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Benevolent Women and an Orphan Asylum: The Case of Rochester, New York

By

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Introduction

The first woman's rights conventions in America were held in Seneca Falls and Rochester, New York in the Summer of 1848. Those events were seen as a crucial step in the continuing efforts by women to attain for themselves a greater voice in social and civil activities. They were also a revolutionary beginning to the struggle by women for women's rights and the attainment of their goal of complete equality with men. However, eleven years earlier, in 1837, benevolent women of Rochester founded the Rochester Female Association for the Relief of Orphan and Destitute Children. This undertaking was also an important advancement for women. It was part of the continuance of the charitable work being done by the Rochester Female Charitable Society and was a foundation to establishing a voluntary social welfare system where none previously existed. Even more, the Rochester Orphan Asylum, as it came to be known, became the basis for later foster care, adoption agencies, public hospitals, residential treatment facilities, behavioral and mental health services, social welfare systems, and child-care agencies.

Historians have focused their attention more on women's political reform movements such as abolition, women's suffrage, and woman's rights than they have on what women achieved through benevolent endeavors. They considered those movements to be the more important outcomes of women's antebellum activism. The women involved in the benevolent work that preceded those reform movements did not generate the same passion or interest as those who embraced those more radical issues. There is ample historiography that makes the assertion that the charitable work done by benevolent women during this period was just the prologue to those more important reform movements like abolition and woman's human rights.

Ellen DuBois states that “Woman’s involvement in abolitionism developed out of traditions of pietistic female benevolence that were an accepted aspect of women’s sphere in early nineteenth century.”¹ Nancy Hewitt contends that women “followed a lengthy, sometimes circuitous, but essentially singular path from benevolent associations through moral reform crusades to women’s rights campaigns.”² Mary Ryan focused her study on Utica, New York, and confirmed the same progression. She made the point that women’s benevolent societies in the 1820’s combined an evangelical purpose with intrusions into the family sphere which culminated in the reform movements of the 1830’s.³ Keith Melder asserts that “A line of evolution may be discerned from female Bible, tract, and missionary work, to ladies’ aid to their sisters in distress and to moral reform and abolition.”⁴

Evidence supports those contentions. The early charitable activities women participated in did indeed facilitate the foundation of the reform movements that followed but that is not the complete story. The benevolent work done by these women was extremely important in its own right and should not be seen simply as the prelude to nineteenth century reform movements and women’s rights. These women created charitable societies and institutions to aid those in their communities that fell subject to social ills, poverty, and the moral and spiritual deterioration that rapid population and commercial growth was having upon their towns and villages. Their charitable pursuits had an enormous impact not only on the local inhabitants at the time but on today’s society as well. These benevolent women laid the foundation for many of the social

¹ Ellen Dubois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women’s Movement in America, 1848-1869* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 32.

² Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women’s Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), 19.

³ Mary P. Ryan. *The Cradle of the Middle-Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1780-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 110.

⁴ Keith Melder, *Ladies Bountiful: Organized Women’s Benevolence in Early 19th-Century America* (New York State Historical Association,) *New York History*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (July 1967), 250. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23162952>.

welfare systems and agencies that exist today, and they deserve a greater recognition and a fuller appreciation for what they accomplished.

This thesis will look at Rochester, New York during the first half of the nineteenth century and explore how the changes it went through during its early years created the conditions that gave rise to the need for women's involvement in organized charitable works. Rochester provides an excellent site for such a microcosmic study. Its rapid development from a small, frontier village into a large, diverse, manufacturing city paralleled similar changes going on throughout much of America but to a much greater degree. It experienced an explosion of economic expansion along with the social ills that accompanied such a transformation. The benevolent women of Rochester banded together to address some of the problems brought on by those changes. These women were the wives and daughters of the upper-middle-class elite founders of Rochester. They transitioned out of their traditional domestic role and organized themselves into charitable societies to alleviate the town's growing humanitarian needs. With the completion of the Erie Canal, Rochester's benevolent women were confronted with additional dilemmas. The canal transported into their community a huge influx of a new type of resident that created new and unfamiliar social issues. It greatly increased the number of people that needed charitable assistance. Instead of being overwhelmed by the magnitude of these latest challenges, the women of Rochester developed better ways to combat them.

Their mission was inspired by a deep commitment to their religion. It was always an integral part of these women's lives and they utilized religious benevolence to address their social concerns. They employed the evangelical revivalism that was awakening across the country to help reclaim pre-canal social order. That evangelical resurgence assigned new religious responsibilities to women which they used to promote interest in Rochester's

humanitarian activities. One of those endeavors was their founding of the Rochester Orphan Asylum. It was a major accomplishment that demonstrated the caring concern these women had for Rochester's destitute or orphaned children and will be the primary focus here of what they were able to achieve through the combination of ambition, sisterhood, and compassion. Their efforts resulted in the establishment of a private social welfare institution that cared for a disadvantaged segment of their society that had been heretofore neglected. These women actively sought out children in Rochester that were living in deplorable conditions and relocated them into an institution where they received a healthy diet, a good education, and religious training in preparation for a productive and useful life after their time in the Asylum. That institution, having gone through several transformations, still exists today and is still caring for children in need.

The social changes Rochester encountered during the first half of the nineteenth century fostered its women's activism. These women saw an array of problems that needed to be addressed and while some of them chose the reform movement path to women's rights, the benevolent women of Rochester fulfilled their role as the "almoners of Heaven."⁵ The charitable work they provided was extremely important to their community at the time and continues to have a lasting beneficial effect on our society that endures to this day.

Rochester: A Nineteenth Century American Boomtown

Rochester New York, according to Nancy Hewitt, was a city that embodied the economic, social, and political transformations that were taking place across the country in the

⁵ Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change*, 17.

early nineteenth century.⁶ The sequence of rapid urbanization, religious revival, and political and social reorganization struck that community with uncommon force. Rochester was the first of the inland boom towns created after 1815 by the commercialization of agriculture. The Seneca tribe of Native Americans occupied the region up until 1797 when they lost their claim to the land in the Treaty of the Big Tree so in 1812, the site of Rochester was still an unbroken wilderness. By 1830, the forest had given way to a city that became the marketing and manufacturing center for a broad and prosperous agricultural hinterland.⁷ Rochester's population grew from around 700 residents in 1817 to over 20,000 by 1840. It was, for most of that time, the fastest-growing community in the United States.⁸ A British traveler, Alexander McKay, said in the mid 1840's, "There is no other town in America the history of which better illustrates the rapid rise of material and moral progress in the United States than the city of Rochester."⁹

Few anticipated the remarkable growth that took place in Rochester from its incorporation as a village in 1817 through the 1840's. It was first and foremost a mill town and family fortunes were made by those early mill owners and land speculators such as the Rochesters, the Stones, the Whittleseys, the Browns, the Wards, the Bissells and the Pecks. The cooperation within and between these wealthier families led to stability in the upper ranks of the Rochester economy. Paul Johnson refers to these alliances within wealthy families and between others as "a fraternization of economic relationships."¹⁰ During those growth years, town commerce was conducted through mutual cooperation, and not by ungoverned individual

⁶ Ibid., 21.

⁷ Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York*, (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1978), 13.

⁸ Ibid., 40.

⁹ Quoted in Blake McKelvey, *Rochester: The Water-Power City, 1812-1854* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1945), vii.

¹⁰ Ibid., 27.

ambition. The result was a remarkably orderly and closed community of entrepreneurs.¹¹ Rochester's entrepreneurial community was an association of elite families and their friends. Together these business elite controlled the town economy and through family continuity, they continued to do so for decades.

Female Charitable Society

While the men were grasping the reigns of public economic and political power, their wives and daughters took on the mantle of society's spiritual and moral guardians.¹² They began their transition away from the traditional "women's sphere" role of being pious, pure, domestic and submissive into one of social activism. But they retained their piety and purity. They would be essential traits in the new roles they shaped for themselves in the public sphere of organized benevolent forms of activity.¹³ Charitable acts of kindness were commonly referred to during this period as benevolent and the benevolent societies that the women eventually founded were mostly directed at helping the young, poor widows, and the care of orphaned and destitute children. Those Rochester women participated in the founding of the First Presbyterian Church in 1815, St. Luke's Episcopal Church in 1818, the First Methodist Church in 1818, the Female Missionary Society in 1818, the Charity School in 1820 and the Female Charitable Society in 1822. The mothers, wives, and daughters of Rochester's elite families gained leadership and organizational skills in these endeavors that helped them foster women's activism in Rochester's charitable activities.

¹¹ Ibid., 22.

¹² Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change*, 18.

¹³ Ibid., 41.

There existed in early frontier villages a customary female neighborliness where people looked out for one another. Survival in these frontier environments necessitated a dependence on one's extended family and neighbors in times of need. In Rochester, these women extended these old practices of 'neighborliness' that were essential in a frontier setting to their new community's needs and concerns.¹⁴ This neighborliness was the model for a new charitable society that was established in Rochester to aid the sick and the poor. In 1822, fourteen women met at the home of Mrs. Everard Peck and formed the Rochester Female Charitable Society. Its constitution stated, "The primary object of this society shall be the relief of indigent persons and families, in case of sickness and distress and the establishment of a Charity School"¹⁵ The society sent out female 'visitors' that went door-to-door looking for residents that required some form of assistance.¹⁶ These 'almoners' should, according to the society's constitution, live in the same proximity as those they were looking to aid. They would, in essence, be caring for their neighbor in much the same manner as they did in an earlier frontier setting. The document said, "The Board of visitors shall be chosen as far as practicable from the different parts of the city according to the proximity to the several districts. It shall be their duty to learn the condition of the sick and suffering in their different districts by visiting them once a month and to all that the children of the families are visited and sent to the Sabbath School."¹⁷

Working through legitimate arenas like the Church, the Charity School, and societies like the Female Missionary Society and the Female Charitable Society, allowed these women to define an acceptable public sphere for women early on in Rochester. Town residents recognized

¹⁴ Ibid., 70.

¹⁵ Constitution, Miscellaneous Documents, and Wills 1822, Rochester Female Charitable Society papers, D.160, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester.

¹⁶ Ibid., 27.

¹⁷ Constitution, Miscellaneous Documents, and Wills 1822, Rochester Female Charitable Society papers, D.160, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester.

that if a woman was involved in organized benevolent activities, they were a member of the town's emerging elite. Only elite women had the resources and the leisure time to pursue those activities. According to Hewitt, these women viewed charitable work "not as an opportunity for escaping woman's sphere but as an appropriate vehicle for carrying out the responsibilities appropriate to wives and daughters of community leaders."¹⁸ Hewitt was partially correct. Although the early elite women of Rochester did feel it was their duty as prosperous wives of the town's leaders to do charitable work, they were also doing something publicly that was separate from men and different from what their domestic role in the home used to be. They might not have viewed it as an opportunity to escape their sphere as much as a way of expanding their sphere. As spouses of those early town leaders, they were able to define what their 'sphere' would now be. By having their elite husband's support, their public involvement in charitable activities was now seen as being part of an acceptable 'sphere.' The families of female benevolent leaders were the builders of Rochester's early kin-based economic and political order. These influential and powerful men of the town provided their wives and daughters with three crucial resources for public activism: legitimacy, money, and political influence.¹⁹ Securing the support of these men greatly enhanced the ability of these women to pursue their charitable objectives. Everand Peck, whose home was used by the fourteen women who founded the Charitable Society, was a good example of one of those men. He was a church elder, a newspaper editor, a successful merchant and a village trustee. He was a leader in religious activities and reform societies. He was married three times and enthusiastically supported each of

¹⁸ Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change*, 44.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

his wives in their public benevolent projects. Hewitt states that Peck “was representative of the husbands of benevolent women in the forms and degree of aid he provided his female kin.”²⁰

Women were able, through their volunteer charitable efforts in societies like the Female Charitable Society, to gain the town’s acceptance of a new community role for themselves which allowed them to expand their benevolent activities. The congregations at the First Presbyterian, St. Luke’s Episcopal, and the Free Presbyterian Churches enlisted their female members to organize schools to teach reading, writing, and proper thoughts to poor children, and to keep them away from the “highways and resorts of dissipation.”²¹ These were those ‘visitors’, the town’s wealthy women, that went door-to-door in poor neighborhoods to determine who needed help and who deserved to be helped.

