Poverty and Discipline: A Case Study of the Philadelphia House of Refuge

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Introduction

“If the question lies between a jail and such an institution as the House of Refuge, it should be remembered that those who begin their days in a jail, most commonly become a burden for life, subsisted by the public while in, and by plunder when out; whereas the Refuge, working a reform, enables them to support themselves, and to contribute something to the general expenses of society.”

On February 7th, 1826, the Philadelphia House of Refuge was founded as a youth reformatory as part of a larger effort to separate juvenile delinquents and vagrants from their adult counterparts. As the project of a wealthy and politically powerful Board of Managers, the House garnered over twenty thousand dollars in government grants and more than eight thousand dollars in private donations. Composed of thirty-one men appointed by both public authorities and private contributors, the Board of Managers was responsible for reviewing applications for admission into the House, as well as exercising guardianship and discipline over the admitted youth. At the core of the philosophy behind the nineteenth-century reform movement inspiring these charities was an assumed link between poverty and criminality; likewise, the managers of the House viewed pauperism not in terms of its relationship to socio-economic conditions, but as a moral problem that necessitated change in the poor themselves.
New York House of Refuge on Randall's Island, one example of the various Houses of Refuge that were established in the 19th century

In this paper, with particular focus on the Philadelphia House of Refuge, I argue that the logic of punishment and rehabilitation in reformatories and the conditions and ideology of the contemporaneous economy reinforced each other. I examine how the economy of the early nineteenth century gave rise to a particular carceral sentiment that specifically targeted poor children (as an extension of the approach to incarcerate the poor that had existed since the seventeenth century). In turn, I also assess how the reformatory legitimized the carceral-capitalist ideology at the time by analyzing how the treatment of children in the House became increasingly penal and rigorous.
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Historical Context

The Long History of Incarcerating the Poor

The incarceration of the poor is not an unprecedented phenomenon new to the nineteenth century. Rather, it was an established tradition that was practiced since the early sixteenth century. For instance, Concerning the Relief of the Poor (1526)—a highly influential essay by Juan-Luis Vives from which the Senate of Bruges modeled its system of welfare—declares “if the hospitals cannot accommodate all the incapacitated poor, a home should be built, or several…There let them be confined.” Describing the advantages of the confinement, Vives argues that “fewer thefts, acts of violence, robberies, murders, capital offences will be committed; seeing that poverty will be alleviated, which drives men first into vices and bad habits,” that “it will be safer and more pleasanter to dwell in the city,” and that “there will be just so many citizens made more virtuous, more law-abiding, more useful to the country; nor will they participate in revolutions or seditions.” These justifications reveal that the poor and vagrant, by their mere presence on the streets, were seen as disturbances to the public order and threats to social stability. Incarceration, then, was an effort by authorities to at once minimize the visibility of the poor in public and quell the rising tide of violence that widespread poverty at this time was brewing.

This trend continues in the seventeenth century, most prominently exemplified by the 1601 Elizabethan Poor Law, in which providing relief for the poor was established as a public responsibility, and the poor were classified into two categories: the worthy (orphans, widows, the eledery, the disabled, etc) and the unworthy (the idle, for instance). Colonial legislatures in America also adopted laws that mirrored the same values as their English predecessors, often resorting to confining the
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poor in poorhouses and coercing them to labor. The reformatory, then, is an extension of a long history of placing the destitute in total institutions that isolated them from the rest of society.

Economic Conditions of the Early Nineteenth Century in Philadelphia

The economic conditions of Philadelphia in the early nineteenth century were turbulent. While Philadelphia had primarily been a center for transoceanic shipping in the 1700s, by the 1820s, it became a manufacturing center whose economy revolved mainly around factory production. According to the sixth U.S. census, the capital invested in manufacturing in Pennsylvania increased from $6,323,077 in 1820 to $31,815,105 in 1840, while the number of people employed in manufacturing leaped from 8,875 to 87,722.

