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TO CARE FOR THE "FAIR FRAGILE FORM"
THE FOUNDING OF THE BOSTON FEMALE ASYLUM

by

Elizabeth Mock
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History 811

In September 1800 a number of women met at the home of Mrs. Jonathan Mason in Boston, Massachusetts, for the purpose of organizing a charitable society to meet the needs of a certain portion of the poor in their community, destitute female orphans. The society was named the Boston Female Asylum and the constitution adopted that day stated their cause:

Those who are acquainted with the condition of the poor must know that many Female Orphans suffer for want of early patronage: notwithstanding the care taken of them by the Town, much may still be done for them -- May the Ladies of Boston be stimulated to rescue some of the many from that wretchedness too common to the poor -- To them the appeal is made, and from them relief is wished, can Virtue, can Talents, can Wealth be employed in a more laudable way? -- Females will sympathize especially with the sufferings of their own sex, when unprotected by Parents or Friends. -- Are there not many among the Children of prosperity, who wish to lay the foundation of an Institution, which at some future period, may prove an extensive blessing to thousands of Unfortunate Females?-- To the benevolent Heart how delightful the prospect!! --¹

The impetus for the organization resulted primarily from the concern and leadership of Mrs. Hannah Stillman, wife of Rev. Samuel Stillman of the First Baptist Church of Boston. A letter by Mrs. Stillman printed anonymously in J. Russell's Gazette of 2 December 1799 suggested that the ladies of Boston organize a society similar to one established recently in Baltimore for the care of the "fair fragile form." Mrs. Stillman recounted

¹Boston Female Asylum, "Records of the Meetings of the Board of Managers," Meeting of 26 September 1800, Massachusetts State Library Manuscripts Collection. (Boston Female Asylum hereafter cited as BFA)

an incident involving a young woman in distress as evidence of the need for some further type of organized relief for this unfortunate element of society than what was currently available in Boston. Two writers answered Mrs. Stillman's letter quickly, urging that a humane society for females be created by women in Boston. The following September the result of these plans and exactly who would benefit were indicated with the announcement in the Gazette of the creation of the Boston Female Asylum, the "object of which is to raise a fund to support and educate female orphan children, till they shall arrive at a proper age to be placed in virtuous families."²

The initial group of organizers consisted of about one hundred women who had "subscribed" to the society through the payment of the three dollar membership. These subscribers first met 26 September 1800 to form their plan, adopt rules, and consequently to elect a Board of Managers and officers to run the organization. Their plan was to raise money by obtaining subscriptions from women to become members, and also to solicit donations from anyone who wished to support this charity. The subscriptions were to be used for the expenses of their work, while donations were to be invested for future income. The Asylum proposed to accept only orphan girls from three to ten years of age and board them with a reliable and discreet matron who would teach them reading, writing, simple arithmetic, and

²J. Russell's Gazette, Commercial and Political, 2, 9, 16 December 1799; 29 September 1800. (Emphasis theirs)

domestic skills.³ The original plan of accepting only orphans was altered very soon when the Board of Managers voted to admit an extremely destitute girl whose mother was willing to give her up to the care of the Society.⁴ This policy of helping destitute girls, orphaned or not, became the prevalent characteristic of the charity of the Boston Female Asylum throughout its history.

The girls under the care of the Asylum were to be dressed alike in a simple attire and good behavior was expected and encouraged "by some token of approbation conferred by the Society." Also, the matron was required to take them to public worship on Sundays. At a proper age, first at twelve and later at fourteen, the girls would be placed with "virtuous families." When the girls reached the age of eighteen they would no longer be under the care of the Asylum. The Board of Managers and its officers were to make all decisions regarding the Society and the care of its girls. This Board was elected annually from the whole membership. Included in the lists of officers, managers, and subscribers could be considered some of the prominent women in Boston society at that time. Officers elected at that first meeting were Mrs. Samuel Stillman, Mrs. Ebenezer Dorr, and Mrs. Jonathan Mason. The Managers were listed as Mrs. Dr. West, Mrs. Samuel Whitwell, Mrs. Widow Perkins, Mrs. James Bowdoin, Mrs. John Coburn, Mrs.

³BFA, "Records of the Board of Managers," Meeting of 26 September 1800.

⁴Ibid., Meeting of 28 December 1800.

