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Women and Religion in the Atlantic Age, 1550–1900

Edited by

EMILY CLARK
Tulane University, USA

and

MARY LAVEN
University of Cambridge, UK

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Notes on Contributors

Robin Briggs is an Emeritus Senior Research Fellow, All Souls College, Oxford, and a Fellow of the British Academy. He has published extensively on early modern French history and the history of witchcraft, and is currently writing a synoptic study of the history of north-western Europe.

Emily Clark is Clement Chambers Benenson Professor of American Colonial History and Associate Professor at Tulane University. She is the author of *Masterless Mistresses: The New Orleans Ursulines and the Development of a New World Society, 1727–1834* (2007) and *The Strange History of the American Quadroon: Free Women of Color in the Revolutionary Atlantic World* (2013).

John J. Clune, Jr is Professor and Chair of the History Department at the University of West Florida. He is the author of *Cuban Convents in the Age of Enlightened Reform* (2008) and co-author of *Historic Pensacola* (2009).

Patrick Collinson, who died in 2011, was Emeritus Regius Professor of Modern History at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Trinity College. His voluminous writings include *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (1967), *The Religion of Protestants: The Church in English Society 1559–1625* (1982), *The Birthpangs of Protestant England* (1988) and *Elizabeth I* (2007).

After a successful career as an academic historian, **Annette Laing** now works full-time performing and writing history for children, and is best known as the author of the *Snipesville Chronicles*. Her academic publications include “A Very Immoral and Offensive Man”: Religious Culture, Gentility, and the Strange Case of Brian Hunt, South Carolina, 1727; *South Carolina Historical Magazine* (2002) and “Heathens and Infidels”? African Christianization and the Anglican Mission in the South Carolina Low Country, 1700–1750; *Religion and American Culture* (2002).

Mary Laven teaches History at the University of Cambridge, and is a Fellow of Jesus College. Her publications include *Virgins of Venice: Enclosed Lives and Broken Vows in the Renaissance Convent* (2001) and *Mission to China: Matteo Ricci and the Jesuit Encounter with the East* (2011).

Chapter 9

Religion and the Rise and Fall of Female Benevolence in Antebellum Savannah, 1801–60

Timothy J. Lockley

Historians generally agree that religion and charity became mutually reinforcing in the urban Anglo-phone Atlantic World in the early nineteenth century. Voluntary societies, organised to provide food, clothing, housing, education, and moral reform to widows, orphans, and the sick, nearly always had a religious agenda, and the tale of the good Samaritan or the Doctrine of Good Works gave charities a religious justification for their work. Bringing the light of Christianity to those who otherwise would have lived irreligious lives was, of course, an added bonus. What is less clear is how the relationship between religion and charity evolved during the first half of the nineteenth century, in response to social and political developments. When one also considers that benevolence was highly gendered, since women led the way in assisting others in England, Ireland, as well as in the United States, it becomes apparent that much can be learned about the female role in society by examining the work of female charitable organisations.¹ Quite why women took such a central role

¹ See Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820–1920* (Cambridge, MA, 1978), p. 9; Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex & Class in New York, 1789–1860* (New York, 1986), pp. 66–71; Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: 'Women's Sphere' in New England, 1750–1835* (New Haven, CT, 1977), pp. 132–3; Anne Boylan, 'Women in Groups: An Analysis of Women's Benevolent Organizations in New York and Boston, 1797–1840', *Journal of American History*, 71 (1984): pp. 497–523 (497); Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815–1860* (New York, 1997), pp. 23, 27–8; Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics and Class in the Nineteenth Century United States* (New Haven, CT, 1990), pp. 11–66; Suzanne Lebsack, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town* (New York, 1984), pp. 216–19; Keith Melder, 'Ladies Bountiful: Organized Women's Benevolence in Early Nineteenth Century America', *New York History*, 48 (1967): pp. 231–54 (232); F.K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century England* (Oxford, 1980), p. 3; Maria Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century Ireland* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 56.

in charitable works has been the subject of some debate amongst historians, though many suggest that the contemporary perception of a woman's natural role of nurturing and educating others was influential. In the context of the United States, the ideology of Republican Motherhood, whereby women were seen to be vitally important in the education of the young as virtuous citizens, was also significant.²

Like their counterparts across the Atlantic, and north of the Mason-Dixon line, women in southern towns and cities played a central role in the religious and charitable activities of their communities. In Savannah, one-time capital of Georgia, and still an important port as well as the largest city in the state in the early nineteenth century, women vastly outnumbered men in the city's white churches. The memberships of the two oldest churches, Christchurch Episcopal founded in 1750 and the Independent Presbyterian Church founded in 1755, were 67 per cent and 83 per cent female respectively. Nineteenth-century churches, such as the First Baptist Church and the Wesley chapel, also had about twice as many female members as male.³ Numerical dominance did not mean, of course, that women were permitted a governing role in church affairs. The small male minority exclusively managed church business and provided all lay officers such as churchwardens, vestrymen, and trustees. Some churches, such as the First Presbyterian Church founded in 1827, wrote the marginalisation of female members into their rules, while others merely took it as read. The female members of the First Baptist Church, for example, although evidently permitted to vote in discipline meetings, were not allowed to conduct any business without male members present.⁴

² Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* (Urbana, 1991), p. 13; Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence*, pp. 11–35; Lebsack, *Free Women of Petersburg*, pp. 204–5; Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*, pp. 96, 141–6.

³ These figures are taken from the membership records of each church, which are in the Georgia Historical Society. For the Independent Presbyterian Church and the First Baptist Church, the figures are an aggregate of members recorded between 1800 and 1830. Figures for Christchurch are taken from a communicants list from 1823. Members of the Wesley chapel in 1847 are listed in Haygood S. Bowden, *History of Savannah Methodism* (Macon, GA, 1929), pp. 68–73.

