

# Northeast Historical Archaeology

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Volume 20

Article 3

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1991

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### Recommended Citation

Feister, Lois (1991) "The Orphanage at Schuyler Mansion," *Northeast Historical Archaeology*: Vol. 20 20, Article 3.  
<https://doi.org/10.22191/neha/vol20/iss1/3> Available at: <http://orb.binghamton.edu/neha/vol20/iss1/3>

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# The Orphanage at Schuyler Mansion

## **Cover Page Footnote**

I would especially like to thank Sister Elaine Wheeler, archivist, for the attention she gave me while doing research on this topic at the St. Vincent de Paul Provincial House, Menands, New York. In addition, acknowledgements go to Joe McEvoy for photographing the artifacts for this article; to Paul Huey for his helpful suggestions; and to Mary Valek for her patience at the computer while correcting various versions of the text. In addition, I would like to thank the staff at Schuyler Mansion State Historic Site for their interest in this topic which is somewhat outside their primary interpretative mission.

## THE ORPHANAGE AT SCHUYLER MANSION

Lois M. Feister

*Doll parts, toy tea set fragments, and other toys were excavated from the late 19th-century through early 20th-century occupation layers at the Schuyler Mansion State Historic Site in Albany, New York. Their occurrence raised questions about the orphans housed there during that time period. Archival research and archaeological analysis resulted in increased understanding of the care received by homeless children during that period.*

*Des morceaux de poupées, des ensembles à thé pour les enfants et d'autres jouets ont été récupérés de contextes d'occupation datant du tournant du siècle au Schuyler Mansion State Historic Site à Albany dans l'état de New York. Leur présence a soulevé des questions concernant les orphelins qui y vivaient durant cette période. Les recherches en archives et l'analyse archéologique ont permis une meilleure compréhension des soins alors apportés aux enfants sans foyer.*

### Introduction

Schuyler Mansion was built by Revolutionary War general Philip Schuyler in 1761 on the outskirts of Albany, New York. It remained in the Schuyler family until 1806, and then passed to a series of owners. By the late 19th century, growth of the city had created an urban environment around the house. When it again went on the market in 1886, the Mansion was purchased by St. Vincent's Orphanage on Elm Street in Albany for use during a measles epidemic and was operated by the Daughters of Charity.

Sixty-six orphans were placed in quarantine at the Mansion on May 24, 1886 (Bowers 1987: 14–15). Following the epidemic, most of these children were returned to the orphanage on Elm Street, but infants from St. Ann's Orphanage in Troy were then transferred to Schuyler Mansion together with Catholic children from St. Margaret's Home in Albany, a non-Catholic facility. More room was needed by 1905, and a new three-story addition was built on the back of the Mansion. By 1914, because more space was needed, the orphans were moved to a new building in Albany and the Mansion sold to the State of New York for operation as a state historic site.

Starting in the late 1960s, a series of archaeological projects were conducted in response to various phases of restoration work at the

Mansion. Included in the collection of artifacts that resulted were playthings excavated from strata dating to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These objects represent what Schiffer has called "child play refuse" (Schiffer 1987: 75). The clustering of all of the above doll and tea set fragments outdoors along the south side of the Mansion suggests an area where the little girls congregated and played with their toys. One of the pictures of the orphans shows them gathered together on the south side of the house for a group photograph (FIG. 1). However, it is difficult to discern much detail from the photograph except that some of them appear to be holding dolls.

This study of toys excavated from strata associated with the orphanage period at Schuyler Mansion was conducted by researching the archives of the Daughters of Charity, examining photographs taken during the orphanage years, and studying the archaeological collection. This has resulted in some better understanding of the daily functioning of this institution.

In the modern world where care of the homeless is an issue and where the care of AIDS and crack babies is an emerging problem, it is instructive to look to the past for tested methodologies. Orphanages have received different ratings as to their success, images generated by Charles Dickens' novels being particularly strong in the public mind.



Figure 1. Schuyler Mansion after 1905 showing the addition built for the orphans on the back of the building and showing a group of orphans posed near the southeast corner of the house. The addition has since been removed. (New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, Division for Historic Preservation, Bureau of Historic Sites.)