Richard Green, Mrs. Mary Lynde Smith, Mrs. Mathew Parke, Mrs. Ozias Goodwin, Mrs. John Cushing, Mrs. William Thurston, and Miss Mehitable Torry.⁵ Of these fifteen women; eight can be identified as the wives or widows of merchants, two as wives of clergymen, two as wives of political figures and attorneys, and one as the wife of a ship captain.⁶ Several of these women made a donation to the Society above the amount of the three dollar subscription,⁷ presumably due to their financial capability. Their active support is made obvious through their consent to serve on the Board or as an officer. Among the list of the first subscribers are seen the names of Mrs. John Adams, Mrs. Samuel Adams, and Mrs. E. Sumner, wives of an United States President and two Massachusetts governors.⁸

The purpose of this present study will be to discuss the Boston Female Asylum's founding and early history in conjunction with the changes and trends that were evident in social and benevolent movements in American society at the end of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century. The Boston Female Asylum was established as an institution to benefit destitute female orphans and it continued essentially as an asylum until the end of the nineteenth century. The last fifty

⁵BFA, "Register of Subscribers to the Boston Female Asylum, 1800," Massachusetts State Library Manuscripts Collection.

⁶Boston, Massachusetts, The Boston Directory Containing the Names of the Inhabitants, their Occupations, Places of Business, and Dwelling-Houses ... (Boston: John West, 1800), passim.

⁷BFA, "Register of Subscribers, 1800."

⁸Ibid.

years of its existence, when it had associated and finally merged with the Children's Aid Society to become the Children's Aid Association, it had become a child placement and counseling bureau. This change was evident especially when the name was changed to the Boston Society for the Care of Girls in 1910. The organization was dissolved in 1947. The Boston Female Asylum, the fourth charitable organization established in Boston and the first by women there,⁹ can perhaps illustrate the growth of benevolent and social movements, as well as illustrate the changing role of women in the early republic.

Methods of dealing with the destitute elements in society in the Colonial period did reflect certain practices used in England and Europe, but these practices were influenced by the special conditions in the colonies. The poor were looked upon as a natural part of society and were treated within the structure of the local community. Aid was called "outdoor relief" before the introduction of institutional care of the almshouse. Some of the concepts of the English poor law system were transferred to America with the colonists. Relief would be given by the proper ruling group or responsible organization to the destitute within their realm in direct aid, through apprenticeship, or by work-relief. In England relief policy was established on a nationwide basis through their poor laws, but was administered by the local government unit. With the Revolution in America changes in the sources of assistance were evident. This was

⁹Justin Windsor, Memorial History of Boston, 4 vols. (Boston: J. R. Osgood, 1880-1881), 4:348.

due primarily to the development in the United States of a federated system of government, separation of church and state, and the growth of benevolent organizations. Due to the federal system established after the Revolution, no central policy for aid to the destitute was set up. This would be left to the responsibility of the state and local governments. Also, with the separation of church and state, religious groups were able to seize the opportunity for benevolence in areas in which the national government was not involved. Additionally, during this period certain intellectual and social movements, such as the Enlightenment and the Second Great Awakening, began to affect the methods used in treating the dependent elements in society, especially with the growth of private charitable associations and philanthropy. Indeed, the Second Great Awakening of the 1780's, apart from its theological aspects, has been described by historian Donald Mathews in "that the Awakening in its social aspects was an organizing process that helped to give meaning and direction to people suffering in various degrees from the social strains of a nation on the move into new political, economic and geographical areas."¹⁰ These new religious feelings channeled people of established groups in a social movement characterized by religious, missionary and benevolent organizations.¹¹

The early national period also marks a change in attitude in the justification of giving aid to the poor in society.

¹⁰ Donald G. Mathews, "The Second Great Awakening as an Organizing Process, 1780-1830: an Hypothesis," American Quarterly XXI (1969): 27.

¹¹ Ibid., pp.23-43.

Previously it was done as a proof of Christian virtue, now it was becoming a means of social improvement. The Boston Female Asylum was one of the very first private institutions established in the United States that cared for children separate from other dependents in society; similar institutions were to be found in New Orleans, Savannah, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore.¹² Finally, in the early national period with the growth of urban areas, the realization that the poor would not disappear, even in this new land of plenty, began to influence the governments and the benevolent groups of the local communities.¹³

The establishment of the Boston Female Asylum as an organization to deal with a certain portion of the destitute in Boston was influenced by the changes and developments in social welfare and benevolence that were taking place in the period. The founders of the Female Asylum spoke of their motives for creating a society to care for poor female children consistently in terms of virtue, benevolence, and humanity. These women were the wives of many religious, political and business leaders in the area. They evidently had enough leisure time and

¹²Homer Folks, The Care of the Destitute, Neglected and Delinquent Children (New York: Macmillan, 1902), p.55.