⁴ *Rules for the Spiritual and Temporal Government of the First Presbyterian Church, Savannah, Georgia, May 13, 1840* (Savannah, GA, 1840), 4, Rule II, 'The elders of this church shall be elected by the male members'; 5, Rule III, 'The pastor of this church shall be elected by the male members thereof'; 11, Rule XIV, standing committee of five chosen by the male members. For dates when no business could be conducted by the First Baptist Church due to the lack of male members see 'Minutes of the First Baptist Church, Savannah', 14 August 1813, 21 August 1813, 6 January 1815, 13 January 1815, microfilm, Jack Tarver Library, Special Collections, Mercer University, Macon, Georgia.

Some historians have argued that the fact that women constituted the majority of church members, without being given any power, gave a strong impetus to the creation of female benevolent societies that were solely managed and organised by white women.⁵ In this sense, urban white women used their charitable activities as an outlet for their frustration at not being able to fulfil any kind of public religious role. It is hard to make this case with regard to Savannah, since there is little evidence that women in the city conceived of their charitable work in this way. Rather, their aims were more straightforwardly charitable: 'to rescue the children of the indigent'; 'to supply the wants of destitute infirm widows and single women, of good characters'; being 'most deeply penetrated with the suffering of our own sex'.⁶ Such ideals led Savannah's women to organise themselves enthusiastically for benevolent purposes: during the 1810s, for instance, between a quarter and a third of adult white women, mainly drawn from the city's elite families, subscribed to a benevolent society.⁷ But while it may not have been the primary motivation, religion certainly influenced the nature of female benevolence in Savannah. The idea for the Savannah Female Asylum (SFA), founded in 1801 as a refuge for poor girls, ostensibly came from Henry Holcombe, the pastor of the First Baptist Church, who suggested it to a group of ladies after 'reading an account of a society formed in Boston for the benefit of such children'. The women who translated this idea into action hoped that their charitable endeavours would bring 'sacred pleasure to the soul'. The orphanage, once established, reflected its semi-religious origins: 'the girls had nightly

⁵ Cynthia Kierner, *Beyond the Household: Women's Place in the Early South, 1700–1835* (Ithaca, NY, 1998), pp. 181, 184 describes religion as the 'key loophole' that permitted women to enter public life. Stansell, *City of Women*, pp. 68–9; Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*, p. 141; Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change in Rochester, New York, 1822–1872* (Ithaca, NY, 1984), pp. 43–4.

⁶ *Columbian Museum and Savannah Advertiser (CMSA)*, 7 January 1819; *Georgian*, 28 January 1823; *Georgia Analytical Repository*, July–August 1802, p. 69.

⁷ The exact proportion of women in Savannah who subscribed to the Savannah Female Asylum (SFA) and Savannah Free School Society (SFSS) is impossible to determine. The adult white female population of Chatham County was 893 in 1810, and 1,300 in 1820, according to the Federal Census. The number of adult white women in Savannah alone would be slightly smaller. In 1816 the SFA had 194 subscribers, the SFSS a further 133 (total 327). If the white female population was about 1,100 in 1816, then the proportion of women subscribing to a benevolent society was 29.7 per cent. Forty women subscribed to both societies. 'Savannah Free School Society (SFSS) Records', 'Savannah Female Asylum (SFA) Minutes', 1816, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia. In comparison only 10 per cent of women in Rochester subscribed to a benevolent society. Hewitt, *Women's Activism*, pp. 40–41. Directresses were married to several of the ministers in Savannah, as well as to a number of merchants, lawyers, and aldermen.

family worship, attended a Sunday school on Sunday mornings and one of the city churches by rotation in the afternoon.⁸ Similarly, the benevolent women who formed the Savannah Free School Society (SFSS) in 1816, to provide free education to 'indigent' girls and boys, stressed the 'important advantages' of religious instruction and required all children to attend 'such places of public worship as may be designated by their parents or guardians'. Given that some parents might not have been overly concerned with the spiritual welfare of their children, the ladies governing the school made attendance at church one of the 'indispensable conditions' of taking a child, and reinforced the religious message with twice daily readings from scripture.⁹ When the ladies of Savannah formed a Widow's Society in 1822 to assist indigent adult women, especially those with children, they followed the lead of the SFA and SFSS by partly justifying their benevolent endeavours in religious terms, stating that 'one part of pure and undefiled religion is to visit the widow and the fatherless in their affliction'.¹⁰

The personal piety of benevolent women did not lead to sectarianism however. Baptist Pastor Henry Holcombe was the first to acknowledge the leading role taken by Presbyterian women in the foundation of the SFA, noting that 'the Presbyterians of the city are entitled, as a society, to the highest praise'.¹¹ In fact the women who formed the boards of the SFA, the SFSS, and the Widow's Society during the 1810s and 1820s were drawn from each of the city's Protestant churches, making the non-denominational, ecumenical, nature of these early societies particularly striking. About 40 per cent of directresses belonged to the independent Presbyterian Church; 35 per cent to Christchurch Episcopal; and 20 per cent to the First Baptist Church.¹² Board members of these

⁸ Henry Holcombe, *The First Fruits in a Series of Letters* (Philadelphia, PA, 1812), p. 77. The account Holcombe probably read was *The Institution of the Boston Female Asylum, Organized September 26, 1800* (Boston, MA, 1801). *CMSA*, 22 December 1801; 'SFA Minutes', 5 April 1838.

⁹ 'SFSS Rules', pp. 27-30.

¹⁰ *Georgian*, 28 January 1823.

¹¹ Holcombe, *The First Fruits*, p. 79.

