House of Refuge

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Epilogue

As the year 1857 marked the culmination of the Refuge movement, so the period following this date witnessed a series of subsequent reform movements dedicated to producing an impact upon juvenile crime. Although a definitive history still needs to be written on the rise of the reformatory, it is doubtful that this institutional development varied in its major features from the Refuge. Still, the reformatory movement of the post-Civil War era awaits a thorough investigation. One thing is clear, however: the dream of an ideal society, which so many reformers cherished during the antebellum period, had not materialized by the post-Civil War era. Neither the piecemeal efforts such as the House of Refuge movement, nor the massive attempts at social uplift such as the common schools, had achieved the perfect society. In fact, the Refuge and her sister institutions had begun to come under fire. Critics claimed that refuges and reformatories alike contributed, rather than detracted, from the rate of juvenile crime. It was only a matter of time until correction officials sought to change the public view of juvenile institutions by one means or another.

To some extent, the decline of the Refuge and its replacement by another type of institution, the reformatory, was visible to any astute observer. Almost as soon as the massive prison on Randall's Island had been completed, it had become an anachronism in the eyes of many of those devoted to the fight against juvenile crime. The “cottage system,” with its decentralized custodial surveillance, had caught on, and massive institutions had come under heavy criticism. A number of its critics argued that by becoming huge, the New York House of Refuge, in particular, had lost the advantages of its early days. Many who were in a position to appraise the institution from the point of its over-all effectiveness noted that the boys who were taken in invariably entered either the City Penitentiary on Blackwell's Island or the New York State Prison. When Enoch Wines led a state investigation of the state penal
system in 1870, the Refuge was found to be markedly deficient. Later, at the turn of the century, the Refuge would become a subject for exposé.

Part of the loss of qualitative control of the Refuge program could have been linked directly to an alteration in the actual structure of responsibility for the institution’s government. Private control, which had given the Refuge its character of a public institution run by a private self-perpetuating corporation, gradually began to become a thing of the past. As the state itself took on an even more important role in the management of the institution’s financial affairs, the close knit group which had founded it ceased to be involved. By the time of the Civil War, upstate New York had begun to contribute its share of managers; this meant that many of the managers could seldom be on the spot at short notice. The role of the managers also became more detached and honorific. As time went on they convened less and made fewer decisions. In the meantime, professional correction officials and state bureaucrats, by their inside knowledge, gained greater control over the Refuge operation.

As the state system expanded, having added first the Western House of Refuge in Rochester in 1847 and later, in 1876, the Elmira Reformatory, the somewhat older notions behind the original Refuge were incorporated into a new movement in penal philosophy. Although much of the Refuge program could be detected in the Elmira Reformatory’s scheme of indeterminate sentence with built-in incentives for progress, industrial training, and parole, the creation of a clearly delineated state reformatory, with its professional and public connotation, symbolized the end of the Refuge system per se. With it went the strange quasi-public arrangement which had been so characteristic of the antebellum period. Much criticism, no doubt, emerged as a by-product of the always difficult transfer from an old system to a new one.

During the 1880’s, the hitherto unquestioned religious character of the Refuge system, one of the trademarks lauded by early reformers, also came under question. Politicians, eager to grasp an issue which would gain votes and confidence, embarrassed Refuge officials by attacking what they considered to be the Protestant monopoly on religious services in the House of Refuge. The disparity between the huge
number of Roman Catholic children in the institution, as compared to the largely Protestant Board of Managers and Refuge officials, offered an inviting contrast for critics.

The Refuge also came under attack from the very type of people who had founded it. By 1900, the reformatory system into which the Refuge system had flowed had expanded throughout the United States to include 65 reformatories and refuges. These institutions contained over 19,000 inmates and, in the estimation of many, had become as poorly managed as they were overcrowded. Although the refuges and reformatories had been intended for the treatment of first offenders, many of the most hardened recidivists filled them. Inevitably, security tightened, and places such as the New York House of Refuge took on the characteristics of adult medium-security prisons.

In 1901, reformers exposed the Refuge as a huge “chamber of horrors.” Crusading journalists declared that beyond the waters of Hell’s Gate and behind the bastions of Randall’s Island lay a barbaric prison colony. An investigation took place and the air was thick with charges of brutality. Although the Refuge officials were largely exonerated, the design of the future had become clear. The name House of Refuge must go and so must the edifice on Randall’s Island.

