

Research Assessment 10: Dorothea Dix

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Date: 01/22/17

Sources:

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Analysis:

Dorothea Dix was an author, teacher, activist, and reformer who was a champion for those with mental illnesses. She is famously known for writing *Conversations on Common Things*. She brought health care reform to prisons and was an advocate for the indigent insane. Dix spent approximately forty years lobbying to establish state hospitals for those with mental illnesses. Accordingly, her lobbying and effort led to the creation and construction of thirty two US institutions.

Dix was born in Hampden, Maine in 1802 and was taught how to read and write at a young age. After she moved to Boston, and began teaching at a school at the young age of fourteen. Later on, she established a series of schools in Boston, such as the Dix Mansion, due to her passion and interest in education. The Dix Mansion was a girls' school and a charity school that impoverished young girls could attend for free.

Dix's interest in mental health reform began when she began teaching at a women's prison called the East Cambridge Jail. There, she witnesses the terrible treatment of prisoners, especially the mentally ill prisoners. This inspired her to travel Massachusetts to record the treatment of prisoners and the condition of prisons. Dix then compiled the collected information into a report and presented it to the Massachusetts legislature. Her report was "filled with dramatic accounts of prisoners flogged, starved, chained, physically and sexually abused by their keepers, and left naked and without heat or sanitation" (Biography, 2017). Such accounts shocked the legislature and the public and spurred reform. She was successful in her effort to campaign for improved conditions for the imprisoned and insane. Massachusetts immediately increased the budget to expand the Mental State Hospital at Worcester.

However, Dix wasn't content at leaving it at just that. She took the campaign to Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri, Tennessee, Maryland, Louisiana, Alabama, South Carolina, North Carolina and even Europe. In Europe, she traveled to England, Scotland, France, Austria, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Russia, Sweden, Denmark, Holland, Belgium and Germany. Wherever she traveled, she documented the conditions and treatment of prisoners and the mentally ill and advocated for the establishment of more humane asylums and prisons, and the construction of more mental hospitals.

One of her biggest project and disappointment was the Bill for the Benefit of the Indigent Insane. This bill was a piece of federal legislation that set aside 12,225,000 acres of federal land to be used for the benefit of the insane, blind, and deaf. Any proceeds from the sale of the land would have been given to the states to help maintain and build mental hospitals and asylums. The bill passed in both the Senate and House of Representatives but was vetoed by President Franklin Pierce in 1854 under the grounds that social welfare was a state responsibility.

Though Dorothea Dix is mentioned in less than ten percent of textbooks, she was instrumental in mental health and prison reform. Dix, nearly single handedly, advocated for the betterment and expansion of mental hospitals and asylums. Furthermore, she was a leading figure in the national and international movements that challenged the idea that people with mental disturbances could not be cured or helped. During her time, her ideas were considered radical, but overtime they have come to be accepted by a majority of the world as a whole.