

THE CAPITAL'S CHILDREN:
THE STORY OF THE WASHINGTON CITY ORPHAN ASYLUM, 1815-1860

by

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INTRODUCTION

One of the persisting social issues of human history has been that of the orphan, the child that circumstance, fate, mishap, or parental choice has left to encounter the world without the guidance, protection, and care of parents. Providing for orphans most often falls to the hands of society, and how the treatment of these children manifests itself changes from society to society. During the colonial period of American history, the care of orphans most often went to households within the community. Rather than establishing orphanages in which to gather all the desolate children in the community, families took them into their homes. During the nineteenth century, beginning especially during the 1830s, America experienced a growth in orphan asylums as society assumed the responsibility previously delegated to individual families.¹

On October 10, 1815, years before this era of founding orphanages began, a group gathered at the Hall of Representatives in Washington, D.C. for the first annual meeting of Washington's first orphan asylum.² Though both men and women attended the gathering, the women of the group were the ones that came up with the idea for the asylum. The institution they founded, the Female Orphan Asylum of Washington (later and more commonly referred to as the Washington City Orphan Asylum) sought to serve the city of Washington after the city's destruction in the War of 1812, particularly to help the girls of the city that had lost their fathers during the war. They proposed to provide not only for these girls physically but to tend to the formation of their morals as well.

¹ David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), xviii.

² "Orphans' Asylum," *Daily National Intelligencer*, October 10, 1815, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu> (September 15, 2011).

This thesis examines the founding of this institution as well as its history during the antebellum period, or the first forty-five years of its existence from 1815 to 1860. I argue that this asylum acts as a lens through which to view broader trends and issues in society, such as the rights and roles of women, the place of government in social welfare, and the treatment of children in the nineteenth century. The most important question I ask is “Who did nineteenth century Americans believe responsible to care for desolate children?” People tend to base their treatment of orphans according to their views on childhood, family, and social welfare, so that the way they regard orphans is often indicative of their culture and mores as well.

This thesis consists of three chapters. The first chapter examines the role of women in the formation and management of the Washington City Orphan Asylum. The idea of opening an orphan asylum originated with a small group of elite Washington women. Dolley Madison, Marcia Van Ness, Margaret Bayard Smith, and Elizabeth Riley Brown brought their friends in on their endeavor, and for at least the first forty-five years of the institution’s existence, the women who managed it were predominately well-connected members of Washington high society. The first chapter focuses on their involvement in the institution, arguing that these women invested considerable amounts of time, money, and energy into the asylum, a level of commitment that corresponded well with America’s evolving notions of proper womanly action in society. The status of these women and their many connections with important actors in American history played a significant role in the shaping of the Washington City Orphan Asylum, as seen predominately in the second chapter.

The second chapter focuses on two different but conjoining trends. First is the external aid sought by the women managing the asylum. In many ways, this chapter focuses on the men who helped the asylum. These men performed tasks that women could not legally accomplish in the nineteenth century. This included forming the asylum into a corporation capable of owning

and bequeathing property, investing the asylum's finances in stocks, and appearing formally before governmental bodies to request assistance. The men that the women brought into association with the asylum were varied and diverse in their occupations, but generally fell in the same social group as the women of the society. Many of the men were married to the women in the society. Looking at these men, and their various roles in society (such as ministers and politicians), helps to assess the involvement of the wider Washington population in the care of children.

The second thread in chapter two involves the city of Washington and the impact its urban environment had on the Washington City Orphan Asylum. One cannot separate the asylum from the city. The development of Washington – its reconstruction after the War of 1812, its political and social climate, its various nineteenth century epidemics, and the very soil upon which eighteenth century Americans constructed the city – played a crucial role in the formation of the asylum. Like the men who participated in the asylum's management, the city of Washington was a profound and affective external force. Examining the Washington City Orphan Asylum shows the role the city of Washington played in the lives of every day citizens. The history of the orphanage also provides an interesting look into how it also shaped the city and served as an important part of the city's rebuilding process following the War of 1812. A key part of this examination is also the relationship between the Washington City Orphan Asylum and the other orphan asylums in the District of Columbia. The manner in which these institutions interacted lends interesting insight into the philosophy various orphanages adopted in their mission of helping children.

The last chapter focuses on the children of the Washington City Orphan Asylum. The unfortunate nature of historiography is that often the historical characters who led seemingly voiceless lives also left behind little to indicate their point of view, their observation of events,

and thus history often renders them voiceless as well. This is, regrettably, the case with the children of the Washington City Orphan Asylum. The children of the institution in the antebellum era left no traceable diaries, letters, or telling account of their own experiences in the orphanage. We cannot truly ascertain what these children thought of their position. I cannot argue that they considered the asylum to be a step towards a better life, the Godsend that the managers believed it to be, or that they instead despised the home and the way their lives were managed. What I can say about these children I have pieced together in large part from the managerial records, and thus always carries the bias of the women that wrote them. However, some of the children's actions, such as running away or defying punishment, indicate some of their feelings.

The third chapter looks at the way the asylum treated its children. The way the adults running the asylum treated the institution's children serves as a critique of not only the asylum's managers and trustees, but also society as a whole. The preference the managers gave to accepting particular children over others shows the manner in which society viewed poverty and need. The food they fed the children exhibits the effect of an urban setting and changing food habits on the diet of nineteenth-century Americans. The children's education testifies to the importance antebellum America placed on raising children, especially lower class children, to be useful, productive members of society. The Washington City Orphan Asylum maintained particular practices in all these areas. Some of these policies were consistent with other asylums and general nineteenth-century American norms, but others deviated in a way that proved forward thinking on the part of the Washington City Orphan Asylum.

Before beginning an in-depth look at any orphan asylum, an examination of the terms "orphan" and "asylum" is necessary. These words carry different meanings in the twenty-first century than they did two hundred years ago. Twenty and twenty-first century cultural

perceptions and stereotypes have shaped these words to a usage foreign to orphan asylums in the nineteenth century. For the word “orphan,” this difference primarily lies in the word’s definition; for “asylum,” it relates to the word’s connotation and reputation.

The term “orphan” did not apply solely to parentless children. That all orphans had two dead parents is perhaps one of the greatest myths about orphans perpetuated in American lore. An examination of almost any orphanage in western society dating back to the early modern age in Europe shows that often the children in homes for orphans were in fact not orphans but rather had one or even two living parents.³ Institutions typically categorized each child as either a “full orphan” with no living parents or a “half-orphan” with one surviving parent. Society often considered children “orphans” if their father was dead, even if their mother was still alive, because they had lost the parent most capable of caring for them financially. Society and orphan asylums did not necessarily treat all orphans with the same level of care and concern, a trend that I examine more in chapter three. For the sake of consistency, I maintain the nineteenth century usage of the term “orphan,” and refer to all children of the Washington City Orphan Asylum as “orphans” regardless of their parental situations, specifying a child’s specific familial situation as needed.

A majority of the homes for orphans in the nineteenth century used the term “asylum” in their title (Washington City Orphan Asylum, Boston Female Asylum, Cincinnati Orphan Asylum, etc.). Several of these homes derived from the nineteenth century reform movement for asylums for children, the insane, and other dependents. Their usage of the word embraced its definition of providing a haven for the needy. “Asylum” did not carry the same negative

³ Ondina E. Gonzalez and Bianca Premo, eds, *Raising an Empire: Children in Early Modern Iberia and Colonial Latin America* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2007), 41; Timothy J. Coates, *Convicts and Orphans: Forced and State-Sponsored Colonizers in the Portuguese Empire, 1550-1755* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001); Nicholas Terpstra, *Abandoned Children of the Italian Renaissance: Orphan Care in Florence and Bologna* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 27.

connotation commonly used in the twenty-first century, and would not do so until the turn of the twentieth century.⁴ As with the term “orphan,” I choose to use the word “asylum” because the word is in the institution’s name and it was the term used by the people associated with the asylum. I use it interchangeably with other words, including “institution,” “orphanage,” and “home.”

The asylum this thesis examines changed names with some frequency during its history. The institution’s founders first named it the Female Orphan Asylum of Washington. The orphanage’s name officially changed to the Washington City Orphan Asylum in the late 1820s with an act of incorporation by Congress. The change of name was fitting, as the asylum would soon start accepting boys as well as girls, and the title Female Orphan Asylum of Washington no longer applied. The institution bore the name Washington City Orphan Asylum until the early twentieth century, when it changed to Hillcrest Children’s Center. At this point it also changed purposes as well, no longer serving as an orphanage but rather as a home for troubled youth.⁵ The people of Washington also used the name Protestant Orphan Asylum in reference to the orphanage. Rather than trying to use the different names of the institution at its different points in history, for the sake of clarity and consistency I solely use the name Washington City Orphan Asylum.

The bulk of the research for this thesis came from the managerial records for the asylum, found in the Hillcrest Children’s Center collection at the Library of Congress. This collection includes (but is not limited to) the minutes of the Board of Managers’ monthly meetings, the children’s admission records, the children’s relinquishment records, miscellaneous

⁴ Timothy A. Hacsí, *Second Home: Orphan Asylums and Poor Families in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁵ Container 31, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

correspondence between involved parties in the asylum's welfare, and financial records of the institution. The minutes of the Board of Managers' meetings proved the most useful as far as describing different parts of the asylum machine. Contemporary newspaper articles, personal letters, and Congressional records comprised the bulk of outside primary sources used for this thesis.

The story of the Washington City Orphan Asylum contains triumph and heartbreak, joy and sorrow. The adults managing and aiding the asylum experienced problems with financing and legal issues, but also experienced successes in helping the asylum to thrive and grow. The asylum's children likewise endured hardships, facing illness and loss, but several of them saw happiness as well. In telling the orphanage's story, we can see the circumstances that shaped its history as well as the lives of its children.

CHAPTER ONE

“AN ASSOCIATION OF BENEVOLENT AND PIOUS LADIES”:

THE WOMEN OF THE ORPHANAGE

The women who started the asylum and served on its Board of Managers for the first forty-five years of its existence were of a particular type. They, like their first official leader, Dolley Madison, were often high society women of Washington and some of the most esteemed women in the nation. They did not view the orphan asylum as a mere social club in which they gathered and conversed with dear friends; they felt very deeply about both the worthiness and necessity of their cause, and devoted themselves to it. They maintained close control over all facets of the asylum and invested in its success and the success of its children.

The Managers

That the women who gathered to form the orphanage were close friends was natural. The idea for the orphanage likely originated with Marcia Burnes Van Ness, who then discussed it with those closest to her (her family and friends), bringing them in on her endeavor.¹ An article in *The Daily National Intelligencer*, announcing the first official meeting of the society stated: “The Ladies of the county of Washington and neighborhood are requested to meet at the Hall of the House of Representatives, this day, at 11 o’clock, A.M. for the purpose of joining an association to provide an Asylum for destitute Orphans.”² This announcement opened participation in the asylum to an audience beyond their own social group. However, the names

¹ Catherine Allgor, “Queen Dolley’ Saves Washington City,” *Washington History* 12, (Spring/Summer 2000): 68, under “Coming into the City: Essays on Early Washington D.C. Commemorating the Bicentennial of the Federal Government’s Arrival in 1800,” <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40073433> (accessed September 22, 2011). 68.

² "Orphans' Asylum," *Daily National Intelligencer*, October 10, 1815, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu> (September 15, 2011).

on the list of the Board of Managers and trustees remained largely concentrated among this social circle, at least in the beginning years. Given that the people in attendance at the meetings voted for the limited number of women whom would be managers, it is likely that these women (and their husbands) voted for their friends. It is also probable that, since membership in the asylum society required a subscription fee, only the wealthiest citizens of Washington participated.

Undoubtedly, Marcia Burnes Van Ness was one of the most important women in the orphanage's beginning decades. Marcia was born a Burnes, a Scottish planter family that owned a significant portion of the land on which they built the United States Capital in the late eighteenth century. The Capital's relocation from Philadelphia to Washington ushered Marcia Burnes into society. She formed a fast friendship with Dolley Madison based on shared connections and similar personalities. Marcia married John Peter Van Ness in May 1802. Van Ness was a Congressman from New York at the time of their marriage, but would soon leave to become a member of the Washington militia. By the time of the War of 1812, Van Ness had achieved the rank of colonel. He would be a general by the time of his death. When Marcia Van Ness' mother died in 1807, she became the sole heir of the Burnes fortune – approximately one and a half million dollars. John Van Ness was wealthy, as well, so Marcia Van Ness did not face financial restraints when it came to her generous inclinations.³

Sources disagree as to whether the asylum was initially Marcia Van Ness' inspiration or if the idea was a collaboration with a few other women (Dolley Madison, Elizabeth Riley Brown, and Margaret Bayard Smith). In either case, Marcia Van Ness was there from its conception.

³ Frances Carpenter Huntington, "The Heiress of Washington City: Marcia Burnes Van Ness," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.* 69/70, no. 47 (1969/1970) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40067706> (accessed October 24, 2011).

She would continue to play an active role up until her death in 1832. She served as Second Directress from the asylum's opening until 1818, the second-in-command to both Dolley Madison and Elizabeth Monroe, who served as First Directress. Often during these years, Marcia Van Ness filled in for these two women. In 1818, she became First Directress, an office that she would keep for most of her time with the asylum. The only two exceptions were 1820-1821 when she served as Secretary pro tem and 1831-1832 when she served as Trustee (both of these instances she had been once again elected to the role of First Directress, but declined).⁴

Rarely in the course of her service to the asylum did Marcia Van Ness miss a meeting. Beyond simply attending the gatherings, she took an active role in the business of the asylum. She was the one who requested an audience with Elizabeth Monroe to notify the First Lady that the asylum society had chosen her as First Directress. Several of the children that entered into the institution were legally bound to Marcia Van Ness.⁵ When she died in 1832, Congress adjourned for a day out of respect and admiration, an honor that they had never bestowed on a woman before.⁶ Her obituary in the newspaper commended her as an incredibly generous and genuine woman, and closely connected her to the orphanage.⁷

Dolley Madison, a co-founder in the enterprise and First Directress of the asylum, possesses a reputation as a champion of the United States, and perhaps more specifically the city of Washington. Her actions during the War of 1812 have become famous. While she may not have personally pried the portrait of George Washington from its frame in the Presidential mansion while the British army grew closer and closer to Washington, D.C. (as is sometimes

⁴ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Huntington, "Heiress of Washington," 100.

⁷ "From the Philadelphia Inquirer. A Benefactress," *Salem Gazette*, September, 21, 1832. <http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu> (accessed April 2, 2011).

rumored), it was she who commanded that it be removed. She waited until the last possible minute to leave the city, only doing so once she heard the sound of approaching cannons, and as she left she ensured the safety of crucial government documents and artifacts – among them Washington’s portrait.⁸

Dolley Madison’s renown does not derive solely from her actions during the War of 1812, but from her personality and popularity as well. She still has her name among the most well known and loved First Ladies of the United States.⁹ She served as Thomas Jefferson’s hostess in the years before her husband’s Presidency, since Jefferson’s wife died before he became President. In this time, Dolley Madison made a name for herself as an original and inspired hostess, a reputation that would carry to her husband’s presidency and beyond. Women around the United States sought to emulate her wardrobe, her dinner parties, and all manners of her persona.

Her prowess extended beyond fashion and food; Dolley Madison was able, through her beloved and popular parties, to bring different political factions together in a sense of good will. For instance, she formed a close friendship with the prominent Tayloe family, even though John Tayloe was an ardent Federalist and a fervent opponent of James Madison’s political ideologies.¹⁰ Dolley Madison organized soirees during the War of 1812 to bring together Doves and Hawks in a feeling of national unity, a camaraderie essential to the war effort. Conciliation became even more important after the city of Washington’s destruction and debate surfaced over the question of rebuilding the capital in Washington or finding a new location. Dolley Madison

⁸ Catherine Allgor, *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of The American Nation* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 1-4.

⁹ Robert P. Watson, *The Presidents’ Wives: Reassessing the Office of First Lady* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2000), 50.

¹⁰ Allgor, “Queen Dolley,” 65.

was among those who adamantly fought for the city of Washington. Even after Madison left the presidency in 1817, Dolley Madison maintained a significant presence in the Washington social circle. Upon her death in 1849, President Zachary Taylor stated, ““She will never be forgotten because she was truly our First Lady for a half-century.””¹¹

The Washington City Orphan Asylum felt the influence of Dolley Madison as well. The list of trustees and managers for the beginning years of the asylum read like a who’s who of Dolley Madison’s closest social circle. Often within the first few years of the orphanage’s founding, outsiders connected the asylum specifically with the First Lady. An article circulated in several Northern newspapers stated that “A female Orphan Asylum Institution ha[d] been established in *Washington*; of which the amiable and interesting Lady of the President [was] the first Directress.”¹²

The last meeting of the asylum Dolley Madison attended was March 5, 1817, a day only too fitting for it was the day after the next American president, James Monroe’s inauguration. Reportedly, the Madison family had already vacated the Presidential mansion, turning over the keys on the day of the inauguration. Dolley Madison did not want to be a burden on the new Presidential family. She even kept her participation in the inauguration events to a minimum so she would not overshadow Elizabeth Monroe in her new role as First Lady.¹³ Shortly thereafter, on April 6, 1817, the Madison family departed Washington for Montpelier, their home in Virginia.¹⁴ As Dolley Madison left behind Washington and the office of the First Lady, she also

¹¹ Paul F. Boller, Jr. *Presidential Wives: An Anecdotal History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 36.

¹² “Interesting Facts,” *New-England Galaxy & Masonic Magazine*, October 31, 1817, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu> (accessed April 2, 2011) 19; “Orphan Asylum; Institution; Washington; Lady; President; Directress,” *Northern Whig*, November 4, 1817, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu> (accessed April 2, 2011), 20.

¹³ Noel B. Gerson, *The Velvet Glove* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1975) 230-231.

left behind the asylum and her office as First Directress. She would not be gone from Washington for forever, though, and eventually returned in 1837 following her husband's death. During her years in Virginia, she stayed well apprised of happenings in Washington, and maintained close connections with friends there, several of whom continued to be active in the asylum society.¹⁵

In terms of participating the asylum's governance, Dolley Madison was not as active as some of the other members of the asylum society, particularly her good friend Marcia Van Ness. She served as First Directress for the institution from its opening in October 1815 until March 1817. She actively attended meetings within the first few months of the asylum's opening. These months were crucial in ensuring the orphanage had a smooth start. Dolley Madison attended six meetings within the first three months of the orphanage's founding, at which she delegated tasks to the other members of the society. For instance, at the October 17, 1815 meeting, Dolley Madison assigned Mrs. Mechlin and Mrs. Breckenridge to a committee charged with finding a location for the orphanage. Other committees included one to find clothing for the children, another furniture for the house, and one for establishing a means of transferring legal guardianship of the orphans from their parents to the asylum. In addition to serving as the institution's First Directress, Dolley Madison also donated money and goods to the asylum. At the March 5 meeting in 1816, she gave \$35 with the specific purpose of purchasing a cow.¹⁶

Beginning in 1816, Dolley Madison's attendance at the meetings dwindled. She attended one meeting in March 1816 and another in March 1817. Though she did not remain as active as

¹⁴ Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 345.

¹⁵ Allen C. Clark, *Life and Letters of Dolly Madison*, (Washington, D.C.: W.F. Roberts Company, 1914), 383.

¹⁶ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

she had once been (possibly because of the demands of serving as First Lady as well), in a way her most important service was already rendered. Dolley Madison did for the orphanage what she did for Washington – brought people together in its service and gave it credibility by her mere presence. Though she left, several of her friends would continue to work with the orphanage and the asylum as an institution would maintain its good name and honor overall as the century progressed.

The orphanage came to carry some of the political ties that Dolley Madison worked so hard to cultivate in her own social circle. Women who served as trustees and managers had husbands representing a wide array of political ideologies and commitments. Dolley Madison was the wife of a Democratic Republican. Louisa Adams was the wife of a Whig at the time of her service. Ann Tayloe was the wife of a Federalist.¹⁷ President Andrew Jackson, who would bestow favor upon the orphanage both before and during his presidency, was a Democratic Republican.¹⁸ The people who took an interest in the orphanage transcended political boundaries.

Elizabeth Monroe was not a First Lady like Dolley Madison. To say she was her predecessor's polar opposite would perhaps be unfair to Elizabeth Monroe, but Washington society certainly experienced an abrupt change when the Madisons exited the role of presidential family and the Monroes entered. Whereas Dolley Madison cultivated social and political relationships, planned parties, and was the life and light of Washington, Elizabeth Monroe remained aloof and often shunned the social norms of DC society. Any successor to President

¹⁷ Allgor, "Queen Dolley," 65.

¹⁸ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Jon Meacham, *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House*, (New York: Random House, 2008), 319.