¹³Sources for this discussion on the background of colonial and early republic aid to the destitute are the following: Merle E. Curti, "Tradition and Innovation in American Philanthropy," Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society 105 (1961): 146-147; Oscar Hanlin, Introduction to Protestants Against Poverty; Boston's Charities, 1870-1900, by Nathan Irvin Huggins (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1971), pp.x-xii; Emma Octavia Lundberg, Unto the Least of These: Social Services for Children (New York: D. Appleton Century, 1947), pp.49-51; Walter I. Trattner, From Poor Law to Welfare State; a History of Social Welfare in America (New York: Free Press, 1974), pp.35-40.

money to be able to participate in such a demanding activity, and were led by a sense of duty and humanity to attempt to help a needy element of their town with which they had sympathy. To understand the founding of the Asylum one must consider the possible influence on the early leaders and what made them establish such an organization at this particular time and place, and in this particular form. While the Female Asylum was not formally connected with a religious group, it was of a type considered sectarian and protestant by non-protestant groups.¹⁴

As mentioned earlier, the girls were required to attend worship services, usually at a nearby meeting house where special arrangements were made with the congregation. The founder of the Society, Mrs. Hannah Stillman, was the wife of Rev. Samuel Stillman who was the popular minister of the First Baptist Church of Boston from 1764 to 1807. He was an outspoken proponent of the American Revolution and of religious liberty for the young republic.¹⁵ Mrs. Stillman was known to have been an active supporter of her husband's ideals and actions. This evidently led her to the actions which resulted in the establishment of the Boston Female Asylum.¹⁶ Religious influences were also evident in the annual anniversary services held by the Society for the first thirty years of its existence. These ceremonies,

¹⁴Folks, p.56.

¹⁵Nathan E. Wood, The History of the First Baptist Church of Boston, 1665-1899 (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1899), pp.

¹⁶BFA, Reminiscences of the Boston Female Asylum (Boston: Eastburn's Press, 1844), pp.3-4.

in which different local protestant ministers delivered a sermon or discourse, served as fundraising events and social occasions, as well as a means of informing the public and its supporters of the activities of the organization.¹⁷ While the Boston Female Asylum was not affiliated with a religious group, it did fit into the religious traditions and movements of the period.

Certain progressive historians, such as Charles I. Foster and Clifford S. Griffin, account for the development of religious benevolence with the interpretation that religious leaders of the age were trying to regain a position of social control that they enjoyed before the Revolution, rather than seeing it as a move toward social improvement. They were trying to promote morality and further Christianity, rather than working for better conditions for humanity. In an article in the Journal of American History, Lois W. Banner discusses these interpretations of religious benevolence and offers an alternative to the motive of social control. Banner sees the movement as growing out of the ideas of millennialism and what she calls the concept of "Christian republicanism." Hope for the millennial age was seen in the events of the eighteenth century, such as the American Revolution and missionary movements. This hope influenced benevolent actions; if these groups were successful perhaps the millennial age would follow. The concept of "Christian republicanism" that she discusses shows the relationship between benevolent causes and

¹⁷See BFA, Anniversary Sermons, Delivered Before the Boston Female Asylum at Sundry Times ... (Boston: Privately printed, 1817).

clerical ideas about the nature of republicanism in the new nation.¹⁸ The early national period in which the country was trying to adjust to this experiment in Republican government was marked by much uncertainty and political unrest. Basically it was a time of insecurity; the success of the experiment was by no means assured. The only hope for its success held by many of the political and religious leaders of the day would come from the strict moral and virtuous behavior of its citizens.¹⁹ To attain this "Christian republicanism" in order to deal with the evils apparent in the young nation, according to Banner, three processes were necessary; education, religion, and voluntary association. Education would permit the people to learn republic virtues, religion would teach them humility and humanitarianism, and voluntary associations would provide the avenues to carry out these aims without putting more power in the hands of the central government.²⁰ In a letter to the General Court of Massachusetts requesting an act of incorporation by the Board of Managers of the Female Asylum, the idea of improving a part of society along the above lines is illustrated:

¹⁸ See Lois W. Banner, "Religious Benevolence as Social Control; a Critique of an Interpretation," Journal of American History 60 (June 1973): 23-41; Mathews, pp.23-43.

