

*Magdalene Laundries: The First Prisons for Women
in the United States**

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ABSTRACT

The Indiana Women's Prison, originally known as the Indiana Reformatory Institution for Women and Girls, is considered the first separate prison for women in the United States. We believe that distinction belongs instead to Catholic institutions commonly referred to as "Magdalene Laundries" that were established throughout the nation beginning in the 1840s and that served as private prisons for women whose sexuality offended mainstream society. We first discovered the existence of a Magdalene Laundry in Indianapolis as part of research on the early history of our prison. In digitizing records for the original inmates, we found that none were in for sex-related offenses. We discovered a Catholic prison that had opened in Indianapolis five months before the Indiana Reformatory Institution for Women and Girls. We have since found 15 Catholic women's prisons that existed before the one in Indianapolis opened, beginning with Louisville, Kentucky, in 1843, and another 23 before 1900.

We discuss attributes that clearly establish these institutions as private prisons to which state and city courts sentenced women and girls for sex-related crimes. As in the now-infamous Magdalene Laundries in Ireland, women in U.S. institutions were forced to perform hard labor without

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compensation and were subjected to cruel and sustained punishment, often for years.

In incarcerating, abusing, and stigmatizing thousands of women, these prisons played an important role in shaping attitudes toward female sexuality and identity for 150 years, yet we seem to have lost all memory of them. We contend that this historical amnesia hinders our understanding of prisons and marginalized women, past and present.

KEY WORDS Indiana Women's Prison; Indiana Reformatory Institution for Women and Girls; Magdalene Laundries; Sisters of the Good Shepherd; House of the Good Shepherd

Catholic Magdalene Laundries, and not the Indiana Reformatory Institution for Women and Girls, should bear the distinction as the first separate prisons for women in the United States. Opened in 1873, the Indiana Reformatory (now known as the Indiana Women's Prison) incarcerated women convicted of crimes not of a sexual nature even though the institution was created in part for the purpose. U.S. Magdalene Laundries, the first of which opened in 1843, had a mission of reforming the fallen and in that quest created institutions that were prisons in all but name.

By 1900, approximately 39 Catholic prisons for female sex offenders existed in 20 states and the District of Columbia, yet memory of these institutions has been lost. This historical amnesia distorts our picture of the origins of prisons for women in the United States and obscures the extent to which female prisons and female sexuality have been entangled since separate prisons for women began.

