

Records of Relinquishment

Caregiving and Emotion in the Philanthropy Archive

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ABSTRACT: This article focuses on the archive of the Washington Female Orphan Asylum, founded in 1815, and places the study of philanthropy in conversation with scholarship on the archive in histories of slavery, colonization, and trauma. It argues, first, that philanthropic and reform institutions such as the asylum were domestic sites of empire and that their archives reveal the reach of statecraft into the intimate lives of women and families. The article explores, second, the role of emotion in archival research, which can highlight an archive's construction and its silences. The relinquishments within the asylum's records provoke emotion; as fragmentary evidence, they testify to trauma and demand the historian's care.

KEY WORDS: archives, philanthropy, material culture, emotion, caregiving, orphan asylum, Washington, DC

“Rather than accepting that the archive is empty of affect, what if we allowed emotion, our own and that of historical others—others whose feelings haunt us even from the distant past—to penetrate our sources and our selves?”¹

Archives are full of philanthropy objects: institutional constitutions, meeting minutes, account books, newspaper clippings, and more. This isn't the stuff we might imagine when we first think of material objects. Old papers in tidy, quiet archives don't promise the same wonder—the same emotional reaction—as, perhaps, a carefully preserved article of clothing or, on a grander scale, a historic building.

And yet, the papers within archives are tenderly cared for, preserved, and full of stories (and absences) that can provoke wonder and emotion. In what follows, I want to consider the role of emotion in the philanthropy object that is the archive, looking particularly at the relinquishment records from a nineteenth-century female orphan asylum in Washington, DC. Emotion can be an important part of archival research; it can pull the scholar to recognize the lives beneath the often-dry

¹ Jennifer Scheper Hughes, “Religion and Emotion in the Archives of Empire,” *Hemisphere: A Magazine of the Americas* 27 (Winter 2018): 35.

bureaucratic minutiae of philanthropy collections and prompt new research questions and directions. It can, likewise, make the reader acutely aware of absence—of the biased nature of the archive and the impossibility of knowing the past, including the emotions of its inhabitants.

In the case of the Washington asylum, emotions were a crucial part of the benefactors' discourse in their early self-description and appeals, and yet we know little of their inner emotional lives and even less of the emotions of the asylum's children and their families. As Saidiya Hartman has argued, the archive can be a "death sentence." For many historians of slavery and colonialism, such as Hartman, Marisa Fuentes, Stephanie Smallwood, and Ann Laura Stoler, the archive is a place, a process, that reveals more about the power of those who created it than the subjects it might mention—or not mention, or reduce to a number, a victim, a caricature.² Scholars have had different responses to such archival absences, and yet the archive remains a center of focus, a place where we *care*: for the documents, for the stories we might find, for the narratives we might imagine, for the emotions they provoke, and for the questions we have about the ethics of our practices and of our professional obligations as historians to share with the public an ever more complete, useable, resonant, and responsible past.³

By focusing on an *archival collection* as a *philanthropy object*, my goal is twofold. First, I want to consider the study of philanthropy in conversation with the rich theoretical and methodological scholarship on archives in recent work on slavery, colonization, and trauma.⁴ The history of philanthropy is inseparable from these

2 Saidiya Hartman "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 1–14; Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Stephanie E. Smallwood, "The Politics of the Archive and History's Accountability to the Enslaved," *History of the Present* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 117–32; Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," *Archival Science* 2, no. 1–2 (March 2002): 87–109; Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009). To be clear, Stoler argues for understanding "archives-as-process rather than archives-as-things" (20); my argument here is that to consider this archive as a philanthropy object demands us to consider it as process.

3 While "public history" is not easy to define, I am shaped in this article by the view outlined in a recent article by Michael J. Brown in this journal, which stresses public history as process and collaboration—an effort to breakdown "elite" and "popular" distinctions, to consider local and lived experience, to reflect affectively on the process of historical knowledge production, and to meditate on the significance of history for our present world and debates. Michael J. Brown, "Overlapping Origins, Diverging Paths: 'Public History' and the 'Public Intellectual,'" *The Public Historian* 45, no. 2 (May 2023): 7–42; see especially 12, 37, 40–42. I am also influenced by recent historical scholarship on the slave trade and the public importance of such work in our modern world. As Stephanie E. Smallwood writes: "Our task, then, is to tell the stories that bring the ghostly outline of that tracing fully into view." Smallwood, "The Politics of the Archive," 128. The idea of "care" is shaped by Christina Sharpe's invocation of care as both theory and method, as described in Christina Sharpe, "And to Survive," *Small Axe* 22, no. 3 (November 2018): 171–80; Sharpe elaborates on this concept in the recent book *Ordinary Notes* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2023), see especially 136.

4 For scholarship on slavery and colonization, see footnotes 2 and 3; on trauma, see Laura Levitt, *The Objects that Remain* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020); cf. Robert A. Orsi, "The Study of Religion on the Other Side of Disgust," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* (Spring/Summer 2019).

topics; philanthropic and reform institutions were domestic sites of empire, and an early nineteenth-century orphan asylum thus invites us to see the reach of statecraft into the intimate lives of women and families.⁵ My second goal is related to the first: scholars of slavery, colonization, and trauma have demonstrated the emotional effects of attending to the archive, its construction, and its absences, and the way these experiences shape their method, work, and voice. I want to understand and reckon with my own emotional response to the asylum materials as a human, a historian, and a storyteller.

The records from the Washington Female Orphan Asylum, as material objects, are a point of contact where very different forms of caregiving met. One is a somewhat unsurprising story: the philanthropic aspirations of elite Washington women who founded, managed, and funded the asylum. They lived in the capital city of a young nation that had recently been proved, again, by war. As news pieces attached to their endeavors made clear, their care for poor children was not only a sign of civilization and progress but also an outward sign of their pious feeling and sentiment. The documents the women benefactors saved are straightforwardly legal and organizational records, but they are also, more subtly, proof of their moral activity and achievement—for labor that was otherwise unpaid. The second story is less known: from the archival fragments, we see trauma—scraps of paper testifying to the separation of child from parent. We also see the discipline of those children into civilized, feminine subjects as they were trained in virtue and piety for a future in domestic labor. In both of these stories, a history of the early nation emerges, one shaped by a sentimental, gendered notion of Christian civilization, virtue, and care, all of which were seen as foundational to its economic progress and aspirations to empire. The sentimental and economic forces of this time shaped the archive left behind. I attempt, finally, to engage this archive with *care*, all the while cognizant that I—as a human and a historian—am very much a product of this nation and the gendered forms of emotion and caregiving it has perpetuated and sustained.

5 On philanthropy and empire, see Lori J. Daggar, *Capitalism, Philanthropy, and the Negotiation of American Imperialism in Indian Country* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022). Daggar terms her topic of study as “speculative philanthropy.” She writes: “Understanding civilizing missions as a particular manifestation of philanthropy—what I call *speculative philanthropy*—offers a means to connect histories of the civilization plan with broader developments in North America and beyond. The term ‘speculative’ is here used in both a territorial and economic sense . . . involve[ing] both a desire (which could be performative or grounded in a sense of paternalism) to promote the welfare of others as well as a drive to acquire economic, territorial, moral, or spiritual capital” (5). Daggar is in conversation with Christopher Leslie Brown, who writes that “the self-concerned, self-regarding, even self-validating impulse in early British abolitionism represents a key theme” of his work, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 25–26. See also Emily Conroy-Krutz, *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 9–11; Amanda Moniz, *From Empire to Humanity: The American Revolution and the Origins of Humanitarianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 12–16; Kathleen Brown, “Body Work in the Antebellum United States,” in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 215–17.

In 2019, I began a project on missions and reform in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Atlantic world. I was particularly interested in ideals of womanhood and how discourses of “motherhood,” shaped by Protestant Christianity, fostered colonial and early national projects of benevolence and evangelism. While researching at the Library of Congress, I requested a collection from the Washington Female Orphan Asylum, which was founded in 1815 by a group of elite Washington women as an institution for girls orphaned by the War of 1812.⁷

I am no stranger to historic orphanages. In fact, I lived for months in a historic residential building (built 1713–16) of the Francke Foundations in Halle, Germany, an influential philanthropic, educational, and missionary institution and orphanage founded in 1695 (see Figure 1). It is a breathtaking and massive philanthropy object that I know well, a place where children were housed and educated and which inspired many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Christians in the Atlantic world.⁸ And yet, my encounter with the archival collection from the Washington Female Orphan Asylum transformed my understanding of historic orphanages. The papers, as philanthropy objects, raised discomfiting, emotional questions that I had failed to confront living in my impressive historic residence—questions about religious philanthropy and orphanages, about caregiving and emotion, about power and silence.

6 I am working here with Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, as well as Smallwood’s engagement with Stoler’s work in Smallwood, “The Politics of the Archive,” 128–29.

