

Mary J. Bularzik, "The Dedham Temporary Asylum for Discharged Female Prisoners, 1864-1909" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 12, No 1 (January 1984).

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 Dedham Temporary Asylum for Discharged Female Prisoners 1864-1909

Mary J. Bularzik

The Dedham Temporary Asylum for Discharged Female Prisoners (1864-1909) was an institution begun by women to serve the needs of other women. As such, it reveals the interactions between the middle class reformers and working class inmates, as well as the bonds of sisterhood between them. The Dedham Asylum offered the model of a privately controlled (though in part publicly funded) agency which offered individualized attention (“womanly sympathy”) while avoiding scientific testing and classification. It interacted closely with the nineteenth century criminal justice system, but was a model rejected in the Progressive era.<sup>1</sup>

The Asylum was founded in 1864 in Dedham by a group of middle class female reformers led by Hannah B. Chickering (1817-1879), daughter of an old New England family. Her friends recalled the only striking aspect of her early years in Dedham to be “an almost morbid conscientiousness.”<sup>2</sup> Yet her strong sense of moral duty attracted others to the cause she espoused. When she failed to obtain a nursing position during the Civil War, she began to make “friendly visits” to the local Dedham jail. The appalling conditions faced by women imprisoned there, and especially their lack of resources upon release, inspired the idea of a temporary shelter, or “home,” that would help these women to begin a better life.

In March of 1864 the women presented to the Massachusetts State Legislature their plan for the incorporation of the asylum. The plight of the female ex-prisoners was graphically described:

They seem thus to be shut up to the alternative of a return to their former ways, and almost inevitably sink deeper and deeper in vice. They are soon again arrested, re-committed, and this mournful round is trodden again and again, till a wretched death closes the scene for these victims of misfortune, neglect, and sin.<sup>3</sup>

The reformers felt that their plan would help a certain type of ex-inmate. For a woman to gain admission to the proposed asylum, she had to “manifest a

desire for improvement." The inmates of the asylum were to be "thoroughly taught in all branches of domestic services, and in needle-work, and thus be provided with a capital with which to earn an honest and respectable living; so that, at their departure, after a trial of character and a test of their sincerity, suitable employment can be found for them." But reformation was the real aim of the shelter. This would be accomplished through the arts of womanly understanding: ". . . above all, loving sympathy, judicious advice, and the elevating influence of religion." Teaching inmates to read and write was proposed because "the mental effort to acquire [these skills] provides a moral strengthener."<sup>4</sup> On November 15, 1864, the Dedham Asylum "was set apart as a Christian home" when the first inmate was received by a staff consisting of one matron and an assistant. Forty-three women from the jails of Boston, Deer Island, South Boston, East Cambridge, Dedham, and Springfield used its facilities that first year. This was a smaller response than the founders had hoped for. But they attributed it to the newness of the institution and, more particularly, to "the degradation of the class we desire to rescue."<sup>5</sup> It is evident that the majority of ex-prisoners took off on their own, giving little thought to reform.

Thus the early years of the asylum brought the reformers face to face with the problem of rescuing a group of women who were not eager for this type of salvation. The "visitors" of the Board had no legal status as parole agents. Indeed, that job did not as yet exist in the state system of adult corrections. These "visitors" did, however, try to meet the female prisoners upon release and persuade them to come to the asylum. "An agent in the employ of the Society is then sent to the prison for the woman, to convey her to the Asylum . . . lest evil befall her on the way, and she should be overcome by temptation."<sup>6</sup> But many released women saw the asylum as further imprisonment, and did not take up the invitation:

One of our board of managers not long since, hearing that sixteen women were to be discharged from Deer Island, resolved to visit them on that day, and come back to town on the boat with them, hoping that by kind words and sympathy, she might influence them to go to the Asylum. Out of the sixteen women, only three were willing to go with her. We can imagine her disappointment, when, on landing at Boston, two of these were drawn away from her by old friends, who, knowing the time of liberty had come, were on the watch for them. The other was only conducted safely to the railway station by being implored by her protector to cling closely to her and not to lift her eyes from the ground.<sup>7</sup>

These incidents illustrate one of the reformers' strongest themes: the need for the women ex-prisoners to break away from old friends and companions, coupled with the mission of the asylum to provide them with a new social structure away from old influences. As a private institution, the Asylum would endeavor to put into practice those "lessons" learned in its first years of experience: ". . . to exercise care in the choice of our inmates, to expel those who perseveringly exert a bad influence, and . . . to raise the moral tone of our household."<sup>8</sup>

