



August 2026 Her Story ENewsletter Mental Health Activists

Mental institutions in the United States have a sordid history. Women were sometimes locked up against their will because their husbands had them committed. The conditions in the facilities themselves were often far less than satisfactory – if facilities even existed at all. Two women who campaigned to increase the number of institutions available to provide services, improve conditions in the facilities and limit the conditions under which people who could be confined are Dorothea Dix and Elizabeth Packard.



In 1843, **Dorothea Dix** exposed the harsh treatment of the mentally ill when her report documenting an eighteen-month survey of facilities throughout the state was presented to the Massachusetts legislature. Dix was horrified when she saw the conditions at those facilities. Issues she described included dirt, cruelty, and disease. She went on to review conditions at mental institutions in other states. She became well-known for writing memoranda to edify, embarrass, and spur legislators into “doing the right thing” for the mentally ill.

Dix won support for her cause from educators and statesmen. Her “firstborn child” was the New Jersey State Lunatic Asylum in Trenton that was completed in 1848.

That institution became the role model for the humane care of the mentally ill. In 1843, when Dix began her work, there were 13 mental hospitals in the entire U.S. By 1880, due to her efforts, and those of her supporters, there were 123. She also helped provide the foundation for enhancements in the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness. Dix has been inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame and was featured on a 1982 U.S. postage stamp.



In 1860, in Illinois, **Elizabeth Packard** was confined to a mental institution against her will after her husband had her committed. The youngest of her six children was two years old at the time. For the next three years, Packard kept a journal of the terrible conditions she and the other women endured. In 1863, she was determined to be incurable and discharged. When she returned home, her husband locked her in the nursery; she then appealed to a local judge. After a five-day trial, the jury delivered its decision after only seven minutes of deliberation – she was sane. When she again returned home, her husband had removed all the furnishings including her possessions, and the children, and had fled to Massachusetts. Although she appealed to courts in both states, she had no rights as a married woman.

Packard founded the Anti-Insane Asylum Society and worked to secure rights for married women. She became a lobbyist and an outspoken advocate for better insanity laws. She petitioned the Illinois and Massachusetts legislatures, which in 1869 passed laws allowing women equal rights to their property and to their children. Both states also passed laws allowing individuals accused of insanity the right to a public hearing before committal. Packard's husband ceded custody of their children after the equal rights laws were passed. In 2023, a mental health center in Illinois was renamed in her honor.

We profile more than 850 women like Dorothea Dix and Elizabeth Packard and in our book *Her Story: A Timeline of the Women Who Changed America*. Women's accomplishments continue to inspire and encourage us. Continue to help us tell women's stories!

Charlotte Waisman and Jill Tietjen

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