

DOROTHEA LYNDE DIX

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BASIC BIOGRAPHY

Dorothea Lynde Dix (1802–1887) was born in Hampden, Maine, to a poor family. At age 12 she went to live with her grandmother in Boston. When she was only 14, Dix founded a school in Worcester, Massachusetts. After a 20-year career as a teacher and writer, in 1841 Dix visited a jail in East Cambridge, Massachusetts, and was appalled by the conditions. Many of the prisoners were mentally ill, and they were treated terribly by being ill-fed and abused. Dix took it upon herself to report these conditions to the Massachusetts Legislature in 1843, documenting the poor conditions faced by hundreds of mentally ill men and women. Her action led to the successful passage of a bill to reform the way the state treated prisoners and people with mental illness. Dix canvassed the country working for prison reform and improved conditions for the mentally ill. Eventually her crusade became international. She even lobbied the pope in person about conditions in Italy. During the Civil War Dix served without pay as superintendent of nurses for the Union Army in the U.S. Sanitary Commission. She died on July 17, 1887, in a Trenton, New Jersey, hospital that she had founded.

KEY EVENTS

Memorial, To The Legislature of Massachusetts (1843), Massachusetts Legislature appropriates money to reform and expand a hospital for the insane in Worcester (1845), Bill for the Benefit of the Indigent Insane (1854), Civil War

KEY PEOPLE

Franklin Pierce, Abraham Lincoln, Clara Barton, Samuel Gridley Howe

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Second Great Awakening was a religious revival movement that swept across the country in the early nineteenth century. New religions and new ways of thinking about religion led to the rise of various reform movements. Reformers believed that if people could improve their souls, then they could also improve their society. Many of the leading revivalists and clergymen became leaders and advocates for a variety of reform movements including temperance, abolition, women's rights, and prison reform. This document is an excerpt of what was compiled by Dorothea Dix and presented to the Massachusetts State Legislature in 1843.

FUN FACT

The Bangor Mental Health Institute was renamed the Dorothea Dix Psychiatric Center in her honor in 2005. Dix grew up



Dorothea Lynde Dix, Library of Congress (2004671913), <https://www.loc.gov/item/2004671913/>

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

- Make one copy of *Memorial, To The Massachusetts Legislature* for each pair of students.
- Divide students into pairs.
- Distribute one copy of *Memorial, To The Massachusetts Legislature* to each pair of students.
- Ask students to read the document and answer the prompt questions together.

LEARNING ACTIVITY

- Ask each student, *What one issue today would you be willing to ask the state legislature to pass a law to help with (like Dorothea Dix did) and why?*
- Discuss answers with partner, and be ready to share with the class.

Teacher Tip: Depending on the grade level, students may find it helpful to first brainstorm some of the issues or problems our society faces today in order to have a bank from which to choose.



St. Elizabeths was a hospital founded by Dix. This building housed offices for hospital administrators and wards for patients, 1900, National Archives and Records Administration / National Building Museum, <https://www.nbm.org/national-building-museum-present-architecture-asylum/>

nearby in Hampden, Maine. In 1843, there were 13 mental hospitals in the country; by 1880 there were 123, and Dorothea Dix played a direct role in founding 32 of them. Learn more at <http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/DDPC/> and <https://www.massmoments.org/moment-details/dorothea-dix-begins-her-crusade.html>.

LOCAL CONNECTION

You can visit the grave of Dorothea Dix at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. To learn more, go to <http://mountauburn.org/dorothea-dix-1802-1887/>. You can visit the Dorothea Dix Exhibit at the Museum of Disability History in Buffalo, New York. To learn more, go to <http://museumofdisability.org/information/about-us/>.

LEARN MORE

PRIMARY SOURCES

Correspondence, Dorothea Lynde Dix to Abraham Lincoln, June 17, 1861
Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress
<https://www.loc.gov/item/mal1032100/>

Dorothea Dix Correspondence
Menninger Historic Psychiatry Collection,
Kansas Historical Society (223255)
<http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/223255>

Dorothea Lynde Dix Papers
Houghton Library, Harvard Library, Harvard University

Remarks on Prisons and Prison Discipline in the United States, 1845
HathiTrust Digital Library
<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/003457033>

SECONDARY SOURCES

Chai Woodham, "Eastern State Penitentiary: A Prison with a Past," September 30, 2008
Smithsonian
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/eastern-state-penitentiary-a-prison-with-a-past-14274660/>

Dorothea Dix
National Women's History Museum
<https://www.nwhm.org/education-resources/biographies/dorothea-dix>

Dorothea Dix Begins Her Crusade
MassMoments, Massachusetts Humanities Council
<https://www.massmoments.org/moment-details/dorothea-dix-begins-her-crusade.html>

Parallels in Time: A History of Developmental Disabilities, 2017
Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities
<http://mn.gov/mnddc/parallels/four/4b/1.html>

MEMORIAL, TO THE LEGISLATURE OF MASSACHUSETTS (EXCERPT)

Note: In 1843, Dorothea Dix delivered a petition to the Massachusetts Legislature describing what she had witnessed at various asylums for the mentally ill in her travels around the state.

“If I inflict pain upon you, and move you to horror, it is to acquaint you with the sufferings which you have the power to alleviate, and make you hasten to the relief of the victims of legalized barbarity..”

LINCOLN (MASSACHUSETTS). A woman in a cage.

MEDFORD. One mentally ill person chained, and one in a closed stall for seventeen years.

PEPPERELL. One often doubly chained hand and foot; another violent; several peaceable now.

GRANVILLE. One often closely confined; now losing the use of his limbs from want of exercise.

CHARLEMONT. One man caged.

SAVOY. One man caged.

LENOX. Two in the jail, against whose unfit condition there the jailer protests.

DEDHAM. The insane disadvantageously placed in the jail. In the [charity ward], two females in stalls, situated in the main building; lie in wooden bunks filled with straw: always shut up. One of these subjects is supposed curable. The overseers of the poor have declined giving her a trial at the hospital, as I was informed, on account of expense.”

Memorial, To The Legislature of Massachusetts (excerpt), U.S. National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1470564/>

Respond to each prompt or question below based on the document.

1. What questions do you have? Write down three questions that come to mind after reading this document.
2. How would you describe the treatment of the mentally ill as witnessed by Dorothea Dix?
3. What is the point of view of Dorothea Dix? Does she think the mentally ill are being treated appropriately? How do you know?
4. Why do you think the mentally ill were treated this way?
5. Are the mentally ill treated differently today? Why or why not?