Chronicles of Brunonia

States of Mind:
The Founding of Rhode Island's First Hospital

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If you enter the sprawling main building of Butler Hospital, a psychiatric ward in Providence, Rhode Island, and walk down the hall for a while, you'll eventually come to a set of stairs that looks markedly different from its immediate surroundings. Butler is an eminently calming place inside, picked out almost entirely in creams, pastel blues, and deep, rich browns; its waiting areas are well lit, with curtains on the windows and tasteful rugs on the pale carpet. Still, it is unmistakably an administrative building, with the same functional metal banisters and gray corkboard ceiling panels of middle schools across the country. The exception is the central stairway, which looks like something you'd see in a house from the last century. The ceiling is lower, the molding a bit more decorative. Climbing to the fourth floor, you'll find a raised tile design on the ceiling that seems thoroughly out of place. When Butler Hospital first opened, in 1847, it was called the Butler Hospital for the Insane, and it was much smaller. That building now stands at the center of the current Butler Hospital, and walking through that wing feels a little bit like time travel.

Outside, you can find gazebos, a volleyball court, a few scattered chairs and benches, and a thoroughly modern playground, all woodchips and plastic swings. (Butler offers a wide range of child psychiatric services.) Pines and bushes dot the lawns, and in the middle distance there are other buildings: a sleep lab, an alternative school, an assisted living facility just visible through a grove of winter-bare trees. What strikes the visitor is how large a role empty space plays at the Butler grounds. Everything is separated from everything else by long stretches of pretty much nothing. The few cars that drive to and from the main building can hardly be heard from a little ways off, and the entire campus is

set well back from the Providence suburbs. Behind the main building, the land falls away down a series of gentle ridges, a slope tangled with stark trees and tall grass and the calm slate shine of the Seekonk River at the end.

The Butler Connection, the hospital's monthly in-house newsletter, was full of good news recently. A Providence *Journal* article about a former patient had just won a national award, and the hospital had been given a $2.4 million grant for an experimental brain-mapping study. A sidebar noted that Butler had recently tweaked its list of core values, collapsing some and clarifying others, and now there was a new acronym for everyone to memorize. The old list had spelled out COMPASSION, which was the first item on the new version.

It's a strange experience to stand in the central staircase of Butler Hospital and read the literature emphasizing the importance of physician accountability and the inalienable dignity of each patient; when these stairs were built, one hundred sixty years ago, these ideas were fairly radical to American medical care. Butler was the first facility in Rhode Island, and among the first in the country, to incorporate what are now the fundamental tenets of modern psychiatry. The history of medicine doesn't just consist of a linear march of science — it has involved a good deal more serendipity and good fortune than an observer might realize — and nowhere is this more true Butler Hospital, a groundbreaking institution that almost didn't get built.

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On April 10, 1844, the activist Dorothea Dix published an article in the Providence *Journal* called "Astonishing Tenacity of Life." Dix was forty-two years old, and though she was very close that spring to the halfway point of her life, she

had only recently arrived at the work for which history would remember her.

For Dix, that spring was a complicated time. Three years ago, she'd been almost completely ignorant of the conditions in which mentally ill Americans were kept; now she thought of nothing else. Her campaigns to radically improve mental health facilities, first in Massachusetts and later in New York, had met with unmistakable success, but in the process she had become a figure of moderate revilement, a woman who attracted scorn and personal criticism in a way she'd never encountered as a schoolteacher in Boston. Dix was in many senses an idealist, but she was not what anyone would call naive. Still, her unflinching accounts of squalor and abuse were often met with indifference, and it puzzled her that so many people were insensitive to what she believed were obvious moral obligations. Though she would eventually visit every state east of the Mississippi and play an instrumental role in the founding of more than thirty mental hospitals, in 1844 Dix was a relative newcomer to the world of reform, and she would have been excused for feeling some doubt about her own ability to effect change.