7 Proceedings of the Washington Female Orphan Asylum at their First Annual Meeting, October 10, 1815, box 34, Hillcrest Children’s Center Papers, Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Washington, DC (hereafter Hillcrest Children’s Center Papers). The Asylum changed its name to the Washington City Orphan Asylum in 1828. By 1870, its name was the Washington City Protestant Orphan Asylum. See the *Constitution and By-Laws of the Washington City Protestant Orphan Asylum Society* (Washington: Pearson, 1870), box 35, Hillcrest Children’s Center Papers. Today, the institution is known as the Hillcrest Children’s Center. It no longer operates as an orphanage but focuses on mental health outpatient treatment. The only modern study I have found of the orphanage is a dissertation: Jamalin Rae Harp, “The Capital’s Children: The Washington City Orphan Asylum, 1815–1890” (PhD diss., Texas Christian University, 2017).

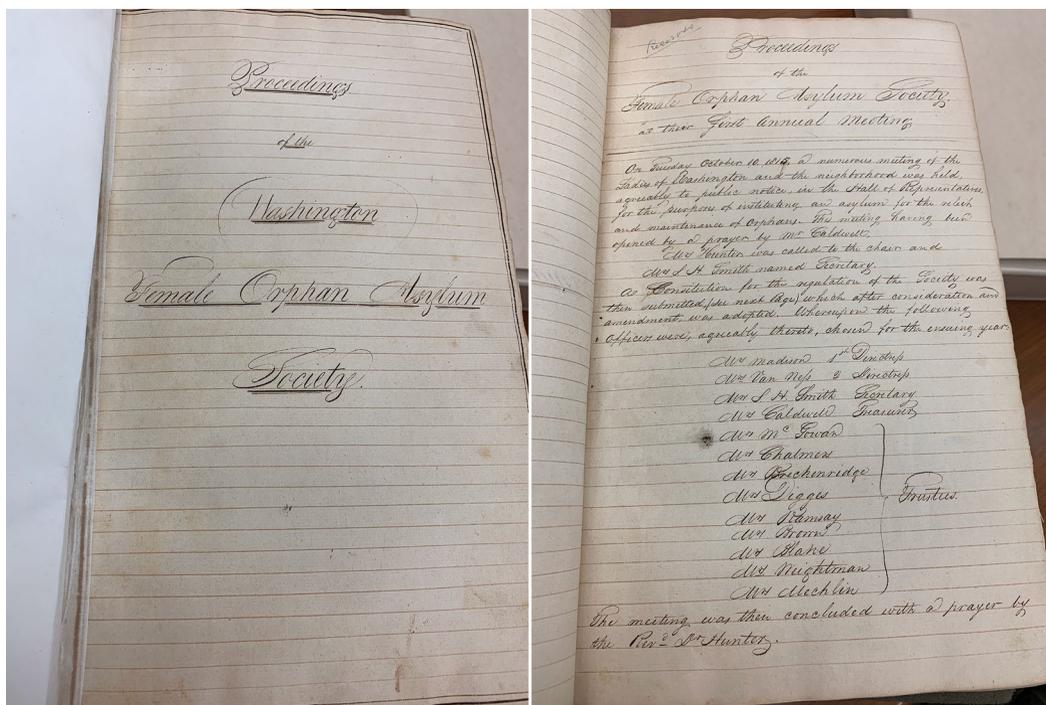
8 The orphanage in Halle was well known in the Anglophone world in part through a popular translation of August Hermann Francke, *An Abstract of the Marvellous Footsteps of Divine Providence* (London: Downing, 1706); for the German text, see August Hermann Francke, *Segens-volle Fußstapfen* (Halle: in Verlegung des Wäysen-Hauses, 1709). It was referenced by a wide range of eighteenth-century religious leaders; see for example Cotton Mather, *Nuncia Bona e Terra Longinqua* (Boston: Green, 1715); Journal of Sarah Osborn in Newport, Rhode Island, February 21, 1758, Newport Historical Society; George Whitefield, *A Continuation of the Account of the Orphan-House in Georgia, from January 1741 to June 1742* (Edinburgh: Lumisden and Robertson, 1742). On the challenges of replicating the Halle orphanage in the American context, see Renate Wilson, “Replication Reconsidered: Imitations, Models, and the Seeds of Modern Philanthropy,” in *Waisenhäuser in der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Udo Sträter and Josef N. Neumann, *Hallesche Forschungen* 10 (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2003), 197–218. On Francke’s influence on changing views of childhood and child sponsorship programs in the nineteenth century, see Hillary Kaell, *Christian Globalism at Home: Child Sponsorship in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 24–28.



Figure 1. Inner courtyard of the historic Francke Foundations. (Photograph by author, 2017)

My initial reading of the papers followed my normal routine. I made a preliminary overview of the collection before digging in. Much of the first parts of the Orphan Asylum collection are found in large, bound volumes. I did not measure them at the time, but as I recall the first volume was about 14–16 inches tall and 7–9 inches wide. The volumes were well organized and kept (as can be glimpsed in Figures 2 and 3). It all seemed rather bureaucratic on first glance, but I was hoping to find more as I read. Perhaps this collection would give me more insight into women reformers and Christianity in the early national and pre-Civil War eras. Perhaps it would allow me to see firsthand early republican efforts to inculcate femininity and virtue in an educational institution with a captive audience.

The collection's papers describe early leaders, such as Dolley Madison and Marcia Burnes Van Ness, and the asylum's mission and operation. In an early appeal for subscriptions, there is an indication of the founders' intentions and, subsequently, their reception of local support. The asylum board urged the city council and aldermen to assist in the "support and education of Orphans and the children of poor Widows." The asylum was "an undertaking, which the sufferings of the poor loudly call for; especially since the war, which has greatly increased the number of helpless Widows and unprotected Orphans." On December 13, 1815, the asylum's meeting minutes reported that the mayor of Washington, James H. Blake, awarded them \$200 and was pleased "to be serviceable in any way" to "the benevolent objects of the Ladies of Washington." While initially intended for girls orphaned by the war, others were admitted as space and resources allowed; in



Figures 2 and 3. The opening pages of the Proceedings of the Washington Female Orphan Asylum at their First Annual Meeting, October 10, 1815. Hillcrest Children’s Center Papers, box 34, Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Washington, DC. (Photograph by author)

1828, the asylum’s name was officially changed to the Washington City Orphan Asylum with an act of incorporation by Congress. The new name reflected its changing mission and population of children.⁹

Reading “along the grain,” as Ann Stoler and Stephanie Smallwood suggest, reveals a bit more beyond the story the asylum founders explicitly tell in their archive. After all, as Smallwood cautions, without understanding what the grain—the larger context—is, we cannot read against it. We must meditate on the archive’s collections as forms of “knowledge production” and as “monuments to particular configurations of power.”¹⁰ We know, for example, that the asylum was a Protestant undertaking, although members did not make that explicit in their records until around 1870 when the updated constitution reflected its new name: the Washington City Protestant Orphan Asylum. We also know it was a segregated institution, although that policy was only made clear in 1863 when a Black child was denied

9 Meeting Minutes, October 10, October 17, December 13, 1815; “Constitution of the Washington Female Orphan Asylum Society,” box 34, Hillcrest Children’s Center Papers; on Van Ness, see Frances Carpenter Huntington, “The Heiress of Washington City: Marcia Burnes Van Ness, 1782–1832,” in *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.*, Vol. 69/70 (1969/70): 80–101; Harp, “The Capital’s Children,” 17.

10 Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 20–22; Stoler, “Colonial Archives,” 90–92; Smallwood, “The Politics of the Archive,” 128–29.

admittance.¹¹ We know, finally, that the participants engaged in a particularly patriotic rhetoric in their evocation of the War of 1812, in spite of little evidence that many of the orphans were actually connected to the war. The appeal to the conflict certainly reflected the patriotism, nation-building, and Christian duty that suffused elite Washington circles of the era.

These legacies of Protestantism, race, and patriotism loom large over the papers and the feminine and civic ideals that they express. The emerging ideal of the sentimental mother was a white middle-class woman with obligations to her God, community, and nation. Such women had a duty in response to the War of 1812, which had produced an important—indeed “sacred”—legacy of patriotism. In an early letter describing the asylum, published in the *Virginia American Beacon* and authored by “A Mother,” the writer urged readers to remember that the orphans of Washington were not simply “those who have lost their parents by disease or casualty” but also “the offspring of many of our brave soldiers who fell in their country’s defence.” Such soldiers “bequeathed” to “their fellow-citizens” a “sacred legacy” in the “care and protection of their destitute children.”¹² Maternal sentiment and care could rescue the poor children whose fathers sacrificed their lives on behalf of the nation. It was imperative for Washington’s women to do so, as the letter made clear in its further reflection on proper memorialization: “Let not their blood call in vain upon their country—for us it was shed, to preserve our liberties—to ensure our safety—and let not the sin of ingratitude rest upon our heads.” In a study of child sponsorship programs that emerged in this same period, Hillary Kaell has shown that many nineteenth-century Americans subscribed to “older covenantal theologies that saw God’s blessing as tied to obligations.” The obligation toward the young orphans in Washington was framed not merely as a debt to the fallen patriots but also as a Christian covenant; the dead—in rather obvious reference to Christ—“shed” their blood to preserve American life and liberty. Not to care was, thus, to “sin.”¹³

11 *Constitution and By-Laws of the Washington City Protestant Orphan Asylum*; Harp, “The Capital’s Children,” 5.