Most of the Society’s charter members were spouses or daughters of the town’s elite founding fathers. A similar collaboration existed among the female kin in their benevolent efforts as the elite men had in business and politics. Hewitt stated that Mable (Mehetabel) Ward who was a founder and the first president of the Female Charitable Society, “rested her benevolent labors on a solid but not atypical foundation of family ties.”²² She took an early and active part in various charitable and reform organizations and her daughters followed her in “these various walks of usefulness among the poor, ignorant and distressed.”²³ The Wards were economic and religious leaders in their new community as they had been in the New England town they left. Rochester had only the basic institutions, so the women in the founding families like the Wards

²⁰ Ibid., 50.

²¹ Johnson, *The Shopkeeper’s Millennium*, 118.

²² Hewitt, *Women’s Activism and Social Change*, 47.

²³ *Dedication - Home Volume*, 1886, Ward Family Papers, Rochester Historical Society.

had to try and organize, with the resources of frontier life, some type of social order similar to what they had in their former communities.²⁴

These women shared a commonality in their social and economic status. Hewitt asserts that one reason for these women sharing activities early on in the Female Charitable Society was their shared experience of pioneer life in Rochester. They moved to Rochester at roughly the same time. At least ten of these charter members arrived during the first year of settlement. The dozen or more that came within the next five years joined them in living in close proximity. They went to church together. Their husbands transacted business with each other, and they shared in the town's political decisions. Their families together attended the village social functions, shared resources in times of crisis, and intermarried with regularity.²⁵ Their similar background coupled with their shared economic and social position, led these women to experience the same concerns regarding the changes that were happening in Rochester. These early benevolent women had economic and social stability which enabled them to combine a newly developed sisterhood with ambition and purpose and pursue charitable activities. Women in the 1820's were limited to public endeavors that kept them in their 'accepted sphere' so the female members of the Ward family, like other women in Rochester, found acceptable activities they could participate in. This was doing charitable work.

The Rochester Female Charitable Society that was formed in 1822 to aid the sick and the poor, was the only organized charitable society in Rochester at the time and the humanitarian work being done there was praised by most of the citizens of Rochester and its church preachers. Another example of how the men in town supported their wives was again given by Everard

²⁴ Nancy Hewitt, "The Perimeters of Women's Power in American Religion," *The Evangelical Tradition in America*, edited by Leonard I. Sweet, Mercer University Press, 1984, 238-239.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

Peck. He, as editor of the *Rochester Telegraph*, noted in the March 4, 1823 edition that an excellent sermon was given on that Sunday by the Rev. Mr. Penney. The preacher said that “on no former occasion have we heard the claims of the poor urged with more ability.” Peck wrote in the article that arguments were given with “irresistible proof” that “it is the duty of the affluent to cherish the unfortunate.” He reported that the sermon “inclined every heart to a willing discharge of this duty.” Rev. Mr. Penney, according to Peck, gave examples which “touched the sympathies of the audience,” and helped convince the congregation of the good work that was being done by these women. The article praised the women and the fine work they did were involved in. Church pastors were also lauded for their part in recognizing and promoting the importance of what the women were achieving. These types of sermons helped the women with their efforts of solicitating donations to keep their charitable work continuing. Peck commented:

May the children of affliction in every community, find as warm advocates as the reverend gentlemen who have appealed with eloquence and effect, to the citizens of our village in behalf of the Female Charitable Society – And may the benevolent ladies of that invaluable institution, who are softening the pangs of grief, soothing the despair of affliction, assuaging the pains of sickness, wiping the widow’s eyes, and feeding, and warming, and educating her orphans, be sustained and strengthened. It would be an offense against God and Humanity to withhold from these almoners of Heaven who are carrying education, nourishment and consolation into the retreats of ignorance, sickness, and misery, the means of continuing their divine administration.²⁶

The article gave insight into the “invaluable institution” that the benevolent women of Rochester created. In it, they educated, nourished, and consoled the town’s orphans and their humanitarian activities were recognized by the town’s residents for the benefit it had on their community.

An article in the *Rochester Daily Advertiser* described another example of a preacher in a Rochester church service giving a sermon to promote and praise the charitable work done by the

²⁶ “Female Charitable Society.” *Rochester Telegraph*, 4 March 1823.

town's women in the Charitable Society. It explained that since its inception, the charitable work done by the women has been "persevering and indefatigable almost beyond example, and the poor and suffering have found in them a band of *comforters* ever ready and willing to alleviate their misfortunes."²⁷ A notice in the *Rochester Telegraph* announced a charity sermon given by the Rev. Mr. Perry for the purpose of obtaining donations in order to "aid the efforts of the Female Charitable Society in relieving the distressed and indigent."²⁸

These sermons and newspaper articles were examples that showed that the town enthusiastically supported the benevolent work the women of Rochester were doing and believed that their endeavors were sufficient to alleviate the needs of those negatively affected by the town's early growth.²⁹

The Erie Canal and Social Ills

Things changed dramatically for Rochester with the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825. It had a profound effect on the town by transforming it from a frontier agrarian village into a thriving commercial city. James McElroy asserted that the Erie Canal, more than anything else, had been the cause of Rochester's rapid expansion and the new disruptive elements that came with it.³⁰ The women involved in the town's benevolent activities were confronted with these changes and they were compelled to alter the scope of their charitable pursuits.

²⁷ "Charitable Society." *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, February 3, 1831.

²⁸ *Rochester Telegraph*, February 25, 1823.

²⁹ Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change*, 27.

³⁰ James L. McElroy, *Social Control and Romantic Reform in Antebellum America: The Case of Rochester, New York*. (New York State Historical Association, 1977) *New York History*, Vol. 58, No.1 (January), 22.

In pre-canal 1818, the town had a few mills that processed the local farmers wheat and exported about 26,000 barrels of flour. By 1828, it was 200,000 barrels and by the end of the 1830's, Rochester produced a half-million barrels of flour annually. It became the largest flour producing city in the world and earned the moniker, 'The Flour City'³¹ The Erie Canal was the catalyst for this and the main cause of the city's thriving enterprise and phenomenal population growth. It created the atmosphere of a port city in an inland town. The canal-related economic boom expanded entrepreneurial opportunities and allowed newer and upwardly mobile settlers to seek canal-based fortunes.³² The canal made Rochester the chief provisions market for migrants on their way farther west, and canal travelers continued to spend money here even after newer western towns were established like Buffalo, Cleveland, and Chicago. Mainly due to canal workers and transients traveling through Rochester, there was a large enough working class to support the numerous groceries and small retail stores that were appearing. It was here that men who had little in common with mill proprietors and farm owners could prosper and attain canal-related wealth.

The path to material success was there for many but the economic gains that benefited the entire town also had its downside. Along with that expanded commerce, the canal also created new social ills. Hundreds of itinerant canal workers along with an influx of immigrants were settling in Rochester and they were changing the structure of the town. There was now a sprawling dockside community of groceries, taverns, boarding houses, and brothels. The wage workers that were once part of business owners households now inhabited a distinct social world away from the social order that the previous system sustained. These workers entered a fraternal, neighborhood-based society in which they were free to do what they wanted. The town elite

³¹ Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*, 18.

³² Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change*, 64.

could no longer control social order by the means they were used to. Resident behavior used to be governed by patriarch household heads, the disciplinary machinery of the church, and a web of community interrelationships. The canal changed those relationships and, as Nancy Hewitt stated, that “Change was irreversible, open-ended, and highly visible.”³³ Rochester’s sons were being enticed by free-flowing liquor at the new dockside taverns, and its daughters were being taken in by transient adventurers. Materialism was becoming more important than morality, and the town was confronted with a sense of losing their old way of life.³⁴ Although the elite citizens of Rochester were benefitting economically from the commercial expansion brought on by the canal, they started looking at all the negative and disruptive elements that came with that growth and they began to express some concerns.³⁵ The emergent new town had to cope with multinational immigrants, distrusted Catholics, canal boatmen, footloose boys who served as mule drivers, prostitutes, swindlers, transient adventurers, and drunks. There were establishments that did not exist in Rochester before the canal such as brothels and gambling dens. There was a dramatic increase of dramshops, taverns, and boardinghouses which helped introduce a new licentious element into their town. The old citizens of Rochester found these changes distasteful and disturbing and believed they were threatening the stability of the community. One of the more noticeable consequences was an increase in the number of poor and destitute people living on the streets.

Prior to the opening of the canal, the women in the Female Charitable Society sent ‘visitors’ to the towns different districts to service the needy as almsgivers. Those needs were

³³ Hewitt, “The Perimeters of Women’s Power in American *Religion*,” 239.

³⁴ Hewitt, *Women’s Activism and Social Change*, 64-65.

³⁵ James L. McElroy, *Social Control and Romantic Reform in Antebellum America: The Case of Rochester, New York*. (New York State Historical Association, 1977) *New York History*, Vol. 58, No.1 (January), 22.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23169828>.

mostly met by supplying food and clothing. The “vile and degraded inhabitants of the canal district, their idleness, drunkenness, and affronts to decency,”³⁶ became a more troubling matter for these women. Mrs. Kempshall, who was once a president of the Charitable Society, resigned from it in 1837 in part because she felt visiting the canal districts was becoming too dangerous for women. She contended that these districts were “where no decent female should go because of their vile and degraded inhabitants.”³⁷ Something different needed to be done and the elite women of Rochester began looking for ways to address their concerns.³⁸

The social and economic conditions in Rochester during the canal boomtown years increased both the number and the type of people that needed charitable assistance and, according to the town’s elite, moral reform. With the expansion of the city, there was a flood of immigrants that came looking for work and a place to settle. There were also the transients that stayed for a short time before moving on westward for fresh opportunities. Those canal workers that traveled back and forth through Rochester brought additional concerns especially during the winter months when canal activity was greatly reduced. The seasonal unemployment forced many of its idle workers, some considered unsavory characters, to briefly reside in Rochester. Concern grew over the surge in crime, prostitution, gambling, heavy drinking, and overall licentiousness. The Reverend Joseph Penney of First Presbyterian Church declared that “our far famed canal is fast becoming a channel for corruption to our community and a disgrace to our country...Records of petty larceny and other crimes in our village begin to mark out the canal as

³⁶ Hewitt, *Women’s Activism and Social Change*, 98.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

³⁸ Jack Kelly, *Heaven’s Ditch: God, Gold, and Murder on the Erie Canal*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2016), 145.

a school of corruption.”³⁹ There was even an organization called the Boatmen’s Friend Society that was founded for the sole purpose of bringing morality and religion to the canal workers.⁴⁰

The social and moral order of Rochester was being transformed. Paul Johnson explains how market changes led to shifts in the town’s social order by separating the workplace from the household. Workers used to live in or near the homes of their business owners where they were considered part of the family. They adhered to the rules and controls of that patriarchal household. Once production moved outside of the home and into different locations, there was a separation of workers from business owners and with that detachment came a loss of social and moral control. This new relationship between master and wage earner was created by business owners who deserted their old patriarchal duties and who now preferred money and privacy to the company of their workmen.⁴¹ The new canal workers joined with the workers removed from the households to form an autonomous working class that no longer had that old patriarchal system of control. Without those old forms of social control, the upper and middle class began to sense a moral breakdown among the working people. Johnson contends that when the town business owners came to realize their role in facilitating some of the town’s resultant social ills, there developed a sense of guilt on their part and they sought ways to correct the situation. They looked for ways to reestablish the moral control they had when their workers were part of their household. Without those controls and the charitable safety nets that accompanied those patriarchal relationships, the town’s social ills expanded along with the number of those poor unfortunates that fell by the wayside and needed some assistance.

³⁹ Joseph Penney, “To the Forwarders, Merchants, and others more intimately concerned with the Erie Canal,” *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, August 20, 1830.

