

# THE PRISON DISCIPLINE SOCIETY (1825-1854)

Records, 1826-1854

## Charities Collection - CC 1

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**ACQUISITION:** In 1911 the Boston Children's Aid Society gave its entire library to the Simmons College School of Social Work Library. This library included the annual reports of many local and international welfare and charitable organizations. With the passage of time this collection took on historical significance and in 1991 it was transferred to the Simmons College Archives.

As part of donations in 1988 and 1989, Donald Moreland, a local social worker and collector of social work history, gave the Simmons College Archives a large number of annual reports, pamphlets and other materials related to various welfare and charitable organizations. Because neither of these donations is a discrete collection, the materials transferred in 1991 from the School of Social Work Library and related materials donated by Donald Moreland were combined to form the Charities Collection. The Simmons College Archives Charities Collection consists of numerous small collections. Accession numbers for the individual collections are assigned during processing.

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### **HISTORY:**

The purpose of the Prison Discipline Society (1826-1854) was the improvement of public prisons. The members of the Prison Discipline Society (PDS) collected facts and statistics on prisons through correspondence and annual visits to various prisons. One of the duties of the PDS was to establish other Societies in each of the United States. Among those states in which this endeavor was successful were New York and Pennsylvania. The objectives of the PDS were to urge that: cells be provided for separate confinement at night; bibles be provided to prisoners; the gospel be read; prisoners be treated with respect; employment and productive industry be provided; separate housing be provided for lunatics, hardened criminals, and youths and children; common school be provided for prisoners; programs for discharged convicts be implemented; and

matrons be available for female prisoners. The Society also discussed the needs of "coloured" prisoners and criminals.

The ideas of the PDS were based upon the philosophy of the Auburn Prison System. The premise of this system was the belief that good food, clothing, medical aid, discipline, and economically practical and productive labor lead to reform. For the system to function, prisoners were to be divided into three levels or classes. Class one was to include hardened criminals in solitary confinement. Class two prisoners mixed solitary confinement with silent labor enforced with a whip. Class three prisoners engaged in silent labor and were kept in solitary confinement only at night. This system contrasted with the Pennsylvania (separate) System which espoused opposite values including solitary confinement all day and night without any opportunity for productive labor, although prisoners were provided with bibles.

The work of the PDS resulted in the construction of prisons based on the Auburn Prison System in Thomaston, Maine; Wethersfield, Connecticut; Charlestown, Massachusetts; Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Ossining and Clinton County, New York; Concord, New Hampshire; Windsor, Vermont; Providence, Rhode Island; Columbus, Ohio; Jackson, Mississippi; and Indianapolis, Indiana. It also resulted in improved lighting and ventilation in an already existing prison in Richmond, Virginia. The effects of the activities of the PDS were wide ranging and included an 1826 bill passed by the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives appropriating \$5,000 to repair the jail in Washington, DC.; \$10,000 to build a new jail in Alexandria; and \$40,000 to build a penitentiary in Washington. In addition to affecting prisons, the activities of the Society brought about the construction of houses of refuge or reform schools and state asylums for the mentally ill in many states including New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Maryland, Maine, Rhode Island, and Connecticut.

The founder of the PDS, Louis Dwight (LD) was a moving force in the work of the PDS. LD was born on March 25, 1793 and attended Yale University. He was later ordained as a minister. LD was unable to serve in the pulpit due to an accident at Yale which damaged his lungs. His interest in prison reform began while distributing bibles to prisons in the South. LD was appalled by the conditions in the prisons he visited and upon his return to Boston in May 1825 founded the Boston Prison Discipline Society. LD served as secretary for the society from its founding until his death in 1854. Following his death the PDS ceased to exist.

All information taken from:

Prison Discipline Society, Reports of the Prison Discipline Society of Boston (Boston: T.R. Marvin, 1855; reprint ed., Montclair, New Jersey: Patterson Smith, 1972),

#### **SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE:**

The Prison Discipline Society records, 1828-1854, include loose and bound materials that may duplicate each other and are arranged chronologically. The records include annual reports and the Rev. Mr. Stone's 1854 sermon before the Society.

The reports from 1828-1830 include discussions and correspondence on prisons at Wethersfield, Connecticut; Auburn and Ossining, New York; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Baltimore, Maryland; and Charlestown, Massachusetts. Subjects covered include religious education, prison expenses, and the need for general improvement. The reports include statistics on the number of persons imprisoned for debt and public opinion on those statistics in New England, the Atlantic states, and most specifically Berkshire County, Massachusetts. There are also statistics on the number prisoners, the crimes they committed, mortality rates, employees' salaries, and total expenses and earnings of the prisons.

In addition to the information on various U.S. prisons, these reports also contain excerpts from the annual reports of the London Prison Discipline Society. The excerpts of the London Society include lists of European countries with prison discipline societies and those countries the authors felt were in need of such a society. Throughout the reports comparisons are drawn between European and United States prisons, specifically between the Maison de Force at Ghent and the prison at Auburn, New York. Reports also include information on the treatment of "lunatics" and "coloured" prisoners.

Beginning in 1836, the annual reports cover the previously described topics with several additions. The reports from 1836-1854 include a separate section on asylums for the insane and houses of refuge or reform schools for juvenile delinquents in New England, New York, and other states. Information on prisons in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Washington, D.C., Virginia, Kentucky, Ohio, and Canada include the plans of various prisons and discussions on the causes of crime, classification of prisoners, solitary confinement, variant types of inmate discharge programs, and the role of prison labor in regard to the Auburn and Pennsylvania prison systems. All the reports include a listing of the officers, corresponding members (including Alexis de Tocqueville and Samuel Woodward), life members, subscriptions and donations, and a treasurer's report.

In his sermon before the Prison Discipline Society on May 28, 1854, the Reverend Mr. Stone praises the successes of the Society and their work "for the reformation of the criminal himself, and his restoration to loyalty and virtue" ( Reverend A. L. Stone, p. 24). He praises the Society's work and its support of the Auburn Prison System. In his sermon he supports and praises the society's views on classification of prisoners, solitary confinement, religious instruction, prison labor, houses of refuge and correction for juvenile delinquents, lunatics, common schools in prisons, matrons, and programs for discharged convicts.

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