12 A Mother, “To the Editors of the National Enquirer,” *American Beacon*, November 1, 1815. On the War of 1812 and nationalism see Rachel Hope Cleves, Nicole Eustace, Paul Gilje, Matthew Rainbow Hale, Cecilia Morgan, Jason M. Opal, Lawrence A. Peskin, and Alan Taylor, “Interchange: The War of 1812,” *The Journal of American History* 99, no. 2 (September 2012): 520–55. See particularly pages 535–37.

13 Nora Doyle, *Maternal Bodies: Redefining Motherhood in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 137; Nora Doyle, “‘The Highest Pleasure of Which Woman’s Nature is Capable’: Breast-Feeding and the Sentimental Maternal Ideal in America, 1750–1860,” *Journal of American History* 97, no. 4 (March 2011): 958–73; A Mother, “To the Editors of the National Enquirer”; Kaell, *Christian Globalism*, 35. On the ways in which sentimental language of womanhood was applied specifically to white women, and was used to differentiate black women, see Doyle, *Maternal Bodies*, 131–35; Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 36–49; Philippa Koch, *The Course of God’s Providence: Religion, Health, and the Body in Early America* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 186–87.

The news coverage of the asylum built on the religious and symbolic significance of the war and described how women could make their own sacrifices toward a safer future and uniquely blessed nation. The asylum contributed to the civic pride of the country's new capital city as its workers repaired buildings and infrastructure in the war's aftermath and proved it to be a true city of progress and civilization. In an 1816 article that appeared with some variation in several papers, including the *Boston Daily Advertiser* and the *Nantucket Gazette*, the asylum was featured in a column on the "City of Washington." The city was "improving very fast" with new and repaired houses, bridges, and transportation. The population was expanding along with key institutions of civilization, including diverse "houses of public worship," public schools, private academies, and "a Sunday school for blacks," which "promises great benefit to this neglected part of our species, both in informing their minds, and amending their morals." The overview of Washington's civic growth concluded with the "excellent female orphan asylum," created by an "association of benevolent and pious ladies" who sought to "support and educate indigent female orphans, and thereby lead to virtue and happiness those, who, but for this seasonable and friendly aid, would become the victims of vice and misery."¹⁴ The view of the City of Washington presented here imagines a city actively seeking to improve itself through educational and civic institutions, and the voluntary work of women in the promotion of virtuous girls was a crucial sign of that progress.

The rhetoric surrounding the asylum was similar to what can be found in notices of women's philanthropic efforts in other cities. When the Female Orphan Asylum in Boston, for example, solicited subscriptions in 1802, it likewise stressed the "benevolent" work of the "Ladies of this metropolis" in "snatching innocence from the paths of poverty, vice and ruin"—a cause which "deeply affects the heart." In an 1806 request for funds for the Orphan Asylum in New York City, the *New York Evening Post* reported that with support from subscribers (and "the blessing of Providence"), the asylum might save "thousands from poverty, idleness and vice." In so doing, it "will live to bless the hands which sustained them, and afford additional proof that New York as a city, will be distinguished for its charitable works."¹⁵ Four years later, reports of the New York Orphan Asylum were published in Philadelphia papers, which quoted the *New York Evening Post*: "Among the many charitable institutions which bless our city . . . and reflect honor and credit on the country, and on mankind in general; the orphan Asylum holds a distinguished place." The ladies who founded the institution—a "work of which angels might boast"—had transformed the lives of the inmates. "Perhaps nothing this side the

¹⁴ "City of Washington," *Nantucket Gazette*, September 14, 1816; "Washington, AUG. 31," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, September 5, 1816.

¹⁵ "Female Orphan Asylum," *Columbian Centinel Extra*, March 24, 1802; "Communication," *The New-Evening Post*, August 5, 1806.

regions of eternal happiness, was ever so well calculated to give delight to the philanthropic mind as a sight of this heavenly institution.”¹⁶

In the pages of early American newspapers, orphan asylums were a sign of advanced, Christian civilization. They signaled this, in part, through emotional claims of rescuing innocents from vice and poverty and, in so doing, creating a more orderly urban environment. But just as importantly, in the repeated advertisements and subscriber notes that dotted urban newspapers, the asylums represented the rise of an elite class of benevolent women. The women involved had the time and privilege to dedicate to this work, which they described in sentimental and religious terms, but which also allowed for cultural and artistic collaborations that were designed to raise funds and promote social connections.¹⁷ The directors met frequently not only to organize but also to forge community and networks. Special events signaled these connections to a larger group of subscribers and society. Newspapers published lists of board members, subscribers, donors and donations, and fundraising opportunities. For example, the Orphan Asylum in New York City earned funds in part through the sale of popular books. Early events of the Washington Orphan Asylum Society included a Friday evening lecture by “Mr. Whitlow” on “his botanical exhibitions” in Washington Hall and fundraising performances of a Thespian Society.¹⁸

The women who founded, managed, and subscribed to these asylums gained social connection and prestige, a religious calling and obligation to the poor, and a sense of civic and national pride. Philanthropy was a way for them to labor in a world where economic opportunities for women were limited. They could sacrifice their money or their time; they could help to redeem the parts of society that had been burdened by capitalism, as Hillary Kaell has shown. As they did so, they traded in a discourse of emotion—a shared sentimentalism “that suggested religious feeling passed organically through families and societies.” In the sentimental culture that pervaded early nineteenth-century America, mothers—in particular white middle-class mothers—were imagined to center both domestic life and civilization through the nourishing of Christian citizens.¹⁹ The emotional language surrounding orphan asylums in this time period demonstrated how this sentimental culture

16 “Orphan Asylum,” *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser*, August 6, 1810.

17 On the role of gender in antebellum reforming societies, see Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 3–21.

18 “Miss Bowdler’s Essays & Poems,” *Alexandria Gazette*, August 26, 1812; “Science and Charity,” *The Columbian*, February 22, 1816. The thespian event proved rather controversial, as the theater was still perceived by some to have a “demoralising tendency.” “Letter to the Editors,” *Daily National Intelligencer*, October 13, 1815.

19 Kaell, *Christian Globalism*, 36, 41; Doyle, *Maternal Bodies*, 146–49; Ruth H. Bloch, *Gender and Morality in Anglo-American Culture, 1650–1800* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 57–77; Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1800* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980); Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 7–32; cf. Nicole Fermon, “Domesticating Women, Civilizing Men: Rousseau’s Political Program,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (August 1994): 431–42.

was utilized in philanthropic settings, creating community and provoking caregiving beyond the home.

The sentimental caregiving imagined in these news pieces is not as easily transparent in the archival documents. We know little of the day-to-day care and relationships between the benefactors—or even the onsite asylum managers—and the children. The papers do, however, include a rather revealing document, the “Laws for the Regulation of the Asylum.” The regulations highlight how the benefactors imagined the children and what they required to be transformed. (They also may give a glimpse into the daily life of the children, though we do not know to what extent the regulations were implemented.) They outlined a strict routine of classes, chapel, cooking, eating, and cleaning. The girls were expected to learn not only important domestic skills, including sewing, knitting, and spinning, but also reading, writing, and cyphering. Saturdays and Sundays were focused on catechesis, hymn singing, and worship.²⁰

A special section of the regulations was dedicated to personal hygiene, suggesting that the benefactors imagined the girls to be filthy on admittance and what they understood was necessary to bring the girls’ bodies to a standard of civilization. The girls were carefully inspected prior to admittance to ensure they were free from infectious disease. Each admitted child received a toothbrush, towel, and comb and was taught how to use them. The children’s bodies were inspected daily, as “not only their health, but their welfare in life materially depends on habits of order and cleanliness.” If a girl was found dirty, she was “sent out, to wash herself and after school to be punished.”²¹

The girls learned quickly that cleanliness, morality, femininity, and their future were interwoven. The organizers made stark disciplinary procedures key to this instruction. Each day, a girl’s name might be listed on the board under the words “Good” or “Bad.” At the end of the year, the girl most frequently listed under “Good” wore a white dress affixed with the word “Good” to the annual subscribers’ meeting, where she also received a clean white apron. The most “Bad” child, meanwhile, stood at the meeting wearing a card labeled “Bad.” All of the prescribed punishments contained such symbolic elements. If a girl was disobedient or used bad language, she would sit alone “at a small black table in one corner of the eating room.” For lying, “she shall sit during the afternoon school with a piece of black silk tied round her mouth.” For stealing, “she shall sit during the afternoon school with her hands tied in a black silk bag.” If a girl entered school dirty, however, there were no black-tinged symbolic punishments; she had to stay late. Dirt was tied to idleness. The nearby “Society for Promoting Industry” claimed that some mothers kept their children “in dirt and rags” to “excite compassion” in their begging, which, in turn, allowed the mothers to continue in idleness and dissipation. Thus,

²⁰ “Laws for the Regulation of the Asylum,” December 26, 1815, box 34, Hillcrest Children’s Center Papers.

