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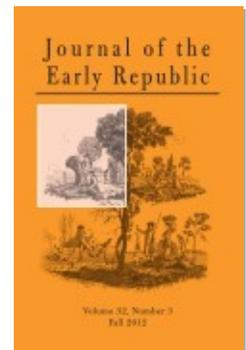
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# Poor Mothers, Stepmothers, and Foster Mothers in Early Republic and Antebellum Charleston

JOHN E. MURRAY

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As curious as we might be about the interior life of poor families, the extant documentary record largely restricts our view to their interaction with the world outside. Whereas even middling families left behind considerable written primary material—consider the wealth of travel diaries in the early republic or soldiers’ letters during the Civil War—the poor in the ordinary run of their lives rarely had occasion or ability to record their experiences. As a result, the body of historical writing on American families has been skewed toward those who formed so much of the documentary record, and away from those families who, while numerous, exited this vale of tears without leaving their thoughts and experiences behind. This article seeks to right the balance by considering over 400 letters, many of which were written by and about poor women in Charleston, South Carolina, and nearly all of which concerned families and their well-being. The women were seeking alternately to place their children in the Charleston Orphan House, to establish their rights to visit and be visited by their children, or to recover permanent custody. In addition, some letters came from investigative efforts to ensure that the Orphan House aided only the neediest of families. The picture that emerges from the pleas of poor women and responses by the

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city's white elite is one of constant struggle by families who lived at, and sometimes below, subsistence level.<sup>1</sup>

Three relationships characterized the women who sought relief from the Orphan House: strangers who had brought orphaned or abandoned children into their homes temporarily, whom I call foster mothers; women of some blood or legal relationship to the child that was short of motherhood, whom I call stepmothers; and mothers who had borne and raised these young ones. Although it is clear that the mothers themselves enjoyed the closest bonds with their children, it is also clear that even unrelated women felt and acted in a loving way toward their charges.

Historians have examined and speculated upon the interior lives of families in the American past. Carl Degler inferred that the tendency of Puritan families to send their children out to be raised in other families, which Edmund Morgan demonstrated, was a sign of parental detachment. For later families, Degler acknowledged the paucity of sources on the working class but still endorsed the general view that the failure of eighteenth-century adults to discuss their children in letters indicated a more general lack of interest in them.<sup>2</sup>

To break the absence of primary sources on children, Harvey Graff used some 500 autobiographical accounts of childhood. To generalize from a prosopography even of this size is dangerous indeed, and Graff reasonably concluded that "neither a simple summary nor a casual conclusion [was] possible." One consequence of the scarcity of sources is that historians have tended to focus with considerable intensity on a few well-known examples of young people, beginning with Ben Franklin's spell as an apprentice printer. Steven Mintz begins his chapter on working children with a vignette about young Lucy Larcom, a mill worker about whom we have a published autobiography, an edited volume of letters and her diary, and two recent biographies! Of course, the fundamental problem here is lack of primary material written by the poor and working class—what else could one expect? But at the same time we should not be too quick to surrender to a supposed absence of written

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1. A more complete picture appears in a forthcoming book. John E. Murray, *Worlds of Children: Poor Families and Their Orphan House in Antebellum Charleston* (Chicago, 2012).

2. Carl N. Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York, 1981), 69, 71.

records, as there may be such documents available that hitherto have been overlooked.<sup>3</sup>

More recent efforts by historians of the South have generated insight on the lives of the planter class and of slaves. Bertram Wyatt-Brown considered southern child-raising patterns in the context of honor. Mothers felt ambivalence toward their children, he proposed, but still permitted themselves to form emotional bonds with their offspring. The evidence for these assertions, though, was of questionable salience to poorer families, depending as it did on secondary literature on planter families plus assumptions that the poor acted pretty much the same as their betters. Still, indirect views of working-class women's capabilities appear in their use of public speech. Cynthia Kierner showed that groups of working women in Charleston took advantage of the Revolutionary era discourse that emphasized equality and then learned how effectively to petition men in politically superior positions. Sally McMillen described the experiences of *Motherhood in the Old South*, focusing on pregnancy, childbirth, and infant care, but again, who else but the planter class would have the time, ability, or desire to write about such things? Suzanne Lebsack examined one southern community in her groundbreaking *Free Women of Petersburg*, but few poor women and their families appear, primarily because they left behind few of the legal records on which she relied, at least until the women were widowed.<sup>4</sup>

The limited history of poor whites in the Old South has been heavily influenced by the nature of the available primary sources, mostly court records. The result has been an overemphasis on law-breaking, which was the motivation for creation and preservation of such records. Charles Bolton and Bill Cecil-Fronsman each examined poor whites through census, tax, and court records. They described people who, without much to live on, sought self-respect through belief in racial superiority.

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3. Harvey Graff, *Conflicting Paths: Growing Up in America* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), 184. Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), 133, 403nn1–2.

4. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1982), 126–37. Cynthia A. Kierner, *Beyond the Household: Women's Place in the Early South, 1700–1835* (Ithaca, NY, 1998), 124–28. Sally G. McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Infant Rearing* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1997). Suzanne Lebsack, *Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784–1860* (New York, 1985), xvii.

Frank Owsley's long influential *Plain Folk of the Old South* sought to rehabilitate the yeoman class: those who may have owned a little bit of land but few, if any slaves. His work influenced later historians such as Stephanie McCurry, who found in her study of the South Carolina yeomanry a strong element of patriarchy even at the lowest levels of material wealth. The subjects of these studies, like most southerners, were rural people. Urban poverty existed, but in different forms from that in the countryside.<sup>5</sup>

The poor in Charleston were at least fortunate enough to live in one of the wealthiest cities in early America. Some of that wealth provided for children who had few other sources of food or shelter. Prior to the Revolution, responsibility for care of poor and orphaned children in Charleston lay with St. Philip's Parish, the mother church of the established Anglican faith. St. Philip's had the authority to levy poor rates and distribute them as it saw fit to care for destitute adults and abandoned children. After the Revolution and disestablishment, poor-relief responsibilities fell to the city of Charleston, which received a small subsidy from the state of South Carolina for its relief efforts. As a way to cut back on costs of caring for large numbers of children, City Council investigated Bethesda, the orphanage built by the great revivalist George Whitefield in nearby Savannah. Satisfied with this potential model for their own efforts, Charleston's city council passed the 1790 ordinance creating the Orphan House "for the purpose of supporting and educating poor orphan children, and those of poor, distressed and disabled parents who are unable to support and maintain them." The measure began by noting the "heavy expense" that attended the previous system of "supporting and educating poor children." Both expectations then were built into the founding of the Orphan House: to care for children, and to do so as cheaply as possible. By the end of the Orphan House's

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5. Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi* (Durham, NC, 1994); Bill Cecil-Fronsman, *Common Whites: Class and Culture in Antebellum North Carolina* (Lexington, KY, 1992). Frank Lawrence Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1949). Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York, 1995).

first year, forty-two new children had been legally bound into it, and many more were to follow.<sup>6</sup>

The Orphan House proved to be an attractive option not just for full orphans who literally had nowhere else to go, but also for widowed and other poor whites who lacked the resources to raise their children. In fact, so many more children hoped to enter the institution than the Orphan House could accept that it established an admissions protocol for prospective residents. In the majority of cases responsible adults, typically widowed or abandoned, approached the Orphan House to nominate their child or ward for admission. They commonly notified the Orphan House of the dire straits in which they found themselves through a letter, many of which survive. Many such letters were written by those parents. About three-fifths of women who brought their children to the Orphan House were able to sign their names.<sup>7</sup>

For other women, a lack of formal literacy skills was not much of an obstacle to the Orphan House. Some women dictated their stories to an amanuensis who wrote it by hand. The responsible woman then endorsed her letter with a simple “X,” near which others attested to her identity by signing their names. In other cases a woman’s signature differed so clearly from the handwriting in the rest of the letter that it seemed safe to infer that someone else had composed most of the document and the signer contributed the story and her signature. Indeed, some letter writers provided blanks for the name of the child as well, so that it could be filled in as boilerplate. For example, two people clearly wrote one particular letter as follows (second hand underlined). “Gentlemen,” pled this mother, “Necessity compels me to request that you will assist me by taking under your care my daughter *Catherine*. She is 11 years old.” This letter appears to have been signed by its author, Ann C. Duncan, but further investigation indicates that two other people

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6. *By-laws of the Orphan House of Charleston, South Carolina* (Charleston, SC, 1861), quoting 1790 city ordinance; electronic edition at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/orphan/menu.html>. Copy of ordinance in *Minutes of Commissioners’ Meetings, I*, Charleston Orphan House records, South Carolina Room, Charleston County Public Library (hereafter cited as *Minutes*).

