Their Sisters' Keepers

Women's Prison Reform in America, 1830–1930

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Chapter 1

The Problem of the Woman Prisoner, 1820–70

In 1819 the male managers of the New York Society for the Prevention of Pauperism described the women's quarters at the Bellevue Penitentiary as "one great school of vice and desperation," replete with "prostitutes, vagrants, lunatics, thieves, and those of a less heinous character." What shocked them as much as the indiscriminate mixing of "every kind of female convict" was the lack of attention paid to these outcasts by the more fortunate of their sex:

> Why this melancholy spectacle of female wretchedness has claimed no more attention, and excited no more sympathy, in a city like ours, where scenes of exalted benevolence and acts of religious devotion are continually displayed, we cannot say. Why no female messengers have entered this gloomy abode of guilt and despair, like angels of mercy, and seraphs of peace and consolation, is a matter of deep reflection and regret.

After citing the example of British reformer Elizabeth Fry, the managers expressed their hopes that a similar "benevolent spirit will take root in our own country."[1]

This plea for "female messengers" rested on two assumptions that would eventually provide a foundation for American women's prison reform: first, that women constituted a special category of prisoners, and second, that women more than men had a responsibility to come to their aid. In 1819 these ideas were not yet widely shared and the angels invoked by the managers did not materialize. But soon three historical preconditions for a movement to aid women prisoners occurred. First, most northern states adopted the prison as a primary means of punishing and reducing criminal activity. Second, a small but significant number of women became inmates of these prisons, especially after 1840. Finally, middle-class American women, motivated by both religious benevolence and their growing consciousness as a sex, became active in reform movements that brought them into contact with their imprisoned sisters. To understand why reformers would view

women as a special group of prisoners in need of their care requires an examination of woman's place in nineteenth-century prisons.

The Use of the Prison

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, Americans engaged in the restructuring of their economic, political, and social institutions. Commerce and later industry gradually replaced agriculture as the base of the economy. National political parties superseded local deference politics. Public educational institutions supplemented familial and religious training. At the same time, new legal and penal systems, partly adapted from European models, reorganized criminal justice and punishment.

Systems of criminal justice in Europe and the colonies had begun to change rapidly during the period of the American and French revolutions. Formerly, capital punishment had predominated as the ultimate deterrent to crimes ranging from murder to adultery. Lesser punishments were still severe, corporal, and usually executed in public. In the American colonies, for instance, both men and women who broke the law were publicly hanged, whipped, ducked, or placed in stocks or pillories, thus adding humiliation to their physical discomfort. Local jails served mainly to detain those awaiting trial or punishment.[2] In the late eighteenth century, Enlightenment thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic began to reject the widespread use of capital punishment. They argued that carefully designed criminal codes provided a more rational and humane deterrent to crime. Soon after criminal law reform began, however, the concept of prison reform seized the imaginations of many Americans.[3]

The term "prison reform" has come to refer to efforts to improve prison conditions, but it has a more basic meaning as well: the use of prisons to re-form, rather than merely to detain, criminals. Advocates of prison reform in the early nineteenth century favored the establishment of prisons which, through their influence on prisoners' behavior, would encourage repentance. The penitentiary, they believed, best combined the goals of punishing criminals and re-forming their characters so that they would not break the law again. The penitentiary ideal consisted of extreme isolation of criminals from society, extensive supervision over their daily lives, and compulsory productive labor.

Although it originated in eighteenth-century England and France,

the penitentiary had its most enthusiastic reception in the United States. After 1815 dozens of American states, counties, and municipalities constructed penitentiarylike institutions. American advocates of prison reform, men like Louis Dwight, Matthew Carey, and John Griscom, elaborated the penitentiary ideal into two competing models. One, the Pennsylvania system, used by Quakers in Philadelphia since the turn of the century, isolated each prisoner in a separate cell and required total silence, both day and night. Left alone, except when the Bible was read to him, the prisoner might repent his crimes and even achieve religious conversion. The alternative Auburn plan, named for the congregate-style prison that opened in Auburn, New York, in 1817, introduced a variation of the silent system. After 1825 Auburn's inmates, though isolated in separate cells at night, worked together during the day in silence under an elaborate system of regimentation and surveillance which included the lockstep, striped uniforms, and extensive corporal punishment. Less concerned with spiritual redemption, the Auburn system attempted to remold inmates through "prison discipline."[4]

Historians have speculated widely about the rise of the penitentiary, its appeal to nineteenth-century Europeans and Americans, and its effect on both prisoners and the society as a whole. One set of scholars has debated the motivations of the middle- to upper-class men who founded American institutions for the "deviant and dependent." Gerald Grob has emphasized the humanitarian impulses of the institutional founders, while David Rothman has insisted that the reformers were responding to fears of social disorder and acting from their need for social control.[5] Other writers have assessed the penitentiary within the context of the nineteenth-century capitalist political economy. As the wage-labor system enlarged the dependent, unproductive classes, Michael Katz has explained, transients and criminals had to be retrained as productive laborers. The factorylike penal institutions served this purpose.[6] Transcending questions of individual motivation and economic function, French historian Michel Foucault has approached the penitentiary as an expression of the "political anatomy." According to Foucault, the distinguishing feature of the penitentiary—surveillance, or discipline—reproduced the power mechanism of the larger social body, the "disciplinary society" of the nineteenth century.[7]

Whether the isolation and regimentation of the penitentiary was intended to convert, control, or retrain prisoners, the institution

ultimately failed to achieve its founders' goals. Most writers agree that prisons, like other nineteenth-century asylums, deteriorated rapidly into purely custodial institutions. They then provided a convenient storage system for individuals who were no longer defined as members of the body politic.

This approach meshed well with the new perception of criminals. No longer seen as individual sinners who remained integral members of the community, those who committed crimes now acquired new identities as members of a separate criminal subculture. The "dangerous class" of anonymous vagrants, thieves, and prostitutes who were increasingly noticed on European and American city streets after 1815 were seen as a threat to property and public order.[8] Since the traditional community sanctions of public humiliation, excommunication, or banishment were ineffective in a mobile, heterogeneous urban society, new forms of control evolved that included professional police forces and prison systems. Arrest and incarceration helped to seal the identities of criminals and segregate them further from the society.

Although historians of prison reform have concentrated largely on male criminals and reformers, women also entered the new penal institutions as inmates and eventually as keepers. Some European reformers expected women to serve in the penitentiary,[9] but Americans rarely mentioned female prisoners as a special group. In fact, very few women served in the earliest American prisons, and women were not at first considered a significant part of America's dangerous classes.

The initial infrequency of women's incarceration can be explained by their different historical relationship to institutions of social control. As several historians have noted, imprisonment developed simultaneously with the growth of "republicanism," the extension of political liberties and economic rights to men.[10] The punishment for abusing these privileges was the denial of political and economic liberties through imprisonment. Women, however, had fewer liberties to abuse. Because their place in the republican society remained in the home, they had less opportunity to commit crimes. More importantly, women remained under the traditional controls of family and church longer than did men. Because women's behavior was more closely regulated by these private institutions, they were less likely to become the subjects of new public agencies of punishment, at least for the reasons that men were. Only after certain categories of female crime emerged within a

sexual ideology of female purity were more women punished in jails and prisons.

Although the fragmentary evidence left by prison reformers and state officials does not reveal how often women committed crimes, it does show the limited use of imprisonment for women up to 1840 and the types of crimes for which women were convicted. In four state penitentiaries observed by Gustave de Beaumont and Alexis de Tocqueville in 1831, an average of only one in twelve prisoners was female, ranging from one in nineteen in New York to one in six in Maryland.[11] In 1850 women constituted only 3.6 percent of the total inmates in thirty-four state and county prisons. New York's penitentiaries received the highest proportion of women, 5.6 percent; the Massachusetts state prison, on the other hand, held no women because women convicts were sentenced to local institutions. In 1850 women represented 19.5 percent of the inmates of the Massachusetts county jails and houses of correction.[12]

The small number of women in state prisons as opposed to local jails was due in part to the different types of crimes for which men and women were convicted. Of the three major categories of crimes—against person, property, and public order—only the last included a significant number of women. In New York state, for instance, men's convictions outnumbered women's by fifteen to one in the Courts of Record, which tried person and property crimes. In the Courts of Special Session, however, which tried drunkenness, vagrancy, streetwalking, and petty larceny, the ratio of male to female convictions narrowed to five to one for county courts and four to one for city courts[13] (see table 1). When convicted for murder, manslaughter, arson, or burglary, women did serve in penitentiaries. The most frequent women's crimes, however—the petty street crimes and those governed by moral and sexual codes—usually led to jail terms.

American officials and foreign observers commented on the small number of women convicted of "serious" crimes in the United States. New York Secretary of State John Dix noted in 1838 that while in England the ratio of male to female criminals was five to one, in New York it was sixteen to one, a comparison he found "very highly in favor of the morals of the female sex in the State." Dix also cited Belgian criminologist Adolphe Quetelet's theory that the strict sexual division of labor in America, which kept women closer to the home than in Europe, provided fewer

opportunities for female crime.[14] Another New York secretary of state elaborated on the lower incidence of female crime when he reported in 1842 that women accounted for only 1/114th of the state's criminal convictions, even though they constituted almost half of the population. "This is a very remarkable disproportion," Secretary Samuel Young noted, "which may be accounted for partly by the reluctance to prosecute females, partly by their domestic life and habits, leaving them less exposed to temptation, and partly by the unavoidable inference that they are superior to men in moral honesty."[15]

Whatever protection from temptation or prosecution women enjoyed soon proved to be temporary, for the criminal statistics began to reveal a startling trend. New York and Massachusetts records show that after 1840 women joined the ranks of the criminal class in America, though in smaller numbers and for different crimes than men. In New York courts, convictions of women increased between 1847 and 1860 at a much higher rate than that of men's convictions (appendix A). Consequently, the ratio of male to female crime fell from over six to one in 1840 to under two to one in 1860 (table 1). The ratio gradually rose at the end of the century

TABLE 1. New York Sex-Crime Ratios, 1833–92 (Males: 1 Female)

	Courts of Record	Courts of Special Sessions		Sum of All Criminal Courts
		County	*City*	
1833–37	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	6.02
1838–42	14.14	6.40	4.01	6.40
1843–47	13.89	5.79	3.83	5.90
1848–52	17.80	6.76	3.92	3.46
1853–57	14.85	4.50	1.70	2.01
1858–62	9.41	3.04	1.69	1.94
1863–67	11.62	4.14	1.56	2.32
1868–72	15.71	4.97	1.90	2.89
1873–77	16.78	4.54	2.27	2.99
1878–82	20.00	5.88	2.51	3.27
1883–87	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	3.85
1888–92	21.00	8.06	0.27	4.21
Average	15.52	5.40	2.37	3.77

Source: New York Secretary of State, *Convictions for Criminal Offenses, 1830–1899.*

Note: The figures from which the ratios are derived represent male convictions per 100,000 adult males/female convictions per 100,000 adult females.

but it never returned to the earlier extreme disparity. Imprisonment rates in Massachusetts revealed a similar trend. Shortly after 1840 the incidence of incarceration rose for both sexes, but after 1860 the female rate continued to climb despite a drop in the total rate. The ratio of all women committed to Massachusetts jails (per 100,000 women in the state) increased from under 300 in the 1840s to over 400 in the 1860s. The proportion of women among the total commitments to jails and houses of correction rose in Massachusetts from 20 percent in 1842 to a high of 37.2 percent in 1864.[16]

The most dramatic increase in women's criminal convictions and imprisonments occurred during the 1860s. In New York City, Buffalo, Boston, and Detroit, female crime rates soared during the Civil War years. During this period the female populations of Massachusetts and New York prisons increased by a third while the number of male prisoners declined by almost half. As the warden of the Eastern State Penitentiary in Pennsylvania noted, "while the number of male prisoners has been diminished by the civil war now raging, the number of female prisoners has been increased."[17]

In addition to the relative shift attributable to men's absence during wartime, the 1860s witnessed an independent rise in criminal convictions of women. The traditional offenses against public order accounted for part of this trend, with a probable increase in the visibility of prostitution during the war as one factor. But contemporary observers expressed more alarm over the frequency of women's serious crimes. In New York the number of women convicted for crimes against the person more than tripled between the 1850s and 1860s, although comparable male convictions declined. Women's conviction rates for crimes against property also rose during the 1860s—ten times as fast as men's.[18] Some commentators blamed women's increasing practice of abortion for the rise in crimes against the person, although stricter statutes and enforcement may have been equally responsible.[19]

The conviction and imprisonment of women resulted from many of the social changes that fostered a general increase in European and American crime rates between 1815 and 1860. Movement from rural to urban areas, or across the Atlantic, as well as the gradual transformation from a family to a market economy, disrupted the lives of migrant, immigrant, and working-class men and women. A growing number of individuals lived outside of the traditional institutions of church, family, and community. Many led economically marginal and geographically mobile lives.

Especially in the rapidly growing cities, they came into conflict with new agents of social control, such as urban police forces and moral reformers. Not serious crimes against person or property, but unlawful personal behavior—drunkenness, idle and disorderly conduct, and vagrancy—brought the majority of criminals of both sexes into courts and prisons.

Women's crimes, however, had additional economic and sexual origins. The limited opportunities for wage earning and the lower salaries paid working women placed them in the most marginal economic position in the society. Prostitution provided a temporary source of income for poor women throughout the century. At times of stress, as when the Civil War removed male wage earners from many families, women may have had greater need to resort to crimes, whether theft or prostitution.[20] Equally important, though, was the sexual definition of women's offenses. A subcategory of public order offenses, sometimes called crimes against chastity or decency, applied almost exclusively to women. Although laws against sexual misconduct had regulated both women and men in colonial America, a stricter code of female morality in the nineteenth century led to the overrepresentation of women in this category of crimes. A wide range of behavior, including lewd and lascivious carriage, stubbornness, idle and disorderly conduct, drunkenness, and vagrancy, as well as fornication and adultery, brought women, more often than men, into conflict with law enforcers.

Arrest, conviction, or imprisonment for offenses against chastity, decency, or public order carried a unique penalty for the nineteenth-century female criminal—the label of "fallen woman." In the past a woman convicted of even a sexual offense might repent, accept her punishment, and return to society.[21] Now, however, a new moral standard helped create a permanent category of female criminals. No longer the perpetrator of a single immoral act, those who crossed the boundary of chastity gained a lifetime identity as a "fallen woman."

A nineteenth-century fallen woman experienced a greater stigma than did contemporary male criminals or than had women criminals in the past. Many women and men refused to associate with or employ even a suspected fallen woman. Thus outcast, the first offender often entered a vicious cycle which led her directly into the criminal class, often as a prostitute, as case histories illustrate. A respectable young widow left penniless, for example, became the mistress of a man who later abandoned her. "The poor woman

had sinned away her right to return to her friends at home—men despised her—*decent* women here could not speak to her! She had recourse to the Lethe of our Christian age, and after a series of miseries was found . . . in the Tombs."[22]

The penitentiary had not been designed with the fallen woman in mind. Yet female inmates who carried this special stigma did enter state and local penal institutions in antebellum America. Their increasing numbers and their special status posed unique problems for both prisons and reformers.

The Treatment of the Fallen Woman

The women who served in penal institutions between 1820 and 1870 were not subject to the prison reform experienced by male inmates. Officials employed isolation, silence, and hard labor to rehabilitate male prisoners. The lack of accommodations for female inmates made isolation and silence impossible for them, and productive labor was not considered an important part of their routine. The neglect of female prisoners, however, was rarely benevolent. Rather, a pattern of overcrowding, harsh treatment, and sexual abuse recurred throughout prison histories.

