Guide to the Rhode Island State Institutions Records
1839-1968 (bulk 1885-1944) (bulk 1885-1944)

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# Collection overview

**Title:** Rhode Island State Institutions Records  
**Date range:** 1839-1968 (bulk 1885-1944)  
**Creator:** Rhode Island Institutions  
**Extent:** 6.5 linear feet  
**Abstract:** The Rhode Island State Institutions, a group of correctional and charitable facilities located in the town of Cranston, have had a complex history under many different jurisdictions. The state’s central prison buildings, however, have always been a common thread. Several institutions were built there, including: the State Workhouse and House of Corrections; the State Hospital for the Insane; the State Almshouse (renamed the State Infirmary in 1917); the State Prison and Providence County Jail (managed jointly); and the State Reform Schools (the Sockanosset School for Boys, and the Oaklawn School for Girls).  
**Language of materials:** English  
**Repository:** Rhode Island Historical Society  
**Collection number:** MSS 231 SG 1

## Scope & content

This collection contains inmate records for several of the State Institutions from 1839 to 1968. The records are far from complete, and do not include any of the policy-making documents of the institutions. There are, for example, no minute books, correspondence or memos from prison management. One exception is a volume of notes from state prison inspectors, 1839-1912. Other than this volume, the collection contains only specific inmate information, and daily statistical recapitulations.

The bulk of the records relate to the State Workhouse, and its successor institution, the State Reformatory for Women. There are detailed entries for each inmate (Records of
Commitment) for 1888-1936, indexed by volume; as well as daily lists of inmates admitted and discharged (Intake/Release Ledgers) for most of the period 1895-1968; the earliest of these ledgers also include information on the Hospital for the Insane, and the State Almshouse. There is also a workhouse visitor register, 1916-1924; and two discharge books, 1885-1896 and 1918-1924.

Other records include detailed Records of Commitment for the State Prison and County Jail, 1919-1932; the Almshouse, 1907-1910; the Federal Reformatory for Women, 1925-1928; the State Farm, 1871-1872.

**Arrangement**

The records are organized into four series, as follows.

- Series 1: Records of commitment, workhouse building, 1871-1936
- Series 2: Intake / release ledgers, workhouse building, 1895-1968
- Series 3: Miscellaneous, workhouse building, 1885-1929
- Series 4: State Prison and County Jail, 1839-1943

**Historical note**

Restrictions on use: As these records contain sensitive information regarding persons who may still be living, they are closed for a period of 72 years after their creation; this parallels the schedule for release of federal census information. The unrestricted portions of volumes which also contain restricted data may be viewed under close supervision of the manuscripts curator. Scholars who desire statistical information from the records may be, at the discretion of the curator, permitted to view the later volumes, though no notes may be taken regarding names of inmates.

The Rhode Island State Institutions, a group of correctional and charitable facilities located in the town of Cranston, have had a complex history under many different jurisdictions. The state's central prison buildings, however, have always been a common thread.

Although various forms of town and county jails were in operation in Rhode Island from the early colonial times, the first state-operated prison was not built until 1838, in Providence. This building quickly proved to be unsuitable, and the state purchased land in the Cranston village of Howard in 1869. This land, known as the State Farm, was managed by the Board of State Charities and Corrections until circa 1920. Several institutions were built...
there, including: the State Workhouse and House of Corrections; the State Hospital for the Insane; the State Almshouse (renamed the State Infirmary in 1917); the State Prison and Providence County Jail (managed jointly); and the State Reform Schools (the Sockanosset School for Boys, and the Oaklawn School for Girls).

The State Workhouse and House of Corrections building held men and women; it was also the home for the women's county jail and state prison inmates. The male workhouse inmates were phased out, and it became the State Reformatory for Women in 1924. It was closed circa 1968.

The State Prison and Providence County Jail in Cranston was built in 1878; it eventually evolved into the Adult Correctional Institution, which remains in operation today. Federal inmates have also been kept in this facility over the years.

The governing body for the State Institutions changed over the years, becoming variously the State Public Welfare Commission, the Department of Public Welfare and the Department of Social Welfare. Though some of its inmates have been under federal or county jurisdiction, the institutions seem to have always been operated by the state of Rhode Island. The titles of Keeper of the State Prison and Warden of the County Jail were held jointly by the same man.

**Access & use**

**Access to the collection:** Restrictions on use: As these records contain sensitive information regarding persons who may still be living, they are closed for a period of 72 years after their creation; this parallels the schedule for release of federal census information. The unrestricted portions of volumes which also contain restricted data may be viewed under close supervision of the manuscripts curator. Scholars who desire statistical information from the records may be, at the discretion of the curator, permitted to view the later volumes, though no notes may be taken regarding names of inmates.