¹² Of 85 benevolent women before 1830 whose religious affiliation is known 18 (21 per cent) were Baptist, 30 (35 per cent) Episcopal, 35 (41 per cent) Presbyterian. In addition, there was one Methodist woman and one Jewish woman. Betty Wood, *Gender, Race and Rank in a Revolutionary Age* (Athens, GA, 2001), p. 64. Names of women were taken from 'SFA Minutes'; 'SFSS Minutes'; *Savannah Gazette*, 25 January 1817; *Columbian Museum and Savannah Daily Gazette*, 1 January 1818; *Georgian*, 5 January 1819; *Savannah Republican*, 23 January 1819; *Georgian*, 28 January 1823. Information about religious affiliation comes from 'First Baptist Church Communion Roll'; 'Independent Presbyterian Church Communion Roll'; 'Christ Church Register of Births, Marriages and Deaths'; 'Michev Israel Synagogue Minutes', all in the Georgia Historical Society. On the non-denominational nature of

benevolent societies, while pious members of their own religious congregations, were generally keen to be seen to be even-handed in their approach to all denominations. Thus when the president of Savannah's Hibernian Society voiced concerns that Catholic children at the Free School were not being encouraged to read Catholic religious texts, the board acted quickly to reassure him that they respected freedom of conscience for all their pupils, and that this would be rectified.¹³

Some sense of the generic religious agenda of benevolent women can be gauged by the response of the board of the SFA in 1803 to the offer from theatre-owner Mr Placide to donate the proceeds of a performance to their funds. The board of the SFA published a condemnation of the event in a city newspaper, declaring that:

they consider the very extensive indulgence given the players to exhibit their performances in this city as very unfriendly to religion, as it will be allowed by the candid among those who are attached to such amusements, that they more generally are the means of encouragement to vice and dissipation, than to good morals.

Even worse was that the players were allowed 'to perform on the evening preceding the Sabbath, and on the night that our Christian congregation meet stately in public worship in an almost adjoining building'.¹⁴ This stance was not without its critics. The editor of the *Savannah Republican* noted that 'the commandment which institutes the Sabbath is equally imperative the we shall labor for six days as the seventh shall be kept ... by what authority will the ladies justify lengthening the Sabbath?' Furthermore, he pointedly observed that the ladies had trespassed into a 'political question, foreign to their field' by offering their opinions to the public at large on a controversial issue.¹⁵ However, the decision stood: the board of the SFA would not accept funds from sources they believed were 'very unfriendly to religion'.

A much more acceptable form of funding, and one which the benevolent women of Savannah relied upon in the period before 1830, came from the

early nineteenth-century benevolence see Leonard I. Sweet, *The Minister's Wife: Her Role in Nineteenth-Century American Evangelism* (Philadelphia, PA, 1983), p. 157; Hewitt, *Women's Activism*, p. 40; and Gail S. Murray, 'Charity within the Bonds of Race and Class: Female Benevolence in the Old South', *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 96 (1995): pp. 54-70 (57-8). On the deeply sectarian nature of male benevolent societies in Ireland see Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*, p. 178.

¹³ 'SFSS Minutes', 24 March 1824.

¹⁴ *CMSA*, 21 January 1803.

¹⁵ *Savannah Republican*, 22 January 1803.

various religious congregations themselves. The close connection of benevolent women with their respective churches was of vital importance to the early viability of these female societies, with the ecumenical nature of their makeup allowing the societies to draw on the generosity of all the city's congregations. Almost every year the boards of female benevolent societies requested that ministers in each church preach a charity sermon, with a collection afterwards. Such sermons stressed that donations should be given freely and graciously, since the greatest reward would come from the prayers of children seeking 'divine benediction' for their benefactors and benefactresses.¹⁶ This message evidently hit the right note, since the amounts raised by charity sermons were substantial, bringing in at least \$600 per year to both the SFA and the SFSS, and sometimes more than \$1,000. Such was the power of the charity sermons that the SFA was even able to raise \$520 from a charity sermon at the Independent Presbyterian Church in 1820 when Savannah had been devastated by fire only five months previously.¹⁷ The lion's share of this money was provided by the congregations of Christchurch Episcopal and the Independent Presbyterian Church, which were the wealthiest in the city, and which also provided the bulk of board members of female benevolent societies.¹⁸

These three pioneering female benevolent societies, the SFA, the SFSS, and the Widow's Society, operated outside of the boundaries set by their respective religious congregations. Because no single denomination held sway, the women who served on the boards of directresses enjoyed a significant degree of autonomy from male interference. The founder members of the SFSS, for example, ensured female control of their society by inserting a rule in their

¹⁶ For an example of a charity sermon preached for the Female Asylum see Henry Kollock, 'The Good Samaritan', in *Sermons on Various Subjects by the Late Henry Kollock, D.D.* (Savannah, GA, 1822), pp. 289-94.

¹⁷ Amounts raised were \$733 for the SFA in 1810, \$655 in 1811, \$700 in 1812, \$872 in 1814, \$770 in 1815, \$1,250 in 1816, \$1,195 in 1819. The SFSS raised \$929 in 1819, and a further \$589 in 1821. *CMSA*, 7 January 1811 and 17 February 1812; 'SFA Minutes', 6 May 1812; 21 May 1820; *Savannah Republican*, 27 December 1814, 23 December 1815, 31 December 1816, 2 February 1820. 'SFSS Minutes', 5 March 1821; *Savannah Republican*, 21 January, 17 and 24 February 1819.

¹⁸ For example in 1816, sermons raised \$638 at the Independent Presbyterian Church and \$470 at Christchurch, but only \$90 at First Baptist and \$52 at the Methodist chapel. 'SFA Minutes', 2 May 1816. In 1819, the congregation of the Independent Presbyterian Church could raise \$1,155 (\$690 for the SFA and a further \$465 for the SFSS). The congregation of Christchurch raised a respectable \$649 (\$332 for the SFA and a further \$317 for the SFSS). The members of the First Baptist Church could only raise \$163 (\$87 for the SFA, \$76 for the SFSS), while the Methodist congregation raised just \$157 (\$86 for the SFA and \$71 for the SFSS). *Savannah Republican*, 21 January, 7, 17, and 24 February 1819.

constitution stating that 'the affairs and concern of the society shall be managed and conducted by thirteen directresses'.¹⁹ The organisation, management, and running of these societies was evidently an immense task, more akin to a business than a charity. In each society, the 13 directresses were elected annually by the members (shareholders in a sense), but the election of exactly who was to be the first and second directress, the secretary and the treasurer was a matter for the 13 alone. Meetings were to be held monthly, minutes were to be taken and accounts properly kept. At the annual meetings of the societies, the subscribing members were to be presented with an annual report, which was often published in the newspapers, setting out the activities of the society that year, ensuring that the directresses remained accountable to the members for how money was spent.²⁰

