

Indiana's Catholic Carceral Beginnings, 1878-1881

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The Sisters of the Good Shepherd, a Catholic order of nuns, operated a private prison in Indianapolis from the late 19th Century and into the 1960s. This prison effectively increased the total carceral capacity of the state of Indiana, and the Sisters struck deals with city and county authorities to provide space for prisoners in exchange for land and money. Regardless of the way a women or youth became committed to the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, once a prisoner, she was inside of Indiana's carceral system.

Before my colleagues began to uncover this history in 2013, historians had traced the founding of the first separate women's prison in Indiana—and, indeed, in the country—to the separation of female prisoners from the male prisoners at the State Prison in 1873.¹ Although the first Indiana woman was recorded as entering the Indiana State Prison in 1840, the 1873 segregation of the sexes allowed for carceral growth and state control of a different type of criminal--the criminal woman.² That year, seventeen women were relocated from the State Prison in Jeffersonville, a formerly co-ed facility, to the Indiana Reformatory Institution for Women and Girls, later renamed The Indiana Women's Prison.³ Investigating this common premise, my colleagues Michelle Jones and Lori Record obtained and researched early historical

¹ The History of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, 16

² The History of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, 12

³ The History of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd 16; Magdalene Laundries: The First Prisons for Women in the United States, Michelle Jones, Lori Record 166

documents of Indiana Women's Prison.⁴ Recognizing that the prison's admission records were absent of the common criminal offense of prostitution, they found that in Indiana's gendered carceral beginnings, control extended beyond the state-operated Reformatory Institution for Women and Girls. In addition to the all-female state-operated prison, there was also *a privately operated all-female prison*.⁵ Despite the Reformatory's fame as the first gender-separate prison, my colleagues first uncovered Indiana's private Catholic carceral institution through a search of local 19th century newspaper records.

One of these scholars, Christina Kovats, described the early development of Indiana's contract with the local Catholic Church to operate a private prison in Indiana.⁶ She also researched how this model operated in Ireland and New England, in institutions commonly referred to as Magdalene Laundries. In 1863, years before the construction of Indiana's state Reformatory for women, the city of Indianapolis received donated land from an Indiana benefactor, Mr. Stoughton A. Fletcher, for the purpose of building a city prison for women.⁷ In her work, Kovats proffers a conversation found in the *Indianapolis Journal* from 1869 that shows that, despite some protests against farming "out [prisoners] to private corporations," the city granted Father Bessonies the land for the purpose of having the Sisters of the Good Shepherd operate a female prison.⁸ The agreement between Indianapolis and the Sisters offered confinement for women formerly residing at Jeffersonville or county jails "for one half the compensation that would otherwise be required for them."⁹

⁴ Magdalene Laundries: The First Prisons for Women in the United States, Michelle Jones, Lori Record 166.

⁵ Magdalene Laundries: The First Prisons for Women in the United States 167

⁶ Indiana's Magdalene Laundry, Christina Kovats, <https://www.in.gov/history/files/Kovats-2017-paper.pdf>

⁷ Indiana's Magdalene Laundry 6, citing Holloway 126

⁸ Indiana's Magdalene Laundry 7, 9

⁹ Annals 4, The History of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd 16

The Sisters of the Good Shepherd came to Indiana on February 26, 1873 from the Provincial House of Louisville, Kentucky.¹⁰ They entered with a twofold purpose: to fulfill their vocation of “binding themselves to the labor for the conversion of fallen women and girls needing refuge from the temptations of the world,” and to oversee the construction of the prison, a foundation of which was already laid.¹¹ Throughout the first year of their residence in Indianapolis, the Sisters oversaw the construction of the prison on Raymond Street while taking residence on Maryland and Tennessee Streets, about two miles away.¹²

Life Under the Sisters

The first “charges” to the Sisters of the Good Shepherd were not taken in until “probably after” March 19, 1873.¹³ Details are provided of some of these very first admissions, defined here as prisoners because of their inability to freely leave the residence once they entered. These first inmates of the Home of the Good Shepherd illustrate Indiana’s carceral capacity via the Catholic sect of Sisters, and the entwinement of social welfare with the carceral state in 19th century Indiana.

