

DOROTHEA DIX PLEADS FOR THE MENTALLY ILL

Perhaps the most famous of the early 19th century reformers was Dorothea Dix. Born in Maine, she ran a school and published several children's books. Later, she began fighting to improve conditions for the mentally ill. This selection is condensed from her report to the Massachusetts state legislature in 1843.

Gentlemen – I come to place before the Legislature of Massachusetts the condition of the miserable, the desolate, the outcast.

I come as the advocate [defender] of helpless, forgotten, insane, and idiotic men and women; of beings sunk to a condition from which the most unconcerned would start [cringe] with real horror; of beings wretched in our prisons, and more wretched in our almshouses [houses for the poor].

I proceed, gentlemen, briefly to call your attention to the present state of insane persons confined within this Commonwealth [State], in cages, closets, cellars, stalls, pens! Chained, naked, beaten with rods, and lashed into obedience.

It is defective legislation which perpetuates [allows to continue] and multiplies these abuses. I offer the following extracts from my Note-book and Journal:

Springfield. In the jail, one lunatic woman, furiously mad, improperly situated, both in regard to the prisoners, the keepers, and herself.

In the almshouse [poorhouse] of the same town is a woman apparently only needing judicious care, and some well-chosen employment, to make it unnecessary to confine her in solitude, in a dreary, unfurnished room. Her appeals for employment and companionship are most touching, but the mistress replied she had no time to attend

her.

Lincoln. A woman in a cage. Medford. One idiotic subject chained, one in a close stall for seventeen years. Pepperell. One often doubly chained, hand and foot, another violent; several peaceable now.

Brookfield, one man caged, comfortable. Granville. One often closely confined; now losing the use of his limbs from want of exercise. Lenox. Two in jail, against whose unfit condition the jailer there protests.



Besides the above, I have seen many who, part of the year, are chained or caged. I encountered during the last three months many poor creatures wandering recklessly and unprotected through the country.

Men of Massachusetts, I beg, I implore, I demand pity and protection for these of my suffering, outraged sex. Become the benefactors of your race, the just guardians of the solemn rights you hold in trust.

Gentlemen, I commit to you this sacred cause. Your action upon this subject will affect the present and future condition of hundreds and thousands. In this legislation, as in all things, may you exercise that “wisdom which is the breath and power of God.”

Group Discussion: *What were conditions like for the mentally ill and insane people seen by Dorothea Dix? What did she do to get convincing evidence? Who does she think has the main obligation to do something about the situation?*