

**“The Shame of Pennsylvania”:
Public Memory, Local News, and Institutionalization’s
Contested Past**

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In 2010, when Pennhurst State School and Hospital, a long-abandoned residential facility for people with intellectual/developmental disabilities, was reused as a haunted attraction called “Pennhurst Asylum,” it sparked a public debate and became an occasion for storytelling about what Pennhurst meant to the surrounding Pennsylvania community. I apply theoretical perspectives from memory studies to the case of “Pennhurst Asylum” in order to understand what is at stake when we remember institutional spaces such as Pennhurst. More specifically, this case study is based on a narrative analysis of 224 relevant news stories, reader letters, and comments appearing in Pennsylvania newspapers in 2010 and 2011. The narrative patterns I identify have ramifications for contemporary disability politics; the emergence of minority histories into official, public narratives; the role of local news in the formation of public memory; and ethical debates over how to approach popular representations of historical trauma.

Keywords: Disability history, historical asylums, commemoration, Pennhurst State Hospital, communication ethics.

On September 14, 2010, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* ran an editorial denouncing a haunted attraction set to open in nearby Spring City, Pennsylvania that October. The authors claimed the site of the attraction — the long-abandoned Pennhurst State School and Hospital that was closed by court order in 1987 — as a place of remembering for people with disabilities. As a residential institution, Pennhurst had housed over 10,000 individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities since its opening in 1908. “Haunted House exploits real horror,” the headline read, “Pennhurst shouldn’t become a Halloween attraction.” At Pennhurst, it described, “abuse and neglect ran rampant.” Though the number of people in institutions nationwide has declined since the lawsuit that led to Pennhurst’s closure, the authors argued, “the attraction would exploit misplaced fears of disabled people, which brought about the sort of institutionalization that once occurred at Pennhurst” (Clarke & Hanyok, 2010).

The authors of the editorial used both the vocabulary of memorialization and the vocabulary of disability rights. They referred to “people with disabilities” as “a class of people struggling to achieve full civil rights and inclusion.” And they suggested that although the former Pennhurst campus was now privately owned, an organization called the Pennhurst Memorial and Preservation Alliance sought to find “an appropriate use for the property” instead of a use that “tramples on the memory of those who lived and died at Pennhurst.” The combination of these ideas amounted to a historical narrative that identified Pennhurst as the site of a political struggle too cavalierly reincarnated as a site of entertainment. Several thousand people attended the attraction *each night* during that Halloween season in 2010. During that fall, the attraction remained a hot issue about which certain members of the community were eager to opine.

In the terminology of memory studies, the public conversation about the reuse of Pennhurst was what sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel (1996) would call a *mnemonic battle*—when groups of people disagree about the past, how its story should be told, or if it should be told. Local newspapers played a particularly important role in providing a public venue for conversation about Pennhurst. Early news of the “Pennhurst Asylum” haunted attraction was immediately described in local newspapers and later by *The Associated Press* (Walters, 2010) as a full-blown controversy. The online version of an article in *The Mercury* announcing the opening of the haunted attraction received 111 reader comments. In 2010 and 2011, Pennsylvania newspapers printed over one hundred stories and letters about Pennhurst in response to the haunted attraction. The front page of Philadelphia’s alternative newspaper, *The Philadelphia Weekly*, featured a photograph of a dusty and rusted wheelchair posed in Pennhurst’s underground tunnel system with the headline “The Future of Pennhurst Hospital Divides a Town” (Goldberg, 2010). Local broadcast news stations also featured several reports on the attraction and news vans were on the scene on opening night. The Pennsylvania chapter of the largest national advocacy organization in the United States for people with intellectual/developmental disabilities, the ARC of Pennsylvania, took out a full-page ad in the *Daily Local News* to protest the “Pennhurst Asylum.”

There was other evidence, too, that community members were engaged with the question of how to remember Pennhurst. The most visible resistance to the attraction was mounted by the Pennhurst Memorial and Preservation Alliance (PMPA), the

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grass-roots organization advocating for the preservation of the buildings and the story of Pennhurst. In September of 2010, a small protest against the attraction was organized by advocates at Philadelphia's Independent Living Center, Liberty Resources. Protesters held picket signs that read "People's suffering is not entertaining" and "Ignorance is the real horror" (Kessler, 2010, p. 1, 4).

The cultural conflicts in this case are symptomatic of the progress and stagnation in how society regards people with disabilities. Like other similar institutions, Pennhurst opened during the eugenics era (1880s – 1930s), a time when professionals of all stripes saw disability as a threat to the public gene pool. Pennhurst was still open during the rise of rehabilitation (1940s – 1960s) that sought to find a use for disabled people through productive work. By 1955, Pennhurst had reached its peak population of 3,500 while major shifts in theories of care and policy were eminent. Wolf Wolfensberger's principle of normalization was introduced and took hold in the early 1970s, advocating that human services ought to be delivered in a way that most closely mimicked the typical patterns of daily life in mainstream society. The principle of normalization (meaning offering a normal environment, routines, and opportunities) was widely used by advocates and policy makers to justify the transition toward providing services for disabled people in their community, rather than centralizing services in large institutions. Pennhurst remained open in the decades that followed the 1963 Community Mental Health Act (also known as the Mental Retardation and Community Mental Health Centers Construction Act) and the 1965 creation of Medicaid, which helped speed the pace of deinstitutionalization, mostly for mental health facilities. Pennhurst remained open throughout the 1970s, as the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act was passed, giving children with disabilities a right to education in the least restrictive environment possible. After significant down-sizing throughout the 1980s, Pennhurst's 1987 closure still left other private and public peer institutions intact. Five residential state centers for developmental disability continue to operate in Pennsylvania today (dhs.pa.gov).

