

## The Strange Case of Henrietta Wiley: A Habitual Drunkard's Journey Through Guardianship and the Asylum, [David Korostyshevsky](https://nursingcliclo.org/2025/10/01/the-strange-case-of-henrietta-wiley-a-habitual-drunkards-journey-through-guardianship-and-the-asylum/), (Oct 1<sup>st</sup>, 2025)

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## The Strange Case of Henrietta Wiley: A Habitual Drunkard's Journey Through Guardianship and the Asylum



In the 1880s, a court declared that Henrietta Wiley – a wealthy New York heiress and socialite – was a habitual drunkard and put her under guardianship. Her court-appointed guardian subsequently committed her to an insane asylum, where she was incarcerated for almost two years.

Guardianship, also known as conservatorship, is a diminished legal status that strips adults who have become incapable of taking care of themselves or their affairs of civil rights associated with full citizenship and legal personhood, including the right to property, contract, make a will, and, in some states, to vote. Designed to protect vulnerable adults, guardianship remains susceptible to ulterior motives and outright abuse because each case represents a collision of individual family dynamics with competing interests in the estate.

An obscure and poorly understood corner of civil law, guardianship for mentally unsound adults has existed in the English legal tradition since the early modern period, and in North America, the colonial period. After American independence from Great Britain, legislatures and courts across the United States [expanded guardianship](#) to include “habitual drunkard[s],” as they were called in the language of state statutes and case files.

American courts conducted inquisitions to determine if the alleged lunatic or habitual drunkard required guardianship. Rather than a criminal prosecution, the inquisition was a civil proceeding that could only be initiated by a private petition. Typically, court-appointed commissioners, not judges, conducted these hearings. Attorneys from both sides questioned and cross-examined witnesses in front of a jury who ultimately decided.

Henrietta’s case is especially strange because most people who were put under guardianship during the nineteenth century, including 99% of habitual drunkards, were men of means. For respectable men with families and property, the loss of civil rights associated with citizenship and legal personhood represented a shameful loss of social, political, and economic status. However, women did not gain full citizenship until the twentieth century. Henrietta’s inheritance must have represented what few civil rights she had. Furthermore, many male habitual drunkards never found themselves committed to an asylum. Henrietta’s institutionalization made her case even more unique.

Henrietta was born in New York City in the mid-1830s to shipping magnate Henry Harbeck and his second wife, Louisa. When Henry, who had amassed a vast fortune, died, Henrietta inherited a life interest in an estate worth over \$200,000 and a substantial annual income, making her a millionaire by today’s standards. By the late 1870s, after two failed marriages, forty-something-year-old Henrietta found herself newly independent with the financial means to enjoy life.

She became the life of her own party, spending her money freely, drinking alcohol, and enjoying the company of younger men, including one of her household employees, Charles Van Slyck. The family finally took legal action in early 1883 after Henrietta’s alleged romantic entanglement with Charles soured. Her older half-brothers, her married daughter, and a former boarder petitioned the court against her. They accused Charles, allegedly a violent thief, of influencing Henrietta to imprudently sell her Upper East Side brownstone, and instead, rent an expensive country mansion outside White Plains, NY, where she continued to hold parties.<sup>[1]</sup>

The inquisition of a wealthy, middle-aged heiress with a “prepossessing” physical “appearance” drew sensational nationwide newspaper coverage.<sup>[2]</sup> The jurors heard from over thirty witnesses, including medical experts, household staff, local

shopkeepers, and neighbors. Physicians on both sides struggled to agree with each other about Henrietta's condition, a conflict that reflected the inchoate and contested status of "inebriety" and "alcoholism" as medical diagnoses.<sup>[3]</sup> Witnesses also testified about her being intoxicated during the day, her spending habits, and her public behavior. According to the *New York Tribune*, Henrietta had been seen in public "accompanied by a Spanish girl" acting "in a very unbecoming manner."<sup>[4]</sup>

Although, as *The New York Times* put it, Henrietta "appeared to be in good health and spirits" and "conducted herself in a ladylike manner," the jury rendered a verdict against her, declaring her a habitual drunkard.<sup>[5]</sup> Soon after, the court appointed a local attorney to serve as Henrietta's guardian, while her half-brother William, a banker and insurance executive, took control of the money.

Reading between the lines of salacious newspaper articles, it is impossible to tell if Henrietta was a profligate drunkard or not. Nevertheless, her publicly visible alcohol consumption, spending habits, fraternization with servants and non-white people, and alleged sexual behavior were transgressive and scandalous for a well-heeled lady from a respectable family. Guardianship became the vehicle for her family to use legal and medical institutions to punish – not protect – Henrietta by stripping her not only of her inheritance, but of her very freedom.

Several weeks after the jury's verdict, Henrietta's guardian committed her to Sanford Hall, a private, for-profit mental asylum in Flushing operated by the respected psychiatrist Dr. Josiah W. Barstow. In an 1886 newspaper interview, Henrietta recalled that on the day of her commitment, her guardian and an unnamed "relative" spirited her away in a "private carriage" without telling her the destination.<sup>[6]</sup> Only when she arrived at Sanford Hall did Henrietta learn that she was to be confined there.