The Auburn, New York, penitentiary combined most of these features. In the 1820s the prison had no separate cells designated for the twenty to thirty women who served there at any one time, some of them for sentences of up to fourteen years. Lodged together, unattended, in a one room attic, the windows sealed to prevent communication with men, the female prisoners were overcrowded, immobilized, and neglected.[23] Although they escaped the isolation and regimentation imposed on male inmates, their quarters, as a member of the Board of Inspection reported in 1832, presented "a specimen of the most disgusting and appalling features of the old system of prison management at the worst period of its history."[24]

In 1826, despite the attempt to keep women segregated, prisoner Rachel Welch became pregnant while serving a punishment sentence in a solitary cell. As a result of a flogging by a prison officer, Welch died after childbirth. A grand jury investigating the flogging seemed unconcerned about her pregnancy or the condition of other women at Auburn. The public scandal, however, may have influenced the passage of a law in 1828 requiring county prisons to separate male and female inmates. In 1832 Auburn hired a matron for the women's quarters.[25]

Neither public attention nor the presence of a female guard alleviated the plight of Auburn's women. Both overcrowding and disinterest in women's rehabilitation continued to bring harsh treatment. As English visitor Harriet Martineau observed after touring Auburn in 1838:

> The arrangements for the women were extremely bad.... There was an engine in sight which made me doubt the evidence of my own eyes: stocks, of a terrible construction; a chair, with a fastening for the head and all the limbs.... The [warden] liked it no better than we. He pleaded that it was the only means of keeping his refractory prisoners quiet with only one room to put them in.[26]

Little wonder that the prison chaplain once proclaimed of Auburn: "To be a male convict in this prison would be quite tolerable; but to be a female convict for any protracted period, would be worse than death."[27]

In jails, prisons, and penitentiaries established throughout the East and Midwest, the difficulty of housing and supervising women prisoners in institutions that had not been designed for them produced wretched conditions. In 1838 the New York City Tombs had only forty-two cells to hold up to seventy women inmates, while in the Albany, New York, jail, "fifteen females were in one room with bed, so far as they had beds, on the floor."[28] In Michigan in the 1850s, ten women—three of them pregnant—were confined in two small, poorly ventilated rooms, where only male keepers entered. An 1859 newspaper account described an overcrowded Michigan prison ward as "hot and putrid." The inmates, it reported, "dwell as in Pandemonium."[29] Although almost every account of prisons and jails mention illegitimate births by female prisoners,[30] in one state, Indiana, the sexual exploitation of inmates was overt and systematic. A corrupt administration at the Indiana state prison operated a prostitution service for male guards, using the forced labor of female prisoners.[31] The Illinois state penitentiary opened a separate women's building during the 1860s, but in 1870 the twenty-two female inmates were removed to the fifth floor of the warden's house. They remained in this so-called Chicken Coop for the rest of their sentences, sitting all day in rows of chairs, mending the male prisoners' stockings. A warden later described their annual outing: "They were allowed a holiday stroll in the yard—to the accompaniment of the whistles and cries from the locked-in and eagerly watching male prisoners."[32]

Although the women's quarters of nineteenth-century penal institutions contrasted markedly with prison reformers' ideals of order, discipline, and silence, only rarely did male officials address the problem of women prisoners. When they did, little came of it. In 1828 New York Governor DeWitt Clinton recommended the establishment of a separate penitentiary for women, but the legislature decided against it because the women's washing, ironing, and sewing saved the Auburn prison money.[33] Massachusetts Governor Emory Washburn in 1854 commissioned a survey of women in the county jails. Although the report revealed poor physical conditions, few matrons, and little work for inmates, it recommended only that matrons be hired under the authority of jail keepers and that women nursing infants be transferred to the poorhouse.[34] A report on whether to establish an institution "for the punishment and reform of abandoned women," made to the Connecticut legislature in 1860, resulted in the founding of a home for delinquent girls, but adult women criminals remained in mixed jails and prisons.[35]

Why did male reformers and state officials so neglect the state of women prisoners at a time when they were occupied with methods for curing or controlling men's criminality? One historian of prisons, W. David Lewis, has suggested a relationship between the sexual double standard and the treatment of women prisoners. "Especially if she had been sexually promiscuous," he wrote, "the female convict was a veritable pariah" who was viewed with "a special degree of aversion and despair." He summarized her treatment in New York prisons as "The Ordeal of the Unredeemable." Or, as a nineteenth-century prison official explained: "The opinion seems to have been entertained that the female convicts were beyond the reach of reformations, and it seems to have been regarded as a sufficient performance of the object of punishment to turn them loose within the pen of the prison and there leave them to feed upon and destroy each other."[36]

The statements of other male prison reformers support the view that the fallen woman was considered beyond hope. They suggest that the condemnation of women criminals derived in part from the pressures placed on women to maintain a morality superior to men's. Francis Lieber, for example, argued that men's crime was more "rational" than women's, for men were made for an "agitated life." Because she had denied her own pure nature, the female criminal was more depraved than her male counterpart. Therefore the fallen woman, Lieber believed, was more likely to reach the

depths of sinfulness and commit the most heinous crimes.[37] Or, as the Reverend James B. Finley, the chaplain of the Ohio state penitentiary, wrote in 1851, "No one, without experience, can tell the obduracy of the female heart when hardened and lost in sin. As woman falls from a higher point of perfection, so she sinks to a profounder depth of misery than man."[38]

Instead of sympathy for her plight, however, most men expressed outright hostility to the fallen woman and blamed her for men's crimes as well. Her defiance of the law, they reasoned, had more serious social consequences than a man's, for by removing her influence as a virtuous wife and mother she undoubtedly encouraged male criminality. Dr. Lieber pointed to "a worthless mother who poisons by her corrupt examples the souls of her children—or a slothful intemperate wife who disgusts her husband with her home" as the cause of men's crimes.[39] Another male reformer lamented: "Worse than outer darkness ensues when the light of a household has gone out in the one most essential particular . . . the pure mother's influence has no equal; for its loss there is no earthly substitute and for criminal default the world tolerates no expiation."[40]

Not only by default, but through direct assault the fallen woman disrupted society when she, like Eve, tempted men to sin. The Prison Association of New York cited an incident at the Connecticut State Prison to illustrate "the influence of licentiousness on the production of crime." A chaplain explained that although born virtuous, when "a woman had once fallen she desired to revenge herself not only on her seducer, but on all his sex." One woman whose case the association detailed had caused the "downfall" of thirty-two erstwhile innocent young men.[41] Henry Lord warned charity workers in the 1870s of the young courtesan who "goes forth to prey upon mankind" and of the "wanton women" who could make life "dangerous for your sons in their necessary walks and journeys."[42]

Although not all officials shared this extreme hostility toward the fallen woman, the attitudes expressed by these influential men do help explain the neglect of women in American prisons. They also raise an important question for nineteenth-century women's history: Why was the fallen woman so feared and despised? Part of the answer lies in the dominant sexual ideology of the Victorian era.

The nineteenth-century sexual system has often been described in terms of the ideology of the separate sexual spheres. White,

middle-class men and women inhabited sexually differentiated social spaces with distinct values and manners. The model of the self-made man who was adventuresome, mobile, aggressive, and competitive predominated in Jacksonian America. These men entered the public spheres of paid labor, the professions, or politics. Women, in contrast, were supposed to remain in the home where they cultivated the virtues of piety, purity, and submissiveness.[43]

Although this ideology limited women to unpaid labor in the domestic sphere, it placed a high cultural value on the tasks they performed there. Because women reared children, managed the household, and maintained spiritual and moral values, men could specialize in wage-earning tasks. As men entered the impersonal world of the marketplace, moreover, they knew they could return to the domestic sanctuary, where a pure woman waited inside to refresh them. As novelist James Fenimore Cooper explained, in order to ease, console, and correct her husband's "sordid struggles with the world," woman had to be "placed beyond their influence."[44] The idea of women's superior morality thus provided a foundation and justification for the sexual division of labor.

Interestingly enough, nineteenth-century sexual ideology began to suggest that purity came naturally to women, in contrast to men, who had to struggle to control their innate lust. Influential Victorian authorities argued that women had little or no sensual appetite and that they submitted to sexual intercourse solely for the purpose of procreation.[45] Born innocent, woman had a natural self-control which could counterbalance man's lust. Female sexual desire seemed pathological to many medical and moral authorities; unchaste behavior signalled deep depravity. According to one popular novelist, "even as woman is supremely virtuous, [she] becomes, when once fallen, the vilest of her sex."[46]

The impure woman presented a serious threat to a society that relied on women's chastity for important symbolic functions. Female purity, historian Ben Barker-Benfield has argued, upheld the "spermatic economy" by channeling men's energies away from sex and into the economically productive tasks required during this period of capital accumulation.[47] Whether or not there was a direct relationship between economic change and sexual ideals, the social changes accompanying the early phases of American capitalism did influence sexual ideology. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has characterized the concentration on sexual purity among Jacksonian male reformers as the result of a deep fear of social disorder, for which sexual pollution functioned as a central symbol. The

men who helped establish purity as a cultural ideal, she argues, were experiencing "psychosocial tensions" as their familial and economic relations were transformed by commercial and urban growth. Uncontrolled sexuality represented for them potential chaos. Women had to be pure to enforce male continence; and this emphasis on their purity gave women enormous power. The impure woman had the capacity to unleash not just male sperm, but more importantly, the social disintegration that sexuality symbolized.[48]

Within the context of this ideology of sexual purity it becomes clear why responses to the impure or fallen woman were so emotionally charged. She represented, on a basic level, a symbol of women's resistance to the ideal of purity and their misuse of the sexual power granted them. In addition, as male prison reformers pointed out, an impure woman had not only sinned, she had also removed the constraints on men's virtue—both those on the men in her family and, potentially, those on men in the streets.

Although the fallen woman lost her usefulness as a check on male behavior, she could become an example to other women of the high cost of resistance. The social stigma attached to fallen women, the belief in their total depravity, and the treatment they received in penal institutions thus helped control the behavior of all women.

By the 1840s a significant number of women served in prison, and their neglect, if not abuse, set them apart as a special category of prisoners. Nineteenth-century penitentiaries were never intended to rehabilitate women. In practice they rarely reformed criminals of either sex and probably served to confirm a prisoner's membership in the criminal class. Male reformers had several reasons for ignoring women prisoners: the small number of women in penitentiaries, the logistical and economic problems of caring for them, the disdain they felt for the fallen woman. But the question posed by New York reformers in 1819—why no female "angels of mercy" cared for women prisoners—remains to be answered.

Pure women had to surmount an ideological barrier before they reached out to female prisoners. The line that separated the pure woman from the fallen demarcated privilege on one side and degradation on the other. By not crossing that line, pure women could retain their class privilege at the expense of their outcast fallen sisters. However, these two groups of women remained separated only if pure women agreed that the boundary dividing the pure

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and the fallen, a class division, was stronger than the sexual division between women and men. Both the ideology of the separate sexual spheres and women's personal experiences over the course of the century supported a definition of women as a sexual class, an identity that contradicted and potentially weakened the purity boundary. Eventually some women would find the concept of a common womanhood stronger than the boundary of moral purity. A few would cross the line and cautiously enter the "gloomy abode" of women prisoners.

Chapter 2

"The Helping Hand": The Origins and Ideas of Women's Prison Reform, 1840–1900

Between 1840 and 1900 small groups of women, concentrated in New York, Massachusetts, and Indiana, took up the cause of women prisoners as their special mission. At first individuals merely visited penal institutions. Then, gradually, women formed associations to aid released female prisoners. In the decades after the Civil War, women prison reformers demanded greater authority over public institutions that housed women. And by the end of the century women had joined men as professionals in the growing field of charities and corrections.

In the course of their encounters with prisoners, middle-class women found that the fallen were not as depraved as they had expected. As early as the 1840s some reformers questioned the condemnation of the fallen woman. By the last quarter of the century women had elaborated a new interpretation of female crime that reversed the earlier view. One reformer's comment reveals the change in public opinion that women sought. "Much is said about the depths to which women may fall," Rhoda Coffin stated in 1885. "While we always have claimed that women are equal to men, we have never yet admitted the point that she was superior to him in ability to sin or to entangle others."[1]

The Origins of Benevolent Reform, 1820–60

Looking back over the women's prison reform movement at the end of the century, Susan Barney offered a simplistic but useful explanation of its origins: "When Elizabeth Fry, in 1815, rapped at the prison doors in England, she not only summoned the turnkey, but sounded a call to women in other lands to enter upon a most Christlike mission."[2] Elizabeth Fry did provide both a personal example and a set of theories for American women. Although the movement outgrew her voluntary, benevolent methods by the 1860s, it also fulfilled her vision of women's prison reform. Fry's

career provides a fitting introduction to the questions of why and how nineteenth-century women reached out "the helping hand" to their imprisoned sisters.

Like many of the American reformers who would follow in her path, Elizabeth Gurney Fry (1780–1845) came from a Quaker family with deep commitments to both religion and antislavery. In 1811, after marriage and a conversion experience, Fry became a minister, a position open to her because the Society of Friends believed in the spiritual equality of the sexes. Following a long tradition of prison visiting by Quaker women, Fry entered London's Newgate Gaol in 1813. There she encountered starving, drunken, partially clothed women, often accompanied in prison by their young children. Although her original mission was religious conversion through prayer, she recognized that alleviating the physical misery of prisoners was necessary for their salvation. Thus she first offered clothing and comfort, and only later, prayer.[3]

In 1816, when Fry returned to Newgate after bearing and burying several of her children, she found conditions as appalling as before. This jail, one of her biographers has written, "offered an extreme example of how badly the dominant masculine upper class could design and administer a prison."[4] Determined to improve it, Fry and her companions obtained permission to experiment with prison reform for women. They established a Ladies Association for the Improvement of the Female Prisoners at Newgate which organized workshops, Bible classes, and a system of discipline monitored by inmates. They also hired a matron and attempted to aid female prisoners after their release.

Fry's 1827 treatise, *Observations in Visiting, Superintendence and Government of Female Prisoners*, furnished the principles that would later dominate American women's prison reform. She argued that female prisoners could be reformed, elaborated on the methods for doing so, and emphasized women's responsibility to come to the aid of their fallen sisters. Combining the themes of sisterhood and female superiority, Fry wrote, "May the attention of *women* be more and more directed to these labors of love; and may the time quickly arrive, when there shall not exist, in this realm, a single public institution [where women] . . . shall not enjoy the *efficacious superintendence* of the pious and benevolent of THEIR OWN SEX!"[5]

Perhaps it was the strength with which Fry argued for women's superintendence of female inmates that brought her into disfavor with English authorities, who rescinded her reforms in 1835 for

allegedly making prison life too soft. Perhaps it was simply her loss of status following her husband's bankruptcy in the late 1820s. Biographer John Kent suggests that Fry lost influence because she had exceeded the limitations society placed on her sex.[6]

However short-lived her personal involvement, Fry's followers in England and America benefited from her experience and writings. Americans learned of Fry's work in the 1820s both from her book and from newspaper and travelers' accounts.[7] Like Fry, Quaker women in American cities, along with evangelical reformers from other denominations, were beginning to visit penal institutions to comfort or proselytize inmates.

The American women who followed in Fry's path had many individual motives for reaching out to women prisoners. As a group, however, they did share certain historical experiences as well as many social characteristics. Of thirty women active in some type of women's prison reform in America during the nineteenth century, a majority came from middle- and upper-middle-class Protestant families in the northeastern United States (see table 2). A disproportionate number belonged to liberal sects; almost a third were Quakers and many others were Unitarians. In all of these respects, the prison reformers resembled women abolitionists and feminists.[8] Indeed, some women participated in all three movements as well as a variety of other reforms, including temperance, social purity, and pacifism. Abby Hopper Gibbons, Josephine Shaw Lowell, and Elizabeth Buffum Chace, for instance, were each raised in antislavery families and each led two or three reform movements during her life.

Growing up in such families influenced young daughters' views of themselves as women. Since most of their families could afford to send them to school, many reformers had attended a Female or Friends' Academy. At school, as at home, they were exposed to the ideology of "true womanhood" which was directed especially at young women of their class. Those who attended all-female institutions or who later joined women's missionary, benevolent, or antislavery associations experienced the full implications of the separate sexual spheres. As historian Nancy Cott has shown for New England women, these educational and religious "sisterhoods" intensified both female identity and women's sense of their own mission.[9]

The work histories of these reformers suggest how they acquired further skills necessary for the type of prison reform Elizabeth Fry recommended. Although trained for domestic tasks, their

socialization as moral guardians influenced many middle-class women to seek suitable work until marriage.[10] The reformers had most frequently been occupied as teachers, and many had been engaged in church-related work as missionaries or Sunday school instructors. A few single women in this group had careers as writers, doctors, or nurses. During the Civil War many of the reformers served as nurses, aides, and administrators in field hospitals and on the home front.

Like most nineteenth-century women, the majority of the prison reformers married, gave birth to an average of four to five children, and experienced the death of one or more children.[11] Several women, including Fry, Gibbons, and Chace, returned to reform shortly after mourning, while others became active when widowed. Traditional women in many ways, only a few actively supported the women's rights movement when it emerged at midcentury. Most, however, publicly expressed their respect for women's contributions to the society and their opposition to the degradation of women in any sphere, but particularly in prisons.

Stressing only common experiences, however, provides too static and homogeneous a profile of the reformers. Women entered prison reform during different decades, during different times in their life cycles, and at different stages in the movement they were creating. From the small steps taken by a few religious women in the 1820s to the opening of the third state reformatory prison for women in the 1890s, women's prison reform changed from private, voluntary benevolence to public, professional work for women. In the process, reformers revised their ideas about fallen women and attempted to transform penal policies toward them.

American women first discovered the plight of female prisoners during a period of religious revival and social reform. The Second Great Awakening of the 1820s and 1830s popularized a new, perfectionist theology that held out the possibility of individual and social salvation. As a result, movements for the redemption of sinners, including temperance, prison reform, and moral reform, proliferated in the Jacksonian period.[12]

Although Quaker women had begun to engage in benevolent reforms in the late eighteenth century, large numbers of other Protestant women experienced religious conversion during the Awakening and joined the ranks of social reformers. Religious benevolence offered women an excellent opportunity to fulfill their tasks of moral guardianship. Many believed that through their efforts the

TABLE 2. Personal Backgrounds of Women Prison Reformers

	Nineteenth Century (n = 30)		Twentieth Century (n = 20)	
	%	n	%	n
Place of Birth				
Foreign	6.66	(2)	11.11	(2)
Northeast	76.67	(22)	50.00	(9)
Midwest	6.66	(2)	33.33	(6)
South	10.00	(3)	5.55	(1)
West		(0)		(0)
Unknown		(1)		(2)
Primary Religious Affiliation				
Quaker	32.15	(9)	9.09	(1)
Unitarian or Universalist	25.00	(7)		(0)
Methodist	10.71	(3)		(0)
Presbyterian or Congregational	10.71	(3)	9.09	(1)
Episcopal or Anglican	3.57	(1)	36.36	(4)
Other Protestant denominations	17.86	(5)	9.09	(1)
Catholic		(0)	27.27	(3)
Jewish		(0)	9.09	(1)
Unknown		(2)		(9)
Highest Educational Level				
Some education	30.00	(6)	4.76	(1)
High school or academy	40.00	(8)	33.33	(7)
College or normal school	15.00	(3)	9.52	(2)
Graduate or professional	15.00	(3)	52.38	(11)
Unknown (or none)		(10)		(0)
Prison Reform				
Private, voluntary	43.33	(13)	15.00	(3)
Public, professional	20.00	(6)	70.00	(14)
Both	36.67	(11)	15.00	(3)
Paid Work				
Some	66.67	(16)	89.47	(17)
None	33.33	(8)	10.53	(2)
Unknown		(6)		(1)
Primary Type of Paid Work				
Writer		(4)		(3)
Teacher		(11)		(4)

