

# Dorothea Dix

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Dorothea Lynde Dix (1802-1887) was an author, teacher and reformer. Her efforts on behalf of the mentally ill and prisoners helped create dozens of new institutions across the United States and in Europe and changed people's perceptions of these populations. Charged during the American Civil War with the administration of military hospitals, Dix also established a reputation as an advocate for the work of female nurses. Her own troubled family background and impoverished youth served as a galvanizing force throughout her career, although she remained silent on her own biographical details for most of her long, productive life.

## DOROTHEA DIX'S EARLY LIFE

Dorothea Dix was born in Hampden, Maine, in 1802. Her father Joseph was an itinerant Methodist preacher who was frequently away from home, and her mother suffered from debilitating bouts of depression. The oldest of three children, Dorothea ran her household and cared for her family members from a very young age. Joseph Dix, though a strict and volatile man prone to alcoholism and depression, taught his daughter to read and write, fostering Dorothea's lifelong love of books and learning. Still, Dorothea's early years were difficult, unpredictable and lonely.

***Did You Know?*** Louisa May Alcott was a nurse under Dorothea Dix during the Civil War. Alcott recalled that Dix was respected but not particularly well liked by her nurses, who tended to "steer clear" of her. Alcott wrote of her experiences in "Hospital Sketches," years before achieving fame with the classic "Little Women."

At 12 Dorothea moved to Boston, where her wealthy grandmother took her in and encouraged her interest in education. Dix would eventually establish a series of schools in Boston and Worcester, designing her own curriculum and administering classrooms as a teenager and young woman. In the 1820s Dix's poor health made her teaching increasingly sporadic, forcing her to take frequent breaks from her career. She began to write, and her books-filled with the simple dictums and morals that were thought to edify young minds-sold briskly. By 1836, persistent health problems caused Dix to

close her latest school for good.

### **DORATHEA DIX: THE ASYLUM MOVEMENT**

That same year Dix traveled in England with friends, returning home months later with an interest in new approaches to the treatment of the insane. She took a job teaching inmates in an East Cambridge prison, where conditions were so abysmal and the treatment of prisoners so inhumane that she began agitating at once for their improvement.

Prisons at the time were unregulated and unhygienic, with violent criminals housed side by side with the mentally ill. Inmates were often subject to the whims and brutalities of their jailers. Dix visited every public and private facility she could access, documenting the conditions she found with unflinching honesty. She then presented her findings to the legislature of Massachusetts, demanding that officials take action toward reform. Her reports-filled with dramatic accounts of prisoners flogged, starved, chained, physically and sexually abused by their keepers, and left naked and without heat or sanitation-shocked her audience and galvanized a movement to improve conditions for the imprisoned and insane.

As a result of Dix's efforts, funds were set aside for the expansion of the state mental hospital in Worcester. Dix went on to accomplish similar goals in Rhode Island and New York, eventually crossing the country and expanding her work into Europe and beyond.

### **DOROTHEA DIX: THE CIVIL WAR**

Dix volunteered her services one week after the Civil War (1861-1865) began. Shortly after her arrival in Washington in April 1861, she was appointed to organize and outfit the Union Army hospitals and to oversee the vast nursing staff that the war would require. As superintendent of women nurses, she was the first woman to serve in such a high capacity in a federally appointed role.

With supplies pouring in from voluntary societies across the north, Dix's administrative skills were sorely needed to manage the flow of bandages and clothing as the war wore on. Still, Dix often clashed with army officials and was widely feared and disliked by her volunteer female nurses. After months of hard work and exhaustion, she was eventually ousted from her position, stripped of authority by the fall of 1863 and sent home.

