This chapter examines asylum tourism in nineteenth-century New York. It argues that the popularity of visits by the public undermines the notion that asylums were segregated from greater society, and instead, suggests that these institutions were deeply embedded within the social and cultural landscape of the time. While challenging many of our assumptions regarding the relationship of asylums with their greater communities, the phenomenon of visiting enhances our understanding of both popular attitudes towards the mentally ill and the experiences of patients themselves. As people believed asylums represented something remarkable in society, visiting provides new perspectives on the social role of these institutions and nineteenth-century cultural practices more generally.1

Introduction

In a mid-nineteenth-century issue of Harper’s, a writer described in detail his visit to the New York City Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell’s Island, established in 1839 on the East River and located about six miles from City Hall. The writer began the piece with the statement, ‘Among the numerous charitable institutions founded by the benevolence of our City and State, we know of none of which New York can be more justly proud than the Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell’s Island.’ He proceeded to describe the institution’s location, charming grounds, elegant architecture, clean interior, therapeutic practices, amusement programmes, and the people confined inside its walls. Writing for the ‘benefit of those who may have a curiosity to see the interior of a lunatic asylum,’ the author discussed the exchanges that took place with ‘the gay and the melancholy’, the ‘reasoning’, the ‘matronly’, and the ‘benevolent’, and remarked on the ambiguity that existed between the sane and the insane. One patient who captured his attention in particular was fluent in several languages. According to the writer, if learning were ‘the one
thing needful, [the patient] would certainly be better entitled to the professor's chair than many who occupy that position in our first-class colleges. While the narrative tone of the article fluctuates between meticulous observation and anecdotal story, the interactions that took place with patients clearly captivated the writer's eye more than any other feature of the asylum. However, as if to reassure those who might dismiss the tour as cruel spectatorship, the writer claimed that the patients 'did not seem to be disturbed by our visit; but, with a very few exceptions, they were rather pleased than otherwise.'

The people who read the piece, had they not visited the Blackwell's Island asylum already or another in their community, may have been inspired to follow the author's example and see for themselves the changes taking place in the treatment of mental illness. Indeed, this writer was merely one of the thousands of visitors who toured this New York City institution every year in the nineteenth century, a phenomenon that characterised most publicly funded asylums in the United States. From the 1830s to the end of the century, people traipsed across the gardens, strolled through the wards, and spoke with patients confined inside the asylums of New York State, believing that these institutions represented something exceptional in society that needed to be seen in person. Drawn especially to the asylums in Utica and on Blackwell's Island, 'lay' visitors represented a broad spectrum of society: they were men, women, and children from different socio-economic and ethnic groups who either lived in the communities surrounding the asylum or travelled from abroad to be part of the growing endeavour to study insanity. Albeit not without certain restrictions, asylums opened their doors to the general populace, attracting attention from farmers, leisure travellers, aboriginal leaders, labourers, teachers and botanists. One superintendent of the New York State Lunatic Asylum at Utica, John P. Gray, claimed, in 1884, that 'more than 10,000 people visit and go through the wards yearly, and no week day is without this public visitation.' Nevertheless, in spite of the significant number of 'casual' tourists to asylums between the 1830s and 1880s, scholars have tended to overlook their presence and significance.

Traditionally, when their existence has been acknowledged, lay visitors have been portrayed as indulgent voyeurs who annoyed institutional employees and treated the asylum as nothing more than a human menagerie. In his 1945 study of the history of psychiatric practices at the New York Hospital, William Logie Russell wrote, 'in some places in Europe and also in America a visit to the “Lunatic Asylum” was considered a means of entertainment, and an admission fee was sometimes charged.' In the 1980s, Anne Digby argued that the presence of the public in England's Bethlem Asylum rendered the institution a 'human zoo', while Patricia Allderidge