Chapter 4

The Women's Prison Environment

In 1877, a new resident of the Massachusetts Reformatory Prison for Women wrote home to her sister: "I wish thee could see me! I cannot describe my surrounds. I might as well be in the desert of Sahara—for human companionship at this moment.—no, hark! in the distance I hear the rumble of a railway train, which means life. But I am separated from it by a high red fence—and from the other inmates of this building by wings—and corridors and doors."!

Although she came as a paid staff member, Dr. Eliza Mosher knew when she wrote these words that she was in prison. Her initial impressions offer a hint of how the buildings, their location, and their inhabitants must have affected the newcomers to women's prisons. Measured by Mosher's sentiments, the task of creating a homelike, reformatory environment posed a great challenge to prison reformers and administrators.

Both internal and external constraints contributed to this challenge. Within their own movement, reformers found themselves in a new relationship to prisons and prisoners once they had established their own institutions. Previously, they had criticized prisoners from the outside, either as visitors, advocates for released inmates, or members of state correctional boards. Now, however, the reformers were inside, as keepers. Their very jobs constrained them as critics. Even as they remained sympathetic to the women under their care, they had to defend their institutions to the state officials who controlled their budgets and commitment policies. These external agencies—state legislatures, courts, and boards of control—imposed numerous constraints on prison funding, design, hiring, and inmate commitments.

As a result of both kinds of limitations, the histories of the first women's prisons, from approximately 1870 to 1910, reveal a narrowing of reformers' visions. The process of compromise first became evident in the creation of the women's prison environment—design, staff, and inmates—which is discussed in this chapter. The internal life of the institutions, the subject of chapter five, further illustrates the problems of implementing feminine prison reform.
Architectural design had been an important component of American prison reform since Jeremy Bentham’s *Panopticon* of 1787 influenced the plans of the first state penitentiaries. Massive, imposing structures from the outside, the prisons built in the early nineteenth century reflected the goals of isolation, order, and discipline that were enforced within them. Central buildings housed administration and services, and from them emanated wings of long hallways with tiers of cell blocks easily viewed by guards. Miniscule cells, averaging fifty square feet, housed prisoners in isolation from each other. Like cogs in a machine, inmates moved according to strict schedules and, ideally, remained silent at all times. Even the late nineteenth-century reformatories, which rejected the punitive objectives of earlier institutions, retained their disciplinary goals. Reformatory design included greater specialization of interior space, with numerous workshops, classrooms, and usually a gymnasium, and with courtyards and a parade ground between buildings. But all these areas remained enclosed within an outer wall.²

In calling for unique, feminine prisons, reformers clearly stated that these institutions should not replicate the design of the penitentiary. Rather than a factory or military atmosphere, women required an environment suitable for their feminine temperaments. Josephine Shaw Lowell advocated the cottage system used in juvenile reformatories. Other reformers hoped to modify penitentiary or reformatory designs by making women’s prisons less austere, less militaristic, and even less secure than men’s. As a Massachusetts prison commissioner wrote, the “Proper Construction of Prisons for Women” did “not require the strength and solidity of a prison intended for the worst class of male convicts.” Rather, he suggested, it should be relieved “as far as possible, from prison-like features” in order to be “homelike and cheerful.”³

When women’s prisons were constructed, their designs reflected a mixture of traditional and newer domestic styles. To a limited degree, the plans followed Lowell’s recommendations. In 1877 the Massachusetts Reformatory Prison for Women (MRPW) opened on thirty acres of land in the village of Framingham (Sherborn). Its locale, thirty miles west of Boston, suggested a retreat from the city to a pastoral setting. Instead of cells, the reformatory had “private rooms” which ranged from fifty to ninety square feet, slightly larger than most men’s prison quarters. Iron bedsteads and white
linen, not the typical bare cot, adorned each room. Well-behaved inmates could decorate their quarters, enjoy unbarred windows, and have wood slats instead of grating on their doors. Room size and location was determined by a merit system, with six-by-ten-foot rooms for most and nine-by-ten-foot rooms for the honor class.4

The New York refuges at Hudson and Albion adopted the cottage plan. The numerous small structures there made it easier to classify inmates and to approximate domestic life. The Hudson House of Refuge, set on 40 acres in northeastern New York State, had four cottages at its opening in 1887 and added three more later. Each cottage housed twenty-six inmates and officers and included a kitchen and dining room. “The ‘cottages’ are fitted up as nearly as possible like an average family home,” the Charities Review observed. In later years, the board of managers assigned the cottages names instead of the original numbers “in furtherance of its plans to free the institution from the appearance of a place of imprisonment.” The institution also had a main building with office, work, and school rooms. Similarly, the Western House of Refuge opened in 1893 on a 100-acre campus adjacent to a park. It provided seven residential cottages, surrounded by ten other buildings.5

Indiana’s prison, situated on 15.6 acres in Indianapolis, consisted of a superintendent’s residence connected to a traditional congregate prison with a central administrative section and two wings. One housed forty to sixty adult felons in cells 8-by-11½ feet. The other had a capacity for 200 juvenile offenders. The two divisions had separate facilities, except for a common chapel located in the girls’ school wing.6