TABLE 2 -*Continued*

	Nineteenth Century (n = 30)		Twentieth Century (n = 20)	
	%	n	%	n
Primary Type of Paid Work (*continued*)				
Doctor or lawyer		(3)		(5)
Social work (and research)		(0)		(10)
Other		(3)		(2)
Other Reform Activity				
Civil War nurse or aide		(9)		(0)
Missionary or Sunday school		(8)		(2)
Women's rights and suffrage		(5)		(8)
Temperance		(7)		(2)
Antislavery		(7)		(0)
Antisuffrage		(3)		(0)
Social purity/social hygiene		(3)		(1)
Pacifism		(3)		(1)
Politics		(1)		(5)
Women's clubs		(1)		(5)
Settlement houses		(0)		(4)
Labor organization		(0)		(2)
Family				
Ever married	73.33	(22)	63.16	(12)
separated/divorced	3.33	(1)	31.58	(6)
Single	26.67	(7)	36.84	(7)
Age at first marriage				
median	21		22.5	
mean	25.4		24.8	
Number of children born				
median	4.5		2	
mean	4.64		2.8	
Number of children surviving				
median	3		2	
mean	2.64		2.5	
Age first widowed/ divorced				
median	49		45	
mean	42.56		44	

Note: See appendix B for individual data and biographical sources.

most hardened sinners—drunkards, adulterers, slave owners, and even prostitutes—could be saved.[13]

Like the men who earlier became "their brothers' keepers" when they proselytized the unconverted through Bible, tract, and temperance societies, middle-class women formed associations to aid the indigent or dissolute. Both the ideology of the separate spheres and women's personal experiences in various sisterhoods encouraged these reformers to aid dependents of their own sex. In the 1820s and 1830s, for instance, female urban missionaries considered widows, orphans, and homeless women to be their special charges, while the female moral reformers dedicated themselves to the unpopular task of uplifting prostitutes.[14]

Philadelphia Quakers were the first Americans to attend to imprisoned women. Inspired by Elizabeth Fry, they began to visit women inmates at the Arch Street Prison in 1823. A women's prison visiting committee later expanded Fry's work by offering "individual and systematic instruction" to female prisoners to aid their spiritual redemption. The visitors also provided a library, and sewing and writing classes. For inmates who seemed truly penitent they sought "to procure suitable situations . . . in families or institutions."[15]

In the 1840s Protestant missionaries to New York City's charitable institutions encountered female prisoners during their rounds. Phoebe Palmer, a popular evangelical preacher, and Sarah Platt Doremus, a member of the Tract and Mission societies, found the women incarcerated in the New York City Tombs most in need of their services. Palmer helped organize the Methodist Five Points Mission while Doremus helped found a house of industry for poor women, a women's hospital, a women's missionary society, and a women's old age home. During the same period, members of the New York Female Moral Reform Society tried to convert and uplift young prostitutes both within prison and after their release.[16]

These scattered efforts at individual moral regeneration took on greater urgency when, in the 1840s, women's crime became the subject of concern to the men who had recently formed the Prison Association of New York (PANY). The male reformers visited the city's penal institutions and, confronted with the "contamination of evil communication" between male and female inmates, wondered whether any reformation could take place of women confined there. In 1845 they reported that "it is a matter of great doubt whether it would not be better for an innocent female to be consigned at once to a brothel . . . [where] she would at least enjoy

the advantage of being able to fly from the approach of corruption at her pleasure."[17]

Although the men were indignant about sexual license in city prisons, their willingness, even in jest, to commit the fallen woman to a brothel reflected the popular view that she was beyond redemption. In contrast, the women whom the Prison Association asked to form a ladies' auxiliary began to question not only prison conditions, but also the underlying attitudes toward female criminals that perpetuated them. Could reform ever take place, they wondered, given the greater condemnation of the fallen woman?

The New York women who raised this question joined the auxiliary to the Prison Association, called the Female Department, in the same spirit that initially motivated Elizabeth Fry—to encourage religious feelings among female prisoners. In the course of their benevolent activities, they encountered the increasing numbers of immigrant and working women sentenced to city jails. The meeting of these pure women with those the society deemed fallen affected a number of benevolent reformers who began to reconsider the prevailing view, as the early history of the Female Department illustrates.

The leader of the Female Department of the prison association, Abby Hopper Gibbons, came from a Quaker family of very modest means. Her mother was a Quaker minister and her father, Isaac Hopper, devoted himself to abolitionism and prison reform. Abby Hopper had operated a Friends' school in Philadelphia and had taught in New York before marrying James Gibbons in 1833. She belonged to a predominantly black female antislavery society and resigned from the Society of Friends in part because it had disowned her father and husband for their abolitionism.

In 1846 Isaac Hopper encouraged his daughter to join the work of the Prison Association of New York which he had helped found. In its ladies' auxiliary Abby Hopper Gibbons met Sarah Doremus, local authors Catherine Sedgewick and Caroline Kirkland, and a number of women from prominent New York families. These women's lives conformed in many ways to the cultural ideal of true womanhood. Most were married, had large families, and were active in benevolent organizations like the Tract and Mission societies. Even the self-supporting among them maintained the ideal; for example authors Sedgewick, who was single, and Kirkland, a widow, wrote on domestic themes.[18]

The Female Department decided to open a home for discharged

women prisoners, a halfway house providing shelter, prayer, and training in order to prevent recidivism among drunken, vagrant, and immoral women. A fitting extension of the reformers' domestic sphere, the home provided a means of expanding these women's moral guardianship beyond their own families and to the fallen women whom they would receive and nurture.

The campaign for a home for discharged women prisoners had the support of one of the country's outstanding feminists, Margaret Fuller, then an editor of the New York *Tribune*. Her insights into the problems of women inmates represented a more radical approach than the New York auxiliary had yet assumed. Fuller provided one of the earliest feminist perspectives on women's crime when she introduced the theme of women's victimization by social forces.

Fuller had visited the women's department at Sing Sing prison in October 1844 when she spoke with the "so-called worst" (whom she compared favorably with the proper women in her Boston classes!). Returning to address the inmates on Christmas Day, she defended the fallen woman. According to William Channing's memoir of her talk, Fuller explained that "the conduct of some now here was such that the world said:—'Women once lost are far worse than abandoned men, and cannot be restored.' But no! It is not so! I know my sex better." The inmates, she suggested, were victims who needed help to overcome the circumstances which had led them to crime: "Born of unfortunate marriages, inheriting dangerous inclinations, neglected in childhood, with bad habits and associates, as certainly must be the case with some of you, how terrible will be the struggle when you leave this shelter!"[19]

Fuller's views reached the public in a series of articles which appeared in the *Tribune* in the spring of 1845, coinciding with the campaign for a home for discharged women prisoners. The author reported that the city almshouses and penitentiaries contained shocking sights of mothers with newborn infants, "exposed to the careless scrutiny of male visitors" and to dreary, daily routines without even the pretense of training. At the "gloomiest" institution, the penitentiary, she decried "the want of proper matrons, or any matrons, to take the care so necessary for the bodily or mental improvement or even decent conditions of the seven hundred women assembled here." Most importantly, she questioned the predominant view that these women were hopelessly fallen. The Transcendentalist and feminist was struck by "how many there are in whom the feelings of innocent childhood are not dead, who need

only good influences and steady aid to raise them from the pit of infamy into which they have fallen." Following closely the advice of Elizabeth Fry's *Observations*, she suggested that the first principles of the institution should be inmate classification and instruction, and a good sanitary system. "We trust," she wrote, "that interest on this subject will not slumber."[20]

A few months later, when the Female Department of the prison association opened its home for discharged women prisoners, Fuller published an appeal to New York citizens to support the endeavor with money and furnishings. Once again, she rejected the condemnation of fallen women. She addressed her article to "men, to atone for the wrongs inflicted by men on that 'weaker sex,' who should, they say, be soft, confiding, dependent on them for protection. [And] to women, to feel for those who have not been guarded either by social influence or inward strength from that first mistake which the opinion of the world makes irrevocable for women alone." Then, in a twist on the concept of women's greater fall, she added: "Since their danger is so great, their fall so terrible, let mercies be multiplied when there is a chance of that partial restoration which society at present permits." Fuller admonished "people of leisure" to see at first hand the sick and ruined women at Blackwell's Island penitentiary and hospital, and to recognize social responsibility for them. Her article concluded with Thomas Hood's poem, "The Bridge of Sighs," a moral tale narrating the plight of a fallen woman who, when rejected by family and society, plunged into a river. The sins of those who had refused to help her, it preached, were as great as those of the victim.[21]

Gibbons, Sedgewick, and their colleagues who operated the home for discharged prisoners had, in general, more traditional views than the feminist advocate Margaret Fuller. They also were far more actively involved in providing practical services to prisoners. Through the home they hoped to prevent the immediate rearrest of released prisoners who had no family or friends.

The Isaac Hopper Home, named after Gibbons's father, provided a refuge for inmates who would forsake smoking, drinking, and cursing in favor of the domestic pursuits of sewing, laundry, and religious study. After a month or more of residence, about half of the inmates were placed in domestic positions, ideally in homes like Catherine Sedgewick's, which offered the "favorable circumstances and kindness [which] were the means best adapted to save them from an evil life."[22]

From 1845 to 1864, the home sheltered 2,961 women, found

placements for 1,083 of them, and deemed only 480 "unworthy or without hope of being reclaimed." The case of one inmate, as told by Caroline Kirkland, expresses the attitudes that reformers often repeated about the influence of the home:

> S.C. was considered a hopeless case; but after she had been several months at the Home—too bad to be recommended to a place, yet showing occasionally such encouraging signs that we did not dare reject her—she began to improve so evidently that the records of the House speak of it as an "astonishing change." From having been very violent in her temper, she became, under the influence of kind words and good offices, docile and pleasant. The religious exercises of the Home exerted an influence over her, and the Chaplain at Blackwell's Island expressed his surprise that he had not seen her there *for more than a year*—a remarkable thing in his experience.[23]

Kind words, prayers, and a full schedule of domestic tasks transformed thousands of New York City's female prisoners into docile and pleasant women who, no longer resisting the standards of feminine behavior, would be spared the harsh penalties of prison life.

In the course of effecting these transformations, members of the Female Department adopted new attitudes toward women prisoners. In contrast to most prison officials and male reformers, who condemned the fallen woman as a social outcast, these women insisted on removing the stigma that separated them from their fallen sisters. As one of their reports explained, "we would approach the fallen woman, and when all the world turns away with loathing from her misery, we would take her by the hand, lift her from her degradation, whisper hope to her amid her despair, teach her lessons of self-control, instill into her ideas of purity and industry, and send her forth to work her own way upward to her final destiny."[24]

Once reformers had proclaimed that the fallen could be redirected toward purity, they took issue with the analysis of women's crime that had condemned female prisoners. The women they aided, their reports noted, had not been designing temptresses very often. Rather, many were innocent victims of male seduction. Women drifted astray, they argued, not simply from lust or greed, but through the deception of others. Although "they seem to be what they are . . . by their own perverse choice," reformers asked, "has there in truth been any such deliberate choice—any such insane election!"

> Our experience has shown us conclusively that in nine cases out of ten, no choice was ever made, for none was ever offered. Hereditary tendencies have their share, evil associations theirs, temptations, . . . lack of any kindly aid after the first offense, . . . the hard trials of poverty— . . . the passion for drinking.

Given the lives these women had led, the reformers concluded, "How, then, can we be pitiless toward the transgressions of the untaught, the unwarned, the neglected!" As long as the fallen woman retained "a hope of redeeming the past," reformers would treat her "as a woman and as a sister."[25]

The use of sisterhood to describe the relationship of women prisoners and reformers suggests the influence of the ideology of women's separate sphere. Reformers attempted to dismiss class difference and emphasized the common bond of an innate womanly spirit. Moreover, case histories in their annual reports stressed the leveling influence of the home. In 1849, for example, an upper-class woman and an Irish servant, both seduced and abandoned by upper-class men, were given shelter. The former was "placed on an equal footing" with other inmates, all of whom achieved redemption through penitence and docility.[26]

Underlying the rhetoric of sisterhood was also the criticism of male behavior and attitudes which would contribute to the formation of the Women's Prison Association (WPA). Annual reports of the Female Department included attacks on the double standard, asking why "so unequal a measure of retribution should be meted out to the man and the woman?" In private correspondence members such as Abby Hopper Gibbons and Catherine Sedgewick occasionally expressed anger toward men's treatment of women.[27] Their own experiences working in a male organization may have further influenced the reformers' emphasis on sisterhood. Like women in the temperance and antislavery movements, some members of the Female Department of the PANY chafed against the limitations men placed on their work.

An explicit conflict with men's authority in the 1850s eventually brought New York reformers to assert their independence. Catherine Sedgewick recorded that when the women were discussing the management of their home, a "committee from the men's society appeared" at the meeting "to remind the women that they were but a department." Some of the women "were disposed to stand upon their reserved rights," Sedgewick wrote, and "some modestly hinted that they had privileges as well as responsibili-

ties."[28] In response to these tensions several women left the PANY and in 1854 formed the autonomous Women's Prison Association and Home. They raised private funds to support the home and, beginning in 1861, they received a financial contribution from the city, acknowledging the home as a quasi-public institution.[29] Prison visiting continued, both at city jails and state penitentiaries.

Although their reports made no mention of the political movement for women's rights which had begun at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, the new organization did draw upon its rhetoric. Caroline Kirkland's fund-raising tract, *The Helping Hand*, asked privileged women to overcome the gulf between themselves and the fallen of their sex in the following terms:

> Among the most precious of Women's Rights is the right to do good to her own sex; . . . Sad it is that [the] fallen woman hopes less from her sisters than from her brothers; . . . women should consider themselves as a community, having special common needs and common obligations, which it is a shame to turn aside from under the plea of inability or distaste. *Every woman in misfortune is the proper object of care to the happier and safer part of her sex.* Not to stretch forth to her the helping hand—not to defend her against wrong and shield her from temptation—is to consent to her degradation and to become, in some sense, party to her ruin.[30]

An important distinction must be drawn between the prison reformers' appeal to sisterhood and the demand of the women's rights movement for political equality. Most antebellum prison reformers did not support women's rights. Like more vehement opponents, such as Catharine Beecher or the vocal antisuffragists of the late nineteenth century, benevolent reformers assumed that women's power emanated from the moral influence of their separate sphere. In contrast to radical feminists, they did not seek equality in the public sphere; many even prided themselves on remaining outside of politics.[31] These reformers did insist, however, that their feminine values should have equal weight in the society. Neither radical feminists nor antifeminists, their prison reform activities had led them to several prefeminist insights, including a critique of the double standard, a call for solidarity between women, and a commitment to establishing autonomous women's institutions.

The antebellum women reformers had set the precedent that the

fallen woman need not be an outcast, that she could be uplifted, and that women had the right to direct this work. But, as they were the first to admit, the cause was not yet a popular one. "To solicit public assistance for the prisoner, and especially for the female prisoner," the WPA lamented in 1855, "is to row against wind and tide."[32] Their own activities, moreover, remained limited to voluntary measures aimed at individual moral regeneration through prison visiting and a halfway house for released prisoners. Only after the Civil War, with the expansion of women's prison reform, would their sympathies for fallen women lead to alternatives to the neglect of women in prison.

Professional Reformers, 1860–1900

In the decades after 1860 the scattered voluntary efforts to uplift women prisoners expanded into a movement to achieve public authority and professional status for women prison reformers. Building upon the precedents of the antebellum period, particularly the home for discharged women prisoners, postwar activists adopted new methods and added new responsibilities to their reform agenda, including authority on state correctional boards and institutions. By the end of the century they had attained legitimacy for women as professionals in public agencies which cared for female clients.

The Civil War influenced older prison reformers and helped bring more women into the movement. Abby Hopper Gibbons, who had served as a battlefield nurse, continued to work with the WPA but also became receptive to women's rights and a leader of the social purity movement. In the 1870s she joined forces with Josephine Shaw Lowell to campaign for the establishment of separate women's prisons in New York, to be run by women.[33]

Lowell had grown up in one of Boston's oldest families, surrounded by Transcendentalist and abolitionist luminaries. The widow of war hero Charles Russell Lowell, she helped direct the Women's Central Association of Relief for the Army and Navy and became an advocate of "scientific philanthropy." In addition to leading the postwar-charity organization movement in New York, Lowell investigated the conditions of women in jails, served on the state charities board, and argued for women's control over public institutions. She also supported woman suffrage, the Women's Municipal League, and the New York Consumers' League.[34]

In Massachusetts a group of women had similar experiences during and after the war. Ellen Cheney Johnson, a temperance advocate who had taught domestic skills to women in the slums, founded the New England Women's Auxiliary Association and raised funds for the U.S. Sanitary Commission. In the process of searching for veterans' dependents and survivors, she discovered many women virtually unattended in local jails and workhouses. In trying to assist them she met Hannah Chickering, who had become a prison visitor in order to be useful during the war. Chickering founded the Dedham Asylum for Discharged Female Prisoners, a home supported by prominent Boston women, including former WPA member Mary Pierce Poor. In the 1870s both Chickering and Poor served on the Massachusetts Prison Commission and, along with Ellen Cheney Johnson, led a statewide campaign for a separate women's prison.[35] Johnson later became the superintendent of the institution they succeeded in establishing.

Both wartime social service and religious benevolence motivated a group of midwestern Quakers to enter prison reform during the 1860s. The most active reformer in the Friends community was Rhoda Coffin of Richmond, Indiana. From yet another antislavery family, Coffin had originally learned about prison visiting during a trip East in 1858, when she and her husband, Charles, were impressed by the reforms their Quaker acquaintances had undertaken in New York and Philadelphia jails. During the war, influenced in part by a religious revival among Indiana Friends, the Coffins began visiting soldiers' families and prisoners. Quaker minister Sarah Smith and Chicago prison visitor Elizabeth Comstock, both of whom attended to soldiers and prisoners during the war, inspired the Coffins to launch a prison reform committee in the Indiana Yearly Meeting. Sarah Smith and Rhoda Coffin, like reformers in New York and Massachusetts, first aided women prisoners by establishing the Home for the Friendless in Richmond, Indiana. They also visited state penal institutions and, appalled at the treatment of women, campaigned for the creation of a separate state women's prison.[36] Like other reformers, after 1870 the Indiana women served as state officials.

These personal experiences of wartime social service and postwar prison reform suggest some of the ways the Civil War influenced American women. During the 1860s thousands of women worked for the state in some capacity—as nurses, charity workers, and clerks, on the battlefield, or in offices. They learned that women could serve competently in the absence of, or alongside,

men. After the war many nurses, administrators, and volunteers were committed to a life of social service, but they did not want to accept subordinate rank or menial tasks.[37] Like the prison reformers, they sought public and professional roles in which to utilize their skills.

