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AN AMERICAN PRISON SCHOOL IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

REX A. SKIDMORE

The author is Professor of Sociology and Director of the Bureau of Student Counsel at the State University of Utah. He has made an extensive study of the famous Walnut Street Jail in Philadelphia. His article entitled, "Penological Pioneering in the Walnut Street Jail, 1789 to 1799" was published in this JOURNAL, 39, 167-180 (July-August, 1948). It is the author's expectation to publish a volume on the basis of these studies. Dr. Skidmore was Special Agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, with headquarters in Miami, San Antonio and San Francisco, during 1943-1946.—EDITOR.

Education is recognized today as one of the important activities in prisons, reformatories and other places of detention for violators of social norms. Historically, however, formal education for prisoners is a relatively recent development. Most accounts indicate that schools were first established in American penal institutions during the early part of the nineteenth century. Barnes and Teeters report that Caleb Lownes, Philadelphia reformer, in 1798 "urged that a school be opened in the Walnut Street Jail, but there is no record that it was done."¹ In 1801, in New York State, "elementary education was given to 'meritorious convicts' during the winter months by the better educated convicts. In 1823 the records of Massachusetts State Prison show that a school attended by about 60 convicts had been organized."²

Sutherland states that secular education in prisons resulted from the effort to teach prisoners to read the Bible and other religious materials. Some resistance to education was shown, illustrated by the action of the warden of Auburn prison, who, in 1824, "successfully opposed an attempt to teach the younger convicts to read and write. His opposition was based on the 'increased danger to society of the educated convict.'³"³ Within a few years, however, some secular education was established in the New York House of Refuge and in Auburn prison. Taft⁴ indicates that secular education had its beginning in the juvenile institutions and developed from 1825 onward.

Contrary to most present-day accounts which indicate that formal schools were first established in American prisons in the 1820's, a school was in action in the Walnut Street Prison,⁵ located across from Independence Hall and famous for its part in developing the system of solitary confinement, in 1798. In fact, education was informally begun soon after the law of 1790, which brought about many prison

¹ HARRY ELMER BARNES and NEGLEY K. TEETERS, *NEW HORIZONS IN CRIMINOLOGY*, 2nd ed.; New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1951, p. 652.

² *Ibid.*

³ EDWIN H. SUTHERLAND, *PRINCIPLES OF CRIMINOLOGY*, 4th ed.; New York: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1947, pp. 487-88.

⁴ DONALD R. TAFT, *CRIMINOLOGY*, rev. ed.; N. Y.: The Macmillan Co., 1950, p. 480.

⁵ For a brief general account of this prison which received convicts and other violators in Philadelphia from 1776 until 1835, see: REX A. SKIDMORE, *Penological Pioneering in the Walnut Street Jail, 1789-1799*, J. CRIM. L. AND C. Vol. 39, pp. 167-180, July-August, 1948.

reforms in Pennsylvania, was passed, when on Sunday afternoons the time of the prisoners was "spent, by many of them, in reading: proper books being furnished for that purpose."⁶

The *minutes*⁷ of the inspectors of the Walnut Street Prison reflect that on February 27, 1798, at a meeting of the board of inspectors, the committee which had been appointed to arrange a plan for disposal of the time when the prisoners were not at work "produced a specimen of the Writing executed by some of the prisoners (that are formed into a School) which affords a pleasing prospect of our rendering them essential service in this Way." The committee was requested to continue its efforts.

The Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons also played an important role in maintaining the school in the prison. The society met at Carpenter's Hall, July 24, 1798. "Caleb Lownes attended & represented that Schools had been established in the Prison for the improvement of the Criminals and enquired whether this Committee (Acting committee of the prison society) would cooperate therein by affording its aid."⁸ This matter was considered so important that a special meeting was called, which convened a week later. At this time the following resolution was adopted: "That the Acting Committee be authorised to encourage the said institution by such compensation for past services, in the establishing of it; and by such aid towards the carrying it on in future as they in their discretion shall judge useful and proper."

The best account extant of this school is found in the *minutes* of the board of inspectors for July 27, 1798, reproduced as written:

The Chairman who had been appointed at a former meeting to find employment for the Prisoners at Hours not interfering with their daily Labour; made the following REPORT.—

"That particular attention has been paid to the appointment, and the success resulting from the endeavour, it is hoped will be truly gratifying.—The most beneficial employment which appeared to your committee was to establish Schools for learning some and improving others of the Prisoners in the first Principles of reading writing and Arithmetic,—the necessary Desks with Books &c was procured & every attention paid for carrying into effect a plan which afforded a hope would be productive of the greatest advantage, in addition to the necessary School Books, your Committee added a small collection which comprised Moral & religious Subjects— . . . many of the prisoners who were totally ignorant in every respect, who began with their Letters now write well & Cypher, those who had heretofore acquired some knowledge in Reading Writing &c are much improved; the Zeal and inclination manifested by almost all the prisoners to acquire knowledge & become perfect evince at one view the double effect of securing their time in obtaining what will be always of infinite service to them as individuals, and the benefit derived to the institution by diverting their attention from objects unfortunately to (sic.) common to men in their situation;—

⁶ LOWNES, CALEB, in WILLIAM BRADFORD'S AN ENQUIRY HOW FAR THE PUNISHMENT OF DEATH IS NECESSARY IN PENNSYLVANIA, WITH NOTES AND ILLUSTRATIONS; To Which is added, *An Account of the Gaol and Penitentiary House of Philadelphia and of the Interior Management Thereof* by CALEB LOWNES, Philadelphia, 1793, p. 87.

⁷ The original, hand-written minute books of the Board of Inspectors of the Walnut Street Prison are located in the record room of Moyamensing Prison in Philadelphia. The quotations used here are taken verbatim from the records and have purposely not been corrected or punctuated.

⁸ *Minutes* of the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons, July 24, 1798. These original minute books are located in the record vault at Christ Church in Philadelphia.

The improvement of the Blacks is however a source of high gratification . . . all of them (who have been any length of time at School) can spell—& Read, & many of them write & are in a fair way of great improvement;

Your Committee feel so perfectly satisfied with the success of the undertaking that if consistent with the views of the Board he will continue the present plan without any material alteration.”

Which being read was approved and afforded a singular pleasure that the design thus far has succeeded so well; WHEREON it is RESOLVED that the Chairman be requested to continue his exertions in furthering a plan which promises effects beneficial to the prisoner & honorable to the Institution.

Thus it is evident that the Walnut Street Prison was a pioneer institution in sponsoring education for inmates. Even before 1800, community-interested citizens were endeavoring to bring about reformation in the behavior patterns of criminals through the introduction of classwork in penal institutions.