²¹ “Laws for the Regulation of the Asylum,” December 26, 1815, box 34, Hillcrest Children’s Center Papers.

while there were no black silk ribbons for the dirty child, her punishment of a prolonged school day was nonetheless a direct and symbolic response to her supposed filthy indolence.²²

At times, this collection felt like a parody—as if Foucault himself described the processes of surveillance and discipline.²³ The rules for behavior were not unexpected, and yet, I cannot make light of them. As Ann Stoler has argued, we need to take care in “assuming we know those scripts.” For to do so causes us to miss how archives are “both transparencies on which power relations were inscribed and intricate technologies of rule in themselves.” We must attend to “the power in the production of the archive itself.” We have to “pause at . . . its conventions” and attend to “emotional economy.”²⁴

The fixation on cleanliness and discipline outlined in the regulations cannot be separated from the sentimentalism apparent in the benefactors’ descriptions of their own work and calling. But the connection can seem hard to fathom. The punishments, as outlined, assumed difficult subjects—subjects characterized above all by their dirt, idleness, and vice. The girls imagined here are a far cry from the poor children, the “sacred legacy” of sacrificial soldiers described in news stories and subscription appeals. Rather, these girls seemed inseparable from disgust. But disgust was not necessarily a bad emotion, as Hillary Kaell has shown; among nineteenth-century missionaries and reformers, disgust could be understood as an instinctual, embodied reaction able to provoke response. The common sense philosopher Adam Smith “believed that disgust, once transmuted into loving contempt (or pity), could unite a ‘world of impartial spectators into a moral community, as cosharers of the same sentiments, as guardians of propriety and purity.’ Members of this moral community tried to experience others’ feelings vicariously, but always insofar as they judged how the other *should* feel.”²⁵ The regulations demonstrated the benefactors’ effort to imagine, together, and in a concrete and embodied way, the specific attentions the children would need to be transformed into a shared norm of a proper and pure woman. They imagined that the girls would desire such transformation through a straightforward process of hygiene and discipline. Although seemingly minor, this focus on personal cleanliness as part of the process of civilization—or “body work,” as Kathleen Brown terms it—had a key place in imperial projects. Here was a “home front” to the “conflicts and conquests that seem easier to classify as ‘imperial.’” Making American cities to reflect a civilized ideal meant creating clean and industrious inhabitants at every level. The benefactors shared a moral commitment to this transformation, and they

22 “Laws for the Regulation of the Asylum,” December 26, 1815, box 34, Hillcrest Children’s Center Papers; “Society for Promoting Industry, of Georgetown, D.C.,” *Ladies Literary Museum* (January 18, 1817), 1, 18, in *American Periodicals*, 141.

23 See for example Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of a Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Knopf, 1995; first published in 1975); Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Knopf, 1994; first published in 1963).

24 Stoler, “Colonial Archives,” 87–88, 101.

25 Kaell, *Christian Globalism*, 32.

believed the girls they housed should feel likewise. They were all a critical part of establishing the progress of their city and nation, which depended on benevolently minded reform societies shaped by compassionate women—and the women they shaped within.²⁶

The regulations—with their hygiene and disciplinary measures—is a difficult document to read, and yet I began to make sense of them and the part they played in the sentimental project of the asylum’s founders and their larger civic role. Other documents within this collection, however, were harder still to interpret, to read “along the archival grain.” This was the case with the relinquishments, which were the formal documents that recorded the parent or guardian’s surrender of a child.

Although I had briefly made note of the relinquishments as I did an initial overview of the collection, it was on closer read that I became overwhelmed by the sheer number of them. There were pages upon pages, written directly in or pasted into the volumes. The relinquishments were a surprise to me, although, in retrospect, I am not sure why. Of course an orphan asylum would require such witnessed documentation of the admittance of its charges.

One typical relinquishment (seen in the bottom left of Figure 4) reads:

I hereby relinquish my child Jane McGowen to the Managers of the Wash[ington] City Orphan Asylum, and promise not to interfere with her in any way, nor to visit her more frequently than the Ladies of the Institution permit. [Signed] X. Margaret McGowen, her Mark. November 7th 1838.
Witnesses [Marcia] Van Ness, Ann Wiglett.

Other relinquishments were written on separate pieces of paper and pasted directly into the volume (see Figures 5 and 6). The relinquishments were nonetheless fairly uniform, many written in the same hand, and covered pages made rigid by extra paper and paste. Most were signed with a mark, not a signature, which offers some indication of the educational level of the parent or guardian who signed.²⁷

As I moved through the relinquishments, I grew uneasy. Based on my training and experience, I have always tried to maintain emotional distance from my

26 Brown, “Body Work in the Antebellum United States,” 215–17 (note that Brown attributes this concept of “Body Work” to Mary Fissell and Brown’s discussion of empire here is informed by Ann Stoler’s work, which appears in the same volume); cf. Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women*, 21. For a study of the political importance of voluntary associations in pre-Revolutionary Philadelphia, see Jessica Choppin Roney, *Governed by a Spirit of Opposition: The Origins of American Political Practice in Colonial Philadelphia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

27 Relinquishments, box 34, Hillcrest Children’s Center Papers. An inability to sign with a signature does not necessarily mean that one could not read, as reading and writing were taught separately for much of early American history. Studies of literacy in early America have focused predominantly on New England, but there does seem to have been significant increases in women’s literacy in the revolutionary and early national period. See for example Joel Perlmann and Dennis Shirley, “When Did New England Women Acquire Literacy?” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (January, 1991): 50–67; Mary Beth Norton, Letter to the Editor, “Communications,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (October, 1991): 639–45.