7. John E. Murray, “Family, Literacy, and Skill Training in the Antebellum South: Historical-Longitudinal Evidence from Charleston,” *Journal of Economic History* 64 (Sept. 2004), 773–99.

likely drew up this document at different times, with Ann Duncan (or perhaps Catherine Duncan, the daughter) telling a transcriber the name and age of her children and other specifics. On the same date as this letter, neither Ann nor Catherine Duncan was able to sign the indenture that legally bound Catherine to the Orphan House, and instead each marked it with an X. In this example as in others, relatively low literacy rates among poor women of Charleston did not prevent them from communicating their experiences with children, work, husbands, and dire poverty.<sup>8</sup>

Lest these women be tempted to exaggerate the burdens under which they labored, the Orphan House sent an official to visit their household. This Visiting Commissioner interviewed the applicant and, often, her neighbors, landlord, or employer. Visiting Commissioners conducted their investigations with varying degrees of diligence, depending on their caseload and on the space available in the institution. One such visit revealed that the applicant was a widow of three years and “in utter poverty,” but that she had a plan to place her daughter at the Orphan House so that she could then go out to work as a domestic. The Visiting Commissioner emphasized the veracity of this account by noting, “These facts I have ascertained by investigation and inquiry.”<sup>9</sup>

Other cases required multiple visits, which sometimes led to inconsistent information. Where one Visiting Commissioner saw a father as “a worthless drunkard,” another found a man “in the prime of life [who] could with proper diligence support his children.” Signs of living standards slightly above destitution led Visiting Commissioners to recommend rejection—in one case because the “mother appears to be a hearty woman & able to support” her children. Aware of the usefulness of corroboration of their accounts, some applicants appealed to neighbors or town fathers to sign documents that attested to the applicant’s industriousness and misfortune. The ability of women and men alike to provide testimony that the Commissioners of the Orphan House treated as trustworthy can be seen in one petition signed by no fewer than sixteen

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8. One example: Marie Allison to Commissioners, June 24, 1825, in Applications to Admit Orphans, Charleston Orphan House records, South Carolina Room, Charleston County Public Library (hereafter cited as “Applications.”) Ann C. Duncan to Commissioners, July 16, 1818, “Applications.”

9. H. A. DeSaussure to Commissioners, Mar. 28, 1850, “Applications,” case of Amanda Luderwig.

women. Nor was a lack of literacy ability a bar to acceptable endorsements; in some cases, the recommenders themselves marked the document. The difficulty of misrepresenting one's situation must have been widely known, which suggests the fundamental accuracy of these letters in describing the lives of Charleston's white poor.<sup>10</sup>



The first group of women who wrote the Commissioners of the Orphan House included those who felt responsible for children in their household but lacked any kind of legal relationship with them. I will refer to these women as foster mothers but, as will become apparent, that is not to imply that they had a formal status by that or any other title. Thirty cases of unrelated women taking children into their homes appear in these letters, plus a number of others, not considered here, in which the patron was a man. Authorship of the available letters can be divided about evenly between the foster mothers themselves and male intermediaries, many of whom were clergymen who represented their case to the Commissioners of the Orphan House. Foster mothers found support among neighbor women and members of benevolent societies. In one case, a group of prominent women wrote and individually signed the application letter on behalf of the foster mother. Because the letters were aimed at getting the children into the Orphan House, they disclose little information about the foster mothers directly, but a close reading yields some perspective on a little noticed group of women. Most seem to have been widows, although a few mention obligations to children of their own. They generally appear as poor, emphasizing that status by describing their occupation as one at the bottom of the social and economic scale: needlework or keeping a boarding house. One foster mother emphasized her poverty by noting that she was "receiving a pension herself from the Poor House," meaning that she was impoverished enough to be getting outdoor relief. To dispel any illusions about her

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10. Form for four Lonergan children dated Nov. 1, 1855, "Applications." The report appears in two different hands, the first unsigned and the second signed by M. Caldwell. Application of Margaret Farrell, Dec. 9, 1858, Rejected Applications to Admit Orphans, Charleston Orphan House records, South Carolina Room, Charleston County Public Library (hereafter cited as "Rejected Applications.") One of many: R. W. Force et al to Commissioners, Apr. 23, 1857, "Applications," case of Mary McCormick. File of Rebecca Simons, June 12, 1816, "Applications."

character, she made sure that a former employer described her as “sober & industrious.”<sup>11</sup>

The paths followed by the foster mothers into the children’s lives were circuitous and, except in one respect, heavily influenced by luck, mostly but not entirely bad. In most cases, the women appear to have received the children as an act of kindness in an emergency. In a case from 1818, Margaret Denoon explained that John Campbell Sanders came to her as an infant after his mother died. She “took him into my family” for the next ten years, long after her last contact with his father. Two women cared for Thomas King after his mother died and his father abandoned him. Then an unnamed Irishwoman with a large family took him in for a time. When this Irishwoman could no longer afford the extra mouth to feed, Mrs. Elizabeth McLaughlin took him in. Dying of uterine cancer, she enlisted the aid of an Episcopal priest, A. Toomer Porter, in contacting the Orphan House. Two months after Thomas was admitted, McLaughlin was dead. Sometimes short-term caregiving by women other than mothers led children into the Orphan House. Before Martha Bennett decamped to Columbia, reputedly for a brief visit, she left her three children “with a coloured woman named Youngblood” a few blocks from the Orphan House. In assessing the children’s situation, Visiting Commissioner wrote, the race of the foster mother was secondary to the mother’s poverty and behavior. “The mother of the children has no means and the sooner the children are out of the reach of her influence and control the better for them,” he wrote. The Orphan House admitted the Bennett girls two days later.<sup>12</sup>

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11. Women intermediaries: M. C. Wilson, Hannah Drayton, and Mary C. Gregorie to Commissioners, Mar. 9, 1815, “Applications,” case of Margaret Thompson. A widow with her own children: Margaret Church to Commissioners, May 19, 1824, “Applications,” case of Thomas Devlin. Needlework: Jane Smith to Commissioners, Jan. 9, 1817, “Applications,” case of James Lawrence. Boarding house: Mary Byrd to Commissioners, Nov. 1829, “Applications,” case of Washington Stevenson. Quote from Letitia Glen to Commissioners, Dec. 17, 1803, “Applications.”

12. M. Caldwell, reverse of application form, Nov. 27, 1855, “Applications.” The children stayed five years in the Orphan House until their mother, remarried and living in Georgetown, retrieved them. Catherine, Henrietta, and Laura Bennett, “Indenture Books,” Charleston Orphan House records, South Carolina Room, Charleston County Public Library (hereinafter cited as “Indenture Books”).

