visitor is often pulled inward - exhibits, museum programming, and presentations promote self-reflection in the museum space. The JCM staff does not expect more from their visitors than they themselves are willing to give. By sharing their own experiences and challenges with the racist exhibits, the staff encourages the visitors to turn their thoughts into productive ends. Indeed, the museum often works with social justice groups, college classes, and other community groups. Through transparent work and dedication to displaying difficult objects, these "troubling objects [at the JCM] become vehicles for education, critique, self-reflection, dialog, personal growth, and social change."<sup>118</sup>

Museums have three key roles in the exhibition and interpretation of difficult history: to initiate dialogue within a community, to provide context for historical events and tragedies, and to get involved in the community through civic engagement and educational programming. These roles could be taken on by the owners of Pennhurst Asylum, whether that means creating an exhibit through the removal of artifacts from the attraction, or by donating their artifacts to an established museum. The first role for museums when exhibiting difficult history is to open up dialogue within a community.

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 63.

This can be done through interactive exhibits, inviting speakers to the museum, or running programs which encourage community discussion. The goal of opening dialogue between the museum and the community is to break down barriers between the institution and the layperson. Once a platform for discussion has been created, the museum can become a center where communities could exchange ideas and talk across difference.<sup>119</sup> Difficult history can foster discussion about topics considered dangerous outside of the walls of the museum.

The second key role of a museum when exhibiting difficult history is to provide context for tragic historical events. Putting difficult history into a global and sound historical context will help visitors come to terms with such events. Understanding history relative to the world around us, rather than in a vacuum, will foster empathy for others and discourage isolation. This could be especially relevant to Pennhurst Asylum. One of the many successes of The Museum of disABILITY History in Buffalo, NY, is that it encourages a feeling of community among those with disabilities and their loved ones.<sup>120</sup> By creating programming which supports education about disability history, the museum supports normalizing this history rather than continuing to display disability history as an *other*, or separate from the norm. This type of work could be done at Pennhurst with the help of previous Pennhurst residents as well as community groups like the Pennhurst Preservation and Memorial Alliance.

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<sup>119</sup> Center for Civic Reflection - Community, Leadership, Dialog. Accessed Dec. 8, 2016. <http://civicreflection.org/impact/case-studies/chicago-cultural-alliance-dialogue-as-a-tool-for-community-engagement>.

<sup>120</sup> Museum of disABILITY History, Accessed April 20, 2017. <http://museumofdisability.org>.

The third key role for museums which display difficult history is outreach through educational programming and civic engagement. The Pennhurst Preservation and Memorial Alliance ("PMPA") is a local non-profit organization whose members and staff believe that the fear and misunderstanding of those with disabilities can be rectified through education. The previous two roles of museums can be brought together through dynamic programming. Educational outreach can inspire progressive discussions, the contextualization of difficult history and tragedies, and better understanding of difficult exhibitions. One of the pillars of museums is accessibility - accessibility of both education and collections. There are several possibilities for Pennhurst Asylum, or similar sites, to care for its collection and rewrite its narrative with difficult history.

The most effective way to transform Pennhurst Asylum into a responsible institution is to both follow standard collections care guidelines and allow the site to display and exhibit the material culture from Pennhurst with respect. The first and second recommendations are to fundamentally change the narrative and name of the attraction and to remove the historical objects from the public areas; while potentially still engaging with the history of the Pennhurst campus through historical ghost tours during weeknights or year-round. Key to this recommendation is changing the theme of the attraction from "crazy mental patients and doctors" to something more classically scary, like assorted monsters or fictional characters like Jason Voorhees or Freddy Krueger. This is similar to what Sean Kelley did at Eastern State Penitentiary in 1995. Since this change, Eastern State refuses to engage with a narrative about haunted cells or murderous prisoners and has steadily increased the numbers of visitors to the museum. Eastern State is an example of a successful haunted attraction which uses monsters and non-offensive

characters to scare visitors. By taking the historic artifacts out of the actual attraction, the objects would not only be safer, but they also would not contribute to a harmful narrative about people with disabilities. Removing the artifacts in totality gives other organizations or museums the opportunity to use them to successfully, professionally, and respectfully exhibit and interpret the artifacts and the history of Pennhurst State School.

