

## The Vermont Asylum System


In the same era as the Retreat, Waterbury State Hospital opened in northern Vermont in 1891, as the former was getting too crowded.

In these buildings, those called Insane were kept indefinitely without trial, worked without pay, were submerged in icewater as a 'cure' for 'troubling behavior,' and in the mid-1900s subjected to hysterectomies and vasectomies by the hundreds.

Likewise, the Brandon Training School housed over two thousand Vermonters from 1915 – 1993. They were disabled children, children of poor or deceased parents, or women judged as unfit to be parents because of their poverty or disability. It was not a school. It was a place where people were people were kept for their entire lives. They were not being 'trained' for any opportunities outside its walls, nor compensated for any work within it.

Today, grassroots organizations of the disabled like Green Mountain Self-Advocates center survivors of these programs, offering free conference tuition to ex-Brandon School residents. Nationwide networks like ADAPT fight for disabled people to get the services and healthcare they need to live in their own homes.

Some states have begun paying reparations to victims of sterilization, North Carolina and California among them, but Vermont has not yet followed suit.






**Retreat Trails**  
Brattleboro, Vt.

Trailhead Kiosk  
Retreat Trail System  
other trails  
access road or line  
woodlands  
agricultural fields  
old fields and brush

These trails are on land owned by The Woodham Foundation and Woodham Farm, who graciously offer and maintain them for public recreational use.

For more information, contact The Woodham Foundation at 800-688-2222 or www.woodhamfoundation.org  
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Some trail distances:  
Ice Pond from Cable St. - 0.5 mi.  
Ice Pond from State St. (via Lewis Woodlands) - 0.8 mi.  
Ice Pond from Upper Danversville Rd. - 0.8 mi.  
Ice Pond from Retreat Farm (via Montpelier) - 1.17 mi.  
Main Trail loop - 1.5 mi.  
Retreat Tower from Cable St. via Town Rd. - 0.37 mi.  
segment of Tower Hill trail from Cable St. - 0.8 mi.  
of Country Trail, Tower Climb, Lodge Trail, Tower Road.  
Cable Connector - 0.3 mi.  
Bogart Trail - 0.4 mi.



**BRATTLEBORO, VT**

The Retreat Farm, which opened as the Vermont Asylum For The Insane in 1834, ran a working dairy and vegetable farm with the labor of the 'Insane' for well over 100 years.

People committed here raised, tended, and processed cattle until the 1970s. The dairy herd consisted of purebred Holsteins, the namesake of the downtown Brattleboro building.

Those kept in confinement here were also put to work doing groundskeeping, laundry work, and staffing boiler rooms, the slaughterhouse, piggeries, and acres of crops.

These people were not paid for their work. Many had no way to get out while still living.



*Photos by Brown*

What does our culture call work done without pay by people unfree to leave?

Today, Vermont's dairy industry continues to be driven by farmworkers struggling to get fair pay and legal protections. For more information on how you can support them, look up the Migrant Justice coalition's Milk with Dignity campaign.

## Who Were the Farm Inmates?

People were classed as insane for anything from having epilepsy to angering their parents or husbands. Many were unwed mothers or women who wouldn't conform to straight marriages.

During the 1930s and 40s, native Abenaki and mixed-race people were especially targeted by eugenicists, the politicians and doctors obsessed with "improving Vermont's genetic stock" and stopping an imagined "racial exodus" (of white Protestants.)

Those judged as "unfit" were funneled into the asylum system and subject to sterilization. Nancy Gallagher's "Breeding Better Vermonters," 1991, tells the fuller story.

The Children's Aid Society was a major eugenics proponent, framing people's poverty and disability as signs of irresponsibility, and violating their rights in the name of protecting their children, a pattern which continues today.



The Retreat extracted a good deal of unpaid construction work for its projects as well. From 1887 to 1892, inmates built the 65-foot Retreat Tower in the nearby woods.

It never fulfilled its intended use – it closed shortly after being built because too many inmates jumped to their death from its roof.

They were among the 659 people originally buried at the Retreat Cemetery. The small plot of land with 35 remaining headstones could not hold nearly this many people.



It is unknown where the rest of those who lived and died behind these walls were moved. Some remains were recorded as moved to the Prospect Hill Cemetery.

The names and memories of the Insane may not have been remembered, but their stolen strength built this place and laid foundations for today's local tourism economy. If every Mad one of us started a scorched earth campaign tomorrow, we could not come close to the level of damage that our caretakers have wrought.