

Anne Bauer, "The Charleston State Prison (1804-1878)" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 2, No 2 (Fall 1973).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

You may use content in this archive for your personal, non-commercial use. Please contact the *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* regarding any further use of this work:

[masshistoryjournal@wsc.ma.edu](mailto:masshistoryjournal@wsc.ma.edu)

Funding for digitization of issues was provided through a generous grant from MassHumanities.



Some digitized versions of the articles have been reformatted from their original, published appearance. When citing, please give the original print source (volume/ number/ date) but add "retrieved from HJM's online archive at <http://www.wsc.ma.edu/mhj>.



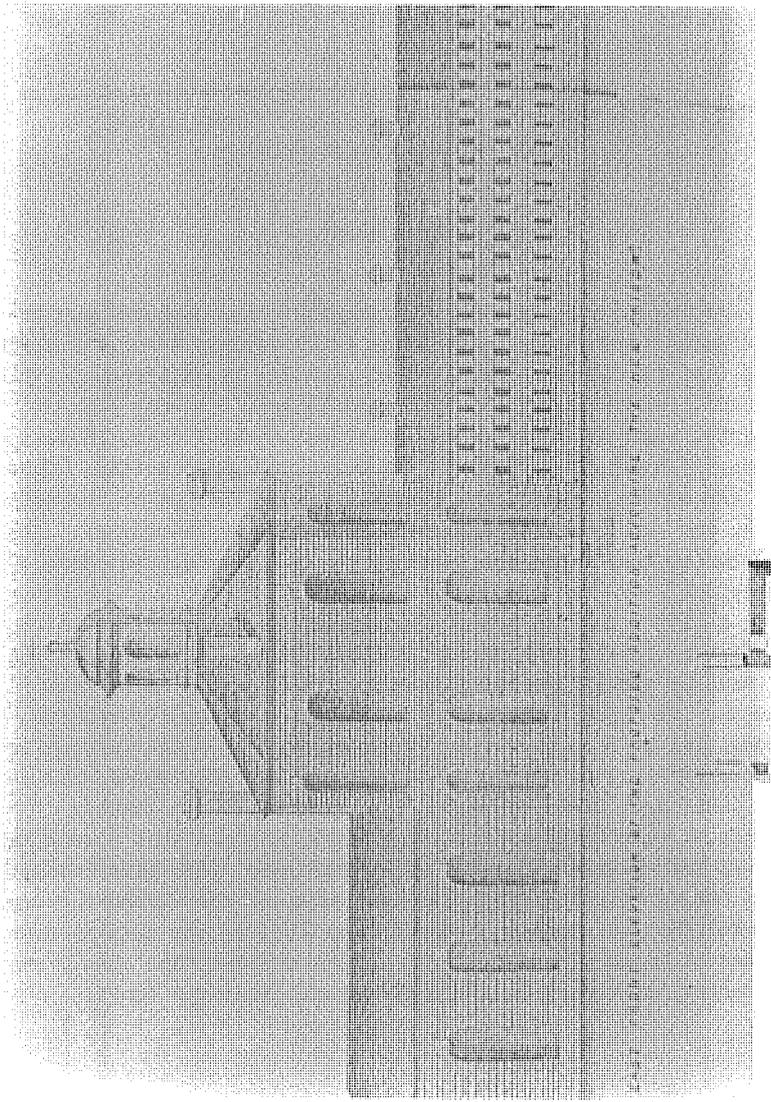
## The Charlestown State Prison

by

Anne Bauer

As imprisonment became the substitute for corporal punishment during the second half of the 18th century, the jails which were used for imprisonment evolved into the first prisons. Prior to 1785, in Massachusetts, county jails were the only prisons. In 1785, however, a prison was built on Castle Island, in Boston Harbor. In terms of security, it was most inappropriate. During the winter, inmates could escape across the ice to the mainland, and good swimmers could easily escape in the summer. Its insecurity caused the prison to be abandoned after less than 20 years.