Orphanages, poor houses, and other such charitable organizations associated with various churches have a long history reaching back to the Middle Ages. A member of the Daughters of Charity who has spent most of her adult life caring for orphans in various cities notes that one of the reasons her order took on such problems was because of the abuse suffered by children placed in foster homes, a problem which receives publicity today but did not in the past. A safe, strong religious upbringing seemed preferable to that of foster home care. Then, too, she notes that many Daughters of Charity orphanages were established as the result of the epidemics that occurred in the past. These events left many orphans in their wake. With single parents not able to enter the marketplace for jobs as they can today, with the large number of poor immigrants entering the country, and because relatives were often unable to take in more children, orphanages for "normal" kids were essential. It is acknowl-

edged that today's problems require trained, highly specialized care (Anne Marie Hayes, personal communication, 1992).

## Background

A romantic description of the Schuyler Mansion orphanage in *Catholic Albany* uses terms such as "simplicity," and "littleingham aproned figures" (Bowers 1987: 15), but little is known about the realities of life in the institution. Research in the archives of the Daughters of Charity revealed some interesting information, however. "Infants" were regarded as boys and girls newborn to about the age of six. These children were kept together at the Mansion. After age six, boys were sent to the Hillside Home for Boys in Troy, also operated by the Roman Catholic Church. Girls were sent to the Elm Street facility in Albany until they finished elementary school. Some



Figure 2. A group photograph of some of the orphans gathered in an interior room at Schuyler Mansion. Note that some of the girls are holding dolls and that other dolls are placed in chairs. (New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, Division for Historic Preservation, Bureau of Historic Sites.)

then went to high school; others were sent to an industrial school in Albany where they were taught domestic skills such as sewing, child care, and cooking so that they could support themselves once they left. After age 18, most of the girls went to live with relatives. Those who had no family were allowed to live in Troy at Seton Home for Working Girls. Since this home was across the street from a shirt factory, some of the women went to work there (Archives 1886–1914: History Folder 2[1]; Sister Elaine Wheeler, personal communication, 1992).

Christopher Cunningham, an altar boy who visited Schuyler Mansion every Thursday with the priest to celebrate mass with the children, recalled that 30 to 40 of the children (the majority) were Italian immigrants (Archives 1886–1914: History Folder 2[1] and taped interview). Many of these children came by boat to Albany from Ellis Island and, if one of the parents became ill or died, the other parent

often was forced to place the children in the orphanage (Wheeler 1992). Cunningham remembered that one of the Sisters in the Community was the cook and that the seamstress was one of his own relatives who had been taken in by the Sisters in return for her sewing skills.

### Funding and Expenses: Sources for Toys

Some of the funding for the care of the children came from government sources. On May 28, 1884, the Sisters were receiving \$4.00 a week for each baby and \$1.50 for each of the others (Archives 1886–1914: Correspondence, Folder 3 [1]). By January 1908, this had increased to \$4.00 a week for each baby under one year old and \$2.00 a week for infants ages one to two. With this increase, the Sisters could afford more help. Account books, kept on a monthly basis (Archives 1886–1914), indicate

wages of \$12.00 were being paid for outside help beginning in January 1889. By 1893, this help was described more specifically as "man and woman," and the wages were now \$14.00. By 1897, specific persons were named as the janitor (Mr. Doherty), kitchen help (Louise F.), child care (Annie S.), and kindergarten teacher (Miss Coyle) together with their monthly wages.

The Sisters also received donations and occasionally collected from boarders. By the 1890s, at the urging of the Bishop, they were taking in some maternity cases; although they were concerned about a lack of space (Archives 1886-1914: Correspondence, Folder 3[1] and Account Book 1889-1896). Assistance occasionally was offered by volunteers as indicated by one letter dated March 29, 1889: "The ladies will be a great help to us; but oh! how I hate to meet them, they are to sew one afternoon every week for the little ones, and furnish material" (Archives 1886-1914: Correspondence Folder 3[1]). At Christmas time in 1892, two pieces of gingham were donated for aprons (Archives 1886-1914: Correspondence Folder 3 [1]).

