

First Church History Role Fact Sheet: Hannah Balch Chickering

1817: Hannah was born in Dedham, youngest of seven children of Jabez and Deborah Chickering. Hannah's father was a lawyer and banker. He also was a leader of the Unitarian group in First Church that brought about the hiring of Alvin Lamson and the split between the Congregationalists and Unitarian churches in Dedham in 1819.

1842: Hannah attended Sunday school at First Church and was brought up as a Unitarian. However she left First Church to become an Episcopalian and began to attend the St. Paul's Church.

1846: Hannah moved to Philadelphia where she taught Sunday school. One of the students that she taught said that "She was young and vigorous and her teaching was bright and lively, always showing careful preparation of the lesson and study of the Bible."

1849: Hannah returned to Dedham to live with her brother's family. She spent much of her time nursing sick and elderly townsfolk.

1861: With the beginning of the Civil War Hannah volunteered to work with the Dedham Women's Aid Society. She, however, was disappointed that she wasn't able to get to the front lines in order to nurse the wounded.

1862: During the Civil War Hannah again visited Philadelphia. Her friend asked Hannah to accompany her to the Pennsylvania State Penitentiary to speak to women prisoners to read to them and pray. Her friend related that Hannah "at once became warmly interested in the work with an enthusiasm that was surprising and the foretaste and pledge of the spirit with which she afterwards carried on the work for the improvement in the conditions of prisons and prisoners in Massachusetts."

1863: Hannah returned to Dedham and became a constant visitor to women at the Dedham prison. She also took books to the prison and established a library. In her discussions with the female prisoners, she began to understand that many of them had committed crimes not because they were evil or corrupt, but rather because they were poor and had been misled by men.

1864: Hannah became convinced that in order to change their lives, female prisoners needed financial and emotional support when they were released from prison. She raised funds from interested philanthropists and established the Temporary Asylum for Discharged Female Prisoners. It was housed in a farm which consisted of a house, large barn, several outbuildings, and 25 acres of land. At its opening "a pleasant company of friends interested in the object were assembled, and words of sympathy, encouragement, and Godspeed were spoken."

1865: Hannah staffed the Asylum with female matrons. At first, only one former prisoner, discharged from Dedham Prison, was in residence, but within the next 15 years more than 1000 women passed through its doors. The focus of the Asylum was to rehabilitate the ex-convict women by restoring their self-respect and preparing them to be self-sufficient. They were trained to do domestic work, especially laundry, and many became maids and mill-hands in Dedham. The State of Massachusetts donated \$2500 a year to the Asylum

1868: A farmer was added to the staff so that the women residents could have fresh food, and on Thanksgiving and Christmas special menus were prepared. In addition, Wellesley students started visiting the Asylum to provide theater and music entertainment. Hannah was one of the first prison reformers to recognize the importance of recreation in rehabilitation.

1869: Hannah had met Ellen Cheney Johnson, the founder of the New England Women's Auxiliary Association, after the Civil War. At the time Johnson was searching for the dependents and survivors of Civil War soldiers and had discovered that many of them were in prisons and workhouses, living under very brutal and sexist conditions. Johnson got to know Hannah when she visited the Dedham prison and they decided to work together to improve prison conditions for women. At a meeting at St. Paul's Church in Dedham, Hannah organized a committee to advocate for separate prisons for women with female guards, regular religious instruction, and vocational training.

1871: Johnson and Hannah testify about female inmate problems at state house hearings before the Massachusetts Legislative Prison Committee. Hannah launched a state-wide petition campaign, developed plans for a women's prison, and becomes a member of the Massachusetts Prison Commission.

1874: Largely as a result of Hannah's efforts, a bill for the women's prison is passed into law by the Massachusetts legislature and Hannah went to work overseeing the building plans and prison site selection.

1877: The Reformatory of Women at Sherborn was opened and Hannah's collaborator, Ellen Cheney Johnson, was named as the first superintendent of this prison.

1879: Hannah died in 1879, but the Dedham Asylum for Female Prisoners continued in operation, though it was changed into the Dedham Home for Women and Children in 1910. This institution, called Chickering House, served as a convalescent hospital for almost three decades, until it ran out of operating expenses in 1947. Hannah's legacy then underwent yet another transformation, as the proceeds from sale of Chickering House were invested in Chickering Foundation. This Foundation currently provides funding for many Boston-area social agencies that promote women's and children's health and welfare, for instance by serving the needs of teen mothers and the homeless.

When the managers of the Asylum asked Hannah for a photo of their patroness to be placed there, she wrote "Let me dwell for a while in your affection and memory, and let the Asylum testify of the loving-kindness of our Father who allowed me the pleasure of beginning the work."

For more information on Hannah Balch Chickering, see the following URL's:

<http://www.chickeringfund.org/#>