The future of rights for people with intellectual disabilities might be summarized by Allison Carey's position in her book *On the Margins of Citizenship: Intellectual Disability and Civil Rights in Twentieth-Century America* (2009), in which she places "people with intellectual disabilities in the same theoretical context as other citizens," writing:

Human interdependence and vulnerability to social constraints are not solely an issue for people with intellectual disabilities, or for people with disabilities more broadly. They are the crux of the exercise and value of rights for all people (p. 35).

Adding to this historical backdrop, a communication perspective on *public memory* considers our understanding about the past as developed through an exchange between storytellers (or producers of messages) and listeners (or audiences) that happens within a particular historical moment and culture and through particular media (whether these be objects, Hollywood movies, or historical markers). As a field, memory studies asks us to consider the motivations and interpretive resources available to speakers and audiences as much as it asks us to consider facts and evidence. Through this lens, we can perhaps more compassionately understand why the emergence of minority histories into official, public view often provokes significant disagreement.

That images and stories of the past should drive us to public engagement through protest or the humble letter-to-the-editor is in itself a wonder. Questions of memorialization, of what pieces of the past ought to be preserved and remembered publicly for the future, are examples of when representation matters. This is what is at stake for media and communication scholars in the study of public memory.

Public Memory of Historical Asylums:¹ Applying Kenneth Foote's Phases of Commemoration

What remains in public memory is often a question of what's left behind. That is, physical objects and places act as mnemonic devices. Their very materiality sparks questions about their origins and the answers often come in the form of storytelling. In the case of deinstitutionalization², part of what is left behind in every state in the country is buildings, often entire campuses, that each housed hundreds or thousands of individuals. The predicament of what to do with publicly-owned land and buildings that were once asylums can in part be attributed to timing—a number of decades have now passed since the greatest thrust of institutional closures. The options for what becomes of such places are not unlike the options for any other place that falls into disuse: demolition, abandonment, or reuse. However, in the case of historic sites, it is often the threat of loss that spurs action toward the

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preservation of history (Barthel, 1996; Glassberg, 2001). As empty institutional spaces are threatened by decay or redevelopment, and as the disability advocates who led social change in the 1970s and 1980s begin to age, the time is right for memorial and preservation efforts.

Cultural geographer Kenneth Foote (1997) studies the commemoration of difficult pasts by looking to American landscapes of violence and tragedy. For Foote, abandoned places, such as Pennhurst and other long-shuttered asylums, are not necessarily forgotten. Instead, Foote describes commemoration as a process, which may move through four phases: sanctification (those widely venerated, specifically marked, and often transferred to public ownership), designation (those marked for significance without formal consecration, often including sites in a transitional phase prior to sanctification, such as minority causes), rectification (those exonerated from association with the tragedy and reintegrated into everyday use), and obliteration (those removing or covering up all evidence of tragedy and completely removed from use). There are examples of former asylums in all four of these phases of commemoration, perhaps suggesting that public memory of asylums is at an especially critical tipping point, or at least occupies a somewhat unsettled or ambiguous status.

Haunted History: Edutainment or Exploitation?

Ghost-themed attractions at historic places are neither a new phenomenon nor one limited to historical asylums. Approaches to such programming can vary widely among historic tourist attractions that attempt to offer some combination of education and entertainment in order to remain economically viable. In Philadelphia, Eastern State Penitentiary is one example of a historic site run by a non-profit organization that has public education as part of its mission. While an annual haunted attraction provides for the majority of its operating budget, it allows the site to be open all year round for historic tours and exhibits (Eastern State Penitentiary, 2011). In contrast, Louisville, Kentucky is home to the privately-owned Waverly Hills Sanatorium, which offers ghost tours once per week by a “paranormal expert” and provides no historical interpretative programming (Waverly Hills, 2013). Like Waverly Hills, there are numerous examples of historical asylums that currently feature some combination of ghost tours, paranormal investigation, and/or haunted attractions: “Hill View Manor” in Pennsylvania, “Rolling Hills Asylum” in New Jersey, “Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum” in West Virginia,

and “The Haunted Infirmary” and “Ashmore Estates” in Illinois.