¹⁹ For discussions of the uncertainty and political unrest in the early national period see: John R. Howe, Jr., "Republican Thought and the Political Violence in the 1790's," American Quarterly 19 (Summer 1967): 147-165; Perry Miller, The Life of the Mind in America from the Revolution to the Civil War (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965), pp.3-6; Gordon S. Wood, ed., The Rising Glory of America, 1760-1820 (New York: Braziller, 1971), pp.1-22.

²⁰ Banner, pp.38-39.

That to the ordinary duties of relieving the distressed, the contemplation of tendering a fostering hand & saving from misery, vice & ruin, helpless orphans of their own sex, was at once pleasing, and as they conceived benevolent & useful: pleasing, by promising to add something to the common stock of female happiness, benevolent & useful by enabling a number of distressed objects to become virtuous, industrious members of society, and by infusing into their tender minds early habits of religion, purity and morals, add thereby to the number of happy marriages, affectionate wives, & prudent mothers...²¹

This charitable organization to house and educate young female children could be considered one example of how citizens were influenced by the situations at the end of the eighteenth^(century), and one attempt on their part to deal with the problems they faced in the social sphere.

The only problem faced by the founders of the Boston Female Asylum appeared to be in regard to the initial organizing. An early printed account of the rise of the Society mentions having to overcome objections and delays in the creation of this novel institution. The problems were overcome by appealing to subscribers privately and by the offering of a leader of Boston society of her home for their meetings.²² One historian of the rise of women's benevolent societies, Mary Bosworth Treudley, discusses this incident as the only question raised during the period of

²¹BFA, Board of Managers to the General Court of Massachusetts, in accompanying papers to Massachusetts Acts and Resolves, 1802, ch. 87, "An Act to Incorporate Hannah Stillman and others into a Society by the Name of the Boston Female Asylum," approved 26 February 1803. Archives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

²²BFA, An Account of the Rise, Progress, and Present State, of the Boston Female Asylum ... (Boston: Printed by Russell and Cutler, 1803), p.4.

the propriety of such organizations. She explains the problem as relating to the fact that the founder, Mrs. Hannah Stillman, was a Baptist while the social leaders of the time were Unitarians. This possible denominational conflict was overcome when Mrs. Stillman was able to enlist many prominent women as subscribers and when Mrs. Jonathan Mason, Sr., donated the use of her house for the meetings of the Society.²³ Religious historians do not see much denominational conflict between the Baptist and other protestant sects in Boston in this period; rather there was a growth of toleration among these groups.²⁴ Until private papers, if they exist, of the founders can be analyzed, no discussion of denominational conflict as the cause for this early problem can be offered. Another possibility for the concern about the initial undertaking would perhaps be due to the fact that this society was organized and would be run by women, the first such charity in Boston. Of course, this too would be difficult to verify without the papers of the founders. Very soon after the establishment of the Female Asylum, however, a leading Boston merchant, Mr. Samuel Smith, raised nine thousand dollars from the men of Boston toward a building fund for the Asylum.²⁵ This would seem to indicate support, not opposition, by the men of the community.

²³Mary Bosworth Treudley, "The 'Benevolent Fair:' a Study of Charitable Organizations among American Women in the First Third of the Nineteenth Century," Social Service Review 14 (194):511.

²⁴See Robert G. Torbet, A History of the Baptists, Rev. ed. (Valley Forge: Judson, 1963), p.245; William Warren Sweet, Religion in the Development of American Culture, 1765-1840 (New York: Scribners, 1952), p.52.

²⁵BFA, "Records of the Board of Managers," 1802, passim.

This support would seem to indicate that the men of Boston were in favor of charitable work by women.

The years around the turn of the nineteenth century saw the creation of the first women's benevolent organizations. The Boston Female Asylum was among the very earliest such associations. These women's charities characteristically involved relief for the poor, education, or spread of religion. According to a study by Keith Melder, the women involved with these groups were community leaders who had the time and the sense of duty to encourage their participation. The limits of their work were defined by convention at that time; charity work with women and children, help for the aged woman, and education of the young only were permissible. The formal organization of women's societies was determined by their status in society as well. Acts of incorporation were required to hold property.²⁶ The Female Asylum was incorporated in 1803 when the Managers realized that purchasing a house for their Asylum rather than boarding their girls became advantageous. In the act of incorporation is the provision that the Treasurer of the Society must be a female, single and over the age of twenty one,²⁷ a measure inferring that they considered a husband would have rights to any type of funds handled by his wife. From the early women's benevolent associations such as the Boston Female Asylum, there

²⁶Keith Melder, "Ladies Bountiful; Organized Women's Benevolence in the Early 19th Century," New York History XLVIII (1967) : 231-255.

