House of Refuge

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Preface

In 1935, the Board of Managers of the first American public reform school for juvenile delinquents, then situated at Randall's Island in New York City, sent all of their inmates to New York State's correctional institutions at Warwick and West Coxsackie and closed the gates of their own reformatory for the last time. By their action, the managers of the New York House of Refuge, the name by which the place had been known since its founding in 1825, ended 110 years of labor in the care and retraining of delinquent children.

The following pages represent my attempt to introduce the reader to the origin and development of the Refuge idea prior to and including the period in which the Refuge movement became a national phenomenon. I believe that the ideas which shaped the New York House of Refuge as it became the predominant scheme for treating juvenile criminals and neglect cases eventually constituted a substantial share of the notions which now govern our understanding of the causes, as well as the treatment, of juvenile delinquency.

In preparing this book I have assumed that the history of the rise of the first American public institution for juveniles will prove useful for historians as well as for social scientists. For historians, the book intends to correct misinformation. In a reasonably current standard history of New York State, the date describing the establishment of the first House of Refuge was in error by seventeen years. This error is at least an improvement over one of the earlier histories of the state of New York in which a volume entitled *The Age of Reform* contained nothing whatsoever about the history of the rise of either the Refuge or the reformatory system.

Hopefully, *House of Refuge* will also be of assistance to social workers and people who are engaged in or related to the field of juvenile corrections. Willard F. Johnson, director of the Office of State Institutions of the State of New York, once said that the training school
House of Refuge

has no "recorded history." He suggested that it had no "framework of tradition" such as other social institutions, and consequently, "remains an enigma to the community at large." In his opinion, the lack of such historical guideposts is unfortunate. "We can better chart the roads ahead," Johnson argues, "if we know the road we have traveled." Perhaps, this book will be helpful in accomplishing a small portion of a much larger task—that of compiling a comprehensive account of the rise of American corrections.

Although some individuals maintained that the American House of Refuge originated in their minds alone, none could lay exclusive claim to the idea. The role of those who were most influential in the eventual implementation of the Refuge idea is another matter. Here, I have attempted to isolate the chief architects of the Refuge, as it grew from informal discussions to the largest institution for juveniles in the world. To some extent, it is a straight chronicle of the hopes, fears, and desires of a small group of religiously motivated and somewhat influential men as they related to one of their pet projects of moral reform. The account is, of course, restricted in the sense that there is relatively little material supplied by the juvenile delinquents themselves. Unfortunately, one can only infer their reactions and responses from data put down by those who supposedly controlled them. Because of this, the book is basically concerned with social process and ideas, therefore focusing more upon the reformers and their beliefs than on the stories of individual delinquent children.

Although an epilogue is supplied, my account ends with the first national meeting of reformatory officials. At this point, the Refuge had become a recognized national institution, and juvenile correction officials had achieved professional status. It is my feeling that the period from 1825 to 1857 was a critical one in the annals of American reform. It represented a middle and final stage in antebellum reform activity. Orlando F. Lewis, in his pioneer work on the development of American penal reform, promulgates the thesis that three distinct waves of prison reform struck the United States during the antebellum period. The first occurred during the institution of the nation, e.g., the founding of the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons (1787), the establishment of state prisons in Philadelphia, New York (1790–97), and elsewhere. A score of years then intervened in
which little happened. Around 1820, however, a new interest in prison reform appeared, e.g., the creation of Auburn (New York) State Prison in 1819; Sing Sing [Mount Pleasant] (Ossining, N.Y.) in 1825; Wethersfield (Connecticut) State Prison in 1827; and the Eastern State Penitentiary (Philadelphia) in 1829. The Boston Prison Discipline Society, under the leadership of Louis Dwight, also arose during these years. The third wave was not to strike America until the mid-1840’s when Dorothea Dix (1802–87) and others agitated for widespread renovation in the prison system. This last agitation took place against the more violent backdrop of the anti-slavery crusade. The prison association of New York formed during this period, and Pennsylvania began to publish the *Journal of Prison Discipline and Philanthropy*.

The cutoff date of this study occurred during the third wave of reform. The choice of 1857 as a terminal date is to some extent arbitrary, but, it also appears reasonable. In the 1870’s, a markedly different type of reform movement occurred; the post-Civil War reforms seem to have introduced new concepts into the reform schools, e.g., the Elmira Reformatory in New York State, and prisons of the period, in the form of a series of national prison investigations. A national charity organization movement also took place during the last half of the nineteenth century. The background for this period is touched upon in passing in the Epilogue, but a much fuller treatment is still in the future. Also, the post-Civil War period, since it represents a period when ongoing “reforms” came under scrutiny, requires a somewhat different treatment; here, institutional analysis might be useful to indicate the impact of social change.

The reader might well wonder why the origins of the phenomenon take up such a prominent portion of the total treatment of the Refuge idea. Certainly, an account of the evolution of the Refuge in subsequent generations is an important story. Instead, however, the dictum of Aristotle is kept in mind: “He who . . . considers things in their first growth and origin, whether a state or anything else, will obtain the clearest view of them.” Although survivals are certainly important, less emphasis is placed upon them here. The point where men decided that they needed to intervene in the “natural” order of things and bring into being a regulatory device to control peoples’ behavior can be examined separately, it would seem, as a facet of important social knowledge.
Before the discussion of how the Refuge either failed or lived up to its limited objectives can begin, the goals which its originators envisioned and the ideas which conditioned those goals must be determined. It is against the goals of the founders, not some absolute standard of perfection, which the achievement of the Refuge movement must be measured.

In terms of structure, I have attempted to write a type of case study of a group of men who created an enterprise, set it in motion, and watched it grow into a national institution. The mutual education process, the grand designing, and the peddling of influence, are considered in the early chapters. These chapters also introduce some of the important figures and deal with the establishment of the institution. The story of the first administration is told in Chapter IV. Chapter V briefly traces the development of the Refuge concept in other places, and from Chapter VI on, the various facets of the history of the Refuge are treated as they appear to relate to the changing character of the institution. The Epilogue is a broad sketch of the 110-year period between the first national convention and the present day.

Initially, my interest in the subject was generated while working as a graduate research assistant at the Youth Development Center of Syracuse University. Dr. Robert J. Rayback of Syracuse University's History Department, my seminar teacher and eventual dissertation advisor, saw me through the early and later struggles with the data as it emerged in dissertation form. I am strongly indebted to him for his insight and imagination, as well as for his sound criticisms of my writing. Also, I would like to recognize the early contributions of Dr. Stuart G. Brown, Dr. Alfred A. Louch, and Dr. Roy A. Price. I particularly wish to thank Dr. Kenneth W. Kindelsperger, now dean of the Kent School of Social Work in Louisville, Kentucky, and former executive director of the Youth Development Center, along with Mr. David R. Hunter, formerly of the Ford Foundation, and Dr. Jackson Toby, coordinator of the Ford Foundation small grant program. Their financial and evaluative support aided me greatly in the early formulation of this study. Dr. Irwin Deutscher, formerly of Syracuse University, and Dr. Robert Hardt of Syracuse University's Sociology Department and Youth Development Center, along with Miss Elizabeth Thompson, former public relations head of the center, are also to be thanked for encourage-
Preface

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Although my indebtedness to many people is here a matter of record, I would like to assert that none of them are responsible for the shortcomings of this book. I am the responsible party for any errors and omissions which have taken place within its pages.

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