In Massachusetts, New York, and Indiana, the women’s prisons rejected the penitentiary plan of individual seclusion. Specialized interior rooms encouraged inmates to circulate throughout the prison to the chapels, workrooms, libraries, and infirmaries. Access to the outdoors also helped “naturalize” the settings. At each of the institutions, even the one in downtown Indianapolis, officials encouraged inmates to cultivate the prison gardens. In Massachusetts and New York the presence of children contributed to a domestic atmosphere. The former provided a nursery for infants born within the institution until they reached age two. The Western House of Refuge at Albion had a separate cottage for mothers and infants. Babies remained there until “suitably placed” in families, where mothers could reclaim them after their release.7

Unfortunately, these innovations could not compensate for the
limitations of traditional prison design. Of the four women’s prisons constructed during the nineteenth century, two—in Framingham and Indianapolis—were traditional congregate buildings: massive stone structures with wings containing rows of rooms. Only the New York Houses of Refuge used the cottage plan. Furthermore, all four of the institutions suffered from inadequacies in design resulting from shortsighted economic concerns and inexperience in structuring adult reformatories.

The Indiana and Massachusetts prisons ignored the call for “family-style” designs. Stone walls and elevated fences enclosed their grounds, while double doors and iron gratings further insured prison security and discouraged efforts to provide a domestic atmosphere. Punishment cells, sometimes in the basement, revealed the expectation that intransigent prisoners would be beyond the reach of moral suasion. The Massachusetts edifice, despite the contention that it was a “beautiful, castle-like building, surrounded by ample grounds,” more nearly resembled a “grim, dark, ‘bastille’-like structure.” Even at the Hudson refuge a ninety-six cell prison building housed new arrivals and punishment cases.

Although the founders of women’s prisons called for vocational, medical, and child-care services, it became painfully apparent in the first few years of institutional life that insufficient space hampered their provision. The New York Houses of Refuge lacked chapels, assembly rooms, and adequate school rooms. Indiana officials soon found the combined girls’ school and women’s prison inadequate and regretted their failure to provide a library and enough schoolrooms. The Massachusetts prison hospital was overcrowded within a year of its opening. In both of the congregate-system prisons it was nearly impossible to classify inmates satisfactorily within one building. Massachusetts employed different wings for the various grades of prisoners, but Indiana officials had no means of separating classes of inmates.

Separate female prisons, then, were handicapped from the outset by inadequate buildings and poor planning. The congregate-prison design was more economical to construct and more conducive to the supervision of a large number of inmates, and so in spite of the commitment to reformatory design, it, rather than the campus-style cottage plan, prevailed in Massachusetts and Indiana. Major concerns of classifying inmates and providing special services were impeded by the limitations of space in these prisons.
Even in the cottage-plan reformatories, medical and educational facilities were often too limited to meet institutional needs.

Management and Staff

The first women’s prisons were somewhat more successful in realizing their goals of female control than in realizing those of design, but only after an initial period of struggle to oust male managers. At first men maintained ultimate authority over the Indiana and Massachusetts prisons, and male physicians served in New York and Indiana. Their presence contradicted the theory that women’s problems, whether medical or emotional, could best be treated by members of the same sex. Other men worked at each institution, not only to calm fears that inmates would overrun their too-gentle female keepers, but also to perform engineering, firefighting, and carpentry tasks for which there were few women available.12

It was not easy to attract capable women who were willing to direct prisons. In Massachusetts, where the governor appointed prison superintendents, and in New York, which early relied on civil service to recruit officers, the first “professionals” chosen did not necessarily meet the standards of competency and kindness that reformers had set. The Massachusetts prison commissioners, for example, included the problem of finding suitable administrators among the “great disadvantages” at Framingham in 1879, suggesting their disappointment with Eudora Atkinson, the first superintendent.13 Low salaries, too, created “great difficulty in securing officers,” and resulted in frequent turnover of personnel. At one point the Hudson House of Refuge had to close its schoolrooms for lack of teachers and Massachusetts governors had to cajole women into accepting the apparently unpopular position of superintendent.14

Gradually, however, official constraints on female control eased and new personnel entered the institutions. Indiana rejected its male board of managers in 1877, and in 1883, along with Massachusetts, it dispensed with the male-held office of treasurer-steward. Women doctors joined the Indiana and New York prisons during the 1880s and 1890s and continued to serve at Framingham. In Indiana a “nightwatch-woman” joined the staff.15

By 1900 the managers of the women’s reformatories could boast the attainment of female control. “Every officer, from the head
down to the lowest matron, is a female," explained Warren Spalding, Massachusetts prison commission secretary, "and no man goes into the institution for any official business whatever." Not only could the women workers "hitch up a horse as readily as a man," superintendent Sarah Keely of Indiana told charity workers, but in spite of the presence of difficult inmates, "we have found that women are just as able to govern unruly women as men."  