²⁷BFA, "Act of Incorporation," Records, 1803.

was a remarkable growth of organizations over the next thirty or forty years. After first being involved with benevolent charities dealing with the needy and the spread of religious ideals, women's activism began to develop into true reform movements, including abolitionism and temperance causes. The early benevolent organizations can be viewed as the first step women took toward activism in reform movements which led to the growth of feminism.²⁸

The Boston Female Asylum accepted its first orphan for care in December 1800, and admitted more as funds allowed. Soon the plan to board children became unreasonable as the demand for the care of the Asylum grew. A series of houses were leased or purchased for the Asylum until a building was erected on Washington Street in 1844. Women were hired by the Board of Managers to run the institution and teach the children. The Asylum only accepted girls from three to ten years of age. As mentioned earlier, need became as important a determining factor for admittance as did being an orphan. The Managers decided on all proposed girls for the benevolence of the Society. No clear guidelines were set up, decisions being based on individual need according to information obtained by the Managers on their own or through acquaintances. Many children were presented for the Asylum by a parent or relative who was unable to care for the child due to the illness or extreme poverty of the guardian. A surviving parent or relative who wanted to turn their

²⁸See Keith Melder, pp.231-255; Treudley, pp.509-522.

child over to the care of the Asylum was required to sign an obligation to give full guardianship to the Asylum, under whose responsibility the girl would remain until she reached the age of eighteen.²⁹ Those admitted lived at the Asylum under the care and instruction of a governess and her assistants. The girls were all dressed alike and were required to follow a specified routine daily regarding times for sleeping, washing, eating, playing, learning and working. They were given a rudimentary education, were expected to behave in a virtuous manner, and were required to perform basic domestic skills. All this would make them suitable to be placed with a good family as a domestic worker when they reached the age of twelve or fourteen. The Asylum placed these girls through an indenture system; the girls were to receive a cash settlement upon the completion of their indenture. Families who were to receive girls were investigated by the Managers and these families were expected to provide the girls a good home as well as a job. Subscribers and Managers of the Society evidently had priority among applicants for taking Asylum girls, in fact many of the earliest placings went ~~ot~~ to the homes of the Managers.³⁰ Occasionally girls were adopted outright, and in the second half of the nineteenth century there was a tendency toward trying to return the girl to her family when conditions at home improved. Until the home was built in 1844, the Asylum usually cared for thirty

²⁹BFA, "Records of the Board of Managers," Meeting of 28 April 1801.

³⁰BFA, "Register of the Orphan Children Admitted into the Boston Female Asylum," 1800-1864 volume.

to forty girls. After 1844 the number increased to approximately seventy or even higher in periods of economic distress.³¹

With the changes taking place in American society in the 1830's, we see a corresponding change in methods and attitudes of dealing with deviant and dependent elements in society. This was a period of considerable immigration and other alterations in the social order. There was a growing need to solve the problems of order in the community through specific reforms, and asylums began to play an important role in the process. According to historian David Rothman "the Asylum was to fulfill a dual purpose for its innovators. It would rehabilitate inmates and then by virtue of its success, set an example of right action for the larger society."³² The asylum did not become a dominant method of social reform until after the Boston Female Asylum had been an established institution for approximately thirty years. Nevertheless it did share some of the characteristics of the newer orphan asylums. The Female Asylum stressed obedience as did the newer asylums, but it also included an element of reward for good behavior which the others did not. Child care organizations were considered very important in the period, with this group the reformer had a better chance of altering behavior and creating a good citizen for the future.³³ Methods of dependent child care

³¹BFA, "Records of the Board of Managers," passim.

³²David J. Rothman, The Discovery of the Asylum; Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), p.xix.

³³See Rothman, pp.206-264; Trattner, pp.51-101.

continued to evolve throughout the nineteenth century until the use of the institution lost favor. The eventual return to care for the child in natural home situations resulted from the reform movements of the second half of the nineteenth century. The Boston Female Asylum remained as rather a static organization during this long period and only gave in slowly to reforms moving toward foster care. It did not give up its institutional form until the beginning of the twentieth century when it became a child placement and counseling bureau under the name of the Boston Society for the Care of Girls.

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