### **DOROTHEA DIX'S LATER LIFE**

After the war, Dix returned to her work as a social reformer. She traveled extensively in Europe, evidently disenchanted with her experience during the war, and continued to write and offer guidance to what was now a widespread movement to reform the treatment of the mentally ill. Old hospitals were redesigned and rededicated according to her ideals, and new hospitals were founded in accordance with the principles she espoused. After a long life as an author, advocate and agitator, Dorothea Dix died in 1887 at the age of 85 in a New Jersey hospital that had been established in her honor. She is buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

# Jane Addams

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Settlement house founder and peace activist Jane Addams (1860-1935) was one of the most distinguished of the first generation of college-educated women, rejecting marriage and motherhood in favor of a lifetime commitment to the poor and social reform. Inspired by English reformers who intentionally resided in lower-class slums, Addams, along with a college friend, Ellen Starr, moved in 1889 into an old mansion in an immigrant neighborhood of Chicago. Hull-House, which remained Addams's home for the rest of her life and became the center of an experiment in philanthropy, political action, and social science research, was a model for settlement work among the poor.

Addams responded to the needs of the community by establishing a nursery, dispensary, kindergarten, playground, gymnasium, and cooperative housing for young working women. As an experiment in group living, Hull-House attracted male and female reformers dedicated to social service. Addams always insisted that she learned as much from the neighborhood's residents as she taught them.

Having quickly found that the needs of the neighborhood could not be met unless city and state laws were reformed, Addams challenged both boss rule in the immigrant neighborhood of Hull-House and indifference to the needs of the poor in the state legislature. She and other Hull-House residents sponsored legislation to abolish child labor, establish juvenile courts, limit the hours of working women, recognize labor unions, make school attendance compulsory, and ensure safe working conditions in factories. The Progressive party adopted many of these reforms as part of its platform in 1912. At the party's national convention, Addams seconded the nomination of Theodore Roosevelt for president and campaigned actively on his behalf. She advocated woman's suffrage because she believed that women's votes would provide the margin necessary to pass social legislation she favored.

Addams publicized Hull-House and the causes she believed in by lecturing and writing. In her autobiography, *20 Years at Hull-House* (1910), she argued that society should both respect the values

and traditions of immigrants and help the newcomers adjust to American institutions. A new social ethic was needed, she said, to stem social conflict and address the problems of urban life and industrial capitalism. Although tolerant of other ideas and social philosophies, Addams believed in Christian morality and the virtue of learning by doing.

Because Addams was convinced that war sapped the reform impulse, encouraged political repression, and benefited only munition makers, she opposed World War I. She unsuccessfully tried to persuade President Woodrow Wilson to call a conference to mediate a negotiated end to hostilities. During the war she spoke throughout the country in favor of increased food production to aid the starving in Europe. After the armistice she helped found the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, serving as president from 1919 until her death in 1935. Vilified during World War I for her opposition to American involvement, Addams a decade later had become a national heroine and Chicago's leading citizen. In 1931, her long involvement in international efforts to end war was recognized when she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Allen F. Davis, *American Heroine: The Life and Legend of Jane Addams* (1973); Daniel Levine, *Jane Addams and the Liberal Tradition* (1973).

Elizabeth H. Pleck

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Use the article "Dorothea Dix" to answer questions 1 to 2.**

1. Read these sentences from the text:

"Prisons at the time were unregulated and unhygienic, with violent criminals housed side by side with the mentally ill. Inmates were often subject to the whims and brutalities of their jailers. Dix visited every public and private facility she could access, documenting the conditions she found with unflinching honesty. She then presented her findings to the legislature of Massachusetts demanding that officials take action toward reform."

What were funds set aside for as a result of Dix's efforts?

2. Explain how Dorothea Dix helped improve the treatment of the mentally ill. Support your answer with evidence from the text.

**Use the article "Jane Addams" to answer questions 3 to 4.**

3. Read this sentence from the text:

"Having quickly found that the needs of the neighborhood could not be met unless city and state laws were reformed, Addams challenged both boss rule in the immigrant neighborhood of Hull-House and indifference to the needs of the poor in the state legislature."

What legislation did Addams and other Hull-House residents sponsor?

4. Explain how Jane Addams helped improve the treatment of the poor. Support your answer with evidence from the text.

**Use the articles "Dorothea Dix" and "Jane Addams" to answer questions 5 to 6**

5. Compare the work of Dorothea Dix on behalf of the mentally ill with the work of Jane Addams on behalf of the poor.

6. Jane Addams (1860-1935) was twenty-seven years old when Dorothea Dix (1802-1887) died. What might Addams have thought about Dix's work to improve the treatment of the mentally ill? Support your answer with evidence from both texts.