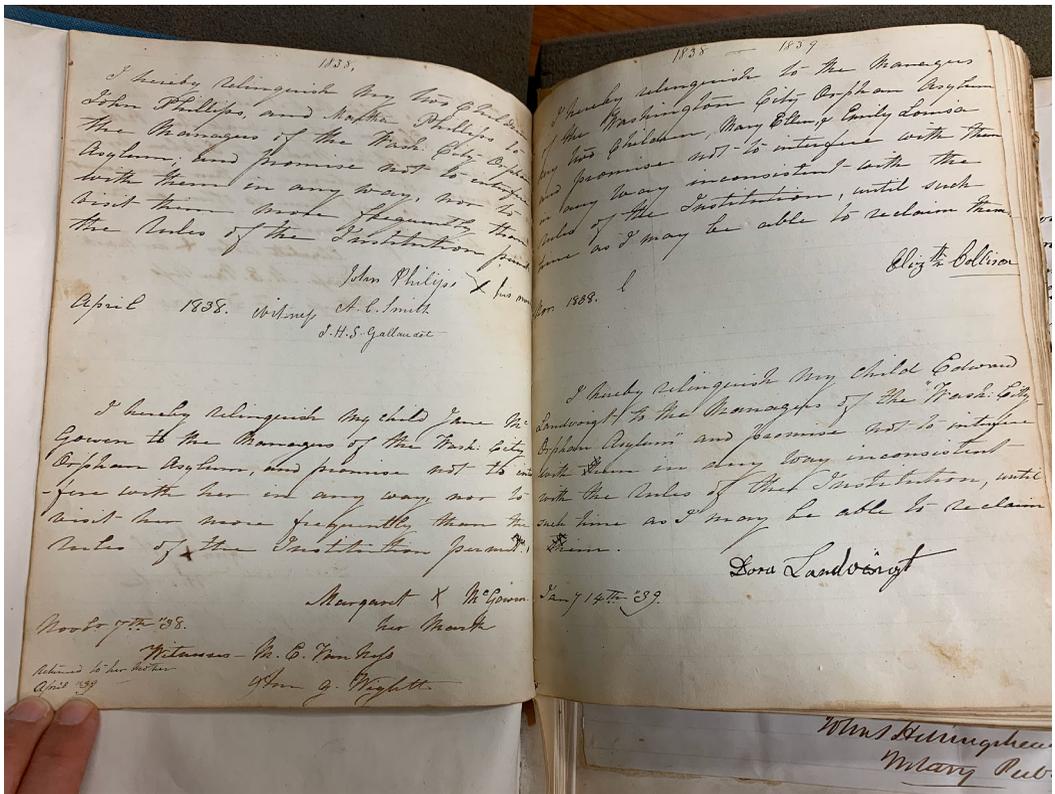
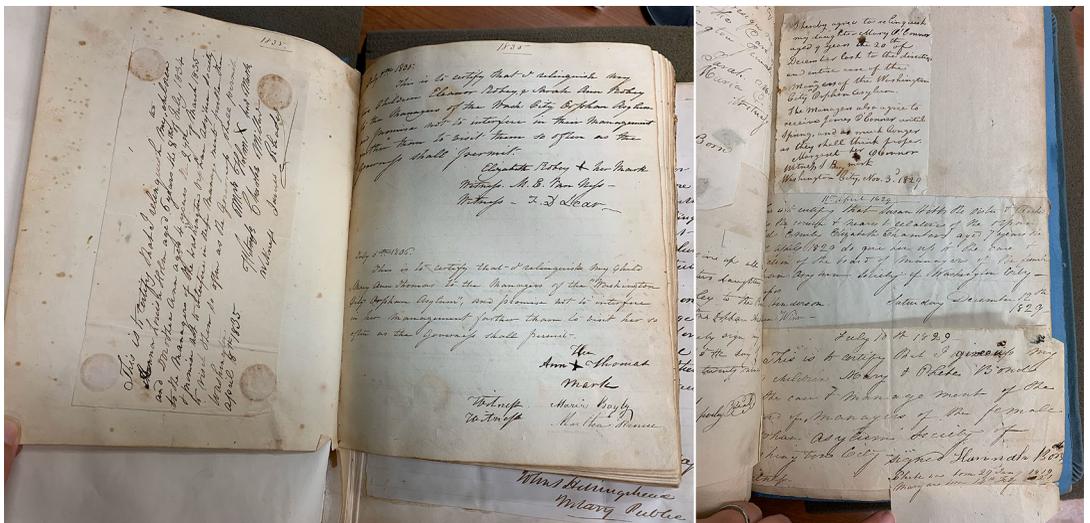


Figure 4. Relinquishments. Hillcrest Children's Center Papers. (Photograph by author)



Figures 5 and 6. Relinquishments. Hillcrest Children's Center Papers. (Photograph by author)

sources. I found this especially important in my years researching sickness: I would rather hear what my sources say than my own sense of sadness over their suffering and loss.

And yet, in these relinquishments, I could hear little. In their anonymity, they contributed to a growing sense that these papers should be seen and analyzed as material objects as much as words. In writing, they seemed like one more bureaucratic piece of a dense collection. As objects, though, in their collective near uniformity, they were significant. On the one hand, they were a professional secretarial script; on the other, they were human lives, families, and households in need or come apart.

The relinquishments altered my experience of the archival collection and my questions. I had an emotional response to what I was reading—what I was touching. At the time, this made me uncomfortable. I paused. Was it okay to have an emotional response? And what exactly was mine? I had already known that orphanages often housed children with living parents; such was the case for some of the Lutheran missionaries and ministers from Halle, whom I had previously studied.²⁸ But I had never focused specifically on orphanages. I had never held a relinquishment. Was I upset because I was a mom with young children? I worried that was annoyingly cliché—but true. Was I upset because these relinquishments all seemed so unfeelingly straightforward and procedural? My stomach turned. I encountered these records after more than a year of reading news reports about the Donald J. Trump administration’s family separation border policy. And as I was working on this collection, on July 30, 2019, *National Public Radio* reported that such separations had continued, despite a federal court order to end the practice.²⁹

While the context of the Orphan Asylum relinquishments was very different than contemporary border separations, for me, the connection served as a helpful reminder that bureaucratic actions are moral actions. The striking anonymity and bureaucracy of the asylum’s divided families felt like a stark parallel to events at the US border. As in the present, the seemingly dry bureaucracy in the archive actually revealed much about the moral and emotional worlds of its subjects, the norms within which they lived, thrived, and suffered.³⁰

My emotional response pulled me to the relinquishments as full of human life and trauma. The collection demanded my scholarly attention and even discomfort; I was convinced it could reveal important stories. Although I worried that the disgust I felt was simply a continuation of the nineteenth-century sentimentality that provoked white women to action, I decided to follow my gut. Perhaps it was

²⁸ Such was the case of Heinrich Helmuth, an important Lutheran minister in Philadelphia in the late-nineteenth century. He had been educated as a charity student at the Francke Foundations in Germany. Koch, *The Course of God’s Providence*, 125. As Jamalin Rae Harp reminds us: “That all orphans had two dead parents is perhaps one of the greatest myths about orphans perpetuated in American lore.” Harp, “The Capital’s Children,” 4.

²⁹ Richard Gonzalez, “ACLU: Administration Is Still Separating Migrant Families Despite Court Order To Stop,” *NPR* July 30, 2019.

³⁰ Cf. Stoler, “Colonial Archives,” 101–3.

not only okay to allow myself some horror as I read and touched the relinquishments, but perhaps I *should* feel some horror at these fragments and pursue what that meant—and whether it changed my larger research questions and methods.³¹

Emotion and Tender Objects in the Archive

There is an ongoing and rich scholarly conversation about the place of emotion in the archive. As Jennifer Scheper Hughes has observed, there are protocols and norms that make archives quiet, disciplined places, but that doesn't mean they must be. Scholars have, in fact, much to gain when we consider our presence in the archive, our relationship to the collections, and the forces that bring us there and support our research. Hughes takes a religious studies approach to these questions. She has described, for example, the ritual of archival labor: "the body of the scholar, habituated as if to prayer, sits in stillness before the document raised on its foam stand as if on a dais." For Hughes, such ritual is a part of the "bureaucratic apparatus captured in the archives of empire," which has "a sort of brutal neutrality that can be seductively numbing for the researcher."³²

When I encountered the Orphan Asylum papers, I was sitting in the Manuscript Reading Room in the Madison Building of the Library of Congress. It is a room of straight lines and clean surfaces, designed for efficiency, with tables perfectly spaced for researchers' work and for the movement and parking of document carts. It is all whispers and muted movements, the perfect atmosphere for the ritual of archival labor: undistracted reading, transcription, and study. It was also startlingly incongruous with my emotional response to the relinquishments, which added to my unease.

As a historian, my presence with this collection was shaped by the bureaucratic regime of the archive, including the research center which sponsored my residency, the identification office which accepted my documents and gave me a library card and badge, the qualifications provided by my academic transcript and professional appointments, and last—but certainly not least—the salary that allows me to pay for childcare. Jessica Delgado has described similar experiences in her own research and the complicated process that goes into archival work: scholars have often faced "the exercises of disciplinary authority . . . before we even arrived at these documents"—proving our credentials, receiving identifications, locking away

31 I am shaped here by Robert Orsi's recent work on disgust in critical scholarship: "Disgust is visceral and intimate; it is the power of revulsion in the body. Disgust lacks the cultivated reserve of the hermeneutics of suspicion that so easily slides into a posture of knowingness." Disgust can be problematic, he acknowledges; when religious authorities are disgusted by impoverished people, for example, they might use that disgust to claim control over them and their lives. Orsi, though, wants to "take disgust itself away from the powerful and use it against them." He asks scholars to attend to their visceral response as well as their more cerebral training in careful reading. Orsi, "The Study of Religion on the Other Side of Disgust."

32 Jennifer Scheper Hughes, "Religion and Emotion in the Archives of Empire," *Hemisphere: A Magazine of the Americas* 27 (Winter 2018): 33–35.

excess materials so we enter with a bare minimum. As Delgado argues, acknowledging this process can actually help us in “confronting the layers of power” in the lives of our subjects as well. For Delgado, a scholar of laywomen in colonial Mexico, this means attending to “the historical forces that shaped the women’s words and controlled their bodies; the interlocking institutional histories that partially documented their experiences and then relegated them to the miscellany of the archive; and the contours of the academic professions that have devalued their stories.”³³ When we are more attentive to our place within the strange world that is the archive, we realize the layers that invite research and analysis in the lives of those we study and the limits and absences that necessarily shape our work.

Bearing in mind these insights from Hughes and Delgado, what could I do with these relinquishments and my response to them? They strike me as a particularly important part of the story of the Washington Female Orphan Asylum. Although the words are rather uniform and almost anonymous, the relinquishments, as objects—in their material bulk—are telling us something. Leora Auslander argues that “objects not only are the product of history, they are also active agents in history. In their communicative, performative, emotive, and expressive capacities, they act, have effects in the world.” They might offer a “guide to how such events were lived by their protagonists.”³⁴ Auslander’s argument provides a sense of the potential significance of the relinquishments as objects. But I was left with the fact that the documents themselves do not betray much emotion. There was, on an initial read, little interiority to reveal “their protagonists.”

