Background History

By the second and third decades of the 19th century the village world of colonial America had all but crumbled. Historians and sociologists use certain abstract terms to describe the forces behind this erosion: "modernization," "urbanization," "industrialization." Regardless of terminology, the processes at work throughout North America altered the old relationships between local communities and the dependent poor (Rothman, 1971). Dependents in the villages had usually been treated as poor cousins; little effort was made to differentiate between various needs such as those of the old, orphaned, infirm, insane, widowed, or unemployed. Part of the duties of village members as a "collective family," insulated from the larger world and interdependent on each other, was to care for their own—first within the family unit, then within the village. Dependents, therefore, were not seen as social threats, but simply as a particular segment of society in need of care. Outdoor relief—the practice of giving relief to the needy in their own homes—reflected this attitude. Aid was seen as the duty of the village, and the family was to be kept together if at all possible. Institutions for the dependent—in the few cases where they did exist—were kept close to family style. That is, families either remained together within the institution or inmates of various ages with different infirmities cohabited in a homelike structure within which they were given some supervision and provisions. Dependent and orphaned children usually were placed with a surrogate family. It was only strangers who were seen as a threat to the social fabric. They were not welcomed into the community. It was not within the realm of communal duty to offer solace to the alien.

The forces of urbanization threw vast numbers of strangers together. The problem of the stranger became a central concern of the reformers, who in their fear of urban chaos were working out the rationale for new social institutions.

While this gradual shifting away from the "pre-modern" community into an urban and industrial world is far too complicated to trace in this paper, it is a critical part of the background to be kept in mind in trying to understand the emergence of Lancaster Industrial School for Girls. This is particularly so as the combination of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration created and exacerbated fear of the unregulated poor, and especially the urban and dependent child. In most emerging North American cities growing concern developed regarding the spread of juvenile crime. Poverty and crime were seen as interrelated, and attributed to the city and immigrant. For all the depth of their alarm, the reformers and policy-makers had shed older conceptions of humankind's innate depravity and were hopeful environmentalists. They were also institution-builders and believed strongly in the rehabilitative effects of the carefully structured institutions that would provide refuge from the pernicious effects of city streets and allow the errant and the weak a chance for betterment.

This effort at rehabilitation resulted in numerous debates among North American reformers regarding the style and structure of prisons (Rothman, 1971). Running through and connecting various arguments concerning appropriate prison style was the underlying romantic conviction that people, separated from the vices of the new urban environment and evil peers, could be "cleansed" and set aright (Houston, 1974; Rothman, 1971).

The hope for effective rehabilitation of criminal adults soon waned. There was little evidence of success in spite of penal reform. The reformers’ optimism now focused on street urchins whose youth and malleability made them appear more salvageable.

The industrious Christian family continued as the model from which moral and upright young adults could be expected to emerge. Often poor, usually immigrant, families were confronted by economic and social forces that resulted in a constant struggle to survive. This desperate fight for survival made it almost impossible for them to replicate the popular image of the ideal stable and American home: one in which were provided the training and example deemed essential for correct socialization (Prentice, 1972).
The belief that environmental change made both crime prevention and rehabilitation possible spawned a rigorous effort to save children. Furthermore, a new sense of the importance of childhood and the potential of education led to concern for the dependent and potentially delinquent child. The state was now to provide that environment that would save the child from the pernicious influences of the street; the ideal family was to be reproduced in institutional form. Out of the state's increased sense of responsibility for children developed various institutional responses such as public and reform schools. In these institutions youth would be supervised and exposed to Christian and American habits and values.3

The Creation of Lancaster

The specific history of the creation of Lancaster begins, in fact, with the opening of the State Reform School for Boys at Westborough, Massachusetts. Established in 1846, it was considered to be the first American public institution of its kind.4 In an effort to offer a surrogate home for deviant and dependent boys, Westborough was to be congregate in structure: eating and recreation were to be enjoyed in a large group, the sleeping facilities were dormitories. In an effort to provide the atmosphere considered appropriate for a good home it was to imitate family life in sentiment: the boys were to be treated as children in need of the firm, but kind, guidance of a good parent. Westborough was intended as a substitute family in a suitably rural setting. Within these confines the street urchin was to be transformed into a well-ordered adult.

No similar provisions were made to house and rehabilitate girls. There are several possible explanations. One, juvenile and delinquent girls were seen as more problematic—they were accused of being volatile and hysterical—and no policy precedents had been set from which to follow. Two, it may have been perceived that there were many more male than female juvenile delinquents. Three, a belief in the sinfulness of women had carried over from colonial times and discouraged reformers from attempting to treat the delinquent girls. However, by the mid-19th century there was growing concern that lack of provisions for juvenile girls similar to those for boys would result in their learning vicious and corrupt habits through being imprisoned with criminal female adults. Perhaps 19th-century sentimentality toward women and the Victorian fear of sexuality combined with egalitarian impulses to compel policy-makers to consider treating female delinquents.

The founders of this first reform school for girls were exceptionally conscious that they were constructing a model.5 Westborough was intended as a model, so was Lancaster. However, the problems inherent in incarcerating a large group of boys together soon became painfully apparent. Escape efforts, violence, and rebellion were frequent (Katz, 1968). Lancaster was to avoid many of the pitfalls into which Westborough had fallen. It was to answer the perceived needs of 19th-century girls, particularly those seen as potentially on the “road to ruin.” With these goals in mind, in 1856 Lancaster Industrial School for Girls was opened.

Following debate on the efficacies of various styles of reform institutions and solicitation of points of view from many people who were considered knowledgeable in this area, Lancaster was created as a cottage- and family-style institution. Departing from the contemporary norms of penal architecture, reflected in large walled institutions, this reform school was to be a series of houses or cottages. In each a matron was to serve as a mother. Every girl was to have her own room and no more than 30 girls were to live in the same house. Firmness and love were to replace corporal punishment. The girls would remain in their new home, bound by the “cords of love” rather than imprisoned by bars.

In addition to the agreement that the school should serve in loco parentis, the institution was expected to provide both intellectual and moral training. The girls would be taught to read and write as well as to perform household tasks. Most important, they would have rigorous religious training. Education and moral training were seen as reinforcing each other:

“Intellectual development exalts the moral; and although order and more direct appliances may be necessary to complete its culture, still, when you open the avenues to knowledge and supply the mind with healthy food, it ceases to long after the garbage which works such mischief with those who have nothing else to feed on. The cultivation of self-respect, besides the inculcation and enforcement of those great moral truths which it is the business of society to develop and to cherish, should be carefully attended to. The germ of all-morality lies in self-respect; and, unless you have sufficiently stimulated and excited this, all your efforts will be as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.” (Annual Report to Legislature, House Document 43, Appendix 34)

The “resolves” to establish the school (1855) outlined the details of the theory that was to govern the creation of Lancaster:

“The title of the Resolves under which the Commissioner act is, 'Resolves for the establishment of a State Reform School for Girls.' A State Reform School for Girls! Every word is significant and suggestive. In the first place the institution established is to be a state school. . . . Its establishment and maintenance will certainly affect the material interest of every citizen; and its beneficial operation will as certainly it is hoped return a