At the same time, between 1800 and 1830, impoverished immigrants from abroad contributed greatly to the number of unemployed people, as seen by the city’s expenditure of one million dollars on poor relief between 1816 and 1827. Urban areas were doubly burdened by the influx of European immigrants and rural migrants, who accounted for the majority of the cities’ relief bills. Between 1800 and 1830, the population of Philadelphia grew from 67,811 to 161,410. Such rapid growth of population and industry, economic fluctuations, and the resulting strain on the city’s budget for public welfare created such a massive population of the needy that traditional forms of charity such as almshousing could not suffice. These conditions ultimately played a significant role in garnering public acceptance for the institutional care of the needy.

In addition, these conditions led to changes in how poor children, in particular, were managed by society. Philadelphia witnessed the emergence of industrial childhood labor at this time, which signified a break from the traditional system of
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apprenticeship that children engaged in prior to the early nineteenth century. Prominent politicians such as Alexander Hamilton claimed that factory production was advantageous because new factories would employ otherwise idle children, promoting habits of order and industry while saving money in poor relief. Between 1837 and 1838, one fifth of all factory operatives in Pennsylvania were children under twelve. The absence of apprenticeship as a provider of food, shelter, moral training, and intellectual and spiritual guidance gave rise to complaints that children received no education and were prone to become reckless vagrants. Rules regarding moral conduct existed in factories, but their chief concern was to ensure that the factory operated at a high level of efficiency, not to instill moral values into the children.10

The responsibility of guiding children, therefore, was left to the community and its traditional agencies of socialization, such as schools and churches—most of which were insufficiently addressing the issue of juvenile delinquency. Meanwhile in the 1820s, the number of juvenile delinquency cases became alarming in Philadelphia. An investigation conducted on November 13th, 1828 showed that there were sixty boys in the prison of Philadelphia, most of whom were homeless children.11 The economic instability of the early 1800s and the decline of apprenticeship as a stable source of guidance for children contributed to steadily rising crime. As Glazier (1985) puts it, the House of Refuge arose out of the “conjunction of the need to socialize prospective young laborers to the demand of a new workplace with the absence of agencies of socialization capable of preparing the young for changing adult roles.”12

The Early Nineteenth Century Economy’s Engendering of a Progressive Carceral Sentiment Toward Children

By the end of the eighteenth century, public attitudes
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toward penal policy were changing. Led by Beccaria and his Enlightenment ideals, physical torture was increasingly seen as illegitimate. This gave way to changes in punishments that strike the “soul rather than the body, leading to the invention of the penitentiary.” Between the 1790s and 1810s, social reformers including the Quakers publicly supported penitentiaries, hoping that the proper environment (characterized by isolation, silence, and labor) would awaken the inmates’ minds to proper conduct. This was, of course, underwritten by the principle that inmates in the penitentiaries would not be left to sit idle, but would instead actively engage in the process of rehabilitation through labor. Benjamin Franklin, for example, warned against the possibility of public welfare engendering slothfulness in the poor: “If we provide arrangement for laziness, and support for folly, may we not be found fighting against the order of God and nature, which perhaps has appointed want and misery as the proper punishments for, and cautions against, as well as necessary consequences of, idleness and extravagance?”

However, despite the popularity of the prison as the new default form of punishment, riots, violence, suicide, and chronic overcrowding undermined the penitentiaries’ fundamental vision of moral reform, giving rise to a new reform movement that sought to differentiate those with and without the potential for rehabilitation. In 1787, the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons was founded by Thomas Eddy, one of the pioneers of the prison reform movement. He believed that rehabilitation ought to be the chief end of punishment, seeking to eradicate crime through work, religion, and education. The first public recommendation of the Society was for “more private or even solitary labor” and the separation of the depraved from the less depraved.

In particular, the separation between the depraved and less depraved came to symbolize the distinction of juvenile delinquents from their adult counterparts. Indeed, the progres-
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sive movement was supported by popular Lockean notions of the malleability of youthful character (as opposed to the hardened character of adults). Ben Franklin’s activities as president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery (founded in 1775) reveal how political leaders at the time emphasized early forms of crime prevention: the purpose of the organization was “to instruct, to advise, to qualify those, who have been restored to freedom, to promote in them habits of industry, to furnish them with employments suited to their age, sex, talents, and to procure for their children an education.”