Madison's First Lady would undeniably have an arduous path ahead.¹⁹ Already burdened with an impressive void to fill in terms of style, Elizabeth Monroe seemed to many to be lacking; she simply did not possess the exuberant graces to be the Dolley Madison style of entertainer. Even before James Monroe became president, and while he served as Madison's Secretary of State and Secretary of War, Elizabeth Monroe remained absent from society. Margaret Bayard Smith, one of Washington's most well known women, stated "Altho' they have lived 7 years in W. both Mr. and Mrs. Monroe are perfect strangers not only to me but all citizens."²⁰ When Elizabeth Monroe became First Lady, she did not call on the women of Washington, Dolley Madison's custom, nor did she return the favor when the women of Washington came to call on her. Her daughter, Eliza Hay, who often filled in as White House hostess, went a level beyond her mother in provoking anger from society women – she returned calls, but only of select people.²¹

Elizabeth Monroe also suffered from a mysterious ailment that hindered her ability to play the role of gracious hostess. The Monroe family never discovered the nature of this illness, or if they did, never divulged it. The malicious comments toward her behavior incited some concern from the First Lady, for she sought counsel with Louisa Adams, wife of Secretary of State John Quincy Adams. In her conversation with Louisa Adams, Elizabeth Monroe stated that her constitution simply did not allow her to keep such a rigorous schedule of social engagements. She would be better suited to host occasional events at the White House for several people at once rather than try to maintain a multitude of relationships based on reciprocal social calls. Louisa Adams advised that Elizabeth Monroe needed to create a First Lady social repertoire all

¹⁹ Watson, *The President's Wives*, 75-76.

²⁰ Margaret Bayard Smith, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society*, (New York: F. Ungar Publishing Co., 1965), 141.

²¹ Sol Barzman, *The First Ladies*, (New York: Cowles Book Company, Inc., 1970), 38-47.

her own. The women of Washington continued to harbor resentful feelings towards Elizabeth Monroe throughout Monroe's first presidential term. They only attended events that protocol deemed necessary. By the second term, feelings thawed and Elizabeth Monroe came to be seen as a perfectly respectable hostess, though still not on par with Dolley Madison.²²

Just as Dolley Madison's style as First Lady reverberated in her involvement with the Washington Children's Orphan Asylum, so did Elizabeth Monroe's. When Dolley Madison vacated her office as First Directress of the asylum in 1817, the attendants at the annual meeting on October 14 elected Elizabeth Monroe to be the new First Directress, the second one in the asylum's history. Elizabeth Monroe was not present at this meeting; a committee of women, including Second Directress Marcia Van Ness, visited the First Lady and notified her that they had voted her as the First Directress of the institution. This visit was in fact the first that Elizabeth Monroe accepted as First Lady.²³ She had never been to a meeting of the society before or had any other interaction with it (besides maybe knowing some of the women who served as officers and trustees). Her name does not appear in any of the earlier records of the asylum.²⁴ She was, however, the wife of the President, and the women of the society probably meant the election as a good will gesture towards the new First Lady, an opportunity for her to slip with moderate ease into the place of Dolley Madison. They could have also seen it as a legacy, a position tied to the office of the First Lady, in many ways both an honor and a responsibility.

No matter how the managers viewed this gesture, it is likely Elizabeth Monroe saw the First Directress position mostly as a burden. She bore the title of First Directress for a year, but

²² Boller, *Presidential Wives*, 49-52.

²³ Smith, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society*, 141.

²⁴ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

only attended one meeting during the duration. Marcia Van Ness filled in as a pro tem First Directress for the duration of Elizabeth Monroe's service. When elections came around again in October 1818, the asylum elected Marcia Van Ness as First Directress. The published proceedings of the meeting stated the following in regards to Marcia Van Ness' election: "Mrs. Monroe, having intimated that she found it impracticable to pay the necessary attention to the duties of first Directress, at the same time expressed the warmest interest for the prosperity of the Institution."²⁵

Elizabeth Monroe's true feelings towards the situation with the institution remain a mystery, as the majority of her personal papers have been lost.²⁶ We cannot know whether she truly sympathized with their calling and desired to play an active role or if she really did not care to become involved. Either way, the statement published regarding her resignation fits perfectly into the context of her life and First Ladyship. Like Dolley Madison, Elizabeth Monroe's relationship with the orphanage mirrored her relationship with Washington. Elizabeth Monroe was sickly and often fatigued, and serving as the head of an orphan asylum society undoubtedly took a great deal of strength and energy. She was relatively reclusive and on the occasions she did socialize, she preferred to do so at the White House; participating in the asylum society would have required her to attend a social gathering outside of her domain and given her office as the First Directress, be in large part responsible for leading the social gathering. Being a part of the asylum was not only impractical, but also lay outside of her worldview as First Lady.

²⁵ "Female Orphan Asylum," *City of Washington Gazette*, November 9, 1818. <http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu> (accessed April 2, 2011).

²⁶ According to the First Ladies' Library, James Monroe destroyed all but six of Elizabeth Monroe's letters upon her death. First Ladies Library, "Manuscripts for: Elizabeth Monroe," <http://www.firstladies.org/bibliography/manuscripts.aspx?bioid=5> (accessed October 5, 2011).

Margaret Bayard Smith served as the first Secretary of the Asylum.²⁷ She was the daughter of Colonel John Bayard who served in the American Revolution. In 1800, she moved to Washington, shortly after marrying her second cousin Samuel Harrison Smith. Samuel established *The National Intelligencer* the year that they arrived in Washington, a newspaper that became one of the most prominent and trusted of its time. Smith also had a successful career in banking. Not all of the Smith family's remarkable achievements belonged to Samuel Smith – Margaret Bayard Smith accrued a number of accomplishments as well. Most of these belonged in the literary world. She published numerous times, although sometimes under anonymous authorship. Her works appeared in *Lady's Book*, *The National Intelligencer*, and *The Southern Literary Messenger*. During the forty years they lived in Washington they lived among the top echelon of society. Margaret Bayard Smith maintained relationships with Dolley Madison and several other important women whose names appeared in the records of the orphan asylum. She was a prolific correspondent, and several of her personal letters appeared in the early twentieth century in a volume called *The First Forty Years of Washington Society*.²⁸

Margaret Bayard Smith was among the group of women that found the institution. She was the asylum's first Secretary, serving for a year before resigning from the Board. After the end of her service, she did not completely disappear from the asylum's history. Some of her correspondence indicates that she remained informed of the asylum's happenings. For instance, in 1835 she wrote about Clara Bomford, then First Directress of the Institution, and the measures she was taking to procure funds for the orphanage.²⁹ Most importantly, in 1827 Margaret Bayard

²⁷ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²⁸ Smith, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society*, v-viii.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 367-368.

Smith published, “What is Gentility?” a moral treatise that she sold at a fair supporting the orphanage.³⁰

Samuel Harrison Smith sold *The National Intelligencer* not long after opening it. The two men who purchased it also had wives who worked with the orphanage. Sarah Gales, daughter of Theodorick Lee from Virginia, married Joseph Gales, a man who, in addition to being a newspaper publisher, also served as Washington’s mayor from 1827 to 1830.³¹ Sarah served the asylum as Secretary from 1821-1827.³² The sister of Joseph Gales, also named Sarah, married William Winston Seaton, Gales’ newspaper partner.³³ Sarah Seaton participated in the asylum from 1816 to 1817 as Secretary and from 1818 to 1819 as a trustee.³⁴

Clara Bomford (sometimes spelled “Bomfard”) served as a trustee in the asylum society from 1819 to 1822 then again from 1832-1833. Her longest service to the orphanage was as First Directress, a role that lasted seven years.³⁵ As with the familial situations of these other women, the Bomford family acquired an admirable amount of success. George Bomford, Clara’s husband, served as a colonel in the army.³⁶ Other women who participated in the orphanage were the wives of high-ranking military officials. Mrs. Thompson, the wife of Colonel Thompson, served as Secretary from January 1818 to 1819. Colonel Larned’s wife was active in

³⁰ Container 31, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³¹ *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v. “Gales, Joseph, Jr.”

³² Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³³ *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v. “Seaton, William Winston.”

³⁴ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Clark, *The Life and Letters of Dolly Madison*.

the orphanage from 1822 until 1837, the year she died.³⁷ She held the office of Trustee, Treasurer, Secretary, and Second Directress. Elizabeth Blair Lee, born into the distinguished Blair family and married to Samuel Philips Lee, an admiral in the navy, began her service in the orphanage in 1852 as a trustee.³⁸ She served as First Directress from 1862 to 1906.³⁹ Several women were the wives of ministers. Elizabeth Riley Brown, the wife of Baptist minister Reverend Obadiah Brown, was one of the founding members of the orphanage and participated in such activities as finding clothing for the children. Elizabeth B. Laurie was married to Presbyterian minister Reverend Dr. James Laurie and Wilhelmina Potts Hawley was married to Episcopalian minister Reverend William Hawley. Others, such as Susan Coxe, Ann Lucinda Lee Jones, and Elizabeth Collins Lee had husbands who were prominent Washington lawyers, politicians, and judges.⁴⁰

The women who served on the Board of Managers were able to boast of not only affluence and familial success, but also of virtue. Society respected several of them for being noble in character and refined in action. This sentiment carried over to their actions with the orphan asylum society. Americans viewed the society, especially in its founding, as a particularly virtuous endeavor. People usually see taking care of poor, homeless children as a benevolent activity, yet for the women of the Washington Children's Orphan Asylum, general opinion went beyond simple admiration for a good deed. Society viewed their service as not

³⁷ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³⁸ *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v. "Lee, Samuel Philips;" Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³⁹ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁰ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

only generous, but also as an ideal form of service for women, the perfect female occupation. Even more so, several people considered it a truly noble calling by a truly noble group of women.

In the first few years following the orphanage's founding in October 1815, several newspapers around the country printed articles describing the orphan asylum. Most of these articles praised the generosity involved in establishing such an institution, using phrases like "an association of benevolent and pious ladies" to describe the managers.⁴¹ A few even focused on the caliber of women invested in this particular undertaking. One example surfaced in the *Ladies Literary Museum; or, Weekly Repository* in January of 1817. It stated that the institution's "officers at once show[ed] [the institution's] credit and respectability...the bosom-companion of [the] Chief Magistrate being at the head of the benevolent group."⁴² Another article, which appeared in the *Concord Observer* on January 4, 1819, stated the "Ladies of the first rank in our country are actively engaged in setting the noble example of providing the means of relief and maintenance to unhappy female orphans, and others who need their charitable aid in procuring subsistence."⁴³ Such an article highlighted both the prominence of the women running the orphanage as well as the virtue in their mission.

Nineteenth century American thought considered the act of caring for the desolate a particularly wonderful occupation for women. After the War for American Independence, the image of the Republican woman emerged in the American psyche. A Republican woman

⁴¹ "Washington, Aug. 31." *The Repertory*, September 5, 1816, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu> (Accessed April 2, 2011).

⁴² "Female Orphan Asylum Society, of Washington City." *Ladies Literary Museum; or, Weekly Repository (1817-1818)*, (January 18, 1817): 141, <http://www.proquest.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu/> (accessed March 31, 2011).

⁴³ "Washington Orphan Female Asylum," *Concord Observer*, January 4, 1819, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu> (accessed April 2, 2011).

devoted herself to virtue, the perpetuation of the ideal citizen, and the protection of all that was truly American. One of the greatest elements of Republicanism was patriotism, a willingness to defend the country and battle against its enemies. For women this manifested itself not in physically taking up arms, but in battling other enemies of the nation, such as poverty. During the early Republic at the turn of the nineteenth century several charitable organizations founded and managed by women appeared along the Eastern seaboard.⁴⁴ The view of women as virtuous and benevolent beings continued into the antebellum period, as women participated in reform movements and charitable acts that society viewed as particularly suitable for their gender.⁴⁵

The Washington Children's Orphan Asylum fit well into the mental framework of the nation; these women participated in a truly feminine cause. An announcement advertising the orphanage's opening contained a phrase that read, "a nobler object cannot engage the sympathy of our females."⁴⁶ Another article argued that the women running the orphanage "doubtless know of how much more value is an approving conscience, than wealth and honors.—May such, and none but such, be elevated in society to claim the attention and imitation of others."⁴⁷ When Marcia Van Ness died, her obituary read: "Woman should always be an object of respect and regard, but when to the loveliness of her nature she adds all the ennobling qualities of virtue and disinterested benevolence, she bears the closest resemblance to the celestial that may be

⁴⁴ Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 110-111.

⁴⁵ Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women in Antebellum Reform* (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2000), ix.

⁴⁶ "Orphans' Asylum," *Daily National Intelligencer*, October 10, 1815.

⁴⁷ "Extract from the Constitution," *Concord Observer*, January 18, 1819, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu> (accessed April 2, 2011).

conceived.”⁴⁸ Popular opinion affirmed that these noble women’s undertaking was a truly wonderful and feminine cause.

Managing the Asylum

For the purposes of governing the Asylum its founders approved a two-and-a-half page constitution at the first meeting held on October 10, 1815. The document makes evident just how rigorous a commitment to the orphanage would be. Women who served in some official capacity took on an immense amount of responsibility. The constitution not only stated their specific duties but also stipulated the manner in which they would run the asylum.⁴⁹

The document set up the methods under which the society would assign leadership and allocate responsibilities. The society held a meeting every year on the second Tuesday of October, most commonly at a local church.⁵⁰ The members of the Board of Managers, the children of the asylum, and the governess would all attend and they invited the men and women who pledged subscriptions to the orphanage to attend as well. At each yearly meeting, those present elected four officers and nine trustees, the offices consisting of First Directress, Second Directress, Treasurer, and Secretary. The First Directress, in essence the president of the society, received the to duty to “preside at all meetings, both of the Society and the Trustees -- preserve order -- state questions for discussion, and declare the decision.” In the event of a tie, she would have the deciding vote, and she could call special meetings if the board felt it necessary. Not to be a nominal head with no real power, she was to take “active superintendance of [the asylum’s]

⁴⁸ “From the Philadelphia Inquirer. A Benefactress,” *Salem Gazette*, September, 21, 1832.

⁴⁹ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁰ They later moved the annual meeting to January.

general welfare.” The Second Directress, a vice president of sorts, would fulfill these duties if the First Directress was absent or otherwise indisposed.⁵¹

The Secretary and Treasurer of the society both held a considerable amount of the tangible responsibility. The Secretary was responsible for all record-keeping, taking down the minutes of the meetings, and for “notify[ing] the meetings of the Society.” She also had a significant role in handling the institution’s finances as she maintained a “register of the names of the Subscribers and donors,” collected money to be transferred to the Treasurer, and reported the collection of money to the rest of the Society at meetings. The Treasurer was responsible for managing the money, allocating it as necessary, and supervising the Governess’ expenditures. Like the Secretary, the Treasurer would be required to report to the rest of the Society at their meetings.⁵²

The Trustees of the institution gathered on a monthly basis, along with the Second Directress, Treasurer, and Secretary, to discuss the business of the asylum. They also committed to take turns visiting the asylum every week so as “to inspect [its] situation, and to examine the progress of the Orphans in their education, as well as to observe the general conduct of the Governess.” The Board as a whole had the responsibility of finding a building for the orphanage as well as a suitable Governess.⁵³

Certainly the women of the Society were not strangers to the concept of a constitution, and perhaps not even foreign to the craft of constructing one. Dolley Madison’s husband, President James Madison, had been the chief architect on the United States Constitution a few

⁵¹ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵² Container 34, , records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵³ Ibid.

decades before. In many respects, the constitution of the asylum society resembles the United States Constitution. The crafters of each constitution created them with the view that society, people, and nations all change and adapt over time, and that an effective governing document survives by evolving with them. The United States Constitution included the ability to add Amendments. The concluding line of the Washington City Orphan Asylum's constitution stated, "This Plan may hereafter be altered or amended, as the experience of the Society, or the future circumstances of the Institution, may render advisable."⁵⁴ The women of the society considered the future of the asylum, and accounted for its need for growth and adaptation. This insight would prove necessary as the asylum eventually changed fundamental policies.

The society instituted a close adherence to the guidelines stipulated in the constitution. They held meetings monthly and a meeting for their subscribers annually. The Trustees divided and appointed weeks in which they visited the orphanage and made sure the asylum's governesses and teachers conducted affairs as expected. Tension occasionally surfaced based on one issue or another. The Secretaries of the asylum generally possessed enough tact to keep the minutes of meetings focused on the matters of the orphanage and did not include arguments amongst the members of the board. Yet they did include resolutions passed by the board, and these provide telling information as to what problems the board's members encountered in terms of functioning as an organization.

In December 1815, after only having met for a few months, the managers passed a resolution stating, "...no lady shall speak while another is speaking and...when the votes are called for the answer shall be yes or no, without the reason being assigned." Such a resolution indicates that the women were attempting to talk over one another, perhaps even having heated

⁵⁴ Container 34, , records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

disputes. On October 12, 1816, a resolution entered the Board's minutes, stating, "That if any member of the Board absent herself on the regular day for meeting, without sufficient and reasonable excuse, such member, is liable to the penalty of fifty cents for each and every offence." Right beneath this resolution was another one reading, "the Board of Direction meets on the first Tuesday of every month, without any other notification than this resolution." Standing alone, either one of these resolutions might have simply served as a gentle reminder. Yet their combined force indicates that the board suffered from a problem of elected members not attending meetings. If an insufficient number of board members attended, the asylum society could not reasonably conduct business. They typically postponed or altogether canceled one meeting a year because only three or four women showed up.⁵⁵

Individual members of the asylum exhibited varying levels of commitment and participation. Some women only served as a trustee for a year or two, perhaps even just for a few months. Others, such as Marcia Van Ness, devoted extensive amounts of time to the orphanage and remained active for decades, much of that time spent in one of the four officer positions. As a whole, the women maintained close control and an invested interest in the success of the orphanage, making decisions that pertained to finances, governesses and teachers, and the management of the children.

The Finances

The women managing the orphanage, especially the Secretary and the Treasurer, maintained significant control over the finances, in the manner in which the institution collected the money as well as how they distributed it. One of the main ways the board raised money for

⁵⁵ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

the institution was through subscribers. This group of people, made up of members of the board and outsiders, committed to giving the orphanage a certain amount of money every year, which the Secretary collected at the annual meeting and then gave to the Treasurer. This amount usually fell between \$2 and \$10 per subscriber, although subscribers who were also members of the board might give more, such as Ann Lee Jones and Ann Tayloe, who both gave \$20. Sometimes the women took a more active role in acquiring subscriptions, for instance in May 1825 when the board decided that Frances Dandridge Lear, Ann Tingey, and Mrs. Henderson would visit Mrs. Adams “to solicit a subscription.”⁵⁶ It is unknown whether this woman (possibly, but not conclusively, Louisa Adams, wife of John Quincy Adams, who had served as a Trustee a few years before) had promised a subscription but failed to pay or if the managers thought she might be a likely person to be added to the list of subscribers. Either way, the managers actively involved themselves with the list of people who annually gave them money.

The asylum also operated on donations. Several individuals or groups donated money at unexpected times. When the orphanage received a special donation, the managers recorded the case in the minutes of their meetings and delivered a note of thanks to the donor. Sometimes they organized donations around a specific purpose, such as when the institution needed funds for a building.⁵⁷ The women also worked to organize special events to raise money, such as a fair held in 1827. Margaret Bayard Smith wrote in reference to the event’s planning: “Next week there is to be a Fair, for the benefit of the Orphan Asylum. Every female in the City, I believe, from the highest to the lowest has been at work for it. Mrs. Van Ness spares neither time or expense.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

The managers also donated considerable amounts to the institution. While this sometimes came in monetary form, they also gave material goods to the orphanage. These donations seemed to fit every facet of life. Some – such as tables, cups and saucers, eating utensils, and dishes – furnished the dining room. Gifts of food, like cabbage, potatoes, and beef, helped feed the children. Other gifts, like bonnets, gloves, stockings, aprons, and swathes of cotton, provided clothing. Thimbles, Bibles, and spelling books helped to educate the children. Marcia Van Ness even gave a door for the oven.⁵⁹

Once they had collected money for the orphanage, the women then allocated the funds to certain purposes. The women made decisions at almost every single meeting as to the best ways to use the money. They often designated amounts for marketing and covering previous expenses, frequently assigning defined amounts for specific expenditures. For instance, in October 1836 they allotted \$15 for marketing purposes and another \$15 to pay the bill for wood. In December 1845, they set aside \$1.87 for mending shoes, while putting \$5.00 towards Christmas.

The Governesses

The managers put forth considerable effort in procuring women to run the day-to-day functions of the orphanage. They expected the governesses, matrons, and teachers of the orphanage to embody the same noble characteristics possessed by the women on the board of managers. The managers stated in their guidelines that “The Governess must be a woman of pious character...She shall engage to be faithful, tender, and unremitting in the care of the Children committed to her superintendance...” They listed piety first among the necessary traits

⁵⁸ Smith, *The First Forty Years of Washington*, 255.