Outlays for each month were most often food-related items: "marketing" (not defined), bread, milk, soap, butter, potatoes, and garden seeds (specified for March 3, 1891). The garden seeds probably indicate that the plots to the south of the Mansion as shown in one photograph were being used to raise some vegetables. One letter dated February 20, 1911, mentioned purchase of a new machine to peel potatoes. Although the new machine cost \$75 it "makes it unnecessary to keep children from school peeling potatoes" (Archives 1886-1914: Correspondence Folder 3[1]). Other expenses included building upkeep and the needs of daily life: gas, coal, wood, ice, clothing, dentists, street repairs, roof repairs, whitewashing material, and plumbing. One interesting and large expense entered on March 1, 1893, was for a photograph for the Worlds Fair! Perhaps the Daughters of Charity had an exhibit. Unfortunately this photograph remains unidentified, if it still exists, despite the fact that at that time it was so expensive.

A few of the entries show that on occasion treats were provided for the children, including candy, ice cream and, on special occasions, toys. On December 1, 1896, \$3.50 was spent for toys, probably for Christmas presents. According to

the Montgomery Ward and the Sears catalogues for that era, doll prices began at \$.25 for a jointed kid doll with a bisque head having hair and painted eyes (undressed). Dolls could be as high as \$3.50, such as the one with a full winter costume made of fine wool with plush and ribbon trim. However, the majority of dolls were less than \$1.00 each. Toy tea sets ranged in price from \$.10 to \$1.75 (Montgomery Ward Company 1895: 231, 233). Thus, \$3.50 could buy quite a few items.

Christmas, 1892, brought a donation of \$10.00 which meant "Santa Claus was very good to them . . . they had a Christmas tree in the play room, and they were delighted with all the good things they got . . . and then besides they had the usual Christmas dinner of turkeys, etc." The Christmas celebration continued as "Our little ones had a play on Holy Innocents, in which they all took part, everyone seemed to enjoy it for the actors were so small" (Archives 1886-1914: Correspondence Folder 3[1]).

A letter from one of the orphans to Santa read: "Dear Santa, When you come down our chimney at Christmas, please do not forget to put a dolly in my stocking; one with eyes that move when you shake her if you've got one like that" (Archives 1886-1914: Newspaper Articles Folder 4[1]). Such a doll with moveable eyes could be purchased for as little as \$.50 in the 1890s catalogues. This child's letter, in addition to the archaeological evidence, suggests some individual choice. Evidently the girls were not issued an "institutional doll"; different types were purchased or donated and the children themselves apparently felt they were able at least to *request* a specific type.

A photograph (FIG. 2) of some of the children (DHP 1977: 113) shows several of the girls in the front row holding dolls. A stuffed tabby cat leans against a small rocker on which is seated a large doll holding a small doll. On the other side of the picture in a tiny rocker is another doll. One of the small dolls being held in the front row is a baby doll almost identical to one shown in the Sears 1902 catalogue (Sears, Roebuck and Company 1902: 914). They are described as "Infants in long white dresses . . . Bisque heads with curls, stationary eyes. Something new and pretty. Length, without dress, 8 1/2 inches. Price, each \$.25." The picture is obviously posed or girls in the other rows would have been holding their favorites, too.

However, that the orphans played with dolls and tiny tea sets is confirmed by the presence of many doll parts and tea set fragments in the late 19th-century soil layers deposited around the house.

## The Archaeological Evidence of Toys

Beginning in the 18th century, children were encouraged to play with toys. These toys were used to teach children how to behave as grownups. Therefore, most of the dolls had the features and clothing of miniature adults. Little girls were encouraged to make clothes for the dolls and to play with them as though they were participating in an adult world (Freeman 1962: 12, 14). The tea sets were part of this "playing grownup" behavior. Although baby dolls were available in the second half of the 19th century, they did not become popular until the 20th century.

