

Williamsport girls: The wayward, delinquent and incorrigible

Williamsport Women

by MARY SIEMINSKI

The January "Williamsport Women" article looked at the lives of poor, abandoned and delinquent girls in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Some of these girls were placed in institutions such as the Home for the Friendless, the Girls' Training School and the Girls' Industrial Home, sent there by relatives or "sentenced" by the courts.

If a girl disobeyed institutional rules, stole from the institution or caused internal strife, or if she was accused of other criminal acts, she risked being sent to the House of Refuge. Sometimes a girl's parents were not able to "control" her; she was deemed incorrigible. One such girl was Jennie Newton.

Jennie Newton's parents went to court on Jan. 29, 1875,

telling the judge that the 16-year-old was "leading a profligate life and was beyond the control of her parents." She recently had been "arrested and incarcerated for drunkenness and profanity on the streets." According to the story in the Gazette and Bulletin, Jennie's parents asked that she be sent to the House of Refuge.

On Feb. 8, 1875, the Gazette and Bulletin reported that Lycoming County Sheriff Mahaffey had set off for Philadelphia with seven prisoners: five men, all sentenced to the Eastern Penitentiary, and two women. Elizabeth Dunlap was on her way to the Eastern Penitentiary for concealing stolen goods (there was no sep-

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Lifestyle

Williamsport Sun-Gazette, Sunday, April 12, 2015 E-3



PHOTO PROVIDED

Shown in this photo from the collection of Chuck Van Horn, are four unidentified girls working in the fields of Sleighton Farm, Glen Mills, accompanied by a matron.

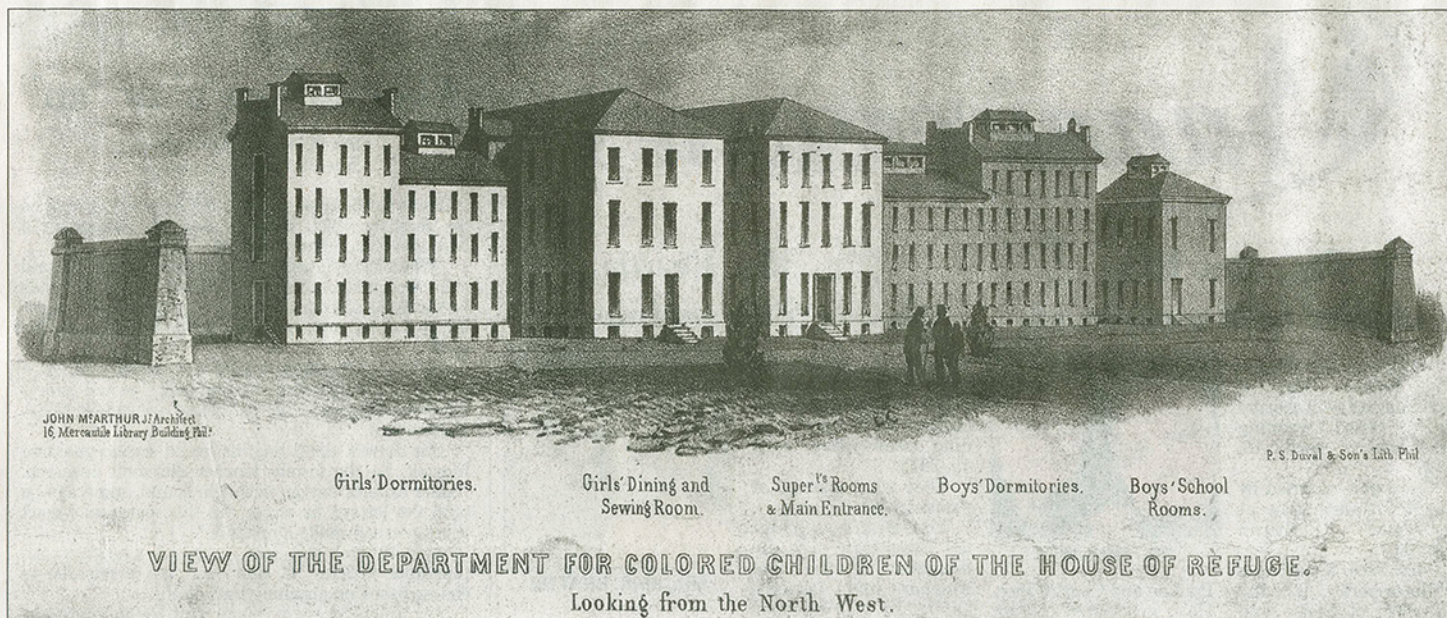


PHOTO PROVIDED

Shown in this photo from the Library Co. of Philadelphia, is the Department for Colored Children of the House of Refuge in Philadelphia. It includes the girls' dormitories, the girls' dining and sewing rooms, the supervisors' rooms and the main entrance, the boys' dormitories and the boys' school rooms. These buildings, located between Parrish and Brown streets between 22nd and 24th streets, opened in 1850.

