

## The New York Times

### Forgotten Suitcases, Emotional Baggage



An attic at the Willard Psychiatric Center in Romulus, N.Y., held the histories of former patients.

By PATRICIA COHEN

**TO** a child a forgotten trunk in an attic opens the door to a beguiling fantasy world where a castoff shawl can be transformed into a king's robe, a superhero's cape or a genie's flying carpet.

But the forgotten trunks and suitcases found in an attic at the abandoned Willard Psychiatric Center in the Finger Lakes region of New York represent the opposite: how the door to a desperately desired reality was closed to virtually all its patients.

The 427 suitcases, trunks, crates and bundles recovered after Willard closed in 1995 turned out to belong to patients who had spent decades in this vast state mental institution. In them were the remnants of lives left behind when their owners entered the locked gates.

Now a handful of artifacts once packed away, and the stories behind them, are on display at the [New York Public Library's](#) Science, Industry and Business Library in Midtown through Jan. 31.

“The history of mental health is almost always told by psychiatrists and hardly ever by patients or through patients’ lives,” said Darby Penney, “so this is pretty amazing.” Ms. Penney, who worked in the New York State Office of Mental Health, and Dr. Peter Stastny, a psychiatrist and documentary filmmaker, spent years piecing together what happened to 25 patients from their belongings, medical records and interviews.

In their poignant detail the items helped rescue these individuals from the dark sprawl of anonymity. But barely a dozen of the thousands of objects, now in the New York State Museum’s collection, are in this tiny traveling exhibition.

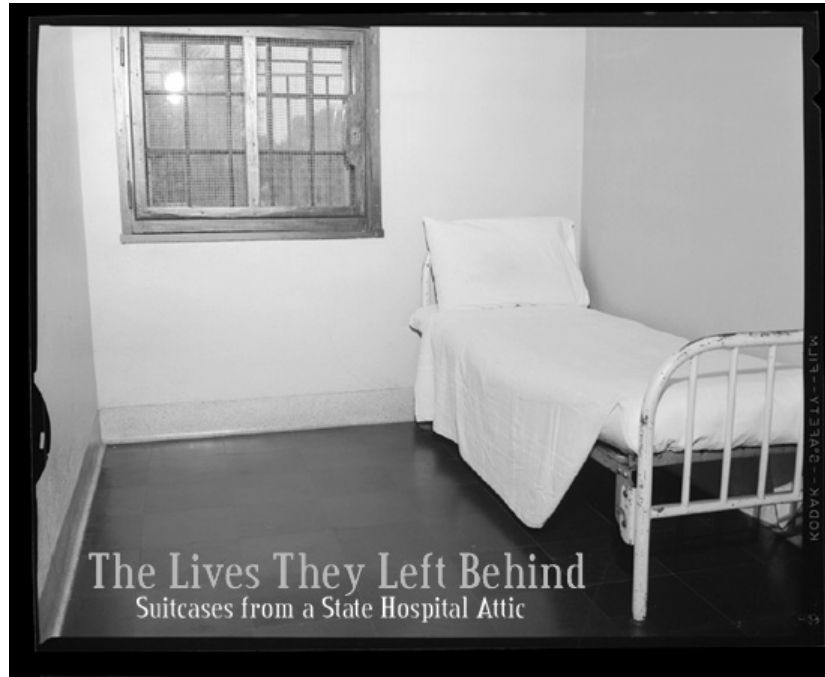
The heart of the display consists of seven-foot-high panels, each with a sepia-tone portrait of one of the nine patients featured, their life stories and photographs of them and their cache of belongings. The same information and much more is on the Web site [suitcaseexhibit.org](http://suitcaseexhibit.org) and in a forthcoming book, “The Lives They Left Behind: Suitcases from a State Hospital Attic” (Bellevue Literary Press), written by Ms. Penney and Dr. Stastny with photographs by Lisa Rinzler.

