DOROTHEA DIX AND SOCIAL REFORM IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA, 1845-1875

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DOROTHEA DIX, for whom the Dixmont Hospital is named, was interested in both legislative and administrative reforms in the care of the insane in western Pennsylvania. She is recognized primarily for her legislative work, ably described by her biographer, Francis Tiffany. Less is known of her experience and understanding of the problems of hospital administration. Fortunately her unpublished correspondence with John Harper, first secretary and treasurer and later president of the board of managers of the Western Pennsylvania Hospital, is replete with references to this phase of her genius.

In 1835 Miss Dix, at thirty-three years of age, was the head mistress of a successful private school for girls in Boston, Massachusetts. At thirty-nine, financially independent but with her health impaired by the long struggle against poverty, she began her work for social reform, appealing to state legislatures and later to the United States Congress. In 1843, after successful efforts in Massachusetts and Rhode Island and coincident with a legislative campaign in New Jersey, she made her first visit to Pennsylvania. The intervening years had been rich in experience. She had traveled widely on her visits of investigation and had acquired skill and dexterity in dealing with state legislatures. Of her approach to her task at this time her biographer wrote that she “believed in woman’s keeping herself aloof and apart from anything savoring of ordinary political action, as equally from every desire of material reward, whether in

1 Read at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on March 27, 1934. Dr. Hathway is assistant professor of social work at the University of Pittsburgh. Ed.
2 Francis Tiffany, Life of Dorothea Lynde Dix (Cambridge, Mass., 1890).
3 This group of correspondence is part of the collection known as the Harper Papers in the possession of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.
way of money, place, or personal distinction. She must be the incarnation of a purely disinterested idea appealing to universal humanity, irrespective of party or sect; at once a voice of tender supplication for the outcasts of the earth and their impassioned champion, capable of flaming with sacred fire." Stately and by some described as beautiful, sensitive to human suffering, dynamic as a leader, stern as a disciplinarian, she had become a "gentlewoman" lobbyist of rare foresight and competence.

In preparation for a memorial to the legislature of Pennsylvania she made a brief but comprehensive survey of public institutions in Allegheny County in August, 1844. The following excerpt from the famous memorial presented February 3, 1845, indicates the nature of her findings:

The Allegheny County Jail, at Pittsburgh, combines all the faults and abuses of the worst county prisons in this state, or in the United States.... I found transgressors of all ages, colors, sexes and degrees, promiscuously associated... here the sick were unattended, the ignorant untaught, the repentant if any unencouraged, and the insane forgotten.... If it had been the deliberate purpose of the citizens of Allegheny county to establish a school for the inculcation of vice, and obliteration of every virtue, I cannot conceive that any means they could have devised, would more certainly have secured these results, than those I found in full operation in the jail last August.... It is a relief to turn from this to other public institutions of Pittsburg: the Orphans' Asylum situated in Allegheny city, is a charity which rescues many unprotected children from early crime, and saves some from the jail. This institution, so creditable to those who support it, and to the good matron who directs it, is well ordered throughout. The Poor-house of Pittsburg, soon to be replaced by a more commodious establishment, is also in Allegheny city. I found it comfortably arranged, and neat. The two insane of the fifteen inmates, were kindly looked after.... Allegheny County has no poor-house, but the poor in most of the townships are distributed as is customary in other counties. The Western Penitentiary... is one of the most excellently governed prisons I have ever visited.... It is honorable to the county and the state, and creditable to the warden, Major Beckham, to whose judgment and fidelity, its prosperity is mainly to be ascribed.5

The publication of this document shocked the citizens of Allegheny County. Editorial comments in the Pittsburgh Gazette and Advertiser urged a thorough investigation. Mayor William J. Howard of Pitts-

