

VERMONT HISTORY

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- ❖ Thomas Davenport and the Dream of an Electric World
David Hammond and Kevin Thornton
- ❖ A New Look at an Eastern Vermont Pottery
Warren F. Broderick
- ❖ Halloween in Vermont, 1870-1940: Modernizing
Pranks, Fortune Telling, and Parties
Elizabeth A. Allen
- ❖ Vermont Milk Chocolate Company Factory: A Bittersweet History
Thomas Durant Visser
- ❖ Vermont Chronicle: The Raid at Island Pond
Dean B. Pineles
- ❖ History Day 2025 Essays
Jing Williams and Quincy Sabick

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About the Covers

Angelica Whiting's Sketch of the Brattleboro Asylum for the Insane

On September 13, 1846, Angelica Gilbert Whiting entered the Vermont Asylum for the Insane at Brattleboro as patient #946. She would stay for the next fifteen years, departing on May 9, 1861.

Whiting was the third daughter of Daniel and Elizabeth Whiting, one of a total of seven children in a family raised in Troy, New York. Other Whiting siblings were teachers, authors, military officers, cartographers, and prominent citizens in their community, but we know far less about Angelica.

According to intake records, Angelica worked as a teacher and had first been committed to an unknown asylum in 1843, at the age of thirty-two. She remained there for two years and was then released to the care of her parents in New York. One year later, her parents left New York to move in with another Whiting daughter in Philadelphia, and brother Henry Laurens Whiting brought his sister Angelica to Brattleboro.

Founded in 1836, the Vermont Asylum for the Insane was one of the earliest hospitals in the country to focus entirely on mental healthcare. In previous centuries, mental illness had been variously understood as a religious crisis, a moral failing, a personal choice, or an incurable and permanent break with society. When Anna Hunt Marsh died in 1834, she left an endowment for building a “hospital for the relief of insane persons,” after years of having watched her husband, Dr. Perley Marsh, treat patients with the accepted regimens of the time—many of which were profoundly violent and dangerous.

The first superintendent of the Vermont Asylum for the Insane, William Rockwell, was part of a different movement for treatment. Alongside others, he believed that patients living with mental illness could be helped and even “cured” by kinder and gentler methods. He instituted a plan for the new asylum that encouraged “useful” physical work, connection with nature, and a supportive atmosphere. He moved his own young family to the grounds and encouraged residents to be



social with each other and with the staff. The asylum had a large library, a home farm, published its own newspaper, and by the time Whiting arrived, a population of 300 patients—a huge increase from its originally planned twenty.

One key element of Rockwell's vision for treatment was "moral therapy," an innovative approach for the time that encouraged relaxation, creating arts and crafts, and conversation with others—all techniques that might be familiar to the modern reader, but were new at the time.

Today, we know of three pieces that Angelica Whiting created while a patient at the Asylum. One is a friendship quilt that she made—alongside other patients, staff, and members of the Rockwell family—as a gift for a fellow patient named Mary Young, who arrived shortly after Whiting in September 1846. The quilt was likely a departure gift when Young returned home to Vergennes in December 1846. It is now in a private collection.

The second known work by Angelica Whiting is the sketch that graces the cover of this issue of *Vermont History*. According to case notes from her time at the asylum, "Most of her time is spent in drawing. She has taken several very good sketches of the asylum and ground adjoining." The image is an extraordinarily talented rendering of the campus, done in pen and ink. The perspective of the buildings is

correct, and the trees and mountains are particularly delicate. The entire image is tiny—only 2 $\frac{5}{8}$ " x 4 $\frac{1}{4}$ " —speaking to the precision and care of the detail work.

Whiting signed the image on the back—"Penciled / by / Angelica Whiting"—and dated it 1850 on the front, four years after her arrival. The frame is contemporary to the drawing, a simple grain-painted construction of wood and nails. It's possible that fellow patients at the Asylum made it—there was a carpentry shop on the grounds—or it may be a later addition.

A third piece by Whiting, also in the collections of the Vermont Historical Society, is a larger and more finished drawing of the Asylum; the sketch may have been a preparatory drawing for the final piece, or simply a variation on a theme.

Whiting's sketch came into the collections of the Vermont Historical Society in 1989, during the tenure of Executive Director Michael Sherman. Sherman advocated strongly for better representation of marginalized voices in everything VHS did, from programming to collections, and this sketch is an outstanding example of that initiative. The Society purchased it for \$500 from a Williamsburg, VA, dealer, with support from several members, including longtime VHS trustee and friend John Carnahan. Michael and John both passed away in the spring of 2025 and their presence among the VHS family will be greatly missed.

AMANDA KAY GUSTIN
Director of Collections & Access
Vermont Historical Society



Vermont Historical Society
60 Washington St.
Barre, VT. 05641-4209

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