While wartime social service drew some women into prison reform, others entered the public charities movement that resulted from the centralization of social services during the war. Organizations like the U.S. Sanitary Commission facilitated the move away from benevolent, private reform and toward secular, "scientific philanthropy" modeled on the British charity organization movement.[38] The creation of state boards of charities and corrections provided new opportunities for women reformers to assume public, professional roles.

The entry of Elizabeth Buffum Chace into women's prison reform provides a notable example of how women began to demand official status in the new state agencies that directed correctional institutions. Like other prison reformers, she came from a Quaker, abolitionist family. The Buffum home in Providence, Rhode Island, had been a way station on the Underground Railroad and a meeting place for antislavery proponents. In 1835, several years after her marriage to cotton manufacturer Samuel Chace, Elizabeth Buffum Chace formed the Female Anti-Slavery Society and from 1868 to 1870 was vice-president of the American Anti-Slavery Society.[39]

The deaths of several of her children left Chace longing for activity, and the women's rights movement influenced her decision to enter public life. Chace had attended the 1850 women's rights convention in Massachusetts and, at the close of the Civil War, her feminist friend Lucy Stone urged her to accept the social responsibilities incumbent on her as an economically secure wife and mother. In response to Chace's doubts about entering public life, Stone advised that she "let the housekeeping take care of itself while you take care of the Republic."[40] Chace heeded the challenge. In addition to supporting Negro rights, woman suffrage, and higher education for women, she began to visit penal institutions in Rhode Island and to call attention to the problems of female inmates.

At the time, no woman sat on the official state board of control nor on the boards of management which directed most state institutions. Through the Rhode Island Woman Suffrage Association, of which she was president, Chace sent a memorial to the governor

requesting that state charity boards include both sexes.[41] As a result of her effort, an 1870 Rhode Island act provided for a Board of Lady Visitors to inspect institutions which housed women; the board was not given power to enforce its recommendations. Chace was "rather scornful of the Legislative sop," but served on the new board for several years. In 1876, however, she resigned to protest women's lack of power on the board. "When the State of Rhode Island shall call its best women to an equal participation with men in the direction of its penal and reformatory institutions," she explained, "I have no doubt they will gladly assume the duties and responsibilities of such positions."[42]

By the time of her resignation, several states had established positions for women in directing charities and corrections. In Connecticut the newly created State Board of Charities (1876) formed a department with female members to supervise state institutions. In New York Josephine Shaw Lowell, who became a member of the State Board of Charities in 1876, began to inspect jails, penitentiaries, and almshouses, with particular attention to methods of caring for young women delinquents. The Massachusetts Prison Commission, established in 1870, legally required female members and was well advanced toward giving women complete control of their own reformatory. By 1888 the Department of Franchise of the Women's Christian Temperance Union recommended that women become directors and visitors for state institutions as one means of taking advantage of any local political power they could achieve en route to suffrage.[43]

Women's participation in two new national organizations provides another measure of the change from private to public, and from voluntary to professional, prison reform. Through the National Prison Congress (later called the American Prison Association) and the National Conference on Charities and Corrections (NCCC), new middle-class professionals in penal and charitable agencies sought to standardize their methods and to increase both their prestige and their influence on social policy. In each organization women eventually shared in these tasks.

The American Prison Association (APA) was formed in 1870 as a meeting place for reformers, public officials, and prison administrators. Originally called the National Prison Congress, it recommended penal reforms, including the indeterminate sentence, industrial and academic training for inmates, and the creation of specialized institutions for misdemeanants, first offenders, and women.[44] At its founding meeting, the APA adopted as the last of

thirty-seven principles for a better correctional system that "both in official administration of such a system and in the voluntary co-operation of citizens therein, the agency of women may be employed with excellent effect." In 1875 Rhoda Coffin delivered the first paper by a female member and in 1896 Ellen Cheney Johnson became the first woman on a standing committee.[45]

A similar process occurred within the National Conference on Charities and Corrections, the social workers' professional organization. Between its founding in 1874 and the turn of the century women increased their participation at conferences, offering papers in those branches of the profession that seemed most open to their participation. Among these areas was penology, and women in the NCCC insisted that they were particularly suited for the tasks of preventing female crime and aiding women prisoners. By 1890 the organization officially recognized women's achievements, citing female membership on almost half of the existing state boards of charities and the increased use of female professional staff in state institutions that cared for women.[46]

The expansion of women's prison reform into public and professional life had been fostered by several events of the 1860s. Public officials, faced with the increase in the number of women arrested, convicted, and imprisoned during that decade may have been more willing to entertain women's ideas about female inmates. Women's wartime public service contributed to their interest in postwar charities and corrections. Furthermore, although the war had a dampening effect on most reform movements, for women the political aftermath of the war inspired feminist organization. The failure to include woman suffrage in the Fifteenth Amendment resulted in the establishment of two national suffrage associations that publicly questioned restrictions on women's rights over the next decades. After the war, female prison reformers became more sympathetic to the women's suffrage movement.

While the political feminists may have had a limited audience between 1870 and 1910, other women, since termed "social feminists," enjoyed growing support for their efforts to expand female moral guardianship from the home to the society.[47] Like temperance advocates, social purity leaders, and settlement house founders, the postwar prison reformers believed in women's separate sphere and superior morality. Even as they entered the public sphere and gained valuable skills by building separate women's organizations, social feminists continued to argue that women had unique, feminine virtues that should be embodied in social policy.

These principles strongly influenced prison reformers' attitudes toward fallen women and their growing interest in creating separate women's prisons.

The Fallen Woman Reconsidered

Ever since Elizabeth Fry first entered Newgate Gaol, women prison reformers had expressed sympathy for the fallen woman and a belief in her capacity for redemption. As nineteenth-century American women argued for a greater degree of public responsibility for women prisoners, they articulated these views more frequently and more publicly. Those who held official positions had a wider forum for their ideas, while others continued to volunteer their criticism of prevailing attitudes toward fallen women.

In speeches and writings, late nineteenth-century prison reformers elaborated on earlier observations that the fallen woman should not be held solely responsible for her crimes. Increasingly, women stressed that societal forces created the problem of woman's fall. This tendency toward a social, rather than individual, analysis of crime derived in part from the women's new vantage point as public reformers. In addition, two streams of late nineteenth-century social thought—determinist theories of crime and social feminist views of the relations of the sexes—influenced women's ideas and gave them credence among both professional colleagues and feminist allies.

A more sympathetic portrait of female criminals first reached the wider public through novels written between 1860 and 1890, when "fictional sympathy for the fallen and interest in their rehabilitation . . . generally shifted attention from the harlot as temptress of men and befouler of society to the harlot as victim of economic distress and the vice rackets." Stories by Rebecca Harding Davis, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Bayard Taylor, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, for instance, suggested that women were driven to crime by urban and industrial life, or by men. Moreover, the fictional fallen women were often rescued by other women, who helped them find Christian redemption and an honest means of support. By 1890 novelists had adopted the theme that fallen women could achieve almost total rehabilitation.[48]

Women who had participated in antebellum prison reform and those who entered charity and correctional work in the postwar decades shared these new attitudes about fallen women. What is especially interesting about these women's explanations of

prostitution and other crimes is the way they singled out their own sex as a subculture of the dangerous class. Reversing the older view of women's greater fall, they argued that women were more victimized and even more capable of reformation than were male criminals.

A number of women prison reformers viewed the fallen woman through the dual perspectives of hereditarian thought and feminist sympathies. Josephine Shaw Lowell argued that since criminal tendencies could be inherited, women offenders were not entirely at fault for their sins; furthermore, environmental conditions, if properly manipulated, might subdue them. Thus Lowell told the 1879 meeting of the NCCC that "the community itself is responsible for the existence of such miserable, wrecked specimens of humanity" as the women and children who filled state almshouses. "Circumstances make the criminal," Ellen Cheney Johnson repeatedly contended, while Indiana reformers told their legislators that young women traveled the "path of ruin . . . not so much because of any predisposing fault of their own, as because parents, church and State have failed to give them sympathy, and to inspire them to seek a better and higher life."[49]

Dozens of other statements by women prison reformers over the next years reiterated the point that unique circumstances led to women's crimes. Although they realized that unhappy homes and immoral literature could create male as well as female criminals, the reformers singled out women as the victims of two particular social forces: economic and sexual exploitation. The economic explanation predominated in women's rights movement literature; it constituted a minor theme for prison reformers, who launched their major attack on the sexual victimization of women by men.

Radical feminist Susan B. Anthony provided the strongest expression of the economic origins of women's fall in her 1875 address on "Social Purity." Anthony distinguished between the causes of crime in men and women, claiming that the former acted from "love of vice," while the latter acted "from absolute want of the necessaries of life." Historical forces had created this want, she explained. Women who once engaged in profitable household manufacturing had been displaced by men and machines. When "thrust into the world's outer market," they found exhausting labor and little recompense. The working woman, Anthony wrote, "weary and worn from her day's toil . . . sees on every side and at every turn the gilded hand of vice and crime outstretched, . . . Can we wonder that so many poor girls fall, . . . Should we not wonder,

rather, that so many escape the sad fate?"[50] Her solution was economic self-sufficiency: "Clearly, then, the first step toward solving this problem is to lift this vast army of poverty-stricken women who now crowd our cities, above the temptation, the necessity, to sell themselves in marriage or out, for bread and shelter."[51]

Although some antebellum writers, both male and female, had made similar points, limited economic opportunities for working women became a central focus of feminist analysis after 1870. Like Anthony, writers in the suffragist *Woman's Journal* anticipated the feminist economics of Charlotte Perkins Gilman. They too argued that financial need, not innate sexual depravity, sent women to the streets, largely because respectable work for women offered inadequate wages. "Society says to all women, 'Go sew' . . . and schools . . . train them chiefly to sew," but in an overcrowded market, the *Journal* lamented, they starved from low wages and were tempted to prostitution. The harlot would disappear only if women became "educated to self support" in various industries. Or, as one former prostitute from Indiana stated, "It was not knowing how to work that made me bad; now I can get my own living, married or single."[52] The Women's Prison Association began to agree with the economic argument in the postwar years. As long as working women received only "their pittance, just so long will they eke it out by the wages of sin," the WPA explained.[53]

Reformers' concerns about working women reflected changes in women's work experiences. Despite the persistent ideology of domesticity, many unmarried, working-class and immigrant women were entering the paid labor force in the decades after 1870. They earned meager salaries for tedious work as domestic servants, laundresses, and unskilled factory workers. A generation later women's low wages and poor working conditions would become a major concern of the Progressive movement. In the late nineteenth century, reformers often suspected the relationship between class and crime, but they did not extend their insight into a full-fledged analysis.

Most women prison reformers pointed to another social force which was unique to the etiology of female crime: sexual exploitation and the double standard of morality. Men, they held, demanded fallen women, but women alone paid the moral and legal price for prostitution. Like the female moral reformers of antebellum New England and New York, the women prison reformers increasingly claimed that men were the root of the social evil.

Elizabeth Buffum Chace came to this conclusion early in her

career when she wrote that only uplift work among men could check the demand for fallen women. Similarly, the WPA reported that "If disreputable men were not to be found upon our streets, disreputable women would not go there to seek them." In the *Woman's Journal*, Ellen Batelle Dietrick placed this cause above all others. Criticizing a group of clergymen she explained that "They are only dealing with half of the problem so long as they utterly ignore the fact that the chief cause for 'fallen women' is fallen men."[54]

Even more annoying was the double standard which, Dietrick held, served to deny the ideal of female superiority. When woman alone bore the blame for sexual infidelity she suffered a loss of status from which men were immune. "Every such [fallen] woman," she wrote, "was once an innocent girl born into a civilization which considers men her superior, supporter and protector. Every boy in our civilization knows that society will excuse in him, the superior, what it will relentlessly condemn in her, his inferior."[55]

That men established the demand for prostitutes, and that they usually escaped without punishment, constituted only part of the indictment. Case histories, written by reformers, blamed men for actively initiating women's fall. Women's crimes, ranging from drunkenness to lewdness to larceny, were attributed to the experiences of being "dragged down by a worthless husband"; accused by "a brutal husband"; "seduced by a coachman"; prostituted by a "bad, intemperate man"; "ruined by the wickedness" of men; or of having fallen "victim to masculine wills." Cruel stepfathers, dishonest lovers, or ruthless employers seemed to plague women at every turn. Other case histories pitied those who had "married a base man"; or been ruined by a promise of marriage that led to a house of prostitution; or been "led off by a married man."[56] One inmate's friends wrote to a women's prison that it was "better to leave her in jail where she has home and food" than to let her return to her drunken husband. So too did prison commissioners often note the woman of "more than usual capacity" who had "been dragged down by a worthless husband." As one case read, "if she had married a better man [she] might have turned out differently."[57]

The reconsideration of the fallen woman was encouraged in part by the deterministic thought which had begun to influence American criminology in general. Both experts in the newly founded social sciences and popular writers who attempted to explain the

origins of crime and poverty rejected individual moral responsibility in favor of theories of hereditary and environmental causes. Despite the influence of Darwinian ideas in popularizing biological interpretations of crime, Americans displayed a deeply ingrained environmentalism that continued to hold out hope for the regeneration of the criminal, the insane, and the poor. The rise of a medical profession with a vested interest in "curing" not only disease but also deviancy tempered biological determinism, as did the emergence of a social service profession committed to eliminating poverty and vice.[58]

In addition to the influence of environmental determinism, the specifically antimale content of women's writings suggests other sources for new interpretations. The reformers approached the problem of the fallen woman as one rooted in the social relations of the sexes, rather than as simply the result of heredity or environment. Although they joined contemporaries in speculating on inherited vice and even pointed to the relationship between wages, working conditions, and crime, they repeatedly returned to the theme of woman's sexual vulnerability. Reformers' adoption of a sexual interpretation of crime is not surprising, given that the world of nineteenth-century women was so clearly defined as one in which their sex was supposed to inhabit its own separate sphere—one which had a morality superior to men's. The ideology of women's purity that had earlier condemned the fallen woman now could be used to condemn instead the impure men who, reformers claimed, were at the root of women's crimes.

This sexual interpretation illustrated an important strain of social feminist thought at the end of the century. Many feminists argued that men's intemperate drinking habits and their sexual indulgence led to the exploitation of women, whether as abused wives or as prostitutes. Therefore, the WCTU and the social purity movement attempted to control men's drinking and sexual behavior through personal moral force or through legislation outlawing liquor and vice districts. Some historians view these efforts as part of a symbolic struggle waged to increase women's power in the family and the society.[59] The attacks on men's behavior may have been more defensive, however. Women attempted to protect their personal interests by minimizing their physical vulnerability. Sexual activity carried heavy risks for Victorian women, including the dangers of venereal infection, the strain of repeated childbirth, and a life of constant child rearing.[60] Within this personal framework some women perceived chastity as a liberating experience

and saw all institutions that fostered sexual activity as contributing to women's oppression. Thus, social feminists often condemned men's sexual freedom and women prison reformers attacked men's sexual victimization of women as a cause of female crime.

Women's prison visiting had begun as a suitable female auxiliary to men's antebellum reforms. Led by Quakers, charity workers, and social feminists, women's prison reform grew into an independent movement by the late nineteenth century. From their experiences visiting women in jails, operating homes for discharged women prisoners, and participating in the postwar charities and social feminist movements, women reformers developed a unique perspective on the fallen woman. They challenged the view of her total depravity and substituted an indictment of society and particularly of men for causing her fall.

Underlying both women's entry into prison reform and their reinterpretation of the fallen woman was a firm belief that women constituted a separate sexual class. Despite their social analysis of women's crimes, reformers accepted biological categories that separated them from men but bound them to their sisters in prison. Although they acknowledged economic sources of crime, they discounted class differences between themselves and the objects of their concern. In the WPA, and later in state charity and corrections boards, women claimed that, if given a chance to bring their feminine influence to bear, the fallen could be redeemed and made into true women. This commitment to female moral superiority ultimately led to demands for separate women's prisons.

Chapter 3

Feminist or Feminine? The Establishment of Separate Women's Prisons, 1870–1900

Sympathy for the fallen woman as victim and faith in her capacity for redemption characterized the nineteenth-century feminist approach to women prisoners. When women who shared these sentiments approached local and state correctional institutions, they found the American prison system severely deficient. Ameliorative efforts such as prison visiting and homes for discharged women prisoners seemed inadequate to correct the problems exposed by postwar reformers. After the 1860s, women who now had a foothold in public charities and corrections demanded changes in state policies. During the last third of the century they articulated an alternative model of feminine prison reform to replace the neglect of women in men's prisons. Three principles guided them: the separation of women prisoners from men; the provision of differential, feminine care; and control over women's prisons by female staff and management.

By the end of the nineteenth century reformers had succeeded in incorporating these principles into separate women's prisons in the three states in which they were most active—Indiana, Massachusetts, and New York. The Indiana Woman's Prison opened in Indianapolis in 1874. In the same year the Massachusetts legislature established a Reformatory Prison for Women that began to admit inmates in 1877. The first New York House of Refuge for women opened at Hudson in 1887, followed by the opening of the Western House of Refuge at Albion in 1893. A third New York institution, the Bedford Hills Reformatory, was completed in 1901.

The establishment of separate women's prisons contributed to the larger process of female institution-building in the late nineteenth century. Prison reformers and other social feminists drew upon the ideology of women's separate sphere and gradually expanded its boundaries from the private to the public realm. By creating extradomestic female institutions—colleges, clubs, reform organizations, and even prisons—middle-class American

women gained both valuable personal skills and greater public authority.[1]

Like the "separate but equal" racial ideology, however, social feminist strategy rested on a contradictory definition of equality. The nineteenth-century prison reformers did seek to expand women's rights when they argued for greater authority over public policy and improved treatment for women prisoners. But at the heart of their program was the principle of innate sexual difference, not sexual equality. Their femininity, reformers asserted, qualified them to control women's prisons. Moreover, they acted on a faith that simply strengthening the feminine elements in institutions would improve them. Thus, in their three major arguments for separate women's prisons, reformers combined feminist goals of preventing men's exploitation of women with feminine methods of extending women's sphere to encompass correctional institutions.