For the third time in the Refuge’s career, the encroachment of New York City contributed to a change in location. The Refuge stood in the shadow of Manhattan’s burgeoning skyline. By the late 1920’s, state and city officials began to push for the removal of the boys to a new set of buildings which would be farther upstate. Somewhat earlier, the girls, who had always inhabited a separate set of buildings on Randall’s Island, had moved to a young women’s reformatory at Hudson, New York. As new structures began to rise in areas far outside the city, state officials began to look forward to the day when they could close down the old buildings on the island. In some senses, the archaic physical plant, taken together with the unpleasant image which had accrued to it, constituted a source of embarrassment for a supposedly forward-looking state government. Although a number of officials maintained a sense of nostalgia about the old Refuge, others were glad to become affiliated with a new regime. In 1935, when the New York Vocational Institute opened at West Coxsackie, a quiet town a few miles south of Albany, a number of Refuge officials appeared on the staff. The transi-
tion occurred in a fairly unobtrusive fashion. Most of the inmates were transferred from the old House of Refuge to the new institution at West Coxsackie and to Warwick, one of the other newer reformatories. There was a sense, however, in which the old lived on. In the cellar vault at West Coxsackie, Superintendent Donald D. Scarborough stored all the records dating back to the founding of the pioneer institution. Also within the walls of the new buildings were numerous youngsters who had known the earlier regime. The Refuge era had clearly passed, but its impact lingered on.

In the years between the closing of the New York House of Refuge and current times, new movements in the area of juvenile corrections have supplanted the institution of the reformatory variety. The insights gained by social science, plus the increased knowledge in the science of penology itself, has caused much of the Refuge system to become an austere footnote to current techniques. Large institutions such as the State Vocational Institute at West Coxsackie still exist, but the size and centralization of their plants may be only a reminder of a past era rather than a symbol of future development. Currently, it is clear neither whether nor how the population of a place such as West Coxsackie can be managed in a situation with considerably less security. More indicative departures are illustrated by the type of institution at Industry, New York, with its highly dispersed units, absence of massive structures, and reduced population. To some extent, the institution at Industry represents a public extension of the “cottage system” instituted at Lancaster, Ohio, and elsewhere during the post-Civil War period. The Elmira Reception Center philosophy of careful attention to classification of the needs of young offenders is symptomatic of new approaches, but it also indicates a historic concern with this issue. Neglect cases, of course, have long since disappeared from reform schools. They have been placed by social agency personnel in foster homes or other more appropriate institutions. Pennsylvania’s Sleighton Farms, the California’s series of Youth Authority institutions, New York’s “work camps,” and many other places are all indicators of an alteration in institutional care. The decline in the use of large institutions, however, stands as a basic trend. Whether or not this trend is entirely for the good remains a moot question. The reformatory, heir to the prospects as well as the problems of the Refuge, still fulfills a basic need in
providing services for youth in trouble. It represents, in fact, a substantial improvement over the ill-assorted detention homes which dot the countryside. These places, with their vastly different staff qualifications and varying facilities, almost defy systematic identification. Intake procedures and length of stay are subject to many variables. Responsibility for detention homes probably most clearly resides in the various family and children's courts, which in themselves have been in a state of flux during the last half-century. Detention homes often represent a place of orderly transition to more appropriate places for the children, be they foster homes, industrial schools, or a return to the youngster's homes. In some cases, such institutions merely serve to place the child in a limbo of uncertainty and apprehension.

The so-called halfway house has, to some extent, supplemented and replaced the reform school. While some states have been considerably less willing to utilize the halfway house because of its presumed high cost, it has proliferated in other areas and provided a more effective transition from institution to community. The halfway house, because it provides partial surveillance and partial participation in the larger society, has often provided well for the first phase of a youngster's rehabilitation. Probation or suspended sentence and foster care have also been utilized to assist in a creative redefinition of reformatory discipline. Perhaps, in time, these other types of treatment will totally replace the juvenile institution.

In seeking direction to the proper course for the future, one might raise the question: What has been learned from the experience of the New York House of Refuge? First of all, the refuge or reformatory, be it the first crude structure in New York City or the latest cottage-plan institution, has clearly fallen short of its intended goal. How many more delinquents there would have been without such places no one, of course, will ever know. No doubt, numerous young people who never knew parental guidance or who overthrew that guidance, have benefited from the reformatory's existence. For these people, the refuge and reform school surely have acted in loco parentis. Never, however, have these establishments been the preventive institutions which their founders often claimed them to be.

The Refuge and its successor, the reformatory, should never have been thought of in preventive terms. Like nearly all other methods of
dealing with delinquency, the institution has always been a means of treatment, not of prevention. Instead of striking at the conditions which have constantly been described as causative factors in the creation of juvenile crime, e.g., "bad example, ignorance, depraved parents, and wretchedness," or their equivalents in modern terminology, the refuge and the reformatory, by their very nature, have always come onto the scene only after the damage has already been done. Long after the delinquent career has become thoroughly established, authorities have called on institutional officials to pick up the pieces of a potentially useful citizen and remold him. In this particular task, and given these tremendous odds, they have been more adept than could be expected.