The ethical reuse of historical asylums hinges on several factors. First, how do we regard the role of such places in our collective history? If we see them as sites of trauma, neglect, and abuse, then we might deem reuse for entertainment as inherently unethical in that it uses the pain of past residents as a source of thrills for contemporary audiences and profit for private owners. Further, if we see asylums as part of the history of systematic segregation and devaluation of disabled people, we may further question the ethics of reusing such a space without acknowledging this legacy. If instead, we see cause for valuing freedom of expression over the objections of community members, we might argue that as an act of creative expression, haunted history remains a distasteful but unavoidable result of this freedom. Further, if we wish for abandoned asylums to be preserved as historic sites in a manner that seeks to educate the public, the economics of reuse must be accounted for. With almost a century of public investment poured into this method of care and confinement for disabled people, a similarly significant investment is required to prevent such buildings from the fate of demolition. One might ask if there is a Utilitarian argument for serving the greatest good by using the popularity of some haunt-themed programming in order to provide the public with high quality, historical programming. Finally, we might make this case an occasion to put ourselves in the shoes of the Other, either by applying the basic tenet of Judeo-Christian ethics (the Golden Rule), or by assuming a position behind Rawls’ Veil of Ignorance. If we imagine ourselves as a resident of one of these institutional spaces, either current or past, would we feel diminished by the reuse of historical asylums as haunted attractions? Finally, do we see historical asylums as valuable in and of themselves, and if so, for whose benefit ought this value be leveraged? If their erection was ostensibly for the public good, however misguided we may find this notion³, then should their value be retained for the public good today?

Journalism as a Site of Public Memory

The redevelopment of institutional spaces is a perfect occasion for journalistic storytelling, as are memorialization and preservation efforts. Indeed, many scholars have argued that newspapers and magazines have a legitimate role in disseminating public history (Kitch, 1999, 2005, 2006, 2007; Zelizer, 1992, 1998; Choi, 2008; Robinson, 2006). Journalistic sources have been the subject of particular interest in memory studies due to the crossover

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between news values and the values of historiography. For example, journalists and public historians both have mandates to serve the public good, to seek facts, and create representations of reality as objectively as possible. Still, much research on memory in journalism attends to moments when news norms are subverted in the process of commemoration (Kitch, 1999, 2006; Zelizer, 1998; Robinson, 2006). Choi (2008) finds news narratives are able to create a sense of consensus through the appearance of a set of repeated narratives, even when counter-narratives are also available. Robinson (2006) shows newspapers may also reflect moments of contestation when even the recent past resists the consensus or corroboration necessary for a master narrative to emerge. The question as it relates to historical asylums is what role might journalists play as disseminators of this history, especially as it relates to understanding contemporary issues in disability rights?

Narrative Analysis of Local Newspapers

The sculpting of real events into narrative form makes events comprehensible and, therefore, meaningful. As Hayden White describes, the “value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary” (White in Sturken, 1997, p. 8). As such, the narrativization of the past inevitably leads to “narrative linkages and omissions” (Kitch, 1999, p. 137) so that we can think of memory achieving simplification through narrative (Wertsch, 2002). Further, narratives may seek closure through morals and lessons that can be extended to the world outside the narrative (Kitch, 1999). Indeed, this is one of the ways a memory can be made “useful” in the present (Zelizer, 1995). Fitting events into existing narratives facilitates continuity across time and enables events that conflict with existing narratives to be either “forgotten” or reinterpreted. As Freud suggested in conceptualizing secondary revision, “renarrativization is essential in memory; indeed, it is its defining quality” (Sturken, 1997, p. 42). Carolyn Kitch (2007) explains the variety of elements involved in narrative analysis as focused on the what, how, and who of storytelling:

This kind of study takes note of the events and anecdotes in stories (what is in them and what is left out) as well as overall plot development (how, in what order and with what language, the story is told; how it opens; how its

conflict is established and resolved; and how it ends) and characterization (who, within the story structure, emerges as the most salient players and how they interact). (p. 40)

The benefit of narrative analysis is that by attending to the system of meaning as it is communicated in the elements of story, one can more easily compare stories from a variety of sources and attempt to identify patterns.

In order to understand the public conversation about Pennhurst during the haunted attraction controversy, I collected and analyzed⁴ all available news articles and reader letters on the subject of Pennhurst from 2010 and 2011, the first two years the “Pennhurst Asylum” was open. I attempted to gather a total census of news and letters by cross-checking three news databases (Access World News, Proquest, LexusNexus) and using the search term “Pennhurst.” Of the 224 relevant articles appearing in Pennsylvania newspapers in 2010 or 2011, 64 were Original News Articles, 20 were Syndicated News Articles, 79 were Letters or Comments, 14 were Editorials or Columns, 18 were Event Listings (mostly for the haunted attraction, but also for a protest for the haunted attraction as well as for a theatrical production based on the autobiography of Roland Johnson, a former Pennhurst resident), and 29 were Obituaries (Table 1). The obituaries were included in the sample because they reflect a subsection of the shrinking living memory of Pennhurst: people who were employed by the institution. The news articles, editorials, and columns reflect the work of 13 different bylined journalists and 15 different publications (though some are owned by the same media conglomerate). The 79 reader letters and comments appeared in 9 different publications; 56 of them (or more than half) appeared in *The Mercury*. Of the 64 original news articles, 27 appeared in *The Mercury*.