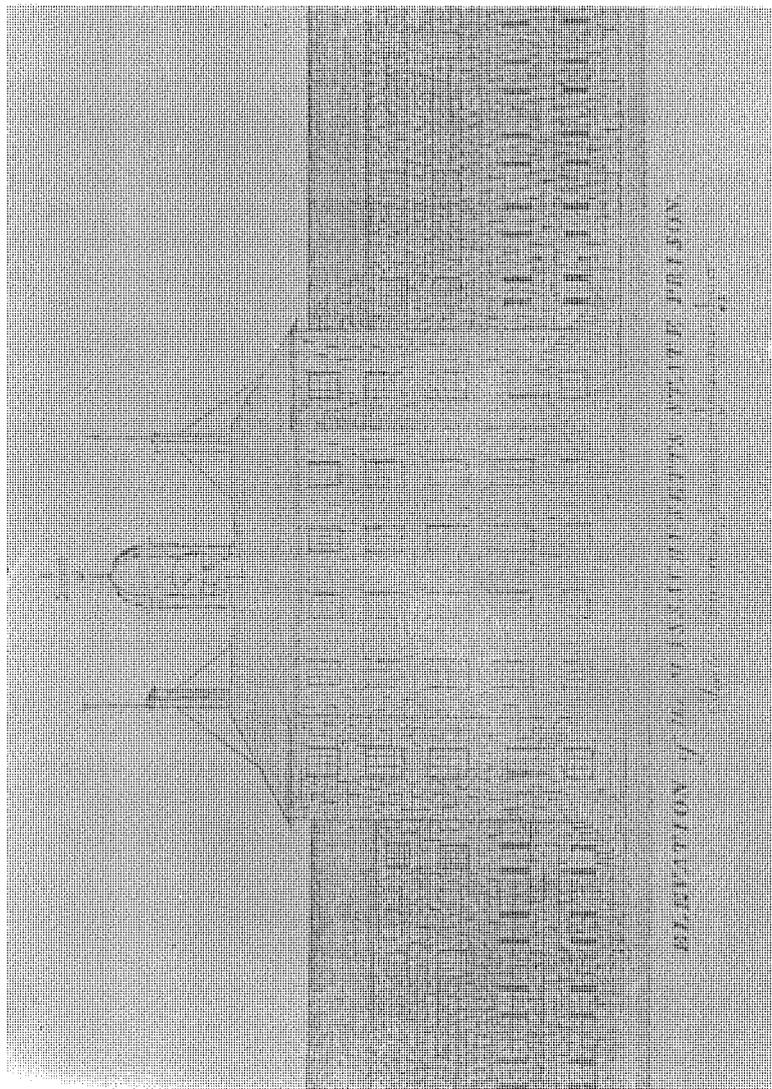
In 1804, the Massachusetts legislature decided to construct a state prison in Charlestown, and work began on the four acres of land at Lynde's Point, just across the Charles River from Boston. The site was selected both for its salubrity and its access to the river, for the transportation of stone for convict labor. The prison was intended "for the reformation as well as the punishment of convicts."<sup>1</sup> It was built like a massive fortress, with outer walls 4 feet thick, a stone wall 5 feet thick and 15 feet high surrounding the prison yard, and solid wrought iron doors, weighing 500-600 pounds each, on the basement story. It was first occupied on December 12, 1805, by the arrival from Dedham of Richard Hart of Saybrook, Connecticut, and John Green of Dedham, sentenced to two years imprisonment for theft.<sup>2</sup>



The governor of Massachusetts and his council appointed a board of five men, called the "board of visitors," to manage the prison. The members of the board believed that discipline "should be as severe as the principles of humanity will possibly permit...." The prisoner "should be cut off from the world...."<sup>3</sup> As inhumane as this sounds, it was the accepted view of the time, which stated that the greater the discomfort and gloom experienced by the inmate, the sooner would he be terrorized into leading an honest life. Yet even though the theory stressed severity, in 1815 the board of visitors' description of the prison stated that the keeper should always have the reformation of the prisoner in mind.<sup>4</sup>

