A unique exhibition aims to ensure the many thousands of individuals who lived and died in psychiatric institutions are not forgotten.

Recovered lives

By the time Willard Psychiatric Center, one of 30 asylums serving New York State, shut down in 1995 more than 50,000 people had passed through its doors. Many were to leave only when they died. Opened in 1869, the asylum now serves as a prison for people with substance abuse problems, but in the process of clearing it out hundreds of suitcases belonging to its former inmates were found in its attics, covered in dust and bird droppings, each labelled with the patient's name. Some of the 400 suitcases were empty but others contained precious possessions people had brought with them - family photographs, diaries, postcards, books, letters, news clippings - mementos of their former lives.

'Lost cases: Recovered lives' is a unique exhibition of the contents of some of these suitcases, currently on show at the New York State Museum, Albany. The exhibition is the work of curator Craig Williams, psychiatrist Peter Stastny, photographer Lisa Rinzler and Darby Penney, former director of recipient affairs (a senior service user representative position) at the New York State Office of Mental Health (OMH).

Penney learned about the existence of the hoard of cases only when Williams and colleagues from the New York State Museum, where the cases had been stored, came to OMH to discuss their efforts to document the history of the state's mental health services. 'Craig invited me to come to the museum's warehouse to see them. I was amazed. While most were empty, or had just one or two items, a number of them were full of photographs, letters, diaries, books, clothes, dishes and household items even - things that really gave a sense of who the person was that owned them. When I saw them I knew these were unique historical artefacts that could be used to tell the personal stories of individual patients in a way that had never been done before,' Penney says.

With Peter Stastny, who is also a filmmaker, Penney set about researching the history and lives of 12 of the suitcase owners. Their original idea was to make a documentary but they finally decided to curate jointly an exhibition at the State Museum. Penney managed to get funds from the OMH to pay photographer Lisa Rinzler to join the team and they used information from the hospital's patient records, together with photos from the hospital's own archives and the contents of the cases, to piece together the stories of these individuals' lives before they entered the asylum. 'The records included transcripts of people's intake interviews, which were very important because they presented people's stories in their own words,' Penney says.

It was, she says, quite a painful process to be sifting through these abandoned fragments of destroyed lives.
While a few were placed in board and care homes or nursing homes as they got older, most of the people died at Willard, after decades of hospitalisation – 30 or 40 years on average. One woman died there 75 years after she was admitted. These are people who were basically discarded by society, people who were marginalised. But each of them has a fascinating and often heartbreaking personal story. They had careers, families, artistic or intellectual aspirations – many had dealt with personal tragedies that would break almost anyone.

These are not happy stories, and it was often painful work. Their faces were almost uniformly sad. But it was also often strangely exhilarating, to be in a position to tell the stories of people who had been so forgotten during their lives,' Penney says.

She describes one woman whose story particularly affected her: Ethel Brown Swart, who brought her to Willard a trunk full of fine needlework. 'Beautiful quilts, linens and items of hand-made baby clothes, some with very fine embroidery. It turned out that Ethel had made her living as a seamstress after divorcing her abusive husband in the 1920s. She had two living children but had also suffered two miscarriages and then had two children who both died in infancy. So for me the baby clothes had particular poignancy.

Then there's the Willard grave digger, Lawrence M. Born in 1878 in what was then Austria-Hungary, he arrived in the US in 1907, where he got a job as a hospital window cleaner. He was sent to Willard in 1918 because, according to his records, he was 'singing, shouting, also praying, claiming to hear the voice of God and seeing the angels, then accusing himself of having sinned too much'. He became the grave digger in Willard's cemetery in 1937 when nearly 60 years old and continued to dig the graves of his fellow inmates until his own death in 1968, aged 90. He too was buried in the Willard cemetery. When his trunk was discovered it contained only a few shaving brushes, some ties, suspenders and some pairs of well-worn leather shoes.

The aim of the exhibition, Penney says, is two-fold. Partly it's about ensuring society does not obliterate this aspect of its history, and giving a voice to these otherwise forgotten people. 'From the mid-19th century to the late 20th century hundreds of thousands of people were warehoused in huge mental institutions in the US. The history of these institutions, when it's studied at all, is usually written at a macro level, as the story of developments in the policy and practices of public psychiatry. The history of the many individuals whose lives were so permanently affected by these policies remains virtually unknown. We want to get the viewer to see beyond the mental patient label, to show the true humanity of people whose lives were essentially taken from them by institutionalised psychiatry. Most of the people who are featured in the exhibition were victims of circumstance. They had to deal with sudden hardships - the death of a spouse or child, the loss of a job, a physical illness. The almost arbitrary nature of these people's confinement in a mental institution is important for the public to learn about. Sometimes I walk through the exhibition to listen to visitors' reactions and one of the most frequent comments I hear is: "Oh my god, that could have been me." That's one of the messages I hope people take away from it.'

The other motive is to raise awareness of the plight today of thousands of people with severe mental health problems. 'Psychiatry still negatively affects so many people,' Penney says. 'While not so many are institutionalised in this way for decades, many thousands still live out their lives of what I think of as "mental health ghettos" - heavily medicated, living in group homes, in vans to day programmes and then back to their group homes at night. There's a lot of talk about treating people with psychiatric disabilities "in the community", but people are often not "in the community" in any meaningful way. They are still isolated, constrained by the system, told where they must live, how they may spend their days.'

Penney hopes to find other venues for the exhibition when it closes in September, and to find funding for a smaller travelling version to display in libraries, hospitals, shopping centres - "places where it can be seen by people who don't generally go to museums". She is also planning with her co-curators to write a book about the lives of the suitcase owners.

Lost Cases, Recovered Lives is at the New York State Museum, Albany until 19 September. Details www.nysm.nysed.gov