

Benevolent Societies

Women were fundamental to the reform spirit that shook America from the 1820s to the Civil War. But the first steps in their efforts came earlier, after the American Revolution, when women began to come together in groups and form benevolent societies. Often they worked through their churches and had religious goals, like running Sunday schools. Other societies focused more broadly on charity for people in need.



Isabella Graham, 1843. *The Power of Faith*, frontispiece. Engraving, New-York Historical Society Library, C1.G739 A2 1843.

In 1806 in New York, Scottish immigrant Isabella Graham and her daughter, Joanna Bethune, joined Elizabeth Schuyler

Hamilton, widow of Alexander Hamilton, and founded the New York Orphan Asylum. Graham and Bethune had gained experience by forming a relief organization for poor widows with children almost ten years earlier. Another orphanage, this one in the nation's capital, was founded in 1815

by Dolley Madison, Margaret Bayard Smith, and Marcia Burns Van Ness. The Washington Female Orphan Asylum not only provided for orphaned girls, it reinforced the city's proud determination to rebuild after the British attack in 1814 (see **Resource 8**).



Gilbert Stuart, *Mrs. Marcia Van Ness*, 1805. Oil on canvas. Edgewater Classical American Homes Preservation Trust.

In both New York and Washington, the orphanages were run by women, with all-female boards of directors, but they

operated under different state and local laws. In New York, the board was able to secure a state charter that allowed it to own and manage the facility. But in its early years, the Washington asylum had no charter, because the married women on the board could not legally own property. It was on shaky financial ground until Congress installed an all-male board in 1828.

The founders of these orphanages were mothers themselves, and knew how to care for children. But opening and maintaining the asylums required that they raise

money, promote their plan, navigate legal requirements, and operate an institution, as is clear from this passage of Joanna Bethune's biography of her mother. These critical skills were more often associated with the world of men, but no one disapproved, because caring for children was well within women's moral sphere. So in these orphanages, and in benevolent societies around the country, women learned how to put their ideas to work, and later they applied these lessons to larger, more political, and more dangerous causes.

Discussion Questions

- ★ What new opportunities were available to women who participated in benevolent societies?
- ★ Why was it socially acceptable for women to take a leadership role in a benevolent society when they were barred from so much else?

Sources: Catherine Allgor, *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006); *The Early Years*, <http://www.graham-windham.org/about-us/history/the-early-years/> (accessed by M. Waters, 10-25-2016); "Orphan Asylum Society," *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, rev. ed., Kenneth T. Jackson, ed. (New Haven and New York: Yale University Press and the New-York Historical Society, 2010).

Learning the Skills

On the 15th of March, 1806, the female subscribers to proposals for providing an Asylum for Orphan Children met at the City Hotel; Mrs. Graham was called to the chair, a Society organized, and a board of direction chosen. Mrs. [Sarah] Hoffman was elected the first Directress of the Orphan Asylum Society. Mrs. Graham . . . , or one of her family, taught the orphans daily, until the funds of the Institution were sufficient to provide a teacher and superintendent. . . .

And truly God has made good his promise towards this benevolent Institution. . . . Having for fourteen months occupied a hired house for an Asylum, the ladies entertained the bold idea of building an Asylum on account of the Society. They had then about three hundred and fifty dollars as the commencement of a fund for the building; they purchased four lots of ground in the village of Greenwich, on a healthful, elevated site, possessing a fine prospect. The corner-stone was laid on the 7th of July, 1807. They erected a building fifty feet square. . . . In that house Mrs. Graham and Mrs. Hoffman spent much of their time; there they trained for Eternity the children of those whose widowed dying mothers they had cheered with the hope that when they should be taken away, God would fulfill his gracious promise and preserve their fatherless children alive.

Joanna Graham Bethune, *The Power of Faith: Exemplified in the Life and Writings of the Late Mrs. Isabella Graham, of New-York*. New York: J. Seymour, 1816.