⁵⁹ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

and likely considered it the trait most desired for the governess to exhibit. The list of characteristics also included practical expectations, such as that the governess be “capable of teaching to read and sew...follow the directions and obey the regulations enjoined her by the Board of Trustees,... and render an accurate account of her expenditures at the Asylum to the Treasurer.” Matrons were the primary care givers, living with the children in the orphanage. The managers hired teachers to assist in the education of the children.⁶⁰

Given the expectations for their matrons and teachers, the asylum hired most of them on a trial period. Mrs. Dawes worked as matron in 1843 for a six month period with the stipulation that “if at any time she, or the Board wish[ed] a change one month’s notice [was] to be given by the dissatisfied party.” The board of managers wanted to confirm that the matron or teacher would measure up before they made a full and lengthy commitment. They also tried to hire from a pool of women that they knew or came with recommendations from friends of the women of the society. Miss Moore, the first official matron of the asylum, came on the recommendation of Elizabeth Brown, a member of the board. Reverend Mr. Rozzell suggested Maria Thompson act as teacher in 1829.⁶¹ The Misses Titcomb, a pair of sisters, traveled all the way from Newburyport, Massachusetts in 1834, one to serve as matron and one to be the teacher.⁶² In January 1834 a committee consisting of Clara Bomford, Elizabeth B. Laurie, and Sophia Towson assembled “to enquire [into]...the character and qualifications of Mrs. Parker as a teacher and if

⁶⁰ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Container 11, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

the result [proved] favourable engage her for three months.”⁶³ The managers did not want to hire a woman with whom they had no familiarity or assurance of her moral fiber.

Most of the governesses appear to have measured up to expectations. The board of managers often examined the children and once a year the rest of the orphan society did so as well at the annual meeting. At least two of the yearly meetings found the children to be healthy and the picture of modest virtue, an accomplishment that reflected kindly on the acting matron.⁶⁴ The managers categorized Louisa and Alice Latimer (another pair of sisters) as “very worthy” and Mary Wannall as “very competent.” The managers’ relationship with some of their other employees did not fare so well – Miss Brawley quit the post of governess and her “resignation [was] accepted with much disapprobation and regret for the ungracious spirit in which it was offered.”⁶⁵ The managers also eagerly accepted Miss Heflebower’s resignation in 1860, as the woman had failed “to carry out their instructions.” A governess who mismanaged funds was a cause for great alarm and grounds for termination. In July 1822, the minutes of the board’s meeting revealed that the current governess had “in hand four dollars of the last months appropriation,” a line which was followed by the resolution “to advertise immediately for a suitable person to take charge of this institution, the first of October next.”⁶⁶ Evidently, the acting matron had overspent the money allowed her, an action that resulted in the board’s disapproval.

⁶³ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁴ "Religious Summary," *Boston Recorder (1817-1824)*, November 8, 1823 <http://www.proquest.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu/> (accessed March 31, 2011); “Female Orphan Asylum,” *City of Washington Gazette*, November 9, 1818. <http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu> (accessed April 2, 2011).

⁶⁵ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁶ Container 44, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

The Children

The relationship between the women on the board of managers and the children of the orphanage began when the board decided whether to accept a child into the asylum. The women usually based this choice on the financial flexibility of the orphanage as well as the child's age, sex, and familial position. They made these decisions at the monthly meetings, and recorded the children's names and ages (if known) in the minutes of the meetings.⁶⁷

The managers accepted most of the children brought to the orphanage. The women usually possessed a generous disposition with regard to accepting children, although the financial situation of the asylum affected their decisions. Occasionally in the asylum's history, it accepted children regardless of the financial situation, and slipped further into debt as a result. When a cholera epidemic struck Washington in 1832, the managers accepted far more children than financially prudent. The managers published a full column article in *The Daily National Intelligencer* on October 8, 1833, in which they explained the situation of the asylum:

...the Managers felt it to be their duty to throw open the doors of the Asylum and to invite applications for the admission of destitute orphans, without restriction or condition: the consequence has been, a great increase in the inmates of the institution; making the number the last year, double that of any preceding year... The Managers anticipated a large deficit, but it did not deter them from the discharge of what they considered an imperious duty.⁶⁸

The managers felt the call to accommodate as many children as needed refuge and threw financial caution to the wind in doing so, trusting that liberal donations would help balance the deficit.

⁶⁷ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁸ "Female Orphan Asylum of Washington: Report of the Board of Managers to the Society at the Annual Meeting, Oct. 8, 1833," *The Daily National Intelligencer*, October 25, 1833, <http://infotrac.galegroup.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu> (accessed September 15, 2011).

Occasionally special cases surfaced in which the family and friends of the child did not apply to place them in the institution, but instead the Board of Managers sought the child out. One member of the board might hear about the circumstances of a particular child, and the group as a whole would decide whether to investigate the situation further. For example, in May 1832, the board assigned Frances Dandridge Lear, Marcia Van Ness, and Sophia Towson “to enquire into the situation of three children at the Alms House.”⁶⁹ Undoubtedly, the women intended to improve the children’s lives by removing them from the communal poorhouse and bringing them to the orphanage. In other instances, individual women made cases for one particular child. In 1820, Sarah Seaton brought a three-year-old girl named Eliza Bryan and asked she be accepted into the asylum, a request which was granted.⁷⁰

The managers of the asylum assumed legal guardianship of a child when he or she entered the asylum, a process they often described with the phrase “bound to”. On September 17, 1816, all the children in the orphanage were bound to Marcia Van Ness. The legal guardian of the child, whether related by blood or not, transferred all power and authority of the child over to the orphanage. The institution required that the person relinquishing the child to the asylum sign a form acknowledging that they relinquished all power over the child to the orphanage.⁷¹ A member of the board often served as witness, signing her name to the document as such. If the person relinquishing the child to the institution could not write, the witness also wrote out the

⁶⁹ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁷⁰ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁷¹ Ibid.

relinquishment statement, signed the person's name, and left a space for the person to leave his or her mark (a simple letter "X").⁷²

The managerial records provide no context surrounding the act of relinquishment, but they most likely conducted the affair at the orphanage itself. Often the witness was the current governess or matron of the asylum. Louisa Latimer, then matron of the orphanage, acted as witness for the relinquishment of nine children between 1843 and 1852. Mary Wannell, who also served as a matron, likewise was witness to the signature of nine relinquishment forms between 1853 and 1855. On even more occasions, a member of the asylum society served as witness for the relinquishment of children. Matilda E. Van Ness, Elizabeth Blair Lee, Susan R. Coxe, Maria T. Gillis, and Charlotte Luce were among the other women of the society who served as witnesses throughout the first forty-five years of the asylum. Occasionally, these women witnessed more than one on the same day, as more than one child in a family entered the orphanage.⁷³

To sign as a witness carried legal weight. In addition to receiving guardianship of these children, the women of the orphanage also participated in the legal action of witnessing the transference of the guardianship of a child from one person to another. Such exhibits a commitment to ensuring the legitimacy of the orphanage, that they conducted business in an official manner and that documents existed in case issues arose in the future.⁷⁴ Acting as a witness also carried a personal connection. These women at least met the person who was relinquishing a child to the orphanage. It was probable that they met the child entering the

⁷² Container 37, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁷³ Container 37, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁷⁴ Container 12, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

orphanage as well. Perhaps the manager serving as witness was the first orphanage-affiliated person that the child met.

Beyond this first interaction, the managers saw the children at the annual meeting and on their weekly trips to the orphanage, which they conducted on a rotating schedule. In at least extreme cases they knew of the children's good and bad behavior, as the ultimate forms of reward and punishment constituted appearing before the board (in either laud or condemnation). Whether the women took an active role in the children's lives – conversed with them, knew of their likes and dislikes, had a personal relationship with them – is hard to say. Some of the managers filled in as governess or teacher when the asylum had need, a service that no doubt increased their level of familiarity with the children.⁷⁵ The children on occasion associated with the managers outside the institution. In October 1860, they went to visit Louise Corcoran Eustis to congratulate her on her recent marriage. They also attended the funerals of some of the women who served on the Board of Managers. This was the case when Marcia Van Ness died in September 1832, an occurrence to which newspapers paid particular attention in their obituaries of Marcia Van Ness.⁷⁶ One observer noted that the children lined the gate before the burial site, separated into two columns through which attendants of the funeral could pass. The orphans also covered Marcia Van Ness' body ““with branches of the weeping willow.””⁷⁷ The asylum took a similar course when Mrs. Colonel Larned died in October 1837. The children accompanied the managers and the matrons of the institution to the funeral and wore a “badge of mourning” for thirty days.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁷⁶ “From the Philadelphia Inquirer. A Benefactress,” *Salem Gazette*, Salem, Mass., September, 21, 1832.

⁷⁷ Clark, *The Life and Letters of Dolly Madison*, 257.

What is most evident about the managers is that they invested in the overall well-being of the children. They knew how many children currently resided in the orphanage. They knew when children in the institution died and sometimes even knew the conditions of their sicknesses, as was the case with one girl afflicted in the cholera epidemic in 1832.⁷⁹ In the newspaper article describing the orphanage's conditions Secretary Sophia Towson was able to describe this child's condition, stating, "She complained of constant, and at times of excruciating pain. Her sight and hearing were affected, and finally she became both deaf and blind."⁸⁰

One of the most important roles the women played in the children's lives lay in their decision to bind the children out for labor, a common practice in the nineteenth century, especially for poorer families. Sending the child to live with another family often gave them the opportunity to learn a trade and thus be better prepared for adulthood. The mentality was the same with orphanages like the Washington City Orphan Asylum.⁸¹ The managers maintained a close relationship with the binding out system, choosing which children to bind out, at what age, and to what adult. If for some reason the relationship between the child and his or her new guardian did not work out, the asylum simply took the child back. Such was the case with Ann Chambers, whom the managers had placed with a Mrs. Shulls. Ann came back to the orphanage in May 1832. Julia Ann Perley returned to the orphanage from her time with Mrs. Owens in June 1832.⁸²

⁷⁸ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ "Female Orphan Asylum of Washington: Report of the Board of Managers to the Society at the Annual Meeting, Oct. 8, 1833," *Daily National Intelligencer*, October 25, 1833.

⁸¹ Ruth Wallis Herndon and John E. Murray, eds., *Children Bound to Labor: The Pauper Apprentice System in Early America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 102-118.

Though the managers sought to find the children places outside of the asylum for them to work, there is no evidence that they neglected the child's well-being in pushing them toward a youth of labor. In fact, there is evidence that women paid particular attention to each situation and made decisions accordingly. The minutes from the November 1824 meeting read: "An application being made to take a child from the Asylum; Resolved unanimously, that owing to the children being younger than deemed expedient to put out no child shall be put out from the Institution the ensuing winter." Though it might have alleviated some of the stress, especially financially, on the orphanage to place the children with other people, they did not do so to the detriment of the child.⁸³

The child could also leave the orphanage to return to their family member who surrendered them to the asylum, most often the mother. The board possessed full control over whether the ex-guardian could legally leave with their child, a request that they more often than not granted. The managers often seemed willing to give a mother back her child if the situation seemed suitable. They returned Mrs. Gates' daughter to her in November 1822 on the condition that she "bind her [daughter] out with the approbation of the Board." The board likewise allowed Mrs. Pie to take her children, Francis and Sarah, in 1836.⁸⁴ Occasionally the managers permitted the child to leave the institution with a friend or family member who did not relinquish the child to the institution, such as Jane and James Sheppard, a pair of siblings that went to live with friends in Virginia.⁸⁵ In letting the children go, as with accepting them into the asylum or

⁸² Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Container 36, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

binding them out to someone outside of the institution, the women sought to do what was best for the child and for the orphanage.

Conclusion

The Washington Children's Orphan Asylum accepted approximately 250 children in the first forty-five years of its history, accommodating anywhere from 10 to 110 children at once.⁸⁶ The women who founded and managed the orphanage had an influence over the lives of every one of these children. Though they themselves may have been used to a life of luxury and affluence, coming from some of the best families in Washington, D.C. and the nation, these women felt a calling to help the less fortunate around them. We can never know their true intentions; some may have possessed purer hearts than others. Either way, they invested deeply in the mission of helping the poor children of Washington. They actively raised funds for the orphanage, managed where the money went, hired women to do the everyday jobs that they could not, and guarded over the lives and well-being of the children.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

CHAPTER TWO

“ORPHANS ALWAYS WITH US”: EXTERNAL FORCES IN THE MAINTENANCE AND FORMATION OF THE ORPHAN ASYLUM

The women of Washington founded and managed the Washington City Orphan Asylum, enacting a close guidance over the lives of the children who walked through their doors. Yet the institution required more assistance in order to keep its doors open and its children fed, clothed, and educated. The institution needed a suitable and lasting residence. Those managing it needed to have the ability to pass the institution’s property legally from generation to generation so the orphans would always have a permanent home. They also needed to secure ample funding. The needs of the institution would require aid from the community, the city, and the nation.

Assistance came from all these places. The people who offered help shaped the institution into a place with a story almost separate from that of its children. The city of Washington, independent of its governing body, also added to this narrative with the external forces of its urban climate, such as its growing population. Yet this external story always strove to serve the children. All the measures they took, the money they raised, and the battles they fought were to ensure the maintenance of the orphans. The way the people aiding the institution interacted with it also spoke about these benefactors and supporters, why they cared, and their philosophy about whose duty it was to care for orphaned children.

Housing

Finding a suitable physical dwelling for the orphanage was a top priority when the asylum society formed in 1815. The location of the asylum changed during its first few decades, as both the size of the city and the size of the orphanage grew. The constitution of the asylum society called for the women on the Board of Managers to find a house for the orphanage. A

committee of three women – Mrs. Brackenridge, Mrs. McGowan, and Mrs. Chalmers – formed at the October 31, 1815 meeting to find a suitable residence for the orphanage. They reported a little over a week later at the next meeting on November 7 that they had secured a house on 10th Street West owned by Mr. Woodworth at \$120 per year. At this point, the number of orphans, all of whom were girls, was approximately ten, and thus did not require a large residence.¹

Mr. Woodworth’s house indeed proved temporary, and as the number of children grew the orphanage moved to a provisional building, constructed by Henry Smith, on land provided without charge by Marcia Van Ness. The asylum then moved to a rented building on 7th Street, between H Street and I Street, in 1822.² At the October 25, 1827 meeting, the Board of Managers decided to relocate the orphanage and began collecting donations to help pay for a new building. This project received a boost when John Van Ness donated property on H Street North, a portion of which was the land Marcia Van Ness rented to the asylum a few years earlier. The asylum engaged architect Charles Bulfinch to draw the plans of the institution. They held an elaborate dedication ceremony on August 11, 1828, the beginning of which took place at Reverend Dr. James Laurie’s church before moving to the site of the future building to lay the cornerstone. The Board of Managers advertised the event in the newspaper and invited “the Rev[erend] clergy, Subscribers, Foreign Ministers, Officers of the Gen. Government, the Mayor, Corporate bodies, and officers of the Corporation of the City of Washington and citizens” to attend. The asylum hired Smith and Pritcher to construct the edifice, with the agreement that the managers would pay them \$550 ninety days after the building’s completion. The project

¹ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

² *Joint Select Committee To Investigate the Charities and Reformatory Institutions in the District of Columbia: Part II – Report* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1898), 109.

finished the summer of 1829 and the orphanage had a permanent home.³ The building would remain much as it was until 1856, when the increased number of children in the institution once again necessitated the construction of new buildings.⁴

Incorporation

The Board of Managers determined there was a need in the asylum's maintenance that they were unable to fill – the institution needed land for a permanent home, money, and to be made a legal corporation. As a result, the board sought assistance for the orphanage from the United States Congress. On November 29, 1815, a committee including Marcia Van Ness, Mrs. Blake, and Mrs. Brackenridge formed with the purpose of approaching members of Congress about having the institution incorporated. They would speak with these men, armed with a petition and fifty copies of the asylum's constitution. The managers reaffirmed the committee at the next meeting on December 13, 1815 and decided that the committee would speak with John Forsyth, a Georgia Democratic Republican in the House of Representatives, and Margaret Bayard Smith would approach Jonathan Roberts, a Democratic Republican Senator from Pennsylvania. The reason the managers chose these two men to represent them in Congress is not completely evident. A likely motive was that both Forsyth and Roberts were Democratic Republicans, the party of which Dolley Madison's husband James was head. It is also very possible that these women had personal and friendly relationships with Forsyth and Roberts.

³ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴ Container 11, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Forsyth, at least, was longtime friends with Margaret Bayard Smith and his wife would later serve as a trustee on the asylum's Board of Managers.⁵

In writing the petition to Congress, the Board highlighted both the virtuosity and usefulness of their purpose, but also the success they had achieved so far. They stated that, "The Society has been organized, a house procured and several destitute female orphans, who might have been suffering all the miseries of want,...and exposed to Vice, are now comfortably situated under the protection and care of your Petitioners, and training, it is hoped, under the blessing of Providence to be useful members of Society." In stating their achievements to date, the Board hoped to convince Congress of the asylum's permanence and therefore worthiness as an investment. The Board also argued that the asylum benefitted society as a whole, thus giving Congress reason to believe the institution a worthy cause to support. The language presented to Congress was flowery and complimentary, calling its members both "Honorable" and "enlightened."⁶

The petition contained two requests. The first concerned issues of legality as well as making assurances for the asylum's future. The Board of Managers asked that Congress pass "An Act to incorporate the Subscribers [of the asylum] for the purpose of enabling them to hold property and to receive the children, free from the future claims of their friends ...and to enable the board of Trustees to bind out those whom they have rear'd and instructed, at a proper age and to suitable persons." This Act would give the asylum legal rights over the children in their care as well as secure their ability to pass along the asylum's property. The second request the

⁵ Alvin Laroy Duckett, *John Forsyth: Political Tactician* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1962), 13; Container 11, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁶ Holly C. Shulman, ed, "The Washington Orphan Asylum Society to Congress, 18 December 1815," *The Papers of Dolley Madison, Digital Edition* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008), <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu> (accessed October 22, 2011).

managers laid before Congress was that the government bequeath lands to the orphanage on which they could construct a building and that Congress help in erecting such a structure. This request came before John Van Ness donated land to the asylum for its permanent use.⁷

Representative Forsyth and Senator Roberts both agreed to present the asylum's petition and did so almost immediately, introducing the matter for consideration on December 18 of that year. The issue did not receive any further discussion for the time being in the House of Representatives, but the Senate assigned a committee consisting of Senators Jonathan Roberts, Robert Henry Goldsborough, James Barbour, William Hunter, and John Williams to investigate the matter further and make a suggestion to the rest of the Senate. The Senate visited the bill again in March of the following year, reading it on the 11th and then again on the 12th. On the 12th, Senator Roberts spoke in favor of the institution before the group voted whether to examine the bill a third time. Tied twelve to twelve, Senator John Gaillard cast the deciding vote in favor of looking at the bill one more time, which they did on the following day.⁸

On the March 13, 1816 meeting of the Senate, more debate took place over the act of incorporating the asylum. Senator Robert Goodloe Harper, a Federalist from Maryland, brought before the group his reasons for voting against incorporation. Harper argued that though he believed in the virtuosity of the asylum and the respectability of the women running it, he saw incorporation as both outside the purview of the government and unnecessary – “a simple deed of trust” would suffice in allowing the institution to purchase and hold property. Senator Roberts countered that without incorporation, the institution could not inherit the property bequeathed to it by individuals. The asylum needed to be a corporate body to protect its property rights. He also disputed Harper's assertion that an act of incorporation was beyond the scope of

⁷ Shulman, ed, “The Washington Orphan Asylum Society to Congress, 18 December 1815,” *The Papers of Dolley Madison, Digital Edition* .

⁸ *Annals of Congress*, 14th Cong., 1st sess., 1815, 29.

government, arguing that states had done so previously (though perhaps an original concept to the District of Columbia). Roberts finally argued that, “The charter would give no privilege nor sanction any abuse. It would enable the trustees of a praiseworthy institution to secure, in the most eligible and favorable manner, the application of such means as may be given by benevolent persons to the benevolent objects of the association, &c.” Senator George Washington Campbell, a Democratic Republican from Tennessee, also spoke in favor of incorporating the institution, though the *Annals of Congress* did not record his words.⁹

The result saw more siding with Harper than with Roberts – seventeen voted “Nay” whereas sixteen voted “Yea.” The bill to incorporate was just one short of passing.¹⁰ Each Senator had his own reasons for voting one way or the other. Other historians have claimed that Harper, in addition to the reasons he stated, lacked a trusting disposition towards both corporations and woman in general.¹¹ For Jeremiah Mason, a Federalist from New Hampshire, the matter seemed to be almost personal. He wrote to his wife three days after the vote, saying, “Mrs. Madison, with other high court dames, lately petitioned Congress for an act of incorporation for a Female Asylum, of which Mrs. M. was to be the presidentess. The Senate most ungallantly rejected the petition. Being among the rebels on this occasion, I expect to experience no more smiles at the palace.”¹² Mason’s statements read with disdain, as he sarcastically deemed the Senate’s actions “ungallant” and referred to the institution’s managers as “high court dames.” Other senators, such as Christopher Gore, were staunch members of the

⁹ *Annals of Congress*, 14th Cong., 1st sess., 1815, 29.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Holly C. Shulman, ed, “Editorial Note,” *The Papers of Dolley Madison, Digital Edition* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008), <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu> (accessed October 22, 2011).