Although his organization focused on instructing newly freed men, the idea that it is crucial to “train” those (1) at risk of poverty and criminality and (2) whose characters are malleable and have not yet adjusted to a rigid form of life early on became widespread.

In sum, the economic turbulence at the turn of the century, changing modes of collectively rearing and employing children, and evolving beliefs of progressive reformists ultimately gave rise to the philosophy of charities such as the House of Refuge, which sought to extend a progressive carceral logic toward poor children.

The Philosophy of the House of Refuge

The House of Refuge delineated its principles as the following: “employment of the idle; instruction of the ignorant; reformation of the depraved; relief of the wretched; a general diffusion of good morals; enlargement of virtuous society; the universal protection of property and life.” These were a direct reflection of the contemporaneous socioeconomic conditions discussed in the previous section. One of the core tenets of the House of Refuge was a firm belief in the possibility of rehabilitation for children, which was necessary for justifying a separate institution for reforming children that would replace
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traditional agencies of socialization and reduce crime. In *The Design and Advantages of the House of Refuge*, the managers of the House called it a “matter of astonishment” that “until within a few years, no measures have been taken to... adopt some plan which shall lessen, if not cure the enormous evil of punishing juvenile offenders, without any prospect of reforming them.” Detailing how the confinement of children into jails without means of instruction would increase recidivism, the managers made it clear that “the institution we want is neither a prison nor an almshouse, but a school of discipline and instruction.”

The notion that moral instruction could deter crime and instability allowed the House to successfully argue before the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania in 1838 that it could hold delinquent children without a criminal trial or conviction. The court justified its decision by holding that “the infant has been snatched from a course which must have ended in confirmed depravity; and not only is the restraint of her person lawful, but it would be an act of extreme cruelty to release her from it.” In other words, the court ruled that the confinement of vagrant children with no criminal offenses was acceptable because of their criminal potential, and thus justified the House of Refuge as a preventive measure conducive to the infant’s welfare. The alleged connection between the poverty of these children and their criminality in the future was a crucial component in rationalizing the logic of the House and the policies that allowed the arbitrary incarceration of vagrant children who disrupted the public order. In this way, reformatories such as the House of Refuge were an ideal solution to reconcile the need to combat instability by incarcerating poor vagrant children with the growing progressive concern that jails were inhumane for children. Vagrant children could now be detained without having committed criminal offenses under the assumption that the House would provide for their welfare.

In addition, the emphasis on preventing idleness re-
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reflects the contemporaneous economy’s distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor and its concern for maintaining social stability amidst turmoil. Throughout the *The Design and Advantages of the House of Refuge*, the managers consistently discuss how the “House of Refuge is designed to be a palace of never ceasing occupation.” They express the hope that “when the pupil leaves the institution… instead of being a weight on the community, supported either in our jails or almshouses, he will be enabled to bear his part of the public burdens.”23 In the fifty-first annual report of the House of Refuge, the managers emphasize the benefits that the House brings to the public by emphasizing how “pauperism is diminished by the inmates… being enabled to gain a respectable living by their honest industry, and thus adding to the general welfare,” the lessening of crime, and the enlargement of public security—in other words, providing reassurance that the House plays its role in maintaining social stability.24

Lastly, the managers of the House of Refuge appealed to the early nineteenth century economy’s focus on productivity and economic efficiency by highlighting that their charity saved taxpayers’ money. The managers appealed not only to the moral imperative to help guide delinquents in the right direction, but also to its economic benefits: “when viewed as a means by which the perpetration of crimes will be prevented, it is believed that a regard to economy alone would require support of this institution.”25 In order to maximize economic efficiency, the House also imposed strict standards for who to admit into the institution. The principal of the House claimed “if one is deformed in body, deficient in mind, and not likely to succeed in acquiring the knowledge of a trade, or unfitted to bear the proper discipline, he has higher claims on some other form of public charity. A house of refuge is not meant for him, nor is it likely to benefit him.”26 In this sense, the House, like other forms of charity navigating through limited resources at
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this time, drew a precarious line between who was worthy and unworthy to access such special types of assistance.

