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# The Child I've Left Behind

In letters found in the archives of the New York Foundling Hospital: evidence that orphans have always been born more of poverty than of neglect.

By LISA LIPKIN

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*The charity was founded in 1869 in Response to rising infant-mortality rates*

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A mother with a new infant is deserted by her husband. A teenager with her 6-month old son is forced to piece together a dwelling at an abandoned construction site. A woman doesn't have the burial costs for her dying baby. Sound familiar? Although these stories might have been taken from today's newspapers, they are from Manhattan in the 1960's.

New Yorkers like to believe that the city is the worst it's ever been, When the New York Foundling Hospital, one of the first social service agencies in the country to address the needs of

poor women, asked me to write and perform a show documenting its 125-year history, I too imagined an exploration of a gentler city.

I was prepared to go spelunking through old business reports, dusty photos, the usual array of documents that help recreate a history. But hidden among the stacks of papers, in a small room at the Foundling's headquarters at Avenue of the Americas and 16th Street, were five leather-bound albums titled simply, "Letter Left on Babies by Their Mothers." In one, a doctor asks the home administrators, the Sisters of Charity, to care for the newborn baby of a patient who was raped; in another, a police officer decides that a mother is unfit because of her drinking and removes the children from her charge. Objects tumbled from the folds of the letters---a piece of fabric torn from a dress; a ribbon from Ulysses S. Grant's re-election campaign---trinkets that would identify children so that one day their mother's might reclaim them.

Much has changed since the letters made their way to the Foundling Hospital. Foster care has, for the most part, replaced the orphanage; unwed mothers aren't so aggressively stigmatized; members of the clergy and police officers no longer singularly decide the fate of children. But these letters reveal more than the pain of surrendering a child for adoption; they also show that the stories of poor women more than a century later, are still the same.

Dec. 1 1875

Dear Sister,

Alone and deserted, I feel to put my little one with you for a time. I would willingly work and take care of her but no one will have me and her too. All say they would take me if she was 2 or 3 years old, so not knowing what to do with her and not being able to pay her board, I bring her to you knowing you will be as kind to her as many others who are under your care, and I will get work and try hard to be able to relieve you of the care when I can take her to work with me. She is only three weeks old and I have not had her christened or anything.

No one knows how awful it is to separate from their child but a mother but I trust you will be kind and the only consolation I have is if I am spared and nothing prevents and I lead an honest life that the father of us all will permit us to be united.
A MOTHER

*Lisa Lipkin is the storyteller in residence with the Museum of the City of New York*

Brooklyn, Nov. 23, 1869

Dear Sister,

I now sit down to write to you a few lines but I hardly know what to say, for when I inform you that I am the mother of the child left on Thanksgiving night between the hours of 8 and 9 o'clock without even a slip of paper to tell you the name of the child left in your care my heart aches so much, I cannot tell, but I knew that I was leaving her in good hands.

Although I have been unfortunate, I am neither low nor degraded and am in hopes if one day claiming my child. Her name is Jone..born on 5 of October 1869 between the hours of 3 and 4 o'clock in the morning…she had a piece of canton flannel tied around her head and a little blue and white cloud around her feet—and if the prayers of an unfortunate creature like myself will do any good, offered to the mercy of God in heaven—for you know that every night on my bended knees I pay for you. I am very sorry that I having nothing to send you this time but I am in hopes there will be a day when I shall be able to pay you for all your trouble.

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November 1876

Miss Brock,

You can keep the baby or you can put it in the street or not for I will not pay for it for it has no father nor any one to look after it. So you better put it away for I will not pay for it.
Child's name: Alpheus. Left by Father Reilly

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Dear Sisters,

By the love of God be so kind as to take this poor orphan child in and if she should die, please to bury her for me and I will be very happy. You must not think that I have neglected her; I have worked very hard to pay her board but I can't afford to bury her. So, by the love of God, take this little child in. May God Bless you all for your kindness to all the little sufferers. This little child has suffered since she was born and I have paid debts but I have not paid all but I shall.

My husband is dead and I have nobody to help me. Be kind to my little lamb. May the great God receive her into Heaven where she will be loved by God.