<i>Pennhurst in PA Newspapers, 2010-2011</i>	
Original News Articles	64
Syndicated News Articles	20
Letters or Comments	79
Editorials or Columns	14
Event Listings	18
Obituaries	29
Total	224

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In addition to *The Mercury*'s proximity to Pennhurst – covering Berks, Chester, and Montgomery Counties – its role in Pennhurst's past helps explain why this paper published the most in-depth coverage of the haunted attraction and the most reader letters among other Pennsylvania newspapers. Starting in the mid-1960s and into the 1970s, *The Mercury*, then known as *The Pottstown-Mercury*, was approaching Pennhurst as an opportunity for advocacy journalism. For example, in a high profile special issue focusing on Pennhurst, "The Shame of Pennsylvania" (Geyer, 1972, p. 1), a sharply critical editorial on the front page announced, "The Mercury Challenges each member of the state senate, each member of the state house and Governor Shapp to eliminate the shame that is Pennhurst" ("Enough Talk," 1972, p. 1). Decades later, *The Mercury* demonstrated that it had an organizational memory of the paper's crusading coverage of conditions at Pennhurst—and that the editors considered it significant to the overall history of the paper—when it highlighted this reporting in a special 50th anniversary issue of the paper published in 1981 and reprinted for the 75th anniversary in 2006 (Contos, 2006). In other words, *The Mercury* already had a stake in Pennhurst memory prior to the 2010 haunted attraction controversy.

The Mercury is an exceptional local newspaper, both for its longevity and notoriety; it was founded in 1931 and staffers have been awarded two Pulitzer Prizes. However, this has not protected the paper from the influence of media conglomeration. *The Mercury* is owned by MediaNews Group/Digital First Media, a Denver-based publisher and the third largest newspaper chain in America today (Fernandez, 2018). At the time of this study, MediaNews Group/Digital First Media was managed by the Journal Register Company, then distributor of 350 multi-platform products to 21 million Americans in five states. The Journal Register Company's Philadelphia region included six dailies and nine weeklies. According to then *Mercury* Editor Nancy March, Journal Register Companies work geographical areas as a corporate policy to save resources and are not allowed to duplicate reporting but instead share content. Thus many JRC papers picked up features on Pennhurst that originated from *Mercury* reporters. Whether or not one JRC paper picks up a story from another rests with each editor. This didn't impact the number of articles I reference, since I excluded duplicated material, however it obviously impacted the number of reader letters and comments. Stories that originated from *The Mercury* received comments from readers across JRC papers—and reader comments are unique to each

paper.

Today, MediaNews Group/Digital First Media is held by the hedge fund group Alden Global Capital, known for “vicious cost-cutting practices and healthy profit margins” (Fernandez, 2018). In June 2018, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* reported that Digital First Media would close the old Mercury building in Pottstown, PA, leaving staff members to either work from home or commute to one of the paper’s printing plants 45 minutes away. The newspaper chain has already sold or closed buildings for three other area papers. The present case demonstrates that the oft-forgotten role of journalism as a site of public memory is part of what is at stake as the vitality of our local newspapers is threatened by nationwide conglomeration.

Narrative Themes in the Pennhurst Story

In local newspapers during the first two years after the haunted attraction known as “Pennhurst Asylum” opened to the public, the words of journalists, disability advocates, and other community members tangled over who owned the Pennhurst story and what it symbolized.

Disability advocates and journalists both took on the role of public historian. They sought to educate the public about the “real history” of Pennhurst State School and Hospital, and they argued for Pennhurst’s representativeness as a “relic” of the culture of institutionalization in 20th century America. More than that, advocates, and many journalists, also crafted a universal story of “tragedy and triumph” that sanctified Pennhurst as hallowed ground. This story told of former Pennhurst residents who were victims of abuse and neglect, and of crusaders in the disability rights movement whose long battle eventually ended in legal victory and Pennhurst’s closure. In Foote’s terms (1997), narrating *sanctification* for Pennhurst made the past useful in the present as a political strategy to support community inclusion and the continued closure of institutions for people with intellectual/developmental disabilities.

But just as disability advocates wrote letters to local newspapers to share what Pennhurst meant to them, so did other readers throughout the area. Some former employees of Pennhurst contested the image of their workplace as a site of collective pain and shame, instead communicating pride and even nostalgia for memories of Pennhurst as a safe haven for former residents. Oth-

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er community members contested the notion that the politics of representation could be brought to bear on a “fun, family-friendly” event such a haunted attraction. Perhaps most tellingly, many saw the controversy as an occasion to police the boundaries of the American sacred, often by drawing analogies between Pennhurst and places of pain already widely-venerated in American culture. In some cases, Pennhurst State School and Hospital was deemed unworthy of sacred treatment and excluded from the tapestry of stories that comprise American heritage on the basis that it seemed to fit better as part of the imagery of American horror films. The picture created is a great deal more complex than one might assume would be possible to glean from the pages of the local newspaper.

Marker Dedicated/Haunt Planned

In April 2010, months before local papers would break the news of the planned haunted attraction, a historical marker was dedicated near the Pennhurst campus, commemorating it as “a milestone in the disability civil rights movement.” As part of Pennsylvania’s State Historical Marker program, the marker text is one of the only official public narratives that testifies to Pennhurst’s past:

Between 1908 and 1987, more than 10,500 Pennsylvanians with developmental disabilities lived here. Public controversy over the inhumane treatment of residents and two decades of complex litigation, including three arguments before the US Supreme Court, led to the institution’s closure. Groundbreaking advocacy and new public policy, including transition to community-based living, made Pennhurst a milestone in the disabilities civil rights movement.

