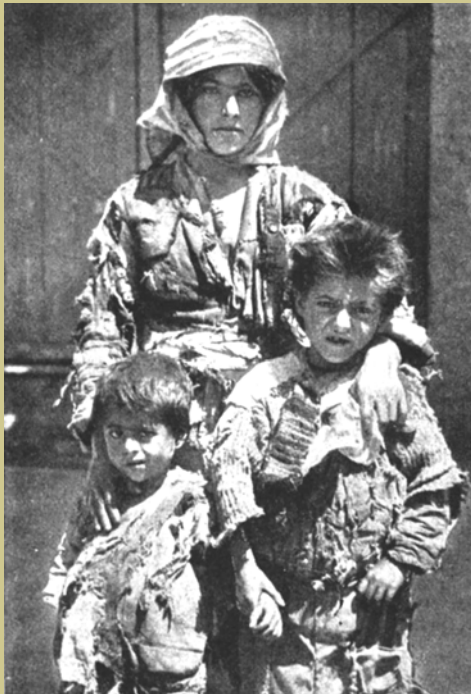




# Poor Intentions



## Portsmouth Asylum In the Fabric of Rhode Island Social Reform

William Saslow  
20 April 2002



# Poor Farm Origins

- **In the Early 1800's, the Number of Poor Rose Sharply, Creating a Social and Financial Crisis:**
  - Many jobs lost to industrialization
    - Independent artisans, undercut by manufactured goods, became wage laborers,
    - Logic of production subdivided work into smaller components, requiring less skilled workers for assembly,
    - Reduction in required skill opened workforce to larger numbers of minimally skilled people, creating a labor glut which drove wages down,
  - Loss of Family Support Base
    - With commuter distances small, many extended families were divided by travel to find jobs.
    - Low wages, low savings, and lack of extended family help, lent many to enter the rolls of public relief.



**Mechanical Thresher Alters  
Agricultural Work Dynamics**



**Industrialization Displaced Artisans**



# Poor Farm Origins

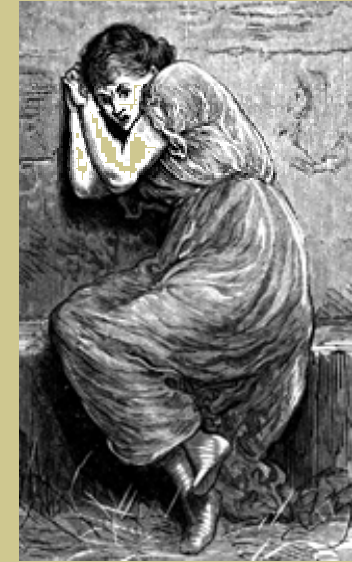
- **Taxes, Collected Separately for the Poor, Rose Quickly:**
  - Something Had to be Done:
    - Too Many Able Poor on Rolls,
    - Outdoor Relief Too Expensive,
    - Too Easy to Get Benefits.
  - Deterrence and Centralization
    - Minimize Existing Outdoor Relief,
    - Create Poor Farms (town or county),
    - Require Work from Able Poor,
    - Create Unpleasant Atmosphere.
  - Portsmouth Asylum Act Passed 1832
    - Commit those, whose “evil courses” have caused themselves to become chargeable, to the town Asylum.
    - Children to be indentured as Apprentices,
    - Wide-Ranging Power Given to Overseer of the Poor with Police Backing.





# Life in The Portsmouth Asylum

- **Insane in their Midst:**
  - Not Treated, Insanity Is Endured:
    - Insane, Elderly, and Children Poor Mix,
      - Violently Insane Terrorize the Infirm,
        - » Documented Fear,
        - » Documented Injuries,
        - » Documented Deaths.
    - No Curative Care
      - Insane Flogged into Submission,
      - Chains, and Bailing used to “control” insane,
      - Insane Let Loose to “worry” inmates.



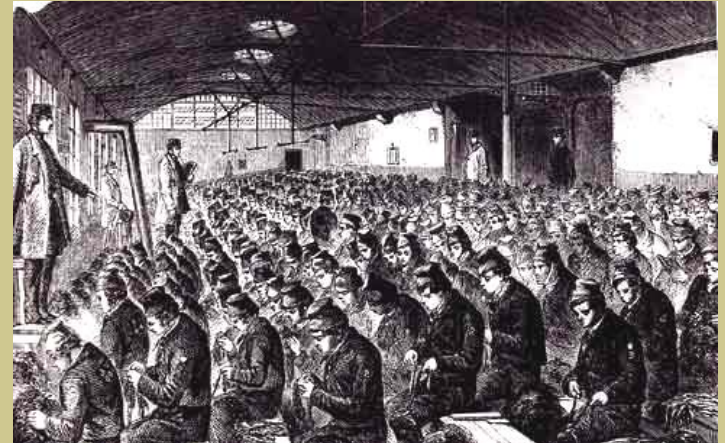
**“I have suffered much for fear of the insane, and sometimes cannot sleep, for fear of being attacked by them.”**

**Caroline Albro, Inmate**



# Life in The Portsmouth Asylum

- **Work and Punishment:**
  - All able poor required to work.
  - Portsmouth Asylum, a Working Farm:
    - Yearly Output (1849):
      - Eggs – 331 Dozen,
      - Butter – 93 Pounds,
      - Onions – 103 Bushels,
      - Apples - 250 Bushels,
      - Seaweed – 15 Loads,
      - Wool – 50 Pounds,
      - Pork – 820 Pounds,
      - Beef – 544 Pounds,
      - Sheep and Lambs – 29.
    - For Children, the Less Mobile and Off-Season:
      - Oakum – 1601 Pounds.



