

THE
REGISTER OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEVOTED TO THE
PRESERVATION OF FACTS AND DOCUMENTS,

AND EVERY OTHER KIND OF

USEFUL INFORMATION

RESPECTING THE STATE OF PENNSYLVANIA.

EDITED BY SAMUEL HAZARD.

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EASTERN STATE PENITENTIARY.

[Concluded from page 91.]

Letter of the Rev. Charles R. Demme.

PHILADELPHIA, December 1830.

To the Board of Inspectors of the Eastern State Penitentiary of Pennsylvania.

Gentlemen,—You wish to have my views of the effects of solitary confinement, as it exists in the New Penitentiary on Cherry-Hill, particularly with regard to the probability of a reformation of the prisoners, by moral and religious instruction. You would have received my letter several days sooner, if I had not been prevented from writing, partly by sickness, partly by prior engagements.

Permit me then first, to render to the Secretary of your Board thanks; for it was through his instrumentality, that I became better acquainted with an institution, to the principles of which I had been decidedly averse, but which I have since learned to regard as the execution of an idea, suggested by the most enlightened and active benevolence, and as a measure, that promises to produce the happiest results on the moral character and condition of society. I had seen solitary confinement on the continent of Europe, and disgust mixed with horror will remain the indelible impression. Admitting, that it would bear a very different character in your intended establishment, and granting that its effects would be greatly influenced by the peculiar temper and constitution of the body, as well as by the frame and turn of the mind of each individual, yet, I thought, that the necessarily attendant evils would be, an impaired constitution, brutish insensibility and lethargy, or incessant anxiety gradually settling down to gloomy dejection and melancholy, and if the prisoner should be roused from that state, resentment, malignity, and purposes of being soon revenged on society by a repetition of the same offence, or the commission of others of a still greater moral turpitude. So I looked on with deep solicitude, while the building on Cherry-Hill was in progress, willingly would I have assisted in taking down every stone, and would have considered it as a work of benevolence. When the system had been in operation for about six months, I was requested by the gentleman above-mentioned to speak to one of the prisoners, a German, who asserted his innocence of the crime, for which he was sentenced. You were desirous that he might be addressed in his native language, hoping that by this means access might be had to his heart. I went, but with reluctance. Since that time I have been there repeatedly, and as every opportunity was afforded me for it by you as well as by your worthy warden, and his keepers, I have conversed with many of the prisoners, have become better acquainted with the principles of the Institution, and the effects it has so far produced, and this has changed my sentiments with regard to it.

Solitary confinement is a severe punishment, and it is felt as such by the prisoners. Let us not compare it with the unjust imprisonment of a good man, who is capable of self enjoyment, is supported by the approbation of his conscience, and who, by reviewing the past with a peaceful mind, may aspire with hope to future happiness. No. The inmates of these cells are guilty

men, who, if once left to themselves, will be stung by the adders of remorse and terrors of the punishment denounced against their crimes by a higher tribunal. For such, to be deprived of almost every opportunity of exercising the faculty of speech, and of indulging an interchange of sentiment; to be condemned, not to a momentary pain, but to a protracted monotony of joyless existence, having no other companion but "a wounded heart;" and being left to themselves, to be forced to commune with that heart, this is punishment indeed, so severe, that if the apprehension of any punishment can deter an evil disposed person from the perpetration of crimes, this I think, will be most likely to do it. But I am convinced now, that there is no cruelty in it; and none of the dangers mentioned, neither physical nor moral, necessarily attendant on it, if, as is the case, the prisoners are allowed to work, and have the means of moral and religious instruction afforded to them. Then, mind and body are both kept in action, and the faculties of neither will grow torpid for want of use, or incurably malignant by feeding on the filth of their passions.

The time is too short, to say with absolute confidence, that an improvement has taken place in the character of any one of the prisoners. The cure, which is to be effected in those diseased minds, must needs be slow and gradual. First impressions, indeed, of religious truth, if once it finds an entrance into their heart, may be very strong, yea! I think, it may be expected on psychological principles, that in most cases, they would be so; but whether these first impressions will have permanency, whether they will overcome the obstinacy of habitual errors, and subdue inveterate passions; whether they will produce a change of sentiment, and of principle, and of taste, so that the prisoner, after the expiration of his term, will despise his former enjoyments, and triumphs of guilt; will prefer honest labour to unlawful gains, will resist the temptation of vice and prosperous villainy, and shun the contaminating circle of his old associates,—to decide these, will require a longer and closer observation, than I have yet been enabled to make. Appearances certainly are in many cases favourable, but they may prove illusory. The calm which seems to reign in those cells may be deceitful; the prisoners may be secretly at work, imagination may be heaping up fuel on the latent fire, and nature, having been long buried, may revive with double strength, when exposed again to its old temptations, for, as in the old Penitentiary, the greatest danger exists within the walls; on your system, Gentlemen, it will meet the prisoner, when he leaves them.

But, thus much may be confidently asserted, that the friends of your system have reason to entertain the most sanguine hopes, that the new Penitentiary will prove a school of penitence in many cases, by leading the criminal to reflection, by forming in him habits of industry, and by giving him back to virtue, and to his God, through the means of religious instruction.

As regards the latter, I rejoice, that you do not regard it as a matter of minor importance.—*Villarme*, it is true, in his excellent work on Prisons, says, p. 113, "Je ne sais point, qu'elle est la part, que nos ministres pourraient avoir à l'amendement des prisonniers; je sais seulement, que sous le régime de nos prisons elle

est nulle;" and *Lucas* seems to agree with him. But they speak of Prisons, in which the prisoners are kept promiscuously together. On Cherry-Hill the case is a different one. *In your establishment the first fair experiment is making, what influence religion can exercise on such minds.* There humanity asks for it, and the success of your system will greatly depend on it. That the prisoners are willing to receive such instruction, you have satisfactory evidence, and I must say, every one of those, with whom I conversed, was respectful; every one was willing to hear me, and desirous of a renewal of the visit. Whoever could read, produced a Bible that had been used; several surprised me by the pertinent questions they proposed, or the remarks they made, and some seemed to feel, that it was not the punishment, but their crime, which had degraded them.

