

## THE HISTORY OF WOMEN'S PRISONS IN THE UNITED STATES

Rachel Welch did not know it at the time, but her unfortunate plight at the Auburn, New York, prison in the 1826 did much to advance women's correctional reforms throughout the United States. Ms. Welch was a prisoner at the Auburn State Prison. She and many other women like her were herded into a large attic room in the prison, where they were confined without benefit of recreation or even limited freedom for 24 hours a day. Food was sent up once from the kitchen daily, and "slops" were removed once a day as well (Rafter, 1983a:135). One of the Auburn State Prison guards raped Ms. Welch, impregnated her, and, after learning that she was five months' pregnant, flogged her so severely that she died soon afterward from the wounds. A committee investigated her death, and although the facts about what had occurred were unclear and inconsistent testimony was presented, the condition of women at Auburn was publicly revealed (Hunter, 1984). Several religious and philanthropic organizations intervened and pressed for various reforms that would improve significantly the conditions under which women were housed.

It is ironic that the death of a female inmate occurred in a "modern prison" touted for its correctional accomplishments and farsightedness in prisoner planning. It will be remembered that Auburn introduced the congregate system, whereby prisoners could work and socialize daily for recreational, dining, and labor purposes, and that during evening hours, prisoners were kept isolated from one another in solitary cells. But these innovations were exclusively for men. Even at the "modern" Walnut Street Jail, where separate quarters for women and men had been suggested several decades earlier, conditions had degenerated by the 1820s such that women at the Walnut Street facility were no better off than the women at Auburn.

The conditions for women at Auburn and similar institutions were criticized initially by religious and philanthropic organizations not because of their substandard and deplorable living accommodations. Rather, the common living areas were considered conducive to moral degeneration and widespread promiscuity. Male guards had virtually unlimited social and sexual access to all incarcerated females. Although increasingly segregated celling accommodations were gradually introduced for female inmates, male guards continued to carry the keys to their individual cells. Thus, as Rafter suggests, segregation of female prisoners from male prisoners was not a foolproof method of birth control (Rafter, 1983a:136-137).

The first major prison for women was established in ~~1830 in New York~~ a few years after the organization of the ~~Magdalen Society~~ (1830), a women's prison reform-oriented movement. The facility was called the ~~Mount Pleasant Female Prison~~ (Rafter, 1983a:138). Rafter says that this facility was important for at least three reasons:

1. Mount Pleasant was the first and only penal institution for women before the great era of prison construction starting in the late 1800s.