From its beginning, the prison seemed to have been plagued with riots and escapes, the prisoner's reaction to the inhumane methods of establishing and maintaining discipline. As early as 1809, a "refractory room" was established in the basement of the prison, which was 25 feet long, grated, and fortified. Prisoners confined in this room were compelled to wear leg chains.<sup>5</sup> Dorothea Dix, in her Remarks on Prisons and Prison Discipline in the United States, noted that "the lash is...resorted to at Charlestown; and, as the warden...told me, 'only when all other modes of influence totally fail.'"<sup>6</sup>

A type of "social discipline" was maintained through efforts to grade the prisoners. Before 1812, the prisoners' garb was half red and half blue; however, around 1812, second-term prisoners were distinguished by 3 colored garments; one red stripe, one yellow stripe, and one blue stripe. These prisoners ate at



VIEW OF THE BUILDING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

separate tables, and had only two warm meals a day, bread and water being the other.

Third-term prisoners were dressed in four colors; one yellow stripe, one red stripe, one blue stripe, and one black stripe. These prisoners also ate at separate tables, were required to perform the most menial labor, and were permitted to have visitors only twice a year. Later, the colored stripes were merged into black and white, which became the conventional pattern.<sup>7</sup> In 1815, this differentiation of garb for the various classes of prisoners was abolished; the half red and half blue outfit returned.

Prisoners who were caught trying to escape were also subject to a mark of humiliation and degradation. They were compelled to wear an iron ring with an attached clog on their left leg.

By 1816, serious over-crowding and the subsequent disruption of industry and discipline, converted the prison into a "den of iniquity." It was so congested that four to eight prisoners were confined in some cells. Homosexuality came to be a problem. In addition, cell searches uncovered counterfeit money and a variety of skeleton keys.<sup>8</sup> A legislative committee reported that the prison was in no way a success. Not only was there no evidence of criminal reformation, but conditions at the prison had become scandalous.

These conditions, however, were finally arousing a wave of popular indignation which in turn prepared the way for a new era of prison reform. Around 1830, progressive developments were observed within the Charlestown prison, which paralleled the humanitarian thought characteristic of the overall reform movement



of that time. Louis Dwight, a reform crusader and head of the Boston Prison Discipline Society, was at that time involved in encouraging the public to support the construction of new prisons and to reform the management and conditions of many of the institutions. He was an advocate of the Auburn system, through which prisoners would work together in silence during the day and sleep in individual cells at night. Dwight's influence was felt, and he was named as one of two commissioners empowered to plan the enlargement of the Charlestown prison. Most of his attention was directed toward the stimulation of the old ideals of education, religion, industrial activity, and human kindness.

In 1826 the Massachusetts State Legislature authorized the erection of a new building at Charlestown for the separate confinement of 300 convicts. The building, which was 200 feet long and 48 feet wide, received its first prisoners in 1829. It was established on the basis of the Auburn system, and it resulted in a change for the better; conditions substantially improved.<sup>9</sup>

Moral and religious instruction was a dominant feature. A Sabbath school was initiated, which taught the Bible, as well as reading, writing, and arithmetic. There were, morning and evening, assemblies in the chapel, at which prayers were said and the scriptures read. The prison had a chaplain, paid by the state, who conducted religious services on Sundays, and who, on many occasions, wrote for the convicts when they wished to communicate with friends or relatives.<sup>10</sup> He also lectured the prisoners "upon moral and religious topics at intervals," and was given "full freedom in administering all the good instruction and beneficial

advice that his experience and studies furnish."<sup>11</sup>

In 1838, the Boston Prison Discipline Society stated that it was not aware of any penitentiary that had a better system of moral and religious instruction than the State Prison at Charlestown.<sup>12</sup> A prison library was also established at this time, and occasionally the chaplain would loan books to the prisoners to supplement Bible reading.