The Mercury reported on the marker dedication ceremony and printed a letter from advocates who supported it. With these two exceptions, there was little talk of Pennhurst in the local news that year prior to the Halloween season.

Once Pennhurst property owner Richard Chakejian announced his plans for the abandoned buildings he purchased for \$2 million dollars from the state of Pennsylvania in 2008, the controversy caught the community’s attention. On August 30, 2010, *The Mercury* published the first story about the planned haunted attraction (“‘Pennhurst Asylum’ Halloween attraction draws strong opin-

ions”), immediately announcing the reuse plan as controversial (Kessler, 2010c).

A Story of “Tragedy and Triumph”: Establishing Consensus for a Master Narrative

When disability advocates and others gathered to dedicate Pennhurst’s historical marker in April of 2010, they passed around programs created by the Pennhurst Memorial & Preservation Alliance (PMPA), which titled the ceremony, “Tragedy & Triumph, Telling the Pennhurst Story.” But the tragedy and triumph narrative was not confined to the community of remembering gathered that day. News stories spoke of Pennhurst as the site of a battle for civil rights, and more than anything else, the subject of landmark litigation that ended in a legal victory. Advocates not only made the case for Pennhurst’s historical significance, they narrated its sanctification by crafting a universal story of “tragedy and triumph” with heroic disability advocates at its center. In many cases, journalists reflected this story, either by relying on advocates as sources, or in the case of *The Mercury*, by editorializing against the haunted attraction.

In a story picked up by newspapers across Pennsylvania (and nationally), the Associated Press found that the debate happening among Spring City area residents was an occasion for journalism to do the work of public history:

Built shortly after the turn of the 20th century, Pennhurst grew to as many as 3,600 residents by the 1960s. It was closed in 1987 in the wake of a lawsuit alleging years of abuse and neglect, legal action that spawned years of appeals and three U.S. Supreme Court rulings. The suit alleged that residents had been found beaten by nurses, strapped to beds, left naked or alone and drugged into stupors. At the time, its 1,200 residents were sent to other facilities and patient advocates nationwide hailed the closure as a civil rights victory. (Associated Press, 2010b, p. 8)

The enduring elements of the story are all present in this brief summary, and were echoed widely across sources. This narrative construction, which foregrounds the opening and closing dates like birth and death dates on a headstone, sets the stage for an understanding of Pennhurst as a relic from another time, but somehow inexplicably also inhabiting our own time into the mid-

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1980s. The narrative focus on poor conditions at Pennhurst, the long legal battle, the role of patient advocates, and the eventual closure hailed as a civil rights victory all show the potential for Pennhurst to emerge as historically significant.

At the heart of the Tragedy and Triumph narrative is the simultaneous characterization of Pennhurst as “horrific” and its subsequent redemption through a legal victory. Letter writers described the “devaluation of human beings” (Carey, 2010, p. 6) and a place with a “horrid history” (“Pennhurst a site,” 2010, p. 6). News from *Philadelphia Weekly* cited a disability advocate who attested, ““People died there. Women were raped. There’s people buried throughout the property at this facility”” (Goldberg, 2010, n.p.). An event listing for a protest against the haunted attraction referred to Pennhurst as a place where people “endured imprisonment” (“Protest of Pennhurst,” 2010, p. 5). Undoubtedly, *Halderman v. Pennhurst* (1977) is the basis for Pennhurst’s historical significance as a legal precedent that would be used to close other institutions. But from a narrative perspective, focusing on the moment of legal victory also allows for Pennhurst’s sanctification by making it legible along side other civil rights battles.

Sanctification of the Pennhurst story was also achieved by focusing on advocates as agents of social change. An editorial for the *The Mercury* described the closing of Pennhurst as the culmination of “The tireless determination of families and human rights advocates” (Strickler, 2010, pp. 1, 3). News from *Philadelphia Weekly* credited PMPA board member Greg Pirmann for being “part of the institution’s sweeping post-exposé reforms” (Goldberg, 2010, n.p.). News from *The Mercury* referred to advocates gathered for Pennhurst’s marker dedication ceremony as “heroes of the movement to end inequality for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities” (Kessler, 2010f, pp. 1, 6).

The Arc, an advocacy group led by parents that has local, state, and national chapters, played a crucial role in the litigation. After *Halderman v. Pennhurst* was filed, the U.S. Department of Justice and the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (PARC) joined the case to make it a class action lawsuit. Charlotte Twaddell, past president of the Arc of Chester County, wrote to *The Daily Local News* of her work to close Pennhurst and advocate for former residents:

Nearly 50 years ago when I was a young mother, I be-

came active in advocacy for the mentally challenged... Many years later, following years of hard work by so many persons and agencies, Pennhurst finally was closed... We have come a long way in giving those folks a voice. (Twaddell, 2010a, p. 6)

Again, an emphasis on the role of advocates transforms the story into one worthy of sanctification. As Foote (1997) describes it, in order to sanctify a place of tragedy, a lesson must be learned, a heroic fight won, a sacrifice made. The threat of the haunted attraction is in part a threat to the legacy these advocates hope to leave behind. In particular, they had roles in gaining the right to education for people with intellectual disabilities in the United States, and the community-based living movement.