4 Tiffany, Dix, 90, 107-110, 121, 148.
5 Dorothea Dix, Memorial Soliciting a State Hospital for the Insane... February 3, 1845, 22-24 (Harrisburg, 1845).
burgh called a public meeting on February 26, 1845, at which the Dix report was read and the following committees were appointed: first, a committee to investigate the truth of Miss Dix's charges and to report at a subsequent meeting, and second, a committee to mature a plan for the organization of a permanent society for the amelioration of the condition of insane persons and prisons that would have the whole subject of prisons, poorhouses, and insane asylums under its supervision. This second committee was directed to report in favor of establishing an insane asylum and hospital and to present a plan for the prevention of crime, to be sent to the legislature for immediate action. As far as local prison reform was concerned, this ambitious effort accomplished little. On October 27 of that same year Miss Dix wrote at length to the Gazette, calling attention to the "want of cleanliness," the lack of system, and the absence of suitable officers in the Allegheny County jail. She noted some changes in appearance since she had last visited the institution but she feared that "this was rather an accidental than a uniform condition." She labeled the Pittsburgh jail as "now a public nuisance."Interest in the care of the insane, however, was stimulated by the agitation in western Pennsylvania and by similar efforts throughout the state, and on April 15, 1845, the Pennsylvania State Lunatic Hospital was established at Harrisburg by act of the legislature. This state institution was designed to care for the pauper insane of the state for some time. Soon, however, additional provision in the western counties became imperative. Miss Dix recognized the need and undertook her prolonged work of reform in Allegheny and surrounding counties.

On November 14, 1845, the Gazette published a letter from a contributor calling attention to the lack of provision for the insane in Pittsburgh. Editorial comment urged community leaders to take the initiative.

6 *Pittsburgh Daily Gazette and Advertiser*, February 19, 25, 1845. Henry Sproul was made chairman of the meeting, John Sheriff, vice chairman, and John H. Sawyer, secretary. The first committee was composed of Richard Biddle, William Marks, William McCandless, Andrew Burke, and John H. Sawyer, and the second of John Sheriff, J. P. Stuart, William M. Edgar, William H. Smith, David N. White, and John Farrell. *Gazette and Advertiser*, February 27, 1845.

7 *Gazette and Advertiser*, November 6, 1845; *Pennsylvania, Laws*, 1845, p. 440. The Lunatic Hospital is now known as the Harrisburg State Hospital.
in the problem. On November 20 the Gazette published an open letter to Mayor Howard asking that a public meeting be called to consider the expediency of establishing an asylum for the insane. This letter was signed by forty citizens, one of whom was Thomas Bakewell, later the first president of the board of managers of the Western Pennsylvania Hospital. A meeting subsequently held on November 22 at the courthouse was "not large, but was very respectably attended, and a deep interest was manifested in the cause designed to be prompted." Resolutions were passed providing for the revival of the Western Pennsylvania Hospital Society and for the appointment of a committee to determine what sums could be raised for the construction and endowment of a general hospital where provision for the care of the insane might be made and to determine upon a suitable site. These resolutions provoked an interesting controversy between those who believed that the insane could be adequately cared for in a general hospital and those who advocated separate institutional provision. Dorothea Dix was of the latter group. A contributor to the Gazette of November 26 called attention to the public criticism of this hospital meeting, which, he commented, "injudiciously attempted to do too much, and therefore did nothing to purpose." He urged that a second meeting be called "whose action shall be exclusively confined to measures connected with the erection and endowment of an Asylum for the Insane." The advocates of the general hospital plan, however, were in the majority, and the Western Pennsylvania Hospital Society was revived at a subsequent meeting of the group. Thomas Bakewell was elected president, Michael Allen, vice president, and James H. McClelland, secretary.

In January, 1853, the Western Pennsylvania Hospital was opened primarily for persons "receiving accidental injuries in our manufactures." Only a temporary provision was made for the insane. During the first year, however, twenty-six insane patients were admitted, and in 1854 there were fifty-two insane patients under care. There was in-

8 Gazette and Advertiser, November 24, 25, 1845. An act "to incorporate the Western Pennsylvania Hospital Society" had been passed by the legislature on April 3, 1837. Laws, 1837, p. 236-239.
9 Gazette and Advertiser, December 5, 1845.
creasing demand for the treatment of the insane. The hospital could not meet the problem alone, and in 1854 the board of managers asked the state legislature for assistance. Miss Dix supported this request for a state appropriation.

As indicated in a previous paragraph, Dorothea Dix had developed a skillful appeal to legislatures by the time she reached Pennsylvania. A word should be said of the lobbying methods she brought to the assistance of the Western Pennsylvania Hospital and later of Dixmont Hospital during the years that followed this first request for aid. First, she carried on her own quiet preliminary work of investigation. Second, she selected leaders to carry out her program. Third, she aided and abetted the leaders she had chosen. According to her biographer her "instinct for detecting the gift of leadership in others was well-nigh infallible." She also learned all she could about each legislator: she arranged interviews with them individually in her own alcove at the Capitol or invited groups of fifteen to twenty to her own boarding house. A helpful contact made in one session was followed up by correspondence as she traveled from state to state. The subsequent history of Dixmont Hospital as told in her letters to John Harper presents ample evidence of the success of these methods.