¹² Holly C. Shulman, ed, “Jeremiah Mason to Mary Means Mason, 16 March 1816,” *The Papers of Dolley Madison, Digital Edition* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008), <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu> (accessed October 22, 2011).

Federalist minority and likely did not want to vote for a project that had so much support from Democratic Republicans – the Democratic Republican president’s wife spearheaded the institution and its main advocate in the Senate, Jonathan Roberts, was also a dedicated Democratic Republican.¹³

Though it may seem that this vote ran along party lines, pitting Democratic Republicans against Federalists, a closer examination indicates otherwise. Though certainly more Democratic Republicans voted for incorporation than Federalists (twelve Democratic Republicans to four Federalists), the number of Democratic Republicans voting against the resolution also outweighed the Federalist “Nays” (nine to eight). Some Democratic Republicans likely possessed significant ideological reasons for voting “Nay.” Nathaniel Macon, a Democratic Republican, generally desired to limit the role of government as much as possible, and probably saw incorporation as government overreach.¹⁴ It is unlikely that the resolution met its end because of partisanship. Geography perhaps played an even smaller role, as senators from North, South, East, and West voted both for and against the act of incorporation.¹⁵ The vote for incorporation of the asylum seems to have been, for the most part, determined by senators voting based on ideological values.¹⁶

Shortly after the Senate negatively decided the question of incorporation, the House of Representatives answered it as well. On March 27, 1816, John Forsyth brought forward a resolution to incorporate the asylum and to grant them four lots of public land. The House voted

¹³ Shulman, ed., “Editorial Note,” *The Papers of Dolley Madison, Digital Edition*.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *Annals of Congress*, 14th Cong., 1st sess., 1815, 29; Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774 – Present. <http://bioguide.congress.gov> (Accessed November 1, 2011).

¹⁶ Shulman, ed., “Editorial Note,” *The Papers of Dolley Madison, Digital Edition*.

on whether or not to continue discussing the resolution. The “Nays” won over the “yeas,” and the resolution died before the House of Representatives even properly discussed it.¹⁷

Yet that would not be the final chapter in the Washington City Orphan Asylum’s story of Congressional incorporation. Twelve years later, on May 24, 1828, a joint session of Congress passed an “Act to incorporate ... the Washington City Orphan Asylum in the District of Columbia.” This act of incorporation also extended to one of the asylum’s neighboring orphanages, the Female Orphan Asylum in Georgetown.¹⁸ The Board of Managers made a special note in the minutes of their June 3, 1828 meeting (the first after the act passed) to deliver special thanks to Senator John Henry Eaton, a Jacksonian from Tennessee, “for his successful and zealous effort in obtaining the pass of an act of Congress incorporating the Washington City Orphan Asylum.” The managers also thanked Reverend J.W. French, a clergyman closely associated with the asylum society for “conducting an Oration for the benefit of [the] institution.”¹⁹

Among its most important directives, the act specifically addressed the creation of “a corporation and body politic in law” to be headed by William Hawley, John P. Van Ness, Nathan Towson, Obadiah B. Brown, and James Larned and their successors under the official name of “The Washington City Orphan Asylum.” It also allowed for the current governing body of female managers to continue in their method of selecting officers and running the institution. It allowed for the legal transference of all goods, land, and property owned by the newly created corporation, with the provision that “the clear annual property to be acquired...shall at no time

¹⁷ *Annals of Congress*, 14th Cong., 1st sess., 1815, 29.

¹⁸ *Congressional Debates*, 20th Cong., 1st sess., 1828, 48.

¹⁹ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

exceed the sum of three thousand dollars.” The act stated the institution’s legal rights over the children left in their care, giving the asylum legal authority over the males until they turned twenty-one and the females until they turned eighteen. It explicitly decreed that the parents or guardians of the child forfeited their rights over the child when they relinquished the child to the institution.²⁰

Several of these Congressional stipulations would be important in the years to come as the asylum faced issues that the Board of Trustees and Board of Managers solved by referring to the Congressional act of incorporation. Later that very year the asylum encountered a problem with one of the children’s mothers, Margaret Warfield, who wanted to remove her daughter, Mary, from the institution. The asylum did not agree with the mother’s demand and opted to keep the child. The conflict required the use of outside legal counsel, and Richard S. Coxe, a Washington lawyer (and husband of future Board of Managers member, Susan Coxe) gave his opinion on the situation. Coxe argued that, though Margaret Warfield placed her daughter in the orphanage in 1826, two years before the Congressional act of incorporation, the act legalized all relinquishments of children to the institution. The institution now possessed legal authority over the children, and the parents had no right to interfere without the institution’s permission. Coxe did advise that the institution make it a consistent policy of having the parents sign a relinquishment form when they gave their child to the orphanage.²¹

Congressional involvement continued four years later with an act that satisfied the asylum’s initial 1816 request for property, though the asylum used this property not for their residence but instead for financial gain. On July 14, 1832, Congress passed “An Act for the relief...of the Washington City Orphan Asylum, and for other purposes.” Like the 1828 Act, this

²⁰ *Congressional Debates*, 20th Cong., 1st sess., 1828, 48.

²¹ Container 12, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

did not apply to the Washington City Orphan Asylum alone, but to another local asylum as well. The other recipient of Congress' favor this time was the St. Vincent's Female Orphan Asylum, a Catholic asylum run by the "Sisters of Charity." The act designated the Commissioner of the Public Buildings to select lots of land in Washington owned by the United States to give to each asylum, the total worth of the land for each asylum amounting to ten thousand dollars. These lands would be exempt from taxes for five years, unless the asylum corporation sold the land to an outside party before the expiration of this time. The corporation had the right to use the land as they saw fit, as long as the proceeds always went to asylum.²²

The 1832 act was contingent upon the act passed in 1828. The asylum could not possess property without first becoming a corporation. The language in the 1832 act conveys as much, as it constantly refers to the rights of the "Corporations" rather than the asylums themselves. For the Washington City Orphan Asylum, it would be the Board of Trustees, the men who embodied the asylum corporation, that would manage the land donated by Congress, as well as fulfill many other important legal and financial tasks.²³

The nature of the changes in Congress that allowed the Acts of 1828 and 1832 to pass, where the resolution of 1816 did not, can only be speculated. The 1816 vote in the Senate, though decisive, was not completely conclusive towards the Senate's position; the resolution to incorporate the Washington City Orphan Asylum only failed by one vote. However, given that the 1816 petition did not even become a resolution before its rejection in the House of Representatives, it is more likely that the 1816 petition did not align with the views of Congress.²⁴ The Congress of 1816 constituted a majority of Democratic Republicans in the

²² *Congressional Debates*, 22nd Cong., 1st sess., 1832, 55.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Annals of Congress*, 14th Cong., 1st sess., 1815, 29

Senate and Republicans in the House. 1828 and 1832 saw a majority of Jacksonians in Congress. In 1816 and 1828, the asylum had at least one prominent advocate from the majority party.²⁵ Beyond the support of men that served in Congress, in 1816 the Washington City Orphan Asylum also had the support of Democratic Republican President Madison and in 1828 the support of soon-to-be president General Andrew Jackson.²⁶ In every year that the asylum petition came before Congress, the orphanage possessed significant political influence. Though the Jacksonians, Democratic Republicans, and Republicans were different parties, they shared common ideology laid forth by Thomas Jefferson and represented similar viewpoints. It is not likely that there was enough of a difference between these parties to bring about the change needed to gain incorporation in 1828. The 1816 election also showed that at least in the Senate, men did not vote along party lines in the case of the orphanage but based on other factors.

The most plausible theory is that the real change occurred not primarily in Congress but in the nation as a whole. As David J. Rothman argues in his book *The Discovery of the Asylum*, the antebellum era of United States history witnessed the rise of the asylum, for orphans as well as for the insane, the criminal, and others who might become dependents of the state. Previously, in the colonial and revolutionary periods, care for orphans often fell to the child's family members or to other members of the community. Colonial philosophy viewed such poverty as an inherent feature of society, one that should elicit aid and benevolence, but did not warrant societal reform to fix the root of the problem. During the nineteenth century the view changed, and as Rothman states, "The response in the Jacksonian period to the deviant and the

²⁵ *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774 – Present*. <http://bioguide.congress.gov> (Accessed November 1, 2011).

²⁶ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Jon Meacham, *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House* (New York: Random House, 2008), 319.

dependent was first and foremost a vigorous attempt to promote the stability of the society at a moment when traditional ideas and practices appeared outmoded, constricted, and ineffective. [These institutions] all represented an effort to insure the cohesion of the community in new and changing circumstances.’’²⁷

The Washington City Orphan Asylum was, in terms of its founding date, ahead of its time. Though not the first orphanage founded in the United States, it preceded the wave of orphan asylums that appeared in the 1830s, the asylums that manifested this shifting view towards reform.²⁸ The Fourteenth Congress, which vetoed the asylum’s petition in 1816, also preceded this change in ideology. Perhaps by 1828, as the country began to adopt the asylum system, Congress shifted their views as well and began to see asylum incorporation as within their domain. Incorporating an asylum would assist in the United States’ journey towards becoming a solid society with productive citizens, a matter of increasing concern in the antebellum period (an argument which the Washington City Orphan Asylum advocated all along). By 1832, the concept of not only incorporating an institution, but giving it land as well, was pervasive enough to pass such an act. The simultaneous incorporation of the Female Orphan Asylum of Georgetown with the Washington City Orphan Asylum in 1828 and the donation of lands to St. Vincent’s in 1832 shows Congress’ willingness to pass legislation for such institutions.

The Board of Trustees

The 1828 Congressional act of incorporation created as a part of the Washington City Orphan Asylum a Board of Trustees consisting of five men. The men specifically named in the act were all already involved with the asylum, mostly through the activities of their wives.

²⁷ David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), xviii.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

General John P. Van Ness was married to Marcia Van Ness, one of the founders and the acting First Directress at the time of incorporation. The couple had already donated extensively to the asylum. Reverend Obadiah B. Brown's wife was Elizabeth Riley Brown, also a founder of the institution, longtime trustee, and Second Directress in 1828. James Larned's wife was Secretary at the time, had also served as trustee and Treasurer, and would later go on to be Second Directress. Nathan Towson's wife was Sophia Towson, acting Treasurer and previously a trustee. She would later serve as Secretary. William Hawley was perhaps the exception to this rule. Whereas the rest of these men had wives who were actively involved in asylum (the four of them in fact filled the four officer positions), Hawley's wife, Wilhelmina, did not become a member of the Board of Managers until later in 1832 when she was elected as Trustee. She would also serve as First and Second Directress. The men who served on the Board of Trustees following the original five tended to continue the trend of having female relatives that currently served, or had served in the past, on the Board of Managers. For instance, Benjamin Ogle Tayloe served as President of the Board of Trustees; his mother Ann served as a Trustee, Second Directress, and First Directress.²⁹

The Board of Trustees mainly assisted in the institution's matters of property and finance. The Board typically met at one of the board member's homes, unlike the Board of Managers, which usually met at the asylum. The Board of Trustees also did not meet as frequently as the Board of Managers, but instead gathered when there was a specific need. One such case occurred on November 2, 1843, when they gathered "to take measures for the slating the roof and doing other repairs to said asylum and to invest certain monies in the hands of the Treasurer

²⁹ Containers 16 and 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

in some good stock.”³⁰ The Board likely had little to nothing to do with the children of the institution, besides on the very rare occasion serving as witness to the child’s relinquishment to the institution and seeing the children at the yearly meeting held for subscribers. The children’s admission into the institution, their binding out for labor, and all other matters concerning their well-being fell under the jurisdiction of the Board of Managers.³¹

The Board of Trustees handled some, though certainly not all, of the institution’s finances. They handled the money associated with the lots given by Congress as well as invested money in the stock market. The money the Board of Trustees collected they passed on to the Board of Managers for them to determine its usage. The Board of Trustees also oversaw repairs to the asylum’s property, hiring someone to conduct the repair and paying for the expense. In November 1843, they discussed repairs to the roof and hired Mathew Waits to do the work for \$220.³²

Subscribers and Donors, Publishers and Presidents

Several men filled other key roles for the Washington City Orphan Asylum besides the Board of the Trustees. The asylum depended on their subscribers, which consisted of both men and women. Subscribing to the institution entitled them to attend the yearly meetings at which

³⁰ Container 12, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³¹ Containers 12, 16, 34, and 37, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³² Containers 12 and 16, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

the asylum society held elections for the Board of Managers. Men made other miscellaneous donations as well, usually in the form of money.³³

Joseph Gales and William Winston Seaton, both of whom had wives that served on the Board of Managers, offered a unique service to the asylum by occasionally publishing the orphanage's records.³⁴ Gales and Seaton were co-editors of the *National Intelligencer* as well as published Congressional proceedings and records in the *Annals of Congress*.³⁵ In 1839, they published the "Report of the Board of Managers of the 'Washington City Orphan Asylum' for the Year 1838: Made to the Society at the Annual Meeting." This brief document opened with a list of the Board of Managers for the year, followed with a summarization of the orphanage's year (written by the Board of Managers' Secretary Matilda E. Van Ness), and concluded with the list of subscriptions, donations, and receipts for the year. Publications like this helped the asylum keep its benefactors apprised of its situation.³⁶

Though most of the men who participated in the society had wives or other female relatives who served on the Board of Managers, this was not always the case. Andrew Jackson, a widower, took an active interest. Rachel Jackson did donate money to the asylum before her death in 1828.³⁷ During his presidency, Andrew Jackson was a patron of the orphanage and visited it on occasion, often with Emily and John Donelson, his great niece and great nephew,

³³ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v. "Gales, Joseph, Jr."; *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v. "Seaton, William Winston."

³⁶ Container 2, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³⁷ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

and Rachel Jackson, his adopted son Andrew's daughter. Emily wrote of her great uncle's affection for the children, stating "all orphans were objects of tender solicitude" to President Jackson, who "was not the least zealous" amongst the orphanage's affluent benefactors.³⁸ Jackson even took several of the children in his family to visit the orphanage on Christmas Day, 1835.³⁹ He reportedly told his family during the drive to the orphanage, "the best way to secure happiness is to bestow it on others, and we'll begin our holiday by remembering the little ones who have no mothers or fathers to brighten life for them."⁴⁰ It is possible that Jackson's concern for the children stemmed from his own life experiences, as his father died shortly before he was born and his mother died when he was only fourteen years old.⁴¹ Jackson brought presents to the children, who gathered in the reception area of the asylum to see him. The children called him "General" as he interacted with them. He picked up one handicapped boy, John McCoy, to give the child his toy. Emily Donelson later wrote, "it was gratifying to see [the children's] faces light up...and even more gratifying was it to note [Jackson's] pleasure at their grateful surprise."⁴² Jackson's involvement was perhaps on a more personal level than the other men involved.⁴³

³⁸ Mary Emily Donelson Wilcox, *Christmas under three flags : being memories of holiday festivities in the White House with "Old Hickory," in the palace of H.R.H. Prince of Prussia, afterwards Emperor William I, and at the Alamo with the Alcalde's daughter* (Washington: Neale Co., 1900) <http://newfirstsearch.oclc.org/> (Accessed January 3, 2012), 24.

³⁹ Ibid, 23.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 25.

⁴¹ Ibid.; Jon Meacham, *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House* (New York: Random House, 2008), 8-13.

⁴² Wilcox, *Christmas Under Three Flags*, 25.

⁴³ Margaret Bayard Smith, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society*, (New York: F. Ungar Publishing Co., 1965), 367.

Gendered Tasks

The Board of Managers brought men in to help with the management of the asylum because tasks existed which they themselves could not legally perform. The women on the Board of Managers could not serve as the head of the corporation created by Congress, nor could they invest the asylum's money in stocks. The men already closely connected to these women's lives stepped in to assist in matters in which the asylum needed help. In some ways the roles the men and women played in the asylum directly mirrored their stereotypical roles in larger society – the women took care of the children and the men took care of the money.

Yet to leave the topic at such a generalized statement would be a disservice to both the men and women of the asylum. The women, though separated from the investment of money, still maintained a considerable amount of control over the institution's finances. They collected money and delegated where and how to spend it.⁴⁴ They even wrote checks on behalf of the institution. The men by no means dominated the institution's monetary resources. On the contrary, on one occasion, Reverend J.W. French, then Secretary on the Board of Trustees, wrote to the asylum's bank concerning the bank's refusal to give Charlotte Luce, Treasurer on the Board of Managers, \$300 when the asylum needed it. French supported the Board of Managers rights to withdraw money, stating, “[The Board of Managers] have power, and their declaration has always been deemed sufficient authority...when as now there is no want of funds it is enough that the Ladies...declare that they need this money to pay their bills.” French did note that the Board of Trustees supervised and managed the Board of Managers use of the asylum's funds, but the Board of Managers maintained a certain amount of control.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁵ Container 16, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

The Board of Trustees also respected that the business of the Board of Managers was that of the women, and the men had no jurisdiction in the managers' proceedings. This rule also worked in the reverse, as the women could not interfere with the Board of Trustees. In March 1857, when the Board of Managers came into conflict with James H. Harrell, the new Secretary of the Board of Trustees, the asylum saw the implementation of their policy. Harrell, a missionary, approached the Board of Managers the previous fall to discuss teaching the children. The managers discussed the matter over several meetings and agreed that Harrell's views were not appropriate for the Washington City Orphan Asylum. Though they did not record the specific details of Harrell's proposal, the women noted in the minutes of their meeting that they wished the children's lessons to adhere to the Bible. Harrell apparently wished to teach from outside religious works as well. Harrell, after deliberating the point with the Board of Managers, eventually conceded and agreed to teach as the women requested.⁴⁶

In March, James H. Harrell returned and disrupted the monthly meeting, demanding to speak with Susan Coxe, the Board's secretary. She acquiesced, and in their private conversation Harrell demanded that the Board of Managers remove certain comments of his from their records. Coxe refused, shared Harrell's demand with the rest of the board (who also refused), and a debate ensued. Harrell said that what the managers' actions were not "legal." Beyond that, he also stated that he, as acting Secretary of the Board of Trustees, possessed the right to order the minutes removed, to which the women responded in the contrary; no member of the Board of Trustees maintained such a right. They took the matter to the Board of Trustees upon Harrell's request. The answer he received was not one he wanted. The Board of Trustees sided with the women in a legal opinion written by Richard S. Coxe, the husband of Susan Coxe, the

⁴⁶ Container 44, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

woman that Harrell argued with initially. Coxe's decision carried more legitimacy, though, when Justice Joseph Bradley, Judge Blair, Mr. Daniel Ratcliff, and Mr. Baxter agreed with his opinion. The decision stated the act of incorporation by Congress created two separate and distinct ruling bodies that had no right to interfere with the other.⁴⁷

Finances

The asylum society employed several different means for bringing in money to support the institution. The Board of Managers on occasion organized fairs to raise money for the institution. The first of these took place in 1827 and included the sale of goods made by members of the board, a performance by the Marine Band (lent by Colonel Henderson), and the patronage of Speaker of the House Andrew Stevenson.⁴⁸ They held another fair in December 1859, the proceeds of which amounted to \$4,600.14. The 1859 fair also hosted the Marine Band, this time lent by the Secretary of Navy and Colonel Harris. Several different religious groups and social clubs donated to the event.⁴⁹

The orphanage also received donations of money and goods, some of which came from the women who served within the society, but also came from their subscribers or people seemingly unconnected with the institution. The goods donated ranged from shoes to livestock to cabbage to bottles of wine. In 1824, Captain Wadsworth gave the asylum three cords of

⁴⁷ Container 44, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁸ Container 31, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁹ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

wood. Commodore Isaac Hull bequeathed a church pew at St. John's Church to the orphanage in 1835. The asylum then rented out this pew and profited from the cost of rent.⁵⁰

On occasion, people made monetary donations with specific intentions for the money. General Nathan Towson, a member of the Board of Trustees, gave the asylum \$62 with the designation that they use the money to purchase badges and black ribbons for the children to wear at the funeral of Elizabeth Brown, a former member of the Board of Managers. At certain points in the asylum's history people also donated money for the construction of a building for the asylum. Other people made donations with the money gained from particular circumstances, such as the painter John Vanderlyn who in 1824 donated "the proceeds of one day exhibition of his painting," an amount totaling \$30. Mr. West hosted a circus on March 16, 1821, the proceeds of which went to the orphan asylum.⁵¹ The Ladies of the Navy Yard gave the asylum \$5.75 in 1824, the money left over after they had gathered a collection for and purchased "colours for a Military company."⁵² Like the Ladies of Navy Yard, people made donations through organized groups as well as on an individual basis. Commander John Rogers and the officers aboard the USS *North Carolina* together gave \$158.50 and a piece of Russia sheeting (a type of linen fabric).⁵³ In November 1821, the asylum received \$7 from "the jury of the Circuit Court." The Managers of the Inaugural Ball donated \$500 in 1837 and the Fraternity of Masons gave \$112 in 1840.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵¹ City of Washington Gazette, March 14, 1821.
<http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu> (accessed April 2, 2011).