Margaret, a tuberculosis nurse, owned the most suitcases and boxes, 18 in all. (Confidentiality laws prevented the authors from using the patients’ real last names.) Inside were the makings of a home: dishes, pots and pans, a Japanese porcelain vase, a percolator, lamps, clothing, a bone-china teacup and saucer, hundreds of photos, her nursing diploma, citizenship papers and a pair of ice skates. Suffering from TB herself, and stressed over a series of illnesses and deaths among her loved ones, she was brought to Willard in 1941 without ever having seen a psychiatrist on the basis of complaints that she “annoys people” and felt persecuted. On her way to the ward Margaret, 48, said she felt “like a fly in a spider web.” She died there 32 years later.

Like many of the women who ended up in this hospital, Ms. Penney said, Margaret was an immigrant and had little or no family nearby. The patients were definitely troubled, she added, but the cause was often an immediate crisis like a death in the family or the loss of a job, something that would rarely need lifelong commitment.

“A lot of these folks happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and said the wrong thing to the wrong person,” Ms. Penney said.

Although none of Margaret’s possessions are in the library exhibition, it includes some items that belonged to Frank, the only African-American identified among the suitcase owners. He ended up at Willard in 1946, at the age of 35, when he became enraged after being served food on a chipped plate at a restaurant in



Flatbush, Brooklyn, a block from his apartment. Though never violent before, he was given a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia, a diagnosis more commonly given to black men than any other group, according to Ms. Penney and Dr. Stastny.

An Army veteran, Frank stayed at Willard for three years before being transferred to a Veterans Administration hospital for the rest of his life. But his trunk stayed behind. A few of its contents are now in a glass case: a folded white T-shirt, arcade photos, a natty blue jacket and a starter pistol.

In another glass case are two hand-stitched quilts, a cream-colored knit baby bonnet with pink ribbon and rosettes, an embroidered white linen christening gown and baby booties, and six silver spoons, one engraved with the name Ethel, the owner. She was a talented seamstress who had suffered a series of physical and psychic blows during the first half of her life.

Two of her four children died before their first birthdays. A miscarriage followed, and she soon learned she had ovarian cancer. By the time she ended up in Willard, in 1930 during the Depression, she had left her husband, an abusive alcoholic, after 22 years of marriage and was renting a room in Freehold, N.Y.

Her landlady tried to evict her after they had a falling out, but Ethel took to her bed and said she was too ill to leave. She was taken to Willard, where her medical records note that she seemed content despite frequent physical complaints. She died there 43 years later at 83.

About half the 54,000 patients who lived at Willard during its 126-year existence died there. Many were buried in the hospital cemetery, their graves marked by their case numbers.

Willard was “built to be the end of the line,” Ms. Penney said as she walked around the hub of display panels at the library. Patients received “less food, less clothing, less amenities” than at other state facilities, Ms. Penney added. “They really wanted to do it on the cheap.” Other panels in the show illustrate the history of mental-health treatments and asylums, while in their book Ms. Penney and Dr. Stastny write that patients were categorized according to their ability to work and their manageability. Patients’ unpaid labor is what kept mental institutions across the country going.

For most of Willard’s existence an understanding of psychiatric disorders was minimal as was appropriate care, Ms. Penney said. Electroshock treatments, ice baths and insulin shocks were common.

The effects of misguided treatments can be seen in the faces of patients. Photographs of Madeline, a rich French woman, taken before her institutionalization at 36 in 1932, show a stunning and sophisticated traveler in locations from the Azores to the Adirondacks. Among her belongings were a silk dress; a riding habit; fine kid gloves; books of philosophy, literature and poetry; and papers from her studies at the Sorbonne in Paris and Columbia and Hunter in New York.

During the Depression she spiraled down into poverty and emotional distress, believing she had telepathic powers. During her 47 years at Willard she was prescribed the first generation of neuroleptic drugs, which caused an incurable movement disorder, tardive dyskinesia. A photograph from about 1960 shows Madeline, her mouth pinched and puckered, her eyebrows drawn together in a tightened frown. A doctor’s note described her “shriveled, wizened face, narrow eyes” and a “stiff and sarcastic smile frozen on her face.”