On May 8, 1855, the Pennsylvania legislature made the first appropriation of ten thousand dollars for the insane department of the Western Pennsylvania Hospital. Separate institutional provision for the insane soon became a necessity, however, and the managers decided to erect a new hospital for this purpose. How much this decision to erect a separate building was influenced by Dorothea Dix cannot be determined from available evidence. According to the report of the state board of public charities in 1870 it was due to her wisdom that the first legislative appropriation for the care of the insane was reserved for a new site. A farm on the left bank of the Monongahela River, purchased for this purpose, was later sold at the advice of Miss Dix, who found it impracticable because of the lack of railroad approaches. After visiting nearly all the suitable

10 Western Pennsylvania Hospital, Report of the Managers, 1867, p. 6; 1854, p. 7; 1857, p. 4-6.
locations near Pittsburgh, a delegation of managers with her assistance selected a farm on the right bank of the Ohio River about eight miles below Pittsburgh. The property was purchased by private subscription. Adjoining land, subsequently acquired, made available in all three hundred acres. Here was erected "a Hospital for the cure of 'mind diseased,' an Asylum for the care of those upon whom God, in his inscrutable wisdom, has laid a chastening hand." The cornerstone was laid on July 19, 1859. The hospital was opened on November 11, 1861, and 113 patients were transferred from the Western Pennsylvania Hospital. The parent hospital took the name of the medical and surgical department and the new hospital took the name of the insane department. An executive committee was made responsible for the administration of the new department, but one board of managers assumed general direction of both. The insane department became known as Dixmont Hospital in honor of Miss Dix, but it was not until May, 1907, that a separate charter was granted.12

How carefully Miss Dix watched the progress of legislative appropriations for Dixmont Hospital is indicated in her letter to John Harper of March 11, 1858, written when further aid was being asked to finance the new building. A beginning should be made, she suggested, by asking the legislature to transfer the appropriation for the insane department to the new farm. No additional appropriation should be asked the first year. There were opposing forces to combat even from Allegheny County. When the hospital section of the bill was finally passed she wrote to Thomas Bakewell of the "almost none but cross influences from yr two Delegates for two months."13 In 1861 she endeavored to secure an appropriation of seventy-five thousand dollars, which would complete the hospital. The vigor of her approach to the committee on ways and means is apparent from her remarks in an undated letter to Harper: "Today-

12 Pennsylvania Board of Public Charities, Report, 1870, p. xxxii; Managers of the Western Pennsylvania Hospital, Report, 1867, p. 8, 9; 1869, p. 11. The charter was granted in an act passed on May 1, 1907, to "provide for the division of charitable corporations having more than one place where their operations are carried on, and of their property; and providing for the performance of public duties of such corporations." Laws, 1907, p. 140-142.

13 Dix to Bakewell, March 31, 1858.
row P. M. I meet the Committee of Ways & Means, and present your claim on the State Treasury. I don’t intend coming before these gentlemen as a special pleader, but shall take the decided ground of yr rights. I shall regard the Committee as charged not to squander state funds, but bound to dispense the same as representing the claims & needs of State Institutions and acting for the good of the same & their Constituents.” Her high hopes were met with disappointment, however, and she wrote of failure in a letter to the board of managers on April 24, 1861. Her understanding of the legislative mind is indicated in her comment: “Do'nt leave a dime to which you are entitled by any Acts, in the State Treasury by next December,—if you would have any thing from the next Legislature.”

This unsuccessful effort before the Pennsylvania legislature was Miss Dix’s last in behalf of Dixmont Hospital for some years. In 1861 she accepted a government appointment as “Superintendent of Women Nurses, to select and assign women nurses to general or permanent military hospitals.” It was 1865 before she resigned this commission. During the three subsequent years she acted as volunteer pension agent for disabled veterans, and devoted her energy to raising funds for a war memorial in the national cemetery at Hampton, Virginia.14

When she resumed her work for the insane in 1867, Miss Dix found many of the state hospitals overcrowded, needing reorganization and new facilities. At the age of sixty-five and frail in health, she once more assumed an active rôle in legislative efforts. The effect of the war upon Dixmont Hospital had been to increase the number of admissions. According to the report of the board of managers for 1867, the ratio of lunacy in Pennsylvania had increased from 1 to 1,000 in 1860 to 1 to 631 in 1867.15 Dixmont, like many other hospitals, required additional facilities, and Miss Dix once more took up its claim before the Pennsylvania legislature.