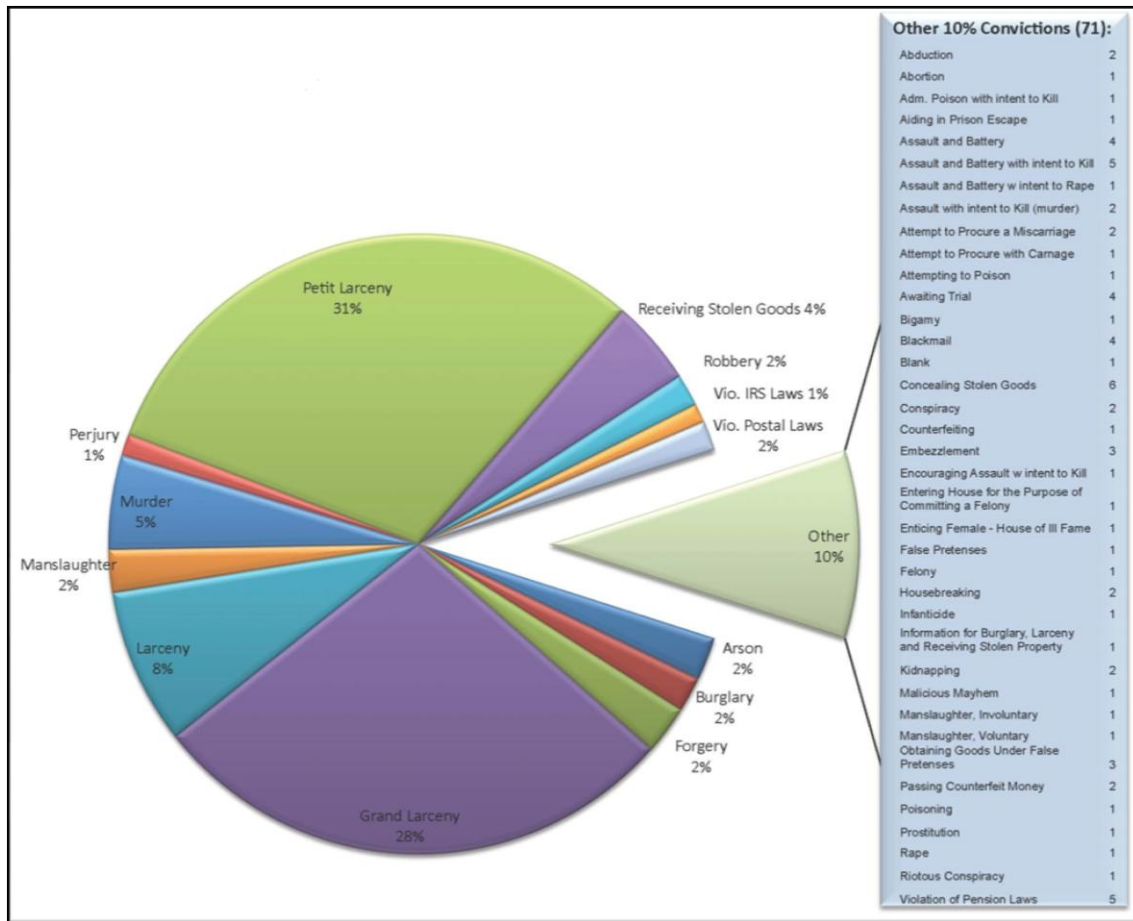
ORIGINS OF OUR RESEARCH

Along with our fellow students in the higher education program at the Indiana Women's Prison, in 2013, we began researching and writing a history of our prison's earliest years. Early in our research, we were fortunate to obtain original sources from the Indiana Archives, Indiana State Library, and the prison itself, including detailed demographic data from the prison's registries and annual reports. We began by digitizing the data for every woman and girl received at the prison from its founding in 1873 until 1900.

When we started to analyze crimes of conviction, we stumbled upon a glaring omission. Figure 1 presents a breakdown of crimes for which women were sent to the prison from 1873 to 1899. The vast majority of women (67 percent) were committed for larceny, petit larceny, or grand larceny, and an additional 11 percent for forgery, burglary, perjury, robbery, or receiving stolen goods. Another 7 percent were in for murder or manslaughter, 2 percent for arson, 2 percent for violation of postal laws, 1 percent for violation of tax laws, and 10 percent for 71 other crimes. Only one was sentenced to the Indiana Reformatory for Women and Girls for a sex offense. Indeed, not

until October 27, 1897—24 years after the prison’s founding—did Estella Koup arrive at the prison as the first woman sent there for prostitution or other sexual offense.

Figure 1. Crimes for Which Women Were Sentenced to the Indiana Women’s Prison, 1873–1899



How could that be? We know that prostitution was rampant during and after the Civil War. A chronicler of Indianapolis wrote in 1870 that among the worst evils that the war brought

was the inundation of prostitutes. They flaunted their gay shame in every public place. They crowded decency, in its own defense, out of sight. Their bagnios polluted every street. The military camps were not always, with all the vigilance of sentries and rigidity of discipline, safe from

their noisome intrusion. The jail was nightly filled with them and *their drunken victims*. And the remuneration of their vice was so ample and constant that a fine was a trifle. Even if it could not be paid, the alternative of a few days' confinement only restored them in better health, with strong allurements and appetites, to their occupation. (Holloway 1870:125, emphasis added)

Holloway's observations led us to search county jail records from the late 1860s and early 1870s, but we could find only a handful of prostitutes. Our friends at the state library also searched, largely in vain. We concluded that either convicted prostitutes were not in Indiana jails or were not recorded as staying in the jails, which we thought unlikely.

We know that prostitution was prevalent everywhere at the time, even in prisons, which, prior to the founding of the Indiana Reformatory for Women and Girls, commonly contained men and women in congregate confinement. According to historian Estelle Freedman,

Although almost every account of prisons and jails mention illegitimate births by female prisoners, in one state, Indiana, the sexual exploitation of inmates was overt and systematic. A corrupt administration at the Indiana state prison [Jeffersonville] operated a prostitution service for male guards, using the forced labor of female prisoners. (Freedman 1984:16)

We also know that women who were forced or who consented to engage in sexual promiscuity were considered "fallen" and remained fallen by the standards of the day. To quote Freedman again:

Arrest, conviction, or imprisonment for offenses against chastity, decency, or public order carried a unique penalty for the nineteenth-century female criminal—the label of "fallen woman." . . . No longer the perpetrator of a single immoral act, those who crossed the boundary of chastity gained a lifetime identity as a "fallen woman."