In the following years the staff either upped her medication or tried “behavior modification therapy” to stop the “extreme grimacing and various twitchings of the hands, arms and trunk” — a vain attempt in the face of neurological damage, Ms. Penney and Dr. Stastny note in the book. “After several years,” they write, “she, like millions of her peers, was in the same predicament: she had become dependent on the very medications that had caused these neurological symptoms.”

Psychiatry, even today, they maintain, is often about stripping individuals of their identities. “If someone had taken the time and effort to piece together these people’s stories during their lifetimes,” Ms. Penney and Mr. Stastny write, perhaps they could have resumed “the lives they led before being institutionalized.”

## CULTURE

# Dreams and Suitcases

An attic in a former insane asylum offers a vivid reminder of the ways we've treated the mentally ill.

By Anne Underwood | NEWSWEEK  
Dec 17, 2007 Issue

It was a chilly afternoon in April 1995, just weeks before the Willard Psychiatric Center in upstate New York was set to close for good. Two staffers, Beverly Courtwright and Lisa Hoffman, were racing to salvage pieces of Willard's 126-year history when they came across a long-forgotten attic room in one of the buildings. Peering inside, they saw the slanting rays of the sun streaming through the windows, revealing wooden racks filled with hundreds of dusty old suitcases, steamer trunks, footlockers and leather bags—the property of former patients who'd arrived in the first half of the century. Courtwright wanted to leave, feeling that they had disturbed a gravesite. But Hoffman was intrigued. Who were the owners? Where had they come from? Over the ensuing weeks, researchers began opening the cases and cataloging their contents—photos, books, wedding albums, silver spoons, military uniforms—things that had been taken from the patients on arrival, never to be returned. "I felt these lives needed closure," says Hoffman. "These patients didn't even have relatives to claim their things when they died."

If recognition represents closure, 10 of these patients have finally found it. Next month their stories will be published in a book—"The Lives They Left Behind: Suitcases From a State Hospital Attic" by researcher Darby Penney and psychiatrist Peter Stastny of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, the writers who pieced together the patients' stories. It was a painstaking task, matching faded names on luggage tags with medical charts and patient records. But the result is a fascinating, though somewhat academic, glimpse into a closed world, where "incurables" were sent as a last resort, with no expectation that they would ever return to society.

The haunting thing about the suitcase owners is that it's so easy to identify with them. Perhaps they had a predisposition to mental illness. But many were hardworking men and women who seemed to be coping until they suffered setbacks—job losses, physical abuse, diseases, deaths in the family—that apparently triggered a downward spiral. One, Ethel S., had just divorced her alcoholic, abusive husband in 1930 when her landlady reported her to the authorities. Ethel, who had also lost two infant children, packed an embroidered christening gown and hand-knitted baby cap in her luggage. Dmytre Z., an immigrant from Ukraine, had survived a Nazi labor camp, only to crumble after his wife bled to death during a miscarriage. A craftsman, he had presented a scale model of the

wooden church in his hometown to President Harry Truman as a gift of gratitude in 1950. His luggage included patterns for making toy animals, crèche figures and a doll's carriage. Granted, the patients displayed some odd behavior. Gravedigger Lawrence M. was "praying, claiming to hear the voice of God and seeing the angels," as one medical report put it—and Dmytre tried to propose to Margaret Truman, the president's daughter, after his wife's death. But if they were alive today, it's hard to imagine that the three of them would have been locked up for 43, 24 and 50 years, respectively.

The irony is that Willard represented progress. On its opening day in 1869, four patients arrived, one of them in a box resembling a large chicken crate—an indication of just how poorly people with mental problems were treated then. Another had reportedly been chained to the walls of a poorhouse in Hudson, N.Y., for 10 years. Willard offered them life in a rural, if institutional, setting. Spread across 600 acres in New York's Finger Lakes region, it included a farm, a dairy, a bakery, a blacksmith shop and workshops for making shoes, clothing, soap and brooms. For a place filled with "lunatics," it was curiously dependent on the unpaid labor of patients. Only the violent and debilitated were permanently confined to locked wards. Still, many people received misguided therapies. Dmytre was given 20 electroshock treatments, though they failed to help.