In a series of three letters to Harper the story of her effort in 1867 is told. In spite of the opposition of the state treasurer who “really seemed to think I had a personal interest in pickings from the Treasure Box”

14 Tiffany, Dix, 336, 344, 348.
15 Tiffany, Dix, 349-359; Western Pennsylvania Hospital, Report, 1867, p. 17.
and in spite of a "secret tie" that was "not at all obvious to the straightforward matter of fact mind" but that held the appropriation bill in committee, she had faith "that in the end all will come right—though right may be reached through much tribulation." She was encouraged to find in the Senate that the opinions of the state treasurer were not "of so serious weight as at first they seemed to be" and "in the House, where the Treasurer is better understood his anxiety to abridge appropriations is charged to his desire to loan the State money to the Banks at 4 pr cent for his own benefit, and that the large appropriations lessen his own available income." But the effort failed after the appropriation had seemed to be safe, apparently because of a letter from the state treasurer which "threw all things in indescribable confusion." 16 It was not an easy task even for a sophisticated lobbyist. Efforts were finally successful, however, and the hospital was completed in 1870. Between 1855 and 1870 the state had appropriated a total of $670,428.50 to Dixmont Hospital. Of this amount, $508,086.62 had been expended for buildings equipped to house 410 patients. During the same period of fourteen years a total of 3,459 patients had been under care. 17

As indicated in an earlier paragraph, Dorothea Dix is known primarily for her legislative work on behalf of the insane, but her interest in hospital administration was second only to her interest in legislative efforts. She had spent the years from 1841 to 1843 not only in inspection visits but in studying therapeutic methods. Thus it was natural that she should advise concerning details of building and management from the first purchase of the Dixmont property. She urged against incurring debt as a "wrong and dangerous practice" that "eventually injures rather than strengthens the argument for liberal donations or just Legislative appropriations." How scrupulously she followed the details of construction and management is indicated in further letters to Harper in which she outlined provisions to be made for patients at the railway station, heating arrangements that would afford protection against fire, and the proper classification and housing of patients. No housekeeping detail escaped her. When an assistant physician was to be appointed she wrote

16 Dix to Harper, March 27, 29, April 10, 1867.
17 Board of Public Charities, Report, 1870, p. xxxi, 87, 93, 94.
with elaborate precision of the necessary rearrangements of office space and living quarters. When she discovered a lock of useful design she wrote describing its construction and giving the place of manufacture.

Miss Dix believed firmly that the hospital superintendent rather than the architect should supervise building construction. In 1858 she wrote to Thomas Bakewell suggesting a reliable overseer of the work of building at the farm: “I distrust contract work & contractors”; and she repeatedly urged this suggestion in letters to Harper. Resuming her interest in the hospital after the war and finding the board engaged in plans for additions to the building, she was once more in conflict over the authority given the architect. On March 29, 1867, she wrote Harper that she proposed “only one point—give up yr architect.” She was not alone in this opinion. Dr. Reed, the hospital superintendent, agreed with her point of view and on May 9, 1867, he wrote to Harper asking to be relieved of any further responsibility for building matters. Dr. Reed wrote with feeling, saying: “if it is necessary to fight for the privilege of saving money for the Hospital and to avoid useless expenditures, I most respectfully decline.” Miss Dix supported his criticism. She believed that Dr. Reed should be made responsible and be urged to study details. “One difficulty,” she wrote to Harper on April 14, 1867, “lies in too large a board bringing too great diversity of opinion... but too little practical knowledge upon the work to decide. . . . I would make the Dr. responsible . . . He will soon show whether he is up to the mark of your requirements.” And she repeatedly recommended that Harper visit other places and “see what is being done by the Superintending Physicians without Architects who show working plans, but passing that, have no more to do with work at Hospital construction, directly or indirectly.”