⁴⁰ McKelvey, *Rochester, The Water-Power City*, 193.

⁴¹ Johnson, *The Shopkeeper’s Millennium*, 106.

Reform movements and benevolent aid were needed. But in the early canal days of Rochester in the late 1820s, there were few mechanisms in place to care for the greatly increased numbers of those that required help. Those in need, the downtrodden and the troublemakers numbered into the hundreds. They lived outside of the families, the churches, and the social networks that the old elite and the new emerging middle class controlled. The old systems no longer worked and new methods would be needed to deal with these social concerns. Rochester's benevolent women picked up the moral mantle that the men had abdicated and came to the rescue.

Religion, Religious Benevolence, and Charles Finney

In the 1820's and 30's, women used religious benevolence to develop roles outside of the home. They created charitable and reform societies. that became the remedies for many of their community's concerns. Nancy Hewitt maintains that essentially every benevolent activist woman tied her social concerns to her religious commitments.⁴² Religious revivalism was awakening across the country at this time and it was thought a way forward for Rochester to reclaim pre-canal social order and moral reform. Religion played an important role in the lives of the men and women that established Rochester. They, for the most part, all emigrated from New England and they brought with them the religious orthodox Congregationalism and moral awareness of that region. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg states that late eighteenth century New England was an economically static and hierarchically structured society. It was a world of patriarchal and patrilocal families and of densely interwoven kin networks. A village structure heavily

⁴² Hewitt, "The Perimeters of Women's Power in American *Religion*," 233-256.

influenced by their religious beliefs bound the family together, monitored public order, and punished deviant behavior through public shaming rituals.⁴³ In his book about the burned-over district of western New York, Whitney Cross states that, “The New England conscience was ever an idiosyncrasy of ample proportions; when migrant sons, relatives, and neighbors wandered westward all the purposefulness of Yankeedom exerted itself to see that these departing loved ones should continue to walk straightly in the accustomed faiths.”⁴⁴ These New Englanders wanted to ensure that religion, morality and the religious benevolence they practiced followed the settlers into western New York. They were concerned that the trans-Appalachian west would be inhabited by a group of people set adrift from the moral restraints of religion. Numerous missionary and bible societies from different religious sects were formed and their members were sent into the western regions. These religious benevolent groups had succeeded by the mid-eighteen twenties in creating an intensive religious and moral awareness in the Burned-over District.⁴⁵ Cross contends that the inhabitants of this burned-over district, of which Rochester was part of, had a solid Yankee inheritance that came with a strong religious moral intensity.⁴⁶ The belief in predestination that was embodied in New England Calvinism was a mainstay of most of these religions. It held that the world was in God’s hands and beyond people’s control.⁴⁷ Timothy Hacsí reaffirms that by saying “Some people were poor and others wealthy because God had decided the world should be that way. The wealthy had a duty to aid their less fortunate

⁴³ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “Women and Religious Revivals: Anti-Ritualism, Liminality, and the Emergence of the American Bourgeoisie.” *The Evangelical Tradition in America*, Edited by Leonard I. Sweet, Mercer University Press, 1984, 199-231.

⁴⁴ Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District: The social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850*. (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1950), 14.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁷ Johnson, *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium*, 3.

neighbors.”⁴⁸ The elite women in Rochester were good examples of this belief. When they witnessed families in need, those religious convictions motivated them to form the Female Charitable Society to address those needs.

With the religious fever of the First Great Awakening that took place earlier during the mid and late 18th century, religious Congregationalists, Baptists and Anglicans awakened the need in men and women to seek God’s grace. They sought to affect God’s plan by becoming better people through adherence to Christian virtues and performing works of mercy such as visiting the sick and feeding the hungry. That desire to become a better person continued into the 19th century. Hewitt assert that the sense of social duty contained in the New Haven doctrines encouraged women to initiate charitable ventures.⁴⁹ These doctrines were a 19th century New England theological system that originated with Nathaniel Taylor and took a more rational approach than that theory of predestination of New England Calvinism. It encouraged individuals to take responsibility for their own actions and assume a more active role in their spiritual and social well-being. It associated one’s morality with one’s duty to promote charity and virtue.⁵⁰

In Rochester, the road to moral and religious expansion had been established early on by the leaders and women of First Presbyterian and St. Luke’s Episcopal churches.⁵¹ The elite founders of Rochester and their families attended these churches. Nathaniel Rochester and his large extended family along with William Fitzhugh and his family were members of St. Luke’s while Mathew Brown, J.W. Strong, Moses Chapin, Levi Ward and their families were members

⁴⁸ Hacs, *Second Home*, 14.

⁴⁹ Hewitt, *Women’s Activism and Social Change*, 72.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 71-72.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

of First Presbyterian.⁵² The women from these churches in the benevolent societies strove to supply the necessary charitable assistance to those in need, but they again were becoming overwhelmed by the magnitude and scope of the problems they faced. They had hoped that the propagation of religion and the dissemination of Bibles and tracts would be the solution to the growing social disorder, but they were finding it falling short of reaching that objective. The religious leaders were also frustrated in their efforts to restore social order by converting the recently arrived immigrants and canal workers. It was into this unsettled community that the evangelical preacher, Charles G. Finney came to preach in 1830.

“It was a young city,” Charles Finney said of Rochester, “full of thrift and enterprise, and full of sin.”⁵³ Many of the inhabitants in Rochester were defying piety and the more stolid citizens of the town: mill owners, lawyers: physicians, successful artisans, and bankers all “puckered their lips in distaste at the shenanigans of the lower classes.”⁵⁴ Respectability was their creed along with social order and prayerful adherence to religion. With the realization that the moral license of Rochester was moving beyond what its respectable citizens could tolerate and fearing that Rochester might descend into permanent decadence, the city fathers summoned Finney, the greatest evangelist of the day to put the “city’s moral house in order.”⁵⁵

Finney converted hundreds of new souls along with reawakening the waning enthusiasm of some of the old established church members. He raised some concerns among the town’s traditionalists especially the practice of having women and men pray together because it implied new kinds of equality between the sexes.⁵⁶ The evangelical revival was helping to alter the social

⁵² Johnson, *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium*, 65.

⁵³ Charles G. Finney, *Memoirs of Rev. Charles G. Finney*, (New York, A. S. Barnes & Company, 1876), 297.

⁵⁴ Kelly, *Heaven’s Ditch*, 144-145.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁵⁶ Johnson, *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium*, 108.

structure of families. A Rochester husband calling himself Anticlericus complained about a visit Finney made to his home:

He stuffed my wife with tracts, and alarmed her fears, and nothing short of meeting, night and day, could atone for the many fold sins my poor, simple spouse had committed, and at the same time, she made the miraculous discovery, that she had been ‘unevenly yoked.’ From this unhappy period, peace, quiet, and happiness have fled from my dwelling, never, I fear, to return.⁵⁷

Finney inspired these evangelical women to continue their transition away from their traditional sphere. They were becoming more assertive with a new religious enthusiasm.

One of the more important outcomes of the evangelical revival was that it assigned new religious responsibilities to women. The revival message that salvation could be obtained through doing good works, inspired women to pursue their charitable endeavors with a greater passion. It caused wives and mothers to look at their previous subordinate position in the family and to realize that they now had a different role with an increased moral authority. New England’s eighteenth-century hierarchical and structured order had subjected women to social, economic, and religious restraints. Carol Smith-Rosenberg stated that “Their [women’s] enforced silence in religion had ritually underscored accompanying institutional and legal insistence upon their inferiority.”⁵⁸ According to Johnson, “Finney’s male converts were driven to religion because they had abdicated their roles as eighteenth-century heads of households. In the course of the revival, their wives helped to transform them into nineteenth-century husbands.”⁵⁹

Another important result that came about from Finney’s involvement, was a revitalized interest in Rochester’s humanitarian activities.⁶⁰ Most American cities had their share of reform and benevolent societies and Rochester was no exception. They had several, such as the

⁵⁷ Ibid., 108.

⁵⁸ Smith-Rosenberg, *Women and Religious Revivals*, 215.

⁵⁹ Johnson, *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium*, 108.

⁶⁰ McKelvey, *Rochester, The Water-Power City*, 191.

Rochester Society for Prison Reform, the Society for Detecting Thieves and Felons, the Monroe County Temperance Society, the Rochester Society for Sabbath Observance, the Monroe County Bible Society, the Rochester Moral Reform Society, the Monroe County Foreign Missions Society, the Boatmen's Friend Society, and the Rochester Female Charitable Society. Finney revitalized these societies, "Literally hundreds of new Christians and old saints newly 'revived' flowed out from the meetings to join one or more of Rochester's benevolent societies, anxious to put their faith to work in hastening the arrival of God's kingdom on earth."⁶¹ Finney and his followers believed preoccupation with worldly affairs was branded, together with other forms of individual selfishness, as a major sin. Finney's equalitarian faith claimed that everyone can be saved through being converted and he regarded conversion as the beginning of a Christian life. Charity, temperance, tolerance, and humility were held up as the true evidences and proper works for Christian men and women. According to McKelvey, Finney's arguments released and coordinated the moral energies of Rochester.⁶² Evangelical women wanted to ensure their salvation. Finney said that by dedicating their moral energies through organized reform and charitable activities, they could achieve that goal.

Combining the female benevolent societies that were established before Finney's arrival with "a new zeal for perfection,"⁶³ the revival converts of the 1830's initiated campaigns for the abolition of vice, intemperance, and slavery and extended the earlier charitable efforts by Rochester's women to provide for the poor, the ill, and the orphaned. Female church evangelists were urged by fathers, husbands, and the clergy to form maternal associations and prayer circles,

⁶¹ Rosell, Garth M. "Charles G. Finney: His Place in the Stream." *The Evangelical Tradition in America*, edited by Leonard I. Sweet, Mercer University Press, 1984, 144.

⁶² McKelvey, *Rochester, The Water-Power City*, 191.

⁶³ Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change*, 29

and to follow their female predecessors into benevolent works.⁶⁴ Hewitt points out that, while it was the clergymen and businessmen who requested Finney's services, after his arrival, it was women who became the "primary agents of personal and community salvation." It was the female converts of Finney like Melania Smith, Mrs. Selah Mathews, Artemissia Perkins, Mrs. David Scoville and Mrs. Hobart Ford who helped focus Rochester's attention on the "floodtides of revivalism."⁶⁵ In the 'Age of Finney,' evangelists turned to women as the receptive group whose activism symbolized a more general rejection of traditional rituals and boundaries. Evangelical preachers had a moral concern for an individual's salvation. Women were told by those preachers that doing charitable work for the community was a way to help guarantee their salvation. The needs of the male religious leaders and the goals of the benevolent women became intertwined⁶⁶ That expansion of women's charitable activism out into society was the beginning of a path to social welfare.

The prominent women of Rochester were exposed to the ever expanding poorer and seedier elements of their town and they "worried incessantly about what went on in the squalid streets and questionable establishments that surrounded their homes."⁶⁷ They also became aware of an upsurge of those in the town that needed some assistance. One condition that became a primary concern was the growing number of orphaned and destitute children. In early colonial times, people lived in small tightly knit communities where families and neighbors looked out for each other. Children that were orphaned were usually taken in by a family member or by someone in the community. Society and social conditions changed in American towns during the nineteenth century and Rochester typified those changes. Extended families no longer lived in

⁶⁴ Ibid., 29.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 74.

⁶⁶ Smith-Rosenberg, *Women and Religious Revivals*, 214.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 55.

close proximity to one another so individuals could not readily turn to a family member if they needed help. Without family or a tight community safety net, people in need were mostly left to fend for themselves. Destitute and orphaned children were in a different category. They were unable to care for themselves, so society needed to step in and assist. In Rochester, it was the town's women, both benevolent and reformists that came to their rescue.