In order to operate effectively the societies usually obtained a charter of incorporation from the state legislature that allowed them to overcome the usual problems of coverture for married women.²¹ As an incorporated body, the directresses of benevolent societies had the power to 'sue and be sued, plead and be impleaded ... in all courts and places whatsoever'. This gave them, in effect, legal equality with men; they would be able to operate as well as any man to make contracts with local businesses. While these acts were vital to enable charities to operate smoothly, they also functioned to protect those men who would be dealing with the directresses as contractors, suppliers, and employees, who would be able to sue for debts in the usual way. However, the legislature ensured that debts would be recovered from societies rather than from individuals, making it absolutely clear that the husbands of directresses 'shall not be liable ... for any loss occasioned by the neglect or malfeasance of his wife'.²² It was this entry into

¹⁹ Rule 4, *An Account of the Origin and Progress of the Savannah Free School Society* (New York, 1819), p. 4. For the accounts of the SFA see *CMSA*, 7 January 1811, 17 February 1812; *Savannah Republican*, 6 January 1814, 27 December 1814, 23 December 1815, 31 December 1816, 13 February 1819, and 7 February 1820. For the annual reports of the SFSS see *CMSA*, 3 December 1817, 7 January 1819, 7 January 1820; *Georgian*, 10 January 1821, 15 January 1822, and 29 January 1823.

²⁰ The rules of the School are set out in the 'SFSS Records'.

²¹ Not all state legislatures were willing to grant women this liberty. In Maryland, the Female Humane Association was forced to surrender nominal control of its affairs to a group of nine male trustees, even though the nine female directors did all the actual work. *A Brief Account of the Female Humane Association* (Baltimore, MD, 1803), pp. 4-5.

²² Identical wording was used in the incorporations of the Female Asylum and the Free School. See Section 6 of 'An Act to Incorporate the Female Asylum of Savannah', passed 15 December 1810, and Section 7 of 'An Act of Incorporation of the Savannah Free School Society', passed 19 December 1818. *Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Georgia* (Milledgeville, GA 1810), 60; *Laws of Georgia* (Milledgeville, GA, 1819), p. 110. See also 'An Act to Incorporate the Widow's Society for the Relief of Indigent Widows and Orphans

the public world, one usually reserved for men, that distinguished benevolent women from other elite women in Savannah.

Although female charitable societies had stretched the normal boundaries of public female behaviour, they received widespread support from local men, much of it financial. More than 100 men either donated money or subscribed to the SFSS in 1819, and for a number of years merchant Andrew Low donated children's clothing worth more than \$200 to the SFA.²³ Editorials written by men reveal that they 'admire[d] and approve[d]' of the work of female benevolent societies, while the city council showed their approval by granting public lots to all three female benevolent societies that petitioned for them.²⁴ The charitable work of women in Savannah was seen to be necessary for the peace and order of society, and as such it was praiseworthy.

The ecumenical benevolent society that was popular in the early years of the nineteenth century was not the model followed in the later antebellum period. In November 1843, elite men in Savannah formed the Savannah Port Society aiming 'to furnish seamen with the regular evangelical ministrations of the gospel'.²⁵ A year later they asked women from the eight white Presbyterian, Baptist, Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, and Unitarian congregations in the city to organise fund-raising efforts for the Port Society. The ladies went further than that, forming the Female Seaman's Friend Society (FSFS) 'to maintain a sailor's home in this city and to meliorate the temporal condition and improve the moral and religious character of seamen'.²⁶ In contrast to previous benevolent

in the City of Savannah, passed 25 December 1837, *Laws of Georgia* (Milledgeville, GA, 1837).

²³ 'Account of the Origins and Progress of the Savannah Free School Society', *Savannah Republican*, 6 January 1814, 27 December 1814, 23 December 1815, and 31 December 1816. In 1816 the board of the SFA 'Ordered that the children of the Female Asylum give over the practice of paying Mr. Andrew Low, an annual visit at the New Year, unless he requests it to be done, as some of the members of the board thought it improper as Mr. Low generally made the children a present at that time, and it was thought that it looked like craving Mr. Low's charity.' 'SFA Minutes', 1 February 1816.

²⁴ *Savannah Republican*, 22 January 1803. See also *ibid.*, 3 December 1816. Five aldermen who granted a lot to the Free School in 1818 were also subscribing members. The School was granted a prime site on the corner of Whitaker and Perry Streets. 'City of Savannah, City Council Minutes' (CCM), 6 June 1817, Georgia Historical Society; 23 February, 4 April, 4 May, and 8 June 1818. 'SFSS Minutes', 5 and 30 May 1817. For the SFA petition see CCM, 4 October 1802; for the Widow's Society see *Georgian*, 25 February 1826. CCM, 23 February, 16 March 1826.

²⁵ Constitution, Article 2, 'Minute Book 1 of the Savannah Port Society, 1843-1873', Georgia Historical Society.

²⁶ 'Female Seaman's Friend Society (FSFS) Minutes', 19 December 1844, 'Commonplace Book, 1844-1872', Mrs Valeria G. Burroughs Papers, Duke University Library, Durham,

societies that had been non-sectarian, the reformation of seamen took on an exclusively evangelical Protestant bent that was closely allied to the temperance movement and revivalism.²⁷ While the Port Society paid for a minister to preach regularly at the Bethel Church, the Female Seaman's Friend Society provided much of the funding for a sailors' home that 'would prove a protection from the temptations which beset the sailor's pads'.²⁸ Indeed, one correspondent to a Savannah newspaper understood that 'females of this city' provided the 'main support' for the Mariner's Church as well as the sailors' home by holding an annual fair. The Port Society itself acknowledged that 'these Benefactresses of the cause have kept alive the Mariner's church until this time'.²⁹ While these women were not so very different in terms of social class from their counterparts who managed the SFA, the SFSS, and the Widow's Society, being married to their fair share of merchants, doctors, and planters, for the first time, the ladies were motivated by a specific, rather than a generic, religious agenda, one that excluded the participation of both Catholic and Jewish women.³⁰ Moreover, it is revealing that none of the five women who assumed the offices of the FSFS in 1844 had ever served on the board of a benevolent society before. Indeed more than half of the women who served on the board of managers of the FSFS gave their time exclusively to this society, whereas three-quarters of the directresses of the SFA during the same period also served on the board of at least one other society. Clearly the specifically religious dimension of this society appealed to a different sort of woman than older societies. It must have been extremely gratifying to the religious sensibilities of these women to hear the life-story of one sick sailor in 1851:

He said that he had a pious mother, and that he been religiously educated, but he had not obeyed the voice of his mother and had been drawn into idle company, and that he had sinned grievously, for which he was sorry. He asked me to pray for him, I did so several times, and told him that although he was a great sinner, Christ was a great savior and was willing to forgive him. He said that he knew

North Carolina. For a report on the congregations that sent representatives see *Savannah Morning News*, 26 November 1844.