In cases unrelated to emergencies foster mothers accepted children with the understanding that she might have the child on her hands for some time to come. Clearly this was the case for foundlings. Finding a baby boy “but a few hours old” on her porch was such a vivid event for Ann Creighton that seven years later she could still recall that it happened “on the evening of the 10<sup>th</sup> of October in the year 1845 between the hours of 9 and 10 Oclock.” She had him baptized with the name James Usher at a nearby Episcopal church, where a priest stood as godfather. Over the next few years, she stressed to the Commissioners, she “sustained him as a mother through his tenderest years of infancy,” and “entirely at her own expense.”<sup>13</sup>

Sometimes calculation at least partially replaced fortune in the child’s destiny, in cases of broken contracts. The foster mothers had negotiated terms of boarding contracts with a child’s parent or guardian, who then failed to make the agreed-upon payments. Anna Wood explained to the Commissioners that while William Edmond Crowe had been “boarding with” her for some two and a half years, she had only been paid ten dollars for her work. Her inability to continue raising the boy without compensation, plus his new habit of running away, led her to ask the Orphan House to take him in. A boarding relationship might begin soon after a mother’s death. James Young’s wife died not long after giving birth to their daughter Jane. Scanning newspaper advertisements for wet nurses, he found Mary Dunn, whose own recently deceased infant would have been about Jane’s age. Young and Dunn agreed on a rate of eight dollars a month for Jane’s care, consistent with wet nurse fees found elsewhere in Orphan House records. Young paid for several months in advance, and then left for New York with his two older children. He was

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For another case of families of color raising a white child, see H. L. Gervais to Commissioners, July 21, 1856, “Applications,” case of Thomas Richards.

13. Margaret Denoon to Commissioners, May 10, 1818, “Applications.” A. Toomer Porter to Commissioners, Mar. 21, 1859, “Applications.” McLaughlin endorsed Porter’s letter with her mark. The date and cause of her death are recorded in City of Charleston, *Death Records*, South Carolina Room, Charleston County Public Library, digital copy transcribed by Elizabeth Newcombe. Ann Creighton to Commissioners, Sept. 22, 1852, “Applications.” Creighton gave no reason for the child’s surname, and no one named Usher appeared in the 1841 and 1849 city directories.

never heard from again. Meanwhile, Dunn struggled with caring for her now-uncompensated charge, plus two children of her own, her aged mother, and a husband in ill health. Her one possible source of relief was the Orphan House, which accepted Jane in July 1853.<sup>14</sup>

Some boarding relationships were warm; others were more business-like. William Player, whose father had been killed in military service, was squeezed out of his mother's new household by the arrival of his half sibling. William first went to board with a Mrs. Armstrong, who became "a second parent" to him. On her death he entered the household of a woman who boarded "several" children, but she determined that "his habits are bad and his disposition unmanageable," and applied to the Orphan House for relief.<sup>15</sup>

Two interesting but most shadowy groups of women acted as accidental foster mothers: free women of color and prostitutes. They appear in the records usually because someone, in many but not all cases related to the child, discovered the child in the woman's care and alerted authorities to this disorderly arrangement. The case of Martha Bennett's children described above gives one example. One of the earliest items Commissioners were faced with appeared in November 1790, when someone alerted them to the fact that a "Negro woman" was caring for an orphan child. The woman, Jenny, produced the following letter: "Bearer Jenny has a poor Orphan under her care, my desire is that he remain there unmolested, at a proper time he will be sent to some school in the mean time any person interfering will do it at his peril Nov 6, 1790 [signed] Francis Kinloch." Kinloch appears not to have been further trifled with.<sup>16</sup>

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14. Anna Wood to Commissioners, May 14, 1853, "Applications," case of William Edmond Crowe; Archibald McLeish to Mr. Campbell, July 20, 1853, and E. Stoney to Commissioners, July 27, 1853, both in "Applications," case of Jane Young. Young was returned to an aunt in 1857 with the intention of continuing on to her father: "Indenture Books," Jane Young, bound on July 28, 1853.

15. Christopher Gadsden to Commissioners, Jan. 7, 1818, "Applications." Note how much earlier the phenomenon of child boarding houses appears than in Vivian A. Rotman Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (New York, 1985), 184.

16. Commissioners' *Minutes*, Nov. 11, 1790. Francis Kinloch was a wealthy planter and politician who had been a representative to the Continental Congress; q.v., James Grant Wilson and John Fiske, *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, Vol. 3 (New York, 1887).

In a similar situation, when the grandmother of Virginia Karnes, two months old, could no longer care for her, she placed her “under the care & in the possession of a Negro nurse.” Authorities found children staying with prostitutes just as alarming. Upon the death of her husband, Harriet Assalit was charged by a family member with having left her youngest, a two-year-old, with a “strumpet.” Another woman, presumably more respectable, took in the child and told the prostitute “not to ever appear in her presence.” It is impossible to tell how long the prostitute cared for the child. Two appeals to take children from their prostitute-mothers suggest that the children lived in a brothel, in a somewhat communal setting. Unfortunately the lower reaches of the Charleston *demimonde* left little else behind in the way of written records.<sup>17</sup>

These cases suggest that not all foster mothers accepted their burden as an act of charity. That is, some took in children as part of an exchange of their child care services for money. But only the exchanges that did not occur to the satisfaction of the women made it into the records. Many foster mothers whose contracts were honored by the child’s parent or guardian must have raised children for some mutually agreed upon time, in exchange for financial support. In Harriet Assalit’s case, the woman who took her from the unnamed prostitute then gave her to a Mrs. Hale on St. Philip’s Street (possibly Ann Hall, a seamstress), and promised to pay Mrs. Hale six dollars per month to care for Harriet. Since Harriet was two years old at the time, this arrangement was probably for standard child care and not wet nursing. That is, it seems likely that child-raising was an occupation for some poor women such as Ann Hale/Hall. Most of those women performed their jobs in such a way that all parties were reasonably satisfied, and so the exchange never made it into the written record. How extensive this network of foster mothers was is impossible to determine, but the fragmentary evidence is sufficient to establish that it did in fact exist.<sup>18</sup>

The attitudes of foster mothers toward their children can be inferred from certain comments in their letters. After being abandoned as a foundling around 1815, Eunice Madison was twice lucky in her foster

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17. Visiting Commissioner report, Sept. 23, 1841, “Applications.” J. Assalit to Commissioners, July 8, 1830, “Applications.” J. A. Johnson to Commissioners, Oct. 14, 1819. re: Julianna Barnes; and five women to Commissioners, Feb. 21, 1825, re: Salina Barto, both in “Applications.”

18. J. Assalit to Commissioners, July 8, 1830, “Applications.”

mothers. First she entered the home of a Mrs. Ferguson, who became unable to keep her but who found a welcoming home for her in Georgetown, sixty miles up the coast. There, according to Mrs. Ferguson, she was “adopted and fondly cherished” by Mr. and Mrs. Ezra Benjamin, until Mrs. Benjamin’s death. Both the Benjamins and Mrs. Ferguson seem to have agreed on what was best for Eunice, because after being widowed Benjamin relied on Mrs. Ferguson’s recommendation in getting Eunice into the Orphan House. Other children were less fortunate, among whom Eliza Smith was especially unlucky. Her first foster mother was a Mrs. Beswick, who after a while left Charleston. A storekeeper named Samuel Hayward took her into his home, aided by a wholesaler (“vendue master”) named Thomas Napier, who agreed to provide Eliza’s clothing. An unidentified woman approached the Haywards to ask if the girl could move into her household, promising “to bring her up as her own child.” Mrs. Hayward reluctantly agreed. Both Haywards were horrified to find that the new foster mother “inhumanely whipt” Eliza and so retrieved her, kept her at home for a few months, and then sought help from the Orphan House. Given the outcome in the Eliza Smith case, it seems reasonable to suppose that in general adults kept an eye on these children even after the youngsters were out of their custody, and at least in some cases arranged for their removal from abusive foster parents.<sup>19</sup>

Even if the typical case involved a warm attachment in the adult’s eyes, at some point the foster mother decided she could no longer raise this child and made other plans. Reasons for deciding to relinquish the foster child varied. The most common explanation was poverty. A barely