⁵² Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵³ Ibid.; "Russia sheeting, n." OED Online. January 2012. Oxford University Press.
<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu> (Accessed January 2, 2012).

Certainly one of the most interesting cases of the asylum receiving a donation was that of the lion, also referred to at the time as the Moorish Lion or the Numidian Lion. The Emperor of Morocco gave the United States, via James R. Leib, the Consul of the United States at Tangiers, the gift of a lion in 1835.⁵⁵ Captain James Riley transported the lion, which was approximately five years old and reportedly “the largest animal of the kind ever exhibited in [America],” to the United States in the Brigadier *William Tell*.⁵⁶ Congress left the discretion of the lion’s fate up to President Andrew Jackson. Upon hearing such, Clara Bomford, First Directress of the Washington City Orphan Asylum, sought an audience with the President and requested that he allow the institution to have the lion to sell, the proceeds of which would go to the orphanage. Reportedly Jackson “showed so much warmth and kindness in acceding to her request, [Mrs. Bomford] sa[id] she was so overcome, that she burst into tears and seizing his hand, kissed it in the excess of her delight and gratitude.”⁵⁷ The President’s office transferred the matter to Secretary of State John Forsyth. Not long thereafter, the State Department decided the proceeds of the sale should go to not only the Washington City Orphan Asylum, but St. Vincent’s orphanage and the asylum in Georgetown as well. The Washington City Orphan Asylum spent \$100 in expenses in caring for the lion for thirty-seven days before the lion eventually sold for

⁵⁴ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁵ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁶ Container 31, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁷ Margaret Bayard Smith, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society* (New York: F. Ungar Publishing Co., 1965), 367.

\$3,350 on April 4, 1835 to a “menagerie in Boston.”⁵⁸ Each of the three orphanages received over \$1,000 in proceeds.⁵⁹

Beyond donations and subscriptions, the asylum also invested in the stock market. Following the asylum’s incorporation, the Board of Trustees began investing a portion of their money in stocks. A significant number of the bonds purchased were in the Washington Corporation. The Board of Trustees put \$250 towards a California War Bond and purchased two Michigan Central Railroad bonds at \$1,000 each. The interest these bonds collected would go to support the institution. Reverend William Hawley, a member of the board, handed approximately \$21 in investment earnings on the Corporation stock to the Board of Manager’s Treasurer A.C. Smith in 1842 and \$37.02 in 1845.⁶⁰

Financial Difficulties

Ondina E. González, in her essay on orphans in eighteenth century Havana, Cuba, well characterized the financial situation of such institutions when she said, “it was one thing to open a home [for orphans] and quite another to ensure that it had the requisite resources for continuous operation.”⁶¹ Though the asylum society employed several different methods of raising funds to feed, clothe, house, and educate the children, the institution, from the very beginning,

⁵⁸ Container 31, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁹ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁰ Container 14, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁶¹ Ondina E. Gonzalez and Bianca Premo, eds, *Raising an Empire: Children in Early Modern Iberia and Colonial Latin America* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2007), 142.

experienced problems in raising enough money; this problem persisted throughout the antebellum era.

Immediately after the asylum's founding it became abundantly clear that "the subscriptions of individuals [would be] insufficient for carrying into effect a plan for the relief, support and education of Orphans and poor widows." At the first monthly meeting of the elected officers, held in October 1815, the managers drafted a letter, written by Margaret Bayard Smith, in which they asked the Aldermen and Common Council of the City of Washington to assist them in their endeavor. The women asked that the Council help them in procuring a physical residence for the asylum or that they grant some other form of monetary assistance. In their letter, they argued that the city delegated money to assisting the poor anyway. By helping the orphan asylum, the Council would lessen the strain of the needy on the city, as the asylum worked towards fulfilling this need already. The board received an answer in December 1815 from James H. Blake, the mayor of Washington and the husband of one of the asylum's board members. The council promised \$200 for 1816, disbursed quarterly, with hopes that similar funding would be available in the years to come. Blake's language conveyed that the City's inability to provide more assistance stemmed from the asylum's new and unproved status. If their venture proved a successful one, the City might be able to supply more aid in the future.⁶²

On October 28, 1822, men representing the orphanage reintroduced the idea of acquiring a lasting fund for the orphanage at a city meeting. Those present at the meeting agreed to open an account at the "Book-Store of Messrs. Davis & Force" in which people could deposit money to support the institution. They also decided to ask the Board of Alderman and Board of the Common Council to create a fund for a consistent yearly donation. In the annual report in which

⁶² Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

they addressed their request to the town meeting, the Board of Managers argued, as they did in 1815 when they previously sought the city's aid, that the city already allotted funds to helping the poor. Granting aid to the asylum was a logical choice as it already had "the same objects precisely as the improved system of poor laws of the city, namely, to convert to some use, or at least to harmless pursuits, the time and capacity [of the poor] which would otherwise be lost, or injurious to society." Their report also declared that municipal support would set a good example for the citizens of Washington, who would then be more apt to donate. It would also reflect well upon the city of Washington.⁶³

William Hawley, active member of the asylum society and one of their representatives at the town meeting, wrote the petition to the Alderman and Common Council on behalf of the committee at the town meeting. In it, he argued many of the same points as the Board of Managers did. He paid particular attention to the financial need of the asylum, stating "experience has shewn that no institutions can long be maintained, with success at least, which depend for their support on extensive voluntary subscriptions." Hawley argued that the orphanage's financial situation grew grimmer, as it had been suffering the loss of subscribers due to "death, insolvencies, honest poverty, and resignations." Hawley anticipated that the city might claim that the almshouse created for the poor already served the asylum's intended purpose. He countered this point with the argument that "instead of [the Poor-House] affording [children] the advantages of the Asylum, it is a school for vice and indolence – not from any misconduct on the part of the Managers, but from the nature of the thing itself." After firmly and thoroughly applying reason and logic, Hawley concluded by appealing to the heart and the soul with the following words:

⁶³ William Hawley and Joseph Gales, Jr. "Washington Female Orphan Asylum." *Daily National Intelligencer*, June 10, 1823. <http://infotrac.galegroup.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu> (accessed April 2, 2011).

By all that interests humanity in the fate of its fellow beings; by your love for your own children, to whom a gracious Providence thus far hath spared your protecting and supporting strength; by your deference to the wishes of your constituents, unanimously expressed, we intreat your aid in favor of the Washington Female Orphan Asylum, in such measure and in such mode as your wisdom may devise better than we can presume to suggest.

Despite the entreaties laid before them, the city rejected the orphanage's plea. In July 1823, the Board of Common Council voted on whether to grant the asylum \$200 per year, as it had done previously in 1815. The council voted to "postpone the bill indefinitely."⁶⁴ The institution would have to continue to seek funding elsewhere, and financial issues would be a persisting concern.

On October 8, 1833, the Board of Managers, in collaboration with the Board of Trustees published in *The Daily National Intelligencer* a plea for financial help. The cholera epidemic that swept through Washington in 1832 caused the asylum to experience need even greater than normal as the number of children in the institution doubled. Sophia Towson, the Secretary of the Board of Managers and the author of the article, brought up one of the same arguments that William Hawley had to the city in 1823 – the number of subscribers was decreasing as need grew. Towson wrote,

The *ordinary* expenses of the past year have been unusually great, owing to the causes stated, and it may be incorrect to calculate succeeding years by it; but taking the increase of population into view; that males as well as females are hereafter to be admitted, and the provision is to be made for *extraordinary* expenditures, such as repairs of building, pump, fencing, &c. which form no part of the last year's account, it is believed the least amount that should be estimated for, will exceed the means now provided at least 500 dollars.

Towson argued that the asylum did not use its funds extravagantly. On the contrary, they neglected, due to a lack of funds, some areas which they felt needed more attention, particularly the education of the children. In fact, the asylum noted that according to the calculations of the

⁶⁴ Thos. L. Noyes. "Washington Female Orphan Asylum." *Daily National Intelligencer*, September 20, 1823. <http://infotrac.galegroup.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu> (accessed April 2, 2011).

previous year they could allot \$3 a month to each child, the lowest amount in the asylum's history. They beseeched "the generous citizens of Washington" to come to their aid, especially in light of such an urban disaster.⁶⁵

The institution trudged on, but experienced other financial crises. In January 1842, the institution noted in the minutes of their meeting that the expenses for 1841 amounted to \$1305.26, whereas the donations received only equaled \$1301.82. The asylum possessed no funds for the upcoming year; in fact, they were slightly in debt. They expressed their sincere "hope that the hearts which have hitherto been callous may respond to the orphan's call."⁶⁶ In 1851, the institution took out two loans from Arthur Middleton, one for \$300 to be paid back in five years with interest, and another for \$299.50 to be paid back in two years with interest. Elizabeth Blair Lee, acting First Directress, would at one point record that the institution was \$1034.26 in debt. She commented that, "it takes a great deal to feed and clothe our 110 children."⁶⁷ In 1858, the asylum began replacing milk with tea for the older children in order to help alleviate some of the financial burden, "noting the apparent forgetfulness and indifference of so many" in regard to the care of poor orphan children.⁶⁸ As time went on and the institution continued to wage war with financial issues, the Board of Managers grew increasingly bitter towards the apparent apathy of the citizens of Washington. They wished for people to remember

⁶⁵ "Female Orphan Asylum of Washington: Report of the Board of Managers to the Society at the Annual Meeting, Oct. 8, 1833." *Daily National Intelligencer*, October 25, 1833. <http://infotrac.galegroup.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu> (accessed April 2, 2011).

⁶⁶ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁷ Container 16, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁸ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

that “orphans [were] always with [them],” as the board stated in their 1851 Annual Report. It was a need that always required more assistance from all people in society.⁶⁹

Some of the means established to provide money for the institution turned out to be burdens instead, most specifically the lots of land donated by Congress. Sophia Towson pointed out in her 1833 *Daily National Intelligencer* article that none of these lands had served to make them money so far, as they had not been rented or sold, and the future did not hold any better prospect. The asylum received the lots only the year before in 1832, so Towson might have been quick to label them as useless. Yet she brought up another point that perhaps contained more validation: “Instead of increasing the funds, the donation has thus far tended to diminish them; as many individuals have withheld their contributions under the impression that they are not necessary after the Asylum got possession of this property.”⁷⁰ The Congressional lots, for at least a time, proved not only stagnant but also harmful.

The Congressional lots continued to create financial problems for the orphanage, partially through the taxation of the land. The Congressional act of 1832 exempted the institution from paying taxes on the property for the first five years of their ownership.⁷¹ During the 1840s, after this time expired, paying the taxes became a difficulty. On August 13, 1846, the Collectors Office notified the institution that they needed to pay the taxes on these lots by September 1 or else sell the property. The asylum apparently protested the taxation, but their objection was overruled and the Collectors Office commanded the asylum to pay the \$300 in taxes or sell.

⁶⁹ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁷⁰ “Female Orphan Asylum of Washington: Report of the Board of Managers to the Society at the Annual Meeting, Oct. 8, 1833.” *Daily National Intelligencer*, October 25, 1833. <http://infotrac.galegroup.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu> (accessed April 2, 2011).

⁷¹ *Congressional Debates*, 22nd Cong., 1st sess., 1832, 55.

They did allow that the land and buildings the asylum actually used could remain tax exempt. They had to pay a pump tax in addition to a property tax.⁷²

The lots also brought maintenance costs, which proved exorbitant during the early 1850s. Several of the lots experienced issues with water standing on the land, a condition referred to as a “nuisance” and a danger to the neighborhood by the Board of Health. The Board of Health required the institution to fix the problem, which necessitated not only draining the water but also filling and grading the land so the lot fell level with the adjacent street. Most of the problems derived from the lots on square 400, located between M Street, N Street, 8th Street, and 9th Street West, though square 259, found on the east side of 14th Street, presented problems as well. The problem of water collecting occurred in December 1852 (costing \$43.00 in repairs), March 1853 (costing \$35.75), October 1853 (costing \$138.08), and again in May 1854 (estimated to cost \$193.25). When four of the lots in square 400 flooded in May 20, 1853, the Board of Health gave the institution three days after notification to fix the problem, and two days after that to notify the city of the job’s completion. The city also required the asylum to have the sidewalks and alleys paved at various points and have a reservoir dug in September 1853. Overall, the expenses for the repairs on these Congressional lots from the end of 1852 to April 1854 cost the asylum at least \$1,000. They eventually were able to sell the lots of land, thus fulfilling Congress’ purpose, but not before losing considerable money along the way.⁷³

Though plagued with financial difficulties, the asylum always found a way to stay open. Money continued to be a concern, but each time the problem worked out enough to allow the asylum to function. This was mostly because of the network of people and organizations created

⁷² Container 23, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁷³ Ibid.

by the Board of Managers and Board of Trustees. The orphan asylum received aid from a large variety of people that heard about their plight – military officers and companies, fraternal societies, politicians, churches, and other benevolent individuals. The way the managers approached their financial issues said a great deal about how they viewed the responsibility of orphan care and on whom they could depend for support.

Religion

Most of the orphanages in the nineteenth century were private institutions founded on religious belief. Catholic asylums opened for the benefit and religious instruction of Catholic children. Jewish Americans founded Jewish orphanages for the same reason. A few Protestant institutions associated with a particular denomination, such as Episcopalian or Presbyterian. Other asylums maintained ties with several different denominations.⁷⁴ The Washington City Orphan Asylum fell into the last of these categories, working with numerous churches including Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Episcopalian.⁷⁵

Christian faith permeated every aspect of the asylum. At the first meeting on October 10, 1815, E. B. Caldwell, a local lawyer, opened with a prayer and Reverend Hunter closed with a prayer.⁷⁶ The women managing the asylum saw the tenets of Christianity as one of the most important reasons for establishing a home for orphaned children. It also led them to teach Christian doctrine to the children in the asylum, enlist the help of ministers and churches, and express faith in God when at times of hardship.

⁷⁴ Timothy A. Hasi, *Second Home: Orphan Asylums and Poor Families in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁷⁵ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

One of the predominate ways that Christianity can be seen in the asylum's management is the involvement of ministers and churches in the institution's welfare. The asylum held its yearly meeting at a church, most commonly in the first four decades at the Presbyterian church on F. Street. The church's minister, Reverend Dr. James Laurie, often led the group in prayer at the opening of the meeting and other ministers present might deliver a brief sermon or close the meeting in prayer. The children usually also sang a hymn for those present. Often more than one minister attended the yearly meetings, and these ministers did not usually belong to the same congregation, or even the same denomination.⁷⁷ Reverend William Hawley served as minister of St. John's Episcopal Church, Reverend Obadiah B. Brown as minister at the Washington First Baptist Church, and Reverend J.G. Butler at St. Paul's English Lutheran Church.⁷⁸ Several ministers also served on the Board of Trustees, such as Hawley, who acted as Secretary, and Treasurer Reverend J. W. French, rector at the Church of the Epiphany, an Episcopal Church.⁷⁹

As with the non-clergyman who served on the Board of Trustees, many of the ministers involved with the asylum had wives whom were members on the Board of Managers. William Hawley's wife Elizabeth remained involved with the institution from 1832 until 1858, acting as a trustee, Second Directress, and finally First Directress. Reverend John Breckenridge of the Fourth Presbyterian Church was married to one of the asylum's founding managers. Reverend James Laurie's wife Elizabeth served as a trustee, Treasurer, and Second Directress. Reverend Eckhardt of the Second Presbyterian Church was married to a trustee.

⁷⁷ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁷⁸ Ibid; Rev. John C. Hillhouse, Jr., "Obadiah B. Brown: A Neglected, Forgotten Baptist Hero" (address, Annual Directors Meeting of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, Deland, Florida, May, 1993); Lorenzo D. Johnson, *The Churches and Pastors of Washington, D.C.; Together with Five Hundred Topics of Sermons, Delivered in 1855 and '6. To Which is Added, A List of All the Church-Edifices, and Their Localities* (New York: M.W. Dodd, 1857). Google Books.

⁷⁹ Containers 32 and 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

The Board of the Managers both invited and welcomed the involvement of ministers in the institution. In 1828 and 1835, they specifically requested the clergy of Washington to attend their annual meeting. They also invited the Washington clergy to be present for the cornerstone ceremony for their new building in 1829. In June 1833, the Managers even opened the institution to visits from Washington's clergymen as frequently as they should wish to stop by. The ministers involved with the institution on occasion attended the meetings of the Board of Managers, where they offered a prayer at the opening of the meeting and delivered a sermon to the board and the children present. One example is Reverend Hawley, who attended the meeting on November 4, 1828.⁸⁰

The Board of Managers often turned to these ministers and their churches when the asylum faced especially dire financial difficulties. Upon the discovery at the annual meeting in 1849 that the institution possessed insufficient money based upon already received donations, the managers "resolved to request the clergy in the District to advocate the orphan's cause & to make at their convenience collections in their respective churches for the Asylum." The asylum did receive donations from many congregations throughout the city, many of which had ministers actively involved in the institution. Other churches did not have as close a connection, but still gave money, such as the German Lutheran Church, Christ Church, the Unitarian Church, and a few area Methodist churches.⁸¹

The managers likely already knew these clergymen because they were members of their congregations. Yet the weight the managers placed on their faith in God's calling and mission was another likely reason they sought help from these congregations and clergyman. Churches

⁸⁰ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁸¹ Ibid.

were likewise supposed to heed God’s command to care for orphans. When the managers felt the strain of inadequate donations, they called for the citizens of Washington’s sense of Christianly duty, stating in the minutes of their meeting, “May the lofty remember that the 'quality of mercy' becomes 'The throned Monarch better than his crown.' -- and let not the lowly forget that although 'they who were rich' cast much into the Treasury 'the humble widow's something' -- was the offering from which arose the incense sweetest to the holy Jesus.”⁸²

In times of financial distress, the managers also expressed their belief in God’s faithfulness to their task. They wove this assurance into the asylum’s constitution, writing, “it is true liberal subscriptions and donations will be wanting for the support of...destitute innocents, but trusting in Him, who is the Orphan's help and pleading with the benevolent of Washington, [we] cannot plead in vain.” They reiterated this belief in July 1834, when the board debated about the financial feasibility of hiring teachers for the institution, “Yet, trusting in the God of the Orphan for aid, and beleiving the Institution will be greatly benefitted by the change – they [were] induced to take the step.”⁸³

Relationships with other Institutions

Three other orphan asylums served the Washington, D.C. area in the antebellum period – the Female Orphan Asylum of Georgetown, St. Vincent’s Orphan Asylum, and St. Joseph’s Male Orphan Asylum.⁸⁴ All three of these institutions formed after the founding of the

⁸² Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ *Joint Select Committee To Investigate the Charities and Reformatory Institutions in the District of Columbia: Part II – Report* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1898), 115-116.

Washington City Orphan Asylum in 1815.⁸⁵ Reverend Father William Matthews, along with the Sisters of Charity, founded the St. Vincent's Orphan Asylum, a Catholic institution, in 1825. St. Joseph's Male Orphan Asylum, another Catholic institution, opened in 1854.⁸⁶ The Female Orphan Asylum of Georgetown's founding date is unknown, but it was likely at the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century. The Washington City Orphan Asylum maintained an interesting relationship with Washington's other orphan asylums, one based simultaneously on cooperation and competition.

These institutions shared a common connection to the government. When Congress incorporated the Washington City Orphan Asylum in 1828, they incorporated the Female Orphan Asylum of Georgetown as well.⁸⁷ The 1832 Congressional Act that provided lots of land to the Washington City Orphan Asylum also allotted land to St. Vincent's Orphan Asylum. Each asylum received lots amounting to \$10,000.⁸⁸ In 1835, the Washington City Orphan Asylum requested permission to auction the lion given to the United States and keep the profits. Andrew Jackson agreed, but later the State Department informed the Washington City Orphan Asylum that the proceeds of the sale would go to the Georgetown Orphan Asylum and St. Vincent's Orphan Asylum as well.⁸⁹ It is quite possible that Congress did not want to show preferential treatment to one orphan asylum over the other, even though (or especially because) the women

⁸⁵ Container 31, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁸⁶ *Joint Select Committee To Investigate the Charities and Reformatory Institutions in the District of Columbia*, 116.

⁸⁷ *Congressional Debates*, 20th Cong., 1st sess., 1828, 48.

⁸⁸ *Congressional Debates*, 22nd Cong., 1st sess., 1832, 55.

⁸⁹ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

and men managing the Washington City Orphan Asylum maintained so many political relationships.

Following the pattern of events might lead one to believe that the Georgetown asylum and St. Vincent's reaped the rewards earned by the Washington City Orphan Asylum. The Washington City Orphan Asylum requested Congressional aid before either the Georgetown Asylum or St. Vincent's even opened, yet all three received Congressional assistance. Washington City Orphan Asylum's First Directress, Clara Bomford, was the one who took the initiative to speak with President Jackson about the lion, but once again, they split the proceeds with the two other orphanages. A few of the orphanage's advocates certainly felt that these other asylums were encroaching upon the Washington City Orphan Asylum's territory. Someone anonymously published in the *Daily National Intelligencer* an article praising every aspect of the Washington City Orphan Asylum and decrying St. Vincent's:

it is to be regretted, that exertions should be made to establish a rival institution. There being no objection or complaint against the present one, no reasonable cause for such a measure can be perceived; and it would seem to be dissipating funds...which might support, in the existing establishment, twice or thrice the number of children that could be maintained in two separate institutions.