²⁷ Anne C. Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1980), 130-85, esp. pp. 165-7.

²⁸ 'FSFS Minutes', 19 December 1850.

²⁹ *A Friend of the Family*, 2 March 1850, 18 January 1851. See also *ibid.*, 1 March 1849 and 2 February 1850.

³⁰ For example, the wives of the pastors of the Second Baptist Church and the Independent Presbyterian Church, and the president of the Georgia Railroad Company were directresses of the FSFS.

God was good, but that he deserved no mercy. The next day he became calm, and said that he was not afraid to die. He got better and went to New York. When he left, he said that he was determined to serve God the remainder of his life.³¹

The conversion experience of this man was precisely what motivated the ladies who ran the FSFS. The formation of the Female Seaman's Friend Society was only the start of a trend of increased sectarianism amongst benevolent women. While the FSFS was at least open to all Protestant denominations, the Episcopal Orphans' Home was managed solely by Anglicans. Originally founded at St John's Episcopal Church in 1843 as 'a parochial day school [by] several pious and benevolent ladies connected with the church', by the following year it had taken on boarding responsibilities for 'nine of the poorer scholars'. Furthermore, unlike previous orphanages in Savannah, only Anglican children were eligible since 'none are admitted who do not attend the Sunday school'. The women who managed the school 'hoped that this systematic course of religious education may prove instrumental with the divine blessing, in training many of the young in the way of godliness'.³² In 1854 the Episcopal Orphan's Home was incorporated by the state 'for the purpose of maintaining, instructing, and employing indigent children particularly orphans'.³³ By taking on this role, Episcopal women challenged the deliberately non-denominational monopoly of the SFA and the SFSS.³⁴

The funding for this charitable endeavour came from donations and congregational collections in the two Episcopal churches in the city. On a practical level, the substantial amount of money that Episcopal women took from the pockets of their congregations was effectively income denied to the older benevolent societies. By the early 1850s, the Episcopal Orphans' Home

³¹ 'Annual Report of the Superintendent of the Sailor's Home, Capt. Parker', *Daily Morning News*, 29 March 1852.

³² 'Report of Stephen Elliott, rector of St John's', *Journal of the Proceedings of the 21st Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Georgia* (Savannah, GA, 1843), pp. 18-19; *Journal of the Proceedings of the 22nd Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Georgia* (Athens, GA, 1844), p. 18.

³³ 'An act to incorporate the Orphan's Home of the Protestant Episcopal Church, in Chatham County passed Feb 11, 1854', *Acts of the State of Georgia*, 1853-4.

³⁴ *Journal of the Proceedings of the 22nd Annual Convention*, p. 18. Miss Mary Bowen was the only directress of the Episcopal Orphan's Home to be a directress of the SFA or SFSS. Some other directresses were members of societies helping adults such as the FSFS and the Needle Woman's Friend Society (NWFS). In 1859 the Episcopal Orphan's Home was also permitted to bind children as apprentices until the age of 18. 'An Act to Incorporate the Orphan's Home of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Chatham County and for Other Purposes, Passed December 10, 1859'.

was receiving more than \$1,000 per year from the ladies of Christchurch, and a further \$500 from the ladies of St John's.³⁵ While the effect of these societies on the Female Asylum is hard to gauge, as minutes do not survive after 1843, fundraising would almost certainly have been made more difficult.

This religious exclusivity was continued by the Sisters of Mercy who arrived in Savannah in 1845. Father O'Neil, the Catholic priest who brought the Sisters from Charleston, spoke of 'universal charity' being 'obligatory on all Christians', and the Sisters of Mercy took him at his word.³⁶ Almost immediately after their arrival they founded a Catholic orphanage, St Mary's Home, with liberal support provided by the growing number of wealthy Catholics in the city. Patrick Minchon, for example, bequeathed \$5,000 for Catholic female orphans, and a number of Catholic women organised themselves informally to raise funds for the Home.³⁷ One visitor to Savannah commented that, 'religious bigotry and party animosity were laid aside' where benevolence was concerned, thus 'at the fairs and the picnics which were frequently held ... might be found the Protestant and the Catholic, the dissenting minister and the Catholic priest, the pious matron of the Jewish faith, and the charitable lady of Christian belief'.³⁸ While the citizens of Savannah might well have supported a variety of charitable causes regardless of their own religious affiliation, the activities of the Sisters of Mercy did have an impact on the older female benevolent societies. The amount of money available for benevolence was limited, so the proliferation of societies simply meant that available resources were spread more thinly. The success of the fund-raising efforts of the Sisters of Mercy inevitably meant less money would be donated to the SFA and SFSS, especially by Catholics. More specifically, the educational role taken on by the Catholic orphanage had an immediate impact on the SFSS. In each of the three years following the establishment of St Mary's

³⁵ Christchurch gave \$1057.95 in 1854, \$1,100 in 1855, \$800 in 1856, St John's \$704 in 1854, \$477 in 1855, \$412 in 1856. St John's also formed a Ladies Society for Benevolent Purposes, and raised \$1,490 to assist sufferers of the 1854 yellow fever epidemic. *Journal of the Proceedings of the 32nd Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Georgia* (Macon, GA, 1854), pp. 29, 33; *Journal of the Proceedings of the 33rd Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Georgia* (Macon, GA, 1855), pp. 34, 44; *Journal of the Proceedings of the 34th Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Georgia* (Savannah, GA, 1856) pp. 30, 34.

³⁶ Cited in T. Paul Thigpen, *Aristocracy of the Heart: Catholic Lay Leadership in Savannah, 1820-1870* (PhD diss., Emory University, 1995), p. 139.