The acceptance of female authority seemed to be based as much on women's ability to control prisoners as on their feminine skills in reforming them, and this attitude influenced the goals for women's prisons. Just as women's prison structures resembled traditional penal institutions', so, gradually, the goals of women's prison administrators came to approximate those of other penal reformers. At first, feminine solicitude seemed to prevail in Indiana, under superintendent Sarah Smith, and in Massachusetts. In the latter state, the different personal styles of the early administrators reveal the shift toward more orthodox methods that occurred during the last part of the century. They illustrate as well how individual superintendents could shape institutional life and how they were affected by it.

Eliza Mosher had never intended to enter prison work. Born in 1846 into a Quaker family in New York State, she studied medicine at the New England Women's Hospital in Boston and the University of Michigan. She later practiced in Poughkeepsie, New York, where she volunteered to work with boys at a local church. In 1877 Mosher entered the women's reformatory at Framingham as the prison physician. Her initial impressions, cited at the opening of this chapter, revealed how isolating and alienating her new home could be. Still, Mosher found comfort in her well-furnished quarters and looked forward to the chance to equip a small hospital and help steer the new institution. Soon she had decided to stay, insisting that "I have consecrated myself anew to my Master, for service here."  

Her first year as prison physician sorely tested that commitment. Venereal disease, insanity, drug addiction, and births of illegitimate or syphilitic infants overwhelmed her. Moreover, superintendent Atkinson, who had initially impressed Mosher with her "elegance," proved to be an obstacle. Atkinson interfered with medical procedures in the hospital and, in Mosher's view, inflicted "unduly severe punishment"—an average of ten cases of solitary confinement each day. While Atkinson "hindered and oppressed" the doctor and other staff members, Mosher and her ally, chaplain
Sarah Pierce, met with the inmates to attempt reformatory treatment. "I had such a satisfactory time reading to some of the women this afternoon," the doctor wrote. "When I was done with the story they asked me to read in the Bible to them and pray, and I think they really were stirred for the time being. But alas that it is so evanescent." 19

Such hopes and doubts recurred throughout Mosher's career. She shared earlier reformers' sympathies for the lot of the fallen woman, but she often felt helpless to relieve it. She had alternately been shocked and disappointed when inmates' "good intentions" were lost "the first time a temptation" came. But, Mosher added, "They are morally deformed, these women! How far are they responsible for their actions?" Like earlier reformers, she increasingly answered that they were not to blame. As the prison official most aware of their physical health she often cited disease and what she considered the "tainted" inheritance of alcoholism or venereal infection as the root of inmates' problems. Privately she wrote: "I feel so unspeakably thankful for the purity of all the parents who are pure. Oh you have no idea of the things which I come in contact with daily! The wretched lives, the hardened—and even lost image of the Maker. Tender spots, covered with rubbish tho' they may be, are often to be found, but the response is lost amid the influences which surround them even here." 20

The pressures of work, the antagonism of superintendent Atkinson, and the deaths of both chaplain Pierce and a close relative caused Mosher to resign in September 1879. But, after visiting her family and traveling to Europe, she returned to Framingham within a year, when Governor John Davis Long threatened to appoint a male superintendent if Mosher would not accept the position. Although she only served from 1880 to 1882, Mosher had a significant impact on the institution. After her first year in office, the prison commissioners found that the institution was "now doing the work for which it was established in a much more satisfactory manner than heretofore." 21

Now the highest ranking official at the reformatory, Mosher attempted to improve the conditions that had irritated her as prison doctor. Contrary to the common practice (then and now) of referring to inmates as girls, she indicated her respect by calling them "women," "the ladies," or "the prisoners." She instituted a merit grading-system, attracted new staff members, and attempted to provide "individual teaching and training." In her first year as superintendent, Mosher organized numerous "entertainments" for
inmates, including speeches by feminists like Lucy Stone, talks by Governor Long, and readings, musical performances, and recitations. She began the practice of inviting students from nearby Wellesley College to visit prisoners and, along with their professors, to entertain inmates on Thanksgiving.\textsuperscript{22}

As Mosher would have been the first to admit, it is difficult to evaluate her efforts. In a characteristic moment of doubt she wrote that “it is so hard to know how much is superficial and how much is heartfelt in the words and actions of those under our care.” But if the strength of personal commitment provides any measure of the prison’s development, enthusiasm for the institution grew under Mosher. “This is a work which tries women’s souls (and men’s, when they do it),” she once wrote to her niece. But in the end she persisted: “This is a wonderful field! As thee said Hannah last summer, it grows upon me. Am I doing the work day by day as it ought to be done. God knows I want to. And truly I am doing it for Him.”\textsuperscript{23}

In spite of frequent longings to return to medicine and to her family, Mosher continued her administrative work until 1882, when a serious knee injury forced her home to recuperate. Although she returned on crutches to supervise the institution, the election of Benjamin Butler as governor of the state, she claimed, took “a great deal of pleasure out of state work” for her. She resigned in April 1882.\textsuperscript{24}