The very first prisoner is recorded by the name “Maggie O’Connor.”¹⁴ In one source, Maggie is described as a “drenched and bedraggled woman who was plodding down the street with her long shawl dragging in the mud.”¹⁵ According to the Sisters’ own account, the local priest, Father Bessonies, knew of the woman before the Sisters’ arrived, and assigned her to the

¹⁰ The History of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, 1, 4. [Around the 1920’s the Sisters consolidated records of their activities into two main sources. One, is referred to as “The Annals of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd,” and the second is referred to only as “The History of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd.” The histories provide some detail of the group’s carceral capacity, and their operation as an arm of Indiana.]

¹¹ Jones and Record 171 citing Cardinal 2006; Annals 4; The Indianapolis News, Friday June 13, 1873; The Indianapolis News, Wednesday, April 12, 1876

¹² Annals 10, 19

¹³ The History of the Good Shepherd 19

¹⁴ Annals 16

¹⁵ History of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd 3

Sisters' care and while helping them move into the Maryland Street location.¹⁶ The Sisters' referred to the woman as a "child" and, according to their rule and custom of renaming those who enter their authority, referred to her as "Joseph."¹⁷ The second prisoner is recorded as being called Josephine. She is referred to as "quite a young girl"; her real name is not mentioned, nor is the condition of her assignment to the Home.¹⁸ However, she stayed with the Sisters until her death in 1898.¹⁹

Young women became committed to the Sisters of the Good Shepherd in the 19th century in a variety of ways, not all of which are legally defined or clear in the available sources. Women or girls became committed to the Sisters of the Good Shepherd by either presenting themselves to the Sisters for commitment—Marie simply rang the doorbell in 1874 and later died as a prisoner in the institution²⁰--or when they were brought in by family members. "Laura," for example, was committed in 1875 by her father and escaped soon thereafter. She was "brought back [to the house] by city authorities."²¹ Indeed, many of the women and girls were committed at the House of the Good Shepherd because of their status as "fallen women" due to their family and society's reception of their potential for impropriety or sin.

The institution's third prisoner, with the name of Mary yet renamed Molly, "came from the hospital."²² According to the Sisters' Annals, "she soon tired of restraint" and upon faking an illness to be alone in the upstairs room, jumped from the second story window in an attempt to escape.²³ Neither her reason for commitment, nor her fate, are recorded. In 1881, another ward of interest, "Mary Angela," was committed by the matron of a local police station. When Mary

¹⁶ Ibid. 3-4

¹⁷ Annals 16, The History of the Good Shepherd 21

¹⁸ Annals 17

¹⁹ Annals 17, The History of the Good Shepherd 21

²⁰ Annals 26

²¹ Ibid. 39

²² Annals 17, The History of the Good Shepherd 21

²³ Ibid.

Angela was picked up by police for “being a tramp,” she went by the name of “Billy” and wore men’s clothing.²⁴ Biologically female, Billy protested against being put in the men’s prison, fearing imprisonment there was dually unsafe because of their gender assignment and presentation. Billy was “dressed properly” by a jail matron and sent to the House of the Good Shepherd where they were renamed Mary Angela, all without seeing trial.²⁵ The Sisters had authority from the state to incarcerate charges for violations of statutory laws, but also for violations of gender and sexual mores of this period.

Broadly, the Sisters recorded that these first prisoners, “were troublesome characters...” and recorded numerous incidents in which they struggled to keep prisoners “in custody” because they yet lacked an enclosure around the home.²⁶ Two more prisoners’ escapes are recorded as occurring in that first year during the Sisters’ jurisdiction on a mandatory trip to mass at a local church.²⁷ The same date, in the evening, an officer returned one of the escaped girls to the Sisters of the Good Shepherd’s residence. The other was never found.²⁸ In this example, the Sisters’ operations are evident as an extension of the carceral capacity of the State, increasing its capacity to detain and cage women for reasons that did not always require the due process of law. Further, even when these women were not condemned by a court or judge, their detention was enforced by local law enforcement; the prisoner could not reassume her freedom unless granted so by the Sisters accord or by a court order.²⁹ If a prisoner escaped from the Home of the Good Shepherd, regardless of the initial underlying reason for her commitment to the institution, Indiana’s carceral capacity increased to include the power to police, arrest and detain individuals, sending