Variation in the number of entrants to the asylum was to some extent a result

of the individual choice of a woman to accept its discipline, or return to her former situation. Still, the secular trend reflects the relationship between this privately controlled Dedham charity and the state criminal justice system. The asylum reformers lobbied for the state to open a reformatory prison for women, and parole agents were eventually hired by this reformatory. As new state institutions began to serve a population similar to the asylum inmates, the population of Dedham decreased. When the asylum reformers reinterpreted their mission to serve women not yet covered by the state social welfare or criminal justice institutions, the house was again filled. The population of the asylum increased from a low of 43 in 1865, its first year of operation, to a high of 158 women in 1873. This increase was used to support the Dedham reformers' campaign for a state reformatory prison for women. The asylum had demonstrated, they thought, that there did exist a large group of women who could benefit from a reformatory program; and their institution had proven that other women were able to supervise such a project.

The general practice in Massachusetts jails in the middle of the nineteenth century was to keep male and female prisoners in separate rooms of the same jails. Since there were always more male than female prisoners, and jails were often overcrowded, this meant that the women were kept in cellars or attics. There was little concern for the welfare of the prisoners' children, more of a problem for the female prisoners than for the male. Some jailors admitted that they preferred a few female prisoners around at all times "to do the housekeeping"; and tales of sexual abuse by guards abounded.<sup>9</sup>

In 1869 the managers of the Dedham Temporary Asylum and those of the Springfield Home for the Friendless called a conference at St. Paul's Chapel, Boston, in order to discuss the establishment of a women's prison. The women's prison at Sherborn, opening in 1877, took in the same "reformable" younger offenders that the asylum served. Unless the female prison population of Massachusetts increased dramatically, fewer women could be expected to use the asylum. The "indenture law" of 1879 allowed the Reformatory for Women to place its most "hopeful" cases in domestic service. These women would have been prime candidates for the asylum's services.

The population of the asylum did experience a rapid decline to a low of 76 women (and 97 total inmates) in 1887. The managers of the asylum attributed this to the opening of the Reformatory for Women: "Last year, from the Reformatory Prison, 93 of the most promising women were bound out into families before the time of their discharge, the very class of women from which our Dedham Family would naturally have been enlarged."<sup>10</sup>

The reformers actively sought other groups of women to fill their institution. One source of new inmates was the "ticket-of-leave" woman, a releasing practice we today would call parole. In 1881 the Legislature authorized the Reformatory for Women to allow selected women inmates to finish their prison sentence at the asylum. The managers were pleased to receive this type of inmate:

The ticket-of-leave woman is as closely held by the law until her sentence ends, as if she were still in prison; consequently she is free from the anxiety for a situation, and the restlessness and discontent which the woman who knows her time of freedom has come, is so apt to show.

Another group of clients became available in 1886, when the charter of the asylum was amended to allow it "to afford shelter, instruction, and employment to women charged with crime whose cases were disposed of without sentence"—that is, women on probation.<sup>11</sup> A third source of inmates that began to receive more attention in the reports of the asylum after the establishment of the Reformatory for Women was a group which originally had been considered a problem: mothers with babies. While from early on there had been children with some of the women at the asylum, at first the Dedham managers felt that this was not within their province. Yet the staff's experience with the lack of opportunity open to single mothers who sought employment and shelter, especially those with a prison record, changed their opinion. Homeless single mothers became one of their target groups for admission. There was even a suggestion that the asylum provide nursery care for the children of prisoners still in the Reformatory for Women, although nothing seems to have come of this. However, the asylum did board children of its own former inmates who were out to service.

The impressions given by the Annual Reports that mothers with children made up an increasing part of the asylum caseload are not borne out by the quantitative data. While the specific issue of aiding mothers to support their children was not addressed until the 1880s, women with children constituted a substantial, but not increasing, minority of the asylum population throughout its history. From the mid 1870s, mothers with children made up from fifteen to thirty-five percent of the caseload. In the late 1880s the managers responded to a drop in the percentage of mothers at the asylum by writing more explicitly in the *Annual Reports* of their duty to serve the needs of imprisoned mothers. But the resulting increase in mothers at the asylum simply brought their percentage up to previous levels.

While the founders' rationale for the establishment of the Dedham Asylum stressed the importance of religious reform, the actual program of the institution concentrated on domestic service training and placement. Domestic service was the only type of "training" offered by the asylum. The ex-prisoners were encouraged to learn domestic service as a means of supporting the asylum itself, because the middle class reformers considered domestic service to be the ideal way in which a working class woman could be useful to society and earn a living, and because live-in domestic service potentially offered a "new life" since the woman was removed from former companions and family.