Praetzellis and Praetzellis (1992), among others, have suggested that Victorianism was a largely middle-class phenomenon that found expression in artifacts such as children's toys. Industrialization resulted in a division of labor between women and men that also affected children. Women were to keep the home and socialize children while men labored in the marketplace. "Freed from economic responsibilities, childhood and adolescence took on new shapes and meaning in middle-class households." Daughters especially needed careful training so that their future homes would become "domestic havens. To this end, play was practice for future homemakers" (Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1992: 75-76, 92). The Sisters at the Schuyler Mansion orphanage were part of the Victorian Age, and their long-term goal for female children was to teach them skills (sewing, cooking, laundry, housekeeping, and child care) that would make them employable and "prepare them to be good house wives and mothers" (Sister Elaine Wheeler, personal communication, 1992). Dolls were objects that fit these goals admirably: children could learn child care and develop sewing skills while playing with dolls; teaware taught table manners. In addition, these homeless children could act out some of the conflicts and desires they must have felt for the past, present, and future, as suggested in a succinct presentation of theories of play by Ingersoll, Attias, and

Gravlin (1992: 428-432).

Nineteenth-century dolls were of two types: those with china heads, arms, and legs sewn to a cloth body and those made completely of an "unbreakable" bisque, sometimes called "stone bisque" as opposed to just "bisque." Both were popular, and both types are represented in the Schuyler Mansion archaeological collection (FIG. 3). Such dolls or doll parts probably were manufactured in Germany, the country that dominated the doll market until World War I. After the early years of the 1890s, the country of origin was marked on the doll, but the usual parts of the doll's body where these marks occurred are missing in this archaeological collection.

Children especially liked the small stone bisque-bodied dolls for which clothes could be made out of scraps of fabric readily available from the home sewing activity carried on by their elders. At least nine fragments found archaeologically at Schuyler Mansion were parts of nine different small stone bisque-bodied dolls. Two of these were torsos. One was no doubt part of what was termed a "Frozen Charlotte" doll, so-called because it was molded without movable arms or legs and named after a popular folk song of the time period (Desmonde 1974: 66; St. George 1958: 39; Gerwat-Clark 1987: 21; Fraser 1963: 62). These dolls were usually sold undressed for about 25 cents (St. George 1958: 40). Their heads sometimes held molded hats, but otherwise it was left to the child to determine the doll's clothing. The second torso fragment was much smaller than the first and had holes for movable arms. It was of the same material as the "Frozen Charlotte" doll and is considered to be of the same type. A number "7" is inscribed on the back. This tiny doll probably was intended to be used in a doll house. The other stone bisque-bodied doll fragments are: two feet of the size needed for a "Frozen Charlotte," a foot for a smaller doll, a hand for a slightly larger size than the torsos represented here, two leg fragments from much larger dolls, and a socketed arm fragment from a large doll. Two of the foot fragments have traces of blue paint on them. A "bright Dutch blue" was used on dolls' feet (St. George 1958: 9) in addition to the more common black and brown colors. The largest doll's leg in the collection has a painted blue stocking coming up to just below the knee. The blue paint also extends up the

