

# Ceremonies on Laying the Cornerstone of the New York State Institution for the Blind

*by S.G. Howe*

All great establishments in the nature of boarding schools, where the sexes must be separated; where there must be boarding in common, and sleeping in congregate dormitories; where there must be routine, and formality, and restraints, and repression of individuality; where the charms and refining influences of the true family relationship cannot be had — all such institutions are unnatural, undesirable, and very liable to abuse. We should have as few of them as possible, and those few should be kept as small as possible.

Let me dwell upon this, for in my view, it is very important. Such persons spring up sporadically in the community, and they should be kept diffused among sound and normal persons. Separation and not segregation should be the law of their treatment; for out of their infirmity or abnormality there necessarily grow some abnormal and undesirable effects, and unless these be counteracted by education, they disturb the harmonious development of character. These effects are best counteracted by bringing up the child among ordinary children, and subjecting him to ordinary social and family influences; but, on the contrary, they are intensified by constant and close association with children who are marked by the same infirmity or peculiarity...

Those establishments are all faulty. Not one of them is worthy to be your model in all respects; and the persons who flatter themselves that their favorite one is worthy to be copied exactly, are blind to faults, which can be seen by looking beneath the surface. Never mind their showy buildings and special accommodations; you may as well measure the mortality of a family by the structure and arrangement of its dwellinghouse, as test institutions by their mechanical advantages; but look at the principles and system by which they are conducted. You will then, find they are faulty in many respects.

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Instead, then, of copying the existing institution, I think, that in organizing a new one something like the following rough plan should be adopted:— If the field were all clear, and no buildings provided, there should be built only a building for school-rooms, recitation rooms, music rooms, and work shops; and these should be in or near the center of a dense population. For other purposes, ordinary houses would suffice.

*S.G. Howe, in Ceremonies on Laying the Cornerstone of the New York State Institution for the Blind, at Batavia, Genessee Co., N.Y. 39-43 (1866).*