Prisoners Picking Oakum As Part of Hard Labor Sentence



Grandmothers Picking Oakum As Part of Pauper Sentence





# Life in The Portsmouth Asylum

- **Work and Punishment:**
  - Punishment in Portsmouth Dungeon:
    - “The dungeon of Portsmouth has scarcely been heard of beyond the boundaries of that town, and yet its victims suffer none the less”.
    - Thirteen offenses requiring solitary confinement on bread and water,
    - Dungeon in Portsmouth not “a very suitable place to put a person a long time in”.
  - Corporal Punishment:
    - Flogging Children and Insane into Submission,
    - Of Inmate, Keeper seen applying a “full blow with his fist on the side of his bald head, which staggered him- because he happened to be in the way”
  - Chaining and Bailing:
    - Chained to Restrict Movement and Keep from Under Foot.
    - Bailed in burlap if chains ineffective.



In The Dark Room on Bread and Water

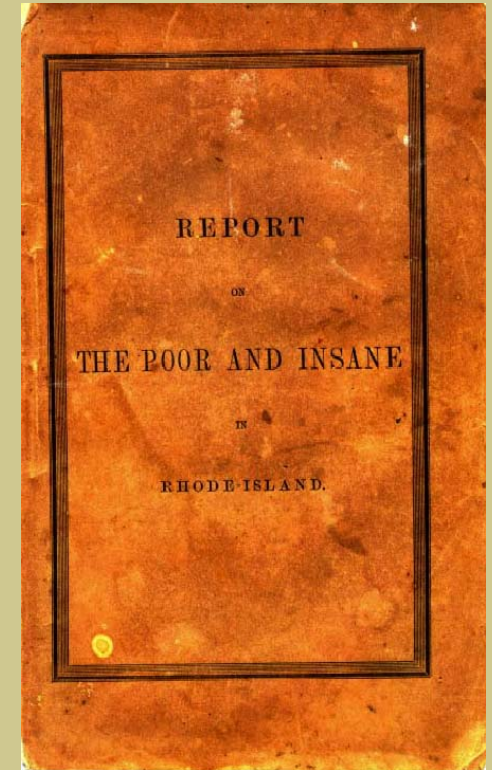


Oakum Picking Usually Performed  
by Children and the Elderly



# Oversight and Reforms

- **State Commissioner of the Poor, Thomas R. Hazard:**
  - Periodic visits to all sites, :
    - Site Inspection,
    - Inmate Interviews,
    - 1851 Report on The Poor and Insane in Rhode Island
  - Legislation Proposed:
    - Prohibit Corporal Punishment,
    - Prohibit Confinement in Dark Rooms and Dungeons,
    - Prohibit Chaining or “bonds intended to confine the limbs” ,
    - Place New Insane Inmates in Butler Hospital for Curative Treatment.

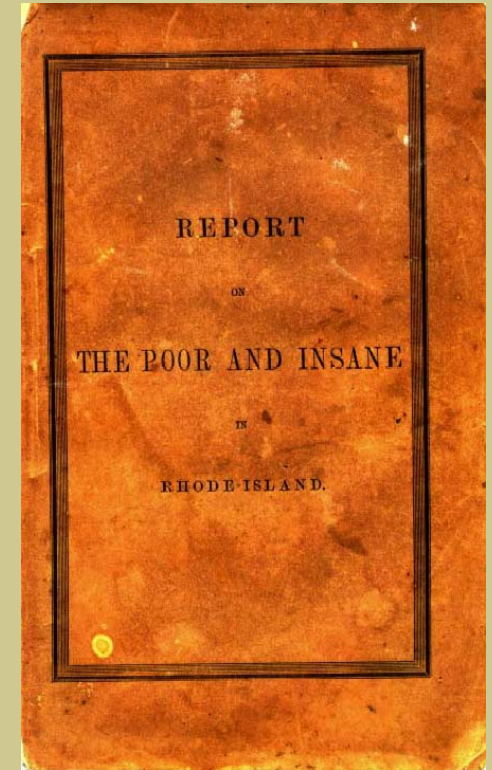


1851 Report Detailing Need For Legislation



# The Fall of the Asylum

- **By the Late 1800's The Portsmouth Asylum had changed:**
  - Insane Placed in Curative "Hospitals",
  - Children Placed in Orphanages,
  - Poor Placed in Flophouses,
  - The Asylum Relegated to an old Folks Home
  - By the early Twentieth Century, the Portsmouth Asylum closed its doors and was sold to the public in 1929.



1851 Report Detailing Need For Legislation





# In the Final Analysis

- **A Number of Factors Contributed to Portsmouth Asylum Becoming the “Poster-Child” for Welfare Reform:**
  - Prevalent Attitude of Hostility or Ambivalence For Poor By Town Leadership
    - Evidenced in Town Meetings,
    - Reforms Outvoted Consistently,
    - “However divided on other subjects, all parties seem there to unite under the banner of oppression”.
  - Portsmouth Asylum Off The Beaten Path, in the Woods,
    - Unlikely to be Visited by Public,
    - Out Of Sight, Out of Mind.
  - Rules and Regulations, while Good Intentioned, Were Oppressive and Fostered Oppression.
- Good Intentions for Welfare Reform Met With Poor Results Uniformly Across the Country’s Poor Farm System