The editor of the *Daily National Intelligencer* added a note in which he countered the anonymous author's declaration, stating, "there cannot be too much of *such* public charity: and we cannot see that these institutions can at all conflict with each other."⁹⁰ The writer of this editorial note was likely either William Winston Seaton or Joseph Gales, Jr., both of whom maintained close ties with the Washington City Orphan Asylum. None of the Washington City Orphan Asylum's records exhibited any animosity towards St. Vincent's. However, at one of their meetings in 1849, the managers expressed their wish for the Female Orphan Asylum of

⁹⁰ "Washington Female Orphan Asylum," *Daily National Intelligencer*, October 11, 1825.
<http://infotrac.galegroup.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu>.

Georgetown to open a home for boys. This perhaps indicates that the Washington City Orphan Asylum felt they could sufficiently care for the female orphans of the city and the asylum in Georgetown could be useful by helping the male orphans. Yet this sentiment is an exception; the Washington City Orphan Asylum did not wage war on the other asylums of the city. On the contrary, the Washington City Orphan Asylum coordinated with other orphanages.⁹¹

Often throughout the nineteenth century, the Washington City Orphan Asylum and the Female Orphan Asylum of Georgetown worked together in the care of children. The Washington City Orphan Asylum took in children initially sent to the asylum in Georgetown when the latter did not possess adequate resources to support all their children. The Washington City Orphan Asylum did not do so without obligation from the asylum in Georgetown, but charged an annual fee in each of these cases to help support the child. The Washington City Orphan Asylum accepted the first child from Georgetown in July 1818 under the agreement that Georgetown pay \$70 a year. In July 1848, they accepted another child, a seven-year-old girl named Cornelia McMannus. The managers of the Washington City Orphan Asylum determined that “the case was urgent” and agreed to take Cornelia on the condition that the Female Orphan Asylum of Georgetown pay \$50.00 a year. Other children they took in included Ellen Harp, Eliza Thompson, Elizabeth Clark, and Margaret Seabury. The Female Orphan Asylum of Georgetown did not always fulfill their promise to help support these children. In 1851, the managers wrote a letter to Mrs. Marbury, the First Directress of the Female Orphan Asylum of Georgetown, informing her that her asylum owed \$212.50 for the children, a sum that was past due. Occasionally the Washington City Orphan Asylum worked with institutions outside of DC.

⁹¹ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

In 1845, the managers agreed to accept a child from an institution in Fredericksburg as long as that institution could provide financial support as well.⁹²

No records indicate cooperation between the Washington City Orphan Asylum and St. Vincent's Orphan Asylum. They likely remained separate due to differing religious affiliations.⁹³ Founders of religious orphan institutions wanted their orphans to grow up with their particular faith. The editorial note added to the opinion article against St. Vincent's in the *Daily National Intelligencer* stated, "If a particular religious persuasion desires to erect another Asylum...under its own direction, so much the better."⁹⁴ This statement conveys an acceptance of the Catholic institution and the right of Catholics to open orphan homes for the same purpose as the Washington City Orphan Asylum, as long as these institutions remained separate. An examination of the events of the 1850s further evidences the divide between these Protestant and Catholic institutions. The managers of the Washington City Orphan Asylum often expressed in their records their desire to see an asylum for boys founded, particularly because boys older than the age of seven years proved very difficult to manage and instruct.⁹⁵ In 1854, the Catholic Church granted their wish by building St. Joseph's Male Orphan Asylum.⁹⁶ Yet the managers once again called for the establishment of a male orphanage in 1860.⁹⁷ As St. Joseph's was a

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Hacsí, *Second Home*, 59.

⁹⁴ "Washington Female Orphan Asylum," *Daily National Intelligencer*, October 11, 1825.
<http://infotrac.galegroup.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu>.

⁹⁵ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁹⁶ *Joint Select Committee To Investigate the Charities and Reformatory Institutions in the District of Columbia*, 111-117.

⁹⁷ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Catholic institution and the Washington City Orphan Asylum was Protestant, little cooperation existed between them.

Urban Formation

The Washington City Orphan's Asylum was an institution largely shaped by the city in which it resided. The same people and factors that influenced the city of Washington also shaped the Washington City Orphan Asylum. The soil on which the city and the asylum were constructed linked them in a shared story and familial connection. Six hundred acres of the land on which eighteenth century Americans built Washington belonged to the Burnes family in the late-eighteenth century, and George Washington himself persuaded David Burnes to sell his land so that they could build the capital upon it. David Burnes' only surviving child, his daughter Marcia Van Ness, would eventually inherit the vast wealth Burnes made from the sale. Marcia Van Ness was one of the founding members of the Washington City Orphan Asylum. Just as her family provided land in 1791 for the city of Washington and the capital of the nation to call home, so Marcia Van Ness, along with her husband John Peter Van Ness, gave land to the Washington City Orphan Asylum on which to build its asylum in 1829.⁹⁸

The selection of Washington as the capital of the United States created the circumstances that brought about the need and desire to build an orphan asylum. During the War of 1812, the British attacked the city for not only strategic but also morale purposes. They destroyed many buildings that not only crippled the ability of American government to function, but also

⁹⁸ Frances Carpenter Huntington, "The Heiress of Washington City: Marcia Burnes Van Ness, 1782-1832" *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 69/70 no. 47 (1969/1970): 81-82. JSTOR. (accessed October 24, 2011).; Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

damaged American spirit due to the emotion attached to the capital. After the war, Americans would rebuild the city out of the ashes, though not without an internal fight of a different type than the war. In 1814, debate raged among the members of Congress as to whether the capital should remain in Washington. Several, especially Northerners, argued for the relocation to another city, such as Philadelphia. These Congressmen cited Washington's destruction, and therefore inability to function as the capital, and Philadelphia's geographic centrality as their reasons. Debating the capital's location dredged up the same issues that brought the capital to Washington in the first place – tensions between North and South, for each of these regions believed a certain amount of power resided in the capital's geographic location and thus wanted it located within their region. In the end, the capital stayed in its location, largely aided by positive post-war fervor that swept through the country following General Andrew Jackson's victory in New Orleans and the identity the city maintained with its hero-namesake, George Washington. Congress saw the benefit of rebuilding the capital rather than forsaking the land chosen by America's first and beloved president.⁹⁹

Throughout the debate concerning the capital's location, Washington possessed several strong and influential advocates. Dolley Madison, for one, strived to keep the capital in Washington. She had worked during her husband's administration as well as during Thomas Jefferson's to create a Washington political and social culture suitable to a capital, all of which would be lost if the capital moved to Philadelphia. She and other local elites knew that the relocation of the capital would be financially disastrous for the Washington economy. Men such as John Van Ness and Richard Lee stepped up to aid in the erection of public structures, finance the militia, and make it fiscally feasible for the government to begin rebuilding in Washington.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Thomas J. Campanella and Lawrence J. Vale, eds., *The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 101-108.

The editors of the *Daily National Intelligencer* printed several articles arguing for the city of Washington as the location for the capital, stating that to relocate would be ““a treacherous breach of the faith of the nation.””¹⁰¹

Several of the people who fought diligently for the city of Washington were among those who established or helped with the Washington City Orphan’s Asylum. Dolley Madison and her elite friends spearheaded the project. John Van Ness and Richard Lee, both of whom lent aid to rebuilding Washington, assisted with the asylum and were married to women on the Board of Managers.¹⁰² Samuel Harrison Smith founded *The Daily National Intelligencer*, publicly supportive of the city of Washington, and then turned it over to William Winston Seaton and Joseph Gales, Jr. All three of these men had wives on the Washington City Orphan Asylum’s Board of Managers; Seaton and Gales even published the asylum’s documents.¹⁰³ In 1829, when the asylum was ready to construct its permanent residence, the Board hired Charles Bulfinch, the final architect hired for the construction of the U.S. Capital.¹⁰⁴

All of these people were passionate about the city of Washington and its survival. The women who decided to open the orphanage did so because of the War of 1812 and to some degree maybe even saw it as a part of the effort to rebuild. By establishing an orphanage, they could bring the healing process to the lower class as well.¹⁰⁵ The rest of the country remained

¹⁰⁰ Catherine Allgor, ““Queen Dolley’ Saves Washington City,” *Washington History* 12, (Spring/Summer 2000): 67-68, under “Coming into the City: Essays on Early Washington D.C. Commemorating the Bicentennial of the Federal Government’s Arrival in 1800,” <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40073433> (accessed September 22, 2011).

¹⁰¹ Campanella, eds., *The Resilient City*, 101.

¹⁰² Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*; *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v. “Gales, Joseph, Jr.”; *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v. “Seaton, William Winston;” Smith, *The First Forty Years of Washington*.

¹⁰⁴ Campanella, eds., *The Resilient City*, 112.

¹⁰⁵ Allgor, “Queen Dolley,” 68.

aware of Washington's efforts to rebuild, and news of the new orphan asylum traveled up the eastern seaboard. Newspaper articles appeared in Boston and other Massachusetts towns that detailed the progress made in Washington's reconstruction. Several of these listed the creation of churches, schools, and the orphan asylum. Some Americans at least viewed the asylum as a part of Washington's effort to rebuild.¹⁰⁶

The environment of Washington continued to shape the orphan asylum. The building projects of Washington persisted, bringing in laborers in pursuit of work. The influx of people in the working class created a substantial population living in less than desirable conditions. This group was also financially incapable of seeking medical attention when the cholera epidemic struck.¹⁰⁷ Many died in the epidemic, including several fathers and mothers, leaving their children in need of care. Sophia Towson, Secretary of the Board, summed up the situation in her appeal to the citizens of Washington for financial aid:

It will be recollected that, previous to the date of the last annual report, the demand for laborers on the public works had brought to this place an unprecedented number of that class of persons; many with families, dependent on their daily labor for bread; and it will also be recollected, that the epidemic which then raged was peculiarly fatal to the elder members of such families, leaving the young dependent on public charity for shelter and support.

The situation of the city necessitated that the asylum let in more children than they might have otherwise. Before the cholera epidemic, the orphanage had a population of eighteen children.

¹⁰⁶ "City of Washington," *Boston Gazette*, September 9, 1816. <http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu> (accessed April 2, 2011); "City of Washington," *Nantucket Gazette*, September 14, 1816 (accessed April 2, 2011); "Washington, Aug. 31," *The Repertory*, September 5, 1816. <http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu> (accessed April 2, 2011); "Washington-City, Aug. 31," *Dedham Gazette*, September 13, 1816 (accessed April 2, 2011).

¹⁰⁷ Smith, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society*, 335.

By October 8, 1833, the date of Towson's newspaper publication, their number had increased to forty-nine, more than doubling the number of children dependent on the institution.¹⁰⁸

Conclusion

The Washington City Orphan Asylum possessed a story separate from that of its children. The men who helped the orphanage, whether ministers or military officers or Congressmen, all played an integral role in helping the orphanage to function. They fulfilled legal responsibilities the women of the orphanage could not and helped in procuring funds for the institution. They would not be the only external force to shape the institution. The asylum felt the profound affect the city in which it resided.

¹⁰⁸ "Female Orphan Asylum of Washington: Report of the Board of Managers to the Society at the Annual Meeting, Oct. 8, 1833." *Daily National Intelligencer*, October 25, 1833.; Some of these children had only stayed for a short while, due to some circumstance or another.

CHAPTER THREE

“FAMILY OF ORPHANS”: THE CHILDREN OF THE WASHINGTON CITY ORPHAN ASYLUM

All orphan asylums of the antebellum era maintained certain procedures in caring for their children. The rules these institutions implemented speak to societal views on children, food, education, and punishment. The Washington City Orphan Asylum was no exception. It presented many commonalities with other orphan asylums in the treatment of its “family of orphans.”¹ Yet the Washington City Orphan Asylum had some very telling differences from some of the nation’s other asylums, differences which will become evident in a further examination of the lives of their children. Looking at the families of the children that entered the institution also helps to determine the situation of Washington’s lower class.

Admittance to the Asylum

The admittance of a child into an orphan asylum could be complicated. Institutions had many criteria and factors to consider before accepting a child. First, institutions typically categorized each child as either a “full orphan” with no living parents or a “half-orphan” with one surviving parent. Several institutions showed preference, at least in their official mission statements, in admitting children that were full orphans. The New York Orphan Asylum, for instance, showed strict adherence to their policy of only accepting full orphans. This became harder to do as the nineteenth century progressed and the demands of society necessitated a change in policy. Parentless children were not the only children in need of aid. They did not even comprise the major demographic of destitute children. The Boston Female Asylum was

¹ Container 2, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

among those that started accepting half-orphans as well as full when they understood their urban situation.²

The Washington City Orphan Asylum fit into this category well. At the asylum's founding, the managers decided that the following would be the preference and procedure for accepting children into the institution:

Admittance shall be granted in the first instance to female orphans deprived of both parents, but if a sufficient number of meritorious objects of that description cannot be found for the useful application of the funds of the association, in that case the privilege of admission may be extended to any other children judged worthy of charitable provision, provided the parent or parents of such children shall give to the Society, a full and entire control of the children so received.³

The managers found themselves often adhering to the later part of their statement as the majority of the children that entered the Washington City Orphan Asylum were half-orphans. The asylum's records only listed approximately ten children with the specific categorization of "orphan" in the antebellum era.⁴ Some children, such as Sarah Ann Kendricks, who entered the asylum in 1827, had two living parents.⁵ The orphanage practiced discernment when determining whether to admit a child, usually basing their decision on the child's familial situation, health, sex, race, and the financial situation of the orphanage.⁶

In order to accept a child into the asylum, the managers needed to be convinced of the family's need. As they stated in their bylaws, they would admit "children judged worthy of

² Timothy A. Hacsí, *Second Home: Orphan Asylums and Poor Families in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 113.

³ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴ Containers 32 and 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵ Container 36, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁶ Containers 32, 34, and 44, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

charitable provision.”⁷ This was generally a judgment not of the child but of the child’s family and the nature of their poverty. The classification of the “worthy poor” was a common practice for those involved in reform movements in the nineteenth century. Reformers believed that aiding people whose poverty derived from vice instead of unavoidable circumstance would only serve to enable their lives of sin. They sought instead to help people they considered moral.⁸

In 1860 the managers decided not to accept any children whose parents were still living and could care for them, but rather to “reserve [their] scant means for the benefit of those whom misfortune rather than vice have rendered objects of charity.”⁹ If the managers felt that the child’s family could care for them, they might refuse admittance, as they did for one child in July 1854.¹⁰ On several occasions, though, the managers looked past the family’s indiscretions for the sake of the child, most likely to prevent the child from following the same path as their elders.¹¹ In January 1839, they admitted George Landvoigt whose father was in prison.¹² On most occasions, it was not the child’s family situation that kept them from being accepted, but another discerning factor.

The Washington City Orphan Asylum was among the first to pay close attention to a child’s health when considering the child for acceptance. This asylum would not admit any

⁷ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁸ Ginzberg, *Women in Antebellum Reform*, 16-18.

⁹ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰ Container 44, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹¹ Container 32, 34, 36, and 44, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹² Container 36, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

children afflicted with an “infectious disease.”¹³ Most others would not adopt this policy until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁴ Residing in the heart of an urban setting like Washington meant that the asylum faced numerous epidemics. Throughout the antebellum period, the children of the asylum experienced such illnesses as cholera, scarlet fever, whooping cough, and tuberculosis.¹⁵ Bringing an already contagious child into the institution would be an invitation for the rest of the children to get sick. The managers adhered most faithfully to this policy. When Mrs. Knight asked if the asylum would take her brother, who had tuberculosis, they offered instead to help her have him admitted to the City Hospital.¹⁶

For the first fourteen years of its history, the institution only accepted girls. In their constitution, the managers agreed to consider accepting boys if the need arose. They remained consistent with this policy until the fall of 1829.¹⁷ Yet the cases of 1829 were exceptions to the rule rather than an indication of a major policy shift. In October, the asylum accepted George and James Perley, along with their sisters Julianna and Sarah Frances. James and Dennis O’Connor and their sister Mary Ann followed the Perley children in November. The asylum made a note that they admitted James O’Connor under the condition of keeping him until the following spring, or longer if the managers deemed it prudent. It is possible that the Washington City Orphan Asylum took these boys because they had sisters. Perhaps the children’s mothers, Sarah Perley and Margaret O’Connor, found the asylum with the intention of housing their girls,

¹³ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁴ Hacsí, *Second Home*, 153

¹⁵ Containers 32, 34, and 36, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁶ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁷ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

but asked that the institution take their sons as well. The asylum may have acquiesced in an effort to keep all of the siblings together. The children's ages may have been a factor as well. The O'Connor children at least were of an age at which their sex made less of a difference – James O'Connor was approximately three years old and his brother Dennis was just a month old.¹⁸

The asylum would not accept any more boys until 1832, the year of the cholera epidemic. The epidemic produced a change in the Washington City Orphan Asylum's policy towards boys as the managers announced in an *Intelligencer* article "that males as well as females [were] hereafter to be admitted."¹⁹ The needs of the city in large part inspired this change. From that point on in the antebellum era, males appeared in the asylum's admissions records, though the gender ratio generally skewed in favor of girls. At times the managers remembered why they initially only intended to aid girls and expressed their preference for girls in their records.²⁰ The managers did not like admitting boys, especially teenage boys, because their behavior could be a problem. The governesses experienced such problems as boys running away from the orphanage and climbing over the orphanage wall. Matilda Van Ness reported in January 1840 that two boys whom the managers had under review for admission were too old to be accepted.²¹ In 1860, the managers agreed not to accept boys over the age of twelve years.²²

¹⁸ Containers 34 and 36, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁹ "Female Orphan Asylum of Washington: Report of the Board of Managers to the Society at the Annual Meeting, Oct. 8., 1833." *Daily National Intelligencer*, October 25, 1833, <http://infotrac.galegroup.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu>

²⁰ Container 32 and 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²¹ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²² Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Though not expressly stated in any of their founding regulations or bylaws, the managers preferred to accept children out of infancy but younger than adolescence. Often this preference would prove to be just that, a preference, and not a policy to which they strictly adhered. Caring for infants proved far more strain on an institution than looking after older children.²³ Infants required more resources and special care, such as nurses and additional milk.²⁴ They were at a higher risk of contracting illness and dying. Historically, societies usually opened homes for abandoned infants, referred to as “foundlings,” separate from orphan asylums. In Europe, at least, infants left without identification carried the stigma of illegitimacy. Parents that abandoned their children at birth were often unmarried and left their children to hide their indiscretions.²⁵ These were not the children of virtuous families the managers intended to help. The first home specifically for foundlings, St. Ann’s Infant Asylum, did not open in Washington until 1860.²⁶ Prior to the founding of St. Ann’s and other foundling institutions, orphaned infants ended up in regular orphan homes like the Washington City Orphan Asylum.

When the asylum did accept these children, the manner in which they handled their cases proved that accepting foundlings was outside their realm of normalcy. In March 1832, a woman left her three-day-old son at the door of the asylum. The managers took him in, but agreed to consult the Board of Trustees as to his care. They later petitioned the city to assist in caring for the boy (who they named Samuel at his baptism). The managers obviously viewed the care of this infant as outside their parameters. Samuel died in August 1832. In other cases, the

²³ Hacsí, *Second Home*, 118

²⁴ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²⁵ Nicholas Terpstra, *Abandoned Children of the Italian Renaissance: Orphan Care in Florence and Bologna*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 101-186.