In short, the Philadelphia House of Refuge was (1) a mechanism for social control that arose out of the turbulent economic conditions of the early nineteenth century and (2) an extension of the history of applying carceral logic toward the poor. By situating itself as a progressive institution with faith in the unique rehabilitative abilities of children, the House effectively addressed socioeconomic concerns in a fashion that was compatible with reformist movements that demanded efficient yet humane solutions to juvenile poverty and delinquency.

The Legitimization of Carceral-Capitalist Ideology in Reformatories

Just as how the economic conditions of the early nineteenth century shaped the logic of reformatories, the reformatories themselves—in their practices—also legitimized the economy’s carceral-capitalist ideology.

The Structure and Organization of the House of Refuge

The House of Refuge was structured in a way that reflected and reinforced the ideology of the contemporaneous economy. The founders of the House were prominent, affluent Philadelphians who were politically active and often involved with other charitable projects. For example, the first president John Sergeant was a financially well-off lawyer who believed that the wealthy had a duty to serve the public. Naturally, the status of the Board of Managers led the managers to be primarily concerned with preserving the social and economic values that enabled them to occupy such positions of privilege to begin with.
Thus, the House was structured in a way that reinforced the narratives of the capitalist economy, namely that one must reap the fruits of his own labor and obey one’s superiors or employers. The children followed a strict schedule in which they were required to labor an average of eight hours per day; recreation and play was only allowed for half an hour if the day’s work had all been completed. In the first year, the boys engaged in bookbinding, basket-making, wicker-weaving… etc., while the girls sewed, mended, cooked, and practiced general housework.

The classification of inmates into four classes according to their level of obedience was also an integral aspect of the reformatory’s mission to indoctrinate docility. The inmates that “behave well, are orderly in their conduct, and attentive to their studies” were rewarded monthly by the Superintendent and Matron in the presence of other inmates, and those who behaved well for a consecutive three months formed a class of honor.
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and wore badges of distinction. This tradition reflects what Foucault termed the gratification-punishment system, in which “the definition of performance [is] on the basis of the two opposed values of good and evil” and the lazy are encouraged by the desire to be rewarded in the same way as the diligent.

The children also received schooling in spelling, reading, writing, arithmetic, etc., as religious, moral, and intellectual education was viewed as an integral part of the House’s mission. The term punishment was claimed to be “unknown, except in the necessary correction of idleness or disorder within the house,” demonstrating how the managers wished to sever themselves from the label of “punitive.”

The Internalization of Capitalist Messages by the House of Refuge

The House of Refuge reproduced the ideology that idleness is a sin by transforming children into wage-earners. The possibility of rehabilitation for children enabled the effort to orient them toward becoming obedient workers in the future. Viewed as valuable potential additions to the labor force, the children were trained to adopt habits of industry and self-reliance, and the ultimate goal was for the managers to place the children into apprenticeships. Indeed, seventy years after its founding, the American Academy of Political and Social Science summarized the work of the House of Refuge as “twice blessed for its benefits not only the immediate recipients of its training, but does incalculable good in changing them from being an expense to the public into wage earners.” The administrators of the House also consistently identified obedience as the chief trait it aims to instill in the children. The principal of the House in its founding years described how “a boy, who has been accustomed to disobey his parents or superiors, and has been allowed to spend most of his time in idleness before he is brought to the refuge, if kept regularly at work and compelled...
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to obey those who have the care of him, will become so ac-
customed to labor, that he will even, in some cases, prefer it to
idleness, and obedience will also become habitual.”

Certain structural features of the House itself, such
as the strict time-table that the children had to follow, repro-
duced the normality of discipline and cycles of repetition that
schools, workshops, and hospitals imposed. It reflected the rig-
ors of the industrial period and legitimized the “working day”
that the capitalist system required in exchange for sustenance.
As Foucault puts it, the principle that underlay the time-table
was essentially non-idleness, under which wasting time was a
moral offence and economic dishonesty. At least in a retroac-
tive point of view, penal labor in the House of Refuge (much
like eighteenth-century disciplinary institutions that Foucault
describes) served less to generate profit or form useful skills,
but more to construct “a power relation, an empty economic
form, a schema of individual submission and of adjustment to
a production apparatus.”