After changing the theme of Pennhurst Asylum, the next step is to find a way to explore the history of the site in a respectful way. Ghost tours have proven to be a successful way of engaging with dark or difficult history in a way that draws in visitors and revenue for house museums and historic sites. Writing a ghost tour of the campus would open up the site to visitors year-round, and if that is not feasible, it would draw in visitors during the weeknights which are not open for the attraction during the Halloween season (Monday-Wednesday). As previously discussed, ghost tours are often a way for visitors to approach difficult history from a safe distance. Ghost tours can be historically rigorous and still fall into the category of edutainment; a nighttime tour schedule, paired with the seasonal decor of the attraction and difficult (macabre) history will be enough to cause a historical fright while maintaining the standards of a historical tour.

The third recommendation has the most potential to influence the way the artifacts at Pennhurst Asylum are interpreted. Members of the Pennhurst Memorial Preservation Alliance (PMPA) want to remember and memorialize those who suffered at Pennhurst State School, but they also want to rally behind the victories that resulted from those who fought for their civil rights at Pennhurst. Pennhurst Asylum should partner with the PMPA to repair relationships with the community and set up a separate space for exhibiting the history of Pennhurst State School. The PMPA could take ownership of one

of the buildings on the campus that is not part of the of Pennhurst Asylum attraction. Ideally the PMPA has identified the former Superintendent's house as a new museum site. If the owners of Pennhurst Asylum were to partner with this local group, or any other local historical organization, it would take the burden of caring for the objects and interpreting the history of the site off their hands.

I recommend that Pennhurst Asylum turn over all its historic artifacts, either through a long-term loan or by donation or sale, to a non-profit group, like PMPA, with a board of historians and museum professionals that would be willing to care for them. Even loaning the objects or sponsoring disability advocacy and education events would be a first step in repairing Pennhurst Asylum's public image. When the artifacts from Pennhurst are in a safe environment under the care of museum professionals, the evidence-based history of Pennhurst State School can finally be exhibited for the public. Perhaps a community center would have the power to undo some of the damage caused by the dangerous narrative at Pennhurst Asylum through education and facilitated discussion of difficult history.

Finally, an option that should not be overlooked is the possibility of Pennhurst Asylum keeping their artifacts and transforming from an attraction to a museum. This would require museum professionals to create a mission statement, a strategic plan for the care of the objects, and to interpret and physically care for the artifacts at the attraction. I do not recommend this option for the future of the objects at Pennhurst because it would be a huge financial investment. A conversation with Pennhurst Asylum owner Derek Strine has lead me to believe that transitioning Pennhurst Asylum into a full-fledged

museum or interpretive center in not in the cards at this time.<sup>121</sup> There have been similar scenarios involving abandoned or closed state hospitals and asylums being restored and used as apartments, community centers, conference spaces, and university-owned classrooms. However, I have found that it is rarer to see asylums and state hospitals that have been restored and transformed into museums which exhibit its own history.

I have identified two examples of museum restoration projects which aim to further education on disability and healthcare throughout history; these projects are important to highlight to show that creating a museum within a closed Institution is indeed possible. The first example is the Indiana Medical History Museum, created from the former Central State Hospital in Indianapolis. The Indiana Medical History Museum aims to tell the story of Indiana's rich medical history through exhibition and public programming.<sup>122</sup> The sight has a large board of directors, and medically educated board officers as well. Another example of a hospital-to-museum restoration is the Glore Psychiatric Museum, located in what was the St. Joseph State Hospital in Missouri. The Glore Psychiatric Museum chronicles the 130-year history of the state hospital and centuries of mental health treatment. In addition to the medical artifacts on display, the Glore also exhibits "pottery, paintings, drawings, and other artwork which gave patients both therapy and an outlet to express their pain, joy, and hopes."<sup>123</sup> Drawing closer to Pennhurst, the former Harrisburg State Hospital has recently had some media attention

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<sup>121</sup> Phone conversation with Derek Strine on November 4, 2016.

<sup>122</sup> Indiana Medical History Museum, "About," Accessed March 15, 2017. <http://www.imhm.org/page-403598>.