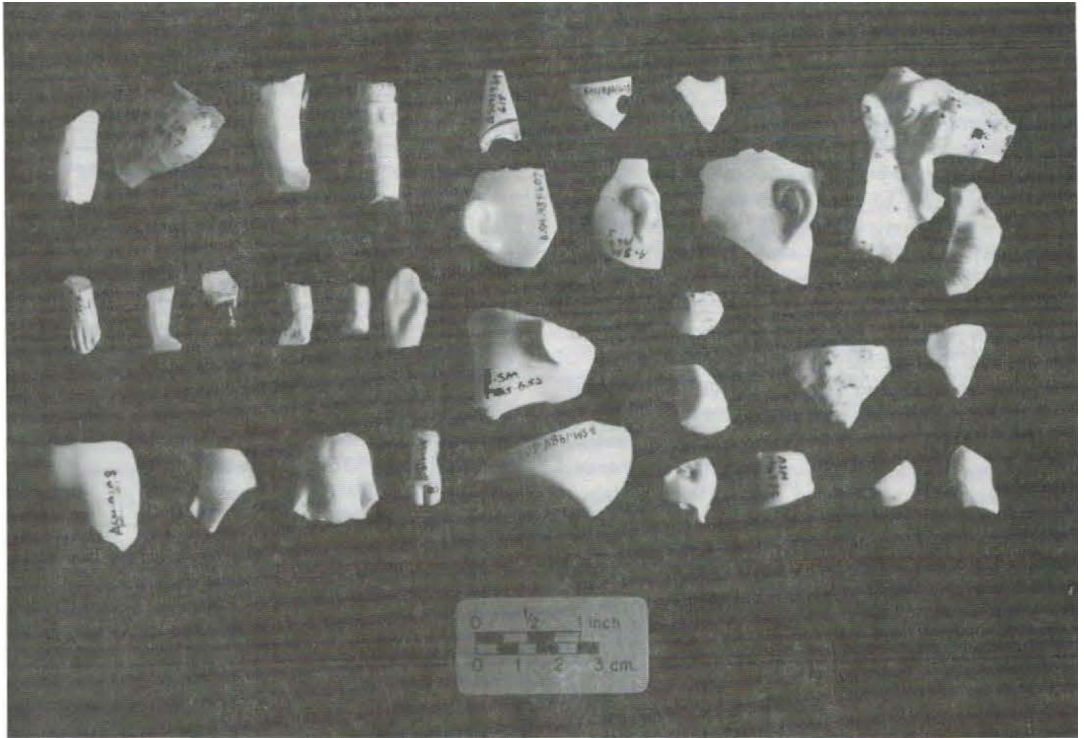


Figure 3. Doll parts excavated at Schuyler Mansion. Legs, arms, and body fragments are grouped on the left: a-c are leg parts, d is an arm, e & j are hands; f-i are feet. Facial and head fragments are shown on the right (o-ff); some have ears and molded hair. (Photograph by Joseph McEvoy.)



back of the leg and over a knob protruding behind the knee, perhaps representing a garter.

Two of the large head fragments have molded hair. One piece has been scorched so that it is difficult to determine how highly glazed it was originally. Low-fired doll fragments invariably had blonde hair; the highly-fired shiny-faced fragments had molded hair painted black (St. George 1958: 40; Gerwat-Clark 1987: 25; Fraser 1963: 56). Experts on doll history speculate this was because of the pleasing contrasts between facial finish and color of hair. One of the excavated doll head fragments has blonde hair as does the molded-haired doll shown on the left side in the Schuyler Mansion photograph (FIG. 2). The doll in the photograph dates to the 1890s; Gerwat-Clark (1987: 22) illustrates a dated, almost identical doll.

Most of the doll fragments were lightly glazed or pink-tinted fragments of large dolls. Four of the facial fragments had molded ears, one of which was pierced but with the earring missing. Pierced-eared dolls date mostly to the years between 1860 and 1880. By 1890, pierced ears were not generally acceptable (St. George 1958: 121; Freeman 1962: 13; Revi 1975: 133), and they do not appear in the Montgomery Ward and Sears catalogues from that period. Therefore, this doll probably dates to the early occupancy of the orphanage or was an older doll donated to them while the others date after 1890. Each is a different doll, as the ears do not match. The smaller glazed facial parts in the archaeological collection have traces of painted blue eyes (the usual color on dolls of this period) and, as was common, two have a red line to represent the eyelid over the eye (Gerwat-Clark 1987: 17; Fraser 1963: 47). None of these doll fragments show traces of molded hair. These probably each had a hole in the top center for the placement and gluing of wigs made of various materials. Most of the dolls in the Schuyler Mansion picture have wigs as do the majority of the dolls for sale in the Montgomery Ward and Sears catalogues for the 1890s and early 1900s.

The remaining doll fragments were manufactured from a highly-glazed bisque. One of the items in this group is a leg with a brown heeled boot. The heeled boot is a style common to the 1880s and 1890s. Two leg fragments are parts of larger dolls, one with a rounded belly,

perhaps part of a large baby doll. Another fragment is part of a derriere, and a third is a small hand.