A superintendent of a large reformatory once confided: "We get them [the children] too late." At an earlier period in history this was not the case. More tractable youths presented themselves amidst the hardened criminals, they were capable of fairly rapid reformation. Now, the reformatory frequently is perceived as the ultimate weapon of a frustrated society. If all else fails and things look utterly hopeless, a youngster gets sent to a reform school. In this respect, the use of the institution has drastically changed. A large number of agencies now intervene between the institution and the delinquent. Since the reformatory is last on the list, its preventive aspect is nearly nonexistent. Harassed parents, schoolteachers, and police officers, to be sure, breathe easier as a result of the presence of reformatories, for troublesome youngsters are taken off their hands momentarily. Rebellious youths, however, cannot remain forever bottled up behind reform school walls. The youngsters return, often having learned "lessons" different from those which their parents and public officials intended. Antisocial tendencies for which the youngster was sent away occasionally become buttressed by the inmate subculture which thrives in many of the more traditional reform schools.

Unfortunately, an institution has been made to try to do the work of others who possess the natural advantages to have done a better job. Such persons are represented in family, friends, and community. Perhaps, the idea of the institution has been overworked and other economic, social, and intellectual systems have constantly been underworked. At the outset of the Refuge movement in America, Professor
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John Griscom began the work of preventing delinquency by scouring Europe in search of an institution which would substitute for what he considered to be inadequate parents. In a characteristically systematic fashion, however, he sought a scheme that could eliminate excessive face-to-face contact. Because Johann Pestalozzi based his system on personal human interaction instead of a mechanically operated scheme, Griscom rejected the old Swiss reformer’s approach. To Griscom, and to later Americans, despite their well-meaning concern, the problem of delinquency has meant a search for the most efficient, often impersonal, and least costly means of disposing of unwanted youths.

John Griscom and his associates possessed a somewhat rudimentary notion of delinquency causation and treatment. They lived in an age which knew no behavioral psychology or systematic sociology as such. Griscom and his friends saw no psychogenic factors, transactional causation, subcultural deviation, or anomie at work. To a large extent the managers responded to delinquency as a threat to the Christian doctrine of human worth and the Enlightenment principle of egalitarianism. They sensed that the Industrial Revolution, European wars, and mass migrations had unleashed macrocosmic forces, and they were trying to do what they could to turn back the evil effects of economic and social change.

In explaining the causes of juvenile delinquency, the members of the Society for the Reformation of Juvenile Delinquents subscribed to a theory of crude environmentalism. They conceived of the surroundings as either good or bad, black or white, sinful or sacred. The child, himself, existed without sin. The notions of Sigmund Freud, which would explain deviation as blocking or expression of hidden drives, was unknown to them. The notions of the managers concerning sexuality were probably very limited; it is doubtful that they understood their own sexual natures, much less those of the delinquents. Men such as Stephen Allen always saw the children with the eyes of an American John Locke; Allen perceived the child’s mind as a tabula rasa, to be written upon by parents and associates. Many of Griscom’s and Allen’s associates thought of the young as pieces of clay, waiting to be molded by the nearest hand. If the hand were strong and righteous, the object became shapely and promising. Otherwise, an evil form emerged.

Today, in the city street as well as in suburbia and small towns, in
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spite of almost 150 years of incessant labor on the part of the agencies of order, juvenile crime still abounds. It does not matter that specific sights and sounds have vanished. New ones have come to replace them. Some progress, however, has been made. Although, at times, hopeful approaches fail for lack of funds, and national periodicals stir up circulation by preparing nationwide vendettas on the vices of "the younger generation," the youth population has come a considerable distance from the days when abandoned waifs found their homes in damp cellars and doorways and kept themselves alive by petty thievery. When present-day citizens read a recent *New York Times* article describing the homeless street urchins of Chile, they might easily make invidious comparisons concerning the state of society in the United States and Chile. A look at their own not so remote past, however, might cause them to realize that American attempts have not always been the most enlightened. In the earlier era, it had taken a band of largely religiously motivated humanitarians to see a need and move to meet that need. Although much of their vision eventually would be supplanted by more enlightened policies and techniques and far more elaborate support mechanisms, the main outlines of their program, which included mild discipline, academic and moral education, vocational training, the utilization of surrogate parents, and probationary surveillance, have stood the test of time. The survival of many of the notions of the founders of the House of Refuge testifies, at least in part, to their creative genius in meeting human needs. Their motivations may have been mixed and their oversights many, but their efforts contributed to a considerable advance in the care and treatment of wayward youth.