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This two Dollars is to have this child christened Willie. Do not be afraid of the sores on its face; it is nothing but a ringworm. You will remember this badge. *(Included with the letter: colorful cloth badge that reads, "General Grant our Next President)*

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Most Holy Redeemer Church

Dec. 10, 1869

Sister Irene, Superioress

Respected Sister,

You would oblige our R.F. Rector Leimgruber in taking the poor child in the Asylum. It has been happily saved from being murdered this morning by his unfortunate mother. She told me that she gives up all claims on it. I gave private baptism to the child.

*Respectfully yours,*
Francis Eberhardt, C.S.S.R

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May 22, 1875

This offspring is the fruit of a brutality on the person of this poor but decent woman and to cover her shame and being too poor to support the children—there are two from her husband—she is obliged to resort to this extreme measure. The child is not yet baptized. *(Day-old infant left by Dr. J.J. Brennan.)*

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The little baby, which was left in the crib on last night, if you for the love of god and his holy mother you will keep it for me I will give anything you require. Her father is a wicked Orangeman. I told him it was dead because I want to have her raised a Roman Catholic and have nursed out. I will pay all the expenses.

Will you, dear Sisters, remember a kind mother's heart? If I do not see her again, I will never do any good on this earth. I work at dress making for a living. My husband gives me but a third of his earnings because I am a Roman Catholic. Write to father Farrell, Barclay Street Church, state circumstances to him. Pray to the Blessed Virgin for me to help me get through.

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July 1870

To the Sisters of the House,

Necessity compels me to part with my darling boy. I leave him, hoping and trusting that you will take good care of him. Will you let some good nurse take charge of him and will you try to find some kind hearted lady to adopt him and love him as her own while he is young that he may never know but what she is his own mother? It would break my heart to have him grow up without a mother to love and care for him. God only knows the bitter anguish of my heart in parting with this little dear; still if it costs me my life I am obliged to give him up.

He is just from the breast, he has been sick with his bowels, they have not been right for a long time. I have cried and worried over him so much that I think my milk hurt him. I think a change of milk with good care will make him well soon. I got these things thinking I could keep him but as I can not they may be of use to you. I shall always take an interest in this Institution.

He is 4 weeks old. Will you please remember his given name and if he is adopted, request that they will not change his name; so that at some future day, if that name should be asked for, you will be able to tell what became of him or where he is. Perhaps you will think me very particular, but if any mother will take it home to her own heart and think how she would feel to have her dear little one torn from her breast, I think they would excuse me.

This is the last time I can speak of him as mine, and if in years to come I could hear that he had a home and kind friends, I could die in peace. On the other hand, if I should never hear, it would haunt the day of my death.

Please excuse all that you think is not right bit for God's sake remember the last request of a heart broken mother.

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St. Patrick's Church
Rectory
263 Mulberry Street

July 15, 1884

Dear Sister,

I have an unfortunate girl in my parish who has given birth to an illegitimate child. She is so circumstanced that it if were known it would greatly injure her and at the same time give rise to a great deal of scandal among her friends. She is truly repentant and has brought the child to me to be baptized. (Its name is Louis.)

I therefore request of you the favor to receive the child in the asylum and free her from the burden which she has been so unfortunate to bring upon herself. Greatly oblige.

*Yours respectfully,*
REV. L.A.MAZZIATA

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Police Department of the City of New York
Precinct No. 20

Aug. 5, 1872

To the Superior of the Foundling Hospital:

We have arrested a woman for intoxication and vagrancy at 11this PM. She has this infant, about three weeks old, she wanted to destroy it. So it is not proper to leave it in her charge and even if she were sober, she is not in a fit state to take care of it.

The child will not live if it does not have nourishment. If you will take care of it, also the older one until tomorrow, I will then have them sent to the Commissioners of Public Charities.

We have tried to get some of her people to take care of this infant. They all refuse. I do not know what else to do with these children then to leave them in your kind protection for this night and by so doing very much oblige.

*Yours Respectfully,*
CHARLES W. COFFRY,
CAPT.

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St. Patrick's Cathedral
New York
Aug. 28, 1875

Sister Irene,

The child in question is indeed an object of charity. The mother is in danger of death, is but 15 years of age and without means of providing for the child. The child has been baptized in this church.

*Yours in Christo,*
REV. WILLIAM HOGAN