

Dorothea dix



Born in 1802, Dorothea Dix played an important role in changing the ways people thought about patients who were mentally-ill and handicapped, originally cast-off as being punished by God, as well as the way facilities handled and treated them. She believed that that people of such standing would do better by being treated with love and caring rather than being put aside. As a social reformer, philanthropist, teacher, writer, nurse, and humanitarian, Dorothea Dix devoted her life to the welfare of the mentally-ill and handicapped. She accomplished many milestones throughout her life, which changed the way patients are cared for, even today. She was a pioneer in her time, taking on challenges that no other women would dare dream of tackling.

Born in Maine, of April, 1802, Dorothea Dix was brought up in a filthy, and poverty-ridden household (Thinkquest, 2). Her father came from a well-to-do Massachusetts family and was sent to Harvard. While there, he dropped out of school, and married a woman twenty years his senior (Thinkquest, 1). Living with two younger brothers, Dix dreamed of being sent off to live with her grandparents in Massachusetts. Her dream came true. After receiving a letter from her grandmother, requesting that she come and live with her, she was sent away at the age of twelve (Thinkquest, 4). She lived with her grandmother and grandfather for two years, until her grandmother realized that she wasn't physically and mentally able to handle a girl at such a young age. She then moved to Worcester, Massachusetts to live with her aunt and her cousin (Thinkquest, 5).

The thought of her brothers still being in her former home environment in Maine hurt her. She tried to think of a way to get at least one of her brothers,

the sickly one, to come and be with her. She knew that her extended family was financially able to take in another child, and if she showed responsibility, there would be no problem (Wilson, 40). She found a vacant store, furnished it, and turned it into a school for children (Thinkquest, 5). At the age of seventeen, her grandmother sent her a correspondence, and requested her to come back to Boston with her brother (Thinkquest, 6).

When she returned to Boston, she asked her grandmother if she could start another school in her grandmothers dining room. After a bit of opposition, her grandmother agreed (Comptons, 1). There, she taught until 1835, when illness from Tuberculosis and exhaustion set in. After she was ill, she closed the school (Comptons, 2). She then traveled to Europe to recuperate, under the advice of friends and family (Thinkquest, 7). After returning to Boston, months later, she found herself with a very large inheritance that would allow her to live comfortably for the rest of her life (Readers Companion to American History, 1).

After realizing that she was not the type to sit back and do nothing, she accepted an invitation to teach at a Sunday school at the East Cambridge Jail in East Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1941 (www. mfh. org, 1). That's when her quest began. She was shocked when she saw that mentally ill patients were being put into the jails, and even more appalled at the conditions they were put in.

She first appealed to the local courts. Although the charges were denied, the conditions were mildly improved (www. mfh. org, 2). Not satisfied with the outcome of the local courts, she traveled the state of Massachusetts for two years, documenting the conditions she found (McHenry, 1). She, with the

help of a member of the Massachusetts State Legislature, Samuel Gridley Howe, presented her reports from her visits to the jails, work houses, and hospitals in January of 1843 (Thinkquest, 10). Her reports consisted of stories such as this, the telling of a Salem County's poor house keeper of his encounter with a patient on day:

I knew I must master him now or never: I caught a stick of wood... and laid upon him until he cried for quarters; I beat him long enough until he knew I was his master, and now he is too much afraid of a thrashing to attack me; but you had better stand off, Maam, for he wont fear you. (Wilson, 1).

At first, the Massachusetts Legislature ignored her requests for better conditions and funding (www. everything60s. com, 1). Some of the assemblymen thought that it was too expensive (Mappen, 2). One of the assemblymen said that the proposed asylum was, too extravagant an Egyptian Coliseum, (Mappen, 3). Despite financially-based arguments with the Legislature, she was at a loss because of the fact that she was a woman (Thinkquest, 9). People were also at the belief that the mentally insane were being punished by God, and that they deserved the treatment they were receiving (Thinkquest, 11). Finally, a member of the Legislation went to personally examine the conditions at a selected hospital, and reported the conditions as even worse than what Dorothea Dix described them (www. angelfire. com). As a result, the Legislature passed a bill, separating the mentally ill from the criminals, and giving them better conditions (www. angelfire. com, 2). \$200, 000 was also authorized for the erection of a new facility in East Cambridge (www. Angelfire. com, 3).

After conquering Massachusetts, she traveled over 3, 000 miles in three years of non-stop traveling, visiting and documenting various conditions and pleading with the state governments to better the establishments (www. mfh. com, 1). While on tour of jails, poorhouses, and work houses, she saw arms and legs pinioned, bodies cut by whip-lashes, and necks bowed by feeders (www. angelfire. com, 1). Throughout the years of 1845-1852, her work inspired the creation of a school for the blind (The Readers Companion to American History, 3) and the persuasion of nine southern states to set up public hospitals for the insane (www. everything60s. com, 2). Dix told the state Legislature of North Carolina:

I am the hope of the poor crazed beings who pine in cells and stalls and cages and waste-rooms... of hundreds of wailing, suffering creatures hidden in your private dwellings and in pens and in cabins, (www. angelfire. com, 4).

Eventually tired of state-by-state campaigns, she worked on Federal reform (The Readers Companion to American History, 4). In 1848, she appealed to the Federal Government for 10 million acres for the use by the insane, deaf and dumb. The bill was passed in February of 1851 by the Senate. Congress then adjourned, so they voted on it again and it passed. Unfortunately, it was vetoed by President Pierce (Thinkquest, 13).

Dorothea Dix started volunteering as a nurse for the Union army after the attack on Fort Sumter and was placed in charge of all women nurses working in army hospitals (www. civilwarhome. com, 3). At the time of the Civil War, Dorothea had spent more than twenty years caring for the mentally ill (www. civilwarhome. com, 2). She ultimately became the Union Superintendent of female nurses during the Civil War (www. civilwarhome. com, 1). She court

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marshaled every doctor she found drunk or disorderly (Thinkquest, 14). And Dix only accepted nursing applicants between the ages of thirty and fifty who were plain-looking, didnt wear hoops or jewelry, and wore plain black or brown skirts (www. civilwarhome. com, 4). She was known as Dragon Dix, because of her constant clashes with military bureaucracy and occasionally ignoring administrative detail (www. civilwarhome. com, 5). A total of over 3, 000 women nurses served in the Union army (www. civilwarhome. com, 6).

In 1843, there were thirteen mental hospitals in the country; by 1880, there were 123. Dix played a direct role in erecting thirty-two of them and improving hundreds of other hospitals (www. mfh. org, 5). Just before her death, Dorothea Dix, also known as The Voice of the Mad, wrote to friend and poet, John Greenleaf Whittier:

I have a notion to see a fountain for animals set up in Boston on Milk Street, where I have often seen the tired draft horses pulling heavy loads to the dock and having no place to drink, (www. angelfire. com, 5).

The fountain was created after her death in 1887, at the age of 85. In response to her fountain, Whittier had a poem engraved at the fountain:

Dorothea Dix spent her last years in the guest quarters of a state hospital she had helped found 35 years earlier in New Jersey. A good friend of hers, Dr. Nichols, also wrote, to Mr. Daniel Hake Tuke, after Dorotheas Death: Thus had died and been laid to rest in the most quiet, unostentatious way the most useful and distinguished woman America had yet produced, (Wilson, Pg. 342).

This statement is also considered her epitaph (Thinkquest, 16).

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