

Dorothea Dix Hospital ^[1]

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Dorothea Dix Hospital

by Harry McKown

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Dix Hospital, 1872. Labeled "Lunatic Asylum."

^[4]In the 1830s and 1840s the United States was swept by what one historian has described as a ferment of humanitarian reform. [Temperance](#) ^[5], [penal reform](#) ^[6], [women's rights](#) ^[5], and the [antislavery movement](#) ^[7], among others, sought to focus public attention on social problems and agitated for improvement. Important among these reform movements was the promotion of a new way of thinking about and treating mental illness. Traditionally, the mentally ill who could not be kept with their families became the responsibility of local government, and were often kept in common jails or [poorhouses](#) ^[8] where they received no special care or medical treatment. Reformers sought to create places of refuge for the insane where they could be cared for and treated. By the late 1840s, all but two of the original thirteen states had created hospitals for the mentally ill, or had made provision to care for them in existing state hospitals. Only North Carolina and Delaware had done nothing.

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](#) ^[9] was a New Englander born in 1802. [Shocked by what she saw](#) ^[10] 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.



Dorothea L. Dix

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](#) ^[5], 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](#) ^[11] 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](#) ^[12] 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 ^[13] 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 ^[14].

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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Drie, C. N. "Bird's eye view of the city of Raleigh, North Carolina 1872." Digital ID g3904r pm006660. Library of Congress Geography and Map Division Washington, D.C. 20540-4650 USA. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3904r.pm006660> ^[4].

"Dorothea Dix." Photograph no. N53-15-1493. From the North Carolina State Archives ^[15], Raleigh, NC.

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