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19. Ezra Benjamin to Commissioners, Dec. 1, 1819, Mrs. Ferguson to Commissioners, Dec. 2, 1819, and Mrs. Ferguson to Commissioners, Dec. 14, 1819, all in “Applications,” case of Eunice Madison. Saml Hayward to Commissioners, Nov. 8, 1817, “Applications,” case of Eliza Smith. For other possible cases of abuse to be resolved by the child’s admission to the Orphan House, see J. A. Johnson to Commissioners, Oct. 14, 1819, “Applications,” case of Julianna Barnes; and Visiting Commissioner’s report on Louisa Benton, Aug. 1, 1844, “Applications.” Note that there were no laws to govern adoption until the mid-nineteenth century, so that the terms “adopt” and “as her own” might be understood in their common usage in the present, but with no particular legal force behind them. See Stephen B. Presser, “The Historical Background of the American Law of Adoption,” *Journal of Family Law* 11, no. 3 (1971), 443–516.

literate neighbor described how a foster mother expected to care for John and William Calvert only a couple of days, but then “the Mother has now bin gon Eleven Weeks, & She has never herd of her Sence.” Because the foster mother “is a poore woman her self;” the neighbor reported, she needed the help of the Orphan House. Even those foster mothers who lived above the poverty level needed the cooperation of their husbands, and when it was not forthcoming, the child headed to the Orphan House. Mary McCaffrey, for instance, “adopted” a foundling in 1853, according to a neighboring physician, but “her husband does little or nothing for her support.” After querying a neighbor to confirm her story, the Visiting Commissioner recommended admission.<sup>20</sup>

In many cases a woman found that as the child aged he or she required more of her time, which she was not able to provide for various reasons. That age might occur as early as three years, in the case of Charles Symonds, or six years, as in the case of Washington Stevenson, or as late as age eleven, as with William Edmond Crowe. In all these cases the foster mother hoped that the Orphan House would discipline the child more effectively than she could.<sup>21</sup>

In general there is no way to know what kind of loving attachment may have formed between the foster mother and child. However, in one case the memory of the foster child stayed with the foster mother through the years, and she felt compelled to learn of his fate. Around 1816 Jane Smith agreed to care for a one-month-old boy of a desperate friend. Jane thought the situation was manageable because her “circumstances at the time [were] very good.” Some two years on she was in a more difficult spot, she wrote, because “lately I have seen a great deal of distress.” At the time of her writing she was supporting herself with needlework (“and that hardly suffices to clothe me”) and living with the boy in a spare room of another family’s house. If the Commissioners accepted the boy, she wrote, she promised to come back for him as soon as her situation improved. The boy, named James Lawrence, immediately entered the

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20. Application form for James Calhoun, Mar. 18, 1857, “Applications.” The physician was W. M. Fitch.

21. F. Keowin to Commissioners, n.d., “Applications,” case of John and William Calvert; Wm Medlich to Commissioners, Dec. 23, 1802, “Applications,” case of Charles Symonds; Mary Byrd to Commissioners, Nov. 1829, “Applications,” case of Washington Stevenson; Anna Wood to Commissioners, May 14, 1853, “Applications,” case of William Edmond Crowe.

Orphan House, and unusually for one so young, was almost immediately bound out as an apprentice. Jane Smith continued with her life as well. Seventeen years later, in 1834, she signed herself Mrs. Jane Smith Page to a letter from New Orleans that asked Orphan House officials about James Lawrence. Mrs. Page described herself as “one who is deeply interested in his welfare.” By that time, James had disappeared from the record, but not from Mrs. Page’s memories.<sup>22</sup>



The protectors and advocates of some children who came to the Orphan House fell into a liminal state between those with no legal or blood relation to the child and the literal mothers who had borne the children. I call women in this group stepmothers, and some were or had been in fact married to the child’s father after he had been widowed. Others were not stepmothers but held some kind of kin relationship to the child, such as sister, aunt, or grandmother.

Literal stepmothers were in a difficult position. Having married a man with a child or children from a previous marriage, and in many cases having borne children by the recently deceased husband, the widowed stepmother was often faced with a most unpleasant choice: to institutionalize her own children or another woman’s. While the choice to keep her own children might seem natural, or even Darwinian, the chronology of such events would dictate that the stepchild would be older and perhaps better able to fend for himself in an institution than the younger children of the second or higher order wife. Thus, when Elizabeth Smith sought admission for her stepson, eight-year-old John Smith, she could note that both his parents were deceased and that she had five children of her own to care for. In most cases, the stepmothers, like all other sponsors, stated that their poverty made it infeasible to raise the child in question, much less to provide any education.<sup>23</sup>

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22. Jane Smith to Commissioners, Jan. 9, 1817, “Applications,” and Jane Page to Commissioners, Mar. 20, 1834, “Applications,” both in case of James Lawrence. See also “Indenture Books,” James Lawrence, entered Jan. 9, 1817, bound out Jan. 3, 1818.

23. Stepfathers, by contrast, often held the key to reuniting mother and child. See John E. Murray, “Mothers and Children in and out of the Charleston Orphan House,” in *Children Bound to Labor: The Pauper Apprentice System in Early America*, ed. Ruth Wallis Herndon and John E. Murray (Ithaca, NY, 2009), 102–

Of course, in many cases the stepmothers themselves were a part of an extended family and were able to tap into networks of friends and patrons. Sarah Gibson Davis was the fourth wife of Laomi W. W. Davis, whose death left her with four children to care for, one from each of his first two marriages and two of her own. In frail health herself, she readily accepted the offer of Eliza Fludd to provide financial support for the two oldest, who continued to live with her. But soon Mrs. Fludd and Mrs. Davis together agreed to place the children in the Orphan House. The illiterate Bridget Adams not only found someone to write a letter to the Commissioners but also obtained signatures of three people to endorse her appeal. Jane Mordechai's application for her late husband's daughter Frances (Fanny) was endorsed by leading members of Charleston's Jewish community, who continued to look after Fanny as she gradually lost her sight. Her uncle, Aaron Davis, took Fanny out for Passover, and the merchant Elias Abrahams and his wife offered to take Fanny under their care when she reached her majority.<sup>24</sup>

From one particular case, it appears that the Commissioners conferred on stepmothers at least some of the legal rights ordinarily attributed to mothers of children. Caroline Hendricks was the stepmother of Richard Hendricks, who entered the Orphan House in 1833 at age nine. When Richard was fourteen years old, an upcountry man named Jesse Bates discussed the possibility of Richard serving as an apprentice to a merchant in Lexington Court House, near Columbia. Bates relayed to the Commissioners that not only did Richard approve, but so did his stepmother. The Commissioners voted to ask Caroline themselves, thus extending to the stepmother the same right to approve an apprenticeship they ordinarily granted to the mother. As many mothers did, Caroline seems to have rejected Bates's offer, because Richard was bound to a

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118. Elizabeth Smith to Commissioners, Sept. 14, 1818, "Applications." Bridget Adams to Commissioners, Feb. 28, 1826, "Applications."

