

No. 39.

IN SENATE,
February 16, 1839.

REPORT

Of the select committee on the Governor's message
in relation to the State Lunatic Asylum.

Mr. Paige, from the select committee on that part of the Governor's message which relates to the New-York State Lunatic Asylum,

REPORTS:

That by the act passed March 30, 1836, for the establishment of the New-York State Lunatic Asylum, the commissioners to be appointed to contract for and superintend its erection, were authorized to contract for the erection of such asylum on such plan, and on such terms as they should deem just and proper, provided the plan and the terms of the contract should be approved by the Governor.

The commissioners appointed under that act state, in their report to the present Legislature, that they have digested and drawn plans of the asylum, which, on the 30th January, 1838, received the approbation of the Governor; that they have commenced the erection of such asylum, and have expended towards the same about the sum of \$47,000; that the residue of the appropriation made by the act of 1836, (being in the whole \$50,000) will be expended by the middle of the present month; and they ask for a further appropriation of \$100,000, for the present year, and suggest that if a small appropriation should be made for the year 1840 they would be enabled to obtain materials at a reduced price and of superior quality. The commissioners also state, in their report, that the cost of the asylum, which is to consist of four buildings, (the structure above the basement being of brick,) is estimated at \$431,636.

The committee are informed that the buildings, if finished in conformity to the plan adopted will accommodate about 800 patients.

The whole number of lunatics in the State in 1835, as appears by the census of that year, was 967, of which 655 were unable to support themselves. There is now probably in the State about 1,035 lunatics; of which number we may safely consider 701 as destitute of means to support themselves. This latter number have, therefore, legitimate claims upon the State for a maintenance and the application of the proper means for the restoration of their reason. Idiots are not included in the above enumeration of lunatics, of whom there were in this State, in 1835, 1,684.

In well regulated hospitals for the insane, recoveries are generally effected of from 80 to 89 out of 100, in recent cases; and of from 15 to 35, out of 100, in *old* cases.

The plan of the New-York State Lunatic Asylum, as adopted by the commissioners, contemplates the erection of four separate buildings, occupying the four sides of a square, facing outward; each building to contain accommodations for about 200 patients, exclusive of the rooms for the attendants. The main building, occupying the principal front, and one of the other buildings, have been carried up several feet above the surface of the ground. The foundations only of the two remaining buildings have been constructed. Although the committee warmly approve of the benevolent undertaking to construct a State Lunatic Asylum, they, nevertheless, entertain some doubts whether the number of the insane poor in the State require, for their accommodation, an immediate completion of all four of the buildings proposed to be, and which are now in the process of being erected.

It is estimated that we have now about 701 lunatics in the State who possess not sufficient ability to support themselves. When accommodations shall be provided in the State asylum for all, or nearly all the insane poor, their increase will not keep pace with the increase of the population, as has heretofore been the case.

If 80 or 90 per cent of the recent cases of insanity shall be cured, and recoveries shall also be effected in a small proportion of the old cases, the number of the insane will probably, for at least some few years to come, fall short of the present number.

Idiots not being proper subjects of curative treatment, it is not absolutely necessary to provide accommodations for them in the asylum. And the asylum is not, in the opinion of the committee, intended primarily for that portion of the insane who are able to support themselves. The asylum at Bloomingdale, which has experienced the liberal benefactions of the State, and the private asylum at Hudson, are intended for this class of the insane.

The principal object of constructing the State Lunatic Asylum, was, undoubtedly, to provide a retreat for the insane poor. If there were no, or not sufficient, accommodations for pay patients at existing asylums, it might well, in that case, be urged upon the State to extend the accommodations for the insane so far as fully to supply such deficiency. The only question, therefore, which, in the opinion of the committee, presents itself at this time for the consideration of the Senate, is whether under all the circumstances, the wants of the insane poor demand an immediate erection of all of the four buildings contemplated in the plan of the State Asylum. It is urged in favor of the immediate erection of the four buildings, that accommodations ought to be provided by the State for that portion of the insane who, although not paupers, are yet not possessed of sufficient means to obtain for themselves the continued advantages of a well regulated asylum. There is undoubtedly much force in this suggestion, and it is entitled to receive a due consideration from the Senate. It is urged, also, in favor of an immediate erection of the four buildings, that the erection of a building, after patients are admitted into the hospital, will have an injurious influence upon their recovery. It has likewise been suggested that it would be desirable to furnish accommodations in the Asylum for a portion of the pauper idiots, as there their personal comfort can be increased and their condition improved. The committee have deemed it proper to submit these considerations to the Senate, without expressing any definite opinion on the subject of an immediate erection of the four buildings before referred to.

The committee conceive that no enterprise could be projected which would be more creditable to the philanthropy, or is more imperiously demanded from the justice of the State, than the erection of a State hospital upon a plan sufficiently extensive for the accommodation of all the insane poor in the State, and of all the other insane who cannot be accommodated at the existing asylums. And the committee fully concur in the following views expressed in the report of the committee

appointed by the Assembly of 1830, to inquire into the propriety of erecting establishments for the insane:

“The duty of the government to provide for the comfort and cure of its insane citizens, is acknowledged in all civilized countries. The most powerful considerations of humanity address themselves to the State to provide asylums for the gratuitous reception and treatment of those who are unable to bear the expense, and also for those who possess the ability to sustain such expense, upon receiving from them a fair compensation for their support, and medical and moral treatment. The great secret of success in the treatment of insanity, is the placing the patient immediately or very soon after the access of the disease, under a process of curative treatment, and under circumstances the most favorable to the success of such treatment; for generally a curable case becomes incurable by neglect. Hence follows the indispensable importance of providing hospitals adequate to the accommodation of all the insane; and the necessity of providing such accommodations gratuitously for those who are unable to bear the expense. The success of these humane establishments should be a sufficient incentive to governments and to individuals to multiply and enlarge them until accommodations shall be provided for every individual afflicted with mental derangement.”

To discharge, therefore, the highest moral duty “which devolves on us as a government and as citizens; to obey the authoritative mandate of the ruler of the world; to imitate the example of other nations, we should erect hospitals adequate in number and extent, to accommodate all our insane; hospitals provided with all the necessary means and facilities for their safe keeping, personal comfort and cure. Let these hospitals be enlarged or multiplied, as the malady increases, so as to accommodate at least all the insane poor, the burden of whose support falls directly upon the public.”

The inducements to embark in this enterprise of benevolence, are irresistible, since it has been ascertained that intellectual derangement is a simple disease, and curable to a greater extent than any of the diseases of the body. “Science has conquered ignorance, prejudice and superstition, and pushed its investigations into the causes, character and curableness of mental disorder, and has come out with the glorious demonstration, that the diseases of the mind can be made to yield to the power of medicine, and to moral discipline.”

The committee, without quoting further from the report referred to, or enlarging upon this interesting subject, will conclude by referring the Senate to that report, which is to be found in the 3d vol. of Assembly Docs. for the year 1831, No. 263, and to the reports of Messrs. Potter, Kemble, Parker and Hertell, on the same subject, which are to be found in the 4th vol. of Assembly Doc. for the year 1831, No. 305; in the 2d vol. Assembly Doc. for the year 1832, No. 176; in the 4th vol. of Assembly Doc. for the year 1834, No. 347; and in the 3d vol. of Assembly Doc. for the year 1835, No. 167.

All which is respectfully submitted.