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arate women's prison at that time), and a girl named Ella Newton was on her way to the House of Refuge. "Ella" must have been Jennie.

Marriage option

I found several stories of girls who were given the option to marry rather than go to the House of Refuge. Jennie Elizabeth Bilby, declared incorrigible by her parents, apparently had been staying with a George W. Steward, who "declared his intention to marry her as soon as he was divorced from his second wife." According to the newspaper story, Jennie said in court to Judge Hart that "she preferred the House of Refuge to her home," and she was committed to that institution. Another time, an older man stepped forward in court with the offer of marriage for a 15-year-old "colored" girl. The judge decided that she was mature enough, and the two were married right there.

What was this House of Refuge? The Philadelphia House of Refuge was the first and for many years the only institution in Pennsylvania established to reform youngsters charged with "delinquency." Juvenile delinquency itself was a new concept, as, according to scholars, changes in family life, apprenticeship and work made socializing and controlling youth problematic. Certainly this would have been the case in Lycoming County, where major social and economic changes were occurring as the population grew with the lumber industry and both entrepreneurs and workers flooded into town to take advantage of lucrative jobs.

Alternative to prison

The goal of the House of Refuge was to provide an alter-

native to sentencing children to adult prisons, jails or almshouses and ideally to "reform" them so that they did not enter the adult prison system. The reformers believed in education and hard work along with Christian values and prayer, a combination of puritanical zeal and progressivism. Hard work meant that the children were up at 7 a.m. (5 a.m. in the summer), worked in a workshop from 8 a.m. to noon and 1-4 p.m. and then had dinner and "school" after that.

The House of Refuge consisted of a complex of large Gothic buildings surrounded by brick walls. There were girls' and boys' sections, with cells, dormitories, dining rooms, schoolrooms and workshops. In 1850, a separate section, the House of Refuge for Colored Children, was opened for African American children deemed delinquent.

Children as young as 5 were committed by local courts to the facility, although the inmates were most likely to be in their teen years. The commitment was indefinite or until an inmate reached the age of 18. After their release, a few inmates returned to their homes; most were apprenticed or indentured to employers. Girls tended to be placed in private homes as mother's helpers.

Clio Club

Helen Hoyt, writing in the Gazette and Bulletin in 1912, cited the need for preventative care, so that girls "may not have to endure the taint of being placed in such an institution." The Clio Club was active in prison reform, and that year five members of the club were appointed probation officers on a trial basis after an appeal to Judge Whitehead.

Clio Club members argued, "It is only fair that a woman should investigate the cases of delinquent girls. She will know whether a girl will receive any



PHOTO PROVIDED

Shown in this photo from the collection of Chuck Van Horn, is the Lucretia Mott Cottage at Sleighton Farm, named after Mott, well known for her role in the abolition movement and women's voting rights. This is a stone colonial revival cottage designed by Cope and Stewardson, and built in 1909.

good from a lengthy period at the House of Refuge. She will realize what it will mean to the girl of eighteen who comes from the doors of this institution into the world to find whereby she may earn a livelihood. She will know what that girl will suffer and what her children will suffer in after life from the taint of the fact that she has been detained in the House of Refuge."

From a Gazette and Bulletin story, we know that years before, in July 1882, a young girl named Mary Hannon had been expelled from the House of Refuge for bad behavior and returned to Williamsport's jail, where she attempted suicide.

Sleighton Farm

In 1910, a new detention center for girls, Sleighton Farm, was established, with a new mission, goals and methods. Prison reformers began to look at the girls themselves, treating them individually and exploring the factors that caused

them to become delinquent.

Charlotte Arnold, writing in 1925, observed, "No more tangible evidence of a changed point of view toward the problems of delinquency can be found than the contrast between the old parent House of Refuge, an institution built on the congregative plan, situated in the City of Philadelphia behind high brick walls, and the group of attractive gray stone cottages in the beautiful rolling country at Darlington, which is now Sleighton Farm." Sleighton Farm was the girls' department of the boys' Glen Mills Schools, established in 1892.

Sleighton Farm was devoted to the education and development of the children committed to its care. According to Arnold, "The word education is used in a threefold sense to include, first, the building of character and training for citizenship; second, the development of the intellectual life; third, the training to earn one's livelihood." After a period of training, usu-

ally two years, the girls were turned over to parole visitors, who would place them in suitable homes and occupations.

The House of Refuge was torn down and the cottages of Sleighton Farm are now abandoned. New institutions for juveniles have taken their place. Along with the members of the Clio Club, I worry about what became of the girls who were at the House of Refuge and Sleighton Farm. What happened to Jennie Newton, Mary Hannon and Jennie Bilby? How did the marriage of the "colored" girl work out? Unfortunately, I was not able to trace any of the girls I had identified from the newspaper stories.

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