Early 19th century and antebellum women reformers were those women that were involved in changing behavior and working to change society in order to provide for marginalized people while benevolent women were mainly concerned with supplying charitable aid to those in need. The benevolent women from the elite families of Rochester had been active since 1822 in the Female Charitable Society. As previously noted, the purpose of the Charitable Society was to seek out the needy and provide them with medical care, food, clothing and bedding. Organized orphan relief did not exist, and it did not develop in Rochester until a few years after Charles Finney's arrival in 1830. The Finney-led revivals of the early 1830's introduced revivalistic techniques for the evangelical women that included door-to-door canvassing for potential converts. They also inspired women to join reform movements such as temperance and abolition in order to eradicate immorality. The female leaders of these reformist campaigns often had ties of membership and kinship to the members of the Charitable Society, yet they represented a distinct economic and social sector. Hewitt describes Mrs. Samuel D. Porter as an example of one such leader. She arrived in Rochester in 1835 and became a member of the Charitable Society. Her husband Samuel started his career in Rochester as a clerk in Everard Peck's store. He eventually made a tidy sum in land speculation and the couple became part of Rochester's younger and upwardly mobile second generation of settlers. They both

converted to the new evangelicalism under Charles Finney and participated in the campaigns for temperance, abolition, and moral reform.

The women in these reform campaigns mirrored the kin networks of their benevolent counterparts but were younger and were more recently arrived in Rochester.⁶⁸ These Evangelical women also joined other reform societies such as the Female Moral Reform Society and the Female Anti-Slavery Society and they constituted the bulk of those societies membership. Very few of the charter members of the Charitable Society joined these reform movements or their societies. They continued to work within their traditional 'sphere' where doing charitable work was an acceptable activity. Since they depended on the support and approval of the men and preachers in the town, these benevolent women did not become involved in reform movements for fear of jeopardizing that approval. By doing so, they were, at least in the short term, much more successful in their charitable pursuits than the more radical activists were in their movements. Reform activists were more willing to step out of their accepted 'sphere' than benevolent women. They engaged in reform activities such as anti-slavery and temperance which at the time, were not as well received by the citizenry of Rochester as the charitable work the benevolent women were involved in. Charitable work was at the time was considered an acceptable activity for women. Women's involvement in political movements was not. Men in the early 19th century were not yet ready to accept women stepping that far outside of their sphere.

The bonds that developed among these evangelical reformists often served as a substitute for the strong kinship ties benevolent women had. Hewitt suggests that the evangelical churches that these reformists belonged to, promoted spiritual bonds among these women that could be as

⁶⁸ Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change*, 55-56.

thick as the blood ties benevolent women experienced. Those shared experiences that frontier life provided for benevolent women were provided for the reformists by their membership in their evangelical churches.⁶⁹ However, despite their dissimilarities and the different reasons that motivated their activities, both groups came together and found a solution to Rochester's orphan problem.

The Female Charitable Society's mission was to assist those in need and orphaned and deprived children were at the top of the list of those they considered needy. Since Charles Finney preached that good works were an important component of real faith,⁷⁰ the Evangelical women in Rochester became involved not just in reform activities but in charitable ones as well. They believed that caring for orphans would be a worthy charitable way of expressing their faith. James McElroy gives an example of a Mary Mathews, a leader in evangelical activism, who was one of these women who tried to confirm her salvation by doing charitable work. He emphasized that for her, "Working among the poor...was not only acceptable but essential to the conservative leaders of religious benevolence."⁷¹ Both types of women, benevolent and reformists, went house to house pursuing their separate missions. They visited the needier families in town and while one group focused more on reform and converting souls, both groups worked to evaluate who might be in need of charitable assistance. Both groups became aware of the same thing. There was a segment of society that was being neglected and needed assistance.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 57.

⁷⁰ McKelvey, *Rochester, The Water-Power City*, 191.

⁷¹ James L. McElroy, *Social Control and Romantic Reform in Antebellum America*, 30.

The Rochester Female Association for the Relief of Orphan and Destitute Children

As these women were traversing the town on their different pursuits, they became aware of numerous destitute children. They first discussed among themselves (and then with the men of the town) if this was “the proper time for an effort in behalf of the Orphan.”⁷² In order to make an informed decision about what to do, they formed a committee in 1836 to canvass the town for orphans and destitute children and ascertain how many there were, where they were, and what condition they were in.⁷³ The committee reported that they initially found eleven orphans in the city. There were five that were living in somewhat “comfortable circumstances” being provided for by their friends, four that were “entirely destitute” dependent on charity and living with families who subsist mostly by begging for assistance. The committee reported that the condition of the remaining two was unknown. Besides these eleven, there were another nine living in the Poor House where they were being treated and cared for in the same manner as the adults living there. The committee stated that there were probably more orphans living in town, but these were the only ones they could confirm. They then reported that in their canvassing they became aware of another class of children who were “far more numerous and more destitute and also worthy of benevolent aid.”⁷⁴ These were children that had at least one living parent but for some reason or another that parent was unable to properly care for them. The term used to describe such a child was a half orphan. A full orphan was the term used for a child that had no living parents. Full orphans were much fewer in number and were much sooner provided for because they did not have a living parent to contend with. Because of issues dealing with family attachments, the

⁷² Hewitt, *Women’s Activism and Social Change*, 89.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁷⁴ Report of the Committee on the Subject of an Orphan Asylum, February 1, 1837, Hillside Children's Center Papers, D.122, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester.

report stated that half orphans were considered to be in a worse situation than a full orphan. The women determined both categories of children were in need of help. Orphan Asylums in America in the early 1800's were to be a place where children in need could be placed in a caring environment where they could acquire decent moral habits and useful occupational skills. The founders of these asylums had a concern for dependent children and a determination that vulnerable young children should be able to grow up independent and self-reliant.⁷⁵

The Rochester Female Association for the Relief of Orphan and Destitute Children was founded in 1837 and incorporated as the Rochester Orphan Asylum a year later. The Asylum was a combination of both charity and reform, and it came about as a result of the concern women had regarding the significant increase in the number of Rochester's orphans and destitute children. A major contributing factor was that the asylum was established amid a new wave of evangelical revivalism brought on by Charles Finney and his motivational church sermons. One observer once noted that the effect of Finney's words was "like cannonballs through a basket of eggs."⁷⁶ He was part of the "Great Awakening" that was happening throughout the region and he "awoke" the evangelical women of Rochester into faith driven charitable activities. The Orphan Asylum was founded and run by the women that were already involved in the town's charitable societies but they were now joined by those members of the evangelical congregations Charles Finney preached in. These evangelicals were also members of the new reform societies such as the Temperance and Moral Reform Societies. Since the Asylum was a combination of both charity and reform, their involvement was beneficial to the overall development of the orphans. Children were given nourishment, clothing, medicine, and a place to sleep but they were also

⁷⁵ Susan L. Porter, "A Good Home: Indenture and Adoption in Nineteenth-Century Orphanages," *Adoption in America: Historical Perspectives*, edited by E. Wayne Carp, The University of Michigan Press, 2002, 30.

⁷⁶Kelley, *Heaven's Ditch*, 60.

educated and trained in how to work so they would be able to function in society when they left the asylum healthy and reformed. They were also given religious instruction that would hopefully mold them into decent and moral citizens.

The Orphan Asylum's early membership included many of the new evangelical reformists along with the women from the original elite Rochester families who belonged to the town's first Presbyterian and Episcopal churches. Most of the first officers were selected from the charter members of the Female Charitable Society. They included Mrs. Elizabeth Atkinson, Mrs. Thomas Rochester, Mrs. Silas O. Smith, and Mrs. Ira West. Other charter members were Mrs. Levi Ward and her daughters, Mrs. Samuel Seldon, and Mrs. Edwin Scrantom. The second Mrs. Everard Peck served as the first treasurer and Mrs. James K. Livingston, a former president of the Charitable Society served as a directress of both the Orphan Asylum and the Charitable Society. Because of their social status, these women brought prestige and respectability to the new institution and as such, were able to use their considerable influence to facilitate the founding of the Asylum.⁷⁷

As witnessed with the Female Charitable Society, one of the components to a successful female run operation in Rochester was getting the approval and support of the male population. Men controlled the town's purse strings and wielded its political power so if anything were to get accomplished, their approval was essential. In the planning stages of the Asylum, these women were quick to realize the importance of having the local town gentlemen included in their discussions and readily sought their advice. They shrewdly did this to gain the support needed to achieve their goal of establishing an Asylum. These women were smart enough to know not to antagonize these men by straying too far outside of their accepted 'sphere'. They would have to

⁷⁷Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change*, 89.

abandon their plans if the village's male leaders disapproved.⁷⁸ It proved to be a needless concern for these women because in the case of helping orphans, the citizens of Rochester, both men and women, recognized the need for such an endeavor and enthusiastically supported the Asylum's foundation. An example of this support was a newspaper article in the *Rochester Gem* dated March 25, 1837, which reported the following:

The benevolent will be gratified to learn that the preliminary steps for the establishment of one of these most excellent charities in our city, have been attended with success. We understand that the ladies who took charge of the subject, have met with a cordial reception from our citizens, and have had contributed a sum sufficient to warrant immediate arrangements for the establishment of an Asylum. When the subject was first broached, we did not doubt but the effort would be attended with success: for who would refuse aid to an institution so truly benignant?⁷⁹

Later that year another article appeared in a Rochester newspaper that gave an update on the progress of the Asylum:

This excellent charity is now in successful operation. Its location is pleasant and healthy. It already contains a number of unfortunate but interesting children, who appear contented and happy with their new home. The squalid appearance which most of them presented when taken into the institution, is already changed. Their little eyes beam with pleasure, and their countenances are lit up with joy, as they participate in the pleasing exercises of the school and receive the kind caresses of their benevolent friends...None who regard the present welfare, and future happiness, of the lonely Orphan can visit this Asylum without becoming its friend and patron. There is something so pure and heavenly in the charity, that it irresistibly attracts the warmest sympathies of the benevolent.⁸⁰

The goal that the women had when they founded the Asylum is aptly articulated by this article. They are doing "excellent charity" by removing the "lonely Orphan" from "squalid" conditions and placing them in a "new home" where children experienced some "joy" from their "present welfare" along with being prepared for their "future happiness".

⁷⁸ Ibid., 89.

⁷⁹ "Orphan Asylum." *The Gem*, March 25, 1837. Rochester.

⁸⁰ "The Orphan Asylum." *The Gem*, July 1, 1837. Rochester.

Rochester was not the first orphanage. There had been homes for orphans in North America since 1729 but very few until the 1800's. New Orleans opened the first one. It was a school and hospital run by Catholic nuns to care for girls that were orphaned in Indian attacks. By 1800 there were still fewer than ten orphanages in the country. They started to become more common after the 1820's in part because of the industrial changes that took place across the country. People were drawn away from family farms and relocated into towns and cities to work in the new factories and the new urban commercial businesses. By doing so, they abandoned the old family support system. Families and individuals were left to fend for themselves so if there were a job loss, a new baby, an illness, or a death, it could upset a family's delicate economic balance and create a situation that would leave the family unable to properly care for its children. One of the main reason children were left without a parent were diseases such as yellow fever and cholera.

Timothy Hasci, in his study of orphanages across the nation, emphasized the correlation between epidemics, especially cholera, and the growth of orphan asylums. The 1832 cholera epidemic ravaged Philadelphia, Baltimore, New Orleans, and cities throughout New York and New Jersey. Hasci states that although it was hardly the only disease that led to the founding of orphan asylums, "cholera may have been responsible for the creation of more asylums than any other single cause prior to the Civil War."⁸¹ Since Rochester was one of those towns that experienced the cholera outbreak, it saw a similar increase in orphaned children that those other towns had witnessed. Rochester's first cholera victim arrived in early July coming from the East via the Erie Canal.⁸² The effects of the disease spread terror and death throughout the community. Approximately one thousand residents fled town and those that couldn't leave,

⁸¹ Hasci, *Second Home*, 24.

⁸² McKelvey, *Rochester, The Water-Power City*, 180

remained behind but stayed indoors. During the first month, fifty-seven people died including eleven in one day during the month of July. Fortunately, the epidemic was short-lived, but it still claimed the lives of one hundred eighteen victims and infected another four hundred.⁸³

Numerous children were left uncared for and destitute when their parents fell victim to the disease. Other children were abandoned when their parents left town and headed west.⁸⁴ The effects of the outbreak lingered for years in Rochester and facilitated the founding of the Orphan Asylum.