Such internalization of the value of work is also re-
vealed by the consistent inclusion of a certain section in the
annual reports of the House: testimonies by the employers to
whom the children were apprenticed. The end of each report
includes quotes by the employers praising the children’s obe-
dience and industry: “William’s conduct, honesty, industry,
and general habits are good and well-inclined,” “Elizabeth
continues to be perfectly honest, very industrious, and toler-
ably obedient.” Out of all respectable traits, the emphasis on
obedience and industriousness reveals that qualities associated
with docile labor were valued the most. The inclusion of the
employers’ appreciation and validation of the House’s work
demonstrate that the achievement of economic productivity
served as one of its most important sources of legitimacy and
values.

This philosophy is also found when examining which

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behaviors were punished and rewarded in the House. The offenses which were punished included escapes, rioting, quarreling, stealing, fighting, defying authority, and refusing to work\textsuperscript{41}—all acts associated with disobedience to one's superior. While it was true that children's homes in general tend to discourage disobedience, the administrators of the House were notable in that they explicitly measured success by levels of obedience and \textit{marketed this in their annual reports}. In the fifty-first annual report, the managers boasted that none of the children attempted to escape when they were taken to the Zoological Gardens and other exhibitions for recreational purposes, highlighting that “most of [their] youth soon learn to value aright the privileges of freedom accorded to them.”\textsuperscript{42} In outlining the benefits of the House, the managers emphasized that the House would replace the “dreaded tramp” with the “quiet and orderly citizen.”\textsuperscript{43} It is telling that these reports praised docility as the most significant asset of the children, instead of other aspects of their character such as creativity, collaboration skills, and happiness that one would typically expect a children's home to develop. The deliberate appeals to future employers, the numerous accounts of the children's lack of rebellious spirit, and the endorsement of this phenomenon as a sign of success further legitimized the carceral-capitalist nature of the charity.

\textit{Point of View of the Children}

Although there is a lack of available first-hand testimonies from the children themselves, it is still possible to infer their attitudes towards the House via reports by third-party entities. For example, observations from the Journal of Prison Discipline and Philanthropy (a revolutionary research project on prisoner welfare at the time) stated that during the parents’ monthly visits to the reformatory, “the children are constantly urging their parents to have them released, and the parents are
equally constantly promising to do so,” which “excites uneasi-
ness in the former and neutralizes what would otherwise be the
useful discipline of the house.” These remarks imply that chil-
dren felt a widespread sense of restlessness and intense desire
for release, suggesting that the House was perceived more as a
typical prison than a warm rehabilitative center as portrayed by
its administrators.

Evidence of the children’s lives after discharge also
suggests that the House was not as effective in accomplishing
its mission as it set out to be. The discussion between Gus-
tave de Beaumont and Alexis de Tocqueville (both scholars of
American prison systems) and the superintendent of the House
in 1831 read that “almost all young persons who have passed
[fifteen or sixteen years of age] when they entered the Refuge
have conducted themselves badly after leaving it.” The su-
perintendent confessed that about one-third of those who had
been released returned to a life of criminality, with the worst
vice among boys being theft and that among girls being prostitu-
tion.

Change Over Time

The intensifying adoption of carceral-capitalist prin-
ciples by the reformatory is displayed in the managers’ increas-
ingly penal and rigorous approach in managing the children.
While in its founding years, the reformatory operated under the
belief that youths who lived in poverty pursued delinquency
because they had insufficient knowledge to make correct deci-
sions, a sense that moral guidance is not enough because the
poor are inherently vicious and must be controlled through
rigid discipline became widespread in the later years.