The 18 fragments of toy tea sets are all white porcelain, some with molded designs (FIG. 4). One complete saucer has a diameter of 1 1/4 inches. In addition to a paneled rim, it has a bow and two daisy and leaf molded designs around the interior. A second, different saucer fragment has a 2-inch diameter with a larger bow molded onto the paneled rim. A third saucer has a roped edge with a paneled rim. It was considerably smaller than the others. The rest were of the larger size and are plain. There are two lids represented, one of which is a whole one for a toy teapot. It has a vertically grooved top terminating in a small knob. It once fit into a teapot with an opening of 1/2 inch. The second lid fragment is plain and belonged with a larger pot. Another fragment was the pouring lip of a probable milk pitcher. Two attractive pieces are matching fancy handles, one with part of a body still attached. The handles are solid pieces and almost v-shaped with molded curves. They are different sizes, one probably from a cup and one from a serving vessel. None of the other designs matched. This suggests either tea sets were put together from donated elements or that several different matching tea sets were present. Prices of such toy tea sets in the Montgomery Ward and Sears catalogues ranged from \$.10 per set to \$1.75 for a set large enough in size for young teenagers to use. The molded unpainted sets all were priced under \$.50. The 1896 outlay of \$3.50 or the 1892 donation of \$10.00 would have bought many such items for the children.

There are few toys other than dolls and tearware in the collection. One is a small pocketknife; a second type is a metal jack used in the traditional game. Marbles were a third type of toy. Made of buff clay and unglazed, these were common toys for the period. A fourth type of object associated with the orphans' activities is represented by a copper alloy reed, probably for a pitch-pipe. This little instrument probably was carried by one of the Sisters and used to set the tone for group singing.

The last items, which in numbers overwhelm the rest, are small four-hole glass buttons. There were over 80 of these in the orphanage occupation layers. There must have been a constant problem with keeping little but

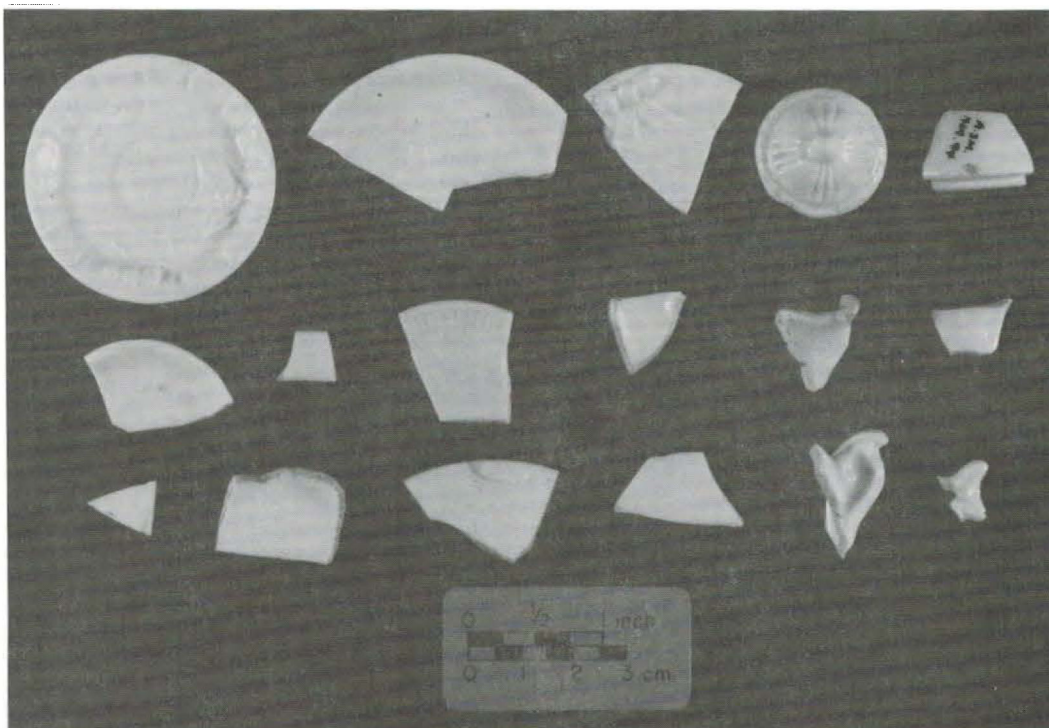


Figure 4. Toy tea ware fragments excavated at Schuyler Mansion. Saucer fragments, a-k, are grouped to the left; l and m are lids, n and o are spouts, p and q are handles. (Photograph by Joseph McEvoy.)

tons in place! In addition, these buttons may have served as toys. They could have been used for counting games, checkers, and other activities requiring tokens.