"Astonishing Tenacity of Life" told the story of one Abram Simmons, a madman in Little Compton, Rhode Island, who had been kept in a seven-by-seven stone cottage behind the town poorhouse for more than three years. In a letter Dix had been alerted to Simmons's condition by Thomas Hazard, a local textile manufacturer with a longtime interest in the indigent insane. According to Dix's firsthand account (framed as a story told to her by a "gentleman... from that town" whom Dix had supposedly met that morning), Simmons's body was twisted, his skin covered in sores; the floor of his room was littered with straw

and human waste. Dix had visited in September, when the frost on the walls of the cell was half an inch thick. The building was double-walled, a keeper told Dix, so that Simmons's screaming would not disturb anyone who lived nearby. "Should any persons in this philanthropic age be disposed... to visit the place," Dix wrote, in an uncharacteristic display of mordant humor, "they may rest assured that traveling is considered quite safe in that country... The people of that region profess the same Christian religion, and it is even said that they have adopted some forms and ceremonies, which they call worship."

At the time that Dix was writing, there was almost no room in American medical convention for the dignity of the mental patient. Insanity had, until the beginning of the century, been largely regarded as a theological malady; physicians spoke of demons and the need for purification. This attitude was most common in smaller towns, particularly in New England, where Puritan beliefs held a lingering currency well past the days of the Salem witch-hunts. Among more progressive circles of thought, the idea eventually took hold that mental illness represented an upwelling of the soul's most bestial impulses: not an infestation but a kind of moral cancer. (A handful of freethinkers, whose ideas prefigured modern psychology in many ways, assigned the blame to external social forces — the pressures and absurdities of life in the nineteenth century — but their way of thinking would not become influential for several decades.)

There were scattered others who, like Dix, sought to replace inhumane conditions and physically punitive treatment with something more civilized. Luther V. Bell, for instance, a Massachusetts surgeon with whom Dix would eventually collaborate, wrote a number of essays about the beneficial effects of

sunlight and visual stimulation for the confined mental patient, many of which are now recognized as well ahead of their time. (Bell, a severe man with an imposing stalactite of black beard, was also the author of a widely reprinted lecture — "An Hour's Conference with Fathers and Sons in Relation to a Common and Fatal Indulgence of Youth" — about the evils of masturbation, which has not aged as well.) Here and there, one could find Americans who recognized no fundamental difference between themselves and the mentally ill. To the overwhelming majority of physicians, though, the sanitarium was little better than a menagerie; a madman was believed to be out of reach of any kind of communication, and he was likely to be regarded, and treated, as an animal.

Dix, having spent eighteen months in England not long ago, had the benefit of a different context. The British and French lunacy reform movements had been in effect for nearly forty years by the time Dix realized her calling. In 1796, the Quaker philanthropist William Tuke opened the Retreat, an asylum in York that rejected "heroic treatment" — the methods of physical extremity, among them bloodletting, flogging, and forcible restraint, favored in larger institutions like London's Bethlehem Hospital. At the Retreat, which is still in operation today, patients were encouraged to wander the grounds, engage in group prayer, and do light farm work; this was one of the earliest examples of "moral treatment," the psychiatric approach that attempts to engage the moral and intellectual faculties of the mentally ill. In Paris, meanwhile, Philippe Pinel had just spent four years as head physician of the Asylum de Bicêtre, where he made a point of regularly visiting and conversing with the two hundred patients in the hospital's mental ward, taking notes all the while. "Off with these chains!"

Pinel is supposed to have written during this period. "[A]way with these iron cages and brutal keepers! They make a hundred madmen where they cure one." Often credited with the elimination of shackles, cages and other restrictive therapies at the Bicêtre, Pinel in fact allowed most of these practices to continue in curtailed form. Still, his findings were widely read, and he was responsible, probably more than any other man in France, for rendering the mentally ill human in the eyes of the European medical community.

A number of British reformers, impressed with the independent but similar philosophies of Tuke and Pinel, urged the House of Commons to publish a report on private asylums in England. The report appeared in 1807, and included so many grotesqueries that improving the circumstances of the institutionalized became a national priority. Subsequent legislation would continue to be introduced through the nineteenth century. By 1841, when Dorothea Dix visited the Middlesex County House of Corrections in East Cambridge to teach a Sunday school class and complained to the warden that the small, adjacent jailhouse, the result of a local codicil mandating a "receptacle for idiots and lunatic or insane persons," was poorly heated, mental institutions in England had largely left behind the barbarous conditions still common in America.