An 1826 address by the Board of managers read that
“few are depraved to err, who enjoy the opportunity of delib-
erate choice. To make free the will by enlightening the under-
In essence, the managers initially believed that the delinquency of poor children is not a manifestation of an inherent flaw, but the result of a lack of education and spiritual guidance. The House focused heavily on environmental factors, portraying itself as an organization that successfully produced environments conducive to well-being. In contrast, the fifty-eighth annual report, when discussing the issue of children escaping, read: “I think this tendency to abscond arises more from a roving, vagrant disposition…than from any dissatisfaction with the home itself, which, in most cases, is better than that in which they were brought up.” To defend themselves against the failings of the reformatory and the continued delinquency of the children, the managers contradicted their original philosophy that moral guidance can mitigate delinquency. Instead of maintaining that the House will guide the children in the right direction, the managers identified an inherent vagrant disposition in them that has little to do with the environment they were placed in.

The need to punish every day also threatened to undermine the initial principle of reform and rehabilitation; this is reflected in the changing character of the annual reports from being philosophical to pragmatic. The third and fourth annual reports, for instance, mainly spoke of developing the morals and education of destitute youth. On the other hand, most later reports discussed not their goals and plans, but mostly specific problems and successes that the Refuge encountered in practice. The managers sought to address the practical problems of disobedience by adopting the conviction that younger subjects were more receptive to reform; in other words, they identified the source of the problem to be the old age of its current inmates. In the third annual report, it is argued that if there was any disappointment in the work of the House of Refuge, it was because subjects had been “permitted to run a career of iniquity so long that habits of vice have become mature.”

Over
time, the records of the House of Refuge reveal that admission of older children declines. In 1828 and 1829, 28% of the subjects admitted into the Refuge were over sixteen, as compared with 16% in 1830. The increasing emphasis that candidates for the House be youngsters who have not yet hardened into delinquent habits, and the continuously decreasing threshold of what age constitutes “young,” speaks to the weakening belief of the rehabilitative potential of all juveniles.

Evolving Language in the Annual Reports and Other Documents

There is a clear deviation from the original principles of the Refuge that can be detected in the language of the Board of Managers over time. In the beginning, the Report of a Committee of the Legislature in 1835 reported that “the buildings are substantial, and their arrangements judicious. The inmates present a healthy appearance; their clothing is comfortable… Their labor is suited to their age and capacity—regular, but not severe. Their government, so far as the nature of the case will allow, is parental. They have their regular hours of labor and instruction… The greatest possible care is had for their intellectual improvement.” The fourth annual report also mainly feature positive reports, outlining that “recreation is provided as regularly and as freely in due proportion as work. Exercise [and gymnastic plays] is encouraged and promoted.”

The hopeful and parental ambience of the earlier years contrasts starkly with the significantly more penal and severe ambience of the later years. In the fifty-first annual report, the first instance of suicide is mentioned, in which an inmate named William Sollenburg took his life by hanging himself in his room. The report also mentions the separation of the dormitories of younger, more innocent children from the rowdier ones, and making the occupancy of the first floor of the Boys'
Sleeping Hall the “exclusive privilege of moral conduct,” demonstrating how authorities restricted disobedient inmates from accessing basic, formerly universal amenities as a means of punishment. When discussing the necessity of walls around the reformatory, the report mentions instances where the children abused the manager’s confidence (i.e. escaped) as a justification to keep the House enclosed. One section of the report reads:

“Humanity in the largeness of its sympathies and kindness of its heart asks, Why the necessity of lock and key on the dormitory? Would it not be better to throw open every door? Would not this remove from the minds of the inmates the idea of prison life?... If every subject committed to us were a youth of ordinary moral rectitude, or had been accustomed to the mild restraints of a well-regulated family, then it would be an undoubted cruelty to subject such one to the restraints of ‘bolts and bars.’ Our experience, however, is, that but a moiety of those we receive are thus moral, or have been thus accustomed. In our discipline and economy, we have to deal with facts, and not fancies. The very young, not hardened in vicious conduct, might, in fact ought to be lodged in an open dormitory. But, for the older in years and in vice, the lock and key at night—or a corresponding police force—are absolute necessities. The protection of the comparatively innocent, as well as the preservation of property, is not to be lightly set aside.”