**Use of materials:** Researchers are advised that express written permission to reproduce, quote, or otherwise publish any portion or extract from this collection must be obtained from the Rhode Island Historical Society.
Preferred citation: Rhode Island State Institutions Records, MSS 231 SG 1, Rhode Island Historical Society

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Administrative information

About the collection

Acquisition: This collection seemed to have been removed from the records of the Dexter Asylum, a home for the destitute and mentally ill operated by the City of Providence which closed its doors in 1957. According to R.I.H.S.L. Manuscripts Curator Harold Kemble in his annual report of 1986, "The collection that was treated for years as the records of the Dexter Asylum yielded up the records not only of that institution but a Federal Prison, three state institutions and three additional Providence institutions (Dexter Asylum; State Workhouse, Almshouse, Insane Asylum and Prison, and the Reformatory for Women)." This collection was apparently donated on October 4, 1957 by the Dexter Asylum; the accession register reads only "Records", and no inventory has been done until now.

Processing information: This collection was separated from the Dexter Asylum records and labelled in 1986. It was organized and relabelled in 1995.

About the finding aid

Author: Finding aid prepared by Rick Stattler.

Encoding: Finding aid encoded by Mark Chepkwony 2009 June 22
Descriptive rules: Finding aid based on Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS)

Search terms

Names: Hospital for the Insane, Howard, R.I.
       Providence County Jail, Howard, R.I.
       Reformatory for Women, Howard, R.I.
       Rhode Island, State of - Prisons
       State Farm, Howard, R.I.
       State Prison and County Jail, Howard, R.I.

Subjects: Almshouses - Rhode Island
          Howard, R.I. - Prisons
          Institutional care
          Jails - Rhode Island
          Prisons - Rhode Island
          Public Welfare - Rhode Island
## Inventory

**Series 1, Records of Commitment, workhouse related.,**

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<td>MSS 231 SG 1 Item 1, State farm</td>
<td>1871-1872</td>
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<tr>
<td>Volume 2,</td>
<td>MSS 231 SG 1 Item 2, Almshouse</td>
<td>1907-1910</td>
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<td>Volume 3,</td>
<td>MSS 231 SG 1 Item 3, Federal reformatory for women</td>
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<td>MSS 231 SG 1 Item 4, Workhouse and house of corrections</td>
<td>1888-1891</td>
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<td>1908-1911</td>
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Volume 13, MSS 231 SG 1 Item 13, Workhouse and house of corrections 1911-1914

Volume 14, MSS 231 SG 1 Item 14, Workhouse and house of corrections 1914-1916

Volume 15, MSS 231 SG 1 Item 15, Workhouse and house of corrections 1919-1919

Volume 16, MSS 231 SG 1 Item 16, RESTRICTED Workhouse and house of corrections 1919-1936

Series 2, Intake and release ledgers, workhouse building,

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<td>• County jail (female)</td>
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<td>• Hospital for the insane (male and female)</td>
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<td>• Almshouse (male and female, including children)</td>
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<td>• Daily recapitulation (statistics, including all of the above).</td>
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<td>1904-1908</td>
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<td>• County jail (female)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• State prison</td>
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<tr>
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<td>• Almshouse (male and female, including children)</td>
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<td>MSS 231 SG 1 Item 19, RESTRICTED</td>
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<td>• Workhouse..., 1913-1925 (females only)</td>
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• Women’s reformatory, 1925-1939
• State prison and county jail, 1913-1940 (female)

Volume 20, MSS 231 SG 1 Item 20, 1918-1927
• Workhouse..., 1918-1924 (male and female)
  • Women’s reformatory, 1925-1927
  • Parolees and escapees, 1918-1923 (male and female)
• State prison and county jail, 1918-1927 (female)
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Volume 21, MSS 231 SG 1 Item 21, RESTRICTED 1927-1944
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  • Federal reformatory for women, 1927-1929
  • State prison, 1928-1940 (female)
  • County jail, 1927-1944 (female)
  • Daily recapitulation, 1927-1944

Volume 22, MSS 231 SG 1 Item 22, RESTRICTED 1944-1946
• Women’s reformatory, 1944-1946
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Volume 23, MSS 231 SG 1 Item 23, RESTRICTED 1946-1948
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Volume 24, MSS 231 SG 1 Item 24, RESTRICTED 1948-1951
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Volume 25, MSS 231 SG 1 Item 25, RESTRICTED 1951-1955
• Women’s reformatory, 1951-1955
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Volume 26, MSS 231 SG 1 Item 26, RESTRICTED 1955-1960
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• County jail, 1960-1965 (female)
• Federal inmates, 1960-1965 (female)

Volume 28, MSS 231 SG 1 Item 28, RESTRICTED 1965-1968
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• State prison, 1965-1968 (female)
• County jail, 1965-1968 (female)
• Federal inmates, 1965-1968 (female)

Series 3, Miscellaneous, workhouse building.,

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<td>1916-1924</td>
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Volume 30, MSS 231 SG 1 Item 30, Discharge book, workhouse..., (indexed) 1885-1896

Volume 31, MSS 231 SG 1 Item 31, Discharge book, workhouse..., (not indexed) 1918-1929

Series 4, Rhode Island State Prison and Providence County Jail.,

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<td>Volume 34,</td>
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<td>MSS 231 SG 1 Item 35, RESTRICTED Intake/release ledger, (includes scattered mention of female prisoners)</td>
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