

PART II - Although most people in America in the 1850s accepted how the mentally were treated, some individuals thought it was wrong and worked to make changes that would improve the lives of the mentally ill. One reformer in this area was Dorothea Dix. Below is how one textbook views the life and work of Dix and excerpts from testimony she gave to Congress on this issue. Read over the passages and answer the questions that follow.

“Reformers Struggle to Improve American Life”

Dorothea Lynde Dix

Another woman who exerted enormous influence was Dorothea Dix. In 1841 she was horrified by the cold, bare, filthy conditions of a jail she inspected near Boston. She laid the facts she discovered before the Massachusetts legislature, but the lawmakers did nothing.

Goaded to further action, Dorothea Dix visited every jail and poorhouse in Massachusetts and gathered overwhelming evidence. She packed notebook after notebook with horrors almost beyond belief. In all of the jails and poorhouses she found old men, young girls, the poor, and the mentally ill thrown together in cold dirty prisons. Some were chained to walls, beds or floors. Some wore iron collars or straitjackets. Some had been kept in cages for years.

Finally, Dorothea Dix returned to the Massachusetts legislature with her evidence. This time the legislators listened. They began to pass laws to improve conditions in jails and poorhouses and to establish a public institution for the mentally ill. During the next few years she repeated her reform work in other states. Moreover, her efforts helped to improve conditions in European jails and institutions for the poor and mentally ill. By the 1850's, largely because of Dorothea Dix and others who shared her views, important reforms had been made in the United States. The death penalty for some crimes had been abolished. A growing number of people were demanding the abolition of capital punishment. Most states had outlawed the whipping of prisoners. Imprisonment for debt had been ended. Men and women were kept in separate sections of prisons. The mentally ill were separated from other prisoners. More attention was given to the individual criminal; and more effort was made to reform than to punish.

Dorothea Dix died in 1887 at the age of 85. A famous English doctor said of her, “Thus has died and been laid to rest....the most useful and distinguished woman that American has ever produced.”

- from Rise of the American Nation, Lewis Paul Todd and Merle Curti. Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, p.327-328, 1982.

Questions:

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