Butler had little sympathy for the women’s prison and threatened to cut off its appropriations or appoint a male superintendent. The only woman he would accept for the position was Clara Barton, whose labors on the Civil War battlefields had won the former general’s respect. Barton at first refused to relinquish her work for the International Red Cross, but with the encouragement of other women reformers, including Mary Livermore, Frances Willard, Marion Talbot, and Ellen Johnson, she agreed to serve and reluctantly remained at Framingham for nine months, until Butler had left office.\textsuperscript{25}

Barton’s reluctance to accept the superintendency did not seem to hinder her enthusiasm for the work. She made clear to inmates that her door was open to them and encouraged the women to write her whatever requests, problems, or experiences they wished to share and to make appointments to speak with her. Many did approach the superintendent, and whenever possible she tried to resolve their legal or personal difficulties. Inmates responded with lavish affection, and several formed friendships with her which continued through correspondence after their release. Barton
Meanwhile handled state officials as effectively as she did women prisoners. She kept Governor Butler and prison visitor Burnham Wardwell, both skeptics about the institution, at bay. She was partly responsible for the success of the legislation that abolished the male-held office of treasurer-steward. She furthered the professionalization of women's prison reform both by assuming financial management of the prison and by disappointing observers who had expected her to serve without salary. By the time Barton left, even Benjamin Butler concluded that “fit women are the fittest to take care of women.”

Although Barton was anxious to return to her work for the Red Cross at the end of the year, she wrote with extreme fondness of the women on her staff and in her care when she left Framingham. Both groups had enjoyed her presence and regretted her departure. “There was not one of whom I could ask forgiveness,” Barton wrote in a letter shortly after leaving, “for I had offended none, and none have offended me.” This evaluation continued, with overtones of the superiority of feminine prison reform:

I knew then, as I know now, that I could conduct that prison from one years end to the other, holding it in good, and ever increasing order, without a punishment. [A]nd if “Reformation” ever comes to any, it must come under such elevating influences, and conditions of self-respect, self-reliance, honor, love and trust:—penalties, degradation, distrust, disgrace never yet reformed any human being, and the more reformatory people come to understand and regard that fact the better it will be for their work.

It is unfortunate that the women’s prisons could not attract and retain more administrators like Clara Barton and Eliza Mosher. Not only did they respect and comfort inmates, but they also maintained good working relationships with their staffs, making it more likely that qualified women would join them. However, Mosher and Barton were exceptional, two of the outstanding women of their generation. Neither of them remained in the institutions, where they had felt as imprisoned as the women in their care. Each went on to accomplish broader humanitarian and women’s reforms. Whether it was the low pay, the uncomfortable living conditions, or the questionable status of the work which repelled more qualified women is indeterminable. In any case, later staff members had difficulty living up to the early standards of feminine care.

More typical of the administrators who would dominate the
women's prisons until the early twentieth century was Ellen Che-ney Johnson, who succeeded Barton at Framingham. From 1884 until her death in 1899, Ellen Johnson ruled at Framingham and made herself the spokesperson for women's prison reform throughout the country. As a newspaperman analyzing her portrait once wrote, Johnson had "a good combination of the feminine and the masculine . . . which qualifies her to comprehend all sides of human life and enables her to dominate her own sex and lead the other."30 At Framingham she indeed combined the sympathy and domesticity of feminine reform with traditional penal concerns: discipline, control, and efficient management.

As a member of the prison commission that successfully argued for a separate institution in the 1870s, Ellen Johnson was a central figure in the establishment of the Massachusetts women's reformatory. She maintained close contact with the managers after it opened, occasionally taking charge when the superintendent was ill or away, and locating homes for released inmates and their children. Her frequent offers to aid Clara Barton were sometimes coupled with apologies for interfering in the superintendent's work, for Johnson was sensitive to her own need to find worthwhile activities to occupy her. She had been lonely and depressed since her husband's death in 1881 and turned to her work for solace. "There is no place so dear to me as that Prison now," she wrote to Barton. Even on vacation, Johnson confessed, "my mind often wanders back to the Prison," and to thoughts of uplifting an inmate, so that "at night I should not feel so absolutely good for nothing."31

After Barton resigned in January 1884, Johnson became superintendent. Enthusiastically she proceeded to organize the institution around the theme of training for self-control. Johnson saw no contradiction in the tasks of reforming and disciplining prisoners. For her, rehabilitation came through control, first by the prison routine, and then by the inmates themselves. The prisoner "must learn to do right without compulsion or she will cease to do right when the compelling force is gone." Johnson's methods, nonetheless, were compelling. She combined a merit system with strict discipline and appeals to inmates' emotions. Her dual precepts were: "No lesson is more important than that which teaches respect for the law, and dread of its wrath. At the same time, it is a fundamental point in our theory that every criminal can be won by gentleness and patience."32

Of the two strains, Johnson emphasized the need for discipline, not only among inmates but with her staff as well. Some workers
complained about their duties and resented Johnson's supervision. They breathed a sigh of relief when she was absent for a day and thought longingly of former superintendent Barton's "words of cheer and comfort." The same methods which drove these women away, however, gave legitimacy to women's prisons in the opinion of others. The Massachusetts legislature, for instance, decided with Johnson's administration that the prison which many "regarded as an experiment, may now be said to have attained a degree of success far exceeding the most sanguine expectations of its projectors." Their acceptance signaled that only with a heavy dose of traditional prison methods would women's work in the profession be considered legitimate.