A nineteenth-century fallen woman experienced a greater stigma than did contemporary male criminals or than had women criminals in the past. Many women and men refused to associate with or employ even a suspected fallen woman. Thus outcast, the first offender often entered a vicious cycle which led her directly into the criminal class, often as a prostitute, as case histories illustrate. (Freedman 1984:14)

As a journalist for *The Fort Wayne News* in 1897 put it succinctly:

In the minds of legislators and public men generally, a woman fallen is down forever. That an unfortunate or criminal woman or girl is so much worse than a criminal man or boy, that there is no hope for her reformation. (“Treatment of Female Prisoners” 1897)

The very idea behind starting the Indiana Reformatory for Women and Girls was to have a separate place for women, including fallen women. Furthermore, the only other two state prisons for women in the United States in the nineteenth century, Sherborn Reformatory for Women in Massachusetts (established in 1877) and the House of Refuge in New York (1887), had large populations of prostitutes (Freedman, 1984; Pollock, 2002). So where were the “fallen women” who had flooded the streets of Indianapolis with their trade? If they were not held at the Indiana Reformatory for Women and Girls, the brainchild of the notable prison reformers Sarah Smith and Rhoda Coffin, where could they have been?

A 1967 article from the *Terre Haute Tribune* piqued our interest. It mentioned that the Sisters of the Good Shepherd had come to Indianapolis in “1873 to operate a correctional institution for women prisoners” (“Sisters to Close Home for Girls” 1967). That was the very same year that the Indiana Reformatory for Women and Girls had opened, yet we knew that none of the women working at the Indiana Reformatory for Women and Girls in the nineteenth century were nuns. Could there have been two women’s prisons started in Indianapolis in the same year? If so, why had we never heard of this other prison, and where was it? Could there have been an agreement between the two prisons, such as, “You get the prostitutes, and we get the murderers and thieves”?

MAGDALENE LAUNDRIES

To answer those questions and many others, we need to step back for a moment and consider the history of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd and Magdalene Laundries.

Magdalene Laundries, a term both functional and metaphorical, have their roots in the 1600s as places for fallen women, but it was not until 1758 that the first structured laundry was established in Whitechapel, England. Named for Mary Magdalene, herself an alleged prostitute, the laundries were supposed to be places of reform and repentance where women could “wash away” their sins while scrubbing society’s dirty laundry. The idea of an institution to control and rehabilitate prostitutes and vulnerable populations of women spread quickly and was embraced by Catholic Ireland. Four orders of nuns, the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, the Sisters of Mercy, the Sisters of Charity, and the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge, became the self-appointed moral guardians of fallen women.

The Sisters of the Good Shepherd is a Roman Catholic order that began in France in 1835. The sisters take the usual three vows of charity, chastity, and poverty, and an additional fourth vow, “binding themselves to the labor for the conversion of fallen women and girls needing refuge from the temptations of the world” (Cardinal 2006). The Sisters of the Good Shepherd were invited to Ireland in 1848—13 years after their founding—to assume leadership of an existing lay-managed Magdalene Laundry (McAleese 2013:30).

Women who were outside of societal norms of the day because of their occupations as prostitutes or escorts, or who were considered at risk because they were unruly, or sometimes merely because they were too pretty, or for the simple crime of being born out of wedlock, could be sent to a Magdalene Laundry (Smith 2012). Though they could enter a laundry on their own, more commonly, they were placed there by their families, priests, or courts (Smith 2012). Once there, many were held for life, enslaved, abused, and unpaid as workers in the laundry.

A century and a half later, Magdalene Laundries have been at the center of a major scandal in Ireland, popularized by the Oscar-nominated movie *Philomena*. The last Irish Magdalene Laundry did not close until 1996. When the property was sold, an unmarked cemetery was found with graves that could not be accounted for (Smith 2007). An official government investigation was finally launched in 2011 that resulted in a report of more than a thousand pages exposing how the women were treated. It included a call for reparations for the survivors of the Magdalene Laundries in Ireland (McAleese 2013).