Despite the fact that the Dedham Asylum was viewed as a privately supported charity by its founders and administrators, a significant part of its operating expenses was earned by the labor of its inmates. Sewing was emphasized in the early years, but was phased out as a money-making activity by 1889. Doing laundry remained a major source of the asylum's support throughout its exist-

tence. In many years this brought in a larger amount of money than either charitable bequests or the state subsidy. That these women inmates were expected to earn their own keep bears testimony to the fact that they were considered workers who were supposed to be productive and not just women who were to be protected.<sup>12</sup> Several years after its opening the asylum was placing half or more of its inmates into domestic service positions. One of its roles, then, was as a placement service for delinquent women, who might have trouble locating positions on their own; and conversely, as a source of cheap labor for the middle class housewives of the area. While it was a practical goal to promote domestic service for female ex-inmates in the mid-nineteenth century, from the reformers' viewpoint live-in service had the advantage of removing a woman from her old associates and giving her a new role model in her employer. Yet this placement service, so important to the concerns of the asylum reformers, almost immediately began a downward trend. The proportion of those leaving the asylum and placed in domestic work declined within the first decade from a high point of nearly fifty-three percent to only one out of three so placed. The decline continued to one out of five near the end of the century; in the last two years of the institution, 1908 and 1909, less than ten percent were placed out.

Since the goals of the reformatory process were so well embodied in domestic placement, the decreasing trend in the acceptance of service positions by the women inmates suggests a decreasing acceptance of the moral reform goals of the asylum. From other sources, we know that middle class women were eager to encourage more working class girls to enter domestic service in the 1880s and 1890s. But jobs in shops and factories often proved more attractive to working women around the turn of the century.<sup>13</sup> Examining where the rest of the women went when they left the asylum indicates a similar conclusion. As no other form of work placement was available, other women either left on their own resources to find work, were dismissed as "hopeless" and beyond the reformatory process, or returned to friends. This last result was tantamount to "failure" in the reformatory's moral scheme of things, in which a "born again" new life was emphasized against a return to old sins. These women, while considered capable of reform by the staff, rejected the future the staff envisioned for them.

The pattern of women who went to friends, and possibly back to their old habits, falls into two periods. The first period (1870 to 1882) shows a decreasing trend ranging from ten percent to zero returning to their former situation. Coupled with the high (fifty percent) placement of women in domestic service jobs in those years, it is obvious that from a "reformatory" point of view the asylum was a success. It was keeping the women from returning to their former situations, and placing them in a new life. But from 1882 on, a sharply increasing trend in the percentage of women returning to their friends is evident. By 1900 nearly one quarter of the women departed in this manner, and by 1909 one out of three left to return to friends. Since this increase was paralleled by the decline in domestic placement, it appeared that the asylum was failing to live up to its reformatory principles. Progressive era reform focused on statistical proofs of "success" and "failure," and in terms of statistics, the asylum seemed to be becoming less effective. In the state Reformatory Prison for Women, the

“womanly sympathy” of the nineteenth century reformers was giving way before “scientific studies” which, it was hoped, would reveal the most effective ways to reform criminals.<sup>14</sup> The asylum never took this path.

But the determination of the asylum reformers to preserve their institutional philosophy of “womanly sympathy” did not mean that the asylum operated on the bonds of feminist sisterhood. True, the Dedham Asylum was an institution founded by women to serve the needs of women. Yet basic class differences separated the lady founders and the women inmates. The asylum was begun by, and remained a project of, those whom labor activist Leonora O’Reilly referred to disparagingly as “the Lady with something to give her sister.” The unavoidable condescension built into the very structure of such an institution occasionally found its way into the written reports:

Not a lady on this board but will tell you how hard to overcome is the shrinking from these sin-stained, and ah! worst of all sin-loving women, every one of whom has a record of crime written on her heart, and almost always giving evidence against her in face, form, manner, and speech.<sup>15</sup>

Methods of encouraging women inmates to stay in the asylum were similarly non-sisterly:

When women first come to the Asylum their clothes and outside garments are carefully locked up, in order to make the temptation less of walking away in a desperate moment. If they go away without permission, as they sometimes do, they must face the world in a calico gown, without money.<sup>16</sup>