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"Astonishing Tenacity of Life" was a powerful account, by turns heartfelt and acerbic, more reminiscent of the sensational style Dix had first developed while touring Massachusetts than the more restrained, decorous tone with which she'd gone on to describe New York institutions. As with those earlier documents, Dix didn't hesitate to employ the Gothic detail or the thundering moral

pronouncement. It's hard to know what parts, if any, were embellishment or even pure fabrication, something of which Dix had been accused a few times in Massachusetts. Certainly the story that appeared in the Providence *Journal* departed in a few striking ways from a second account that Dix later circulated among a select group; in the newspaper article, Abram Simmons was a pathetic creature, shivering on the floor of his cell, while in the later retelling he had become something fearsome and feral, and Dix approached him despite an onlooker's warning that he would attack. Dix claimed to have soothed Simmons with kind words, and touched him gently, as no hand had for years, at which time a tear was seen on the madman's cheek: behold, the transformative power of moral treatment. (Historians disagree about how much of this is invented, although most agree that, at the very least, Dix had clearly been reading Pinel's memoirs of Bicêtre, and they'd left an impression.) In her story of Simmons, the facts about which Dix cared most were those that would generate outrage; other details were secondary. Nowhere, for example, was any mention made of the possible sources — be they medical, social or theological — of Simmons's madness. Dix avoided such speculation in the work she presented to legislators, in part to emphasize the idea that all men and women, regardless of history or circumstance, were entitled to a certain baseline amount of respect.

In spite of whatever inaccuracies it may have contained, the article was widely read. Dix commanded a certain notoriety by this point — many in Rhode Island had seen *Memorial to the Massachusetts Legislature*, her indictment of asylums and almshouses in that state, and been impressed with the clarity of Dix's prose and the stark moral universe she presented. It helped, too, that the

state had been sitting on some money earmarked for a mental facility: Nicholas Brown, Jr., the philanthropist for whom Brown University was renamed in 1804, had set aside thirty thousand dollars in his will for a sanitarium "where that unhappy class of our fellow beings who are, by the visitation of Providence, deprived of their reason, may find a safe retreat." Brown's bequeathment wasn't enough by itself to get such a project off the ground, but it put Rhode Island legislators in a more receptive frame of mind when Dix asked for an audience with the State Assembly the following month.

Dix, for her part, had been splitting her time between Rhode Island and New York, where a series of unfinished projects demanded her constant supervision. In Massachusetts and New York, the ultimate result of Dix's meetings with assemblymen had been the establishment of new hospitals and the drastic improvement of existing ones, but she didn't intend or expect to accomplish much more from this meeting than the release of Abram Simmons from his filthy, freezing prison. Dix was a formidable rhetorician, and when in public she spoke with the conviction of an eyewitness and the ready authority of a schoolteacher. More than one official who'd seen her presentations wrote about the singular effect of hearing this slender, soft-voiced woman describe the squalor and degeneracy into which she'd ventured. By this point in her career, Dix most likely understood that a man in her position, saying the things she said, would not have shared the same power of persuasion. America, particularly New England, was not immune to the rise of Victorian values, which put a premium on female decorum and delicacy, and it was shocking to hear a woman speak so matter-of-factly, especially when the horrors she narrated took place against the

backdrop of one's own town or district.

Around the beginning of May, Dix traveled to Newport and spoke with several members of the State Assembly. She laid out her findings and demanded an opportunity to argue on Simmons's behalf in front of the full legislature. Little Compton authorities had been ignoring Dix's agitatory efforts for months, and she was insistent that Simmons be sent to a facility in Massachusetts or New York, as there was no satisfactory institution in Rhode Island. The selectmen agreed to hear Dix's case, and she appeared before the Assembly at its next session. Just as the issue was presented, though, a delegate from Little Compton stood and made an announcement. Abram Simmons was dead, he said. The room fell silent.

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In the spring of 1844, Providence, Rhode Island was a center of prosperity. The city sat at the nexus of a number of railway lines, and the shipping, whaling and manufacturing industries offered abundant job opportunities for immigrants, who migrated to Providence from all over Europe and Canada. Though the state economy would see a slump before the decade was over, due in part to the depressing effects of the gold rush on maritime trade, Providence was, and would for years remain, a place outfitted with as much cheap labor as Boston and not nearly as much market competition, a modest city where an enterprising businessman could amass more or less as much wealth as he cared to. One such man was a developer and shipping magnate named Cyrus Butler.