The Massachusetts Reformatory Prison for Women may have been unique in the fame achieved by some of its administrators, but its history suggests several themes common to all of the institutions: first, women's prison reform became, in fact, a mixture of "masculine" and "feminine" concerns; second, the personality of a superintendent largely determined correctional treatment; and third, the new prisons were hard-pressed to find adequate staff. At least three women turned down the superintendency in Massachusetts, and only the threat of the appointment of a male head compelled the services of Mosher and Barton. Those who did remain, like Johnson, may have needed institutional work—for personal or financial reasons—to too desperately to leave.

In Indiana and New York, as well, the search for competent staff repeatedly troubled the managers of the women's prisons. At the Western House of Refuge, not only were there difficulties finding teachers, but at one point the entire board resigned over criticisms of their mismanagement. The state prison commissioners admitted "serious embarrassment from [the] difficulty of procuring satisfactory officers from the Civil Service list for assistant matrons and assistant superintendent," and attributed the problem to both hard work and low pay. In Indiana, after a decade during which Sarah Smith had continued the religious uplift of her former rescue work, the women's prison faced recurrent conflicts between managers and staff. Superintendent Sarah Keely failed to gain the respect of her subordinates, one of whom lamented in 1892 that "there is not the good done that use to be [sic]." Members of the board of managers agreed, accusing Keely of unethical practices and harsh punishments. She responded with counter-accusations that board members misused state funds and interfered with prison discipline. The next superintendent, Emily
Rhodes, faced similar charges, including specific accusations of negligence leading to inmates’ escapes; cruelty in tying women up in cold cells; refusal to parole those due to leave; and “working the women to death.”

The record of female correctional personnel during the late nineteenth century, then, was decidedly mixed. Women did achieve control over the penal institutions they had established and helped make prison administration a new female vocation. However they did so in part by identifying with traditional prison standards. Gradually the nurturing approach of Eliza Mosher and Clara Barton became heavily tempered by the disciplined control emphasized by Ellen Johnson. Moreover, there were perhaps too few qualified female correctional workers to run the institutions, and those hired were both poorly paid and overworked. Without the infusion of new ideas and experiences, the reformatories often succumbed to stagnation. Though women had gained the right to run their own prisons, they had yet to establish a pool of qualified persons to do the work in the manner reformers had envisioned.

Inmates

One of the prerequisites set by reformers for successful women’s prisons were inmates who seemed open to reformatory treatment. Only a small minority of all women criminals could be accommodated by the new institutions (most would remain in jails, houses of correction, or state prisons). Those who were young, who were relatively unhardened, who had committed misdemeanors, or who had been the victims of difficult circumstances were the most desirable prisoners.

Each state used different criteria for commitment to its women’s prisons. At the Indiana institution, approximately fifty adult female felons entered annually to serve lengthy sentences—up to life—in the prison wing of the building. (Misdemeanant women remained in local jails.) The reformatory wing housed a girls’ school for incorrigibles, petty offenders, and neglected children under the age of six. In contrast, the New York houses of refuge for women at Hudson and Albion represented halfway measures between juvenile reformatories and adult prisons. They annually admitted several hundred misdemeanor women between the ages of fifteen and thirty, ages chosen to “include women likely to have children.” Sentences ranged, with a high of five years.
While the Indiana prison admitted only felons and the New York refuges concentrated on young misdemeanants, the Massachusetts Reformatory Prison for Women at Framingham accepted prisoners for crimes ranging from stubbornness to murder. For most crimes against public order or chastity, the courts were required to commit women to this institution. If the prison was not full, the court also could transfer women prisoners from jails and houses of correction. Framingham officials resented this provision, claiming that many women sent there were unfit for its treatment. Women officials preferred to take "those who have but recently begun lives of crime, than those who have spent years in prisons and almshouses, until they have lost ambition for better lives."  

Who, in fact, did fill the women's prisons? Were they the "reformables," or habitual criminals, or both? Did they represent the female prison populations of their states or were they a select group? What characteristic types of inmates did the prisons serve? The detailed statistics kept by several institutions provide a composite view of the inmates which can be broken down to account for individual variations. Table 3 presents an overview of the populations of the women's prisons from their openings until approximately 1910.  

In general, the majority of inmates were under age twenty-five, white, and native-born, although often of immigrant parents. Nearly two-thirds had been married at some time in their lives, but half of these were widowed, divorced, or separated at the time of their incarceration. As prison officers pointed out, the family life of those who were married was erratic, or, as they put it, "fruitful of the worst possible evils." Most of the women had no prior convictions, and those who did usually had only one, often for drunkenness. The crimes for which they were serving in New York and Massachusetts were minor—under 20 percent had committed dangerous offenses against person or property. Drunkenness and prostitution alone accounted for about half of the commitments (table 4).

