



SUBMITTED PHOTO

This image taken in the early quarter of the 20th century shows some of the inner workings of the Western House of Refuge. A group of young women pose with cups of soap in preparation to do laundry.

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Women's 'refuge home'

OVERLOOKED ORLEANS: Western House of Refuge in Albion

By **MATT BALLARD**
Orleans County Historian

Nearly 125 years ago, the Western House of Refuge was constructed on farmland located west of the village of Albion. It was largely due to the work of E. K. Hart that this location was selected as the site for this new establishment, which was opened on Dec. 8, 1893. For nearly a month, the institution went without receiving a single inmate until the first woman was "brought in" during the early part of January 1894.

The House of Refuge provides insight into an interesting period in the U.S. penal system. Women ages 16 to 30 who were charged with crimes ranging from petit larceny to public intoxication, prostitution, or "waywardness" would find themselves confined to the Refuge for a period of three to five years. During a time when crimes of a sexual nature, such as prostitution, provided a double standard in society between males and females, women were sent to the House of Refuge by cuckolded husbands or families.

In its earliest years the House of Refuge would have fit the character of a minimum security institution where the grounds

were surrounded by a short fence, far from the chain-link fence and razor wire used at prisons today. The goal of the institution was to train women in the various domestic duties assumed by good wives and housekeepers. The fundamental belief was that by providing a basic grade-school education along with vocational training in sewing, knitting, cooking, laundry, and good etiquette, women would be well equipped to marry or enter into employment as a housekeeper upon their release.

Here are a few interesting happenings and crimes involving women at the Western House of Refuge:

1894 - All of the inmates escaped from the Western House of Refuge through a second story window. Of course, the institution was only open for one month and the population consisted of three inmates.

1910 - Six young women escape from the House of Refuge and are chased to Albion by attendants of the institution. The women arm themselves with clubs and stones in an effort to confront their pursuers. Eugene Mahoney, the engineer at the House of Refuge, is struck in the head with a rock and knocked

unconscious. To avoid capture, the women threaten to throw themselves in front of an oncoming freight train but are apprehended before they are able to follow through on their threat.

1914 - Alice Stearns, 18, and Margaret Trapasso, 20, of Buffalo escape while hanging clothes outside; they were left unattended only for a few moments.

1915 - Antoinette Carron, a Utica woman, is sentenced to three years at the Western House of Refuge for stealing \$1,000 worth of fine laces, embroidery, silks, feathers, and other expensive apparel.

1931 - Eva Young and Rose Babyak of Jamestown escape from the Western House of Refuge and were later arrested with an accused murderer and thief named Lyman Miller at Buffalo.

In another case, date unknown, a 17-year-old girl was sentenced to three years at the House of Refuge after she was taken advantage of and "ruined" by a 38-year-old man whom she was working for as a domestic servant. The man was sentenced to four months of hard labor; a fine example of the double standards of the time.