Dorothea Lynde Dix was an American activist on behalf of the mentally ill who established the first state mental hospitals in the United States. Dix was born in Hampden, Maine, and grew up in parts of Maine and Massachusetts until the age of 12, when she moved to Boston to live with her grandmother. Her father, Joseph Dix, came from a wealthy family, but Joseph chose not to follow a path that would ensure him wealth or even financial security. Soon after Dorothea was born, Joseph became a traveling Methodist minister. He was paid very little for his work, and the family did not have a stable home. Dorothea's mother, Mary Bigelow, a housewife, accepted and supported Joseph's decision to become a minister. Dorothea herself, who was an only child until she was 10 years old, experienced her parents, especially her father, as self-centered and detached, highly emotional, and sometimes critical and punitive. Furthermore, after Joseph's father was murdered when Dorothea was seven, Joseph began to drink heavily. Dorothea likely suffered physical abuse in the form of beatings, in addition to emotional abuse (Gollaher, 1995).

When Dorothea was 12, she ran away from home, moving to Boston to live with her grandmother, Joseph's mother, Dorothy. Dorothy cared for Dorothea but was a strong disciplinarian and lacking in warmth. Dorothea was unhappy there and a year later moved in with relatives, a household that included Dorothy's niece Sarah Fiske. In this household Dorothea experienced warmth, stability, and intellectual and social stimulation. In her later teenage years and her twenties, she experimented with traditional women's occupations, teaching, working as a governess, and writing, but none of these choices made her happy. In her mid-thirties, she suffered a breakdown and moved to England, hoping to find a remedy for her unhappiness. She met the Rathbones, social reformers and Quakers, and lived with them for a year. The Rathbones and others whom Dorothea met cared about an issue that soon sparked a passion in Dix: care of the mentally ill.

In 1840, Dix moved back to the United States with the goal of reforming the treatment of the mentally ill based on models that she had observed in England. In her home state, Massachusetts, she conducted an investigation of treatment of the poor mentally ill. She found that if a mentally ill person or her family had no funds for treatment, her care depended on donations from citizens. This led to widespread underfunding for treatment and abuses of the mentally ill, for instance, being held in small cages without regular food or hygiene, and sometimes beatings. For the next 40 years, from the 1840s through the 1880s, until she died, Dix worked to improve conditions for the mentally ill throughout the United States. Dix worked in a systematic fashion to raise consciousness and effect change. She proceeded state by state, starting with Massachusetts, collecting data about the mistreatment of the mentally ill, seeking support from the public and from politicians, and testifying before state legislatures; she did such testimony in at least 12 states (Lightner, 1999). Dix's testimony led to improvements in many facilities and the establishment of 40 public mental hospitals in the United States and Europe (Hothersall, 2004).

During the Civil War, Dix began her second career. She was appointed as superintendent of army nurses. Although she did her job responsibly as always, by all accounts, she was not as effective in this position as she was as a lobbyist and activist for the mentally ill. She was not hesitant to have open conflicts with doctors, and she did not have the passion for soldiers that she had for the mentally ill.

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/dix_dorothea_1802_1887
In 1881, Dix moved into a suite in the New Jersey State Hospital that the state legislature had designated for her, to live there until her death. Dix had never married or had children, but she maintained several lifelong friendships. By this point Dix was an invalid, and she died in the hospital in 1887.

Further Readings


References:


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