Like many former asylums, Willard has changed with the times. Today it houses drug-abusing parolees, while psychiatric patients have moved out. But the authors argue that many mental patients have traded one set of problems for another. Though people can often recover with the right support, getting that support remains a huge issue. Many have been released from hospitals, only to end up in nursing homes, jails or on the streets. As Penney sees it, significant improvements will come only when patients with mental problems are viewed not as dangerous misfits but as real people, with lives, careers, dreams—and suitcases.

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# N.Y. insane asylum lives opened for all to see

By **Craig Wilson, USA TODAY**

He's known only as Mr. Lawrence. Or worse: 14956.



The number was his patient ID at Willard Asylum for the Insane in upstate New York. It would be his moniker for half a century.

An immigrant from what is now Austria, Lawrence became a window washer at Bellevue Hospital in New York City until he was taken inside the Manhattan mental institution for being "loud, boisterous, singing, shouting, praying, claiming to hear the voice of God."

He was sent to Willard in 1918, where he lived for 50 years, eventually becoming the facility's gravedigger since he worked best alone. At his death, he was buried in the very land he tended for decades. Only his number marks his grave.

Lawrence's story, and those of similar patients, was originally told in a 2004 exhibit at the New York State Museum in Albany, an exhibit that attracted more than 600,000 visitors. It has been retooled to travel, paired with a website, [www.suitcaseexhibit.org](http://www.suitcaseexhibit.org).

The exhibit includes 20 free-standing panels of information and photos about the patients, as well as two display cases full of their belongings, including Lawrence's shaving kit and shoes.

The website also includes biographies of the "suitcase patients," how they ended up at the state hospital, plus first-person accounts from people who worked at Willard.

Suitcase patients?

When the huge state hospital closed in 1995 — it housed 4,000 patients at one point, making it one of the largest in the country — workers found luggage that revealed surprising and often poignant stories about patients who lived and died there. Artists, musicians, teachers and nurses, among others, those whose lives fell apart somewhere along the way.

Darby Penney and Peter Stastny write in *The Lives They Left Behind: Suitcases From a State Hospital Attic* that curator Craig Williams of the New York State Museum, "realizing that he had stumbled across a dream of a treasure, called for additional trucks to salvage the luggage.

" 'Just keep ten, and throw the rest away,' he was told. Fortunately, Craig ignored this order, and within hours, all 427 suitcases were wrapped in plastic and driven to the museum's warehouse. He knew this was a unique historical find, but one that could not be dealt with immediately. Interns and volunteers catalogued the items in some of the suitcases over the next three years, but the majority of them remained unopened.

More than half of Willard's 50,000 patients died at the institution, many buried in the hospital cemetery. (In 1995 the New York State Department of Correctional Services took over a portion of the hospital and converted it to a drug treatment center.)

The number of patients in mental institutions has dropped dramatically in the past half-century. There were 322 mental hospitals in 1950, housing 512,501 patients. In 2004 there were only 204 such institutions, housing 52,632 patients. Many patients are now integrated into the community.

It wasn't always so. At Willard, as in many other similar institutions, Stastny says, "people didn't leave unless it was in a box."

Stastny devoted 10 years to documenting these lives. What he found most interesting was the way it demonstrated that "when people have problems, their biographies usually disappear."

He and co-curator Penney were able to reconstruct a handful of those lives, including Mademoiselle Madeline.

A French intellectual, she was drawn to the occult, an interest that alienated her from friends and family and landed her at Willard. She fought her institutionalization for decades — she was at the hospital for 47 years — and finally died at age 90 at a nearby private facility.

