Giving Voices to the Voiceless: 1969–1971
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Letters to Sister Irene
20248 February 1870
Dear Sisters of Charity,

Today, I feel much guilt in the act in which I’m about to commit. This beautiful baby boy is named Henry. The child was born on the 12th of January 1870. He has received the holy sacrament of baptism in St. Paul’s Church, Brooklyn, NY, by Father Michael. I can no longer take proper care for him, and I am asking you today with great desperation to please take him in and aid for him. I do plan on making my return to retrieve the child back into my possession. For this reason, I have left tied to his delicate arm a piece of blue ribbon that when put together with my piece, connects to make the whole ribbon as one again. Also, his eye is very sensitive; please wash his eye out with a small cloth to help relieve it. God will repay all of you with acts of kindness for your ways.

Sincerely,
A broken hearted mother.

Adela Darling

It has been weeks now since I have left my sweet, sweet baby, Adela, in the care of Sister Irene at the New York Foundling Hospital. Not a single day goes by where I do not wonder what it is my angel is doing. Did they already christen her? Is she being fed properly? Do they burp her? It is only natural for a mother to worry, and that was what I did. Father and I have already put together five dollars to send for her, and perhaps that would be enough to convince Sister Irene that I will return for my Adela. Sweet, sweet, Adela Darling, mother loves you, and I will not ever forgive myself if I do not hold you in my arms again. My greatest wish, besides to have my Adela once more, is to hope that no one will adopt her. I have ensured in my letter to the hospital that I will be back once I get my financial situations sorted out. I have already started sewing gowns for the women in the neighborhood, and soon enough, I shall have enough to get back on my feet. Only then will I return for my baby, my crying angel.

Sincerely,
now. Please be kind to the little stranger.

repay all of you with acts of kindness for your ways.

Institutional History

Founded in 1869, the New York Foundling hospital was located at 17 East 12th Street and was founded with the intent of providing support and care for illegitimate children. Although the hospital was not yet officially open, on October 11, 1969, Sister Mary Irene Fitzgibbon and two other sisters of charity received their first abandoned infant. The Hospital was set to officially open on January 1, 1870. However, by this time, around 123 abandoned children had already been received.

In 1870, it only seemed appropriate to move into a larger building, and so the Foundling Hospital relocated to 3 Washington Square. During the same year, the State Legislature and City granted the hospital $100,000 towards a new building. By 1871, the Foundling hospital had accumulated 2,560 abandoned children. In 1872, construction began by 68th and 69th Streets and by Lexington and Third Avenue.

Collection of Photos

Orphan children surround one of the working nuns in the play room as they interact with one another and develop social skills.

Nuns within the hospital prepare to feed some of the infant children within the orphanage.

General History

1869 to 1871 in America: it is a time period of change and accomplishment. America is going through a certain kind of progressive era. It is four years after the end of the Civil War, and Reconstruction is still running its course while the south has yet to accept Northern beliefs or methods of industrialization. The 17th president, Andrew Jackson, was succeeded by Ulysses S. Grant, a republican.

The year 1869 is the beginning of the Gilded Age; an era of rapid economic growth in America, especially in the North and West, is beginning to rise.

Women are becoming smarter and efforts of educating women are being shown. One example is the P.E.O. Sisterhood, an educational organization for women. Another major change to the views of women occurred in 1869 and 1870, when Wyoming and then Utah gave women the right to vote. Susan B. Anthony becomes a huge influence after the Civil War, and demands that the Fourteenth Amendment include women along with African American men.

Trade and transportation become much easier and faster after the completion of the First Transcontinental Railroad. The completion of this railroad mean that the western states are now officially connected to the Union, resulting in huge profits for America as a whole.

New York Foundling Hospital

Inspired by the Collection of Letters from the New York Historical Society

Sources