³⁷ 'Handwritten History of St. Mary's Home (Catholic Orphanage), Founded June 23, 1845', St Vincent Archives, File Box 7, St Mary's Home, pp. 3-4; 'Receipt Book, June 1845-July 1858', St Vincent's Academy, Savannah, Georgia. Money was being raised for the future Catholic orphanage as early as 1842. *Georgian*, 19 May 1842.

³⁸ Thigpen, *Aristocracy of the Heart*, pp. 140-41.

Home, the SFSS commented on the haemorrhaging of children from its classes to those held by the nuns.³⁹

The response of the older female benevolent societies to what effectively amounted to competition is interesting. Before 1820, the SFA and the SFSS had relied on the contributions of their subscribers and on charity sermons for the bulk of their funding, with smaller amounts being raised by dividends and rents.⁴⁰ However, during the 1820s boards of directresses became increasingly unhappy with these sources of funds, describing them as 'precarious and disagreeable'.⁴¹ Since societies had assumed regular financial commitments in the form of salaries to matrons and teachers, a regular income was vital if the work of each society was to be maintained. By the early 1820s both the SFA and SFSS were experiencing financial difficulties. Facing a deficit of more than a thousand dollars in 1819, the directresses of the SFA went to the city papers to stress 'the urgency of the case' while the directresses of the SFSS appealed to 'the liberality of our citizens' and to 'the generous supporters of the institution' to keep the money flowing. These appeals to the 'benevolence and charity of the community' often resulted in modest increases in income but they were only temporary, and the societies continued to lurch from one financial crisis to the next.⁴² By the mid- to late 1820s, even the charity sermon was no longer the financial fallback it had been a few years previously. The SFA raised only \$380 from a series of charity sermons in 1826, while the Widow's Society managed only \$357 in 1830, only a quarter of what the SFA had collected in 1816 and in 1819.⁴³ In such a climate it is not surprising that the boards of ecumenical benevolent societies increasingly turned to alternative sources of income. In 1824 the board of directresses of the SFSS persuaded the state legislature to entrust to

³⁹ 'SFSS Minutes', November 1845, November 1846, and November 1847. For example there was a Christmas collection for orphans at the Catholic church in 1854, and a fair for the benefit of the male Catholic orphans in April 1855. *Daily Morning News*, 22 December 1854 and 23 April 1855. Similar competition between Catholic and Protestant benevolent societies occurred throughout the Atlantic World. See Priscilla Ferguson Clement, 'Children and Charity: Orphanages in New Orleans, 1817-1914', *Louisiana History*, 27 (1986): pp. 337-51 (341); D. Clayton James, *Antebellum Natchez* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1968), p. 219; Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy*, pp. 139-81; Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*, p. 178.

⁴⁰ For example in 1814, the SFA received \$872 from charity sermons, \$461 from subscriptions, \$213 from bank dividends, and \$150 from rents. *Savannah Republican*, 27 December 1814.

⁴¹ *Georgian*, 9 November 1829.

⁴² *Savannah Republican*, 13 February 1819; 'Fifth Annual Report of the SFSS', *Daily Georgian*, 15 January 1822.

⁴³ *Georgian*, 8 April 1826; 'Treasurer's Accounts, 1830-35', v. 34, Widow's Society Records, Georgia Historical Society.

them the poor school fund of Chatham County, amounting to about \$500 per year. The male trustees of Chatham Academy, which had previously received a portion of this money, protested about what they termed 'an infringement of the vested rights of this institution' but to no avail.⁴⁴ Securing state funding was only the start of a slow and permanent shift in the financing of the Free School, over the coming decades, away from subscriptions and into more reliable methods of funding. In 1833 more than half of the annual income of the SFSS still came from subscriptions and donations, but share purchases through the 1840s and 1850s meant that by 1859 nearly all the annual income came from rents on city lots, interest due on loans and dividends on stock.⁴⁵

The example of the SFSS was followed by the SFA and the Widow's Society. The SFA was 'almost destitute' of funds when it began to hold orphan's fairs in 1829. The immediate success of this event, where the directresses sold cakes and fancy goods to the public, can be seen in the income it produced - more than \$3,500. Determined not to be short of funds again, the board of the SFA purchased their first shares in the Planter's Bank in 1834, and in the future increasingly relied on dividends rather than donations.⁴⁶ After turning away a number of applicants for assistance due to lack of funds, the Widow's Society also chose to invest their money in stocks and shares to provide a steady income. By 1854, the society had \$5,800 invested in shares in the Bank of Georgia, the Planter's Bank, the Marine Bank, the Central Railroad and the South Western Railroad. They also held \$3,000 in Savannah City Bonds, and \$500 in a deposit account. In 1860, the income from these investments alone amounted to \$1,019.28. In electing to secure the financial future of their societies in this way, the directresses had entered fully into the capitalist market place, a place where few women were normally to be found.⁴⁷

Yet non-denominational female benevolent societies continued to be formed in Savannah. The board of the Savannah Clothing and Fuel Society, formed in 1838 to assist 'sick and suffering females and their half famished

⁴⁴ 'An Act to Vest the Poor School Fund in the County of Chatham in the Savannah Free School Society', passed 20 December 1824; 'SFSS Minutes', 1 November 1824, 4 July 1825, and 4 February 1827. 'Minutes of the Chatham Academy, May 8, 1826', Edward Clifford Anderson Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina.

⁴⁵ Annual accounts for 1833 and 1859, 'Account Book 1832-1874', SFSS Records, Georgia Historical Society. For purchases of stocks see the entries for 24 February 1841 (\$909 in Bank of State of Georgia); 10 February 1852 (\$1,032 in Central Rail Road); 19 July 1852 (\$2,475 in Muscogee Rail Road); 15 June 1858 (\$2,040 in South Western Rail Road).

⁴⁶ *Georgian*, 22 April 1828, 16 December 1829. 'SFA Minutes', 7 May 1829 and 5 June 1834.