24. Eliza Fludd to Commissioners, Nov. 9, 1852 (formal application), and Eliza Fludd to Mr. DeSaussure, Nov. 9, 1852 (cover letter), "Applications." Bridget Adams to Commissioners, Feb. 28, 1826, "Applications." Jane Mordecai to Commissioners, Oct. 24, 1815, "Applications"; Aaron Davis to Commissioners, Apr. 5, 1819, "Applications"; E. Abraham to Commissioners, July 20, 1820, "Applications for Indentures," Charleston Orphan House records, South Carolina Room, Charleston County Public Library (hereafter cited as "Applications for Indentures.")

local apothecary two months later. In this case, then, a stepmother was permitted to veto an apprenticeship for her stepchild.<sup>25</sup>

Women who were more distant relations to children found themselves in a spot in between complete strangers and literal stepmothers. As stepmothers were, they were part of the family and generally understood well before crisis struck that the child's parents were ill, broke, or about to split apart. Even so, their support for the child was often called for on short notice, so their reason for approaching the Orphan House was simply that they could not afford to provide for another child. The case of Michael Manihan, born around 1846, is illustrative. His mother, Rose, died in a cholera epidemic in 1853. His father was an "intemperate and poor" laborer, according to the Visiting Commissioner, so his mother's mother, an Irishwoman named Mary Stanley, took him in at some point after Rose's death. Eventually raising a young boy became too much for her, and she brought Michael to the Orphan House. If Richard Manihan's drinking had preceded his wife's death, it seems likely that Mary Stanley was not completely surprised by the need to intervene on behalf of her grandson.<sup>26</sup>

Because extended family members were aware of developing problems they were able to form a rather broad but unpredictably secure safety net before disaster fully struck. The pieces of this safety net consisted of aid from other extended family members, neighbors, and charities, as well as the Orphan House. The experience of the Gilbert brothers early in the nineteenth century illustrates. Between the growth of new institutions along with their building plans in the 1790s, the expansion of rice and cotton culture and marketing, and the reopening of the African slave trade in 1803, early nineteenth-century Charleston was enjoying a boom like no other in its history. It was a good time for a capable workman like Joseph Gilbert to be toiling as a brick mason, and no doubt the successive births of three sons to Joseph and his wife between 1801 and 1806 was greeted with joy. Mrs. Gilbert, however, died in 1808 when

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25. Richard Hendricks, "Indenture Books," entered Feb. 23, 1833; Commissioners' *Minutes*, Mar. 29, 1838; Jesse Bates to Commissioners, [late March] 1838, "Rejected Applications."

26. Visiting Commissioner report on Michael Manihan, June 26, 1856; City of Charleston Death Records, Rose [Monahan], died Jan. 14, 1853. See also Richard Monahan in Bagget, J. H., *Directory of the City of Charleston for the Year 1852* (Charleston, NC, 1851).

the boys were just toddlers, and Joseph soon became known as a “lazy indolent drunken man” who behaved as “a common vagabond about the streets.” Mrs. Gilbert’s brother, William Ruberry, agreed to take all three boys into his home, which seemed feasible since he was married but childless. In spring 1814 he arranged for the oldest boy to begin an apprenticeship with a prominent Charleston brass founder, Robert Wallace.<sup>27</sup>

Later in 1814 William Ruberry died. His widow found herself with two nephews of her husband’s and deprived of her means of support. According to her brother-in-law John Ruberry, over the course of six years Joseph Gilbert “never has given one single fourpence to assist in providing for them.” Mrs. Ruberry first obtained support from the South Carolina Society, a private charity initially formed to benefit poor Huguenots, to send the nephews to school. The burden of raising the two boys alone then became too great, and Mrs. Ruberry was able to get two men to apply for her to the Orphan House for their admission. It is noteworthy that while John Ruberry wrote to the Commissioners on her behalf, as did two future commissioners, Daniel Stevens and James Jervey, it was William Ruberry’s wife and then widow, whose first name appears nowhere in the records, who accepted the responsibility for these boys. When Joseph Gilbert died later in 1814, his brother Seth Gilbert, who as a wharfinger in a busy port must have been reasonably prosperous, wrote to the Commissioners for permission to take his nephews to their father’s funeral. But Seth appears not to have aided Mrs. Ruberry in any material way when she was widowed and distressed.<sup>28</sup>

Because some recently widowed stepmothers were overwhelmed with their new responsibilities, they obtained the assistance of a man to deal

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27. Walter J. Fraser, Jr., *Charleston! Charleston! The History of a Southern City* (Columbia, SC, 1991), 178–81, 187–88. Bradford L. Rauschenberg, “A School of Charleston, South Carolina, Brass Andirons,” *Journal of Early Southern Decorative Arts* 5 (May 1979), 26–75; 64.

28. Barbara L. Bellows, *Benevolence among Slaveholders: Assisting the Poor in Charleston, 1670–1860* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1991), 16. D. W. Stevens to Commissioners, May 4, 1814, John Ruberry to Commissioners, June 16, 1814, and Seth Gilbert to Commissioners, Nov. 8, 1814, all in “Applications.” John Gilbert and William Gilbert, admitted July 7, 1814, “Indenture Books.” See also Abraham Motte, *Charleston Directory and Stranger’s Guide for the Year 1816, including the Neck to the Six Mile House*, transcribed by James W. Nagy (Charleston, SC, 1816).

with the male Commissioners of the Orphan House. Other women addressed the Commissioners directly in making their case. Elizabeth Morton only just managed to sign a short note that was written for her, noting that her two grandsons William and John Morton had “sometime since lost their mother and a few days ago their father.” Many of the letters written by distant female relatives came from sisters or sisters-in-law of the newly orphaned. Christiana Jones hit all the right notes in appealing to the Commissioners on behalf of her nephew James Allen. She had already cared for him over the eighteen months since his parents’ death, she was grateful that the Orphan House had already received James’s brother Charles, and she was currently raising a large family of young children of her own “with very slender means for their support.” Mary Ann Hairgroves defied her alcoholic mother when she alerted the Orphan House to the danger her younger siblings were in after their intemperate mother married a man noted for his “very hard” drinking. As it was, their mother was keeping the children from school, and she often sobered up in the confines of the Poor House. Women with siblings in the Orphan House also demonstrated an ongoing attachment to them by seeking to take them out of the House and into their homes for holidays, such as Christmas.<sup>29</sup>



By far most women who brought children to the Orphan House were the mothers of those children. But these mothers were not a homogeneous group. They came from a variety of circumstances. In marital terms alone, some had been widowed, others abandoned, and still others lived with their husbands in a more or less intact family.<sup>30</sup>

Generally those women who approached the Orphan House with their husbands faced severe health problems combined with destitution.

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29. Elizabeth Morton to Commissioners, Dec. 12, 1818, “Applications.” Christiana Jones to Commissioners, Mar. 17, 1824, “Applications.” Mary Ann Hairgroves to Commissioners, Aug. 19, 1852, A[rchibald] C[ampbell, the Steward] to Commissioners, Aug. 26 [1852], both in “Applications” under Rosanna Higgins. Rebecca Kingdon to Commissioners, Dec. 11, 1817, “Applications.”

30. More or less: See Wm Inglesby, Commissioner of the Poor House, to Commissioners of the Orphan House, Aug. 20, 1833, case of Thomason siblings, “Applications,” in which the mother was in the Poor House and the father “in gaol on some criminal accusation.”

Mothers were a diverse group. As with other women who hoped to get children into the Orphan House, some of them wrote their own letters and some could only mark a message written for them. Many of these women had been born in Charleston, while others were immigrants. All wrote letters that communicated aspects of being poor and desperate in one of the wealthiest cities in America.

Many women cited a decline in their own health as driving them to seek the charity of the Orphan House. Frances Bettison wrote that the sickness that had kept her bedridden “for many months” left her with “no hopes of ever getting out of [bed].” As a result she feared that her daughter would begin to keep bad company. Alas: At age thirteen the daughter was too old for the Orphan House, and within days Mrs. Bettison was dead. Another letter used more general terms to describe a mother as “suffering much under a disease which prevents her superintending her child.” In other cases it was all too obvious that the mother suffered from a particular disease. In January 1853 the mother of John Henry Jerrold, age three, lay “in the Poor House, ill of consumption, and cannot long survive.” Since Mrs. Catherine Gilbert had died on August 22, 1854, leaving behind an infant who was described on August 24 as one day old, it seems likely that she died in childbirth.<sup>31</sup>

The most typical marital status for mothers of potential Orphan House residents was that they were widows. Their letters indicate that they lost their husbands in a variety of ways. Some, perhaps thinking in terms of a social contract and hoping to invoke reciprocity, carefully noted that their husbands were veterans. Sarah Ann Grooms reported in 1804 that her late husband had suffered wounds in battle while serving in the Continental Army. The expectation that the Commissioners would see military service as a sign of membership in the worthy poor extended to other family members. Marie Allison had married a Philadelphian and worked as a midwife’s assistant after his death. She noted that her two youngest sons, ages eight and eleven, could not accompany her to work, for obvious reasons, nor could she afford to board them in someone