<sup>123</sup> St. Joseph Museums, "Glore Psychiatric Museum," December 29, 2016, Accessed March 15, 2017. <http://stjosephmuseum.org/museums/glore/>.



due to a Lancaster planning firm being hired to look into restoring the site. It is still uncertain what will happen with the Harrisburg State Hospital, but the news site PennLive reported that the planning firm's "two-year contract is worth nearly \$259,000 and will encompass a variety of research and community engagement, including information about property appraisal, financial analysis, property marketing and planning and zoning."<sup>124</sup> Considering both the Glore Psychiatric Museum and the Indiana Medical History Museum are both successful museums with new and rotating exhibitions, their example could be a strong model for both the Harrisburg State Hospital and the owners of Pennhurst Asylum to follow, if there was ever a decision to close Pennhurst Asylum.

In conclusion, a partnership between Pennhurst Asylum and the Pennhurst Memorial Preservation Alliance would be an opportunity to increase the visibility of historically marginalized people. Instead of exploiting their story for a profit, the non-profit PMPA group has developed a mission statement which fights against the fictional and damaging narrative at Pennhurst Asylum; the group aims "to promote an understanding of the struggle for dignity and full civil rights for persons with disabilities, using the little-known history at Pennhurst. By sharing this tragic story as well as its landmark victories, we seek to educate citizens in local, national and international communities, to assure that we never go back."<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Wallace McKelvey, "Pa. hires firm to develop plan for Harrisburg State Hospital site," PennLive.com, January 05, 2016, Accessed March 15, 2017. [http://www.pennlive.com/news/2016/01/harrisburg\\_state\\_hospital\\_site.html](http://www.pennlive.com/news/2016/01/harrisburg_state_hospital_site.html).

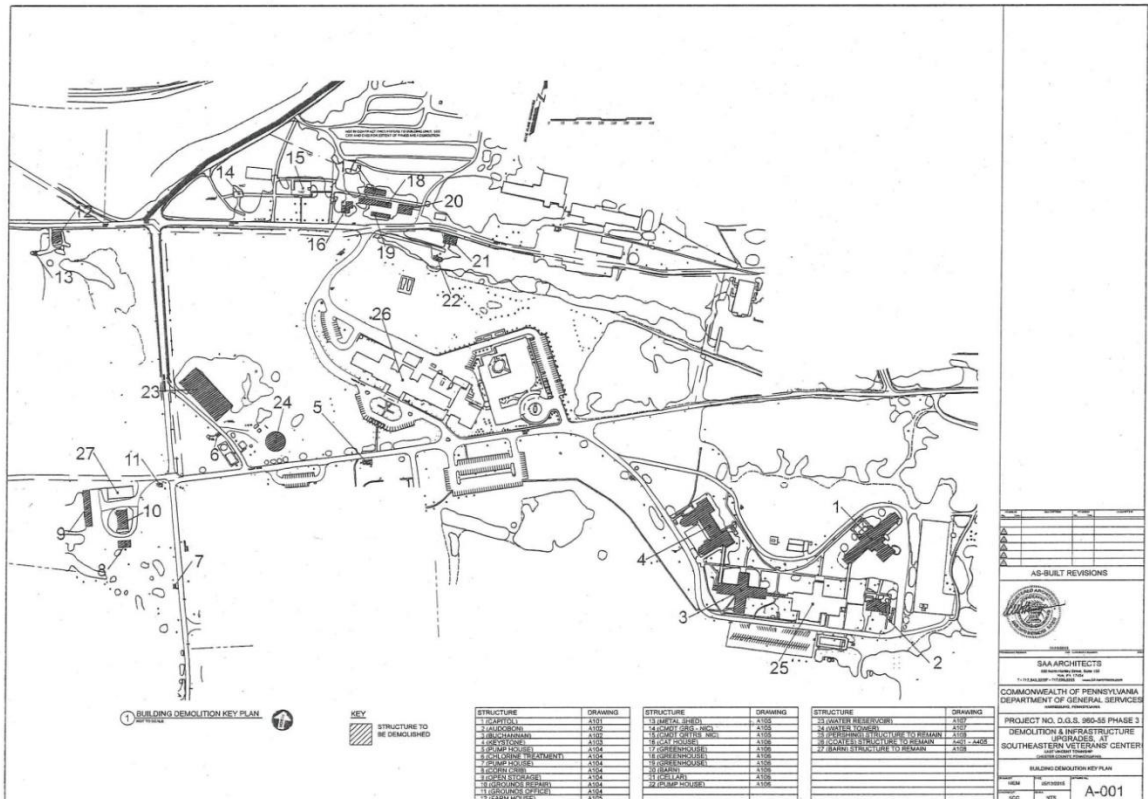
<sup>125</sup> <http://www.preservepennhurst.org/>