Although Ireland may now have “recovered these institutions from the amnesia at the center of state politics” (Smith 2007), the United States has not. Five years *before* the Sisters of the Good Shepherd went to Ireland, they came to the United States and opened what we believe is the first Magdalene Laundry in this country, in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1843. Fourteen more followed before the Indiana Reformatory for Women and Girls opened in 1873, including the Indianapolis House of the Good Shepherd and its Magdalene Laundry. We have identified another 23 or 24 that were opened after the Indianapolis laundry but before the end of the century. These are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. U.S. Magdalene Laundries Established before 1900

Year Founded	State-City	Name	Maintained by	Specific Object
1843	KY– Louisville	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Erring and wayward women and girls
1848	MO–St. Louis	Convent of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Unfortunate and wayward women and girls
1850	IL–Chicago	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Erring girls and women

(cont. next page)

Table 1. U.S. Magdalene Laundries Established before 1900, cont.

Year Founded	State-City	Name	Maintained by	Specific Object
1850	PA– Philadelphia	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Unfortunate girls and women
1858	NYC	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Fallen and wayward women and girls
1859	LA–New Orleans	Convent of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Unfortunate and wayward women, and girls and children
1864	MD– Baltimore	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Fallen women and homeless girls and children
1865	KY– Louisville	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Fallen, incorrigible, wayward, and friendless women and girls; orphaned female children
1865	OH– Columbus	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Wayward girls and children needing protection
1867	MA–Boston	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Unfortunate women and wayward girls
1868	NY–Brooklyn	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Erring women and girls
1868	MN–St. Paul	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Fallen women and neglected children
1870	OH– Cincinnati	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Wayward girls and women; orphan and destitute children
1872	PA– Allegheny	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Wayward and delinquent girls
1873	IN– Indianapolis	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Erring women and girls
1873	KY–Newport	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Erring women and homeless children
1873	OH–Carthage	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Fallen women and girls; children
1874	NJ–Newark	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Fallen and wayward women and girls; destitute children

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Table 1. U.S. Magdalene Laundries Established before 1900, cont.

Year Founded	State-City	Name	Maintained by	Specific Object
1875	TN–Memphis	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Wayward girls and women; children
1877	WI–Milwaukee	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Wayward girls, and children
1883	CO–Denver	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Erring girls and women
1883	Washington, DC	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Unfortunate and wayward girls and children
1883	MI–Detroit	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Fallen women; orphan and destitute girls
1884	NY–Albany	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Erring women and girls
1884	NY–Troy	Mt. Magdalen Reformatory of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Fallen women and children in moral danger
1885	WI–Green Bay	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of Our Lady of Charity	Homeless and wayward girls
1886	PA–Norristown	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Incorrigible girls and homeless women
1887	MO–Kansas City	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Unfortunate and wayward women and girls, and children
1889	PA–Reading	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Erring women and unprotected children
1889	MT–Helena	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Fallen women and girls
1890	WA–Seattle	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Female delinquents and orphans
1891	IL–Peoria	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Erring women, wayward girls and children
1892	PA–Philadelphia	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Wayward colored women and girls; unprotected colored children

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Table 1. U.S. Magdalene Laundries Established before 1900, concl.

Year Founded	State-City	Name	Maintained by	Specific Object
1892	MD– Baltimore	House of the Good Shepherd for Colored Girls	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Fallen colored girls and women
1893	MA– Springfield	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Homeless and wayward girls
1894	NE–Omaha	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Fallen and wayward women and girls
1899	PA–Scranton	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Wayward girls and unprotected children
1899	WV– Wheeling	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Wayward girls and unprotected children
unknown	OH– Cincinnati	House of the Good Shepherd	Sisters of the Good Shepherd	Wayward young girls and women

Source: U.S. Census (1905)

A PRISON BY ANY OTHER NAME

To answer the question of whether these Magdalene Laundries were the first prisons for women in the United States, we need to ask first what constitutes a prison. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (1992) defines a prison as

- (1) A place where persons convicted or accused of crimes are confined; a penitentiary or jail.
- (2) Any place or condition of confinement or forcible restraint.
- (3) A state of imprisonment or captivity.