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31. Frances Bettison to Commissioners, Sept. 4, 1826, “Rejected Applications”; see also postscript by Mary Parker and Mary Grimké. Application form with note signed by John W. Mitchell, Eliza Thompson, and Mary Grimké, “Applications,” case of Elmira Lloyd. Wm Lawton, Chairman of the Commissioners of the Poor House, to Henry A. DeSaussure, “Applications.” Jas R Wood MD to Commissioners, Aug. 24, 1854, “Applications.”

else's home. Seeking a place for the two in the Orphan House, she emphasized that her eldest, like his grandfather, was currently serving in the Army. A more direct connection appeared in letters about children of deceased veterans, such as the one written for Bridget McCluskey, whose "late husband was a member of the Irish Volunteers in the Seminole campaign in Florida," where he succumbed to a local fever.<sup>32</sup>

A form of service of particular value to white Charleston was in the City Guard. An early police force, the chief duty of the City Guard was to keep slaves (and to a lesser extent, sailors) in line. It formed the first line of defense against prospective slave rebellions, an ongoing concern of whites who were all too aware of their status in the numerical minority. In addition, as another mother named Catherine Lowry spelled out in her letter, the Guard did not pay especially well, leaving her unable to support her five children on her husband's income as a Guardsman. At least in extreme cases the Orphan House recognized the sacrifices made by members of the City Guard. When Elizabeth Stenton's husband, a member of the City Guard, drowned in pursuit of a runaway slave, all three sons were quickly admitted to the Orphan House at the direction of Mayor Robert Y. Hayne.<sup>33</sup>

The most common situation among women offering their children to the Orphan House was that they had been widowed and could no longer financially support the child or children nominated for entrance. Here is

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32. [Sarah Ann Grooms] to Commissioners, Feb. 8, 1804, "Applications." [Marie Allison] to Commissioners, June 24, 1825, "Applications." George and James Allison, July 3, 1825, "Indenture Books." Marie Allison signed the indentures and the letter, but the body of the letter was written in a different hand. For another similar case see M. Magrath to Commissioners, July 28, 1813, "Applications." Bridget McCluskey to Commissioners, June 22, 1837, "Applications." Bridget McCluskey marked all three indentures that bound her children. The "Seminole campaign" probably refers to the Second Seminole War, which began late in 1835. See John K. Mahon, *History of the Second Seminole War, 1835-1842* (Gainesville, FL, 1967).

33. Maurie D. McInnis, *The Politics of Taste in Antebellum Charleston* (Chapel Hill, 2005), 70-91. Catherine Lowry to Commissioners, Sept. 15, 1831, "Applications." [Rev.] B. Manly to Commissioners, Sept. 15, 1836, "Applications." Hayne was the first mayor of Charleston to carry the title "Mayor," the previous office holders having been called "Intendants." Hayne was also a fierce nullificationist, and as a U.S. senator attained national standing in his debates with Daniel Webster on the tariff.

an entire, brief, and typical letter from one such woman, Mary Burrows, who appears to have written it herself:

Being desirous of placing my two children on your charitable institution I will endeavour to represent my situation. Your petitioner has been a widow nine years, my husband a branch pilot of this place having been drowned about that time leaving me with five children & no dependence but my own exertions & labour to maintain myself & bring the most of them up. I have strove hard so to do not being desirous of becoming burthensome to the public but finding it no longer in my power to do for the two youngest.

The letter lays out the facts of the matter: A man who worked in the port of Charleston died some time ago, leaving his wife and children destitute. His widow establishes her fundamental stability by noting her husband's trade and the length of time during which she supported her children without charity, and by her having raised three of her children by herself. She proposes to place the two youngest in the Orphan House. The message was endorsed by three men who attested to Mrs. Burrows's probity. The next day Commissioners formally accepted the two boys, eleven-year-old James and nine-year-old Samuel.<sup>34</sup>

The inescapable nature of poverty appears in many letters. It was certain that the death of a breadwinning husband would bring suffering to his family. Poverty seems to have been common enough that many women simply claimed that they were too poor to raise a child, which they expected Visiting Commissioners would recognize when they came to inspect the family. In other cases mothers described their deprivation in some detail. Some widows struggled for years before surrendering their children to the Orphan House. Susan Adams lost her husband at sea, and tried raising their two young boys for two years before engaging a literate acquaintance to write a note to the Orphan House. She was unable to pay her rent, and the presence of her sons, now six and four years of age, prevented her from working in domestic service. In the end, she concluded, "Nothing but necessity could induce me to part with them, but for their support I have sold all that I had." Eliza Connolly had left Charleston years previously with her husband to find work at a port

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34. Mary Burrows to Commissioners, Mar. 26, 1817, "Applications"; *Minutes*, Mar. 27, 1817.

in North Carolina, but his last voyage ended in New Orleans where he died of a “prevailing fever” six or so months before her writing. On her return to Charleston she found herself without friends or family who could help and so, she said, “I know not where to go, nor to whom to apply for relief.” But she knew of the Orphan House, and assuring them that when in good health she was industrious, even now she could report that she “maintained a reputable standing in the community.” The Commissioners admitted all three Connolly children.<sup>35</sup>

Particular occupations served as sure indications of straitened circumstances. In 1856 a Visiting Commissioner noted during his conversation with a Mrs. Dooley that her income came from taking out washing, plus some rent paid by an older daughter who earned \$8 a month as a domestic servant. The occupation most widely associated with poverty for women was that of seamstress. Isabella Doyle described the scant returns to needlework: “I should not be able to support [five children] by sewing if even I could get a constant supply of work.” As a result, she reported, “We have indeed lived chiefly on the comforts of former days, selling one article after another till little remains to be disposed of.” She approached the Orphan House to take two boys aged ten and eight, which it did. Thus was Mrs. Doyle able to earn a bit more as a wet nurse, even after putting her own infant out to a cheaper wet nurse. Similarly Martha Ann Monroe described herself as depending solely on her needle for support, and thus unable to provide any education for her son, William Calvert.<sup>36</sup>

Dependence on the needle might be combined with outdoor relief, or rations, distributed from the Poor House to yield a somewhat less desperate living, but even then, observed a Visiting Commissioner of Frances Hodge, “her needle will not support her & her children & pay the rent, even with the assistance of the rations.” In sum, what Sarah Connelly wrote in 1829, many poor women would have concurred in, that “needle work . . . yields but a poor subsistence for myself and children.”<sup>37</sup>

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35. Susan Adams to Commissioners, June 8, 1824, “Applications.” Eliza Connolly to Commissioners, Apr. 22, 1813, “Applications.”

36. Visiting Commissioner’s report on Augustine Dooley, Feb. 14, 1856, “Applications.” Isabella Doyle, Apr. 1835, “Applications.” Martha Ann Monroe to Commissioners, May 1, 1827, “Applications.”

37. Visiting Commissioner report on Erasmus and Mary Ann Hodge, Dec. 26, 1845, “Applications.” Sarah Connelly to Commissioners, June 8, 1829, “Applications.”