²⁴ Annals 48

²⁵ Ibid. 48

²⁶ Annals 17-18, The History of the Good Shepherd 21

²⁷ Annals 18, The History of the Good Shepherd 22

²⁸ Annals 19, The History of the Good Shepherd 22

²⁹

them back to the Sisters of the Good Shepherd's authority. This institution became, and was indeed founded as, a means by which the State controlled and contained social welfare problems of the late 19th Century.

Penitents, Prisoners

According to one historical account, 1,875 young women and girls who were registered as "Penitents" passed through the Sisters of the Good Shepherd's jurisdiction from March 1873 until April 1911; this list included those "Prisoners committed by Court from August 1877 to December 1881 and released by the same Court," who were cared for at half the price usually accrued by the state.³⁰ Specifically, in this contract with City authorities the wards were described as "prisoners" under this Penitent class designation, revealing the nature of this class, "besides receiving...the fallen women of the world, incorrigibles are also received."³¹ The work "provided" for this class by the Indianapolis Sisters was in the "garment-making factory, which is operated on contract work, and in a laundry in which a great deal of public washing done."³² In these circumstances the carceral and penal nature of the Sisters' operation is revealed despite the Sisters' assertions that the functions were merely reformatory or custodial.

398 prisoners are recorded as having entered the Sisters' prison on Raymond Street from the Centre Township City Court from August 1877 through December 1881.³³ By digitizing the record of prisoners committed to the institution under this contract, I found that 593 prisoners were listed. However, approximately 190 of those committed escaped while prisoners at the

³⁰ Convent of the Good Shepherd Record

³¹ The Indianapolis News, Sat, October 10, 1903, 14/ 40153785

³² Ibid.

³³ Annals 60

Home of the Good Shepherd and subtracting this from the 593 names may be the approximate 400 prisoners under contract between the City and the Sisters. Recidivism frequently occurred in the list of prisoners, but each occurrence of a female being recommitted under a new sentence the Sisters charged the City for detaining her body.

When the Sisters of the Good Shepherd began taking in City prisoners, they were kept separate from the prisoners that were in the Sister's care who were not under City contract: "The rooms in the basement had been prepared as cells for their accommodation...while the windows were small and barred."³⁴ The Sisters complained of a "severe cross" being laid upon them because "some of [the prisoners] were colored."³⁵ From the very beginning, the Sisters were reluctant to take in black prisoners.³⁶ The City authorities informed the Sisters that if they did not take the black prisoners, they could not have the white prisoners either. The Sisters agreed to continue to take them in until 1881, after recorded incidents of rioting and purported threatening behavior by the women of color in particular.³⁷ The Indianapolis House of the Good Shepherd remained in operation for exclusively white women until the mid-twentieth century. In the 1960s, pictures young black women can be found in the yearbooks of the "school" that the sisters founded at the convent the 1920s, presumably after court-ordered desegregation. County courts routinely sentenced women to this institution until its closure in 1968.

The House of the Good Shepherd reveals both the gendered underpinnings of the present-day carceral state and to the intermixing of private social welfare institutions and strategies with the State's carceral capacity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The authority granted to the Sisters of the Good Shepherd to imprison women with informal

³⁴ The History of the Good Shepherd 30

³⁵ Annals 49

³⁶ Ibid. 50

³⁷ Ibid. 50

commitments meant the ascribing of criminality to female populations who were outside of patriarchal, middle-class standards of appropriate female behavior, whether in law or custom. The House of the Good Shepherd encouraged Indiana residents to correlate “failed womanhood” with criminality. The legal system has incorporated these gendered moral offenses by women to be criminal violations of law, and the State continues to incarcerate women and youth within the gendered application of law.