

Maybe I'm to Blame: The Silent Troubles of Female Ancestors

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Timeline

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| 1773 | The first patient is admitted to the Public Hospital for Persons of Insane and Disordered Minds in Williamsburg, Virginia. ¹ |
| 1841 | “Boston schoolteacher Dorothea Dix visits the East Cambridge Jail, where she first sees the horrible living conditions of the mentally ill. Believing they could be cured, Dix lobbies lawmakers and courts.” |
| 1855 | An alien female who married a U.S. citizen is automatically naturalized. |
| 1863 | Massachusetts becomes the first state to create a state welfare system. |
| 1878 | Married Women's Property Act in 37 states, 6 territories, and DC. |
| 1887 | “On assignment for New York World, Nellie Bly feigns lunacy in order to be admitted to the Women’s Lunatic Asylum on New York’s Blackwell’s Island. Her exposé, “Ten Days in a Mad-house,” detailing the appalling living conditions at the asylum, leads to a grand jury investigation and needed reforms at the institution.” |
| March 1907 | The Expatriation Act: Any American woman who marries a foreigner shall take the nationality of her husband. |
| 1907 | “Indiana is the first of more than 30 states to enact a compulsory sterilization law, allowing the state to “prevent procreation of confirmed criminals, idiots, imbeciles and rapists.” By 1940, 18,552 mentally ill people are surgically sterilized.” |
| 1916 | Divorced wives and widows of U.S. citizens living abroad must register with a U.S. consulate to retain citizenship. |
| April 1917 | The U.S. enters World War I. |
| 1917 | Kansas passes Chapter 205, which detains those suspected of carrying a sexually transmitted disease. |
| 1919 | “The American Plan” term appears in a publication of the American Social Hygiene Association. |
| 1920 | Passage of the 19 th amendment (Women’s Suffrage). |

¹ Sources include: <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2013/04/timeline-mental-health-america/>; Christina K Schaeffer’s *The Hidden Half of the Family*.

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September 1922	Passage of The Cable Act (Married Women's Independent Citizenship Act).
1936	Act of 1936 allows women who divorced or is a widow to repatriate. Others had to go through the naturalization process.
July 1940	Act of 1940 allows all women who lost their citizenship based on their marriage to repatriate.
1970s	Enforcement of The American Plan ends. ²

Her Life in the Asylum

“But here was a woman taken without her own consent from the free world to an asylum and there given no chance to prove her sanity. Confined most probably for life behind asylum bars, without even being told in her language the why and wherefore. Compare this with a criminal, who is given every chance to prove his innocence. Who would not rather be a murderer and take the chance for life than be declared insane, without hope of escape?” –Nellie Bly, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*

Whether married or not, women were under the guardianship and control of the men in their lives (fathers, husbands, sons, and sons-in-law). This control sometimes led to incarceration in “insane” asylums, poorhouses, almshouses, and mental hospitals, with little to no due process. When we think of women and asylums, we conjure up mental images of Victorian women locked up for reasons that are unheard of today: anxiety, postpartum depression, and even novel reading.

Questions to Ask:

- What institutions existed in her time/place?
- What more can you learn about that institution via newspaper articles, reports, images, and histories?
- What extant records might exist (court, asylum, newspapers, home sources)?
- What can we learn about her experience from the writings of others?

² “America's Forgotten Mass Imprisonment of Women Believed to Be Sexually Immoral,” *History* (<https://www.history.com/news/chamberlain-kahn-act-std-venereal-disease-imprisonment-women>: accessed 7 June 2022).

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Her Citizenship

The woman naturalized by marriage to an American did not receive a certificate of citizenship from the federal government—the government's reminder to her that a marriage certificate was the only document supporting her claim to U.S. citizenship.

--Candice Lewis Bredbenner, *A Nationality of Her Own*, pg. 42

In 1907 the Expatriation Act changed women's derived citizenship. While those immigrant women who married American citizens or whose husbands naturalized benefited from derivative citizenship, women who were American citizens found their rights taken away. From 1907 to 1922, American women lost citizenship when they married non-citizens.

Questions to ask:

- Where was my female ancestor born? Where was her husband born? What were their citizenship statuses when married?
- How did immigration impact them?
- Did she have to later register as an enemy alien during wartime if she lost her citizenship due to marriage?
- What records might exist (marriage record, naturalization, court record, newspaper)?

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Her Life Under The American Plan

I was walking with my sister to a meat market yesterday morning at about 11 o'clock when we were stopped by the police and told we were under arrest as suspicious characters...At the hospital I was forced to submit to an examination just as if I was one of the most degraded women in the world...

--Quote by Margaret Hennessey. *The Sacramento Bee* (Sacramento, California)

26 February 1919. pg. 5

The World War I era brought up the concern that women were a distraction for soldiers. Even worse, women were blamed for transmitting disease to those soldiers. While sex workers might be an obvious target of this concern, all women were targeted in a public health campaign that continued into the 1970s. Without due process, women were detained, made to endure forced medical examinations treatments, and long-term incarceration.

Questions to Ask:

- How close did your family live to a military base?
- What do newspapers tell us about women's experiences during this time period?
- What records might exist? (court records, police records, newspaper, home sources)

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