Separation of Female Prisoners

Since their first visits to prisons, reformers of both sexes had objected to the intermingling of male and female inmates. As early as 1826 the "promiscuous and unrestricted intercourse" and "universal riot and debauchery" in the Philadelphia jails inspired the separation of the sexes there. Officials elsewhere decried communication between inmates and passed statutes requiring jail keepers to maintain separate areas for the women in their charge. These regulations prevented sexual contact, but at the same time they usually forced all female inmates into the most uncomfortable quarters within penal institutions.[2]

Elizabeth Fry first articulated the importance of separating female inmates for purposes other than merely preventing sexual contact. In her *Observations*, the British prison reformer expressed fears that sexually mixed quarters undermined women's rehabilitation. Separate facilities, she argued, would allow the classification of women into categories by age and offense, rather than simply by sex, and would facilitate instruction and training in feminine pursuits.[3]

New impetus for separating women prisoners came from nineteenth-century penologists who favored the classification of inmates into age, sex, and offender groups. Both male and female reformers, notably Dorothea Dix, urged separate housing of the insane, juvenile criminals, and first offenders. By mid-century

most states had provided facilities for the first two of these groups, and over the next fifty years they established specialized adult reformatories, asylums for alcoholics, and institutions for the mentally ill. These facilities were often designed with separate departments or buildings for female inmates that were an improvement over women's earlier, makeshift quarters.[4]

The first separate women's prison building opened at the Sing Sing, New York, state penitentiary in June 1839. Male staff administered the women's department but matrons served in it. Before long, overcrowding, inadequate hospital and nursery facilities, and disciplinary problems, which culminated in an 1843 riot, plagued the institution. A brief redemption occurred after 1844 with the appointment of Eliza W. Farnham—sometimes feminist, atheist, and phrenologist—as matron.[5]

Farnham believed in rehabilitation instead of punishment. She ended the silence rule, set up a library and a school, classified prisoners, offered incentives for good behavior, and used music, handicrafts, and entertainment to discourage criminal instincts. Instead of the Bible she read the women Dickens's *Oliver Twist*; Margaret Fuller came to speak to inmates at Farnham's request. Unfortunately, her secular methods provoked state officials. They complained that there was "nothing masculine" in the prison routine and forced her to retract her programs and impose silence, work, and strict discipline. Farnham left Sing Sing in 1848. Thereafter, although it remained the only separate state prison for women until the 1870s, it never really furthered the principles of women's prison reform.[6]

Several states continued to house female inmates apart from men within the same institutions, but no new women's prisons were constructed in the antebellum years. By the 1860s, however, when the mounting number of female commitments taxed existing facilities, several new women's quarters were constructed.[7] At the same time, women active in charities and corrections who visited sexually mixed institutions began criticizing the discriminatory treatment of female inmates and revived the issue of separate prisons. Elizabeth Chace, for instance, discovered in her visits to Rhode Island institutions that prisons held classes for men but not for women and that female inmates were offered neither exercise nor mental occupation while incarcerated.[8] Refusal to attempt the reformation of women bothered Josephine Shaw Lowell as well. She told the New York State Board of Charities in 1879 that the "visible links" in the chain of poverty and criminality were

"women who from early girlhood have been tossed from poorhouse to jail, and from jail to poorhouse, until the last trace of womanhood in them has been destroyed." Neither in "jail, poorhouse nor penitentiary," she charged, "will they find anything to help them turn back; on the contrary, all the surroundings will force them lower." Lowell concluded that only separate women's institutions would prevent this cycle.[9]

Women joined other critics of American prisons in calling for change. A revival of interest in prison reform, evidenced by the founding of the American Prison Association in 1870, led to renewed debate about penal methods in general. By this date, American penitentiaries had declined into complacent, overcrowded, custodial institutions. Although many states continued to rely on penitentiaries, the newly organized charity and corrections workers brought several alternatives to public attention. They were particularly impressed by experiments in the British prison system and by the innovations of the reformatory prison.

The British system had instituted policies of commutation of sentences for good behavior, the merit marking-system, and progressive reentry into society. Under the influence of American reformers Enoch C. Wines, Zebulon Brockway, and Franklin Sanborn, these methods were incorporated into reformatory prisons for youthful, male first offenders at Elmira, New York (1876) and Concord, Massachusetts (1884). Brockway, the first superintendent of the Elmira Reformatory, instituted prison reforms that rewarded inmates for internalizing many of the controls formerly imposed by the external discipline of the penitentiary. Incentive systems offered greater privileges for good behavior and the indeterminate sentence allowed prisoners' actions to influence their date of release.[10]

For women, the most significant innovation of the British system was demonstrated by the Mount Joy Female Convict prison in Ireland. In 1862 British prison reformer Mary Carpenter observed the separate women's reformatory at Mount Joy and became convinced of its efficacy in rehabilitating women criminals. Like her American counterparts, Carpenter explained that women only seemed unreformable because of the "injudicious treatment" they usually received as convicts. In her 1864 book, *Our Convicts*, Carpenter recommended that women prisoners should be gathered into one institution where a merit system would determine progression to various stages of treatment and privilege. Female staff would provide "considerable intellectual and cultural

development" for inmates, while the use of male guards would be avoided.[11]

Americans were intrigued by the British plan of a separate, reformatory women's prison. As early as 1865 the Massachusetts Board of State Charities reported favorably on separation and the merit system for women in England. When the first International Penitentiary Congress convened in London in 1872, a session on women's work enabled Julia Ward Howe and Elizabeth Buffum Chace to meet Mary Carpenter and discuss the principle of separate female institutions.[12] Several male reformers were impressed by the fact that the superintendent, subordinate officers, and teachers at Mount Joy were all women.[13] Charles and Rhoda Coffin visited Mount Joy and praised its approximation of family life, the placement of released women in private homes, and particularly the self-respect engendered by the trust placed in upper-grade prisoners. All of these advantages had been unavailable to women dispersed throughout the predominantly male prisons.[14]

At the same time that Mount Joy presented a model for American reformers, the establishment of sexually segregated juvenile reformatories helped pave the way for separate adult prisons. Several reform schools for boys were founded after 1847 and the first State Industrial School for Girls, at Lancaster, Massachusetts, opened in 1856. In Connecticut legislators considered establishing a women's prison in the 1860s, but instead they chartered an industrial school for girls that classified inmates within a cottage system of residence and offered instruction, employment, indeterminate sentences, and conditional pardon and release.[15]

In 1867 a visit to the Lancaster, Massachusetts, girls' reform school inspired Zebulon Brockway, then superintendent of the Detroit House of Correction, to experiment with separate "reformatory" treatment for the women under his care. Brockway had been impressed with the methods of the girls' school, and so he helped establish a women's "House of Shelter." From 1869 to 1874, Emma Hall, a Detroit public school teacher, served as matron. Hall formed "a little society" with thirty female inmates living as a family in "commodious and well furnished" surroundings. She instituted a merit system, offered training for remunerative employment, and fostered "strong social bonds" among inmates. Although the House of Shelter was not technically a prison, it was the first penal institution where women had complete authority over female inmates. According to a historian of Michigan's

prisons, "The House of Shelter was America's first women's reformatory."[16]

By 1870 other separate institutions were being established in Indiana. The Home for the Friendless in Richmond had just become the official city prison. Its female managers, deputized as sheriffs who "paroled" their prisoners to the home, attempted to achieve reformation through prayer, music, Bible study, and work. Meanwhile, Indiana Friends Sarah Smith and Rhoda Coffin led a campaign to end the sexual abuse of women in the state prison. Their lobbying efforts succeeded in 1869 when a bill creating a "Female Prison and Reformatory Institution for Girls and Women" passed the Indiana legislature. The prison, which opened in Indianapolis in 1874, was the first completely separate state women's penal institution in America.[17]

Even as the Indiana Woman's Prison was under construction, reformers in other states were adopting the model of sexually separate prisons. The three women and three men on the Massachusetts Prison Commission decided in 1870 that "a classification of the prisoners, according to sex, age, and degree of crime, was absolutely necessary before any satisfactory progress toward reformation could be expected."[18] In their first annual report they argued for sexual separation on several grounds. "In our county prisons, as a general rule, the poorest and most unfavorable quarters are assigned to women," they wrote. But separation would not help only one sex. "By separating the women from the men, both are benefitted," through the removal of sexual distractions and the possibility of improving the present system which, they felt, "does not tend to the reformation of men or women."[19]

Implementing the recommendation of sexual separation took a four-year campaign on the part of the commissioners and private reformers. First the commissioners tried to centralize all women prisoners into one county jail, but a hostile sheriff undermined that strategy by refusing to remove the male inmates.[20] The commissioners then decided that a new prison should be built. Two of them, Hannah Chickering of the Dedham Asylum for Discharged Female Prisoners and Clara Leonard of the Springfield Home for the Friendless, convened a public meeting in Boston and gathered hundreds of signatures on petitions to the legislature. When lawmakers, reluctant to appropriate money for a women's prison, rejected the bill in 1873, the prison commissioners argued that a women's prison would save money by reducing female crime.[21]

They insisted further that "for this State to say, by its Legislature, that it cannot afford to build a new prison . . . would be absurd. It did not say so last year when the necessity appeared for a new state prison for men."[22]

In June 1873 private reformers organized "a League to secure the establishment of a Separate Prison for the Female Convicts of Massachusetts." They publicized their cause in "secular and religious" newspapers and, borrowing a technique from the temperance movement, they asked for signatures to "The Pledge" of approval of a separate prison.[23] Drawing on local women's networks throughout the state, members held parlor meetings, wrote letters, and distributed new petitions. Over 7,000 signatures reached the Massachusetts legislature between January and March 1874. In June the legislation passed both House and Senate, and the second women's prison in America—the first statewide *reformatory* institution for adult women—was signed into law.[24]

By 1874, then, the principle of separating female convicts, not merely within existing prisons, but in specially constructed women's institutions, had been adopted in Indiana and Massachusetts. The logic of sexual separation was clear. First, it encouraged efficient management by collecting female inmates under one roof. Secondly, it expunged the malevolent male influences which had impeded women's reformation in mixed prisons. But in both states, and soon in New York as well, two additional arguments supported the reformers' commitment to separate institutions: the necessity for differential, feminine, treatment and the unique ability of women to supply that need.

Differential Treatment

Sexually mixed prison facilities in the nineteenth century, far from catering to uniquely feminine needs, usually stripped women inmates of the privileges normally extended to the "fairer sex" and gave them little or no hope of returning to society as restored women. Failure to provide feminine care was in no way egalitarian; rather, it rested on the belief that criminal women were more hardened than men.

Critics of American prisons in the 1870s took issue with the view that fallen women could not be reformed. They charged the correctional system with perpetuating a self-fulfilling prophecy of hopelessness for female offenders. Elizabeth Chace, for instance,

complained of the discouraging treatment offered by male correctional officers, since even "good men regard a fallen woman as so much worse than a fallen man that they involuntarily shrink from association with her" and therefore do little toward her redemption. In a letter to the first national prison congress she amplified her argument:

> The public sentiment which condemns a woman to imprisonment and entire loss of reputation, and then pronounces her reformation hopeless, . . . fills our penal institutions with women of this class. . . . While men are constantly influenced by the expectation . . . [of becoming] virtuous and useful members of society, it is impossible to bring the influence of such a hope upon the women, when there is no belief in the possibility of such a change for *them*. The result is, the women go out hopeless for themselves.[25]

Similarly, the Massachusetts prison commissioners concluded that one evil of the existing system was having female prisoners under the "immediate and entire control of men" who had "little or no faith in the possibility of their reformation." Naturally, if "looked upon as incapable of reformation" in prison, the commissioners reasoned, inmates would lose heart and go back to "the life" after they were released.[26]

Thus the reformers argued that women would remain incurably criminal unless they received a new form of treatment within the correctional system. "We do not say or think more lenient," they pointed out, "but different. And at present the most prominent difference discernible is that they have for the most part poorer and less desirable quarters, and are employed virtually as servants for the men."[27] The alternative treatment reformers proposed represented an almost complete reversal of the patterns they were criticizing. Rather than differential treatment which condemned women, reformers called for greater help and better training to convert the fallen into respectable women.

Reformers wanted not only to alter the traditional belief that female criminals were more hardened than male offenders, they wanted to portray imprisoned women as untapped resources who had within them the cherished qualities of piety and purity. Only the chrysalis of a degrading environment concealed their natural womanhood. Healthier surroundings, both within and after prison, would permit the metamorphosis from depravity to "true womanhood." As the WPA wrote:

> We believe that woman in her deepest degradation
> Holds something sacred, something undefiled;
> And like the diamond in the dark, retains
> Some quenchless gleam of the celestial light.[28]

Their vision of training derived from the ideal of female behavior that had evolved during the nineteenth century. The virtues of "true womanhood"—purity, piety, domesticity, and submissiveness—appealed to middle-class reformers. Their own socialization had been accomplished by ladies' magazines, domestic guides, and academy or seminary courses in moral philosophy and domestic economy. But those who were not exposed to this curriculum, or who simply resisted it, were deviant women who required retraining. Instructing them for feminine roles meant treating women prisoners qua women, recognizing their innate femininity and then encouraging it to blossom under the influences of womanly sympathy and nurture. In essence, it meant extending the middle-class woman's socialization to fallen women.

Although male criminals might be reformed as well, their progress required a form of retraining suitable to masculine ideals of work and discipline, like that found in the factory or military model of penitentiaries. Consequently, even the new reformatories for young men prided themselves on industrial arts classes, physical culture, and military drill.

Women, like children with whom they were often compared, were more impressionable and called forth a special approach. Their innocence could be restored by appealing to intuition, to heart. "I think for women—I will not say for men—God's clear sunlight softens the human heart," one APA member remarked. Or, as Massachusetts officials wrote, "Women need different management from men; they are more emotional and more susceptible; they are far less likely to be influenced by general appeals or force of discipline, and are more open to personal treatment and the influence of kindness."[29]

One of the staunchest advocates of differential treatment, prison superintendent Ellen Cheney Johnson, recommended such "softening" influences on women prisoners as flowers, farm animals, music, and visits to the infant nursery. Johnson speculated that women's "different physical organization and consequent greater nervous sensitiveness" made them "as a class more difficult to deal with" and necessitated kinder treatment. Each woman retained

"the germ of goodness in the heart" which Johnson hoped to "seek out and develop and establish."[30]

Once again, references to women criminals as a class apart from their male counterparts indicated the primacy of gender identity for nineteenth-century women. To reach the "true woman" within each fallen shell, reformers sought feminine methods of corrections. As Josephine Shaw Lowell and others saw their task, female criminals were "first of all, to be taught to be women." Hence, "they must be induced to love that which is good and pure, and to wish to resemble it." Not incidentally, "they must learn all household duties."[31] What better structure in which to carry out this task of socialization for womanhood than in the home, the center of the middle-class female sphere? Domesticity, then, provided a focal point for female corrections and a means of restoring femininity to the fallen.

The "home" had been an important response to female criminality since the 1840s when shelters were used as intermediate lodgings for released women prisoners. The Women's Prison Association of New York, for instance, employed domestic routines to regularize inmates' lives and to train them for proper womanly roles. "A Home," they explained, "is the very heart of the undertaking in behalf of female convicts."[32]

As the number of homes for released female convicts multiplied over the next decades, domestic structure became a requirement for women's reformation. In 1852 the Female Prison Association of Philadelphia sought a refuge for penitent women: " . . . we seem to want a stepping stone between the Prison, and the wide world. . . . —Yes! we want a *Home*; where they may begin anew to tread the path of life."[33] In Dedham and Springfield, Massachusetts, Richmond, Indiana, and other cities, dozens of homes opened between the 1870s and the 1890s.[34]

Not only as shelters, but also as retraining centers for fallen women, the homes catered to uniquely feminine needs. Through evangelical religion, education, and discipline, the matrons and managers offered courses to restore the womanhood of residents. Daily lessons in reading, writing, sewing, "and other feminine employments" supplemented the prayers, Bible study, and religious services, thus ensuring both domesticity and piety. Discipline included the banning of profanity, tobacco, alcohol, and coarse behavior, plus a routine of early rising, regular work (sewing, laundry, cleaning), and habits of neatness and industry at all times. In

spite of the regimentation imposed, the managers of the homes insisted that the key to discipline lay in the familial patterns which they adopted. As the Crittenton Homes' regulations explained: "Inmates when admitted are adopted into the family and are expected to give the loving obedience of dutiful children towards their parents."[35]

The analogy with youth echoed another model upon which reformers of fallen women relied. In the mid-nineteenth century, juvenile reformatories adopted the "family system" to cure delinquency. Domestic training had been applied to female orphans and delinquents as early as 1800, but the introduction of the European cottage plan for juvenile institutions in the late 1850s further encouraged family-model care. In 1856 the Lancaster girls' school in Massachusetts became the first reformatory in the United States designed with small buildings known as cottages instead of dormitories or cell blocks. Boys' schools soon adopted the family plan as well, and increasingly groups such as the Massachusetts Board of Charities were recommending that "in providing for the poor, the dependent, and the vicious, especially for the young, we must take the ordinary family for our model." By the 1870s a number of institutions had adopted the domestic model, or cottage system, for their designs.[36]

Separate women's prisons were established just when the domestic model was gaining popularity. The Detroit House of Shelter, as Emma Hall made clear, approximated in design and routine the patterns of domestic life. A private room, "flowers, pictures, music and home industries" would "create a desire for a permanent home."[37] In New York, Josephine Lowell rejected the silence and hard labor of penitentiaries: "The reformatories must not be prisons, which would crush out the life from those unfortunate enough to be cast into them; they must be *homes*,—homes where a tender care shall surround the weak and fallen creatures who are placed under their shelter."[38]

According to Lowell the ideal reformatory would be set on a large tract of land (from 250 to 500 acres) in order to prevent communication with the outer world. Inmates would be classified and housed in several small buildings, with fifteen to twenty-five women in each, under the charge of female officers. Training would include traditional women's work: cooking, washing and ironing, gardening, and milking cows. Lowell stressed that due attention should be given to "mental and moral faculties" and to the

physical health of the women. Like the Mount Joy prison and the Elmira reformatory for young men, a graded system of residences and progress to more privileged cottages would provide the incentives "necessary to a hopeful life."[39] Citing encouraging news from institutions that tried to implement familial routines, Lowell approached the New York State legislature to ask for a cottage plan institution for young adult female offenders.[40]

Largely due to her efforts, the Albany legislature passed a bill to establish New York's first "House of Refuge" for women in 1881. When appropriations were delayed, Lowell herself "bombarded" the lawmakers with letters and pamphlets and won her battle. The Hudson House of Refuge opened on 7 May 1887, the first cottage-system adult female reformatory. Staffed almost entirely by women, the institution embodied most of Lowell's plans, including an incentive grading system, cottages, and domestic routines. "The idea of a family and home life is carried out as far as possible in the cottages," the board of charities reported in 1888. "In the evening they are gathered together in a circle, of which the supervisor and assistant form the center. . . . The girls, while knitting or sewing, profit by some appropriate reading or oral instruction."[41] The Hudson House of Refuge was filled by 1889 and Lowell, along with Abby Hopper Gibbons and other WPA members, began to press for the establishment of two more New York women's reformatories.