The increasing distinction between the “comparatively innocent” and the guilty who have a fixed character signifies the managers’ decreasing hope in rehabilitation. In contrast to their original philosophy that preaches lofty ideas of reformation, the language in the later reports are realistic, pragmatic, and
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harsh. It dismisses the original principles of the House as “fancies,” not facts, maintaining that punitive discipline is necessary while using age as a category to justify this changing approach. The “humanity [with] the largeness of its sympathies and kindness of its heart” that the managers repudiate here represents, in effect, the initial spirit reflected in their mission statement.

Instances of Abuse

In addition to subtle changes in the nuances of the managers’ tones, there are instances of outright abuse that occur in the later years. In 1876, a nine-day investigation by the Pennsylvania House of Representatives found that the board “punished children by banning play, sending them to bed without supper, placing them in solitary confinement, and even imposing lashings. The board forced children to labor in institutional workshops six days a week without pay.” Below are a few excerpts from the Report of the Evidence taken before the Committee of the House of Representatives appointed to Investigate the Management of the House of Refuge:

Regarding Ernest, a boy who attempted to escape:

“He was taken into Mr. Bulkley’s office and requested to lay over. He did so. Mr. Bulkley took out a rattan from the closet, and commenced to administer the punishment on him pretty heavy at first, and gradually increasing as he got warmed up. While in the process of punishment this boy was taken with a spasm, and the boy fell on to the floor. He immediately proceeded to his medicine closet, and got some medicine out and administered it to the boy, and then requested me to take him and lock him up in the iron front, on bread and water.”

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“I have had boys in my division locked up on bread and water for sixteen days—bread and water three times a day. One boy was locked up in an iron cell that we had at that time—a dark cell.”

Regarding the rule that boys ought to be allowed to go outside for recreation, several watchmen testified that the Superintendent grants this luxury only to the boys in the Class of Honor. In addition, the report contains an account of a boy that was subject to punishment and confinement because he was temporarily unable to work due to a sore hand. The testimony reads: “it used to be that boys with sore hands should be allowed to stay in the reading-rooms and have books; but under the present Superintendent’s administration it has been the rule that boys with sore hands, or trifling causes, should be in confinement, [sometimes for weeks at a time].” The explicit instances of abuse, unwarranted and violent punishments, and complete neglect of the children in the reformatory bear little resemblance to the parental and loving image of the Refuge portrayed in the House’s founding documents and first few annual reports. The House evidently became a less playful and rehabilitative environment, arguably not much different from the original prison model that the House intended to distinguish itself from. The abusive administration of the House, however, was largely normalized and tolerated by the watchmen:

“I don’t think [the managers] have been cruel. [The manager] never gave them a great deal [of punishment]. But what he did give them he generally gave it to them to show that he meant business.”

“There are some boys, I think, you can get along with without thrashing, and there are others, I do think it is a very hard matter to govern without it. If we had them isolated by themselves, I think you might do it. In the
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general discipline of an institution of this kind among boys, I think it is a hard matter to do without a rattan, or something of that kind. I have had very few boys punished. I try to avoid it. I will put a boy on line or march him, and conquer him in that way. Generally afterwards I have very little trouble. If a boy does his duty and what is right, I am kind to him, or try to be."62

The language above implies that physical punishment was avoided yet also seen as inevitable or necessary to properly shape young people and govern the house; such is the only concern expressed in these passages as there is no mention of how such punishment could psychologically impact the children. In addition, the act of physical abuse is portrayed to be “made up for” by displaying kindness to them afterwards. The administrators, too, seemed to share an understanding that corporal punishment was a necessary and natural reaction to disobedience.

On May 19, 1829, an administrative report reads:

“Eliza Philips was this day chastised in consequence of most flagrant and outrageous conduct. Her behavior for several weeks has been marked with insubordination and insolent language. All milder means had been used, but so far from producing good they made her worse… Her language was so horrible and polluted and expressed in so vociferous a manner as to destroy all hopes of any good from means less severe than corporal punishment… This brought matters to a point and a most severe flagellation was necessary to bring her to submission."63

Here, it is clear that physical punishment was perceived to be on the extreme end of the spectrum of punishment, but
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was nevertheless an option that must be taken if all milder means fail. The harshness of corporal punishment was indeed acknowledged by the administrators, but it seems that in no way was it understood as “off-limits” or abusive in the way that current generations would. Indeed, the House committee eventually ruled that the board’s actions were not abusive, revealing the increasingly carceral nature of public opinion.64