How would the people who lived at Pennhurst represent their own history? Would they tell a story of terror or triumph? Engaging with the struggles of the past can call us to fight for social justice in the present. As historic sites and museums move towards improved and more frequent representations of historically marginalized peoples within their exhibits and programming, it is important to call attention to sites like Pennhurst Asylum, which continue to hold us back from the betterment of historical education. It is the duty of public historians to work together towards the inclusion of all people in professional exhibition. Exhibiting and teaching difficult history is an arduous task, but the rewards of education, understanding and empathy are worth the effort in the end.

## ILLUSTRATIONS



**Image 1:** I took this photo of the Administration Building at Pennhurst on August 12, 2016. This is the main attraction at Pennhurst Asylum - the building shares the same name. As you can see, during the off-season, it is hard to tell this building is a haunted house at all.



**Image 2:** Map of Pennhurst Campus, prepared by an architectural firm for the Department of General Services, 2014. Map Courtesy of the Pennhurst Memorial & Preservation Alliance.

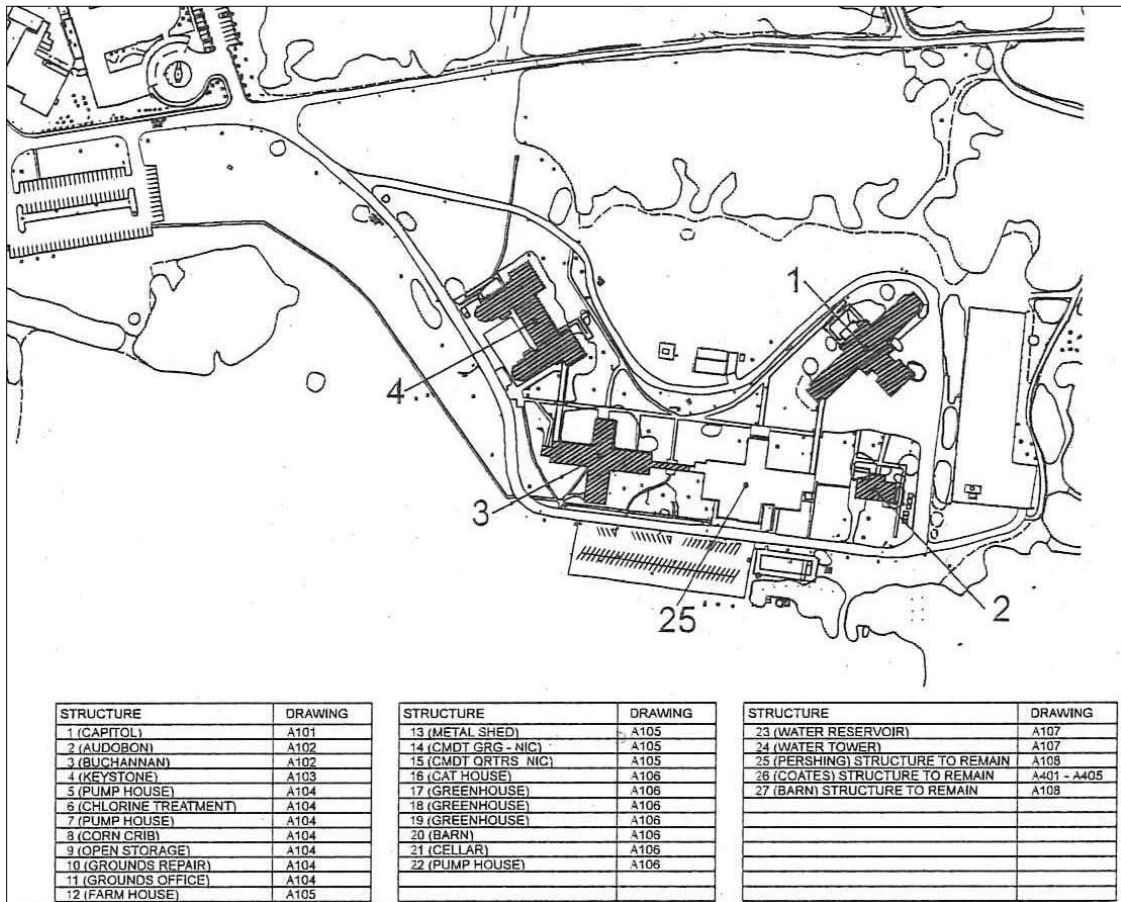


**Image 3:** Screen Capture of Pennhurst Asylum Website: <http://pennhurstasylum.com/>, March 3, 2017. The site features a running video of the “terrifying” tour complete with an ominous soundtrack that would be fit for a horror film.



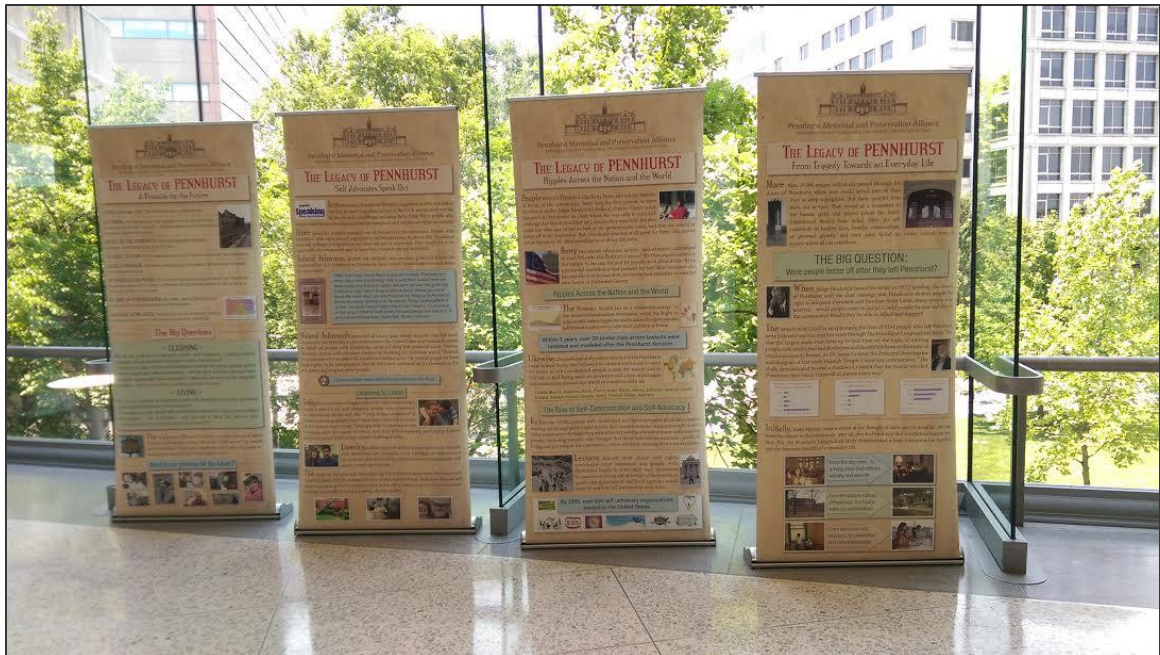
**Image 4:** This is a screenshot from reporter Bill Baldini's NBC special, *Suffer the Little Children*. This image depicts an individual tied to a bed with fabric straps.

Baldini Bill. *Suffer the Little Children* [Television Special]. NBC 10. 1968.  
<http://www.preservepennhurst.org/default.aspx?pg=26>



**Image 5:** Detail from Image 1 showing Lower Campus. Building marked #1 is the Administrative Building and location of the main "Pennhurst Asylum" attraction. Map Courtesy of the Pennhurst Memorial & Preservation Alliance.