Their WPA reports, testimony before the legislature, and support from the New York State Board of Charities helped establish the Western House of Refuge at Albion, New York, which opened in 1893. There, too, the management reported, "the regulations governing the household will follow as closely as circumstances permit those of any well regulated family of young people."[42] By 1892 the WPA had succeeded in securing legislation establishing a third reformatory, to serve the New York City area but secluded in Bedford Hills in Westchester County. Again insufficient appropriations delayed construction, but the institution finally opened in 1901.[43]

By 1900 methods to meet the distinctive needs of female prisoners—womanly sympathy, shelter, familial discipline, and domestic training—had been adopted by institutions in Indiana, Massachusetts, and New York. Although the separate women's institutions served only a small minority of all female prisoners, most of whom remained in sexually mixed local jails, they represented the new ideals of prison methods. Like the homes for

released prisoners, the new institutions embodied the reformers' commitment to traditional definitions of womanhood. But while upholding these traditional definitions, reformers were also attacking barriers to women's entry into male domains, for the final goal of their movement was that women direct and control the reformatory process, an innovation which met initial resistance within the correctional profession.

Female Staff and Management

Elizabeth Fry insisted that prisons provide both separate women's quarters and female attendants within them. Fearing that male guards might abuse women prisoners, and reasoning that women would provide sympathetic counsel and good examples for female inmates, Fry advised: "It is absolutely essential to the proper order and regulation of every prison, that the female prisoners should be placed under the superintendence of officers of their own sex."[44]

American prisons adopted the practice of hiring matrons when women's departments were established in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Rachel Perijo held the first matron position in 1822 at the Baltimore penitentiary, where she offered industrial, educational, and religious training to her female charges. In New York, first at the Auburn penitentiary women's department and later in the Sing Sing women's prison, matrons supervised female inmates. By 1845, when Dorothea Dix toured American jails, she found matrons in several Massachusetts houses of correction, at Sing Sing, in Maryland and Pennsylvania jails, and at the Eastern penitentiary.[45]

The early prison matrons, however, had neither the authority nor the assignment to reform fallen women, and they were invariably supervised by male officials. Most states still had too few female prisoners to warrant separate facilities and matrons, or they simply never considered them necessary. By 1870, though, the larger number of female inmates and women's criticism of male keepers raised new reasons to hire police and prison matrons. Moreover, during the late nineteenth century, American women were beginning to enter certain professions that were considered logical extensions of their domestic and nurturing roles. In addition to teaching, nursing, and social work, correctional jobs joined the list of acceptable women's careers after reformers successfully argued the necessity of female staff in women's prisons.

The major rationale for female staff was that men contributed to, rather than cured, women's delinquency. Just as they had focused on men's responsibility for female crime, so too did the prison reformers point out the victimization of women within the criminal justice system. The indiscriminate arrest of women who were alone on New York streets, for example, annoyed the Women's Prison Association. Their reports cited examples of police brutality en route to station houses, implying that potentially innocent women were commonly being assaulted under the guise of antiprostitution activity.[46]

Reformers claimed that arrested women faced further discrimination in trial and sentencing procedures. When Elizabeth Chace visited court during a case of assault on a woman, she was dismayed to find that not only the lawyers but even the judge treated the victim more harshly than they did her male assailant. Similarly, a female member of the Wisconsin charities board protested the unequal treatment of prostitutes and their customers after a police raid. "The male inmates are suffered to escape, or under an *alias*, fined and discharged," she bemoaned. But the arrested women, before their innocence or guilt had been determined, were "dragged through the streets, and into open courts for trial!" Unless women had "protectors" to pay their fines, the court sentenced them to jail, to be searched by men and possibly to be indoctrinated into the ways of crime.[47] In the opinion of these reformers, the system of justice appeared more criminal than the acts of prostitution for which women were arrested.

More disturbing than the accusation of unjust convictions was the sexual vulnerability of female prisoners. When women prison reformers declared that prison degraded rather than reformed women, they often spoke quite literally of sexual abuse. Hannah Chickering protested male officers' treatment of women, the WPA lamented that male doorkeepers physically searched the "poorer class" of female convicts, and the WCTU complained that male jailers had the keys to women's quarters. In station houses and prisons, Rhoda Coffin discovered, women were "huddled together like cattle in a pen," easily viewed and often assaulted by men. Josephine Shaw Lowell quoted a report about a jailer who "had wantonly assaulted and degraded numerous young women prisoners; and, when sheriff . . . had utterly brutalized three young girls."[48]

At least one woman prisoner confirmed reformers' fears that

sexual abuse in prison undermined all hope of reform. Addie Irving wrote to a woman prison visitor in 1866 that the warden of Blackwell's Island penitentiary in New York City had locked her in a room with a naval officer. The officer attempted to seduce her, explaining "that the authorities sent him there." "Now I ask you," Irving wrote, "after being in such a contaminating place is it any wonder i yealded [*sic*] to temptation again."[49]

Illegitimate births within charitable and penal institutions, noted in Connecticut, Michigan, New York, Indiana, Tennessee, New Jersey, and elsewhere, evidenced the extent of sexual activity in mixed prisons.[50] The paucity of convictions of male keepers suggests not so much that women were willing partners but, rather, that many were powerless to accuse or prosecute their attackers. One exposé of forced prostitution within a state prison did lead to convictions of male officers for assault on female prisoners, and it offers a rare insight into conditions within one of the worst mixed institutions.

The Indiana state prison at Jeffersonville represented a reformer's nightmare. In this "vast bawdy house," a young male prisoner revealed, younger female prisoners were "subjected to the worst of debasement at the hands of prison officials and guards," while the older ones were "obliged to do the work of all." When the warden "established the practice of concubinage," his deputy and other officers followed by making keys to the women's quarters and forcing the female inmates "to submit to their hellish outrages." The convict who authored this exposé may have been the same man who approached Charles and Rhoda Coffin when they visited Jeffersonville in 1868 and begged them "for God's sake, do something for those poor women, their condition is terrible." Sadistic beatings, rape, illegitimate births, "and more," the chaplain confirmed, had become part of the prison routine. A legislative investigation concluded that "the guards and other employees had free access to the female convicts, that the treatment of them has been disgusting, lecherous and brutal." These conditions moved Rhoda Coffin to declare to an APA convention that women confined in a men's prison "may be forced to minister to the lust of the officers, or if they refuse, submit to the infliction of the lash until they do. They are powerless, they are only convicts, and they do not have redress."[51]

Although not every prison was as corrupt as the one in Indiana, less-blatant abuses elsewhere angered women reformers. As in society at large, they concluded, so within the process of criminal

justice—men contributed to women's delinquency. Their response evidenced a growing reliance on feminist rhetoric to attack men's authority. As one reformer reminisced, the call to aid her fallen sisters was in large part a response to what appeared to be male dominance gone rampant: "Arrested by men, given into the hands of men to be searched and cared for, tried by men, sentenced by men, and committed to our various institutions for months and even years, where only men officials had access to them, and where, in sickness or direst need, no womanly help or visitation was expected or allowed."[52] To remedy this situation the women offered an alternative: remove male influences by separating women from male prisoners, male officers, and male guards; and replace the demeaning influences of men with the uplifting force of women.

In the police matron movement, one of the testing grounds for this demand, reformers successfully argued that women's moral force qualified them as prison guards. The WCTU had succeeded in having matrons hired in several American cities between 1876 and 1888.[53] In New York City, however, the WPA encountered resistance to its campaign to require matrons wherever women were detained by police.[54] The men of the PANY opposed the WPA-supported legislation on the grounds that female prisoners did not suffer under men's authority and, even if they did, female matrons would be too weak to prevent abuse. PANY members especially disliked the provisions that police matrons would have the same salary as station-house keepers and the same right to trial before removal.[55] Women reformers avoided the questions of salary and status; they simply explained that women had special skills for protecting and reforming the female prisoner. No matter how depraved or unmanageable the prisoner might be, "a man has no right to go near her." Rather, she required "the shield of a pure woman's presence—, one who could bring to bear a force, often found more potent than muscular strength." The Police Matrons bill finally passed in 1888, though without mandatory status.[56]

Although some men agreed that women's moral force, sensitivity to their own sex, and domestic skills fit them for jobs in women's prisons, many remained reluctant to grant women authority over the new institutions.[57] When Rhoda Coffin first suggested to the APA in 1876 that a "woman's prison should be entirely under the control of women," her audience expressed discomfort. "I believe with the lady that every institution should be homelike," one man responded, "but the home for women

without men is not the home for me."[58] The APA congress refused to accept Coffin's paper. Similarly, state officials remained wary of women's authority. In Indiana, a male board of managers controlled the finances of the women's prison during its first years and, according to Superintendent Sarah Smith, they encroached on the internal management of the institution. In 1877 Indiana reformers succeeded in installing an all-female board that was "watched by suspicious eyes" until members proved themselves competent. Massachusetts women's prison managers found it necessary to respond to critics by claiming that female staff subdued difficult prisoners "as successfully as if inmates had been under the control of men, and we believe, with better results to the character."[59]

Only a constant defense of the new women's prisons, argued at APA and NCCC meetings and in annual reports, convinced the profession that women had both the right and the ability to control their own institutions. The equality they won, however, rested firmly on the belief in a separate female sphere. Men who toured the Massachusetts women's prison in 1881 became convinced that "women can govern women."[60] As Pennsylvania prison chaplain J. J. Milligan confessed: "For ten years I have been doubting that the only persons to take charge of a female prison, were females. . . . But yesterday, I must say, that all my objections vanished into thin air."[61] The next year Milligan criticized his colleagues who remained skeptical of prisons "unreservedly in the hands of women." He exemplified the reasoning behind the gradual acceptance of women's prisons when he explained that they offered "the methods in nearest alliance with honest and pure home life. Girls and women should be trained to adorn homes with the virtues which make their lives noble and enobling. *It is only in this province, that they may most fittingly fill their mission.*"[62] The domestic basis of differential treatment proved to be the most convincing defense for women's prisons.

Both the NCCC and the APA followed Milligan's lead as members converted to the cause of female-controlled prisons. By the time Rhoda Coffin addressed the APA on the subject in 1885, delegates accepted a stronger statement of support.[63] By 1891 the NCCC acknowledged that female staff and management worked well in Massachusetts and Indiana. The organization listed as reasons for appointing women managers of state institutions that "woman's superior knowledge of domestic economy" would

reduce state expenses, while in justice to female inmates, staff and management of the same sex offered sympathetic counsel and representation of women's own interests.[64]

By the 1890s the defense of women's prisons had been successfully accomplished. Separate penal institutions, run by and for women, and police matrons in major cities, supplemented the homes for discharged prisoners and the prison visiting of the antebellum period. The male prison reformers had gradually granted equal status to women and their institutions on the grounds that they constituted a separate female sphere within the correctional system. The legitimacy of women's prisons rested on women's uniquely feminine components—on their domesticity, their emotional sensitivity, and their greater moral force. Even as women encroached on men's professional world, they thus remained limited to the traditional feminine realm. As Milligan explained: "Home! a home is the place for the woman; there she belongs exclusively. Then make a reformatory like a home, educate her to that standard, and it is possible to train her *for a home*, in a home."[65]

The women's prisons established in the 1870s and 1880s set standards that survived almost intact for the next century. Differential treatment of women prisoners remained a central principle of American corrections until a new feminist approach emerged in the 1970s. Although the "separate but equal" argument long outlived its usefulness in justifying women's control of their own prisons, it cannot be totally dismissed as the anachronism it later became. In the end, the arguments based on difference furthered the breakdown of the separate spheres by enabling middle-class women to work and to assume authority in the public sphere. The principle of differential treatment of women provided an effective rationale to counter resistance to the reformers' entry into the public sphere while not conflicting with these nineteenth-century women's deeply held sexual ideology. In contrast to the few egalitarian feminists of their era, most prison reformers believed that they were different from men. Their faith in a common womanhood encouraged their concern for women prisoners; their discovery of sexual exploitation in prisons gave them good reason to believe that substituting keepers of their own sex would improve prison life for women.

The results of the "separate but equal" ideology, however, were as contradictory as were the reformers' plans for feminine prisons.

The two cultural models they hoped to combine—true womanhood and the prison—were incompatible. How could the feminine principles they extolled—heart, home, sisterhood—thrive within an institution designed to facilitate the isolation and discipline of inmates? The histories of the first women's prisons reveal how "their sisters' keepers" responded to this contradiction.

Chapter 4

The Women's Prison Environment

In 1877, a new resident of the Massachusetts Reformatory Prison for Women wrote home to her sister: "I wish thee could see me! I cannot describe my surrounds. I might as well be in the desert of Sahara—for *human* companionship at this moment.—no, hark! in the distance I hear the rumble of a railway train, which means *life*. But I am separated from it by a high red fence—and from the other inmates of this building by wings—and corridors and doors."[1]

Although she came as a paid staff member, Dr. Eliza Mosher knew when she wrote these words that she was in prison. Her initial impressions offer a hint of how the buildings, their location, and their inhabitants must have affected the newcomers to women's prisons. Measured by Mosher's sentiments, the task of creating a homelike, reformatory environment posed a great challenge to prison reformers and administrators.

Both internal and external constraints contributed to this challenge. Within their own movement, reformers found themselves in a new relationship to prisons and prisoners once they had established their own institutions. Previously, they had criticized prisons from the outside, either as visitors, advocates for released inmates, or members of state correctional boards. Now, however, the reformers were inside, as keepers. Their very jobs constrained them as critics. Even as they remained sympathetic to the women under their care, they had to defend their institutions to the state officials who controlled their budgets and commitment policies. These external agencies—state legislatures, courts, and boards of control—imposed numerous constraints on prison funding, design, hiring, and inmate commitments.

As a result of both kinds of limitations, the histories of the first women's prisons, from approximately 1870 to 1910, reveal a narrowing of reformers' visions. The process of compromise first became evident in the creation of the women's prison environment—design, staff, and inmates—which is discussed in this chapter. The internal life of the institutions, the subject of chapter five, further illustrates the problems of implementing feminine prison reform.

Prison Design

Architectural design had been an important component of American prison reform since Jeremy Bentham's *Panopticon* of 1787 influenced the plans of the first state penitentiaries. Massive, imposing structures from the outside, the prisons built in the early nineteenth century reflected the goals of isolation, order, and discipline that were enforced within them. Central buildings housed administration and services, and from them emanated wings of long hallways with tiers of cell blocks easily viewed by guards. Miniscule cells, averaging fifty square feet, housed prisoners in isolation from each other. Like cogs in a machine, inmates moved according to strict schedules and, ideally, remained silent at all times. Even the late nineteenth-century reformatories, which rejected the punitive objectives of earlier institutions, retained their disciplinary goals. Reformatory design included greater specialization of interior space, with numerous workshops, classrooms, and usually a gymnasium, and with courtyards and a parade ground between buildings. But all these areas remained enclosed within an outer wall.[2]

In calling for unique, feminine prisons, reformers clearly stated that these institutions should not replicate the design of the penitentiary. Rather than a factory or military atmosphere, women required an environment suitable for their feminine temperaments. Josephine Shaw Lowell advocated the cottage system used in juvenile reformatories. Other reformers hoped to modify penitentiary or reformatory designs by making women's prisons less austere, less militaristic, and even less secure than men's. As a Massachusetts prison commissioner wrote, the "Proper Construction of Prisons for Women" did "not require the strength and solidity of a prison intended for the worst class of male convicts." Rather, he suggested, it should be relieved "as far as possible, from prison-like features" in order to be "homelike and cheerful."[3]

When women's prisons were constructed, their designs reflected a mixture of traditional and newer domestic styles. To a limited degree, the plans followed Lowell's recommendations. In 1877 the Massachusetts Reformatory Prison for Women (MRPW) opened on thirty acres of land in the village of Framingham (Sherborn). Its locale, thirty miles west of Boston, suggested a retreat from the city to a pastoral setting. Instead of cells, the reformatory had "private rooms" which ranged from fifty to ninety square feet, slightly larger than most men's prison quarters. Iron bedsteads and white

linen, not the typical bare cot, adorned each room. Well-behaved inmates could decorate their quarters, enjoy unbarred windows, and have wood slats instead of grating on their doors. Room size and location was determined by a merit system, with six-by-ten-foot rooms for most and nine-by-ten-foot rooms for the honor class.[4]

The New York refuges at Hudson and Albion adopted the cottage plan. The numerous small structures there made it easier to classify inmates and to approximate domestic life. The Hudson House of Refuge, set on 40 acres in northeastern New York State, had four cottages at its opening in 1887 and added three more later. Each cottage housed twenty-six inmates and officers and included a kitchen and dining room. "The 'cottages' are fitted up as nearly as possible like an average family home," the *Charities Review* observed. In later years, the board of managers assigned the cottages names instead of the original numbers "in furtherance of its plans to free the institution from the appearance of a place of imprisonment." The institution also had a main building with office, work, and school rooms. Similarly, the Western House of Refuge opened in 1893 on a 100-acre campus adjacent to a park. It provided seven residential cottages, surrounded by ten other buildings.[5]

Indiana's prison, situated on 15.6 acres in Indianapolis, consisted of a superintendent's residence connected to a traditional congregate prison with a central administrative section and two wings. One housed forty to sixty adult felons in cells 8-by-11½ feet. The other had a capacity for 200 juvenile offenders. The two divisions had separate facilities, except for a common chapel located in the girls' school wing.[6]

In Massachusetts, New York, and Indiana, the women's prisons rejected the penitentiary plan of individual seclusion. Specialized interior rooms encouraged inmates to circulate throughout the prison to the chapels, workrooms, libraries, and infirmaries. Access to the outdoors also helped "naturalize" the settings. At each of the institutions, even the one in downtown Indianapolis, officials encouraged inmates to cultivate the prison gardens. In Massachusetts and New York the presence of children contributed to a domestic atmosphere. The former provided a nursery for infants born within the institution until they reached age two. The Western House of Refuge at Albion had a separate cottage for mothers and infants. Babies remained there until "suitably placed" in families, where mothers could reclaim them after their release.[7]

Unfortunately, these innovations could not compensate for the

limitations of traditional prison design. Of the four women's prisons constructed during the nineteenth century, two—in Framingham and Indianapolis—were traditional congregate buildings: massive stone structures with wings containing rows of rooms. Only the New York Houses of Refuge used the cottage plan. Furthermore, all four of the institutions suffered from inadequacies in design resulting from shortsighted economic concerns and inexperience in structuring adult reformatories.[8]

The Indiana and Massachusetts prisons ignored the call for "family-style" designs. Stone walls and elevated fences enclosed their grounds, while double doors and iron gratings further insured prison security and discouraged efforts to provide a domestic atmosphere. Punishment cells, sometimes in the basement, revealed the expectation that intransigent prisoners would be beyond the reach of moral suasion. The Massachusetts edifice, despite the contention that it was a "beautiful, castle-like building, surrounded by ample grounds," more nearly resembled a "grim, dark, 'bastille'-like structure."[9] Even at the Hudson refuge a ninety-six cell prison building housed new arrivals and punishment cases.