If a prison is defined as a place of confinement for crimes and of forcible restraint, and if the persons committed to these places cannot leave when they want to and are, in fact, confined against their will, it becomes irrelevant whether the place is called a prison—or, instead, a refuge, correctional facility, house, penitentiary, or even laundry—if it operates as a prison. It is equally irrelevant if the facility is Catholic or Protestant, private or public. The operations and characteristics define a prison as a prison.

Magdalene Laundries in the United States in the nineteenth century exhibited key characteristics of prisons, including

1. Sentencing of inmates to the institution by criminal courts
2. Stripping of identity of inmates, including name and clothing
3. Involuntary confinement, often for years and sometimes for life
4. Isolation from the outside world, including mail and visitation

5. Tall stone walls, some with barbed wire, barred windows, and cells
6. Use of solitary confinement via tiny cells or tight closets as a means of punishment
7. Use of “solidarity sisters,” reminiscent of prison “trustees,” who acted as enforcers and were allowed to punish fellow inmates.
8. Extreme regimentation and infantilization, including in clothing, work, recreation and speech
9. Severe punishment for violation of rules
10. Stigmatization upon reentry into the community that shunned them in the first place

EXAMPLES OF MAGDALENE LAUNDRIES IN THE UNITED STATES

We are still in the process of gathering information about early Magdalene Laundries in the United States, but consider that:

1. At the original Magdalene Laundry in Louisville, “the sisters encouraged courts to commit and pay for [the girls’] incarceration” (Corbett 2000:143). On visiting the institution in 1919, Dr. W. H. Singerland wrote that he was shocked to see that it was “of the ancient type, with gloomy rooms and hall and prison-like conditions and atmosphere.” He protested, “The prisonlike conditions which prevail in this institution ought not to exist for delinquent girls” (p. 66).
2. A House of the Good Shepherd (or “Magdalen Asylum”) was founded in 1858 in Chicago to care for female lawbreakers, whom officials could commit to the institution and whose upkeep was paid for by fines on “keepers, inmates and visitors of houses of prostitution. . . . Despite the stigma that was inevitably attached to anyone who emerged, admission was, by 1867, refused to applicants, and, in 1870, ninety were reported as inmates” (Pierce 1940:443).
3. In Brooklyn, according to a state statute passed on 1872, any “female between the ages of 14 and 30 years” who had been “arrested and brought by the police . . . charged with being an habitual drunkard, vagrant or prostitute, and proved to be such” could be committed by the judge “to the care, custody and instruction of the managers of ‘The House of the Good Shepherd’” unless she was “a member of the protestant faith” (*Laws of New York* 1872).
4. In Indianapolis, the 1880 census lists 1 superior, 11 sisters, 1 gardener, 1 milkmaid, 26 inmates, and 14 prisoners as residents of the House of the Good Shepherd. A 1904 report from the Marion County Juvenile Court notes that it sentenced seven girls to the Home of the Good Shepherd (Chief Probation Officer 1904).

These women and girls, most from poor homes, were clearly being sentenced to religious-run, but state-sanctioned, prison systems of slave labor and abuse. Take, for example, the case of Minnie Morrison. At age 10, she was tricked into entering the Indianapolis House of the Good Shepherd, where she alleged that the inmates were regularly subjected to punishments that paralleled those in other prisons and asylums, such as being placed in a dungeon-like basement and fed only bread and water for weeks. Worse yet, she alleged that she was beaten by nuns—on at least one occasion to the point of unconsciousness—and lost four fingers after being burned as punishment for an alleged theft before finally escaping at age 24 (Morrison 1925).

Moreover, we should not think of these places as only nineteenth and early twentieth-century phenomena. The following examples are drawn from twenty-first-century accounts of Magdalene Laundries by surviving inmates.