This is where, it seems to me, it’s worthwhile to attend to my emotional response. The relinquishments *are* objects and—my response reminds me—they are objects that attest to separation and to trauma. We don’t know how the historical actors experienced relinquishment, but the relinquishments as material objects are a reminder that behind any orphanage admittance is a rupture or disturbance of some kind. If we perceive the relinquishments as such objects, then we can, as Laura Levitt has argued, “keep the event tangible, suspended, and within our reach.” For Levitt, objects of trauma allow us to “stitch connections between ourselves and these different violent legacies.” That is what I would like to do here; I would like to consider these relinquishments as objects that connect us to a difficult moment in the early American nation and in the story of philanthropy.³⁵

Levitt studies objects of trauma and violence in the context of collection practices. She considers a wide range of materials, including those held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, police property management, and her own

33 Jessica Delgado, “On Women in Mexican Archives,” *Hemisphere: A Magazine of the Americas* 27 (Winter 2018): 32.

34 Leora Auslander, “Beyond Words,” *The American Historical Review* 110, no. 4 (October 2005): 1017, 1021.

35 Laura Levitt, *The Objects that Remain*, 6; cf. Orsi, “The Study of Religion on the Other Side of Disgust.”

memories of her experience of rape. As she describes, objects in these scenarios might be intentionally gathered and maintained, they might be scraps of evidence haphazardly stored for the state, they might be fuzzily remembered. She thinks of how objects are maintained and preserved (or not) and how their meaning can shift over time depending on context and audience. Levitt argues that material objects are “fragile evidence,” inanimate evidence that can nonetheless “offer silent testimony.” Because of their witness, because of this “vital materiality”—and here Levitt cites Hughes—these objects move beyond the realm of the mundane. They are worthy of our “tender regard.” They provoke a sense of wonder that causes us to consider how these objects “continue to bristle with meaning.” Although in most scholarship there is typically a sense that “evidence presumes our power over the objects we write and think about,” Levitt insists instead on the agency of objects to provoke us, to affect us.³⁶

The relinquishments affected me, but Levitt reminds me also to consider them as objects that have been collected and carefully preserved over centuries. Why were they? Who else touched them? What did they mean? The relinquishments were not objects of “tender regard” as they were processed by Washington’s leading ladies, but the founders and board members did claim to view the *orphans* as “tender objects” and their work as “sacred.” In their writings and statements, the benefactors understood their work as part of their Christian duty. When I first began my study of the collection, one of my goals was understanding exactly that: how the founders imagined their “Christian duty” as women in the early republic. Lingering over the relinquishments as objects, though, I wondered how such documents were imagined by the elite women who wrote them out, served as witnesses, and collected them into the official records. Were the relinquishments an itemized collection of good and charitable deeds on the road to salvation? These were Protestant women; while they may have spurned anything that seemed like Catholic works righteousness, they could still have been concerned with a record of their own sanctification or perfection.³⁷ But that interpretation seems incomplete; the other records, containing reports, schedules, donations, and even meeting minutes, along with the newspaper pieces, were far more verbose on the sense of a sacred Christian duty, albeit sometimes wrapped in discourses of sympathy and civilization. Moreover, the sense of sacred duty that the women cited in their work does not make the relinquishment documents *themselves* sacred. What did the asylum managers think when they wrote out and collected these relinquishments? Did their sentimentalism extend to imagining or sympathizing with the severance of family ties among the poor? Or did their civilizing mission mute any sense of distress, or reconstrue it in terms of pitiable ignorance? And, finally, how did the parent or guardian feel as they touched and signed the paper? Did they

³⁶ Levitt, *The Objects that Remain*, 3, 6, 46, 112–16, 118–19. On regard, cf. Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes*, 150.

³⁷ Harp describes the Protestant connections of the early Asylum. See Harp, “The Capital’s Children,” 217–18.

know what they signed? Was it under duress? Or was it a relief? The documents do not tell us.³⁸

My emotional response to the archive attuned me to Levitt's notion of "fragile evidence" and the sense of an event still "tangible, suspended and within our reach." But I remained troubled by questions. As scholars of slavery have shown, the pull of the archive, for all its flaws, is powerful. And while I see and understand its limits, I wanted to make sure I hadn't missed anything.

Relinquishments, Counter-History, and the Economics of Caregiving

Archival silences can seem deadening, but they can also be revealing. As scholars of colonialism have shown, much can be learned from seemingly dry bureaucratic documents. Scholars of slavery have likewise reckoned with these problems as they seek to find hints at the interiority of the enslaved. Jennifer Morgan has demonstrated how, even with a limited archive, even with humans reduced to numbers or ledgers into a "kind of evidence [that] is both efficacious and dulling," there are stories to find. For Morgan, all those numbers tell a story of "obscene abstractions" that "could transform human beings into wealth" and thus assuage the "moral code" of European enslavers.³⁹ Stephanie Smallwood, frustrated by slavery's archival silences, has likewise argued for the importance of "counter-history," which is "politically necessary, not because it can ever fully recuperate the subaltern, but rather because by its critique it reveals the otherwise naturalized and taken-for-granted structures of power that produce subaltern figures as such."⁴⁰ It is emotional work, I would argue, to "[disrupt] the archive's naturalization of the violence it narrates." It is a work that requires a great deal of care while also accepting the impossibility of a romantic story of redemption. We cannot, in the end, rescue full-fledged individuals from the silences of the archive and the past.⁴¹

With this scholarship in mind, I decided to reread the papers to see what else might emerge. I started with the most mundane history of the asylum archives, the documents' preservation and housing at the Library of Congress. This placement is

38 In a letter signed simply "A Mother," the work of the Asylum is described thus: "Not only in the District of Columbia, but in every part of our widely-extended Union, may the voice of pity plead for these little innocents! The Saviour of the World did not disdain to notice these tender objects of creation, for *he took them in his arms, put his hands upon them, kissed them, and blessed them.*" A Mother, "To the Editors of the National Enquirer"; "Orphan Asylum." See also Meeting Minutes, October 10, October 17, and December 13, 1815; "Constitution of the Washington Female Orphan Asylum Society," box 34, Hillcrest Children's Center Papers.

39 Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 17, 21–23.

40 Smallwood, "The Politics of the Archive," 128.

41 Smallwood, "The Politics of the Archive," 119–20, 128–29; Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 8–9; cf. Christina Sharpe, "And to Survive," 175–77. Another example of how to respond to archival absences is found in Kaell's study, where she offers interludes to imagine how a sponsored child might have understood her experiences. While Kaell debated this approach, she argues that "the larger point is to foreground how absences constitute even the most intimate global projects—for scholars and for the people we study." Kaell, *Christian Globalism at Home*, 42.

likely due to several factors, including chiefly that the asylum was incorporated by an act of Congress in 1828, the early benefactors and leaders included two first ladies, Dolley Madison and Elizabeth Monroe, and the institution was located in Washington, DC, and continues to serve the area. (The asylum's records are actually part of the papers of the "Hillcrest Children's Center," referring to the current name of the institution that traces its roots to the Asylum.) The finding aid explains these shifting names and missions, as well as the famous historical figures, but makes little mention of the children and families. In a 2017 doctoral dissertation, Jamalin Rae Harp traces the stories of some of the children involved, an impressive investigative effort, but it is not listed in the finding aid.⁴²

What clues are in the relinquishments themselves? More than I initially saw. The relinquishment for Jane McGowen, for example, had faintly penciled "returned to her mother," dated April 1839. Curious about how often such an event occurred, I looked over the lists of admittances again. There I saw with new eyes the records that noted children who ran away, were returned to their mother, or who, more ominously, were "stolen" by their mother (see Figures 7 and 8).

Upon relinquishment, the children legally belonged to the asylum. It was only in pursuing my discomfort, however, and reading with trauma, separation, and silence in mind, that I fully understood that legal binding and its implications. To "run away" or be "stolen" (or even to be "placed") are all phrases that remind us of several things: first, not all families desired this separation or wanted it to be permanent. Some seem to have felt it keenly. These are the small hints to the families' and children's interior lives.

Second, in spite of the sentimental appeals, the asylum's directors had a vested, monetary interest in properly documented and witnessed relinquishments. According to the asylum's 1815 Constitution:

The Children shall be educated, fed and clothed at the expense of the Society, and at the Asylum. They must have religious instruction, moral example, and habits of industry inculcated on their minds.