The social conditions that triggered the need for orphan asylums in other areas of the country were typified in Rochester: industrialization and wage labor, rapid population growth, immigration, transportation improvements such as the Erie Canal and diseases like cholera, all contributed to the increase of orphaned children. When a father died or abandoned the family, the surviving members would often fall into poverty. In such cases many a widow would be forced to find work to support her family having to leave her children home alone and unattended. Some fathers might be unable to find a job, keep a job or even want a job. A mother or father or both might succumb to problems associated with intemperance. Without having any means of support, some families ended up living on the streets dependent on begging or stealing to survive. Occasionally a parent might commit some crime and end up incarcerated. The work the benevolent women were doing in dealing with poor relief was exacerbated by the ravages of the cholera outbreak, the increasing number of destitute immigrants and the economic effects of a recession.

The town of Rochester experienced most of those scenarios listed above and the women of Rochester established the Orphan Asylum to address the needs of those orphaned children.

⁸³ Ibid., 181.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 182.

The purpose of the Asylum, as stated in its constitution, was for “protecting, relieving and educating orphans and destitute and dependent children in the City of Rochester, and maintaining an institution for the care of such children.”⁸⁵ The women in Rochester were determined that “the vulnerable young children” living in their midst would be properly cared for and it was that concern that motivated them to establish an institution to achieve their objective.⁸⁶

On April 13, 1837, the first nine children were brought into the Asylum. An article in the *Gem and Ladies' Amulet* laid out some “interesting facts” from the diary of the Asylum’s first Matron on what transpired and what was accomplished during the earliest days in the Asylum.⁸⁷ These “facts” helped to further expand on the reasons why the women of Rochester decided that they needed to do something to aid destitute children along with how beneficial it was for both the children and the town that the women embarked on that task. That initial small group of children all came from the Rochester Almshouse but half orphans in the town were soon included and the number taken into the asylum quickly increased to thirty. The whole number received that first year was seventy-eight of which forty-four were girls. There were thirty-nine under six years of age and one boy and two girls over ten. Out of those first seventy-eight children, fifteen were known to be full orphans and five were left deserted by their parents leaving the women in the Asylum unsure if their parents were dead or still alive. The remaining fifty-eight, with one or two exceptions, had indigent widowed mothers. Some of these mothers were allowed to place their children in the institution if they could find work and pay for the board of their children. This enabled some mothers to support themselves by working in a textile factory or maybe as a domestic in someone’s home. If not for this option, they and their children

⁸⁵ Constitution, Miscellaneous Documents, and Wills, 1837. Box 1, Folder 1, Hillside Children's Center Papers, D.122, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester.

⁸⁶ Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change*, 88-89.

⁸⁷ “The Orphan Asylum.” *The Gem and Ladies' Amulet*, 1837. Rochester.

would probably be homeless and living on the street “exposed to vice and immorality.”⁸⁸ Begging, prostitution, and thievery were often the only means available for women to survive in that situation and having their children staying with them would expose their sons and daughters to all that “vice and immorality.” The asylum managers declared that these children would probably embark on the same path as their parents in these same immoral behaviors if some other alternative arrangement was not made available to them. In a Board of Manager’s report,⁸⁹ the women stated that “there can be no doubt” that the fifty children currently in the Asylum would be street beggars, or living in the Almshouse, or in some other way supported by the Public if not for their institution. The women compared the care given children at their Orphan Asylum with what the children would be subjected to if living in the Rochester Almshouse.

The Almshouse or poorhouse was a county institution founded in 1826 on a farm a few miles outside of Rochester. Almshouses were common in many states and were established to give shelter to society’s destitute. Most almshouses were filthy, dangerous places where all kinds of people; young, old, sick, and mentally ill, lived together in crowded conditions. Since no institutions existed during Rochester’s early years to care for orphans, these were the places that initially served as a storage place for orphaned or abandoned children. Children in an almshouse came in daily contact with murderers, thieves, prostitutes, the sick, and the dying.⁹⁰ Committees were formed to go to the Rochester poorhouse to examine the condition of the children living there and ascertain if they should be moved into the Asylum. On April 25, 1837, it was recorded that Mrs. Reed and Mrs. Moore visited with the supervisors of the Poorhouse and based on what

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Fourth Annual Report, Oct. 1842, Hillside Children’s Center Papers, D.122, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Presentations, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester.

⁹⁰ Reef, *Alone in the World*, 7-8.

they saw, it was decided to move the seven orphans living there into the Asylum.⁹¹ The Orphan Asylum report stated that, in their view, there was no question as to which place was the healthiest environment for these children:

The best teachings in the world would not obviate the influence of adult depravity, to which the children are daily and hourly exposed; and while one is the receptacle of the worthless & withered branches of society, the other is intended as a nursery of those stems which have been cut off from those branches, & that may be grafted in a vital stock and brought under the influence of virtuous principles.⁹²

The Poorhouse was not a good environment for children. The women involved in the Asylum recognized this and although the children living there were being provided with their basic needs like food and shelter, they believed relocating the children to their asylum would be a far better situation for them. They knew they would care for these children in a more beneficial and caring manner. Removing the children to the Asylum seemed to be the best way to help these children, their mothers, and the town's social order.

The women running the Asylum had certain objectives for what they wanted to accomplish for these children. They established the "Laws for the Regulation of the Family"⁹³ that explained the methods they would use to accomplish those goals. The women applied the term "Family" because they wanted, as much as it was feasible, to have the children in the Asylum treated as they would be if they were living in a stable family. For these women, their involvement in the asylums was seen as an extension of their maternal role in the family. The asylums were to be a home for the children, and the asylum matron was to be like a mother to them. The female managers sought to create an environment that provided children with safety,

⁹¹ Records of the R.O. Asylum from the Organization of the Soc. From. Feb. 28th, 1837 to Sept. 26th, 1843, 23.

⁹² Fourth Annual Report, Oct 1842, Hillside Children's Center Papers.

⁹³ Records of the R.O. Asylum from the Organization of the Soc. From. Feb. 28th to Sept. 26th, 1843. Laws for the Regulation of the Family, Hillside Children's Center Papers, D.122, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Presentations, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester, 18.

nourishment, tenderness and comfort. One of the first concern of any parent would be the physical wellbeing of their children. This entailed making sure they were kept clean, properly nourished, and had a comfortable, safe, place to stay. The 'Laws' document showed how the women addressed those concerns and created a sense of order in the lives of these children by describing what a typical day in the Asylum was like. The women in the Asylum made sure children adhered to a strict regimen where they had to rise at a certain hour every morning, wash and dry themselves, eat their three meals of the day together at specific times, and retire together at a set time every evening. Children in families learned structure and discipline by obeying the rules and regulations laid down by their parents. Discipline and structure were critical in teaching children the difference between right and wrong and in preparing them for adulthood. The women accomplished the same results in the Asylum with their structured environment.

An important component of the physical wellbeing of a child would be their diet and the women made sure the Asylum provided the children with ample and healthy meals. The report described the children's daily diet. Breakfast was usually bread and hasty pudding which was cornmeal and boiled milk. Occasionally it contained molasses. There was also the occasional baked potato. They were given clean water or fresh milk to drink. Dinner, which was the main meal and served during the day, was varied each day. On any given day it may have consisted of soup, codfish, some kind of meat, fruit, potatoes, Indian pudding, boiled rice and a vegetable. Supper usually consisted of bread and hasty pudding served occasionally with baked apples.⁹⁴ If something was found to be unagreeable to a child, the matron could use her discretion and make an adjustment that addressed the different needs of a specific child. This demonstrated a concern the women had for the children as individuals. The women organized committees that arranged

⁹⁴ Ibid., 19.

for the procurement of fruit and vegetables that would last the Asylum through long winters. They had a discussion at one meeting about whether fresh butter should be made available for the children. The women decided it would be beneficial and arrangements were made to supply it. They even procured a cow to ensure a fresh supply.⁹⁵ Another entry described how the women requested and purchased “a quarter of beef” for the children so they could eat fresh meat. The women solicited food donations from people in town when there was a special need or a shortage of funds. It was recorded that their efforts were often rewarded with many gifts such as additional sides of beef and barrels of pork.⁹⁶ The women running the Asylum knew a good diet was essential for the health of a child and, evidenced by their meeting reports, they demonstrated their success in furnishing one. They understood that a healthy child would have a much better chance functioning in society upon leaving their asylum.

Since the Asylum was a substitute for a family where a mother would supply healthy nourishment for their children, it shows the women in the Asylum cared for the children’s health in much the same way they might have with their own children. Not all orphan asylums had that same concern. Catherine Reef claims that many orphans of the early 1800’s ate a monotonous diet that rarely included fresh fruits and vegetables. She points out that records from one asylum, the Cincinnati Orphan Asylum, suggest that the children living there in the 1830’s ate bread and molasses, drank water or weak coffee, and had little else. She does acknowledge though, that there were other orphanages such as the ones in Boston and Portland, Maine, that supplied similar healthy diets for the children as those provided by the women in the Rochester Asylum.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Ibid., 34.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 32-33.

⁹⁷ Reef, *Alone in the World*, 25.

This was evidence that the caring women had for children in need was not unique to Rochester. Organized women's benevolence in the 19th century was happening throughout America.

Training to prepare the children for life outside the asylum was also an important objective for the women. All the children were instructed on weekdays in reading, writing, and arithmetic along with sewing and knitting for the girls. They were all to be educated and "formed to habits of Industry."⁹⁸ Hard work and discipline were values espoused by the Protestant faith and particularly by Calvinism. The women that founded the Orphan Asylum all shared that Protestant background which incorporated that "Protestant Work Ethic." Since it was so highly regarded in their society at this time, the women made sure it was instilled in the children that came through the Asylum's doors. The women in the orphan asylum accepted children into their institution that would serve as both their home and school prior to them being adopted or indentured out into families. Once that happened, they then hoped the children would learn additional skills and the social lessons necessary for a successful and productive life.

Women in the asylum wanted social order in their community. They witnessed how the industrial changes Rochester was experiencing created an unruly working class. They believed they could mold the children in their care to be a particular kind of future worker that respected authority. Through their structured environment in the asylum, they worked to have these children accept a regimented life. That, coupled with instilling in them the Protestant work ethic, would shape them into being better workers and town residents.

As stated previously, religion was an important part of the lives of the women that founded the orphan asylum, so their third goal was to make sure children within the asylum

⁹⁸ Records of the R.O. Asylum from the Organization of the Soc. From. Feb. 28th to Sept. 26th, 1843. Laws for the Regulations of the Family, 19-20.

received their Protestant religious instruction.⁹⁹ The Asylum's "Laws and Regulations" document described such teachings. Each weekday morning after they were washed and dressed, the children would assemble together where the superintendent or teacher would read to them a chapter from the Bible followed by the children repeating the Lord's Prayer. At their meals, the matron had them pause before eating and taught them to thank God for their food. The day would end with another reading of scripture by the superintendent. On the morning of the Sabbath, the women would assemble the children in the schoolroom for Sabbath School where a gentleman from town, chosen by the asylum's Board of Managers, would give them religious training after which they would attend church service. Later in the day, a teacher and the matron would devote an hour to bible instruction along with quizzing the children from "The Child's Scripture Question Book." This would be followed by some religious singing. The women running the orphan asylum considered religious training central to its mission in preparing children for a decent moral life after their time in the Asylum.