In some respects, the prisoners in the all-female institutions of Massachusetts and New York differed from women in other penal institutions in those states (table 5). For example, fewer foreign-born inmates appeared in the reformatories than appeared in the total state prison populations. The age groups represented at Framingham and at the New York refuges were predominantly younger than the total female convict group. The high percentage of single women, particularly in New York, reflected the lower age
range. Massachusetts figures show a lower incidence of recidivism in the women's reformatory than in other state facilities for both men and women. The distribution of crimes, however, is less unique in the all-female institutions than might be expected. The

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<tr>
<th>TABLE 3. Profiles of Inmates at Separate Women's Prisons: Massachusetts, Indiana, and New York</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
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<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<tr>
<td>Under 25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Race</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
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<td>Protestant</td>
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<td>Catholic</td>
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<td>None</td>
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<td>Nativity</td>
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<td>U.S. born,</td>
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<tr>
<td>American parents</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Foreign parents</td>
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<td>Foreign born</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Married (at some time)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Widowed, divorced, separated</td>
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<tr>
<td>Single</td>
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<tr>
<td>First Offenders</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intemperate</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Illiterate</td>
</tr>
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Sources: Massachusetts: inmate sample, 1877–1913, from “History of Inmates,” at Massachusetts Correctional Institution, Framingham, Mass., and mean of annual aggregate data, Massachusetts Reformatory Prison for Women, Annual Reports, 1878–1915; Indiana: mean of annual aggregate data, Indiana Woman's Prison, Annual Reports, 1873–1913; New York: mean of annual aggregate data, Western House of Refuge, Annual Reports, 1893–1900, and records of all admissions in Minutes of Board of Managers meetings, Executive Department, Board of Officers of State Institutions, New York State Library, Albany.
overall proportion of female offenders against person or property in Massachusetts and New York—between 15 and 20 percent—is similar to the proportion in the women's institutions. Indiana statistics are exceptional for in that state the women's prison took only the most serious offenders.44

### TABLE 4. Types of Offenses Committed by Inmates of Separate Women's Prisons: Massachusetts, Indiana, and New York

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offense</th>
<th>Massachusetts</th>
<th>Indiana</th>
<th>New York (Albion)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public Order</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vagrancy</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drunkenness</td>
<td>38</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idle and disorderly</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stubborn (child)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Other</em></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Total</em></td>
<td>57</td>
<td></td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chastity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prostitution</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewd, wanton, and lascivious</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Other</em></td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Total</em></td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
<td>36^a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Person or Property</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larceny</td>
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<td>72</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murder</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arson</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15^b</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Total</em></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sources: Massachusetts: inmate sample, 1877–1912, from “History of Inmates,” at Massachusetts Correctional Institution, Framingham, Mass. (comparison with aggregate annual offenses shows discrepancy of less than 5 percent); Indiana: mean of annual aggregate data in Indiana Woman's Prison, *Annual Reports, 1873–1908*; New York: mean of annual aggregate data, *Western House of Refuge, Annual Reports, 1893–1900*, and records of all admissions, 1904–1909, in Minutes of Board of Managers meetings, Executive Department, Board of Officers of State Institutions, New York State Library, Albany.*

^a. Total only, not broken down by offense.
^b. Includes some public order.
This overview demonstrates that the inmates of the new women's institutions differed only slightly from other imprisoned women, but the distinctions that did exist were important to the reformers: inmates at the new prisons were often young morals offenders who fit the reformers' definition of fallen women in need of aid. A sample of case records from Framingham confirms the profile: the women there were predominantly white, young, and American-born. The typical sentence was less than two years for a minor offense against public order. Most inmates had some formal education before the age of fourteen, when they began to work, 37 percent of them as domestic servants and 39 percent in factories and mills. Usually, but with notable exceptions, a first conviction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 5. Characteristics of Female Prisoners in All Penal Institutions, by Percentage of Institutional Population: United States, Massachusetts, New York, and Indiana, 1880, 1890</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Under 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nativity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foreign born</td>
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<td>Offense(^a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chastity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


a. Offense categories have been rearranged from the United States Census listings to match as nearly as possible those used by the prisons studied; thus the crimes under public order and chastity may differ, and the two groups should be considered as one category. Rounding error accounts for totals ranging from 99 to 101 percent. Because the 1910 census combined juvenile and adult prisoners, the data are not presented here.
brought them to the reformatory, where they remained for an average stay of one year.\textsuperscript{45}

The inmates by no means comprised a homogeneous group, however, for distinctions among types of offenders were significant. The Massachusetts records provide sufficient evidence to analyze the types of female criminals who entered that prison. Although they do not represent all women offenders, they do shed light on the problems faced by the women’s prisons. An analysis of published annual aggregate statistics, a sample of 640 prisoner records, and a study of 2,000 inmates conducted by Dr. Eliza Mosher\textsuperscript{46} reveal the characteristics of three classes of offenders.

