

Dr. Mattocks: an early advocate for Minnesota children

by [Luther Granquist](#) // June 8th, 2012

There is a contemporary flavor to newspaper reports of the debate in the 1879 legislature about what to do about “idiot,” “imbecile,” or “feebleminded” children at the Hospital for the Insane in St. Peter.

During the 1870s, about fifty children with those labels were committed there. The hospital administration and staff did not want them there, but acquiesced in admitting them because there was no help for them and their families even in the larger cities. The State Board of Health, the Ramsey County Board of Commissioners, and the Superintendent of the Academy for the Deaf, Dumb, and Blind in Faribault urged the legislature to establish a school for them, but without success. In the meantime, some of these children died. A few went home to their families. About 20 remained in 1879, when three senators introduced somewhat differing bills to establish a new school for them attached to the Academy in Faribault.

Senator Andrew McCrea, the chair of the insane asylum committee, summarized his bill for the members. He then called for expert testimony from Dr. Brewer Mattocks, a St. Paul physician who had served as an examining physician in commitment cases since 1867. He had also been the St. Paul and the Ramsey County physician. Both the *Pioneer Press* and the *Minneapolis Tribune* reported that he had given a great deal of attention to the question of moving these children out of the Hospital for the Insane. Mattocks told the Senate that most of these children could be educated and gave examples from his personal experience with several of them. It was, he said, utterly incongruous and cruel for these children to be confined with adults at the Hospital. He urged the state to take charge of them and bring them up to a proper standard of culture.

Dr. Charles Adams, a senator from Hastings, continued the expert testimony by explaining the character of mental diseases. He then argued for moving these children from the adults at the Hospital for the Insane and experimenting with separate education for them at the Academy.

Senator Joseph Thacher from Zumbrota sought a broader provision. He contended that all the imbecile patients at the Hospital should be taken care of, not just the children.

James Wheat, who was on the senate Deaf and Dumb Committee, responded from the standpoint of the children at the Academy in Faribault. He said bringing the children from the Hospital into the Academy would introduce “an element of evil.” Orin Page, a senator from Pleasant Grove in Olmsted County, thought it was a difficult matter to determine just who was insane or feebleminded. He said that the feebleminded persons at the Hospital should be sent to their respective homes to be supported by their parents and friends. Calvin Powers from Fillmore County took a more extreme position. He proclaimed that he had no sympathy to waste on the parents of these imbecile and idiotic children. His sympathies, he said, were in favor of the unfortunate taxpayers, and he would oppose creation of another state institution as a means of spending the people’s money.

The Senate appointed the three senators who introduced these bills to a special committee to work out their differences. They compromised by proposing a new bill that met some of the issues raised in the debate. It provided that three doctors would determine which children from the hospital would be proper subjects for training and instruction and transfer them to the new school at Faribault. That school had to be in a separate building from the Academy. Children who could not benefit from instruction and training could be sent home to their parents. And nothing in the bill was to be construed as creating a permanent institution.

This bill passed the Senate 25 to 4, with Page and Powers among the four who voted no. The bill then passed the House unanimously and was signed by the Governor. The children moved to Faribault at the end of July 1869. The long-term issue of which of these children should be trained or educated and where was put off for another day.

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