The women in the Asylum succeeded in obtaining the recognition and appreciation from the citizens of Rochester for the accomplishments of the benevolent work they were doing in the Orphan Asylum. *A Rochester Orphan's Souvenir Book* was compiled in 1843 for the purpose of generating funds to assist in the maintenance of the Orphan Asylum. Frederick Whittlesey, a prominent town attorney and one of Rochester's founding fathers, wrote an essay in the book expressing his thoughts regarding the aid being provided by the women on behalf of the town's orphans. He acknowledged that those in society who are more prosperous have a responsibility to care for those that are less fortunate. He stated that "the promptings of humanity and the requirements of law alike impel us to make this imperfect compensation for the inequities of

⁹⁹ Ibid., 18-21.

fortune.”¹⁰⁰ He recognized that there was a reluctance on the part of many to give aid to those that had ended up in a destitute condition because of their own character deficiencies, immoral behavior, or criminal activity: “This charity or justice is...administered somewhat grudgingly, from the conviction that abject want is more commonly the deserved punishment of vicious or criminal habits.”¹⁰¹ But the lonely orphan, according to Whittlesey, should not be punished for the sins of their parents. The orphan did nothing to contribute to the condition they found themselves in and should not be denied society’s help. He wrote, “the orphan, in its infant helplessness and the guilelessness of its tender years, is innocent in the eye of morality... There may have been vice or crime somewhere, to lead to destitute orphanage; but no stain of it rests upon the orphan, to check or cool our sympathies for its misfortune.”¹⁰² He made the point that the reluctance by many in Rochester to help the parents that are in the depressed situation they are in because of their own actions and behavior might be readily accepted, but “in the case of the helpless orphan, justice itself relaxes the severity of her frown, and permits all the gushing sympathies of our nature to pour forth unrepressed.”¹⁰³ Whittlesey pressed the point that whatever the parents may have done, the orphaned child was not to be blamed or punished because of it.

His essay supported the contention that the conditions in Rochester, like the canal influences previously discussed, fostered the need for an institution to aid these children. He held that in a thriving town like Rochester with its rapid growth, transient population, and social ills, it would naturally happen that the “number of destitute orphans would, from the ordinary

¹⁰⁰ Frederick Whittlesey, “The Orphans,” in *The Orphan’s Souvenir: A Rochester Book in Aid of the Orphan Asylum, 1843*. Rochester: William Alling. New York Historical Society, Main Collection, YC1843. ORP, Record Number 001288831, 5.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 6.

casualties of such a place, be considerable.”¹⁰⁴ There were no other institutions or means of charity that specifically dealt with the town orphans until the women of Rochester founded the Orphan Asylum. Whittlesey’s essay extolled the citizens of Rochester, specifically its women, for fulfilling their duty to care for the town’s innocent orphaned children. It provided an overview of what the institution was accomplishing, and it credited its benevolent women for leading the cause to address and alleviate the problem of what to do with Rochester’s orphans. As Whittlesey put it, “the ladies who are ever the leaders in such charitable enterprises, formed a society expressly for the relief of orphans...The leading object has been pursued with unremitting attention, ever since the commencement of the enterprise under the judicious auspices of the ladies, who have been principally its managers.”¹⁰⁵

Whittlesey noted that the women were concerned with more than just supplying children with their basic needs. Their happiness and moral character were also a consideration as he explained:

The duties of parents have, through the instrumentality of this institution, been faithfully discharged to more than two hundred children who have been received under its care. These duties have not been confined merely to the furnishings of these bereaved ones with food and clothing; but they have been extended, with all a parent’s care, to their intellectual and moral culture, and providing for their future welfare, usefulness, and happiness.¹⁰⁶

Whittlesey emphasized that the women in the Asylum, by caring for the orphans in a way loving parents would, dispatched children out into the world better adjusted where they could contribute to society as useful, happy citizens. On the surface, Whittlesey seemed to imply that aid was given for the more humanitarian concerns for the children; ones that would be what a parent would primarily be concerned with. But his essay used a few terms that lends one to think

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 7.

he believed the social order of the town might have been the more motivating incentive. Social order was indeed a reason for the women to remove children from harmful environments, so perhaps Whittlesey was correct with his inferences.

Whittlesey's references to the children's usefulness suggests that one of the primary goals for the women in the asylum was to have these children fashioned into useful citizens. They did have a humanitarian concern for these orphaned children, but they also understood that children living on the streets, in almshouse, or with unfit parents might threaten the town's social order. Children existing in those conditions would not learn how to be a useful member of society. Whittlesey expressed confidence that the asylum was doing its part to maintain the social order of the town by preparing the children in their institution to become useful citizens. His use of the term "usefulness" along with his quote referencing their Asylum experience supports this. He stated that, "their minds and hearts have been taught by judicious instruction; they have been trained to industrious habits, provided with suitable places at proper age."¹⁰⁷ Whittlesey stressed the importance of having these children trained properly in the asylum with the aim of them being placed back into society as useful contributors. His comments help to confirm the assertion that maintaining the social order was an important incentive for the women in the asylum to take control of the care and training of these orphans.

Whittlesey also pointed out that most of the children did not end up being adopted into a loving family. He stated children were "in not a few instances adopted from motives of affection, into respectable families, as children."¹⁰⁸ He suggested that it was much more common that the children leaving the Asylum were just being placed out into convenient situations. Records from the Orphan Asylum will later show this to be true. Most of the children leaving the asylum left

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 7.

into indentured service. Boys were used as indentured laborers and apprentices in town businesses and girls were positioned in private homes where they worked and were trained as domestics. Whether the incentive for these women to care for these orphans came from humanitarian concerns or a desire for social order, their efforts resulted in children being in a place where they were cared for and prepared to be useful citizens in their community.

Levi Ward Smith also wrote an essay in *An Orphan's Souvenir Book*. He was the son of Silas O. Smith, another of the founding fathers of Rochester. Smith was a lawyer, politician, and in later years, a church minister. His essay told a touching story that underscored the compassionate connection these women had for the children in their care and it helped demonstrate to others in the town how important the asylum was in caring for the town's orphans. In the telling of the tale, a foreshadowing was seen of the transition orphan asylums made into foster care. Smith's essay revealed a more humanitarian concern on the part of the women as the main motivation to assist orphans than Whittlesey's essay did. There was little mention of a child's future 'usefulness' in Smith's essay. The essay, entitled *The Re-Union*, told the tale of Miss Clara Harding and Mr. Frederick Stapleton who were in the beginning stages of a romantic relationship. Mr. Stapleton had been away from Rochester for some time and when he returned, he was surprised and shocked that his Miss Harding was involved with the Orphan Asylum. As he described it, "Here was news: the refined, the delicate Clara -she, so romantic, so *spirituelle*, engaged in collecting and scraping into one heap the refuse of the streets and abodes of poverty."¹⁰⁹ The essay described how Mr. Stapleton went to the Asylum to see for himself what Miss Harding was involved in. He heard her speak to about thirty or forty women regarding

¹⁰⁹ Levi Ward Smith, "The Re-Union." In *The Orphan's Souvenir: A Rochester Book in Aid of Orphan Asylum*, 1843. Rochester: William Alling, New York Historical Society, Main Collection, YC1843. ORP, Record Number 001288831, 11.

men supporting their endeavors. She declared that any man of means who refuses to aid the work being done in the Asylum should be disregarded. She then went on to state how important she felt it was to help these orphans, “It is not in the splendor of wealth, the pride of power, or in the glitter and blaze of fashion, that the noblest traits of humanity display themselves. No! there is more divinity in his soul who sustains one life or purifies one heart, than inspired Napoleon on the field of Austerlitz.”¹¹⁰ Miss Harding showed Mr. Stapleton around the Asylum so he could see for himself the state of children living there. Along the way she related one asylum experience that would in time develop into what would eventually become foster care: A widowed mother with four children was being sent away to state prison so she brought her children to the asylum and begged the asylum manager to “take and save my children.” It depicted a heart wrenching scene of a mother being separated from her children which when witnessed by Miss Harding elicited her to remark, “No fiction could ever draw tears, so many or so pure.”¹¹¹ When her prison term was completed, she returned to the asylum and was able to take her children home and care for them properly. Here was one example of how the Asylum served as a temporary home and became the model of the foster care system.

In the essay, Mr. Stapleton expressed his concern to Miss Harding that the women attending to these orphans were subjected to ‘vulgarity and low life.’ She retorted that the needs of these poor children outweighed any risk or danger that may befall those that were committed in helping that ‘low life.’ The reply she gave regarding the Howarth family children, provided some evidence that the women had primarily a humanitarian concern for the children coupled with a Heavenly reward for charitable acts:

Sir, what of vulgar or low can you discern in those graceful, black-eyed Howarths? Thank Heaven, Nature bestows beauty and the graces where she

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 13.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 14.

wills...I wish you had been with us when we found them in a hovel—their mother dead—the father intoxicated by her corpse—no food—no light—no fire! Did any fear of contamination distress the good Dr. R-----, when he watched, with skillful care, the poor, lame, burned Helen Howarth? He looks for, and will he not find, his reward in Heaven?¹¹²

Mr. Stapleton saw many other Asylum children and was informed of the different circumstances of why they were there. He witnessed the positive results that the women were achieving, and in doing so, developed a whole new appreciation for the women and the work they were doing in the asylum. The essay concluded with Mr. Stapleton promising his support both morally and financially.¹¹³

Although the essays in the book were primarily used to assist the Orphan Asylum with soliciting financial support, they offered insight as to how the town of Rochester felt about the charitable work that their women did and how it was appreciated. By writing glowing reviews of the work being done and contributing money to have it continue, men demonstrated that they believed that what the women were accomplishing in the Asylum was of great value to the Rochester community. These men witnessed children that were no longer living in a destitute state. They were now being well cared for thanks to the charitable efforts of the women running the Asylum. These women had the skill to successfully convince the men in town of the importance of the work they were doing. That enabled them to obtain the financial and moral support that was essential to the maintenance and continuation of such an institution.

Once the Orphan Asylum was established, its Board of Managers issued an annual report to remind their financial backers of the nature of the charity that they supported. The managers provided them with reports regarding their accomplishments during the previous year. They also supplied them with an accounting of how their donations were being spent. The women used the

¹¹² Ibid., 15.

¹¹³ Ibid., 22.

report to encourage even more town donors to contribute to their cause. They hoped that by seeing the positive results laid out in the report, the Asylum's benefactors "may the more cheerfully render their aid in the hour of its future need."¹¹⁴

Half Orphans

The majority of children in the asylum were half orphans and the Board of Managers Reports established certain criteria for their acceptance into their institution. Parents sometimes had to relinquish their rights to their children in return for having the asylum care for them. They required them to sign the following Rochester Orphan Asylum form:

I, the subscriber, solicitous that my child shall receive the benefit and advantages of the Rochester Orphan Asylum, and the Board of Managers being willing to receive and provide for him or her, and also to place him or her out in a virtuous family until he or she is of age agreeable to the rules of the society, provided I do relinquish my child to them. I do truly promise not to interfere in the management of him or her, without their consent. And in consideration of their benevolence in receiving and providing for my child, I do relinquish all right and claim to it and its services until it shall arrive of age. And I do engage that I will not ask or receive any compensation for the same, nor take it from, nor induce it to leave the family where it may be placed by the Board of Managers of the Asylum.¹¹⁵

By having the parents sign such a form, the women running the Asylum were making a judgement that they were better equipped than the parents were to care for their children. The parents, according to these women, forfeited their rights to their own children by showing they were incapable of properly caring for them. The women from the Asylum often held, as most of society at the time did and as expressed in Whittlesey's essay, the belief that it was the parents

¹¹⁴ Fourth Annual Report, Oct. 1842, Hillside Children's Center Papers, D.122, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Presentations, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester.

¹¹⁵ Parent's or Guardian's Rights Once a Child Was Received by the Rochester Orphan Asylum, 1845, Hillside Children's Center Papers, D.122, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Presentations, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester.

own fault that they were in the destitute condition they were in, and it was now up to the women in the Asylum to take control for the sake of the children.

They instituted a rule that an application for a child to be admitted by a parent who had only one child, would not be accepted unless it was an extreme case. The managers thought discrimination in the acceptance process was necessary to save the Asylum from having children abandoned there by an indolent parent. Concern for the parents was secondary to the welfare of the children, Parents would often be separated from their children because the women in the asylum thought they were more capable in caring for the children than the parents were. Separation may have been difficult for both the parents and the children, but it was done by the women in the asylum with the children's best interests and welfare in mind.