As soon as the age and acquirements of the Children shall, in the opinion of the Board of Direction, render them capable of earning their living, they must be bound out to some reputable persons, or families, for such object and in such manner as the Board shall approve.⁴³

As Clare Lyons has shown for Philadelphia in this era, such binding-out—or indentures—made poor relief cost-effective for the city while also preventing

⁴² On the fascinating role of Dolley Madison and Elizabeth Monroe in the early years of the Asylum, see Harp, "The Capital's Children," 279–84. The finding aid for the papers of the Hillcrest Children's Center at the Library of Congress, which includes pertinent history of the Asylum and the collection, can be found online here: <https://lccn.loc.gov/mm73054916>.

⁴³ Proceedings of the Washington Female Orphan Asylum at their First Annual Meeting, October 10, 1815, box 34, Hillcrest Children's Center Papers.

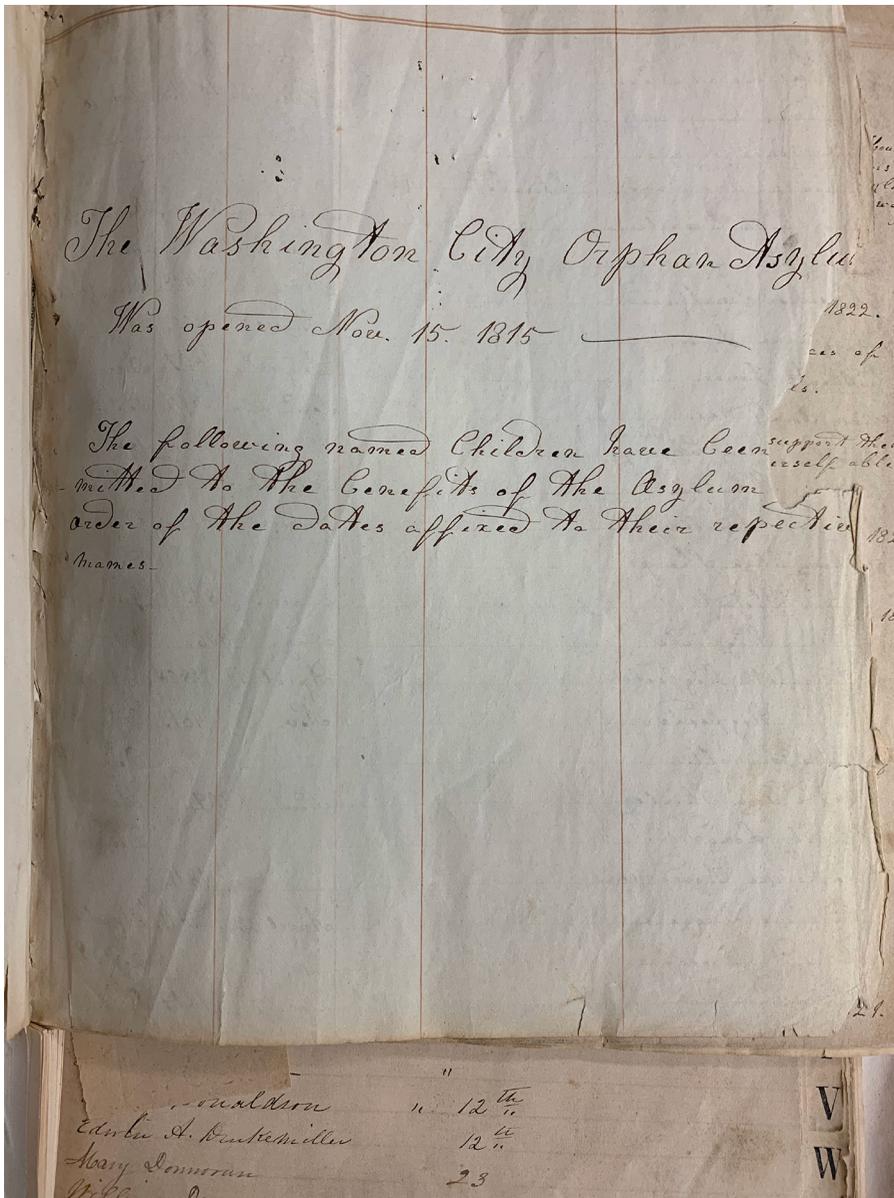


Figure 7. List of Admittances to the Washington City Orphan Asylum, Hillcrest Children’s Center Papers. (Photograph by author)

children from returning to impoverished and (in the benefactors’ view) corruptive, “vicious” circumstances. Such returns could lead to a renewed need for alms and a new generation of impoverished children, potentially born outside of marriage. The ideal option for most reformers at this time was to care for the children in orphanages only as long as necessary and then find them a placement in a home (adopted or indentured) as quickly as possible, thus providing the children with

Name of Child	Name of Parent	When Born	When Admitted	When of Age	Remarks
Charles Jackson		Feb. 16. 1809	Jan. 16. 1811	Jan. 16. 1821	
Lucas Langdon		Feb. 16. 1810	Jan. 16. 1811	Jan. 16. 1821	
Andrew Lyons					
Elizabeth Langdon	Elizabeth Lyons	March 8. 1805	Jan. 22. 1811	March 8. 1823	
Elizabeth Goodwin		March 19. 1808	Jan. 13. 1811	March 19. 1824	
Caroline Goodwin		March 19. 1808	Jan. 13. 1811	March 19. 1824	
John Jones		August 1. 1805	Aug. 1. 1811	August 1. 1823	
John Jones		August 1. 1807	Aug. 1. 1811	August 1. 1825	
John Jones		Sept. 25. 1811	Sept. 2. 1811	Sept. 25. 1829	
John Jones		Sept. 22. 1814	Sept. 22. 1811	Sept. 22. 1826	
John Jones		August 1. 1817	Aug. 1. 1811	August 1. 1829	
John Jones		March 18. 1818	Jan. 1. 1811	March 18. 1831	
John Jones		Aug. 1. 1816	Sept. 1. 1811	Aug. 1. 1824	
Elizabeth Mayfield		April 19. 1814	Sept. 1. 1811	April 19. 1826	
John Mayfield		Jan. 1. 1815	Sept. 1. 1811	Jan. 1. 1831	
John Mayfield		Jan. 1. 1816	Sept. 1. 1811	Jan. 1. 1831	
John Mayfield		Jan. 1. 1819	Jan. 24. 1811	Jan. 1. 1827	
John Mayfield		1811	1811	1827	
John Mayfield		April 22. 1811	April 22. 1811	April 22. 1829	
John Mayfield		Sept. 21. 1811	Sept. 21. 1811	Sept. 21. 1830	
John Mayfield		Dec. 7. 1814	Dec. 7. 1811	Dec. 7. 1832	

Figure 8. List of admittances to the Washington City Orphan Asylum. Hillcrest Children’s Center Papers. (Photograph by author)

useful employment and avoiding the danger of corruption poised by a return to the family of origin, with its long-term personal and social consequences.⁴⁴

In the early years, it seems that the Washington asylum sought to promote its goals of industry and virtue—and the prevention of corruption—by binding or indenturing the children to benefactors and their networks.⁴⁵ Some of the children were indentured to members of Congress or other political figures, Jamalin Rae Harp has shown, with the intention of learning housework. There are records that some completed their indentures and received a promised \$50; others remained as servants in these families after their indentures were complete.⁴⁶

While adoption was an option for the asylum children, indentures seemed a much more likely arrangement. In her investigation of the asylum’s children and outcomes, Harp shows that there is little evidence of familial affection in these arrangements.⁴⁷ Indeed, by 1870, the asylum had in writing the procedures that determined indentures, which stressed appropriate labor conditions:

44 Clare A. Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730–1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 388. There are examples of orphanages being used as temporary childcare from later United States history. See for example Jessie Ramie, *Child Care in Black and White: Working Parents and the History of Orphanages* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012). Harp, “The Capital’s Children,” 1, 4, 264.

45 Records of Children Admitted and Placed Out, box 34, Hillcrest Children’s Center Papers.

46 Harp, “The Capital’s Children,” 285–91.

47 Harp, “The Capital’s Children,” 291.

No child can be sent out on trial. They [the Binding Committee] shall inquire carefully into the character of the persons, and the suitability of the place for the child. No boy shall be bound as a house-servant, or to a tavern-keeper. No girl shall be bound in a tavern or boarding-house, or as a child's nurse. Each child shall . . . have a Bible given to it on leaving the Asylum. The names and situations of those who are bound shall be inserted in the Register by the Secretary, who shall also have the care of their indentures.