In 1847, 100 small gardens were established in the prison yard, and the prisoners could eat whatever they grew. This was found to have a positive effect upon the prisoners, for it was generally found that "when inmates were brought out into nature... discipline problems were fewer, and that the prisoners' own character is strengthened in responsibility and in his relations to his fellows."<sup>13</sup>

Progress was also made in terms of reformatory discipline. A liberal interpretation of the rules of silence, a careful application of the commutation system, and the practice of granting occasional holidays in the yard to those prisoners in good standing, had eliminated the necessity for the use of the lash and reduced the problem of discipline.<sup>14</sup>

The prison report of 1833 asserted that several discharged persons had reformed during the previous few years, and many had become industrious and worthy men. The term "reformation" at that time had several meanings, but it usually meant a thorough spiritual conversion, as well as a desire to lead a law-abiding life. Influenced by the religious practices of the prison, then, criminal reformation was successful, at least in part.

Around 1870, however, unfavorable conditions were observed within the prison, resulting in talk of building a new State prison at Concord. In 1872, in his report to the inspectors, Warden Chamberlain of Charlestown said, "A close and thorough inspection of the prison buildings, workshops and their appurtenances...demonstrates the necessity for immediate and extensive repairs, or the building of a new prison. The insalubrity of the present site of the prison affords one of the strongest arguments in favor of its removal to a more healthy situation."<sup>15</sup>

The State Board of Health, reporting on the sanitary conditions of the prison, concluded, "...we would respectfully represent that there are now four powerful influences tending to cause bad health among the prisoners: 1, the present overcrowding of the convicts; 2, the bad ventilation of the various apartments; 3, the very offensive condition of the prison sewage...; 4, the flats themselves, open as they are to sewage from adjoining sewers. It is somewhat hazardous to make a prediction; but we think that unless some remedy is adopted for the present evils, we shall have in the future only an increase of our present mortality, and we shall be fortunate if no severe epidemic occurs."<sup>16</sup>

It was claimed that the removal of the prison to Concord would result in better sanitary conditions, that the cost of maintenance would be greatly reduced, and that better terms could be made with contractors for the men's labor.

The entire question was brought before the Legislature, where a resolve was passed for the board of inspectors to examine the

expediency of such a movement and make a detailed report to the next Legislature. The inspectors sustained the warden's recommendation, and in 1873 the Legislature passed a bill authorizing the construction of a new prison at Concord. The new buildings were completed on May 22, 1878, and the prisoners were transferred from Charlestown.<sup>17</sup>

CITED REFERENCES

1. Orlando F. Lewis, The Development of American Prisons and Prison Customs, 1776-1845 (New Jersey, 1967), p. 68
2. "The Massachusetts State Prison", An unidentified newspaper clipping found in a Boston Public Library collection (Boston? 1881)
3. Lewis, The Development of American Prisons and Prison Customs, 1776-1845, p. 73
4. Ibid., p. 73
5. Ibid., p. 70
6. Dorothea Lynde Dix, Remarks on Prisons and Prison Discipline in the United States (Montclair, 1967:First published in 1845), p. 19
7. Lewis, The Development of American Prisons and Prison Customs, 1776-1845, p. 71
8. Ibid., p. 159
9. Ibid., p. 160
10. Dix, Remarks on Prisons and Prison Discipline in the United States p. 52
11. Henry J.W. Dam, "Practical Penology", The North American Review, Vol. CXLIV, (New York, 1887)
12. Lewis, The Development of American Prisons and Prison Customs, 1776-1845, p. 158
13. Ibid., p. 168
14. Blake McKelvey, American Prisons: A Study In American Social History Prior to 1915 (New Jersey, 1968), p. 51
15. "The Massachusetts State Prison", An unidentified newspaper clipping found in a Boston Public Library collection. (Boston? 1881)
16. Ibid.
17. McKelvey, American Prisons: A Study in American Social History Prior to 1915, p. 60