A More Ambivalent Past

The tragedy and triumph story was strengthened by the consensus among advocates and some journalists, particularly those writing and editorializing for *The Mercury*, who had similar approaches to narrating Pennhurst's historical significance. But by publishing reader letters, local newspapers also became an outlet for personal narratives that spoke to the contestability of Pennhurst's past and thus captured a far messier picture of public memory than the one that appears on Pennhurst's historical marker. Furthermore, when readers wrote to voice their opinion about the haunted attraction, they invariably did so by first positioning themselves as having a personal stake in the meaning of Pennhurst as a symbol within their communities.

As a community employer, local Pennhurst memory includes the many people who worked there over the years – at its closing in 1987, approximately 870 staff (Associated Press, 1987). Employees would have often been in direct care positions responsible for resident safety and assisting with the activities of daily living: feeding, bathing, toileting, and dressing. A few former Pennhurst employees were among advocates for the PMPA and some wrote to their local papers to provide eyewitness accounts of the abuse and neglect that are central to the tragedy and triumph narrative. But surprisingly, former employees also wrote to refute the negative image of Pennhurst entirely. “I worked for Pennhurst for 27 years until it was closed,” one wrote. “It was not a place of horror. The individuals I helped were well taken care of and had the best healthcare, meals and activities” (“I worked at Pennhurst from the mid-60’s,” 2010, p. 2). Another former employee de-

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nies ever seeing poor conditions, instead painting an image of the institution as a place of caring and community:

I worked at Pennhurst for 25 years and I worked every ward. I have never seen anyone abused or hurt. I get tired of everyone saying how bad it was. People were taken care of. They had activities all the time — they had a circus, they had baseball games, they went out to shows. It wasn't a horrible place. I can't believe all the people who worked there can't stand up and admit that it was a nice place. ("I worked at Pennhurst for 25 years," 2010, p. 2)

Despite attempts by journalists and advocates to shield former employees from scrutiny, these reader letters show that just as the haunted attraction threatened the legacy of advocates, the tragedy and triumph narrative threatened the legacy of former employees.

Like the above reader's description of "baseball games" and "a circus" at Pennhurst, others wrote with similarly fond remembrances, complicating the often flat characterization of the institution as a place of neglect:

Regarding the recent front page article on the "Pennhurst Asylum," I am vehemently opposed to this haunted attraction. I worked at Pennhurst in the 1960s, and so did several members of my family. My father was a dentist at Pennhurst for 20 years. At Christmas time the donations of food and gifts from various businesses were overwhelming. My father played "Santa Claus" every year, and it was such a hit with the clients. I taught sewing in the school building, and several years ago I ran into a former resident who thanked me for teaching her how to sew as she was able to sew her own wedding dress. ("Take a stand," 2010, p. 4)

This reader paints a picture of good intentions and genuine caring at Pennhurst. It is valuable inasmuch as it offers a more mundane portrait of life at Pennhurst than the ones painted in letters from advocates or by the haunted attraction, which in their own ways both rely on a Pennhurst filled with "horrors."

While Pennhurst is a symbol in the community of horrors real and imagined, the above comments from former employees suggest Pennhurst has also been a symbol of the community's good-

will, charitableness, and moral worth. Pennhurst was highly visible as an object of charity in the community. The tragedy and triumph narrative erases this relationship between the community and the asylum. The defensive reaction by some former employees demonstrates that part of what is lost or threatened in the disruption of the status quo which deinstitutionalization represents is the identity of countless human services workers faced with the devaluation of their social worth. At the same time, the image of a Pennhurst that is “integrated” into the community by the kindness of donations and a volunteer “Santa Claus” is also a political argument that institutionalization was, and is, a successful social solution to the problem of disability.

In addition to those writing as former employees, other community members not only refuted the image of Pennhurst as the site of tragedy, they also refuted the image of its closure as a triumph. “I believe it was one of the worst decisions ever enacted by one of our government representatives to initiate the action of closing Pennhurst,” one reader asserted (“Closing of Pennhurst,” 2010, p. 12). As I have already suggested, public memory of Pennhurst is controversial in part because its closure was controversial. Not only did some employees fear for their jobs and for the quality of care residents would receive outside of the institution, many parents opposed Pennhurst’s closure, having assumed that Halderman v. Pennhurst would lead to reform of the institution, not its closure (Carey, 2009). George Myers of Boyertown wrote to *The Mercury* and highlighted this piece of Pennhurst’s past, which was rarely mentioned elsewhere in local papers during the haunted attraction’s opening years:

An association of concerned parents protested vehemently about closing Pennhurst, worried about how challenged people could be let out on the street. But Judge Broderick decided these people had their ‘rights.’ (Myers, 2010, p.6)

Myer’s story shows again that what is at stake in Pennhurst’s past is the culture of institutionalization in the present. Myers remembers what the tragedy and triumph narrative screens out, that Pennhurst’s closure was controversial in its time. He also refuses the rhetoric of “rights” as advocates have applied it to people with intellectual/developmental disabilities.