The slowly evolving character of the Refuge and its eventual embracing of the principles of carceralism were normalized as a kind of inevitable evolution by the administrators. Punishment that was no different from that occurring in a regular jail was depicted as an unavoidable act stemming from a place of love and kindness; in actuality, the institution of reformatories was not a radical movement against, but rather a manifestation of the carceral ideology that the contemporaneous economy propagated. It represented the fusing of capitalist and carceral cultures, strengthening the conception of punishment as not outright torture of the body, but economically and morally productive rehabilitation. This ideology ultimately served to conceal the fundamentally punitive nature of integrating children into a violent capitalist ethos.

Conclusion

The House of Refuge was originally founded as a revolutionary institution that sought to deviate from carceral ideology toward the poor and emphasize the malleable character of children; it was, nevertheless, a product of the economic conditions of its times. While it was envisioned as a new agency of socialization that would address juvenile delinquency in a progressive manner, the history of the House demonstrates how general concerns about the unruliness of vagrants and the social instability they caused dominated its original focus on rehabilitation.
The legitimization of the carceral-capitalist ideology of the time intensified over time and eventually inspired new reform movements that demanded institutions such as the juvenile court that would serve as an intermediate form of control between institutionalization and no supervision at all.65 These new forms of control were, again, portrayed as more lenient forms of punishment, but nevertheless consisted of the same thread of penal philosophy toward poverty. The assumption that the poor are bound to delinquency and thus must be forcibly controlled continued, and the ensuing “progressive” versions of the prison, reformatory, and juvenile court still operated under the framework of carceral capitalism. The House of Refuge, like its past models such as the prison, attempted to revolutionize the approach toward the poor with a seemingly newfound access to humanity, but it did not fundamentally alter the oppressive character of policing: namely, the authority to arrest, punish, and isolate those that threatened the property order. As time passed, the activities of the House grew in opposition to the progressivism on which it was founded. As part of a historic chain of reformism that advocated for more ‘humane’ structures veiled as “charity” yet contained the same disciplinary and punitive logic, the House ultimately served to reproduce discussions about the mechanisms of the detention of the poor, instead of the legitimacy of such detention itself.

At large, the House of Refuge of Philadelphia demonstrates how charity has continuously adapted its moral messages and principles to economic conditions throughout history. It reflects the transition from traditional forms of almsgiving to institutional care as resources became increasingly strained—specifically, the continuation of the long tradition of incarceration as a means of poor relief. It also reflects the transformation of the character of charity from selfless acts of giving by individuals into an exclusive public social service that is (1) afforded only to a special group of worthy recipients (children deemed to have the potential for rehabilitation) and (2) practiced in specific ways that are in line with capitalist values, such
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as conformity to the working day, productivity, and obedience.
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Notes:
2 “Carceral capitalism” is a term popularized by Jackie Wang, that describes how the system of capitalism is perpetuated by (1) imposing punitive measures on those who threaten its propertied order (i.e. are in debt), and (2) transforming punitive institutions into debt-collecting, labor-imposing, and profit-producing facilities.
4 Ibid.
7 Ibid, p. 17.
8 Ibid, p. 16.
9 Ibid, p. 27.
10 Ibid, p. 34.

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21 Ibid, p. 9.
23 Ibid, p. 16.
28 Ibid, p. 91.
29 Ibid.
38 Ibid, p. 453.
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43 Ibid, p. 54.


46 Ibid.


50 Ibid, p. 203.

51 Ibid, p. 203.


55 Ibid, p. 46.

56 Ibid, p. 45.


58 House of Representatives., Evidence taken by the Committee of the
Poverty and Discipline

House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, appointed (February, 1876) to investigate the management of the House of Refuge § (1876), p. 29. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/pst.000018432206.

59 Ibid, p. 25.

60 Ibid, p. 32.

61 Ibid, p. 262.

62 Ibid, p. 263.


Images (listed in order of appearance):