⁴⁷ 'Minutes', November 1851, February 1854; 'Accounts 1854-59', v. 33; 'Accounts 1859-63', v. 38, Widow's Society Records.

children', was mainly Episcopalian, but a significant minority of directresses were Presbyterian.⁴⁸ Similarly, the Needle Woman's Friend Society, founded in 1849 to provide work for unemployed seamstresses, had an ecumenical board. Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Methodist congregations provided the largest number of directresses, but small numbers of Lutheran, Baptist, Catholic, and Jewish women also served on the board.⁴⁹ However, it is perhaps no coincidence that these societies struggled to obtain sufficient funds in the long term. The board of the Clothing and Fuel Society reported a deficit in 1854, and appealed to the generosity of the 'Christian public' to provide additional funds. Whatever response the ladies had to this plea was clearly limited, since the society was still in arrears four years later.⁵⁰ The Needle Woman's Friend Society had quickly enlisted 300 subscribers to support its endeavour to 'give employment to poor women.'⁵¹ Cloth purchased by, or donated to, the society was made into clothing by unemployed seamstresses and the finished articles sold to the public. Yet, in the decade before the Civil War, despite early descriptions of the society as 'a most praiseworthy enterprise', the directresses fought against the indifference of the public.⁵² Patrons complained about the poor quality of work being completed, and the board was forced to appeal to 'the patience, forbearance and liberality' of the citizenry.⁵³ By 1858 the number of subscribers was less than half the number it had been in 1849 and the society languished with debts of more than \$100.⁵⁴

Although religiously more exclusive than the three oldest female benevolent societies, the FSFS also ran into financial problems in the 1850s. After meeting regularly up to 1852, the minutes show that four years then passed with no activity. The sailor's home apparently continued in operation, but the ladies were simply less involved in the running of it. After meeting again briefly in

⁴⁸ *A Friend of the Family*, 22 January 1851. Of 17 directresses whose religions are known in the 1850s, 11 were Episcopalian, four were Presbyterian, one was Lutheran, and one was Methodist.

⁴⁹ The 35 directresses whose religions are known in the 1850s break down as follows: nine Episcopalian, 10 Presbyterian, nine Methodist, one Lutheran, two Baptist, one Catholic, and three Jewish.

⁵⁰ *Georgian*, 19 January 1854. The deficit was funded by the board of directresses from their own pockets. *Daily Morning News*, 13 February 1858.

⁵¹ *Daily Georgian*, 7 March 1849.

⁵² *A Friend of the Family*, 22 March 1849. See also *Daily Morning News*, 18 March 1854; and Timothy J. Lockley, 'Spheres of Influence: Working Black and White Women in Antebellum Savannah', in Susanna Delfino and Michele Gillespie (eds), *Neither Lady nor Slave: Working Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002), pp. 114–15.

⁵³ *Savannah Morning News*, 3 May 1857.

⁵⁴ *Daily Morning News*, 5 March 1857.

1856 and 1857, no further meetings were held until 1861. The reasons for these gaps are not clear. The ladies told the male managers of the Port Society that they had failed to meet 'from many causes' but did not specify them. Financial problems might have been one of those causes, since the ladies reported that they had been left a legacy of \$4,000 but the executor refused to release the money until the ladies raised a matching sum. In 1860, the managers of the Port Society formally requested that the FSFS relinquish control over the sailor's home to them, indicating that the leading role that women had taken in the reformation of seamen was over.⁵⁵

The struggles of the Needle Woman's Friend Society, the Clothing and Fuel Society, and the FSFS stand in stark contrast to the success of the church-based societies, suggesting that without a firm root in one of the religious denominations of the city, proper funding was increasingly difficult to secure.⁵⁶ Older societies that already had some assets were able to diversify into stocks and shares, but newer societies found it hard to raise the money to purchase such shares in the first place.

For the first 50 years of the nineteenth century benevolence in Savannah was dominated by women. Men did organise charitable societies, indeed the oldest in the city, the Union Society founded in 1750, was managed by men. However, male societies were often mutual associations, where benefits were only open to members and their families.⁵⁷ Only the city's poor-house and hospital brought male managers into contact with the generality of the poor. Female benevolence, by contrast was normally directed outwards, assisting mainly poor women and children. However, in the decade before secession men became more interested in benevolence that was outward looking. In 1854 the Young Men's Benevolent Association, later renamed the Savannah Benevolent Association, was created to provide food and clothing to sick people, principally widows, during the yellow fever epidemic of that year. Of course this society competed with those already in existence but managed by women. Within a month of its first meeting the Savannah Benevolent Association had raised over \$24,000, money that was effectively drained from the coffers of female benevolent societies, such as the Clothing and Fuel Society and the Widow's Society.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ 'SFSS Minutes', March 1861; 'SPS Minutes', 21 March 1860.

⁵⁶ *Daily Georgian*, 8 March 1850; *Savannah Morning News*, 2 March 1858. Subscribers paid one dollar each; in 1858 income from subscribers was \$138.

⁵⁷ The St Andrew's Society (1750), the Savannah Association of Mechanics (1793), the Savannah House Carpenter's Association (1802), and the Hibernian Society (1812) all fall into this category, though some did later adopt a policy of assisting the wider pauper population.

⁵⁸ *The Savannah Benevolent Association* (Savannah, GA, 1896), p. 8.

Not content with appropriating the welfare role of outdoor relief societies, men also began to show an interest in the education of poor children. When Peter Massie entrusted the city council with \$5,000 from his will 'for the education of the poor children of the city of Savannah', one might imagine that the SFSS would have been the logical recipient of the money. Yet, the city council preferred to invest the money in the Central Rail Road and the Savannah Gas and Light Company until they could decide what to do with it. In 1853 the Chatham County School Commissioners proposed using the Massie legacy to pay for two free schools. The city council rejected this, but granted the School Commissioners \$2,000 from general funds to fund the construction of one school on West Broad and Liberty streets. It was not until 1855 that the city finally spent Massie's legacy building the Massie School.⁵⁹ In all these debates about public education, there was no reference at all to the work already being done by the SFSS. It was almost as if the school managed by the ladies of Savannah was invisible, even though it had educated about a hundred children a year free of charge since 1816. By 1858 the city council was supporting the Massie School to the tune of \$3,000 per year, whereas they had never funded the SFSS. Aware of the impact these new schools would have, the directresses of the SFSS suggested that civic money should be divided between the schools, with the SFSS teaching girls, and the new schools teaching boys. This proposal came to nothing, and one year after the Massie School opened, pupil numbers were more than twice those of the Free School.⁶⁰

