



Photo: *The Indianapolis Star* (2014)

Rhoda Coffin

Richmond, Wayne County

February 1, 1826 – September 28, 1909

Rhoda Johnson was born in Ohio in February 1, 1826, and moved to Indiana at the age of 18 to attend a Quaker school in Richmond, Indiana. There, she married Charles Coffin, a local bank president, and became the mother of six.

Rhoda Coffin initiated reforms for women and children and soon opened the Marion Street Sabbath School in Richmond in 1864. She founded the Home Mission Association, a Quaker women's group that worked to establish the Home for Friendless Women in 1868, and later successfully lobbied for a female physician at the Indiana Hospital for the Insane.

Her beliefs and efforts led her to lobby for the creation of a separate state penitentiary for women and emphasize the rehabilitation of the incarcerated would place her at the forefront of the national prison reform movement. In her pursuit, the Governor requested they visit two of the state's penitentiaries to assess conditions and recommend improvements. At one state prison, she heard report of sexual abuse from both male and female inmates. Guards took advantage of the women and the women were regularly beaten and sexually mistreated. From her experiences, Rhoda Coffin developed the opinion that only women could understand and properly care for female prisoners. After many years of lobbying the Indiana Reformatory Institute for Women and Girls opened in 1873 in Indianapolis became the first prison run exclusively by women.

In later years, Rhoda's husband, Charles, was accused of fraud and embezzlement after his Richmond bank went into receivership. The Coffins moved to Chicago where she continued her work on behalf of prison reform, women's rights, and children's defense until her death on September 28, 1909.

- For more information about Rhoda Coffin, go to:
<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/imh/article/viewFile/11870/17448>.
- For more information about *Writing Her Story*, go to:
<http://www.in.gov/icw/2440.htm>.

Additional and more detailed references available at the end of Women's History Month

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