Research has uncovered little information regarding how half orphans felt about their experience of being separated from their families and being placed in an Asylum or how they fared after leaving it. Memoirs from children that went through the Rochester Orphan Asylum are hard to find or are nonexistent, but a memoir written by a man that lived through the orphanage life in New York State, gave a glimpse into what the experience was like. Sam Arcus was a seven-year-old boy living in the lower east side of New York City. His mother, Mollie Arcus, had fallen to her death from the roof of their tenement building. His father, Nathan, tried to keep the family together but the money he made as a garment presser was not enough to pay someone to take care of his three children, put food on the table, and pay the rent. He had no choice but to put them in an orphanage. His younger sister, Henny, was placed in an asylum that only accepted girls aged 2 to 5. Sam and his brother Al were taken by their father to the Hebrew National Orphan Home in Yonkers, New York which only accepted boys. They arrived with a social worker, Claire Fiance, to a massive four-story structure surrounded by a barbed wire-

topped fence. When they entered the facility, the social worker led the family to the superintendent's office where events happened all too fast. As the boys held on to their father and begged him to take them home, they noticed that he was in tears. Then a man the children had never seen before pulled the older brother from the room by force. The experience was so traumatic that more than seventy years later, the pain remained fresh in Sam's memory. "I had lost my mother, I was separated from my baby sister, and some strange man came and took away my brother."¹¹⁶ Sam felt a pair of hands pry him from his father and he was taken to a dormitory that he would be sharing with sixty other boys, never to return to the family life he once knew. The trauma of removal had a lasting effect on everyone involved in the process. Similar experiences were most likely taking place in orphanages throughout the country including the Rochester Asylum. As difficult or traumatic as these experiences may have been, according to the town elite, the overall benefit of having children taken in from living in destitute conditions on the streets or removed from the almshouses, likely outweighed that pain of family separation.

In the first thirty years of its operation, the Rochester Orphan Asylum had 1,427 children come through the institution where they "shared the benefits of this Charity."¹¹⁷ A document from 1869 called *Sketch of the Origin and History of the Rochester Orphan Asylum, as Imbodied in a Report to the "Commissioners of Public Charities."* described the intent of the "several charitable ladies" after they became aware of children in town that were dependent on private charity and "exposed to all the evils consequent upon the loss of parental care." There were the poor widows whose "exertions however great," could not support their children. Some other parents were addicted to every kind of vice. They were destitute, subsisting on the bread begged

¹¹⁶ Catherine Reef, *Alone in the World*, 2-3.

¹¹⁷ *Sketch of the Origin and History of the Rochester Orphan Asylum, as Imbodied in a Report to the Commissioners of Public Charities. October 1869*, Hillside Children's Center Papers, D.122, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Presentations, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester.

by their children sent out going door to door. Sometimes these children were subjected to punishment if they returned without anything for the parents. As a result, they often resorted to stealing to get what they needed. In view of all these circumstances, the women of Rochester felt something must be done immediately to “rescue these orphans & destitute children from this life of want and sin & by kind care & and judicious training fit them for usefulness here and happiness hereafter.”¹¹⁸

These women demonstrated that there was a genuine humanitarian concern for these children’s welfare. But by using terms like “training’ them to make them ‘fit’ so they could be ‘useful’, it once again demonstrated that part of their motivation in aiding these children was also a concern for social order. Children left to their own devices on the streets or picking up bad habits in almshouses were seen by these women as potential problems for Rochester. Having these children trained and educated to become useful citizens would be a much better alternative. The Orphan Asylum was the means to achieving that goal. Sam Arcus’s experience can be seen as one such positive example. He went through the orphanage system where he stayed until he finished high school. He went on to college and then graduate school after which he became a social worker. He married and had two children. Without other memoirs, it is difficult to ascertain and document how many more orphans benefited from the experience as Sam did but evidence would suggest that based on the number of children that entered asylums, there were probably a good number that had similar experiences.

According to Timothy Hacsí, more of America’s dependent children were helped in orphan asylums than by any other means. These were children whose families, including their extended families, were unable to care for them. He states that from the 1830’s, when the cholera

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

epidemic led to the founding of dozens of new asylums across the country, until the 1920's, orphan asylums were more influential in shaping poor children's lives than any other American social institution except public schools and churches.¹¹⁹

Through much of the nineteenth century, orphanages were involved in a process that broke families apart. As advocates for children in need of protection from evil influences, these women had to often decide if the harm of being exposed to intemperate or immoral parents seemed more compelling for a child than the maintenance of familial ties.¹²⁰ Most always they decided in favor of what they thought was best for the child without much concern for the parents. They knew that certain situations, such as living in the Poorhouse, was not a good place for children. and they took what they believed to be the correct course of action to ensure their welfare even if it involved separating a child from its mother. The Asylum, according to the judgement of these women, presented the best option for the initial care of the town's destitute orphans. This was demonstrated at an Asylum meeting on December 28, 1841, where the women discussed the case of a Mrs. Scott. She was a poor mother with a drinking problem. Mrs. Reed from the Asylum met with her in her house and reported that she was unfit to have the care of her child and it was resolved that the child be taken into the Asylum. In that same December meeting, Mrs. Tobey, the Asylum matron, informed the Board that a woman brought her two children to the Asylum and left them temporarily to go and get a permit for them to be admitted. Since she never returned she was deemed "worthless" and because of that, it was referred to the committee for action to have the children removed from the Asylum.¹²¹ Martha Ann Church was a child whose mother was deceased and whose father was also referred to as "worthless" for

¹¹⁹ Timothy A. Hasi, *Second Home, Orphan Asylums and Poor Families in America*, (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 1.

¹²⁰ Porter, *A Good Home: Indenture and Adoption in Nineteenth-Century Orphanages*, 32.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

abandoning her. But in this case the child was admitted to the Asylum.¹²² The reports did not give an explanation why the children of one worthless parent were not accepted while the other was.. In another of the Rochester Orphan Asylum meetings, the managers presented an application on behalf of a Mrs. Simpson to have her children placed into the asylum. She was a widow with a family of small children and was well known by several members of the Board. They “made such representations as to her unfitness to have the care of her children” and after due consideration, resolved to receive them on condition that the mother give them “entirely to the care of the Board – and abstain from all interference in their management.”¹²³ An entry from the February 24th meeting in 1846 reported that the managers decided to admit some children into the asylum because their single father was “ignorant” and unable to provide for them because of his “imbecility of mind.”¹²⁴ These cases are some examples that demonstrate the effort the women made in the decision-making process used to admit children into the asylum. Half orphans were not automatically accepted. Each case for admittance was reviewed on its merits for reasons to justify a child being accepted or rejected.

The women in the Asylum did not want to make it too convenient for parents to neglect their parental responsibilities by letting others care for their children. They wanted to save the asylum from becoming a “bounty to indolence.”¹²⁵ By using the term ‘indolence’, it seems there was the assumption on the part of the managers that a parent was just being lazy or uncaring if they were unable to, at the very least, care for their only child.. It was also a way to pressure some parents into reforming their lives so they might be able to one day properly care for their

¹²² Ibid., 113.

¹²³ Records of the R.O. Asylum from its 7th Annual Meeting Held Oct. 10th, 1843 to Sept. 24th, 1850., May 28th, 1849. Hillside Children’s Center Papers, D.122, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Presentations, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester

¹²⁴ Ibid., February 24, 1846.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

children and become a more useful member of society. The women were not only providing humanitarian care for the children. In some ways, they were also helping to reform the parents.

The women wanted their work to accomplish two objectives: charitable aid and social order. Although the women running the Asylum took on the task of caring for the town's orphans, they did not take in every child in need as was the case with the "worthless" mother that abandoned her children. They, like the women in the Female Charitable Society, made their own assessments regarding who was deserving of their charity. They also established conditions for accepting a child into the Asylum. As described previously, many parents had to sign a form relinquishing their rights to their children before they would be admitted. Daniel Cornell was a child brought before the board on August 29, 1843, for their consideration to admit. Since his father was judged to be intemperate, he was made to sign a pledge of temperance before his son could be received into the Asylum.¹²⁶ If a parent wanted the Asylum to take on the responsibility of caring for their child, there were conditions they had to agree to. A report from an asylum meeting stated that the father of the Brisen children would have to pay their weekly board in advance or the children would be removed to the Poor House.¹²⁷ Along with the children being better cared for, such incentives helped with the town's social order by motivating some parents to reform their lives and become responsible citizens.

The Asylum was founded by benevolent women to care for Rochester's destitute children. These women were selective in who was admitted, protective of those they had in their care, and conscientious in preparing them for their life after the Asylum. Most of the children ended up in the Asylum because of their parents being victimized by illness, unemployment, and spousal death more so than from their parent's character flaws. Hacsí points out that there were

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 142

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 125.

certain beliefs dealing with poverty, charity, and welfare that influenced how the poor in America were treated during the nineteenth century. As Frederick Whittlesey also noted in his essay, many people believed that the poor were largely to blame for their own poverty. There were the deserving poor like orphans, elderly widows, and infirmed adults and there were the underserving poor like unemployed adults. These unemployed adults were usually seen by society as being in that situation because of their own shortcomings. Although they were capable of working, they chose not to. Nineteenth century society made judgements about who deserved charitable assistance and who did not. Orphans were always seen as a segment of society that was deemed worthy of being helped, but not always half-orphans.

The women concluded that they needed to try to prevent half orphans from developing their parent's bad habits, like drunkenness and laziness, which they believed would probably lead these children into an unproductive life of poverty.¹²⁸ In many cases these women decided that the removal of children from unfit parents and placing them in an environment where they could learn moral behavior and occupational skills was the most effective way to prepare them to function successfully in society. It also raised some moral questions. Who gave these women the right to determine what should be done with other people's children? Who decided if a parent was unfit and what criteria was used to make that determination? Susan Porter suggests that "elite policymakers" during this period maintained a social vision that children belonged in good families and that poor families, by definition, were defective and not considered good. Those that were unable to sustain themselves and their family were seen by society as having defects in character.¹²⁹ This belief gave some justification for the women to take the actions that they did.

¹²⁸ Hacsí, *Second Home*, 17.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

Parents signed away their rights to their children and Asylum managers would now assume those parental responsibilities. They cared for these half orphans in ways they considered superior to what their ‘defective’ parents would have provided. These were the elite women of the town from decent, upstanding, religious, families fulfilling their moral and religious responsibilities to care for those less fortunate. This process can be seen as the prelude to public child welfare policies and institutions. Society, through today’s child welfare agencies, has taken on the responsibility for caring for children that are not being cared for properly elsewhere in much the same way the women did in the asylum. In both scenarios, the perceived best interests of a child were decided by and taken over by people deemed more qualified than the family.

The positive outcome was that the destitute half orphans in Rochester whose parents could not provide a stable home for them, now had the opportunity to be properly cared for, educated, and trained with the hope of becoming useful and productive members of society. The women in the asylum came to the conclusion that their judgement of what was best for the child took precedence over any concerns they may have had regarding the children’s parents even if it resulted in the breaking apart of a family. Their primary goal was to take responsibility for these half orphans to ensure that they would be properly cared for and adequately prepared for their return back into society as useful productive members.

Indenture: Prelude to Foster Care and Child Welfare Services.

The women in Rochester that were involved in the Orphan Asylum had a broader goal than just admitting the children into the institution and caring for their needs. They also wanted to “procure for the children, situations in private families where they will be appreciated or

otherwise adopted and there brought under the salutary influence of home discipline.”¹³⁰ From the day a child was received into the orphan asylum, these women prepared them for their day of departure. For almost all the children in orphan asylums, life outside the institution began by being placed into homes as indentured servants. It was common practice among the nation’s orphan asylums and the Rochester Orphan Asylum was no exception. Caring for a large number of children was an ongoing expense for the institution and there were limits to how many children could be kept there at one time. If a child could be placed in a home as an indentured servant, it saved the Asylum the cost of providing for the child’s support. The women believed that a child being sent out indentured was beneficial for both the child and the institution. Indenture was a labor system, but it was also an early means by which communities provided for the welfare of dependent children. In exchange for their labor at someone’s home, business, or farm, a child would be sheltered, fed, clothed, and trained in some trade or some work-related activity.