The new interest taken by men in charitable affairs during the 1850s was not confined to Savannah, and can be explained in two ways. Perhaps men finally realised the importance of the work being done by women to reduce social inequality and social tension. In this sense, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.⁶¹ An alternative interpretation is that men were becoming concerned by the independent operations of benevolent women. The city council, and individual men, apparently did not wish to entrust money to societies over which they had no control, preferring to govern the education and support of the poor themselves. The Chatham County School Commissioners believed the city council to be 'the appointed guardians of the public welfare', while Mayor James P. Screven asserted in 1857 that the education of the poor was the proper

⁵⁹ CCM, 22 July 1852, 27 January, 10 March, 21 April, 5 May 1853; Edward C. Anderson, *Mayor's Annual Report* (Savannah, GA, 1856), pp. 4-5. The school opened on 15 October 1855 and housed 225 pupils, all but 45 of whom did not pay fees.

⁶⁰ 'SFSS Minutes, v. 2, 1832-1856, March 1853.

⁶¹ Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1998), p. 22; Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence*, pp. 98-132; Lebsack, *Free Women of Petersburg*, p. 198.

responsibility of the 'rulers of the city'.⁶² New civic institutions took control and influence away from elite women and passed it to elite men. The fact that female charities located within specific denominations, such as the Catholic orphanage, or the Episcopal Orphan Home, lacked male competitors, is also revealing. Stephanie McCurry has argued that elite men in lowcountry South Carolina believed that denominational female benevolence posed little threat to the social order because it operated within a male dominated superstructure.⁶³ Religious congregations in Savannah, though numerically dominated by women, were always run by elite men. In many churches, control over non-elite men, women, and slaves, was regularly exercised through the medium of the discipline council, where members were held accountable for their behaviour.⁶⁴ As secession loomed, Savannah's ministers and elite men reminded elite women of their place in the social order. Edward Purse, editor of the reform-minded newspaper, *A Friend of the Family*, lauded the domestic sphere as most suited to his mainly female readership, believing that 'the good wife and mother, seated in the centre of her family, is the best jewel in the crown of society'.⁶⁵ Stephen Elliott, Bishop of Georgia, warned that a woman who was 'careful and troubled about many things' was insufficiently concentrating on her church and, more importantly, 'her quiet spirit should be prepared to calm the harassed and wearied mind of her husband'.⁶⁶ Women were meant to be humble, pious, un-demonstrative, and certainly to be discouraged from independent thoughts and actions. It was attitudes such as these that led, in 1859, to the ladies of the

⁶² CCM, April 21, 1853; James P. Screven, *Mayor's Annual Report* (Savannah, GA, 1857), p. 14.

⁶³ Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York, 1997), pp. 188-9.

⁶⁴ For an excellent discussion of the significance of discipline councils see Betty Wood, 'For Their Satisfaction or Redress': African Americans and Church Discipline in the Early South', in Catherine Clinton and Michele Gillespie (eds), *The Devil's Lane: Sex and Race in the Early South* (New York, 1997), pp. 109-23. See also McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*, pp. 178-95; Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1988), p. 78; Janet Cornelius, 'Slave Marriages in a Georgia Congregation', in Orville Vernon Burton and Robert C. McMath (eds), *Class, Conflict and Consensus: Antebellum Southern Community Studies* (Westport, CT, 1985), p. 128; Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1998), pp. 183-206; Timothy J. Lockley, *Lines in the Sand: Race and Class in Lowcountry Georgia* (Athens, GA, 2001), pp. 150-55.

⁶⁵ *A Friend of the Family*, 6 December 1849.

⁶⁶ 'The Busy Woman's Religious Difficulties', in Thomas M. Hanckel, comp., *Sermons by the Right Reverend Stephen Elliott, D.D.* (New York, 1867), pp. 136-7.

First Baptist Church surrendering to male members 'all the spiritual & temporal business of the church'.⁶⁷

The emphasis on denominational control of charities formed in the 1840s and 1850s was therefore an important step. Whereas the first female benevolent societies in Savannah had been careful to retain full control over their affairs, the social position of benevolent women increasingly began to mirror that of their counterparts north of the Savannah River. The Episcopal Orphanage, for instance, was under the titular control of the Bishop of Georgia, Stephen Elliott, even though he did not attend meetings of the board of directresses. Similarly, the Sisters of Mercy were nominally under the supervision of Father O'Neil.⁶⁸ Ecumenical female charities such as the SFA and the SFSS were quasi-autonomous institutions and were therefore much more difficult to control or influence. Consequently, properly funded rivals were established that effectively marginalised independent female charities through competition. The fact that the only female charities left alone by men were religious ones gives us some insights into men's changing perceptions of proper gender roles in the late antebellum South.

This essay has shown that religion was a key motivator for benevolent women in Savannah throughout the antebellum era with personal piety shaping their attempts to reform the lives of the poor and disadvantaged. However, the generic religious idealism of the early period gave way to a much more specific religious agenda after 1830, one that increasingly captured the imagination of the public. Women in Savannah had taken the lead in providing for the poor in the early nineteenth century, but by the 1850s men were seriously challenging this dominance. Older female benevolent societies, while they survived, were noticeably less active, and only narrowly contained religious benevolence was allowed the freedom to flourish. The experience of Savannah's female benevolent societies therefore helps us to understand the broader intertwined relationships among gender, religion, and charity in the antebellum urban South.

⁶⁷ 'Independent Presbyterian Church, Board of Trustees Minutes', 1823-69, 20 and 24 May 1853, Georgia Historical Society; 'First Baptist Church Minutes', 27 January 1859.

⁶⁸ 'History of the Episcopal Orphan's Home', *Savannah Morning News*, 27 March 1921. It was Father O'Neil who thanked the public on behalf of the Sisters for supporting an orphan's fair. *Savannah Republican*, 17 February 1857.

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