**Image 6:** This image was taken on July 11, 2016 by the author at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, PA. This image depicts just four panels of the Pennhurst Memorial and Preservation Alliance's traveling exhibit.



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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Next Steps for the Owners of Pennhurst Asylum**

The best case scenario for the protection of the objects at Pennhurst Asylum is to remove them completely from the attraction. However, there are steps that can be taken to increase the sensitivity of the attraction and to care for the objects. The objects at Pennhurst are inherently important to the community because they represent the history of those who lived and worked at Pennhurst State School. Using the study of material culture as a historical method of analysis, historians can piece together a narrative of the past through close investigation of objects. Curators and museum professionals also use material culture to convey a narrative that is supported by archival record and other evidence. Radically changing the way the objects are displayed and cared for presents an opportunity to correct the current damaging narrative.

- Change the name and narrative of the attraction. This means to stop connecting the attraction to the history of the Pennhurst State School and Hospital. The "narrative" of the attraction means the performance and the story that is being conveyed. A new narrative could be to use supernatural creatures or fictional characters to incite fear in the visitor.
- After changing the theme of Pennhurst Asylum, the next step is to find a way to explore the history of the site in a respectful way. Writing a ghost tour of the campus would open up the site to visitors year-round, and if that is not feasible, it would draw in visitors during the weeknights which are not open for the attraction during the Halloween season (Monday-Wednesday).
- The last step is to turn over all objects from Pennhurst State School to a community group with a board of professionals, like the PMPA, or to a non-profit museum in the Philadelphia area. A partnership between Pennhurst Asylum and the Pennhurst Memorial Preservation Alliance would be an opportunity to increase the visibility of historically marginalized people. Instead of exploiting their story for a profit, the non-profit PMPA group has developed a mission statement which fights against the fictional and damaging narrative at Pennhurst Asylum.

## APPENDIX B

### Next Steps for the Pennhurst Memorial and Preservation Alliance

Members of the Pennhurst Memorial Preservation Alliance (PMPA) want to remember and memorialize those who suffered at Pennhurst State School, but they also want to rally behind the victories that resulted from those who fought for their civil rights at Pennhurst. These next steps could be utilized by the PMPA, any museum, non-profit organization, or historian interested in working to create a professional exhibition with the collection at Pennhurst. For this list it is helpful to use the imaginative exercise of an example of an object that can be found at Pennhurst. This example is of a wooden chair, created by a "patient" worker at Pennhurst State School. These chairs can indeed be found at the site.

- The first step is to gain community support through both the partnership with the existing Veterans Center on the former Pennhurst State School campus, and also by utilizing the support of local historic preservation groups. By petitioning the site of the former Pennhurst State School to become part of the National Register of Historic Places through the National Park Service. Any attempts to preserve the buildings would become more legitimate by first securing the campus's spot as a National Historic Landmark.
- The next step is to assess the collection, and to recognize which objects need conservation work and which are basically stable. Then, it is essential to identify the objects, assign accession numbers to the objects, mark the objects, then enter this data into a database system. Organization is key to a successful and accessible collection.
- After gaining intellectual control over the collection, you must also be able to properly store the collection to the standards and best practices of collection management, which has been outlined in this study.
- Finally, you are now able to research and create exhibitions and programming using the collection. The Pennhurst collection creates many opportunities for historical education and programming from just one collection. At this step we can look closer at "the chair." This imaginative exercise uses a chair that was created by a Pennhurst "patient" worker, and was found on the campus and was then used inside the attraction Pennhurst Asylum. Now in the hands of collections professionals, we can explore the options for displaying an object like this. This chair lends historians the opportunity to flesh out exhibits and visitor dialogue about: 1. forced institutionalization, 2. child labor laws, 3. institutional peonage, 4. life at institutions, 5. the use of crafts and work to express oneself when all other outlets are taken away, 6. life after Pennhurst for "patient" workers - where did they go and how did they use these skills outside of the institution? Finally, 7. vocational training and therapeutic programs as part of new ideas and trends within psychiatry in the twentieth century. Here we have laid out seven exhibition options for just *one* evocative chair. Think of all of the possibilities to discuss

many eras and events in history through the exhibition of objects from Pennhurst State School.