While widowhood often led directly to impoverishment, a prominent percentage of women who presented their children to the Orphan House were married but nevertheless destitute. In each case their husbands were unable or unwilling to support the family financially, but the cause of that inability or unwillingness varied. In rough terms, these mothers gave three reasons for the lack of support from their husbands: He was sick, he drank too much, or he had run away. In some cases of illness, it is possible to identify a cause. Elenor Boswell felt “obliged to beg relief from your truly charitable institution” because her husband was suffering from “a tedious lingering sickness.” Appended to the letter was a note from the family physician which described the condition as “the Painter’s cholick”; that is, lead poisoning, a common occupational hazard in a day when lead was still an important component of paint. Other men suffered from unspecified chronic conditions, such as Ann Grainger’s husband, whom she and her neighbors described simply as a “cripple.” Mary Ann Hays and her husband Thomas foresaw trouble as the result of his chronic “disease of the bowels & spine.” Thomas first approached the Commissioners to request that they take their oldest boy, William Warren Hays, in July 1855, but the Visiting Commissioner recommended against the application. Nearly a year later, in April 1856, contact between the family and the Orphan House occurred again. A physician, probably the locally prominent Dr. James Moultrie, described Thomas as “permanently disabled” and recommended admission of William, and there things stood for about two weeks. Another Visiting Commissioner speculated in early May that Thomas could “scarcely recover from his sickness” and again recommended admission of William, and this time he entered the Orphan House on May 8, 1856. Mary Ann’s sorrows were not at an end. Thomas died two weeks later, aged thirty-nine, and later that autumn the widow Mary Ann Hays sought and received permission to send three of her remaining four children to the Orphan House: two girls aged seven and five and a boy aged two. She kept her infant with her, and disappeared from the record thereafter.<sup>38</sup>

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38. Elenor Boswell to Commissioners, Dec. 8, 1803, “Applications.” Ann Grainger to Commissioners, July 16, 1818, “Applications.” File of William Warren Hays, “Applications”; *Minutes*, July 12 and July 19, 1855, May 1, May 8, Oct. 2, and Oct. 9, 1856; “Indenture Books”: William Warren Hays, entered May 8, 1856, Isabella Clara Hays, Margaret Anna Hays, and Thomas Heyward Hays, all entered Oct. 9, 1856; City of Charleston Death Records, Thomas Hays, died May 25, 1856.

A special case of illness that appears in the letters is mental illness. Over much of the period covered by these letters, Charleston's facilities to house safely the mentally ill were limited to the basement cells in the Poor House. The "lunatics" in the cells "filled the house with their unearthly whooping and hallooings." Diagnostic practices changed over the antebellum period such that in the 1820s most inmates were considered incurable but by the 1850s many were discharged as cured, often after less than a year's stay. Thus, the 1830 application of George Jacoby, "friend" to three-year-old Ann Iseman, noted that her father was "a lunatic and now in the asylum for maniacs," suggesting that his commitment was a long-term arrangement. In his absence Ann's mother had abandoned both husband and child.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, Elizabeth King found someone to write a letter explaining that she was "the wife of a maniac" in the Poor House and so she needed to send her twelve-year-old boy to the Orphan House. Mothers themselves were sometimes confined to the cells, and if no family were available, the children often entered the Orphan House. The temporary nature of some of these cases can be seen in the situation of Mary Jane O'Brien, whose presence in the Orphan House followed directly upon her mother Mary's admission to the Poor House "in consequence of a fit of insanity." Once Mary had recovered she asked Poor House officials for aid in releasing her daughter from the Orphan House. The O'Briens may have been a military family, as they intended to go to Fort Moultrie, across the Cooper River, where they were entitled to "Rations & quarters."<sup>40</sup>

It is hard to overstate the role of alcohol in the impoverishment of families who came to the Orphan House. Whether the already poor took to the bottle in despair, or if otherwise capable adults drank their families into poverty, the frequency of drink in letters to the Orphan House is striking. In some cases alcoholism is present only implicitly. The cause of Thomas Hays's death was recorded as "hydrothorax," a condition

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39. A thorough study of the status and treatment of the mentally ill in antebellum South Carolina appears in Peter McCandless, *Moonlight, Magnolias, and Madness: Insanity in South Carolina from the Colonial Period to the Progressive Era* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1996). Quoted in Fraser, *Charleston*, 193–94. McCandless, *Moonlight*, 171. George Jacoby to Commissioners, Apr. 8, 1830, "Applications."

40. Elizabeth King to Commissioners, Mar. 8 1838, "Applications." Thos Akin, Chairman, Commissioners of the Poor House to Commissioners of the Orphan House, Apr. 17, 1838, "Applications."

associated with cirrhosis of the liver. In some cases the applicant described the problem in straightforward fashion. Margaret Dooling hoped her five- and three-year-olds would qualify for entrance because her husband was in jail following a drinking binge. The air of resignation in her story suggests that she had told it many times already: “[W]e struggled long to support ourselves and children and might have succeeded had not my husband been unfortunately addicted to drinking. Gentlemen I shall not dwell on the melancholy effects of this passion on him and his helpless family.”<sup>41</sup>

In a densely populated city, neighbors would have known all too well the homes of those drunks who became loud and violent, and so many reports come from neighbors and Visiting Commissioners who interviewed those neighbors. A Mrs. Moore approached the planter Lawrence Dawson to ask him to contact the Orphan House about receiving her twelve-year-old son. Dawson readily wrote that “from his intemperate habits” Mr. Moore was well known to be “rather an incumbrance than a support to herself and family.” But the oft-drunk father maintained legal rights to his children, so after two neighbors convinced the Commissioners that John Rantin’s “gross intemperance” had left his wife and six children in a state of destitution, it was still John Rantin’s signature that endorsed the indentures that bound two of his sons into the Orphan House.<sup>42</sup>

Women also drank to the point of endangering their families. In W. J. Rorabaugh’s memorable history *The Alcoholic Republic*, women appeared about as often in the role of temperance activists as they did through their drinking. Rorabaugh estimated that “little, however, can be learned about either the reputed 100,000 female drunkards or the more numerous women who consumed from one-eighth to one-quarter of the nation’s spirituous liquor” in the early nineteenth century. A few letters and other references in Orphan House records shed some light on the phenomenon of alcoholic women. Correspondents rarely noted

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41. Margaret Dooling to Commissioners, July 1, 1823, “Rejected Applications.” Mrs. Dooling noted that she was a New Yorker, her husband Irish, and the family had arrived in Charleston six months previously, which was probably the reason for the rejection.

42. Lawrence Dawson to Commissioners, Oct. 20, 1825, “Applications,” file of John W. Martin. E. C. Holmes and M. E. Holmes to Commissioners, Mar. 28, 1831, “Applications.”

how they came to know that the mother was, for example, “addicted to drink, & in very bad health, in consequence of the intemperate life she leads.” The most extreme cases were well known to neighbors, who sought the help of nearby clergy or went directly to Commissioners. James Caldwell, reporting as Visiting Commissioner on the case of Thomas Randles, age four, passed along information from the Reverend William B. Yates that “that the mother of the child is of bad moral character, of intemperate habits, and is a great measure regardless of the interest of the child.” A neighbor might note that a mother had been drunk so often she ended up in the Poor House, leaving her children to their own devices, or perhaps in the hands of “a servant of doubtful character.”<sup>43</sup>

A recalcitrant and often intoxicated mother presented a real problem to the Commissioners. In theory the mother had rights to custody of the children that only the father could trump, and by custom the Orphan House had sought the assent of all parties to a change in the child’s custody. On at least one occasion it ignored the wishes of an alcoholic mother. The episode illustrates a family in an extreme state of disarray, but one that may not have been untypical of the poor and desperate. On August 19, 1852, the case of Rosanna Higgins, age eleven, came before the Commissioners. Her married sister, Mary Ann Hairgroves (mentioned above), wrote to ask the Board to take in Rosanna because their mother was “intemperate herself” and recently had remarried to “an intemperate and otherwise bad man” named Lawless. Her drinking led to her being “oftener than once carried to the Poor House,” and she would not allow the younger children to attend school. The Higgins family situation was so pressing that Rosanna herself came to the weekly Board meeting that evening and made the same request for the same reasons. (Children nearly always communicated with the Board of Commissioners through the steward or Visiting Commissioners.) The Commissioners moved quickly to receive Rosanna contingent upon the usual approval of her mother or, if she would not consent, the Commissioners of the Poor House. Two days later the Steward, Archibald Campbell,

