From the History & Archives Collection: Pictorial History of Psychology and Psychiatry

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This month’s History and Archives Section includes excerpts taken from A.A. Roback and Thomas Kiernan’s A Pictorial History of Psychology and Psychiatry. Originally published in 1969, this book is from the collection of the Delaware State Hospital.

Figure 1 depicts the conditions experienced by psychiatric patients in 18th century. Shunned by society and sent to live in State Institutions, life was bleak for individuals with mental disorders during this time period. This particular image provides a window into life behind the walls of Bicêtre Hospital, in Paris, France. Bicêtre had a dark history riddled with instances of maltreatment inflicted upon its psychiatric patients. Patients were often shackled to walls and pipes, denied access to baths and restrooms, and were subjected to physical abuse and experimentation.

Figure 1. Conditions in Bicêtre Hospital, Paris, France.
Despite this reputation, Bicêtre Hospital also gained infamy for more positive events, particularly the location for the groundbreaking work of Dr. Phillipe Pinel (Figure 2). It was at this hospital in 1793, where Dr. Pinel was credited as being the first physician to deliver humane treatment to the mentally ill. Today, Pinel’s humane approach is known as “moral therapy.” Additionally, Pinel is regarded by some as the “father of modern psychiatry” for his contributions in the classification of mental disorders.

Figure 2. Dr. Phillipe Pinel
of the Convention, the impetuous Georges Couthon, who the following year (1794) was born to the scaffold in the same cart as his staunch friend, Robespierre.

Couthon, seeing danger for the Revolution on all sides, sternly warned the physician that if he intended to protect some of the enemies of the people (how familiar the phrase still sounds!) he would rue the day. Able executive that he was, despite his paralyzing condition, Couthon interrogated some of the fettered psychotics, receiving vile abuse for answers. Turning to Pinel, he exclaimed, "Citizen, you must be crazy yourself to wish to let these brute's howl." Pinel returned that those deprived of air and liberty could hardly be expected to treat their captors with better grace. Couthon finally left the decision to Pinel, not, however, without predicting that he would regret his heedlessness.

Pinel did not undertake the inmates all at once, but gradually, waiting to observe the results in a dozen cases. One of the men he released, a sturdy former soldier, who had tried to put himself off as a general, had been confined in the asylum for ten years. This man, Chevrier, whom Pinel treated kindly, actually saved his life, when an inbred mule, under the delusion that the doctor had been harboring some of the housewives, was about to Lynch him.

How did Pinel himself feel about the experiment? In the preface to his principal work, he writes: "I have examined with scrupulous care the effects which the iron chains had on the insane, and afterward the comparative results of their removal, and I cannot help favoring a wiser and more moderate restraint." He tells of a number of violent cases, who, once the chains were removed, became unruly and convulsed dismally, and who when they felt it necessary, asked to be shackled again.

At Bicêtre, Pinel instituted a regiment which was free from the insane bloodletting, purging, and shocking that were the common treatment of the day. As a practicing physician, in his earlier days, he had familiarized himself with French, German, British, and Italian theories and practices, having translated Cullen's Institutions of Medicine and Baghiv's Opera Omnia, and he was thus fully equipped to undertake the task of hospital administration.

In 1785, when he became the chief of La Salpêtrière, a more modern institution, he was able to carry out all his projects. Due to a succession of brilliant men who followed in his footsteps, culminating in the combined medical skill and showmanship