Although the founders of women's prisons called for vocational, medical, and child-care services, it became painfully apparent in the first few years of institutional life that insufficient space hampered their provision. The New York Houses of Refuge lacked chapels, assembly rooms, and adequate school rooms. Indiana officials soon found the combined girls' school and women's prison inadequate and regretted their failure to provide a library and enough schoolrooms. The Massachusetts prison hospital was overcrowded within a year of its opening. In both of the congregate-system prisons it was nearly impossible to classify inmates satisfactorily within one building. Massachusetts employed different wings for the various grades of prisoners, but Indiana officials had no means of separating classes of inmates.[10]

Separate female prisons, then, were handicapped from the outset by inadequate buildings and poor planning. The congregate-prison design was more economical to construct and more conducive to the supervision of a large number of inmates, and so in spite of the commitment to reformatory design, it, rather than the campus-style cottage plan, prevailed in Massachusetts and Indiana.[11] Major concerns of classifying inmates and providing special services were impeded by the limitations of space in these prisons.

Even in the cottage-plan reformatories, medical and educational facilities were often too limited to meet institutional needs.

Management and Staff

The first women's prisons were somewhat more successful in realizing their goals of female control than in realizing those of design, but only after an initial period of struggle to oust male managers. At first men maintained ultimate authority over the Indiana and Massachusetts prisons, and male physicians served in New York and Indiana. Their presence contradicted the theory that women's problems, whether medical or emotional, could best be treated by members of the same sex. Other men worked at each institution, not only to calm fears that inmates would overrun their too-gentle female keepers, but also to perform engineering, firefighting, and carpentry tasks for which there were few women available.[12]

It was not easy to attract capable women who were willing to direct prisons. In Massachusetts, where the governor appointed prison superintendents, and in New York, which early relied on civil service to recruit officers, the first "professionals" chosen did not necessarily meet the standards of competency and kindness that reformers had set. The Massachusetts prison commissioners, for example, included the problem of finding suitable administrators among the "great disadvantages" at Framingham in 1879, suggesting their disappointment with Eudora Atkinson, the first superintendent.[13] Low salaries, too, created "great difficulty in securing officers," and resulted in frequent turnover of personnel. At one point the Hudson House of Refuge had to close its schoolrooms for lack of teachers and Massachusetts governors had to cajole women into accepting the apparently unpopular position of superintendent.[14]

Gradually, however, official constraints on female control eased and new personnel entered the institutions. Indiana rejected its male board of managers in 1877, and in 1883, along with Massachusetts, it dispensed with the male-held office of treasurer-steward. Women doctors joined the Indiana and New York prisons during the 1880s and 1890s and continued to serve at Framingham. In Indiana a "nightwatch-woman" joined the staff.[15]

By 1900 the managers of the women's reformatories could boast the attainment of female control. "Every officer, from the head

down to the lowest matron, is a female," explained Warren Spalding, Massachusetts prison commission secretary, "and no man goes into the institution for any official business whatever." Not only could the women workers "hitch up a horse as readily as a man," superintendent Sarah Keely of Indiana told charity workers, but in spite of the presence of difficult inmates, "we have found that women are just as able to govern unruly women as men."[16]

The acceptance of female authority seemed to be based as much on women's ability to control prisoners as on their feminine skills in reforming them, and this attitude influenced the goals for women's prisons. Just as women's prison structures resembled traditional penal institutions', so, gradually, the goals of women's prison administrators came to approximate those of other penal reformers. At first, feminine solicitude seemed to prevail in Indiana, under superintendent Sarah Smith, and in Massachusetts. In the latter state, the different personal styles of the early administrators reveal the shift toward more orthodox methods that occurred during the last part of the century. They illustrate as well how individual superintendents could shape institutional life and how they were affected by it.

Eliza Mosher had never intended to enter prison work. Born in 1846 into a Quaker family in New York State, she studied medicine at the New England Women's Hospital in Boston and the University of Michigan. She later practiced in Poughkeepsie, New York, where she volunteered to work with boys at a local church. In 1877 Mosher entered the women's reformatory at Framingham as the prison physician. Her initial impressions, cited at the opening of this chapter, revealed how isolating and alienating her new home could be. Still, Mosher found comfort in her well-furnished quarters and looked forward to the chance to equip a small hospital and help steer the new institution. Soon she had decided to stay, insisting that "I have consecrated myself anew to my Master, for *service here*."[17]

Her first year as prison physician sorely tested that commitment. Venereal disease, insanity, drug addiction, and births of illegitimate or syphilitic infants overwhelmed her. Moreover, superintendent Atkinson, who had initially impressed Mosher with her "elegance," proved to be an obstacle. Atkinson interfered with medical procedures in the hospital and, in Mosher's view, inflicted "unduly severe punishment"—an average of ten cases of solitary confinement each day.[18] While Atkinson "hindered and oppressed" the doctor and other staff members, Mosher and her ally, chaplain

Sarah Pierce, met with the inmates to attempt reformatory treatment. "I had such a satisfactory time reading to some of the women this afternoon," the doctor wrote. "When I was done with the story they asked me to read in the Bible to them and pray, and I think they really were stirred for the time being. But alas that it is so evanescent."[19]

Such hopes and doubts recurred throughout Mosher's career. She shared earlier reformers' sympathies for the lot of the fallen woman, but she often felt helpless to relieve it. She had alternately been shocked and disappointed when inmates' "good intentions" were lost "the first time a temptation" came. But, Mosher added, "They are morally deformed, these women! How far are they responsible for their actions?" Like earlier reformers, she increasingly answered that they were not to blame. As the prison official most aware of their physical health she often cited disease and what she considered the "tainted" inheritance of alcoholism or venereal infection as the root of inmates' problems. Privately she wrote: "I feel so unspeakably thankful for the purity of all the parents who are pure. Oh you have no idea of the things which I come in contact with daily! The wretched lives, the hardened—and even lost image of the Maker. Tender spots, covered with rubbish tho' they may be, are often to be found, but the response is lost amid the influences which surround them even here."[20]

The pressures of work, the antagonism of superintendent Atkinson, and the deaths of both chaplain Pierce and a close relative caused Mosher to resign in September 1879. But, after visiting her family and traveling to Europe, she returned to Framingham within a year, when Governor John Davis Long threatened to appoint a male superintendent if Mosher would not accept the position. Although she only served from 1880 to 1882, Mosher had a significant impact on the institution. After her first year in office, the prison commissioners found that the institution was "now doing the work for which it was established in a much more satisfactory manner than heretofore."[21]

Now the highest ranking official at the reformatory, Mosher attempted to improve the conditions that had irritated her as prison doctor. Contrary to the common practice (then and now) of referring to inmates as girls, she indicated her respect by calling them "women," "the ladies," or "the prisoners." She instituted a merit grading-system, attracted new staff members, and attempted to provide "individual teaching and training." In her first year as superintendent, Mosher organized numerous "entertainments" for

inmates, including speeches by feminists like Lucy Stone, talks by Governor Long, and readings, musical performances, and recitations. She began the practice of inviting students from nearby Wellesley College to visit prisoners and, along with their professors, to entertain inmates on Thanksgiving.[22]

As Mosher would have been the first to admit, it is difficult to evaluate her efforts. In a characteristic moment of doubt she wrote that "it is so hard to know how much is superficial and how much is heartfelt in the words and actions of those under our care." But if the strength of personal commitment provides any measure of the prison's development, enthusiasm for the institution grew under Mosher. "This is a work which tries women's souls (and men's, when they do it)," she once wrote to her niece. But in the end she persisted: "This *is* a wonderful field! As thee said Hannah last summer, it grows upon me. Am I doing the work day by day as it *ought* to be done. God knows I *want* to. And truly I am doing it for Him."[23]

In spite of frequent longings to return to medicine and to her family, Mosher continued her administrative work until 1882, when a serious knee injury forced her home to recuperate. Although she returned on crutches to supervise the institution, the election of Benjamin Butler as governor of the state, she claimed, took "a great deal of pleasure out of state work" for her. She resigned in April 1882.[24]

Butler had little sympathy for the women's prison and threatened to cut off its appropriations or appoint a male superintendent. The only woman he would accept for the position was Clara Barton, whose labors on the Civil War battlefields had won the former general's respect. Barton at first refused to relinquish her work for the International Red Cross, but with the encouragement of other women reformers, including Mary Livermore, Frances Willard, Marion Talbot, and Ellen Johnson, she agreed to serve and reluctantly remained at Framingham for nine months, until Butler had left office.[25]

Barton's reluctance to accept the superintendency did not seem to hinder her enthusiasm for the work. She made clear to inmates that her door was open to them and encouraged the women to write her whatever requests, problems, or experiences they wished to share and to make appointments to speak with her. Many did approach the superintendent, and whenever possible she tried to resolve their legal or personal difficulties. Inmates responded with lavish affection, and several formed friendships with her which continued through correspondence after their release. Barton

meanwhile handled state officials as effectively as she did women prisoners. She kept Governor Butler and prison visitor Burnham Wardwell, both skeptics about the institution, at bay. She was partly responsible for the success of the legislation that abolished the male-held office of treasurer-steward.[26] She furthered the professionalization of women's prison reform both by assuming financial management of the prison and by disappointing observers who had expected her to serve without salary.[27] By the time Barton left, even Benjamin Butler concluded that "fit women are the fittest to take care of women."[28]

Although Barton was anxious to return to her work for the Red Cross at the end of the year, she wrote with extreme fondness of the women on her staff and in her care when she left Framingham. Both groups had enjoyed her presence and regretted her departure. "There was not one of whom I could ask forgiveness," Barton wrote in a letter shortly after leaving, "for I had offended none, and none have offended me." This evaluation continued, with overtones of the superiority of feminine prison reform:

> I knew then, as I know now, that I could conduct that prison from one years end to the other, holding it in good, and ever increasing order, without a punishment. [A]nd if *"Reformation"* ever comes to any, it must come under such elevating influences, and conditions of self-respect, self reliance, honor, love and trust:—penalties, degradation, distrust, disgrace never yet reformed any human being, and the more *Reformatory* people come to understand and regard that fact the better it will be for their work.[29]

It is unfortunate that the women's prisons could not attract and retain more administrators like Clara Barton and Eliza Mosher. Not only did they respect and comfort inmates, but they also maintained good working relationships with their staffs, making it more likely that qualified women would join them. However Mosher and Barton were exceptional, two of the outstanding women of their generation. Neither of them remained in the institutions, where they had felt as imprisoned as the women in their care. Each went on to accomplish broader humanitarian and women's reforms. Whether it was the low pay, the uncomfortable living conditions, or the questionable status of the work which repelled more qualified women is indeterminable. In any case, later staff members had difficulty living up to the early standards of feminine care.

More typical of the administrators who would dominate the

women's prisons until the early twentieth century was Ellen Cheney Johnson, who succeeded Barton at Framingham. From 1884 until her death in 1899, Ellen Johnson ruled at Framingham and made herself the spokesperson for women's prison reform throughout the country. As a newspaperman analyzing her portrait once wrote, Johnson had "a good combination of the feminine and the masculine . . . which qualifies her to comprehend all sides of human life and enables her to dominate her own sex and lead the other."[30] At Framingham she indeed combined the sympathy and domesticity of feminine reform with traditional penal concerns: discipline, control, and efficient management.

As a member of the prison commission that successfully argued for a separate institution in the 1870s, Ellen Johnson was a central figure in the establishment of the Massachusetts women's reformatory. She maintained close contact with the managers after it opened, occasionally taking charge when the superintendent was ill or away, and locating homes for released inmates and their children. Her frequent offers to aid Clara Barton were sometimes coupled with apologies for interfering in the superintendent's work, for Johnson was sensitive to her own need to find worthwhile activities to occupy her. She had been lonely and depressed since her husband's death in 1881 and turned to her work for solace. "There is no place so dear to me as that Prison now," she wrote to Barton. Even on vacation, Johnson confessed, "my mind often wanders back to the Prison," and to thoughts of uplifting an inmate, so that "at night I should not feel so absolutely *good for nothing*."[31]

After Barton resigned in January 1884, Johnson became superintendent. Enthusiastically she proceeded to organize the institution around the theme of training for self-control. Johnson saw no contradiction in the tasks of reforming and disciplining prisoners. For her, rehabilitation came through control, first by the prison routine, and then by the inmates themselves. The prisoner "must learn to do right without compulsion or she will cease to do right when the compelling force is gone." Johnson's methods, nonetheless, were compelling. She combined a merit system with strict discipline and appeals to inmates' emotions. Her dual precepts were: "No lesson is more important than that which teaches respect for the law, and dread of its wrath. At the same time, it is a fundamental point in our theory that every criminal can be won by gentleness and patience."[32]

Of the two strains, Johnson emphasized the need for discipline, not only among inmates but with her staff as well. Some workers

complained about their duties and resented Johnson's supervision. They breathed a sigh of relief when she was absent for a day and thought longingly of former superintendent Barton's "words of cheer and comfort."[33] The same methods which drove these women away, however, gave legitimacy to women's prisons in the opinion of others. The Massachusetts legislature, for instance, decided with Johnson's administration that the prison which many "regarded as an experiment, may now be said to have attained a degree of success far exceeding the most sanguine expectations of its projectors."[34] Their acceptance signaled that only with a heavy dose of traditional prison methods would women's work in the profession be considered legitimate.

The Massachusetts Reformatory Prison for Women may have been unique in the fame achieved by some of its administrators, but its history suggests several themes common to all of the institutions: first, women's prison reform became, in fact, a mixture of "masculine" and "feminine" concerns; second, the personality of a superintendent largely determined correctional treatment; and third, the new prisons were hard-pressed to find adequate staff. At least three women turned down the superintendency in Massachusetts, and only the threat of the appointment of a male head compelled the services of Mosher and Barton. Those who did remain, like Johnson, may have needed institutional work—for personal or financial reasons—too desperately to leave.

In Indiana and New York, as well, the search for competent staff repeatedly troubled the managers of the women's prisons. At the Western House of Refuge, not only were there difficulties finding teachers, but at one point the entire board resigned over criticisms of their mismanagement. The state prison commissioners admitted "serious embarrassment from [the] difficulty of procuring satisfactory officers from the Civil Service list for assistant matrons and assistant superintendent," and attributed the problem to both hard work and low pay.[35] In Indiana, after a decade during which Sarah Smith had continued the religious uplift of her former rescue work, the women's prison faced recurrent conflicts between managers and staff. Superintendent Sarah Keely failed to gain the respect of her subordinates, one of whom lamented in 1892 that "there is not the good done that use to be [*sic*]."[36] Members of the board of managers agreed, accusing Keely of unethical practices and harsh punishments. She responded with counter-accusations that board members misused state funds and interfered with prison discipline. The next superintendent, Emily

Rhodes, faced similar charges, including specific accusations of negligence leading to inmates' escapes; cruelty in tying women up in cold cells; refusal to parole those due to leave; and "working the women to death."[37]

The record of female correctional personnel during the late nineteenth century, then, was decidedly mixed. Women did achieve control over the penal institutions they had established and helped make prison administration a new female vocation. However they did so in part by identifying with traditional prison standards. Gradually the nurturing approach of Eliza Mosher and Clara Barton became heavily tempered by the disciplined control emphasized by Ellen Johnson. Moreover, there were perhaps too few qualified female correctional workers to run the institutions, and those hired were both poorly paid and overworked. Without the infusion of new ideas and experiences, the reformatories often succumbed to stagnation. Though women had gained the right to run their own prisons, they had yet to establish a pool of qualified persons to do the work in the manner reformers had envisioned.