The women in the first category, offenders against public order, were clearly not the intended beneficiaries of reformatory treatment, as the case of Mary M. suggests.\textsuperscript{47} Committed for drunkenness at age sixty, she was Irish-born of “good parents.” She had married forty years before, and six of her nine children were dead. Mary could not find work, and her “bad” husband lived with other women and beat her “terribly.” For the past ten years she had been intemperate periodically. Her case was typical of offenders against public order, the majority of whom were committed for drunkenness. They were older than the other inmates, having a mean age of thirty, with the highest proportion over age twenty-one. Like Mary M., half were foreign-born, particularly Irish. About three-fourths had married. Dr. Mosher found among this group the highest incidence of syphilis, alcoholism, insanity, illiteracy, and recidivism in the prison, with a recommitment rate of over 70 percent.\textsuperscript{48}

Prison officials seemed sympathetic to these women as victims, in spite of their pasts and their poor chances of reformation. A forty-eight-year-old Irish widow, for instance, had been intemperate all of her eleven years in the United States. Her previous sentences included fourteen trips to Deer Island, the city penitentiary, and one term at the House of Correction. She asked the judge to send her to Framingham, and officials there recorded that she was “anxious to reform.” Another drunkard, age thirty-nine, had become intemperate some time after entering the mills at age thirteen. Yet her record claimed that “she never drank until after marriage.” Apparently these older alcoholic women were given the benefit of the doubt by their keepers.

Different backgrounds characterized the second group of inmates, the chastity offenders—nightwalkers, adulteresses, or “lewd, wanton and lascivious” women. Younger, with a mean age of
twenty-six, usually single, separated, or divorced, they were often American-born (50 to 66 percent), or from Britain or Canada. Margaret T., for instance, a common nightwalker, age twenty-four, was American-born of “good parents,” both of whom had died. She had attended school (as had many of this group) and then married, but had not seen her husband for two years. Her sentence was a mere four months. A less-hopeful but not unusual case was Annie B. Though only nineteen, this was her fourth arrest for nightwalking. She was born in Lowell, Massachusetts, of intemperate parents, entered the mills at age ten, and was intemperate by age fifteen. She left home, became a prostitute, “married a known scoundrel,” and “has led a life of blackest sin during the past year.”

Thus the second type included the so-called fallen women, toward whom prison officials were sympathetic and for whom they took special pains. Many of these women were, in fact, the perpetrators of victimless crimes. The case of a twenty-five-year-old uneducated white woman illustrates both the actual nature of many offenses against chastity, and prison officials’ response. Although committed for lewdness, she was described as “A quiet, well-behaved simple woman” whose crime was really an illegitimate pregnancy. Considered “reformable” and thus more likely to benefit from her incarceration, she received an eighteen-month sentence, six months longer than the mean for this group and a year longer than the sentences of most prostitutes. Another chastity offender, a thirty-five-year-old black woman, was sentenced to one year for adultery. Her crime consisted of living with a white man after her own husband had remarried. Reformatory treatment was apparently ineffective; like 16 percent of all chastity offenders, she later returned to the institution. In another case, common-law marriage proved a crime. Emma D., a native-born woman who was adopted after her own parents died, went to school until the age of fourteen. She lived with her husband for five years, but “not happily,” so she left and “lived with a man unmarried.” At first officials considered her a “Good, useful prisoner,” but a doctor’s report indicated that Emma “always had evil tendencies,” and then officials discovered that her real parents had never been married! Now defined as an unhopeful case, it probably did not surprise the staff when she returned to prison the following year.

The chastity offenders included young women sentenced for “stubbornness” when their relatives could not control their behavior. Sixteen-year-old Eliza L., for example, committed for two
years as a “stubborn child,” had been “weak and licentious rather than deliberately bad.” Another sixteen-year-old who had run away from home was sentenced at her grandmother’s request. The length of these sentences reflected officials’ belief that the young, promising cases deserved fuller treatment. As the court explained in the case of a seventeen-year-old girl sentenced for two years for idle and disorderly behavior, the sentence was made “not as a punishment, but to see what can be done for her in a reformatory way.” But the younger inmates were not necessarily the most malleable. After three years in the girls’ industrial school, for example, one inmate, an eighteen-year-old stubbornness case, became a “difficult prisoner” at Framingham who was at one point “sixty days in solitary and still continuing.”

In some instances the prison served as a home or hospital, as in the case of Mary D. Her respectable family had moved from New Brunswick to Fall River, Massachusetts, where Mary attended school, worked in the mills, and then ran away to a house of ill fame. Her father found her there, pregnant, possibly the cause rather than the result of her new life. Sent to Framingham, she gave birth and was then discharged. She later married the child’s father.

Chastity offenders, then, included a mix of young women committed for sexual or moral offenses; only a few, the professional prostitutes, were truly criminals. Most had committed victimless crimes and many needed medical and social services. Instead, however, they received inordinately large doses of reformatory treatment.

More dangerous criminals fell into the third category, offenders against property and persons. A representative subgroup, the larcenists, were young, though often married, with a high proportion from Canada and few from Ireland. The age range for this group varied widely (estimates of the mean ranged from fifteen to thirty-three). Occupation became relevant in this category only. Domestic workers tended to be convicted for property offenses, probably petty larceny from their employers, while factory workers seemed to commit crimes against the person. The latter group, however, was so small that the data may be misleading.