Hacsi contends that, “Indenture in early America was far more concerned with preserving order in society and providing a stable workforce than with the well-being of the children,¹³¹ but reports from the Rochester Orphan Asylum meetings seem to somewhat contradict that. There was indeed a concern on the part of the women for maintaining social order, but they took measures that showed they considered the well-being of the child as a higher priority. They demonstrated that by the effort they made in forming committees to determine if the environment they released a child out to would be suitable. One where the child was properly housed, nourished, hopefully trained and treated kindly. For example, committee accounts noted that

¹³⁰ *Sketch of the Origin and History of the Rochester Orphan Asylum, as Imbodied in a Report to the Commissioners of Public Charities. October 1869.*

¹³¹ Hacsi, *Second Home*, 217.

after numerous attempts covering a few months, “ Mrs. Buell reported that the committee had at length found a suitable place for Ellen Briscoe with Mrs. Perry.”¹³² There was a Mr. Bessae from Albion that wanted to take a child, Eliza Ann Stevens, as a bound indenture and “after some consultation on the circumstances of the case,” that was presented at the previous month’s meeting, the committee resolved to comply with that arrangement.¹³³ There were numerous examples that showed a caring for the children on the part of the managers in that they did not automatically place them out to anyone that requested one.

Research found some records but not many of someone from the Asylum returning to the locations where a child was placed to check on their condition after it left the institution. In one case, an asylum meeting on February 24th, 1846 reported that a young girl that was bounded out to a Mrs. Briggs was visited by an asylum committee that determined the child would be “ruined” if she remained there. They removed the child at once and returned her to the asylum.¹³⁴ Mrs. Whitney announced in a meeting that a committee discovered that a Mr. Dutcher, who had taken Mary Ann McKenny from the asylum as his own, had transferred her to another person. The asylum managers said that was not acceptable and the girl had to now be returned back to the asylum.¹³⁵ These examples show that the placing out process was not always successful. But another meeting report revealed a positive placement outcome. It stated that a Mrs. Scott gave the committee some feedback regarding a Francis Featherly who was taken from the asylum a

¹³² Records of the R.O. Asylum from the Organization of the Soc. From. Feb. 28th, 1837 to Sept. 26th, 1843, 142.

¹³³ Ibid., 132.

¹³⁴ Records of the R.O. Asylum from its 7th Annual Meeting Held Oct. 10th, 1843 to Sept. 24th, 1850. February 24th, 1846. Hillside Children’s Center Papers, D.122, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Presentations, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester.

¹³⁵ Ibid., August 28, 1848.

year earlier. She testified that he was “perfectly contented and happy & much attached to the family & place.”¹³⁶

These meeting reports suggests that the women did do some follow ups on the children that were placed out which again demonstrated their caring about the real welfare of the child and not just an interest in having them placed somewhere to preserve the town’s social order. Since many of the children were placed in homes outside of the town of Rochester, not following up may have been a more common occurrence but that might have been due more to the lack of resources and the difficulty in travel than from a lack of concern on the part of the women. These placements, although not perfect, were thought by the women in the asylum to be better for the children than staying in an institution, begging for food on the streets, learning undesirable habits in the almshouse, or living with an immoral parent. When they were placed out, they lived and worked in situations that resembled, as near as possible, a normal family life which was in contrast to them living in an institution. The women believed that the indenture experience better prepared children for adult life where, aside from gaining work related skills, they learned about families and relationships.¹³⁷

Children were placed out into indentured service categorized either as adopted or as servants. The children listed as servants were placed in homes where they would be employed in some work capacity in exchange for their keep. The children that were placed out as adopted were treated more like a family member for the time they were indentured. They did the same work that a family child would be expected to do, and they were educated the same as a family child would be. Being placed out as adopted was the better situation for a child to learn about and experience real family life. Lydia Sage examined records from the Asylum that covered a

¹³⁶ Ibid., April 24, 1848.

¹³⁷ Hacsj, *Second Home*, 134.

twenty-year period beginning in 1853. She compiled those records into a book in 1873. It listed the children that were sent out of the Asylum indentured either by adoption or as a servant. It gave the names of around 110 children, their age, who they were indentured to, where they were sent, whether it was as a servant or as an adoptee, the date they were sent, and the date when their indenture would expire.¹³⁸ These children ranged in age from two through fourteen with the average period of their indenture being about ten years.

Most children were placed out of the asylum as bounded. They were indentured to a family as a servant or as an apprentice. A report compiled by Mrs. L. M. Moore for the period of 1838 to 1839 gave a listing of the Asylum children that were placed out either unbounded or bounded out as indentured servants or workers.¹³⁹ This demonstrated that a substantial number of these children did not leave the Asylum to become a member of a loving family. They were leaving an institution and going into an environment where they worked in exchange for their room and board. But for most, it was probably a better situation than the one they were in that precipitated them going into the Orphan Asylum in the first place. Whether a child ended up in a loving home or not, the women of the orphan asylum were providing these children with some type of situation where they were being cared for. The reports gave brief descriptions of the children being discharged or placed out of the Asylum. Mrs. Tobey, one of the first matrons, gave a report of children leaving the Asylum from 1837 until 1840. There were numerous examples in the report such as the following that demonstrated the success the women had in finding suitable situations for many of the children:

¹³⁸ Records of the Indentures that Left the Rochester Orphan Asylum, January 1873. Hillside Children's Center Papers, D.122, 11, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Presentations, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester.

¹³⁹ Mrs. L.M Moore's Report of Children Discharged from the Asylum from 1838-1839, Hillside Children's Center Papers, D.122, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Presentations, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester.

1837 Sept 5th Frederic Champlin taken by a gentleman from Farmington.
Returned a few months after and taken by Mr. Chapin of Brockport.

Sept. 11th Susan McCauley Farmington adopted as an own child.

Sept. 23rd William Lambert taken by his father who paid his board.

Oct. 5th Hannah Adams by Mrs. Rint returned soon after & taken by Mr. Aldridge
of Farmington

1838 May 29th Margaret Dempsey taken by Mrs. Robbins returned & taken Oct.
29th by Mr. Parsons – Avon on trial, not returned.¹⁴⁰

Children were often sent to different homes on a trial basis. Sometimes it resulted in finding the child a suitable place and they stayed, but other times it did not work out and they were returned to the asylum to await a new placement. Many went through a few of these cycles of being placed in a home only to be returned back to the asylum. The report demonstrated that although the process of placement of these children was not always a smooth one, they were still part of a system that had concerned women working to ensure these children were being properly cared for. Through these placements, the women were achieving another of their goals. They were securing for children places in families where they would be cared for and trained until a time came when they could be returned to their own family, be adopted or, upon coming of age, be prepared to strike out on their own. These women were establishing a process that began the transition to foster care. That process would continue to evolve into the development of the social welfare systems that exist today.

Women in Rochester founded the Orphan Asylum as an immediate solution to their community's problem of what to do with their destitute children. They, like other orphan asylum managers around the country, considered their institution as a home and tried to make them as homelike as possible. That homelike environment was seen as an essential factor in a child's

¹⁴⁰ Mrs. Tobey's Report of Children Discharged from the Asylum from 1837-1840, Hillside Children's Center Papers, D.122, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Presentations, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester.

chances for the future¹⁴¹ but not all mid- nineteenth century child welfare reformers saw orphanages as appropriate alternatives for children in need of homes. One of those, Charles Loring Brace, held the belief that an institution could never really be a home. What destitute children needed, Brace believed, were the wholesome effects of a real family life. In 1853 he and several ministers founded the Children’s Aid Society in New York City and soon instituted his famous “placing out” program, better known today as the “orphan trains.”¹⁴² Orphan trains carried orphans that were gathered up from towns in the East and delivered them to rural family homes in the Midwest. That placing out policy was just an extension of what the women from the Orphan Asylum were already doing with their indenture system and it played an important role in the development of twentieth- century child welfare practices, particularly in its premise that dependent children were better off in non- kin families than in institutions.¹⁴³ Like orphan trains, orphanages such as the one the women in Rochester founded were the precursors to foster care. A combination of both, orphan asylums and foster care, continued to exist together into the twentieth century where they gave rise to new systems and institutions developed to care for children such as settlement houses, social welfare systems, and child-care agencies.

Conclusion

Upper- and middle-class women in early nineteenth century America progressed out of their traditional domestic “sphere” into a new arena of organized civic activity. They took on the role of community caretakers and became involved in benevolent and reform activities to try and

¹⁴¹ Hacsj, *Second Home*, 65-66.

¹⁴² Catherine E. Rymph, *Raising Government Children: A History of Foster Care and the American Welfare State*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2017, 21.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 22.

help those less fortunate that were in need of assistance and to help alleviate their community's social ills. Along the way, they became activists who also achieved civil and political rights for themselves and others. According to Hewitt, these women, "armed only with humanitarian motives"¹⁴⁴ moved beyond just doing local charity to pursue universal abolition of vice, intemperance, and slavery. Their involvement in these pursuits eventually led them to initiate campaigns for their own social and political rights. These were those well-known activists and reformers such as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Stanton, Abby Kelley, Lucy Stone, and Lucretia Mott. They were the leaders in the reform movements and the crusades that helped bring about women's rights. Historians are indeed correct to recognize the importance of those achievements. But there were those other women during this period whose activities should also be recognized, and they should be lauded for the importance of what they accomplished. These women were motivated to pursue these endeavors out of a humanitarian concern for those in need in their community coupled with a desire to preserve Rochester's social order. It was the charitable and humanitarian work of these women that became the foundation of many of today's social welfare agencies and institutions. Many such women were active throughout the country where they made similar contributions to society as the women discussed here did in Rochester. Women like Mrs. Levi (Mehitabel) Ward, Mrs. Everard (Chloe) Peck, Mrs. James (Charlotte) Livingston, Mrs. Frederick (Anna) Whittlesey, Mrs. Samuel (Susan) Porter, and Mrs. Hamlet (Hannah) Scramton were just a few of the benevolent women of Rochester in the early nineteenth century that need to be distinguished for their charitable achievements. The founding of the Female Charitable Society and the Rochester Orphan Asylum were two of their greatest triumphs.

¹⁴⁴ Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change*, 19.

Both of these institutions have been involved in charitable work continuously since their inception and they continue to exist in some form up to the present day. The Female Charitable Society continued visiting homes and supplying their charitable aid for decades following its foundation. They were instrumental in creating the Rochester City Hospital in 1845 and The Home for the Friendless in 1849. Today the Charitable Society is involved in obtaining and distributing funds to organizations that provide health services and financial assistance to low-income individuals throughout western New York.

The Rochester Orphan Asylum changed its name in 1938 to the Hillside Children's Center which is now part of the Hillside Family of Agencies. It is one of the largest nonprofit agencies in New York with services in 40 different locations and provides care for youth and families with a wide range of emotional, behavioral, or life circumstance challenges. The Hillside Family of Agencies offers mental health, child welfare, juvenile justice, special education, adoption services, specialized foster care, counseling programs for single parents, and developmental disabilities services to children and families throughout Western and Central New York. Its services are customized based on the strengths and needs of individual youth, families, and communities. Annually, Hillside Children's Center now serves approximately 13,000 youth and adults.¹⁴⁵

The charitable work that was started in Rochester by the fourteen women in the home of Mrs. Everard Peck in 1822 resulted in a great benefit to their community then and the social welfare services and agencies that have developed out of their efforts, continue to this day to aid children and families in need throughout the country. While the work these women did with their charitable activities paved the way for those women activists that had a more radical agenda to

¹⁴⁵ Hillside, Family of Agencies. Copyright 2019 Hillside Family of Agencies.
<https://www.hillside.com/about-us/family-agencies/>

pursue, it was the success the benevolent women of Rochester achieved in their humanitarian endeavors that remains their true accomplishment and legacy.

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