Inmates

One of the prerequisites set by reformers for successful women's prisons were inmates who seemed open to reformatory treatment. Only a small minority of all women criminals could be accommodated by the new institutions (most would remain in jails, houses of correction, or state prisons).[38] Those who were young, who were relatively unhardened, who had committed misdemeanors, or who had been the victims of difficult circumstances were the most desirable prisoners.

Each state used different criteria for commitment to its women's prisons. At the Indiana institution, approximately fifty adult female felons entered annually to serve lengthy sentences—up to life—in the prison wing of the building. (Misdemeanant women remained in local jails.) The reformatory wing housed a girls' school for incorrigibles, petty offenders, and neglected children under the age of six.[39] In contrast, the New York houses of refuge for women at Hudson and Albion represented halfway measures between juvenile reformatories and adult prisons. They annually admitted several hundred misdemeanant women between the ages of fifteen and thirty, ages chosen to "include women likely to have children." Sentences ranged, with a high of five years.[40]

While the Indiana prison admitted only felons and the New York refuges concentrated on young misdemeanants, the Massachusetts Reformatory Prison for Women at Framingham accepted prisoners for crimes ranging from stubbornness to murder. For most crimes against public order or chastity, the courts were required to commit women to this institution. If the prison was not full, the court also could transfer women prisoners from jails and houses of correction. Framingham officials resented this provision, claiming that many women sent there were unfit for its treatment. Women officials preferred to take "those who have but recently begun lives of crime, than those who have spent years in prisons and almshouses, until they have lost ambition for better lives."[41]

Who, in fact, did fill the women's prisons? Were they the "reformables," or habitual criminals, or both? Did they represent the female prison populations of their states or were they a select group? What characteristic types of inmates did the prisons serve?

The detailed statistics kept by several institutions provide a composite view of the inmates which can be broken down to account for individual variations. Table 3 presents an overview of the populations of the women's prisons from their openings until approximately 1910.[42] In general, the majority of inmates were under age twenty-five, white, and native-born, although often of immigrant parents. Nearly two-thirds had been married at some time in their lives, but half of these were widowed, divorced, or separated at the time of their incarceration. As prison officers pointed out, the family life of those who were married was erratic, or, as they put it, "fruitful of the worst possible evils."[43] Most of the women had no prior convictions, and those who did usually had only one, often for drunkenness. The crimes for which they were serving in New York and Massachusetts were minor—under 20 percent had committed dangerous offenses against person or property. Drunkenness and prostitution alone accounted for about half of the commitments (table 4).

In some respects, the prisoners in the all-female institutions of Massachusetts and New York differed from women in other penal institutions in those states (table 5). For example, fewer foreign-born inmates appeared in the reformatories than appeared in the total state prison populations. The age groups represented at Framingham and at the New York refuges were predominantly younger than the total female convict group. The high percentage of single women, particularly in New York, reflected the lower age

range. Massachusetts figures show a lower incidence of recidivism in the women's reformatory than in other state facilities for both men and women. The distribution of crimes, however, is less unique in the all-female institutions than might be expected. The

TABLE 3. Profiles of Inmates at Separate Women's Prisons: Massachusetts, Indiana, and New York

	Massachusetts	Indiana	New York (Albion)
	%	%	%
Age			
Under 25	50	50	95
Race			
White	95	72	95
Religion			
Protestant	not given	51	not given
Catholic		10	
None		39	
Nativity			
U.S. born,		90	
American parents	17	not given	42
Foreign parents	41		42
Foreign born	41	10	16
Marital Status			
Married (at some time)	57	65	28
Widowed, divorced, separated	36	24	22
Single	42	35	72
First Offenders	61 to 75	89	80
Intemperate	78	30	not given
Illiterate	20	25	15

Sources: Massachusetts: inmate sample, 1877–1913, from "History of Inmates," at Massachusetts Correctional Institution, Framingham, Mass., and mean of annual aggregate data, Massachusetts Reformatory Prison for Women, *Annual Reports, 1878–1915*; Indiana: mean of annual aggregate data, Indiana Woman's Prison, *Annual Reports, 1873–1913*; New York: mean of annual aggregate data, Western House of Refuge, *Annual Reports, 1893–1900*, and records of all admissions in Minutes of Board of Managers meetings, Executive Department, Board of Officers of State Institutions, New York State Library, Albany.

overall proportion of female offenders against person or property in Massachusetts and New York—between 15 and 20 percent—is similar to the proportion in the women's institutions. Indiana statistics are exceptional for in that state the women's prison took only the most serious offenders.[44]

TABLE 4. Types of Offenses Committed by Inmates of Separate Women's Prisons: Massachusetts, Indiana, and New York

	Massachusetts	Indiana	New York (Albion)
Offense	%	%	%
Public Order			
Vagrancy	4		33
Drunkenness	38		8
Idle and disorderly	10		3
Stubborn (child)	4		1
Other	1		1
Total	57		46
Chastity			
Prostitution	13		—
Lewd, wanton, and lascivious	7		—
Other	7		—
Total	27		36[a]
Person or Property			
Larceny	11	72	16
Assault	1	2	
Murder		9	
Arson		2	
Other	4	15[b]	1
Total	16	100	17

Sources: Massachusetts: inmate sample, 1877–1912, from "History of Inmates," at Massachusetts Correctional Institution, Framingham, Mass. (comparison with aggregate annual offenses shows discrepancy of less than 5 percent); Indiana: mean of annual aggregate data in Indiana Woman's Prison, *Annual Reports, 1873–1908*; New York: mean of annual aggregate data, Western House of Refuge, *Annual Reports, 1893–1900*, and records of all admissions, 1904–1909, in Minutes of Board of Managers meetings, Executive Department, Board of Officers of State Institutions, New York State Library, Albany.

a. Total only, not broken down by offense.
b. Includes some public order.

This overview demonstrates that the inmates of the new women's institutions differed only slightly from other imprisoned women, but the distinctions that did exist were important to the reformers: inmates at the new prisons were often young morals offenders who fit the reformers' definition of fallen women in need of aid. A sample of case records from Framingham confirms the profile: the women there were predominantly white, young, and American-born. The typical sentence was less than two years for a minor offense against public order. Most inmates had some formal education before the age of fourteen, when they began to work, 37 percent of them as domestic servants and 39 percent in factories and mills. Usually, but with notable exceptions, a first conviction

TABLE 5. Characteristics of Female Prisoners in All Penal Institutions, by Percentage of Institutional Population: United States, Massachusetts, New York, and Indiana, 1880, 1890

	U.S.		Mass.	N.Y.	Ind.
	1880	1890	1890	1890	1890
Age					
Under 20	11.45	13.74	7.89	9.84	23.21
Under 25			26.20	25.42	53.57
Race					
White	75.06	62.42	97.06	94.07	79.46
Nativity					
Foreign born	34.13	36.14	57.30	49.80	3.57
Offense[a]					
Person	9.46	12.02	3.97	5.61	16.96
Property	23.72	20.69	13.37	14.54	48.21
Public order			9.89	50.26	4.46
Chastity	55.68	59.83	70.99	26.01	25.89
Other	11.14	7.46	2.67	3.65	4.46

Sources: 1880: United States Department of the Interior, Census Office, *Report on the Defective, Dependent, and Delinquent Classes of the Population of the United States*, F. H. Wines, special agent (Washington, 1888), "Statistics of Crime," pp. 477–574; 1890: United States Department of the Interior, Census Office, *Report on Crime, Pauperism and Benevolence in the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890*, Frederick H. Wines, special agent (Washington, D.C., 1895), pp. 3, 12–24, 45.

a. Offense categories have been rearranged from the United States Census listings to match as nearly as possible those used by the prisons studied; thus the crimes under public order and chastity may differ, and the two groups should be considered as one category. Rounding error accounts for totals ranging from 99 to 101 percent. Because the 1910 census combined juvenile and adult prisoners, the data are not presented here.

brought them to the reformatory, where they remained for an average stay of one year.[45]

The inmates by no means comprised a homogeneous group, however, for distinctions among types of offenders were significant. The Massachusetts records provide sufficient evidence to analyze the types of female criminals who entered that prison. Although they do not represent all women offenders, they do shed light on the problems faced by the women's prisons. An analysis of published annual aggregate statistics, a sample of 640 prisoner records, and a study of 2,000 inmates conducted by Dr. Eliza Mosher[46] reveal the characteristics of three classes of offenders.

The women in the first category, offenders against public order, were clearly not the intended beneficiaries of reformatory treatment, as the case of Mary M. suggests.[47] Committed for drunkenness at age sixty, she was Irish-born of "good parents." She had married forty years before, and six of her nine children were dead. Mary could not find work, and her "bad" husband lived with other women and beat her "terribly." For the past ten years she had been intemperate periodically. Her case was typical of offenders against public order, the majority of whom were committed for drunkenness. They were older than the other inmates, having a mean age of thirty, with the highest proportion over age twenty-one. Like Mary M., half were foreign-born, particularly Irish. About three-fourths had married. Dr. Mosher found among this group the highest incidence of syphilis, alcoholism, insanity, illiteracy, and recidivism in the prison, with a recommitment rate of over 70 percent.[48]

Prison officials seemed sympathetic to these women as victims, in spite of their pasts and their poor chances of reformation. A forty-eight-year-old Irish widow, for instance, had been intemperate all of her eleven years in the United States. Her previous sentences included fourteen trips to Deer Island, the city penitentiary, and one term at the House of Correction. She asked the judge to send her to Framingham, and officials there recorded that she was "anxious to reform." Another drunkard, age thirty-nine, had become intemperate some time after entering the mills at age thirteen. Yet her record claimed that "she never drank until after marriage." Apparently these older alcoholic women were given the benefit of the doubt by their keepers.

Different backgrounds characterized the second group of inmates, the chastity offenders—nightwalkers, adulteresses, or "lewd, wanton and lascivious" women. Younger, with a mean age of

twenty-six, usually single, separated, or divorced, they were often American-born (50 to 66 percent), or from Britain or Canada. Margaret T., for instance, a common nightwalker, age twenty-four, was American-born of "good parents," both of whom had died. She had attended school (as had many of this group) and then married, but had not seen her husband for two years. Her sentence was a mere four months. A less-hopeful but not unusual case was Annie B. Though only nineteen, this was her fourth arrest for nightwalking. She was born in Lowell, Massachusetts, of intemperate parents, entered the mills at age ten, and was intemperate by age fifteen. She left home, became a prostitute, "married a known scoundrel," and "has led a life of blackest sin during the past year."

Thus the second type included the so-called fallen women, toward whom prison officials were sympathetic and for whom they took special pains. Many of these women were, in fact, the perpetrators of victimless crimes. The case of a twenty-five-year-old uneducated white woman illustrates both the actual nature of many offenses against chastity, and prison officials' response. Although committed for lewdness, she was described as "A quiet, well-behaved simple woman" whose crime was really an illegitimate pregnancy. Considered "reformable" and thus more likely to benefit from her incarceration, she received an eighteen-month sentence, six months longer than the mean for this group and a year longer than the sentences of most prostitutes. Another chastity offender, a thirty-five-year-old black woman, was sentenced to one year for adultery. Her crime consisted of living with a white man after her own husband had remarried. Reformatory treatment was apparently ineffective; like 16 percent of all chastity offenders, she later returned to the institution. In another case, common-law marriage proved a crime. Emma D., a native-born woman who was adopted after her own parents died, went to school until the age of fourteen. She lived with her husband for five years, but "not happily," so she left and "lived with a man unmarried." At first officials considered her a "Good, useful prisoner," but a doctor's report indicated that Emma "always had evil tendencies," and then officials discovered that her real parents had never been married! Now defined as an unhopeful case, it probably did not surprise the staff when she returned to prison the following year.

The chastity offenders included young women sentenced for "stubbornness" when their relatives could not control their behavior. Sixteen-year-old Eliza L., for example, committed for two

years as a "stubborn child," had been "weak and licentious rather than deliberately bad." Another sixteen-year-old who had run away from home was sentenced at her grandmother's request. The length of these sentences reflected officials' belief that the young, promising cases deserved fuller treatment. As the court explained in the case of a seventeen-year-old girl sentenced for two years for idle and disorderly behavior, the sentence was made "not as a punishment, but to see what can be done for her in a reformatory way." But the younger inmates were not necessarily the most malleable. After three years in the girls' industrial school, for example, one inmate, an eighteen-year-old stubbornness case, became a "difficult prisoner" at Framingham who was at one point "sixty days in solitary and still continuing."

In some instances the prison served as a home or hospital, as in the case of Mary D. Her respectable family had moved from New Brunswick to Fall River, Massachusetts, where Mary attended school, worked in the mills, and then ran away to a house of ill fame. Her father found her there, pregnant, possibly the cause rather than the result of her new life. Sent to Framingham, she gave birth and was then discharged. She later married the child's father.

Chastity offenders, then, included a mix of young women committed for sexual or moral offenses; only a few, the professional prostitutes, were truly criminals. Most had committed victimless crimes and many needed medical and social services. Instead, however, they received inordinately large doses of reformatory treatment.

More dangerous criminals fell into the third category, offenders against property and persons. A representative subgroup, the larcenists, were young, though often married, with a high proportion from Canada and few from Ireland. The age range for this group varied widely (estimates of the mean ranged from fifteen to thirty-three). Occupation became relevant in this category only. Domestic workers tended to be convicted for property offenses, probably petty larceny from their employers, while factory workers seemed to commit crimes against the person. The latter group, however, was so small that the data may be misleading.

Members of this group received the longest sentences, with means of twenty-two and twenty-four months for property and person crimes, respectively.[49] One twenty-five-year-old woman, possibly insane (she spent part of her sentence in the Worcester Lunatic Asylum), received five years for trying to shoot a man. In

a pathetic case, a sixty-two-year-old American woman professed her innocence in the charge of procuring an abortion for a woman who had died. A "very large, fleshy woman, almost helpless from size," and with an invalid husband, she pled ill-health but was nonetheless committed for five years. She died in prison. In each of these cases, the object of the long sentence was punishment or deterrence; for these women the institution was more nearly a prison than a reformatory.

In addition to these severely treated first offenders, the professional or habitual criminals often fell into this third category. They provided the most colorful as well as the most tragic cases at the prison. One woman operated a successful burglary team with her niece, winning people's sympathy by feigning invalidism. But when her husband discovered their cache of stolen goods, the women were brought to court. The older one received a three-year prison term while her niece got only eighteen months, a reversal of the usual pattern. In the courtroom the niece "cooly requested the judge to make her imprisonment equal" to that of her aunt, a request he denied. For these serious criminals, too, long sentences had the traditional goal of punishment, not reformation. Other professionals who appear in the prison records include the "notorious Dr. Emma Hudson," confidence woman from New York and Boston, perpetrator of fraud, theft, and blackmail. Another inmate, a forty-three-year-old Irish larcenist, remarried a professional thief, and the pair made their separate domiciles in various Massachusetts and New York penal institutions for years.

But the most dedicated, as well as colorful, character, a three-time resident at Framingham, was "Captain Jack"—alias Arthur Holmes, alias Fred Fiske, and actually a twenty-seven-year-old woman, arrested with her husband for horse stealing and sentenced on the charge of being "idle and disorderly." Her behavior, as described by the press, was anything but idle, though certainly disruptive. With "a hard, masculine face and a strong frame," the Captain wore men's clothes and worked as a teamster, sailor, bartender, and sea cook. She had repeatedly "made love to blue-eyed misses and been passionately loved by them" until her true identity was revealed, usually by herself when drunk. "Her mishaps are all owing, she says, to her passion for strong drink; if it were not for this she could wear pants with impunity and teach young men the superiority of woman."

Other inmates convicted of property and person offenses had more pitiful than flamboyant personal tales. They were the victim-

ized women who had not committed willful acts of violence but had paid the price of drugs, drunkenness, and unwanted pregnancies. Eliza W., American-born of good parents, was committed for larceny at age twenty-four. She had once taken morphine on a doctor's advice and, addicted for three years, she stole "when under the influence of the drug." Another case, an alcoholic larcenist, committed for the seventh time, was considered a "poor miserable creature." A female doctor, convicted of abortion at age seventy-one, served five years, the minimum sentence, as "an exemplary prisoner." The charge of child abandonment brought a young woman to prison for a year; she had left her unwanted child on the almshouse steps, where it died. While adequate medical and social services might have prevented many of these so-called crimes, the reformatory at least provided a less-condemning atmosphere than did local jails or state prisons.

The population of the Massachusetts Reformatory Prison for Women consisted of a diverse group of inmates, many of whom did not meet reformers' definitions of hopeful cases. A large proportion—almost half of the inmates in the early decades of the prison, and between a fourth and a third thereafter—were alcoholics over the age of thirty. Chastity offenders, the original fallen women whom reformers wanted to rescue, made up only a fourth of the inmate populace. The dangerous criminals were either professionals and habitual offenders, or women whose crimes had been precipitated by dire circumstances.

Each of these groups brought to the institution different personal experiences which required a variety of responses. Few deserved punishment, as reformers were quick to acknowledge. Many needed social services and medical care, and others would have benefited from some form of personal rehabilitation, particularly the alcoholics. Once incarcerated, however, all inmates could expect a standard form of retraining, based on a traditional ideal of womanhood.

The design, personnel, and inmate populations of the original women's reformatories all fell short of reformers' ideals. The structure of the institutions usually resembled traditional prison buildings, although features of juvenile reformatories were incorporated, particularly in New York. Inadequate space and facilities plagued the institutions, as did the problem of attracting qualified staff, especially after the 1880s. To this setting were added inmate populations that rarely fit the mold of young, first offenders. The

prisoners were of diverse backgrounds, both in age and criminal experience. Most inmates had only a grade school education and had entered low-paying jobs as domestic or mill workers before they were fifteen years old. Though many had married, their family lives were unstable. As the reformers had expected, their crimes were often victimless and due to external circumstances.

Despite their limitations, the new institutions opened their doors to women who would otherwise have served in state prisons or houses of corrections. Although they were, in several ways, poorly equipped for the task, the keepers of these institutions attempted to fulfill their charge of reforming women criminals. To do this they evolved a mixture of feminine reform and traditional penal discipline that was to retrain inmates to their model of womanhood.