It is unclear if these guidelines were the procedure for binding all along, a confirmation of standard procedure, or a response to previous difficulties. In any case, by 1870, the asylum seemed to have taken special care to outline who the children could be bound out or indentured to, hoping to promote a good outcome and to prevent situations that might make them vulnerable to vice.⁴⁸

From the perspective of the benefactors, binding out or indentures were a matter of course. In an 1818 ode by R. T. Paine, written in honor of the anniversary of the Boston Female Orphan Asylum, this issue was directly addressed:

Warmed by thy beams, the frost unkind,
Which blasts sweet woman's vernal years,
In dew exhaled, shall leave behind
Pure Gratitude's unsullied tears!
So shall our Orphan girls no more
Lament the untimely blight of woe;
But reared to virtue, thrice restore
To generous man, the debt they owe.⁴⁹

This sentimental language begs to be analyzed. The phrase “the debt they owe” is likely very straightforward: the girls owed a financial debt to the asylum (or, in other circumstances, to a Poor Relief Committee) for the education and care they received cost-free. They could repay this through their indenture to a benefactor or other family. The phrase could also be read as less directly transactional and refer instead to a sense of civic responsibility the children shouldered as they left the institution. Trained now to understand their responsibility as young women (especially in their “vernal years”), they would be able to joyfully serve their “generous” benefactors in “unsullied” virtue.

Again, the relinquishments—as objects—draw attention to the economics of the asylum. The “debt” that the children owed was a debt of labor, which would most likely be fulfilled in indentured service. We might miss this if we focus on the more

⁴⁸ *Constitution and By-Laws of the Washington City Protestant Orphan Asylum Society*. To Harp, the Asylum did not always follow these guidelines. She points to the indenture of children in the family of the politician Willard Saulsbury, who was known to have a drinking problem. Harp, “The Capital's Children,” 290–91.

⁴⁹ R. T. Paine, “Ode: Written for the Anniversary of the Boston Female Orphan Asylum,” *Philadelphia Magazine, and Weekly Repository*, April 25, 1818; “Orphan Asylum.”

verbose allusions to civic duty and virtue found in official accounts of the asylum's founders.⁵⁰ Dwelling on the relinquishments in all their bureaucratic, papery silence, however, makes it impossible to overlook the economics of the asylum and the larger society. While we still lack detailed knowledge of the interiority of the children and their families, we see that binding out and indentures—the free labor of asylum children—were made possible because the asylum required parents and families to sign for the *relinquishment* of their children.

Conclusion

My emotional response to this philanthropy object brought me to see the archival collection and early American philanthropy in different ways. Scholars of colonization, slavery, and trauma have done substantial work to make transparent the nature of archives: their limits, their power, their pull. They have wrestled with the emotions of a research dead end, where the historical subjects we so want to see and know remain voiceless. These frustrations, however, have prompted new research directions and new provocations to attend to, not least of which are questions of how archives are made, preserved, touched, and revered. Scholars pursue these questions because they matter. As we expand our story of the past, the public must know that we will always lack—a lack that is a direct consequence of past power dynamics that made our current world, and a lack that, if left unacknowledged, will continue to shape our future.

When I started this project, I wanted to investigate how the concept of sympathy, which was crucial to the Protestant missions and philanthropy of the imperial world, played out in networks of women, in their missions to care for and educate girls, and even in their understanding of the body, health, and hygiene. I thought attending to the discourse of elite women would allow me to figure out how an idea like sympathy—much analyzed as an Enlightenment and religious concept and even as a literary device—played out in the overlooked economy of caregiving.⁵¹

Considering the relinquishments as a philanthropy object reminded me, however, that the subjects of caregiving are multiple. Think back to that massive historic philanthropy object that is the campus of the Francke Foundations with its orphan house in Halle. I, like many before, saw it as a place that housed and educated dependent children and, in so doing, provided care to them. The archival

50 See the numerous references to the Asylum and its place in the city's prosperity in newspaper reports of the time. "City of Washington"; "Female Orphan Asylum"; "Communication."

51 On sympathy, religion, and the Enlightenment, I was thinking with a variety of scholars: Norman S. Fiering, "Irresistible Compassion: An Aspect of Eighteenth-Century Sympathy and Humanitarianism," in *Race, Gender, and Rank: Early Modern Ideas of Humanity*, ed. Maryanne Cline Horowitz (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1992), 378–401 (originally published in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37, no. 2 (April/June 1976): 197–218); Catherine Brekus, *Sarah Osborn's World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Early America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 217–47; Heather D. Curtis, *Holy Humanitarians: American Evangelicals and Global Aid* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 29.

object—the relinquishments—however, revealed a different side of caregiving and of philanthropy. Here were documents that allowed such cared-for children to be indentured, to become—most often—servants who cared for their benefactors and their homes and land.⁵² The web of sympathy, gender, economics, and caregiving was more complex than I had imagined.

The relinquishments forced me to reconsider the story of philanthropy and how we tell this story in the nineteenth century. The women who organized the orphan asylum still fascinate me. They found purpose, leadership, and social connection through their sentimental language and voluntary labor in caring for dependent children. Philanthropy and charity were work that women and men both engaged in pursuit of “civic virtue” in the early American Republic, and yet by the third decade of the nineteenth century, voluntary associations became increasingly gendered as feminine, a separate sphere where women could exert influence but where they remained uncompensated, apart from the social opportunities and networks.⁵³ The indentured children who worked in the homes of such women, meanwhile, were also doing unpaid work. All of this work contributed to domestic economies as well as to a public presentation of civilization, cleanliness, and order, which were important for burgeoning American cities like Washington, DC. As Kathleen Brown has shown, servants and masters both could be seen as “cocreators of the ‘civilized’ domestic culture that served as imperialism’s unstated premise,” and it is crucial to attend to the “body work”—the caregiving—that went into this culture from both fronts.⁵⁴

Reading the relinquishments as material objects, allowing myself to be jarred by them, pushed me to see how nineteenth-century philanthropy, with its Christian ideals of sacrifice, morality, and discipline, created not only educated virtuous women and polities but also laborers. Such philanthropy objects highlight an important moment in early capitalism, in which caring labor became gendered, silent, and very often hidden.⁵⁵ Although the interior lives of these women and children might not be recovered in the archive, the collections we have can reveal—as scholars of slavery have shown—the counter-history. It reminds us that this process—in which white girls and women became the virtuous and unpaid

52 According to Harp, most of the children were indentured to work in housekeeping (girls) or farming (boys). Harp, “The Capital’s Children,” 81.

53 Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women*, 13–14, 38.

54 Brown, “Body Work in the Antebellum United States,” 215–17.

55 There remain significant problems in how caregiving is gendered and hidden in our modern economy. The COVID-19 pandemic brought public attention to this issue in new ways, but I am shaped in my readings here by scholars who have working on these issues in other contexts as well. See for example Christina Crosby and Janet R. Jakobsen, “Disability, Debility, and Caring Queerly,” *Social Text* 145 38, no. 4 (December 2020): 77–103. For one example of continued disparities in the nonprofit sector, see this 2018 report by the American Association of University Women, which shows that women make up three-quarters of the American nonprofit workforce, but less than a quarter of nonprofits with the highest budgets (\$50 million+) have women in leadership positions. “Broken Ladders: Barriers to Women’s Representation in Nonprofit Leadership,” AAUW (May 2018), <https://www.aauw.org/resources/research/broken-ladders/>.

caregivers of white Christian civilization—was not inevitable or natural. While it was a sphere in which some women found power and community, others were participants due to relinquishments, poverty, and debt. The labor these women performed was different, but the sentimental language of virtue and sacrifice bound them together.

Although I am mostly satisfied with this analysis, I return nonetheless to the relinquishments and Levitt's discussion of "tender regard" and the idea that objects of trauma "bristle" and have stories to tell. The relinquishments still bristle at me; they still make me look. The concept of tender regard reminds us, as Levitt writes, of the purpose of archival work. Regardless of the historical happenstances that caused an object to be preserved, "what draws so many of us to the shards of broken lives is perhaps a kind of recognition, a sense that acknowledgment matters. This is what is possible down here in the muck."⁵⁶ To dwell on objects like the relinquishments not only corrects a focus on elite women leaders but also balances a reduction to institutionalization. The lives of the children were shaped by deliberate decisions by adults to care for them, mold them into virtuous young women, and indenture them. Their lives and the lives of their benefactors were caught up in larger forces, too, of sentimental language, religious ideals, the city, the nation, and a gendered and raced web of labor and caregiving.

And we historians also find our way in this legacy of caregiving. We look for children's and women's stories, tenderly hold the documents and traces of the past in the fragile material collections that remain, and try responsibly to narrate a past that does not romanticize their lived experiences but nonetheless accounts for why it matters and who we are today.

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Much of the research for this article was supported by a David B. Larson Fellowship from the Kluge Center at the Library of Congress. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their feedback on this piece as well as my cohort in the 2019–2022 Young Scholars of American Religion for their comments and critiques.

⁵⁶ Levitt, *The Objects that Remain*, 28.