



Dorothea Dix's tireless fight to end inhumane treatment for mental health patients

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Today marks the 218th birthday of Dorothea Lynde Dix, one of the America's most eminent reformers of the living conditions and treatment of the mentally ill. After first-hand observation of some of the worst "snake pits" that existed in the United States during the mid-19th century, she tirelessly lobbied state legislatures and the U.S. Congress to enact some of the earliest American laws governing mental asylums and psychiatric care.

Dix was born in Hampden, Maine, in 1802, to parents who had descended from members of the original Massachusetts Bay Colony: a mother who was chronically ill, and a father who was an itinerant bookseller and Methodist preacher, and was often financially embarrassed. Both consumed too much alcohol and her father was abusive. At age 12, a deeply unhappy Dix was sent away to live with her wealthy grandmother in Boston.

By age 14, she began work as a teacher at a girls' school in Worcester, Massachusetts, and developed a novel curriculum that included the natural sciences and ethical conduct. Five years later, in 1821, she established her own school in Boston, which was favored by wealthy families there, including the family a prominent preacher known as "the father of Unitarianism," William Ellery Channing. Over the next five years, Dix wrote a number of books, including the best-selling 1824 text for schoolteachers, "Conversations on Common Things, or Guide to Knowledge: With Questions," which, by 1869, was in its 60th printing.

Dix long suffered from both depression and tuberculosis. By 1836, too much work, pain, and bleeding from her lungs forced her to the sick bed. In order to rest and recuperate, she sailed to Liverpool, England, for 18 months where she was the guest of William Rathbone, a friend of the Reverend Channing's and a prominent social reformer. In England, she met many other do-gooders who were interested in the care and treatment of the mentally ill. They introduced her to the pioneering work of the Parisian alienist Phillipe Pinel who, in 1795, was credited with freeing his insane patients from being chained at the Salpêtrière Hospital. Dix also toured the "madhouses" of Britain and committed herself to a movement that was then known as "lunacy reform."

Upon returning to the United States in 1840, Dix made similar investigations of the poor houses and prisons where many insane women and men resided. Dix was horrified to find these people treated like criminals, locked up in chains, kept in damp, dark cells with foul air, poor sanitary facilities, and given inadequate nourishment and water.

In 1843, she wrote her now famous "Memorial to the Legislature of Massachusetts," in which she beseeched the men running the state to do something to relieve the awful plight of the impoverished insane: "I proceed, Gentlemen, briefly to call your attention to the present state of Insane Persons within this Commonwealth, in cages, closets, cellars, stalls, pens! Chained, naked, beaten with rods and lashed into obedience."

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Such printed memorials, or pamphlets, was one of the few ways a woman could enter the political discussion of this era, given they did not yet have the right to vote, hold office, or even read their work aloud before a legislative body — a man had to read Dix's