²⁶ *Joint Select Committee To Investigate the Charities and Reformatory Institutions in the District of Columbia*, 102.

managers tried to find homes for the foundlings outside the institution as soon as possible. In November 1860, someone left an infant at the institution's door without identification or explanation. The managers arranged for its adoption the next day. In the cases in which the managers accepted foundlings, they did so because of the direness of the situation. Yet if the child already had a place to live, the managers might refuse to admit him or her. In March 1860, the Georgetown Orphan Asylum requested that the Washington City Orphan Asylum take an infant out of their care. The managers declined to accept the child, perhaps because he or she already had a home in an asylum.²⁷

The greatest determining factor for a child's acceptance, besides the absence of a contagious illness, was the financial situation of the institution. In December 1815, just a few months after the orphanage opened "the Board after examining the subscription list found the amount to be so small...they resolved for the present, not to admit more children into the asylum." Another instance occurred in November 1849 in which a woman requested to leave a boy and a girl in the orphanage; the managers referred her to the Female Orphan Asylum of Georgetown.²⁸ Financial difficulties might also cause them to be more selective as to which children they accepted. In 1860, their "scant means" led them to admit only full orphans.²⁹ Occasionally, such as the during the cholera epidemic of 1832, the asylum accepted far more children than their finances deemed prudent, but the current urban crisis of the city necessitated such a decision.³⁰

²⁷ Container 44, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²⁸ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²⁹ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

The managers knew more personal information about some children than others. Some children could give their names, ages, birth dates, parents' names, and place of birth when they entered the institution. The managers knew that Sarah Ann Kendricks was born December 27, 1819 to Benjamin and Julian Kendricks and that she was seven-years-old when she entered the asylum on August 29, 1827.³¹ Foundlings usually provided no information, as their parents often left them without giving the child's name (if he or she had one), the parents' names, or the child's birth date. The people managing the institution typically did not even meet the child's parents.³² Foundlings were not the only children that the asylum admitted with little personal information, but older children often did as well. For these children, the managerial records present an interesting trend. The managers often recorded the same day and month for the child's birth as their entrance into the asylum. Adeline Mackey was born November 16, 1809 and entered the institution November 16, 1815. Eleanor Smallwood was born March 19, 1808 and joined the asylum March 19, 1816, the same day as Elizabeth Gardner, who was born March 19, 1806. This was an especially big pattern in the first few decades of the institution. Seventeen children seemingly entered the institution on their birthdays.³³ Rather than it actually being the case that so many parents took their child to the asylum on the child's birthday, it is more likely that the parents did not know the child's birthday, so the managers made it the same day that the child became a member of institution. This practice makes an interesting statement

³⁰ "Female Orphan Asylum of Washington: Report of the Board of Managers to the Society at the Annual Meeting, Oct. 8., 1833." *Daily National Intelligencer*, October 25, 1833, <http://infotrac.galegroup.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu>

³¹ Container 36, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³² Containers 34 and 44, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³³ Container 36, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

about the way the managers viewed the identity of the child. Entering the Washington City Orphan Asylum almost constituted a rebirthing process, a shift in their persona from being a member of a family to becoming a child of the Washington City Orphan Asylum.

Yet the managers did not intend for the asylum to be the children's permanent home. Very few children stayed until they reached adulthood. Some of them may have received a new identity in entering the institution, but the Washington City Orphan Asylum was merely the next chapter. John E. Murray in his examination of the Charleston Orphan House notes that children could leave an asylum in one of four methods: death, running away, returning to their families, or receiving an indentureship.³⁴ The managers generally preferred the last of these options, as they thought it afforded the children the best opportunity. A large number of children ending up taking the third option and returned to their families.

The Families of the Asylum

One of the best ways to tell the stories of the Washington City Orphan Asylum's children, especially when presented with a lack of sources, is to examine their familial situations. Determining why these children became orphans, who brought them to the asylum, and their demographics (ethnicity, age, and sex), serves not only to shed light upon these orphans, but also the conditions in society which created them.

The Washington City Orphan Asylum, like all other asylums of the time, catered to a specific demographic in terms of ethnicity.³⁵ Almost all of the children in the institution were Americans of European descent. The orphanage also on occasion accepted children of European immigrants. Augustin Unit, a German boy, entered the institution in September 1832. The

³⁴ Richard B. McKenzie, ed. *Home Away from Home: The Forgotten History of Orphanages* (New York: Encounter Books, 2009).

³⁵ Hacsí, *Second Home*.

managers accepted Henry Smith, also German, in 1833.³⁶ Eliza Curwell, Irish, entered in 1834. A French woman deposited her baby with the asylum in 1860.³⁷ The orphanage did not take in children of African American or Native American descent. Almost all of the children hailed from the Washington metropolitan area, such as sisters Eleanor and Sarah Robey, who came from the Navy Yard area in the District of Columbia.³⁸

Three main causes led to children becoming orphans: war, disease, and poverty. These three categories are not always clearly distinguishable from one another, because often war and disease would lead to poverty. For the children of the Washington City Orphan Asylum, the first of these, war, was the initial reason that Marcia Van Ness, Dolley Madison, Elizabeth Riley Brown, and Margaret Bayard Smith decided to open an orphanage. They witnessed the destruction of Washington by the British in the War of 1812. In the city's efforts to rebuild, they determined that they could help those orphaned by the war by opening a home for them. The number of children in the asylum actually orphaned by war during the first forty-five years of the orphanage's history was likely very small. No war would significantly affect the population of Washington again until the Civil War in 1861. At the asylum's opening, they admitted approximately ten children, and none of the managerial records specifically indicates that any of these girls lost their parents in the war. Yet the manager's statement "the war... greatly

³⁶ Container 36, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³⁷ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³⁸ Container 36, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

increased the number of . . . unprotected Orphans” indicated that the war did cause the children to become orphans.³⁹

Disease and illness was responsible for several children entering the orphanage. In March 1832, the institution found the infant who they later named Samuel, left with a note reading the following:

Dear, Madam. Please confer upon me your maternal care for some months, at the expiration of which time I will be called for. Owing to the sickness of my mother, as you see she has not been able even to dress me. I am three days of age this evening. Tuesday 6th March 1832.⁴⁰

He died in August of that year before his mother could retrieve him. It is unknown whether his mother ever recovered from her illness. Cornelia Turner’s mother resigned her to the asylum in January 1860, stating illness and poverty as her reasons. The cholera epidemic of 1832, in particular, left children in need of a home. Some children, such as Maria Gruver and Priscilla Rawlins, lost both of their parents to the epidemic. In other cases, the child lost one parent, but the loss of one rendered the other parent incapable of caring for the child on his or her own. Daniel Wright left his four children – Adelaide, Daniel, Charles, and Laura – in the institution when their mother died of cholera. He also died while his children lived in the orphanage.⁴¹

The majority of the children that entered the institution came from families that simply could not care for their children, usually financially. Some of these children, like Lavinia Lyons in 1815 and Elizabeth J. Hibbs in 1832, already resided in the poorhouse before the asylum received them (or actively took them from the almshouse). In some cases, these families fell

³⁹ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁰ Container 43, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴¹ Container 36, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

onto hard times because of something the parents did rather than a circumstance that befell them. Edward Landvoigt's father, George, was in prison when Dora, Edward's mother, brought him to the asylum in 1839. Eliza Norton, an infant, was the daughter of a man the asylum labeled as "intemperate." Eliza's mother was dead.⁴²

Most often, a parent brought the child to the institution. For more than half of the children relinquished to the asylum their mother did so.⁴³ This was also the case with other institutions, such as the Charleston Orphan House. The position of working women in antebellum America rendered them almost powerless if their husbands died or left them. They would most likely be unable to support their children on their own. Depositing their child in the orphan asylum seemed a reasonable solution.⁴⁴ Mrs. Roberts asked to leave her daughter in the institution for six months in 1860, stating that she needed time to "work and get a sewing machine," undoubtedly to prepare for their future lives. That same month, the institution accepted the six children of Mrs. Letaldi, as her husband "ha[d] deserted her."⁴⁵ The managers often required that parents pay a fee every month to help support their child. Sarah Jane Evans' mother agreed to pay \$3.00 a month when she relinquished her daughter to the institution in 1830.⁴⁶ The managers required Thomas Jefferson's mother to pay a monthly fee of \$2.00.⁴⁷

⁴² Container 36, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴³ Container 37, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁴ McKenzie, *Home Away From Home*, 134.

⁴⁵ Container 44, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁶ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁷ A different Thomas Jefferson than the President of the United States.; Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Other family members brought children to the institution as well. They likely had taken in their orphaned relative but could no longer care for them. Frances Olivor relinquished her granddaughter Mary V. Webster in 1854. The brother of Edgar and Albert Anderson admitted them in 1855. James Gordon admitted his niece Eliza Langly and nephew Charles Langly in 1839. Sometimes the person who brought a child to the orphanage was not even a family member. Amanda Robinson relinquished her goddaughter Ellen Robinson, a girl approximately five years old. Mrs. Partello brought a boy to the institution in 1858, along with the following note: "A child of the name of Harry Perry came to my house for protection and care. I considered the child abandoned and gave him such attention as I was able. I now recommend him to the kind care and protection of the Ladies of the Protestant Orphan Asylum...."⁴⁸ Other children found their way to a local church, which then brought them to the institution to seek admittance. Reverend G.W. Sampson, pastor at the E Street Baptist Church, asked the managers to accept the son of one of the dying members of his church.⁴⁹

Several orphans did not enter the asylum alone but with siblings. Sisters Mary and Phoebe Bond entered in 1829. Jonas and Elizabeth Newell admitted their twin sons Alexander and James Newell, approximately five years old, in 1832. Entering the institution together likely made the transition into asylum life easier for children. Children could also avoid the heartbreak of separation from their siblings as well as their parents, at least for the moment.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Container 36, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁹ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Lorenzo D. Johnson, *The Churches and Pastors of Washington, D.C.; Together with Five Hundred Topics of Sermons, Delivered in 1855 and '6. To Which is Added, A List of All the Church-Edifices, and Their Localities*. (New York: M.W. Dodd, 1857). Google Books.

⁵⁰ Container 36, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Going Home

For several families, the Washington City Orphan Asylum served not as a permanent home for their children but as a temporary place during a period of trouble. Many of the mothers who relinquished their children to the orphanage eventually sought to take them back. To do so required that the managers let the children leave with their loved ones, an allowance they usually made.⁵¹ The nineteenth century witnessed a growing concern over the relationship between a mother and her children. The view that a child's best place emotionally was with its mother began to take root. A large reason for this shift was the changing view about children and their experiences in childhood. People began to view them not as living units of labor, but rather as independent humans with their own desires and opinions. Society believed the mother most capable, through her love, of nurturing a child during this time. An indigent mother previously would have little to no influence in retrieving her child, especially in light of a legal contract, but authority figures now began to sympathize with them.⁵²

The managers based their decisions on their assessment of the family's situation. They allowed Mrs. Hurst to take her child in 1828, making note that she was "now in a situation to provide for said child."⁵³ Mrs. Hurst was recently married, a change of situation that probably afforded her the financial means to care for her child. The managers returned Sarah Jane Evans to her mother in 1831 and Charlotte Ann Yeatman to her mother in 1840. Approximately forty-three of the children that left the institution with family members left with their mother. Some children left the orphanage with other family members. Mary Eliza Sharp left with her father in

⁵¹ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵² Mary Ann Mason, *From Father's Property to Children's Rights: The History of Child Custody in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 49-83.

⁵³ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

1817. Mary and Phoebe went to live with aunts in Pennsylvania in 1829. Relatives of Charles and Eliza Langly took them to live in Virginia.⁵⁴ Though the managers were usually gracious to the family members of the orphans, they occasionally denied a request to take a child from the orphanage. In June 1854, they rejected Mrs. Hayward's request to take her son Frank, because they believed Mrs. Hayward "had not the means for his support."⁵⁵ Yet overall, more than twenty-five percent of the approximately two-hundred-and-fifty children that lived in the asylum during the antebellum era left the Washington City Orphan Asylum with a family member.

Life in the Institution

Like many other orphan asylums in antebellum America, the Washington City Orphan Asylum instituted a daily schedule for their children.⁵⁶ The orphans' days consisted of set times for school, meals, and rest.⁵⁷ In the beginning months of the institution, the managers produced the "Laws for the Regulation of the Asylum," in which they plotted the day-to-day lives of the orphans.⁵⁸ The children would wake when the sun rose and "after, washing, dressing, making their beds, and cleaning their rooms...meet in the apartment of the Governess" for morning prayer. In the warmer months of the year, they would work in either the house or the garden until they ate their morning meal at 7:00 AM. In winter, the asylum delayed breakfast until 8:00 AM. The children would attend school from 9:00 AM until 12:00 PM, break for time to "play",

⁵⁴ Container 36, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁵ Container 44, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁶ Hacsí, *Second Home*, 19.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*; Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁸ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

and recommence from 2:00 PM until 5:00 PM. The Governess determined when the children would go to bed based upon their ages. This schedule applied to Monday through Friday. On Saturday it altered slightly as the children went to school in the morning but in the afternoon focused on religious learning instead, receiving instruction in catechism and hymns. They then would help clean the asylum and get ready for the next day, Sunday, when they would go to two church services. Their schedule on Sunday required that they make all the preparations for Sunday on Saturday.⁵⁹

The managers placed great importance on the cleanliness and neatness of the asylum and, more importantly, its children. All the rules they established followed the belief that “not only [the children’s] health, but their welfare in life naturally depend on habits of order and cleanliness.”⁶⁰ The managers required that the children’s hair stay short and frequently washed. Each child received clothing, a towel, toothbrush, and comb which they were responsible for keeping clean and stored in their proper space when not in use. The girls generally dressed the same as one another, their wardrobe depending on the season, the goods donated to the institution, and the managers’ preference.⁶¹ The managers instructed the governess to monitor the hygienic habits of the children, and punish those that neglected their cleanliness and tidiness.

⁵⁹ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.; "Washington Female Orphan Asylum," *Daily National Intelligencer*, October 11, 1825. <http://infotrac.galegroup.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu>.

Health

One of the main reasons the managers placed so much concern on the hygiene of the children stemmed from their belief in its importance to the children's health. Cleanliness would help to stave off infection and illness in a setting where many people lived in close quarters in the middle of an urban metropolis. The best guard against disease was to take preemptive measures. The health of the children was an area of concern that the managers grappled with throughout the antebellum period.

The managers took other measures to ensure the health of the children, besides instituting rules for the children's cleanliness and refusing to admit children afflicted with disease. They welcomed the assistance of doctors and medicine. In 1843, the asylum received both care and medicine from Dr. Hall and Dr. Cunton. Occasionally the managers and trustees determined they needed repairs to the institution for the sake of the children's health and would do so. In 1856, they improved the asylum by adding indoor plumbing and a few additional rooms.⁶²

When it came to the children's health, the managers adopted the philosophy of sacrificing one for the sake of the many. If a child's illness had a negative effect on the other children, the managers would seek other arrangements for the sick child. In September 1835, M.A. Titcomb, the matron, informed the managers that Martha Owens' illness was affecting the rest of the children.⁶³ Martha had previously lived with Mrs. Cartwright, but Mrs. Cartwright returned Martha to the asylum due to the child's unnamed sickness.⁶⁴ The managers decided to exchange Martha for a healthy child from the almshouse that they had previously agreed to accept.⁶⁵

⁶² Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Container 36, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Some of the children's conditions may have proved too much for the matrons, teachers, and managers to handle. A physically handicapped boy named John McCoy entered the institution with his sister Jane in 1832 when he was approximately a year old. He lived in the institution for several years.⁶⁶ During this time, the managers frequently sought outside aid for his care. For a time they received help from Mr. McLeod, who would assisted in McCoy's education. On March 11, 1845, the managers decided to see if the "overseers of the Poor" could assume the care for John, a request that the organization granted.⁶⁷ Given his physical condition, John could not work. He was about fourteen-years-old in 1845, and the asylum could not be his home into adulthood and beyond. The managers looked for someone that could help him when they no longer could.

The asylum's records indicate that seventeen children died in the Washington City Orphan Asylum during the first forty-five years of its history. Some children died shortly after entering the orphanage and likely brought sickness with them when they arrived. The managers stated a girl that died in 1848 was "very much out of health when received." Other children died several years into their stay at the asylum. Several years passed without any children dying, but other years saw the threat of serious illness, such as scarlet fever in 1850.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁶ Container 36, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁷ Containers 32 and 36, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁸ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Nutrition

Scholars examining other orphanages of the nineteenth-century generally agree that the diet of asylum children left much to be desired, in terms of both nutritional value and variety. John E. Murray in his essay on the Charleston Orphan House in South Carolina states that preceding the Civil War the children's health suffered from consumption of too much meat and not enough vegetables.⁶⁹ The Cincinnati Orphan Asylum provided their children with a steady diet of bread supplemented with molasses in the 1830s. The Boston Female Asylum, founded in the early 1800s, offered more substance, but very little variety or vegetables. They relied heavily on soup, pork, and lamb.⁷⁰

The menus of these orphanages are consistent with food trends in the rest of the nation. Before the 1850s, Americans relied heavily on a diet of meat, potatoes, and bread, as well as any vegetables that could be locally grown. Region and environment determined diet. It is not surprising then that orphans maintained the same monotonous diet as their contemporaries in both class and location. The growth of industrialization in the middle of the century created the ability to transport perishable goods before they went bad. Americans could now purchase vegetables and other foodstuffs that would provide a more balanced, varied diet.⁷¹ Several reform groups of the mid-nineteenth century also began to advocate a better diet with the regular inclusion of vegetables and milk.⁷²

⁶⁹ McKenzie, *Home Away From Home*.

⁷⁰ Hacsí, *A Second Home*.

⁷¹ Elaine N. McIntosh, *American Food Habits in Historical Perspective* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1995).

⁷² Susan Williams, *Food in the United States, 1820s-1890* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2006).

An examination of the Washington City Orphan Asylum's menu in 1854, which, according to the managers, was to "be without variation," reveals a nutritional regiment far more diverse than the ones presented by the Charleston Orphan House, the Boston Female Asylum, or the Cincinnati Orphan Asylum. On Monday the orphans would eat "pea or bean soup, salt pork, bread," on Tuesday, "stewed beef, potatoes, bread," on Wednesday, "Indian pudding, molasses, bread," on Thursday, "Mutton soup, vegetables, potatoes, bread," on Friday "fish, either salt or fresh, bread," and on Saturday "beef soup, vegetable, rice, bread." Sundays were special, as it was the Christian Sabbath, and, the menu reflected the day's sacredness: "cold beef (reserved from day before)[,] bread, cake, apple or pie."⁷³ The asylum's financial ledgers also indicate they frequently purchased milk for the children.⁷⁴

It is possible that the Washington City Orphan Asylum adapted their menu to meet changing dietary standards and market availabilities as the century progressed. The managers wrote this menu in 1854, a year at the beginning of the period that food historians have classified as a time of change in American diets.⁷⁵ Yet evidence also indicates that the managers of the asylum tried from the very beginning to provide the children with a diverse diet. In 1816, the asylum received several food donations from individuals on the Board of Managers, donations which included meat, poultry, fruits, vegetables, and spices. Sophia Meigs gave raisins, cloves, herring, butter, onions, and apples. Mrs. Bradley donated turnips, potatoes, and herring. The asylum received cabbage, beef, shad, ham, and oysters from Frances Dandridge Lear and carrots and other vegetables from Marcia Van Ness. The donations continued, as in 1818, when Marcia

⁷³ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁷⁴ Container 44, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁷⁵ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Williams, *Food in the United States*; McIntosh, *American Food Habits in Historical Perspective*.

Van Ness again donated vegetables as well as a turkey, and Ann Tayloe and Mrs. Dr. Bradley both gave turnips.⁷⁶ Dolley Madison at her departure from the institution donated money for the asylum to purchase a cow to provide milk. The managers' ability to provide quality food for the children improved when they received the donation of a refrigerator in 1852 and some of the men associated with the institution built a smoke house.⁷⁷

Occasions certainly arose in the asylum's history when their financial situation affected what they could feed the children, such as in 1858, when the managers resorted to giving the older children tea because they could not afford milk for all the children.⁷⁸ Yet overall, the managers of the asylum strove to feed the children of the orphanage properly, and the children likely benefitted from having such managers. As several of the members on the Board of Managers were members of the Washington elite, their financial situations lent them the ability to help the children of their orphanage eat a larger variety of foods.

Punishment

American society in the first half of the nineteenth century condoned corporal punishment for children, as long as parents did not deliver "clearly abusive punishment" which inflicted "serious or permanent bodily or mental injury."⁷⁹ Parents employed tools such as whips and rods to correct their children. Teachers, serving as parents while the actual parents were in absentia, could also legally administer such discipline. Managers and governesses of orphan

⁷⁶ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁷⁷ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Myra C. Glenn, *Campaigns Against Corporal Punishment: Prisoners, Sailors, Women, and Children in Antebellum America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 10; Ibid, 3.

asylums, as the children's legal guardians, likewise had the power to use corporal punishment. Orphan asylums in the antebellum era implemented the same corporal punishment as parents and teachers to discipline their children. This was especially the case with male orphans as society considered boys in greater need of physical correction than girls. Americans believed that girls possessed greater feminine sensibilities, which too harsh punishment could damage.⁸⁰

The Washington City Orphan Asylum's forms of punishment differed from that of other institutions. The managers outlined in their "Laws for the Regulation of the Asylum" a defined protocol for punishing children. Specific acts of disobedience merited particular punishments; the governess could choose the punishment for all other crimes. "The Laws for Regulation" did not include the usage of corporal punishment as defined in early nineteenth century terms. The institution relied more heavily upon methods that instructed the children through alienation and shame. For instance, a girl that arrived at school "with dirty hands, face, or nails" would have to remain behind for an additional thirty minutes after everyone else left, a punishment meant to separate the child from her peers.⁸¹

According to their bylaws, the asylum most often instituted a form of discipline that blended psychological and minor corporal correction. Any child that hit another child would have their hands tied and would stand in a room alone for hours at a time. The punishment for lying was for the child to spend the afternoon with her mouth bound in a piece of black silk. Stealing resulted in a child having her hands tied in a black silk bag during the afternoon session of school. The punishment for a girl convicted of "of disobedience to the Governess, of quarreling with her companions, of negligence in her lessons or work, of the sin of bad language,

⁸⁰ Glenn, *Campaigns Against Corporal Punishment*, 10.

