Dorothea Dix Hospital

by Harry McKown
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Dorothea Lynde Dix was a New Englander born in 1802. Shocked by what she saw of the treatment of mentally ill women in Boston in 1841 she became a determined campaigner for reform and was instrumental in improving care for the mentally ill in state after state.

Interest in the treatment of mental illness had been expressed in North Carolina in 1825 and 1838 but with no results. Several governors suggested care of the mentally ill to the General Assembly as a legislative priority, but no bill was passed. Then in the autumn of 1848 the champion of the cause of treatment of the mentally ill made North Carolina the focus of her efforts. Dorothea Lynde Dix was a New Englander born in 1802. Shocked by what she saw of the treatment of mentally ill women in Boston in 1841 she became a determined campaigner for reform and was instrumental in improving care for the mentally ill in state after state.

In North Carolina Dix followed her established pattern of gathering information about local conditions which she then incorporated into a "memorial" for the General Assembly. Warned that the Assembly, almost equally divided between Democrats and Whigs, would shy from any legislation which involved spending substantial amounts of money, Dix nevertheless won the support of several important Democrats led by Representative John W. Ellis who presented her memorial to the Assembly and maneuvered it through a select committee to the floor of the House of Commons. There, however, in spite of appeals to state pride and humanitarian feeling, the bill failed. Dix
had been staying in the Mansion House Hotel in Raleigh during the legislative debate. There she went to the aid of a fellow guest, Mrs. James Dobbins, and nursed her through her final illness. Mrs. Dobbins’s husband was a leading Democrat in the House of Commons, and her dying request of him was to support Dix’s bill. James Dobbins returned to the House and made an impassioned speech calling for the reconsideration of the bill. The legislation passed the reconsideration vote and on the 29th day of January, 1849, passed its third and final reading and became law.

For the next seven years construction of the new hospital advanced slowly on a hill overlooking Raleigh, and it was not until 1856 that the facility was ready to admit its first patients. Dorothea Dix refused to allow the hospital to be named after herself, although she did permit the site on which it was built to be called Dix Hill in honor of her father. One hundred years after the first patient was admitted, the General Assembly voted to change the name of Dix Hill Asylum to Dorothea Dix Hospital.

Update from N.C. Government & Heritage Library staff:
Beginning around 2000, efforts began to look into closing Dorothea Dix Hospital. Various parcels of land on the campus were transferred to other purposes. Discussions to close the hospital increased from 2008 to 2010. In 2010, it was announced that the facility would ultimately close its doors and in 2012 the last patients were relocated to the state’s medical facility in Butner, N.C. In 2015, the state approved sale of 300-plus acres to the city of Raleigh for a city park.

References and additional resources


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