

Dorothea Dix

1802–1887



WHY SHE MADE HISTORY Dorothea Dix was a pioneer for the humane care and treatment of people with mental illness. Her work brought an end to the torture and harsh treatment that many mentally ill patients had endured for centuries.



As you read the biography below, think about how Dorothea Dix's compassion for people with mental illness led to changes in the way that these people were treated by society.

March 28, 1841, was a life-altering day for Dorothea Dix. She had volunteered to teach a class of women inmates at the jail in Cambridge, Massachusetts. When the lesson ended, Dix asked to be taken to the cells where prisoners with mental illness were kept. The conditions she saw horrified her.

Dix saw men and women who were dirty and unclothed. They were chained to walls and had obviously been beaten and abused. These people had no heat and no food, and they were forced to sleep on cold stone floors with no blankets. Dix immediately began a fight to bring stoves and clothing to the mentally ill prisoners.

When her demands were met, Dix began to travel throughout Massachusetts and other states to study the conditions under which mentally ill persons were kept. In the 1800s—and long before—people with mental illness were thought to be less than human. Fear and **superstition** led people to treat the mentally ill cruelly. It was believed that people with mental illness were unable to feel heat or cold, so they were often left naked. Usually, people with



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superstition an irrational belief

mental illness were locked up in their homes or put in prison. Sometimes they were even sold as slaves.

Dix noted the conditions she witnessed in each state and presented her findings to those in authority. She urged legislators to establish state-supported institutions for the mentally ill. The first such hospital for the mentally ill was built in Trenton, New Jersey.

The hospitals brought about many changes in the care for people who were mentally ill. The patients received medical care and attention, in addition to food and clothing. In the more caring environment, doctors were able to study mental illness and develop treatments.

Dix continued to fight for the rights of the mentally ill in the United States and overseas. When she was 80, Dix retired to an apartment that was created for her at the hospital she helped establish in Trenton, but she continued to write letters urging more compassionate care of people who suffered from mental illness. Dix died in 1887.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

- 1. Draw Conclusions** How might the treatment of people with mental illness before Dorothea Dix have contributed to society's view that these people were less than human?

- 2. Evaluate** Why do you think that the mentally ill were treated so cruelly for so many years?

ACTIVITY

Imagine that you are Dorothea Dix and you are asking states to create hospitals for the mentally ill. Write a letter of persuasion. Be sure to include examples from the biography you have just read.