1. At the Magdalene Laundry of Buffalo, New York, a former inmate described being locked inside a narrow broom closet so small that she had to draw her knees deep into her chest to sit down. The same facility had a shower room infamously called the Dungeon Room, where women were confined in complete darkness and silence, tortured by the constant sound of rodents scurrying and, later, by the rodents as they “begin to crawl over your body” (Elam 2013a).
2. At the St. Anne’s House of the Good Shepherd in Albany, New York, one woman told the story of how she endured brutal violence from the Solidarity Sisters and the nuns themselves. She recalls “being struck on the back of the head so hard by one of the sisters that her vision was blurred for days.” Solidarity Sisters, meanwhile, would commit any acts of violence ordered by the nuns. “Never able to become nuns, they instead become the ‘enforcers’ of the Mother Superior, carrying out punishments that were handed down for violation of an ever-changing rulebook” (Elam 2013b).
3. The Magdalene Laundry of Baltimore, Maryland, was surrounded by an “enormous stone wall with jagged glass embedded at the top,” with black curtains covering the windows. The inmates, all of whom were stripped of their names and identities on arrival, “were allowed to talk for only thirty minutes a day after dinner. The rest of their waking hours were spent in complete silence. . . . The punishments meted out were severe and unrelenting, driving many of the young girls to the edge of sanity” (Elam 2013c).

WHY THE EARLY HISTORY OF WOMEN’S PRISONS MATTERS

The historian David Rothman established that prisons can be categorized as places of separation, obedience, and labor (2002:105). It is our contention that the Magdalene Laundries in the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were indeed prisons. They were prisons for “‘lost’ girls—‘lost’ in the dreariest sense of

the word—‘lost’ in their own reckless abandonment to vice—‘lost’ in the judgment and estimation of society—shelterless and utterly depraved—whose only home was the jail, the low brothel, or the open air” (Holloway 1870:196).

They were confined by function of law and society to “wash” away their sins and to reform their characters as “fallen women.” With the evidence presented, we believe we have demonstrated that the Magdalene Laundries were *de facto* prisons.

What is the historical significance? The Indiana Reformatory for Women and Girls officially opened to receive convicted women in October 1873. Although the reformatory is considered the first separate prison for women in Indiana and the United States, the Indianapolis House of the Good Shepherd with its Magdalene Laundry opened on March 19, 1873, and immediately began receiving inmates—roughly seven months *before* the opening of the Indiana Reformatory for Women and Girls. Furthermore, the Indianapolis House of the Good Shepherd was at least the 15th such institution in the United States.

We therefore contend that the Indiana Reformatory for Women and Girls was not the first women’s prison in the United States; it was not even the first women’s prison in Indiana. We believe that the Magdalene Laundries of the Houses of the Good Shepherd should be recognized by historians as the first separate female prisons. Further, the House of the Good Shepherd in the state of Kentucky should be known as the first separate female prison in the nation.

Why does it matter? It matters for the historical record, but there is more. As we have seen throughout history, the practice of physical and sexual abuse and secrecy in institutions breeds a kind of sickness in the mind that affects how persons in authority deal with those under their authority. Absolute power over other people, especially under conditions of absolute secrecy, inevitably lead to abuse, even when those in authority have the best intentions in the beginning. It reflects what happens to people when there is no oversight, when there are no regulations to meet that may curb the hunger for power and control.

Women finding themselves outcast, wretched, poor, or in the occupation of prostitute or escort were considered a threat, vile, and provocateurs of decent men. This ideological view was clearly the lens through which the operators of these institutions viewed the women they incarcerated.

Although the Magdalene Laundries were established and run by Catholics, religion is not an important variable in this equation. We have found that our Quaker-led prison used the nineteenth-century equivalent of waterboarding and other tortures to control the women and girls incarcerated here and employed a Protestant doctor who advocated female circumcision and removal of women’s ovaries and clitorises to cure nymphomania and masturbation.

CONCLUSION

Our discovery of the Magdalene Laundries and their role in confining certain women is stark evidence of historical amnesia. Magdalene Laundries played an important role in shaping attitudes toward female sexuality, identity, and societal reintegration.

Their efforts in incarcerating, abusing, and stigmatizing thousands of women are missing from the discussions of prisons, institutions, and women in general. We did not even know these institutions existed! This is a telling example of secrecy that should be brought to light because scandal is universal; humans abusing one another is not unique. Indeed, at the time that it opened, the Magdalene Laundry in Indiana was the lesser of two evils; either the women could be housed with men in the state prison at Jeffersonville and suffer systematic sexual abuse by male guards, or they could toil their lives away in a Magdalene Laundry.

The facilities operated by the Houses of the Good Shepherd may have provided places where women could avoid harsher realities, but at what cost? What is the price that must be paid in trying to remake unwilling participants into one's ideal image? The Sisters of the Good Shepherd were the pious, righteous, moral compasses of society, and they were going to save those women. In the act of "saving," prisons were the result.

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