The lack of consensus around how to read Pennhurst’s closing disrupts the story created by local advocates who read Halderman

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v. Pennhurst as a definitive civil rights victory. Sociologist Alison Carey's (2010) somewhat dismal assessment of the lack of consensus on granting the rights of full citizenship to people perceived as intellectually disabled seems a more fitting characterization in light of the contestability of Pennhurst's past.

Sacred Comparisons: The Rhetoric of In/Exclusion

The characterization of Pennhurst as either a place of neglect or a place of caring wasn't the only point of contestation taken up in local newspapers after the haunted attraction opened. The controversy also became an occasion to evaluate the sacredness of Pennhurst through historical analogy. If the story of tragedy and triumph set out to sanctify Pennhurst, these analogies showed whether or not the story had been successful. Analogies also helped community members voice their opinions about the haunted attraction and whether or not for-profit entertainment was an appropriate reuse of the site. Well-established sacred or historic sites were used like templates against which the meaning of Pennhurst could be said to fit well or poorly, often showing the connections between the sacred and national identity.

The coincidence of other similar regional and national media stories occurring simultaneously to the first year of "Pennhurst Asylum's" opening impacted the public conversation about Pennhurst. In September 2010, reports began to circulate that the construction of a mosque was planned near the site of the World Trade Center. At the same time, a regional story emerged about one of Pennsylvania's many prominent sites of American history: there were plans for a casino at Gettysburg. In addition to comparisons to Gettysburg and the World Trade Center, narrators compared Pennhurst to Auschwitz; the Titanic; Fort Mifflin; Fort Zachery Taylor in Key West; the Lizzie Borden house; and a slave market in Charleston, South Carolina. Some readers seemed to include Pennhurst among other historic places in an unlikely way: on the basis that it is equally susceptible to exploitation, arguing as one writer put it "nothing is sacred" ("Speaking out," 2010, p. 6).

The most frequently-cited comparison was to the nearby historic landmark Eastern State Penitentiary. While the Penitentiary operates a haunted attraction during the Halloween season, unlike Pennhurst it is owned and operated by a non-profit organization and is open to the public for historical tours 365 days a year. Still, one reader commented that on her recent trip to ESP, "despair,

loneliness, and confinement wept through the walls,” and she wondered, “how having a haunted house at either Pennhurst Hospital or Eastern State Penitentiary could be called entertainment. Both institutions were notorious for the inhumane treatment of their inmates” (“Eastern and Pennhurst,” 2010, p. A18). More readers considered the attraction at ESP a model for an appropriate and socially responsible balance between entertainment and education, though none acknowledged ESP’s mission to educate the public as part of what distinguishes it from “Pennhurst Asylum.”

While many individuals used brief comparisons between Pennhurst and other sites of tragedy to argue their points, columnist Gil Spencer writing for the *Delaware County Daily Times* devoted an entire column to the topic. Connecting the constellation of public memory controversies occurring around September 2010, Spencer wrote, “To build or not to build, that is the question when it comes to mosques, casinos and haunted asylums” (2010, n.p.). Spencer’s reading of these three places shows how such controversies become an occasion to stake out territory around national identity. As was clear from the way advocates argued for Pennhurst’s historic significance, the site’s sanctification relies in part on the inclusion of disability history as a part of American history. Spencer, however, explicitly refuses to deploy the rhetoric of American history and reaches for a different set of cultural touchstones that take Pennhurst immediately out of association with the sacred, reading it instead through the popular. In Spencer’s words, “Pennhurst is not hallowed ground. It’s Halloween ground.” Spencer quotes local advocate Betty Cauler who calls the plans for the haunted attraction “insulting, offensive and disrespectful,” and argues “the inhumane treatment of a group of people should never be sensationalized to entertain the public.” Spencer rebuts Cauler’s argument by suggesting the story of Pennhurst is a better fit with Hollywood horror than with American history:

I don’t suppose Betty Cauler ever went to see “Shutter Island,” “Silence of the Lambs” or “Psycho.” But despite her feelings, Americans have been entertained for decades, if not centuries, by scary depictions of homicidal maniacs and the criminally insane.

It is partly Spencer’s inability or unwillingness to interpret Pennhurst as historically significant that leads him to align the place with fictional narratives. Perhaps it also signals our own

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collective failure to frame asylums as a painful part of our collective history rather than as mere backdrops for Hollywood horror films.