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43. W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York, 1979), 11–13. Miss S. M. Drayton to John Dawson, Jan. 6, 1814, “Applications.” J. M. Caldwell to Commissioners, Apr. 29, 1852, “Applications.” Rev. Yates was well known for his ministering to sailors in the Port of Charleston. W. A. Caldwell to Commissioners, Sept. 6, 1832, “Applications,” file of Bingley siblings.

tracked down Rosanna's mother, who refused her consent and indignantly told Campbell that as she "never was Drunk' etc!" she was perfectly able to "maintain her children respectfully herself."<sup>44</sup>

At this point, it became evident that Rosanna Higgins was part of a wider net of social connections that included her immediate family and beyond. Rosanna's older brother visited her to report that their mother and stepfather now lived somewhere on Market Street, but Rosanna failed to remember the exact address. Rosanna's godmother, a Mrs. Connolly, appeared at the Orphan House on August 25 to announce that "she was going to get a place for her in a respectable family." The Visiting Commissioner found the spot on Market Street and interviewed the Lawless couple's landlady about recent events. She reported that on the night of August 25 Mrs. Lawless had suffered a "fit" that led all to believe she was in danger of death. When Father O'Neill came near midnight and gave her Extreme Unction, the landlady, undoubtedly tired of all the drama her tenants brought with them, announced that she "would not have her die there & sent her to Poor House." Lawless himself, described as a very hard drinker before his marriage, "cursed all of them." Ultimately it was officials of the Poor House and not her mother who signed Rosanna's indenture on September 2. Her mother's interactions with the Orphan House did not end here, however. In May 1854 both Mr. and Mrs. Lawless ended up in the Poor House due to their intemperance, he for the seventh time and she for the fifth. The Poor House was no place for her younger children, eight-year-old Daniel and five-year-old Elizabeth, and so the Poor House Commissioners tried to send them to the Orphan House. The Orphan House accepted only Daniel, but the Sisters of Mercy, who operated a boarding school on Queen Street, took in Elizabeth. Two years later their mother signed Elizabeth's indenture to the Orphan House as "Hannah Higgins," so perhaps she was widowed a second time. Her direct involvement at the later date, without the aid of the Poor House, may further suggest that she had attained a degree of sobriety.<sup>45</sup>

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44. Mary Ann Hairgroves statement on application form for Rosanna Higgins, Aug. 19, 1852, "Applications"; A. Campbell to Henry A. DeSaussure, Aug. 21, 1852, "Applications" in Rosanna Higgins file; Minutes, Aug. 19, 1852.

45. A[rchibald] C[ampbell] to Commissioners, Aug. 26, 1852, "Applications"; Rosanna, Daniel, and Eliza Higgins, "Indenture Books"; S. J. Robinson, Poor House, to Commissioners of the Orphan House, May 25, 1854, "Applications," file of Bridget Crohan; *Minutes*, May 10, 1854, and May 24, 1854; *Metropolitan*

Another important group of married women consisted of widowed women who had remarried. These women tended to be either very fortunate or very unfortunate; those in the middle had no need for the Orphan House. The unfortunate women had remarried men who refused or were otherwise unable to support their stepchildren. A Visiting Commissioner reported one second husband's straightforward reasoning. When interviewing Ann Carter Wilson about admitting her son and daughter, she described her husband's perspective on child support as "Wilson . . . says he has not the means to support the children of Carter." As a result of Wilson's frequent absences the family was desperately poor. Though pregnant at the time, Mrs. Wilson worked with her needle and even went "out to scour houses when her health permits it." Despite her labor, the resulting poverty "obliged [the children] to go to the neighbors for bread." In another troubling case, Maryann McDermott complained that "the present step father Ed. McDermott will not allow [her children] near the House or premises for sustenance."<sup>46</sup>

The fortunate women had remarried men who wrote to the Orphan House to have custody of their new wives' children restored to them. The second husband was a powerful force for prosperity or destitution in poor widows' lives.<sup>47</sup>

A final group of married women consisted of those who were married in name only, women whose husbands had left them. In some cases the departure was less shameful than it might sound: The man had left to go West and establish himself financially before sending for his family, or he might have gone to sea. Thus, for example, Sophia Campbell anxiously begged the Orphan House to take her two sons because her husband had been at sea for six months and the family was destitute without

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*Catholic Almanac and Laity's Directory for the United States, 1859* (Baltimore, 1858), 272.

46. Unsigned Visiting Commissioner report re: Hester and Ruben Carter, June 2, 1842, "Applications." Maryann McDermott to Commissioners, Oct. 29, 1831, "Rejected Applications," case of Charles and Francis Deignan. See also Thos Akin, Chairman Commissioners of the Poor House to Commissioners of the Orphan House, May 20, 1841, "Applications," case of John Connolly.

47. Examples (among many): Edward Kent and Eliza Kent to Commissioners, Jan. 9, 1834, "Applications for Indentures," case of Robert Bassett; Samuel Morris to Mr. DeSaussure, Mar. 7, 1839, "Applications for Indentures," case of Robert Brown.

his continued support. Unfortunately in the long time between his departure and any communications it was not uncommon for the husband to meet his death, and that led the widow to bring their children to the Orphan House. Isabella Doyle, described above, had stopped in Charleston with the intention of continuing to meet her husband, but, she wrote, “having heard here of the death of my husband in New Orleans where he had gone in the expectation of getting into business, I was induced to remain.”<sup>48</sup>

The cases where a wife and mother was simply abandoned by her husband for more nefarious reasons were probably numerous. Mary Hoare’s husband Thomas had worked several years for the merchant William Clarkson. After being discharged by Clarkson he vanished from the city. After a good year of reliance on charitable donations to support her and two children, Mary approached Clarkson for help getting the children into the Orphan House. He had recommended she do so some time ago, but, he wrote, “[H]er maternal feelings could not bear the idea of parting with her children.” Most absconding husbands fled far from Charleston: out of South Carolina or to Europe, for example. Finding a spouse “who has gone I know not whither,” as Ann Wittencamp poignantly wrote, was not a priority for the Orphan House. Determining that he had, in fact, left his wife and children on their own was usually sufficient for the Orphan House to take the children in.<sup>49</sup>



The women who appear in the Charleston Orphan House records do so because they were destitute—and they were mothers. Historical perspectives on mother–child relationships have changed over the years, from rather cold and violent Puritanical desires to break the child’s will to the romanticized “sacralization” of child life. The women who wrote the letters considered here and those who were the subjects of letters written about them by others were people of their own time. Their letters reflect rhetorical conventions regarding motherhood abroad in their days. They

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48. S. B. Gilliland to Mr. DeSaussure, Feb. 4, 1858, “Applications.” I. Doyle to Commissioners, Apr. 1835, “Applications.”

49. William Clarkson to Commissioners, Feb. 13, 1806, “Applications.” Susannah Marriner, Mar. 11, 1824, “Applications”; Visiting Commissioner report, unsigned, case of James Nelson, Feb. 12, 1846, “Applications.”

also reflect, to some degree, women's commitment to caring for their children, a desire to be reunited with them, and the pain of separation from them. This commitment, desire, and pain reflected love on the mother's part at least as much as adherence to convention. When Ann Ferneau wrote to ask the Commissioners not to bind out her son until she returned to Charleston, why should we not believe her when she says, "[M]y son is the only thing I have to make life desirable." Many letters describe the pain of separation. The contacts between poor mothers, stepmothers, and foster mothers and the Charleston Orphan House yield a finely detailed picture of social and familial relationships, in formal contractual terms and in deeper loving terms.<sup>50</sup>

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50. Philip Greven, *The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early America* (New York, 1977); Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child*. Ann Ferneau to Commissioners, Jan. 17, 1813, "Applications." Examples from among many: Mary Hazzard to Commissioners, Aug. 12, 1818, "Applications"; Catherine Lambers to Commissioners, Sept. 7, 1837, "Applications"; Catherine Shelbock, May 8, 1823, "Applications."