Barstow, a specialist in treating inebriety, believed incarceration was an appropriate medical treatment for habitual drunkards, whose “diseased condition” could only be treated by “constant physical restraint” from “indulgence in alcoholic drinks.”<sup>[7]</sup> Although she was allowed to walk Sanford Hall’s wooded grounds and take brief carriage rides outside the property, Henrietta was cut off from all contact with her friends and unable to hire her own attorney.

After a year and a half of incarceration, Henrietta convinced one of the nurses to smuggle out a message to one of her friends, Eliza Eaton. Eliza immediately retained an attorney who specialized in helping wrongfully committed people, including other residents of Sanford Hall. This time, newspapers sympathetically cast Henrietta as a wrongfully committed woman. The legal effort to free Henrietta included multiple unsuccessful habeas corpus cases that saw her brought to court several times, only to be returned to Sanford Hall. In one such appearance, Henrietta managed to tell a *Brooklyn Eagle* reporter, “she was able to care for herself” and “did not want to be a prisoner against her will.”<sup>[8]</sup>

She accused the asylum of conspiring to keep her confined by restraining her and the other patients from reading any newspapers once legal proceedings to free her began. She also accused them of sabotaging her chances of release by drugging her lemonade with alcohol. Henrietta later proclaimed, “they will keep you in so long as you can be paid for, whether you are sane or not.”<sup>[9]</sup> Ultimately, a new judge who took over the case ruled that Henrietta should be given a chance to prove her recovery in a comfortable dwelling outside the asylum.

Finally free from her incarceration, Henrietta nevertheless remained under guardianship. Despite a court order that she be allowed to choose her home, Henrietta’s guardian refused, instead housing her in lodgings that cost half the price. When her guardian sought to sell off her valuables to pay her bills, Henrietta “jumped to her feet,” shouting “You shan’t sell my diamonds! You shan’t rob me again,” before being removed from the courtroom.<sup>[10]</sup>

In the following years, Henrietta continued trying to escape her guardianship, but waning newspaper coverage makes it unclear if she was ever successful. Dropping out of the public eye, she reappeared briefly in the 1890s, when newspapers reported on her tragic death by carbolic acid poisoning after drinking whiskey from a tainted bottle.

It is easy to dismiss Henrietta’s case as a dramatic relic of a bygone era in which women had no legal rights and could be committed to an asylum on a man’s whim. As social reformers illuminated the abuse and neglect that characterized institutional treatment, the deinstitutionalization movement led to the closure of most insane asylums and mental hospitals by the beginning of the 1980s. Readers might think something similar could not happen today because institutions like Sanford Hall no longer exist.

Although there is no national database tracking guardianship cases, an estimated two million adults, mainly elders and people with developmental disabilities are deprived of their legal personhood, civil rights, basic humanity, and sometimes, their freedom. Investigative journalist Diane Dimond [argues](#) that the cases of celebrities such as singer Britney Spears – who was finally freed from a thirteen-year conservatorship in 2021 after giving a [passionate statement](#) to the court – can distract us from the plight of everyone else caught in the guardianship system. At the same time, cases involving famous people are keeping allegations of guardianship abuse in the news.

Enter Wendy Williams, a wealthy New York radio and television personality whose ongoing guardianship case dramatically resembles Henrietta’s predicament almost a century and a half ago. After thirteen seasons on the air, *The Wendy Williams Talk Show*, often just shortened to *Wendy*, ended in 2022 after she took a leave of absence for a combination of family and health reasons that included increasing [alcohol consumption](#).

Wendy was subsequently put under guardianship and diagnosed with dementia and aphasia, a condition defined by the inability to speak or write. After a [relapse](#) on her 60th birthday in 2024, the court-appointed guardian moved Wendy into a secured memory care unit of a luxury, and undoubtedly expensive, assisted living facility in New York City, where she remains incarcerated as an incapacitated person.

Like Henrietta, Wendy continues to contest her guardianship by finding ways to speak for herself despite being largely isolated from the outside world. In February 2025, Wendy spoke by telephone with TMZ founder Harvey Levin in an interview [filmed](#) through a 5th-floor window of a New York high-rise. According to Wendy, she remains barred from receiving visitors, including members of her family, can only make outgoing calls, and is allowed to leave the facility only twice a month. After a new medical examination allegedly [confirmed](#) her diagnosis in August 2025, Wendy immediately contradicted it by interacting in public with a group of friends enjoying [dinner](#) in a restaurant, an outing for which she undoubtedly had to get permission from her guardian.

As the legal effort to #FreeWendy gains momentum, it is difficult to discern the truth from media coverage alone. Unlike Henrietta, a white woman who inherited her money, Wendy is a self-made Black woman. One has to wonder how race and gender complicate the medicolegal dynamics of this case behind the scenes.

Yet the similarities between Henrietta and Wendy's experiences across over a century and a half are striking. The fact that the medical incarceration of vulnerable adults can still occur echoes the troubled history of involuntary commitment, especially of women, long after the era of the asylum ended. It has never been more important for legal reformers, disability rights advocates, and mental health professionals to continue to push for meaningful [guardianship reform](#) that prioritizes individual rights, due process, and less restrictive alternatives.