While some compared Pennhurst to widely-venerated sites of tragedy and found it wanting, others used similar touchstones to argue that the haunted attraction was inappropriate in light of the gravity of Pennhurst's past:

'The fundamental point is that this is a place with history that needs to be treated with deep respect, sadness and understanding,' Clark said. 'Anything that's going to be treated as a haunted place, an asylum ... you can think of a lot of places you would not do that with. You wouldn't do that with a death camp, a Nazi death camp. You wouldn't do that because it's too serious.' (Kessler, 2010c, p. 1, 3, 5)

How would this event be any different than having a House of Horrors in the slave markets in Charleston, South Carolina or a Fun Camping Bonfire at a Nazi death camp? (Weicheld, 2010, p. 59)

What if it was a defunct military base? What if, as part of the scare factor, we had soldiers terrorizing civilians, even killing them, just to scare you? Not a nice part of American military history, but hey, it's happened. If it was an old concentration camp and we were portraying Holocaust victims, it would be unacceptable. If it was held on an old plantation and people were chained up as slaves, it would be unacceptable. This isn't acceptable. (Lightener, 2011, p. 8)

In all of these cases, the narrators appeal to the sense of propriety, especially sensitivity, applied to sacred places. They reach for these analogies, not because they want to argue that the historical events are necessarily similar, but because they want to argue that Pennhurst should be treated with comparable reverence for the human dignity of those who lived there. The above selections also show that advocates found sites associated with systematic dehumanization especially useful as models for how Pennhurst *should be* treated. By referring to such widely-sanctified places, these narrators show that what is primarily at stake is the question of *inclusion* among the sacred. The sanctification of Pennhurst also symbolizes the reification of people with disabilities as a

historically marginalized group, oppressed through philosophical and social systems comparable to those used to enslave African-Americans or exterminate European Jews. In other words, in the hands of advocates, these analogies are acts of rhetorical inclusion.

Conclusion

What accounted for the flurry of civic engagement surrounding public memory of Pennhurst? Why did this issue matter both to advocates and other community members? What role did local newspapers play as a medium for a burgeoning, official public narrative and more ambivalent, contested narratives?

The debate about “Pennhurst Asylum” was as much about questions of ethical reuse as it was about defining the story of the historical Pennhurst. Counter to the sense of closure pursued by the “tragedy and triumph” narrative, the public discourse that ensued through reader letters revealed that the story was far from over. As this narrative attempted to save Pennhurst’s memory from the fate of obliteration (being relegated to the vulgar position of community legend) storytellers used this reinvigorated symbol to support their positions within the contemporary politics of institutionalization. For advocates writing letters to their local newspapers, Pennhurst’s memory could be used as a parable in the battle to end the continuing institutionalization of people with intellectual/developmental disabilities. For many others, the “tragedy and triumph” story was impossible to assimilate because it relied on two assumptions their own memories and attitudes did not support: it assumed Pennhurst was a site of “horrors” and that its closure had been a success. In contrast, for those who fought to close Pennhurst, the memory carries an appropriate degree of local pride and is therefore doubly useful as a tool that affirms their social identity in a positive way. For those who opposed its closure or who were otherwise implicated in its decades long existence, the tale is considerably less useful in this regard. Indeed, as Alison Carey’s research suggests, civil rights for people perceived as intellectually disabled have failed to be definitively won. The ongoing nature of this battle may account for the difficulty in creating a meaning for historical asylums outside the realm of the haunted Halloween attraction and within the realm of civil and human rights. Stated in more positive terms, this means that the creation of a robust, critical, and politically-engaged public memory of disability in the United States can have a vital role in continuing social change. Finally, the Pennhurst case shows the challenges and complexity of establish-

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ing consensus for emerging, minority histories more generally.

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Footnotes

1. I use the term “asylum” to stand for institutions that historically housed people with a variety of physical, psychiatric, and intellectual/developmental disabilities. Contemporary residential facilities for people with intellectual/developmental disabilities are called “developmental centers.” Historically, these have gone by names such as “State Schools and Hospitals” or in the early 20th century, “Schools for the Feebleminded and Epileptic.”
2. Deinstitutionalization refers to the trend beginning in the 1960s of relocating both people with mental illness and people with intellectual/developmental disabilities from long-term residential facilities to community-based care, which usually means services are provided in a group home setting rather than in large, state-run institutions.
3. The State of Pennsylvania still runs residential centers for people with intellectual/developmental disabilities today, despite the fact that many states have done away with this mode of care in light of decades of research showing that care in the community creates better outcomes. Further, some families believe that residential care continues to be the best option for their loved ones.
4. I used Atlas.ti, software for qualitative data analysis, to help me organize the archive and note patterns. I had already reviewed a preliminary data set of approximately 30 articles and letters printed in *The Mercury*, so I began coding the full set at first reading. In particular, I indexed characterizations of key figures, such as the attraction owner, disability advocates, and former residents and employees of Pennhurst. I also indexed all descriptions of what kind of place Pennhurst was and is. I indexed patterns in beginnings and endings to the Pennhurst story as well as to characterization of the role of institutions in society in general. I also indexed topics such as the creation of local jobs, zoning issues, distinctions between psychiatric and intellectual disability, eyewitness accounts, and the use of analogies to frame Pennhurst’s place in history. After this step, I grouped the coded text, or “quotes,” into “families” based on larger themes. Atlas.ti allows the researcher to look at all quotes in a single family in one view, but also to switch directly back to the context of each quote. One of the benefits of using software for this process is that it

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allowed me to be comprehensive with my analysis of the entire set of articles while still keeping the context of the each article or letter in mind. I was also able to see how family groupings related to one another as elements of story. For example, the characterization of the attraction owner as a villainous profiteer was part of a larger narrative that saw the attraction as an extension of the mistreatment of Pennhurst residents in the past.