Butler, born in 1767, had been raised to carry on the family trade of shoemaking, but his father made a series of fortunate investments in Rhode

Island, and by 1813 both Cyrus and his brother Samuel had received a substantial inheritance. Cyrus, for his part, went about attaching his name to every venture in and around the city that seemed likely to turn a profit. He coordinated and provided the ships for extensive trade between Russia and a series of Southern cotton plantations, and underwrote the construction of the shopping arcade in downtown Providence. Butler was known for his ranging investor's curiosity — there was almost no project or industry in which he would refuse to involve himself, if it looked like a sound financial decision — and for his extreme frugality. Among men of wealth and prominence, it was considered good form to give back to the community now and then (although many did it in the most ostentatious way they could find), but Butler disdained charities and kept his money out of anything that seemed unlikely to reward in kind. It kept him rich — in 1844 he was the wealthiest man in Providence, and possibly in all of New England; when he died five years later, the A*merican Almanac* would estimate his worth at between three and four million dollars — but he was not well liked. Still, he had money. So Dorothea Dix paid him a visit.

Following the announcement of Simmons's death, the Rhode Island State Assembly had voted without further discussion to appoint a state lunacy commission. Now they were looking to build a hospital. (It was a project that had been waiting in the wings for a long time: as early as 1650, Roger Williams had urged the Providence Town Council to allocate a space for people "bereft of their senses," but the request had come to little.) The existing facilities for the mentally ill were hopeless, consisting mainly of state-funded poor farms and halfway homes like the one behind which Simmons had been quarantined. The largest of

these was Dexter Asylum, a five-story brick warehouse that squatted behind an eight-foot stone enclosure on the east side of Providence. Dexter had opened in 1828, and served as a catchall repository for the city's indigent; besides the insane, it was possible at Dexter to find runaways, bewildered immigrants, and pregnant women forced to deliver in secret, all working the surrounding farm grounds to earn their meager keep. Medical records from Dexter indicate that one out of every four residents was considered mad, but no treatment was ever offered beyond confinement in the facility's "maniac cells." Dix knew that Providence could do better.

She'd been given Butler's name by William Giles Goddard, a retired professor of moral philosophy at Brown. Goddard was a member of the State Assembly, and it seems that he, along with a few other legislators, had tried to persuade Butler earlier that year to donate funds to be put toward a mental hospital, to no avail. Dix was warned beforehand about Butler's reputation for closefistedness, but she went ahead with the meeting. History does not record what was said, and afterward Dix would refuse to speak to reporters about it; in a letter to a friend some years later, she described only "a long conversation respecting the business." Both Francis Tiffany, one of the earliest Dix biographers, and Pliny Earle, the itinerant physician with whom Dix shared similar priorities but a relationship filled with tension, have written detailed accounts of this meeting, though neither man was present and their versions have almost nothing in common. Tiffany has Dix and Butler making pleasant small talk about the weather, while in Earle's version the millionaire fixes the activist with a suspicious gaze and orders her to state her business.

In truth, it's not at all clear what transpired between Butler and Dix. All we know for sure is that some time after their conference, the Committee of Incorporators for the proposed hospital received a check from Butler. The amount was forty thousand dollars, to be made available on the condition that public fundraising could match the donation. Dix and the legislators pooled their efforts and brought in $54,000 from assorted donors; with Butler's contribution and Nicolas Brown's bequeathment, this gave the new facility a starting endowment of over one hundred thousand dollars.

The Butler Hospital for the Insane, the first hospital of any kind in Rhode Island, was established later that year, and admitted its first patients on December 1, 1847. Luther V. Bell, the physician who'd written about the importance of light and open spaces in mental wards, contributed notes to the building blueprints. Patients would be housed in "wide, bright, high-storied galleries with rooms on one side faced by windows on the other." The hospital would be set well back from the street, and every effort would be made to cultivate an atmosphere of tranquility. Visible from the rooms would be the "dense groves" of surrounding Providence, the rise and fall of the land, and the grounds of the hospital itself, perched on the Seekonk River.