To the ex-prisoners, then, the food, shelter, and employment services offered by the Dedham Asylum came at the cost of continued treatment as inferiors. The majority of women released from the state prisons and jails never did submit to private charity’s concern for their post-release behavior. Many undoubtedly felt, as one “escapee” from the asylum wrote, that they could not adjust to “the dreariness of the stupid life at the Home.”<sup>17</sup>

The assumption of additional functions by the public criminal justice system in the 1900s precipitated another crisis for the Dedham Asylum. The Parole Department for Delinquent Girls was established at Lancaster in 1900 and the Massachusetts Commission on Probation was organized in 1908. The establishment of public agencies for post-release supervision of delinquent women meant the loss of state funds to the asylum after 1905. The subsequent decrease in private contributions during the depression years of 1908-1909, coupled with the retirement of Susan Nickerson, visiting agent for the asylum since 1888, led the administrators to close the home for a year to reorganize it.

In June of 1911, the Dedham Asylum reopened as “Chickering House,” a short-term convalescent center for working women and their children. Women were referred to the house by many Boston social agencies. This revision of the target population allowed the continuation of the “womanly sympathy” so valued by the early founders and apparently still valued by their successors. As

Eliza Nott Converse, the Chickering House secretary, wrote in the *Report* of 1915, "At first we were hampered by instructions from physicians and social workers, and were allowed by small exercise of our own judgement; but now it is frequently said when sending a patient, 'You will know what is best to do for her.'"<sup>18</sup>

The Dedham Asylum had run afoul of Progressive penology. Founded on the nineteenth century model of charitable benevolence, its refusal to become a social service agency with trained social workers resulted in its being supplanted by more "modern" organizations, in particular by state agencies. As a community placement agency, it did not conduct research on its inmates to discover the cause of crime. Nor did the Dedham Asylum join the growing consensus in the years after 1890 that delinquent women were feeble-minded (and *vice versa*) as proposed by Walter Fernald of the Massachusetts School for the Feeble-Minded and Mary Dewson of the Lancaster Industrial School for Girls.<sup>19</sup> It retained the vision of the female corrections movement that these women were "poor victims" needing sympathy and reformation.

#### NOTES

1. Progressive era institutions emphasized professional expertise, rather than community services, which may help to explain David Rothman's findings; see *Conscience and Convenience: The Asylum and Its Alternatives in Progressive America* (Boston, 1980), p. 12 *et passim*.
2. Sarah E. Dexter, *Recollections of Hannah B. Chickering* (Cambridge, 1881), p. 5. Sarah Dexter was a friend and co-worker of Hannah Chickering.
3. Dedham Temporary Asylum for Discharged Female Prisoners, *Annual Report* (1864), p. 6.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Annual Report* (1865), p. 6.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Annual Report* (1881), p. 6.
8. *Annual Report* (1868), p. 11.
9. The best study of the origins of the U.S. female corrections movement is Estelle B. Freedman, "Their Sisters' Keepers: The Origins of Female Corrections in America," Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1976; published as *Their Sisters' Keepers. Women's Prison Reform in America, 1830-1930*. (Ann Arbor, 1981).
10. *Annual Report* (1881), p. 7.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 8; (1886), p. 9.



12. The sources of funds for the operating expenses of the asylum are included in the *Annual Reports*.
13. The Women's Educational and Industrial Union was active in this campaign in Boston. See Committee on Domestic Reform Report #1, "The Effort to Attract the Worker in Shops and Factories to Domestic Service" (1898), Mary Dewson Papers, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe College.
14. For the Progressive approach see Jessie Hodder, "The Next Step in the Treatment of Girl and Women Offenders," National Conference of Social Work, *Proceedings*, (1918), pp. 117-121; Edith Spaulding, "Mental and Physical Factors in Prostitution," National Conference of Charities and Corrections, *Proceedings*, (1914), pp. 222-229; and Estelle Freedman, "Their Sisters' Keepers," chapter VI, esp. p. 246.
15. *Annual Report* (1882), p. 5. This analysis disagrees with Barbara Berg's conclusion that asylum reformers treated inmates as their "sisters." See Barbara J. Berg, *The Remembered Gate: Origins of American Feminism* (N. Y., 1978), chapters 8 and 9.
16. *Annual Report* (1896), p. 8.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 9. Unfortunately, case records from the asylum have not survived, so it is not possible to trace individuals. From internal evidence in the *Annual Reports*, it is likely that the reformers did not keep extensive case records. The asylum building has since been torn down.
18. Chickering House, *Annual Report* (1915), p. 6.
19. On Fernald, see Peter Tyor, "Denied the Power to Choose the Good," *Journal of Social History*, X (1977):472-489.