Administrative personnel at the hospital was Miss Dix’s constant concern. On April 19, 1856, Dr. Joseph A. Reed was appointed superintendent of the Western Pennsylvania Hospital. He remained in this capacity until 1864, when he became superintendent of the insane de-
partment at Dixmont, where he remained until his death in 1884. Miss Dix was an able supporter of Dr. Reed, mindful at all times of his value to the institution and eager that conditions be made conducive to harmony. She early pointed out the necessity of an assistant resident physician and in an undated letter wrote to Harper:

I have seen yr young Clerk—My dear sir, in a large Hospital he might do well as Steward's Clerk but indeed you need have either a responsible and really competent resident Physician who can keep the Books, & serve as a really responsible helper to the Dr. or you need a middle aged man who can, as he must Control all persons on the place whenever the Dr. is temporarily absent. . . . No clerk can receive patients,—control affairs on the place,—nor direct himself anyway and if the Dr. ever leaves the grounds for an hour he would leave no responsible party at all, which you would surely not consider safe or right.

When Reed's administration was attacked in 1860, she urged the board on May 26 to send him a written statement of confidence. Later, in 1868, when his resignation again seemed imminent, and with it that of Harper, she wrote frequently in her effort to adjust the difficulties that had precipitated the trouble, partly caused by the old controversy over the building. On July 18, 1868, she wrote Harper: "You say the Building Committee are good men—I do not doubt that: I only question their judgment in conducting Hospital construction. And am sustained in this questioning by the amt of money expended on the wash House;—not to specify other facts—as for the Architect, he does not care how much money he is the agent of squandering—or expending injudiciously. I do beg of you not to resign yr official Connection with the Board—it can spare no balance weights." She overlooked no detail in strengthening Dixmont through Dr. Reed's influence.

Such was the quality of her interest and concern over the hospital that had been named in her honor. On perhaps her final visit of inspection she wrote on June 12, 1876:

My last visit dates May, 1872:—during this intervening period, it is evident that improvements have been advanced, and comforts multiplied under the superintending cares of Dr. and Mrs. Reed, whose interests never slumber nor responsible labors cease on behalf of the entire establishment. Friends confide their suffering relatives to their directing charge with hope and unhesitating

22 Dix to Harper, January 9, July 17, 1868.
trust, and results prove that confidence is safely placed. . . . Good-order and industry prevail throughout the Offices, and general culinary departments; and the summary of results cannot fail to afford great satisfaction both to the Trustees and Visitors. All this, my friends, you must know, through yr long association with the place, and with Dr. and Mrs. Reed.  

Added proof of the high standard of the hospital is contained in the report of the agent of the state board of charities in 1876, from which the following comment is taken: “A high standard of care and treatment continues to be maintained. All the apartments of whatever kind, from basement to attic were thoroughly inspected and found in a most favorable condition. . . . Nothing seems to have been overlooked, calculated in any way to prevent the gloom which is so apt to pervade the wards of these asylums.”

By this time Miss Dix had made her contribution to Dixmont. Although her active work was at an end, her interest in the hospital remained consistent until her death in 1887. As late as 1878 she was greatly concerned over Dr. Reed’s prolonged illness and the possible need of appointing a successor and she wrote to Harper: “If by coming to Pittsburgh or Dixmont, this season, I could do any substantial good in the interests of the patients and the Institution, I would put aside other plans of occupation and ‘come over and help you’ in your ‘Macedonia’.” She was then seventy-six years of age.

Miss Dix had not completely reformed the provision for the insane in Pennsylvania. Much still remained to be done. In 1872 the state board called attention to the condition of the insane in county poorhouses. According to reports, insane persons cared for in such institutions were without proper accommodations and medical care. They were, for the most part, “wholly uncared for.” According to the report of the state board in 1873, “the shocking and sickening revelations, so graphically set forth in the memorial of Miss Dix, presented to the Legislature of 1845, are not yet obsolete. There have been some improvements since made in some of these places. . . . But in most parts of the State that condition remains now substantially the same as then.” Nevertheless her

23 Dix to Harper, June 12, 1876.
25 Dix to Harper, November 1, 1878.
26 Board of Public Charities, Report, 1872, p. lxviii; 1873, p. cxlii.
achievement had been an extraordinary one. Concerned first with the condition of the insane in jails and almshouses, she had, almost single-handed, brought about state acceptance of responsibility for their care. The result was the building of state hospitals with which her time and attention were concerned for many years. Her loyalty and devotion to Dixmont Hospital was only one episode in her remarkable life. The history of the institution is a tribute to her genius, which combined sympathy and understanding of the group she served with a dynamic leadership over those who had power to provide and a close scrutiny of those who were responsible for developing a program of administration.