

Utica cribs were an early, cruel form of confinement

by [Luther Granquist](#) // March 10th, 2010



Dr. Samuel Shantz, the first superintendent of the Minnesota Hospital for the Insane in St. Peter, had previously worked as an assistant physician in the New York State

Lunatic Asylum in Utica, New York. At that facility, cribs were used to restrain adult patients. These “Utica cribs” were long, narrow, and from 15 to 30 inches high, with slats for the sides, the top and sometimes the bottom. The person restrained could neither sit up nor get out. Shantz procured at least four of these cribs for use at St. Peter.

Reverend Aaron Kerr, the Presbyterian minister in St. Peter in the late 1860s, inspected the Hospital for the Insane there on Sept. 21, 1867 in his capacity as member of the Board of Trustees of that institution. He reported that most of the patients were cheerful, although some of the more excitable women were kept in their rooms or confined by restraints. He wrote: “One female in a crib was very impatient, violent & abusive toward the Matron, still she appeared physically comfortable.” Kerr did not mention the possibility that being locked in such a cage for hours and days might cause both physical and mental distress. On the contrary, he applauded the officers and attendants of the institution for being faithful and attentive to their duties.

Sara Halverson was 37 when she was first restrained in a Utica crib in 1867 because she tried to escape. For a while in the early 1870s she was restrained only with wristlets, but starting in 1872 she was kept in the crib most of the time. The note for June 1, 1873 in her record reads: “Noisy as ever-lowerlimbs flexed so that knees are drawn up to the chin. Crawls about on buttocks feet & hands-fierce & noisy.” The entries for June 1874 and March 1875 are “No change.”

Use of the Utica crib declined, both in other institutions and at St. Peter. In December 1875, a visiting institution superintendent from Iowa said he was favorably impressed at seeing so few persons there in mechanical restraint, only two persons in camisoles (straitjackets) and two or three in less irritating restraints. For Sara, however, the damage had been done. A note in her file from March 1876 says “Can’t walk, but is much quieter.”

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