Stastny says he became very close to his suitcase patients in the course of his research. Many seemed similar to patients entering his office today. Mr. Frank, for instance. "Absolutely I could see him walking through my door," he says.

A young black Army veteran of World War II, Frank ended up at Willard following a disturbance he caused outside a New York City restaurant after he was served food on a chipped plate. He spent more than half his life in mental institutions, including three years at Willard. His suitcase included a metal toy starter pistol, a handkerchief, a jacket and an assortment of small photographs. Of himself.

His number: 27967

# Exhibit Spotlights NY Mental Hospital

Saturday December 1, 2007 5:31 PM

By KAREN MATTHEWS

Associated Press Writer

NEW YORK (AP) - One left a starter pistol and a blue suit jacket, barely worn. Another left a lace-trimmed christening gown, probably made for an infant daughter who died.

The artifacts, part of an exhibit opening Monday at the New York Public Library, were culled from 400 suitcases left behind by patients at the Willard Psychiatric Center in upstate New York, which closed in 1995.

The exhibit sheds light on the little-known world of patients who spent decades at the state institution for the insane, arriving with their belongings and in most cases never leaving.

"There were one or two people who had access to their belongings somehow over the years. But most of them never saw their stuff again," said Dr. Peter Stastny, a psychiatrist who is an organizer of the exhibit and co-author of an upcoming book, "The Lives They Left Behind: Suitcases From a State Hospital Attic."

Formerly known as the Willard Asylum for the Insane, the hospital opened in 1869 in the Finger Lakes region - about 300 miles northwest of New York City - and closed 126 years later as part of the nationwide move toward de-institutionalization of psychiatric patients.

"It was started as the state's hospital for people who were considered hopeless," said Darby Penney, a former state mental health official and the other author of the book about the artifacts, due out in January from Bellevue Literary Press.

"They weren't trying to help anybody get better," Penney said. "They were warehousing people and they tried to do it as cheaply as possible."

The exhibit - on display through Jan. 31 at the library's science, industry and business branch on Madison Avenue - features artifacts from just three of the suitcases found in an abandoned attic at Willard plus information about 10 former patients, the same 10 profiled in the book.

Stastny and Penney received permission to view medical records of the patients they chose to focus on in order to tell their stories. None of the patients are alive, but they were given pseudonymous last names in the book and are identified only by first names in the exhibit.

Patients landed in the mental health system for various reasons - they drank too much, they heard voices, they despaired after a loved one died.

Frank, a natty dresser whose suitcase contained the jacket and starter pistol, was an Army veteran who made a scene when he was served a meal on a chipped plate at a Brooklyn restaurant in 1945.

"I thought that someone planned to kill me," he told a doctor at Kings County Hospital.

Frank arrived at Willard nine months after the restaurant incident and was deemed incurably insane. He was transferred to the VA system, where he died in 1986 after spending more than 40 years in institutions.

Ethel's suitcase contained the christening gown along with booties, a knitted baby bonnet and six silver spoons.

Ethel was 40 when her marriage to an abusive husband ended in 1930. She had two living children; two daughters had died in infancy. Her landlady in the village of Freeville told authorities that she had heard Ethel laughing in the middle of the night and that Ethel ``constantly consulted the spirits about where she should go and what she should do."

Ethel denied the landlady's accusations and said the two had quarreled over money, but she was committed to Willard and died there in 1973.

Willard housed more than 3,000 patients during its fullest years, from 1910 to 1920, Penney said. It was a small city that ran on the unpaid labor of patients who grew food, made clothing and shoes, and worked in the slaughterhouse, brickworks and blacksmith's shop.

That practice ended after 1973 when courts ruled that patients at institutions were covered by the Fair Labor and Standards Act and could not be forced to work for free.

The exhibit is sponsored by the library, the city Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

Wendy Brennan, executive director of the alliance's New York City metro chapter, said she reacted emotionally to the artifacts.

``We pass people by on the street all the time who are ill, and we don't pay attention to them," she said. ``And you can't do that."