## Conclusions

The picture that emerges from the archives, silent photographs, and archaeological collection from the orphanage occupation of Schuyler Mansion suggests a relatively benign system in which the children received at least basic care and affection (including toys). *Oliver Twist* was published in the late 1830s, actually at the beginning of the "Victorian Era." In the decades between the publication of books by Dickens and the establishment of this orphanage, new ideas about the roles of the home, women, and children may have promoted a different kind of institutional care. Indeed, the Daughters of Charity was established in 1846, nine years after Victoria became queen, and the Sisters continually changed their methods of training children in keeping with the "trends of the day" (Sister Elaine Wheeler, personal communication, 1992). They tried to instill in their charges both religious and cultural values in order to prepare them for their future roles in society. Part of this process included providing toys which allowed the children to act out such roles.

The account books also show, however, how tenuous the financial situation was despite the combination of Church support, individual philanthropy, and government aid. At the end of some months, as little as \$.80 remained; others ended in the red. Donations were required for extras. Providing food and shelter was the main concern.

The emotional life of the children is more difficult to document than the material life and can only be examined anecdotally. One Sister who grew up at Schuyler Mansion has related her life story (Sister Elaine Wheeler, personal communication, 1992). Her parents came from Italy. Shortly after their arrival, her father was killed in a job-related accident. Placing the children in Albany's St. Vincent's orphanage, the mother remarried and started a second family, leaving the first group of children in the orphanage. When the girls were older, the mother returned to remove them

from the orphanage so that they could go to work. Later, the two girls each took vows and became members of the Daughters of Charity Community. At another orphanage run by the Daughters of Charity, a little girl spied her older brother (who had been placed in a school for boys) on the other side of the fence surrounding the home. Responding to his call, she crossed to the fence where he gave her a bag of candy and confided that he was running away. She never saw him again and never learned of his fate. Thus, behind the historical and archaeological evidence is the pain of such children, many of whom spoke no English and who were left in institutional care.

That toys were part of the "therapy" provided these children is clear from the archaeological record, much more so than from the documents. That such items were provided and heavily used can be deduced from the variety of types and numbers of broken fragments found in the ground. The children apparently had some individual choice, or at least the dolls provided were not "institutional" types. This also may be a reflection of another ideal of the Victorian era: "In the Victorian household, similar but individually identifiable dolls, mugs, and other items furnished children with private and almost equal property according to their status within the family. The items reinforced age distinctions among siblings, prevented jealousy by giving each clear ownership to items of similar worth, and provided an object lesson in the property relations of Victorian society" (Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1992: 92).

Relatively little archaeological research has occurred at late 19th- and early 20th-century orphanage sites either in the United States or in Great Britain. Recently, however, the discovery of marked ceramics from the Infant Orphan Asylum at Wanstead, near London, dating from the second half of the 19th century has suggested that it was a very highly institutionalized orphanage, in contrast to the infant asylum at Schuyler Mansion. Plates, bowls, and mugs from the Wanstead orphanage were each carefully and plainly inscribed "Infant Orphan Asylum HALL," so that the users of this ware were constantly reminded of their institutional status (Hughes 1992: 387). The contrast between these two institutions indicates that more such studies are needed in order better to understand the functioning of

such organizations in our recent past.

## Acknowledgments

I would especially like to thank Sister Elaine Wheeler, archivist, for the attention she gave me while doing research on this topic at the St. Vincent de Paul Provincial House, Menands, New York. In addition, acknowledgments go to Joe McEvoy for photographing the artifacts for this article; to Paul Huey for his helpful suggestions; and to Mary Valek for her patience at the computer while correcting various versions of the text. In addition, I would like to thank the staff at Schuyler Mansion State Historic Site for their interest in this topic which is somewhat outside their primary interpretative mission.

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