⁸¹ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

or any other fault except those particularly specified” would include only receiving bread and water at however many mealtimes the governess and teachers deemed suitable. The child in question would eat alone at a black table in the corner. If any child persisted with her crime, even after her punishment, she would then receive the same punishment in front of the Board of Managers at their monthly meeting. No doubt standing in front of the First Lady of the United States with your mouth tied in black silk was a troubling concept for the children.⁸²

The pattern of punishment showed in 1857 when the governess brought a child named Fannie Webster before the Board of Managers. The governess’ attempts to punish Webster for the unnamed crime she had committed had proved useless. Bringing the child before the board was the next step. The managers likewise reprimanded the child, but noted in their records that she did not show any signs of giving up her “stubbornness.” They told her to leave the room, and hoped her manners would improve by their next monthly meeting.⁸³

The governesses of the asylum would maintain a record of the children’s indiscretions. This record, posted outside the governess’ room, would make the children’s sins known to the rest of the institution. Once every three months, the governess would discipline the child with the most demerits, choosing the punishment according to her discretion. At the yearly meeting, the managers would bring the child with the most marks against her before the asylum society and their subscribers. The child would wear a placard reading “Bad.”⁸⁴

It is very telling that the ultimate punishment for children came in the form of having their disobedience presented to the board of managers and subscribers. These children should

⁸² Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁸³ Container 44, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁸⁴ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

not fear a whip or a rod but rather the condemnation of the people managing the asylum. The punishment would be even worse if the children understood that their managers were some of the most esteemed members of American society. The tools used in punishing children show the importance the managers placed on shame. Forcing a child to wear a sign that read “Bad” was not a physical form of punishment – it was emotional and psychological. The use of the color black is particularly significant as the color carried the association of darkness and sin; the managers associated the color in many cases with the part of the body that led the child to sin (black tie for the mouth, black bag for the hands).⁸⁵

The Washington City Orphan Asylum drafted these laws when the asylum only accepted girls, so all of the rules are somewhat gendered. Unfortunately, no record indicates how or if these rules changed when the institution began to admit boys. The asylum possibly refrained from the practice of whipping because they only admitted girls at the time when they composed their bylaws. They may not have seen the need for stricter punishment since society believed girls to possess milder manners.

The institution also rewarded children for good behavior. Just as the governess recorded incidents of bad behavior, she also recorded instances when the children behaved particularly well. Every three months the most well behaved child received the privilege of “open[ing] the day with one of the Board [of Managers] and if remarkable, for her neatness [would] receive a white apron.” At the annual meeting, the Board of Managers would bless the child with the most “good” marks by allowing her to wear a sign, in front of all the managers and subscribers, that read “Good.”⁸⁶ Mr. Corcoran also gave \$15.00 to the institution in 1854 to provide rewards for

⁸⁵ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

Rebecca Waters, Sally Brown, Cornelia McMannin, Fanny Webster, and William Heatly. The records do not state the reason why these particular children received such attention, but it undoubtedly had something to do with good behavior.⁸⁷

In terms of punishments and rewards, the Washington City Orphan Asylum was ahead of societal norms as well as other orphanages. Reform movements of the antebellum period would eventually advocate for a movement against corporal punishment. They would argue that parents should only use corporal punishment in extreme cases, employing gentler methods to correct all other misbehavior. They placed greater emphasis on rewarding good behavior as an incentive for further good conduct.⁸⁸ Towards the end of the nineteenth century and in the beginning of the twentieth, several orphanages would move towards this philosophy of discipline, working on a system of merits and demerits.⁸⁹

Recreation, Holidays, and Interaction with the Outside World

The managers of the institution tried to include recreational activities and special holidays in the children's schedules. They acknowledged the importance of free time in their founding guidelines for the institution when they included time for "play" in the children's daily routine. As the nineteenth century progressed, they began planning more opportunities, but these often depended on the financial situation of the institution. The managers frequently worked into the budget a certain amount of money, typically around \$15, for special Christmas festivities. In 1852, they did the same for New Years as well. The Board of Trustees purchased land with

⁸⁷ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁸⁸ Glenn, *Campaigns Against Corporal Punishment*.

⁸⁹ Hacci, *A Second Home*.

several trees next to the institution in 1850 as a playground. Occasionally, outsiders would donate money for specific events or causes for the children. In 1854, Thomas Parker, a lawyer, paid for the children to take a trip to Mount Vernon. The asylum also worked to expose the children to books and art (no doubt of a certain kind and moral value). They constructed a small library in the institution and in 1854 took the children to view the art exhibit the Panorama of Creation and Deluge as well as the Panorama of the City of New York.⁹⁰

The asylum encouraged the children to interact with people outside the institution. It maintained an open door policy to several of the ministers of the city to visit and engage with the children. They also welcomed other visitors such as President Andrew Jackson and various members of the Board of Trustees. In January 1856, a local teacher named Miss Hogan brought her students (likely girls) to interact with the children one afternoon.⁹¹ The children even went to visit a member of the Board of Managers, Louise Corcoran Eustis, to congratulate her on her recent marriage. The managers believed all of these people to have a good influence on the children and useful for their edification and instruction.

The managers did not look so enthusiastically on family members visiting the children. They allowed it, likely recognizing the importance of familial bonds, but placed restrictions on how often they could visit. The asylum usually assigned a specific day and time in the week when the child's family could come visit. Whenever a parent or guardian relinquished a child to the institution, they signed a form in which they promised not to "interfere" in the child's upbringing nor to visit the child more than the managers allowed.⁹² The managers wanted the

⁹⁰ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁹¹ Containers 34 and 44, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

family separated from the child to allow the child to receive proper training without corrupting influences.

Moral and Practical Instruction

The managers of the Washington City Orphan Asylum placed great importance on the education of the children in the orphanage. Like so many other orphan asylums in the antebellum period, the managers viewed education as essential to the future success of the orphans; it would be the difference between usefulness and a life of deprivation and sin.⁹³ In their view, proper instruction and formation of character separated their purpose from that of the almshouse. In the poorhouse, the children would live with vagrants and other dreges of society. Living in such company would encourage children to a life of sin, continuing the plague on society. The managers sought to ensure that the children received “religious instruction, moral example, and habits of industry inculcated on their minds.”⁹⁴

Active participation in the church and instruction in the tenets of Christianity served as key foundations in the orphans’ education. The managers of the asylum instructed the governess to take the children to two church services every Sunday. For at least part of the antebellum period, they attended St. John’s Episcopal Church where William Hawley worked as minister. The children also received instruction every Saturday afternoon in hymns and catechism. Group prayer constituted a part of their daily routine. Ministers associated with the society would visit on occasion and deliver a sermon for the benefit of the children, such as Reverend Dr. Pinkney in

⁹² Container 37, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁹³ Hacci, *A Second Home*; Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁹⁴ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

1860. Ministers, particularly William Hawley, also baptized some of the children in the institution.⁹⁵ The children attended the yearly meetings and performed a hymn for the subscribers and managers in attendance.⁹⁶

The asylum hired teachers for the children's benefit. Occasionally the managers would act as teachers, as Elizabeth Brown and Ann Tayloe did in 1832.⁹⁷ In their morning sessions of school, the children learned the subjects of "reading, writing, and cyphering."⁹⁸ Learning to read and write placed some of these children at an educational level above their parents who could not do either. Later asylum records indicate that the children learned "geography, arithmetic, and grammar" as well. In the afternoon, after a break time for recreation, the lessons turned to "sewing, knitting, [and] spinning." When funds allowed, the asylum employed a seamstress to help teach the children how to sew. The managers drafted this course of instruction when the asylum only admitted girls. The education of the boys likely followed a similar pattern, but the afternoon lesson in which the children learned a skill probably altered to something more suitable for boys during the antebellum era. The managers certainly meant for the time children spent learning to sew to lead to a profession for the girls. The children of the orphanage were not high society children. The girls could not depend on marrying for money; the boys could not count on inheriting. Working as a seamstress was an acceptable profession for girls of their social class. The girls living in the institution practiced their sewing by making goods for the asylum. This also helped the asylum financially. In 1854, the thirty-five girls living in the

⁹⁵ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁹⁶ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁹⁷ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁹⁸ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

institution produced a significant number of garments and household goods, including “11 new mattresses,...100 yards carpet, 50 pairs of pants, 170 dresses, 37 boys shirts, 64 aprons,...27 undergarments, 13 night-gowns, 31 capes, 7 bonnets,...[and] 5 cloaks. The younger girls made 48 handkerchiefs. The girls apparently became proficient enough in their skill as to allow some of them to bring their work to the National Fair in 1855.⁹⁹

The children also participated in the day-to-day upkeep of the institution as part of their education. The older children especially would assist in chores that the governess assigned to them. These usually included helping with the cooking, laundry, and cleaning. The governess chose two of the older girls each week to help with the chores, and one did the cleaning while the other did the cooking. The managers believed that requiring the children to work in the institution instilled in them a solid work ethic. It also benefitted the orphanage financially. If the children performed some of the necessary tasks to keep the orphanage running, the asylum could employ fewer women and thus save money. Often, the managers did hire a seamstress, a cook, and someone to help with the laundry, but in other years, like 1860, they could depend on the girls to handle most of the chores.¹⁰⁰

Indentures

Several of the children left the institution through means of an indenture, a contract to a person that would care for the child while the child worked for them and learned a trade.¹⁰¹ The practice of indenturing children, with precedents in the colonial era, was common in the

⁹⁹ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

antebellum period; many orphan asylums viewed it as a viable method of helping orphans obtain the means for caring for themselves in the future.¹⁰² The managers of the Washington City Orphan Asylum wrote out the terms of indenture in their constitution: “As soon as the age and acquirements of the Children shall, in the opinion of the Board of Direction, render them capable of earning their living, they must be bound out to some reputable persons or families, for such object and in such manner as the Board shall approve.”¹⁰³ At the asylum’s opening the managers published an article in the *Federal Republican* with the same statement they placed in their constitution.¹⁰⁴ People who wished to indenture a child from the institution made an application to the managers. For instance, at the Board of Managers meeting in August 1825, the asylum acknowledged five requests from individuals to take children from the orphanage. Some of the managerial records indicate that the managers consulted the child before binding them out. The managers also considered the child’s age before binding the child out. The managers received an application for an indentureship from Mr. Moore in March 1840. They denied his request because no children currently living in the asylum met their requirements.¹⁰⁵

Approximately seventy-nine children left the institution through arrangements made by the managers, several of these in the form of apprenticeship. The asylum apprenticed James Newell to James Kelly, an artisan who worked with tin plates and sheet metal. William Leaton Kerr began his apprenticeship with Mr. Chester, a cobbler, but ended up with Mr. Todd, a hatter.

¹⁰² Hacsí, *A Second Home*, 133-135.

¹⁰³ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰⁴ “The Washington Orphan Asylum Society.” *Federal Republican*, December 5, 1815.

¹⁰⁵ Container 34, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Sarah Eliza Rawlins worked with a tailor named Mrs. Ford.¹⁰⁶ Occasionally, these apprenticeships turned sour. This might be because of the child's behavior. In March 1837, Mrs. Buckingham reported to the managers that a child in her care named Eliza exhibited a "troublesome temper." Some of the people who took children from the institution did not treat them well, and the managers felt the need to investigate the child's well-being. Such was the case with Elizabeth Bevens, indentured to Mr. Magee, a baker, in November 1839. Eliza Kirke died during her apprenticeship with Mr. Bronwell, a resident of Loudon County, Virginia. The asylum received her body in August 1851 and the managers resolved to make "inquiries...into her illness and death."¹⁰⁷

A few of the orphans "placed out" with families did not do so under any contract of labor, but rather went to live with the families and perhaps receive further education. Some of these families even formally adopted the children. Jacob Nollner, a resident of Washington, adopted James Johnson.¹⁰⁸ Mrs. Ford took Sarah Eliza Rawlins and "engaged to adopt her as her own." In December 1849, Mrs. Howell adopted Martha Moses and Mrs. Howard adopted Mary St. John.¹⁰⁹ In the beginning years of the institution, a few of the members on the Board of Managers accepted children. The asylum placed Elizabeth Gardner with Frances Dandridge Lear, Eliza Wigfield with Mrs. Chalmers, and Elizabeth Wigfield with the Bradley family. Most of the people who took children from the orphanage lived in the Washington, D.C. area, but a few lived a considerable distance away. John and Isabella Magee took Ann Flinn to reside

¹⁰⁶ Container 37, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰⁷ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰⁸ Container 37, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰⁹ Container 32, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

in Bath, New York. Harriet Laskey went to live in Middletown, Connecticut with Reverend J. P. Deerbin. Christiania Dodge, the wife of Governor Henry Dodge of Wisconsin, took Ann Gibson in April of 1845. For these children, living within their new household may have presented itself as a welcome opportunity, especially if their new family was that of a governor as was the case with Ann Gibson.¹¹⁰

Entering the asylum spared some children the pain of separation from their siblings. Being placed out would be a different story. Some of the children had the great fortune of traveling to the same household. General Peter B. Porter took both of the Mace sisters, Marg Ann and Martha, to Black Rock, New York. Others were separated by their indentures. Lavinia Laskey went to live with Mrs. Dr. Lovell in Washington, while her sister Harriet traveled with Reverend J.P. Deerbin to Connecticut. All three of the O'Conner siblings went to different houses – Mary Ann to Mrs. Borkland, James to Mr. J. Douglass, and Dennis to James Cull.¹¹¹

Conclusion

In many ways, the Washington City Orphan Asylum was ahead of its time. The managers implemented discipline techniques that seemed unusual at the time, but by the end of the nineteenth century appeared more and more common in other institutions. The managers also managed to feed their children food at least somewhat more varied and nutritional than other institutions. Overall, though, the treatment of the children in the Washington City Orphan Asylum remained consistent with that of other orphanages as well as with larger societal norms. They adopted the same course of education as other institutions, believing like other nineteenth century Americans that children of the working class should become proficient at some trade that

¹¹⁰ Container 37, records of the Hillcrest Children's Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

would make them useful in society. They placed importance on the moral and religious formation of the children as well. The Washington City Orphan Asylum followed the same admittance patterns as other places and endured the changes and the needs of the city that it served.

CONCLUSION

Ann Flinn entered the Washington City Orphan Asylum in May 28, 1827 at the age of five years. Her mother, also named Ann, relinquished her to the asylum. Neither the managers of the asylum nor Ann knew much about her father, except that he was of Irish ancestry. The asylum eventually bound Ann out to John and Isabella Magee, who took her to live with them in Bath, New York. She lived with the Magee family until 1837, ending her indenture two years early. Ann, who married a man named Mr. Gross from Pennsylvania, later told the institution that Isabella Magee “treated and educated her as her own child.”¹

Martha and John Phillips entered the Washington City Orphan Asylum in 1838, Martha at the age of four years and John twenty-three months old. Their father, John Phillips, relinquished them to the institution. He was likely an uneducated man, as he left his mark at the relinquishment of his children rather than signing his name. Their mother had died. Both of the children spent several years at the asylum before dying. John died February 25, 1842 at the age of five. Martha followed almost four years later on December 1, 1845 at the age of eleven. The managerial records do not indicate the cause of either one of their deaths, but it was most likely illness.²

For better or worse, the Washington City Orphan Asylum changed the life of every child that walked through its doors. Most of the children’s stories likely ended in the range between Ann’s story and the story of the Phillips children. The majority of the asylum’s children may not have been welcomed into a loving home and accepted as a

¹ Container 2, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

² Container 36 and 37, records of the Hillcrest Children’s Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

family member, like Ann, but they lived to leave the institution after receiving food, clothing, housing, and education throughout their childhood. This was the intention for those managing and funding the orphanage – that the children receive education and formation in their time at the institution and that they then go out into American society and live useful lives.

In examining the way the Washington City Orphan Asylum functioned, we determine trends in the rest of the society as well. Looking at the situation of the children that entered the institution answers questions about the common citizen of Washington, D.C. It shows that more often than not, children became orphans not because of parental death but because of parental poverty. The relinquishment records of the Washington City Orphan Asylum show the lack of education in the working class as the parents of these children often could not even sign their name. The records also show the plight of widowed or abandoned lower-class mothers, as they were most often the ones that gave their children to the institution.

The Washington City Orphan Asylum existed as a gendered institution, both for its adults and for its children. The women on the Board of Managers maintained a great measure of control over the institution, but they still needed to bring men in on their endeavor because they could not complete certain important tasks. The asylum constructed gendered rules and procedures for the children, as they specified skill sets in their classroom curriculum, such as sewing, which proved particularly useful for girls. They wished to accept only girls, as they believed them more fragile and vulnerable in society. They also considered boys more difficult to control, and therefore less desirable as candidates for the institution. In examining the asylum's gendered structure, we see

the expectations and limitations placed on gender in the nineteenth century. The Washington City Orphan Asylum also shows the racial attitudes of the antebellum period. Many areas of antebellum America lived in a racially segregated world. The Washington City Orphan Asylum maintained an approach to race consistent with its time, only accepting white Americans and the children of European immigrants.

The asylum exhibits the place of religion in social welfare in nineteenth century America. Religion played an important role in the asylum's management, as ministers and churches lent their aid to the institution and the teachers instructed the children in religious doctrine. The asylum also shows the coordination between denominations, as several different Protestant churches came together to help the institution. The Catholic Church remained separate, though, as seen in the Washington City Orphan Asylum's relations with the city's Catholic institutions.

The manner in which the asylum educated their children in religion, morality, and practical skills shows the importance Americans placed on childhood as a time of formation. The institution dedicated so much time in educating the children because the managers believed the time these children spent in the institution would determine the course for the rest of their life. This echoed the importance society placed on properly raising children so they would not become a drain on the rest of their community.

In some areas, such as nutrition and punishment, the Washington City Orphan Asylum foreshadowed trends to come. From the very beginning, the managers sought to feed the children a variety of foods when they could. They wanted the children's diets to include vegetables and milk, foods that later reformers would come to stress as necessities. The Board of Managers also instituted different methods of punishment,

relying on the tools of shame, alienation, and reward for good behavior to help mold the children's habits rather than using corporal punishment. This view towards punishment, as with nutrition, hinted at a future change in American beliefs and policies. Both of these inconsistencies with other antebellum orphan asylums likely derived from the class of the women on the Board of Managers. In possessing greater expendable wealth, the women could donate better food for the orphanage's use. Other places would not be able to afford these foods until improvements in transportation developed. Coming from refined and seemingly noble households possibly led the managers to adapt the asylum's methods of punishing the children.

The class and status of the women on the Board of Managers certainly afforded the Washington City Orphan Asylum an interesting place in institutional history. Due to their political and social importance, these women led the orphanage down a pioneering path of support as they gained the assistance of not only the city but Congress and the President as well. They were not alone among the District orphanages to receive this aid, but their initiatives based on their personal relationships with men in power brought rewards for themselves, St. Vincent's, and the Georgetown asylum.

The women on the Board of Managers, the men on the Board of Trustees, Congress, President Andrew Jackson, various clergymen, and the city and citizens of Washington all helped in ensuring the asylum's survival. This list of benefactors supplies an interesting answer to the question "Who was responsible in nineteenth century Washington for caring abandoned children?" Every capable person in the city of Washington was responsible for helping these children. Some of the people who heard the call to come to the aid of the city's children did not answer. The city leaders, for

instance, rejected the asylum's request for funding in 1822. Yet many people did decide to contribute. The women of the asylum may have concocted the idea to open an orphan asylum, but their solicitation and reception of aid from all these other groups indicates the complex and multi-partied nature of caring for children.

The people of Washington owed their help to this asylum because it was a part of the District of Columbia organism. The institution was an important cog in the city machine. The city of Washington profoundly influenced the institution. The events that affected the city, such as the War of 1812 and the cholera epidemic of 1832, changed the asylum as well. The needs of Washington dictated how many children the institution should accept, what the children's sex should be, and what familial situations these children would come from. The asylum depended on the city, but the city depended on the Washington City Orphan Asylum as well. The orphanage served as an important part in the rebuilding process after the War of 1812 and fulfilled many of the city's needs thereafter in times of crisis. United through a relationship of mutual need, the city of Washington and the Washington City Orphan Asylum shared a history in the antebellum era.

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ABSTRACT

THE CAPITAL'S CHILDREN: THE STORY OF THE WASHINGTON CITY ORPHAN ASYLUM, 1815-1860

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In October 1815, several Washington high society women – including Dolley Madison, Marcia Van Ness, and Margaret Bayard Smith – established the District's first orphan asylum, most commonly called the Washington City Orphan Asylum. During the first forty-five years of its existence, this orphanage housed, clothed, fed, and educated needy children from the city of Washington and surrounding areas. The institution developed an intimate and dependent relationship with the city in which it resided as well as with the United States federal government. This relationship spoke to nineteenth century philosophy towards welfare aid for children. The policies the asylum instituted in choosing which children to accept into their orphanage, how to care for them, and how to secure financing provide perspective into the social mores and habits for the rest of Washington and American society, as do the familial situations of the children that entered the orphanage.