Members of this group received the longest sentences, with means of twenty-two and twenty-four months for property and person crimes, respectively. One twenty-five-year-old woman, possibly insane (she spent part of her sentence in the Worcester Lunatic Asylum), received five years for trying to shoot a man. In
a pathetic case, a sixty-two-year-old American woman professed her innocence in the charge of procuring an abortion for a woman who had died. A "very large, fleshy woman, almost helpless from size," and with an invalid husband, she pled ill-health but was nonetheless committed for five years. She died in prison. In each of these cases, the object of the long sentence was punishment or deterrence; for these women the institution was more nearly a prison than a reformatory.

In addition to these severely treated first offenders, the professional or habitual criminals often fell into this third category. They provided the most colorful as well as the most tragic cases at the prison. One woman operated a successful burglary team with her niece, winning people's sympathy by feigning invalidism. But when her husband discovered their cache of stolen goods, the women were brought to court. The older one received a three-year prison term while her niece got only eighteen months, a reversal of the usual pattern. In the courtroom the niece "cooly requested the judge to make her imprisonment equal" to that of her aunt, a request he denied. For these serious criminals, too, long sentences had the traditional goal of punishment, not reformation. Other professionals who appear in the prison records include the "notorious Dr. Emma Hudson," confidence woman from New York and Boston, perpetrator of fraud, theft, and blackmail. Another inmate, a forty-three-year-old Irish larcenist, remarried a professional thief, and the pair made their separate domiciles in various Massachusetts and New York penal institutions for years.

But the most dedicated, as well as colorful, character, a threetime resident at Framingham, was "Captain Jack"—alias Arthur Holmes, alias Fred Fiske, and actually a twenty-seven-year-old woman, arrested with her husband for horse stealing and sentenced on the charge of being "idle and disorderly." Her behavior, as described by the press, was anything but idle, though certainly disruptive. With "a hard, masculine face and a strong frame," the Captain wore men's clothes and worked as a teamster, sailor, bartender, and sea cook. She had repeatedly "made love to blue-eyed misses and been passionately loved by them" until her true identity was revealed, usually by herself when drunk. "Her mishaps are all owing, she says, to her passion for strong drink; if it were not for this she could wear pants with impunity and teach young men the superiority of woman."

Other inmates convicted of property and person offenses had more pitiful than flamboyant personal tales. They were the victim-
ized women who had not committed willful acts of violence but had paid the price of drugs, drunkenness, and unwanted pregnancies. Eliza W., American-born of good parents, was committed for larceny at age twenty-four. She had once taken morphine on a doctor’s advice and, addicted for three years, she stole “when under the influence of the drug.” Another case, an alcoholic larcenist, committed for the seventh time, was considered a “poor miserable creature.” A female doctor, convicted of abortion at age seventy-one, served five years, the minimum sentence, as “an exemplary prisoner.” The charge of child abandonment brought a young woman to prison for a year; she had left her unwanted child on the almshouse steps, where it died. While adequate medical and social services might have prevented many of these so-called crimes, the reformatory at least provided a less-condemning atmosphere than did local jails or state prisons.

The population of the Massachusetts Reformatory Prison for Women consisted of a diverse group of inmates, many of whom did not meet reformers’ definitions of hopeful cases. A large proportion—almost half of the inmates in the early decades of the prison, and between a fourth and a third thereafter—were alcoholics over the age of thirty. Chastity offenders, the original fallen women whom reformers wanted to rescue, made up only a fourth of the inmate populace. The dangerous criminals were either professionals and habitual offenders, or women whose crimes had been precipitated by dire circumstances.

Each of these groups brought to the institution different personal experiences which required a variety of responses. Few deserved punishment, as reformers were quick to acknowledge. Many needed social services and medical care, and others would have benefited from some form of personal rehabilitation, particularly the alcoholics. Once incarcerated, however, all inmates could expect a standard form of retraining, based on a traditional ideal of womanhood.

The design, personnel, and inmate populations of the original women’s reformatories all fell short of reformers’ ideals. The structure of the institutions usually resembled traditional prison buildings, although features of juvenile reformatories were incorporated, particularly in New York. Inadequate space and facilities plagued the institutions, as did the problem of attracting qualified staff, especially after the 1880s. To this setting were added inmate populations that rarely fit the mold of young, first offenders. The
prisoners were of diverse backgrounds, both in age and criminal experience. Most inmates had only a grade school education and had entered low-paying jobs as domestic or mill workers before they were fifteen years old. Though many had married, their family lives were unstable. As the reformers had expected, their crimes were often victimless and due to external circumstances.

Despite their limitations, the new institutions opened their doors to women who would otherwise have served in state prisons or houses of corrections. Although they were, in several ways, poorly equipped for the task, the keepers of these institutions attempted to fulfill their charge of reforming women criminals. To do this they evolved a mixture of feminine reform and traditional penal discipline that was to retrain inmates to their model of womanhood.