And why should not religion effect there, what it does effect elsewhere? we have no right to doubt it?—Are they not human beings? Is there a man in existence, whose mind may not be brought to a silent acknowledgment, that Virtue is preferable to Vice, & that there is a reality in a good conscience, and in the favour of God? *Is not the religion of the Bible, wherever it is presented in its simplicity, a message of love?* Does it not speak the language of man, at the sound of which even these guilty beings, who have unmade themselves, will be apt to say, "how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?" Yes, gentlemen, the attempt to reclaim the inmates of your cells, through the means of religious instruction, may be difficult, but it is not utterly hopeless, if made by a person who takes a sincere interest in their welfare, attends to the feelings of their hearts, and thereby is able to convince them, that he compassionates their sufferings, while he detests their crimes. I rejoice, therefore, that you do regard religious instructions as an integral part of your system.

I do not know, which may be the best mode of affording it. Preaching, I think, ought to be continued. It seems at least one, but an invisible and salutary link, between them and society; it is a beneficial change in the dreary monotony of their existence; and the voice of the *Unseen Preacher* may produce on the mind the most striking and happy effect. But it ought to be accompanied, as far as practicable, by private conversations in the cells; and I would expect more good from stated visits of the same person, than from the occasional calls of different individuals. For in this way, a gradual acquaintance with the peculiar character of the prisoner can be acquired, a plan can be pursued, benevolence can be manifested, a feeling of attachment can be formed, and confidence can be gained, without which nothing can be effected.

Should I say, what qualifications the man ought to have, who undertakes the difficult task of speaking of religion to those guilty but unfortunate beings, I would name, a knowledge of human nature, that he may be able to discover the ruling propensities, which have led the individual to his crime, and apply the proper remedy against them; a truly catholic spirit, divesting himself of sectarian theology, but having much of religion; a deep feeling of the dignity of this calling; an invincible love of mankind, and a strong faith in the Saviour of the world.

I am, truly and sincerely, yours.

CHARLES R. DEMME.

Letter of the Rev. Samuel W. Crawford.

PHILADELPHIA, Jan. 1st 1831.

To the Board of Inspectors of the Eastern State Penitentiary of Pennsylvania.

Gentlemen,—With pleasure do I comply with your request, asking a statement of my opinion relative to the effects of solitary confinement on the prisoners in the new Penitentiary.

I have not been long enough there, perhaps, to be qualified to decide very positively, on this subject; but I hesitate not to say, that my present views are very favourable to the system now in operation.

I have paid peculiar attention to the operation of confinement on the bodies of the prisoners. Their looks have not by any means proved it injurious. Their health has been uniformly good. No one, since I began my labours there, has, to my knowledge, been seized with sickness.

From sermons, exhortations, and religious conversations, from time to time, held with the prisoners, I am convinced, considerable good has resulted. The moral sense has, in some instances, been awakened, the heart softened; and impressions of a religious character been made.

Convinced, that the present system is the only one calculated to secure lasting benefit to those miserable beings, my earnest prayer is, that a good God may so order that it shall be kept in operation.

I am, Gentlemen, respectfully, yours,
SAMUEL W. CRAWFORD.

SALE OF WALNUT STREET PRISON.

PHILADELPHIA, 1st mo. 8th, 1831.

Respected Friend—Thy letter as chairman of the "Committee of the Select and Common Councils of the City of Philadelphia, on the subject of the sale of the Walnut street Prison," is received, and I cheerfully comply with thy request, by giving the Committee such information as I possess.

I am asked to "state the evils of the present system in that institution." Were I to state in detail, one-half of the evils I know to exist, this letter would be swelled to a volume, and I fear would be a task on the patience of the Committee.

I may, however, sum them up in a few words, by saying, that I believe there are few acts in the catalogue of crimes that can be done within prison walls, that are not practised there; and few, that are not planned, to be effected after the discharge of the convicts.

I assert, without fear of contradiction, that it is not possible for the Legislature to devise a system where men will be more completely contaminated, hardened, and depraved, than in that college of vice, the Walnut street Prison. Since my knowledge of the establishment, I have known many (I think I may say hundreds) who have been, when received, comparatively innocent men, and who, if they had been kept separate, and not mixed with scores of hardened villains, would have never been convicted a second time.

Finding however, in their new associates, every encouragement to commit fresh depredations, they go out eager for plunder; and our calendar exhibits frequent re-convictions until a lingering life of wretchedness is terminated in those walls which were intended for their reform.

It may be asked, why has such an enormity been suffered to exist for years, in the fairest part of the fairest city in the Union? Why have not those acquainted with the facts divulged them, for if they were known generally, they would not be suffered to exist? Certainly, our Grand Juries, the Philadelphia Society for alleviating the miseries of Public Prisons, and the Inspectors of the Prisons, have from time to time complained of the deplorable situation of the inmates of that place. When these expositions have been made, the community showed themselves alive to the subject; but for years there has been so much difficulty, from the various and apparently conflicting laws, that few have understood, and still fewer have been disposed to meet the difficulties.

I am far from wishing to pass my censure on the Board of Inspectors who have had the management of the prisons. I admit that in some respects they might have done better; but perhaps it is more a matter of surprise, that under all circumstances they have done so well. I think the Board is too numerous, and the manner of their election objectionable.

In order to bring the subject, as I view it, before the