

Records of the Board of Commissioners of the Charleston Orphan House, 1800-1967

Descriptive Summary

Title and Dates:

Records of the Board of Commissioners of the Charleston Orphan House, 1800-1967

Creators:

Board of Commissioners of the Charleston Orphan House

Quantity:

2 cubic ft.

Forms of Material:

Correspondence, pamphlets, reports, manuals, resolutions, and contracts

Processed by:

Rebecca L. Schultz, 2020

Location

AR-B-028 and AR-OS-031

Series List

- I. Correspondence
- II. Reports and Publications

Abstract

The Records of the Board of Commissioners of the Charleston Orphan House date from 1800 to 1967. The material consists of correspondence between City officials and the commissioners, along with contracts, reports, resolutions, and publications produced by the board. These records document the City's efforts to provide a safety net to Charleston's most vulnerable residents.

Background

When the South Carolina State Legislature passed an Act of Incorporation for the City of Charleston, one of the duties assumed by the intendant and City Council was care of the poor. Prior to that, local parishes held responsibility for the care of the poor and indigent, including orphans or children whose parents could not support them. For infants and very young children, parishes hired wet nurses or gave parents the assistance

they needed until the child was of an age to be educated or hired as an apprentice. Parishes provided children an education through a parish school or private schools where they typically lived with their teacher. At the appropriate age (usually between six and ten) a child would take an apprenticeship with a local artisan or skilled laborer.¹

The City of Charleston initially followed a similar path with the use of hired teachers and nurses prior to a child becoming an apprentice. By 1790, however, City leaders sought to lower operating expenses by establishing a consolidated facility where the children (excluding infants) could learn and live together under one roof. The ordinance “for the establishment of an Orphan-House for the purpose of supporting and educating poor orphan children, and those of poor distressed and disabled parents” created a nine-member Board of Commissioners of the Orphan House (this number was later increased to twelve) to manage administrative matters and oversee the children’s care. The Charleston Orphan House, designed by Thomas Bennett, Sr., opened its doors in 1794 on Calhoun Street between Saint Philip and King streets becoming the first municipal orphanage in the United States.²

From its inception, the Orphan House served as an important symbol of community and solidarity for Charleston’s white residents. In many ways, municipal institutions such as the Orphan House and Poor House served as a means of solidifying the racial divide by separating poor whites from free African Americans. The commissioners firmly turned away any foundling suspected of being of African American descent. Moreover, the evidentiary record shows a marked concern for white children housed by their desperate parents in the care of African Americans. Community leaders viewed any social mixing between the races as a threat to white supremacy and sought to stamp it out wherever it occurred.³

The Charleston Orphan House remained at its Calhoun Street location for 157 years, with the exception of a two-year period during the Civil War when the children resided in Orangeburg. In the 1940s, the Board of Commissioners expressed concern over the condition of the Orphan House. They requested the Child Welfare League of America to conduct a survey of the institution with an eye toward bringing the orphanage in step with prevailing standards. Citing inadequate living quarters and “lack of a home-like atmosphere,” the League recommended the advent of a cottage system “far enough from the city so that children could be exposed to a semi-rural life.”⁴

In July 1949, the City of Charleston set plans in motion for the new institution by purchasing a 37-acre tract of land in the Liberty Homes area of North Charleston (formerly Oak Grove Plantation). Plans to build the new orphanage, however, depended on sale of the old Orphan House. The City could not obtain its original asking price of \$500,000 and had to settle for the offer of Sears Roebuck and Co. of \$350,200. Architects Halsey and Cummings designed the new facility, named Oak Grove, with Charleston Constructors acting as contractor. On 6 September 1951, Mayor Morrison and Board of Commissioners of the Orphan House held closing exercises at the soon-to-be demolished Calhoun Street Orphan House followed by the official

¹ Joyner, Judith R., *Beginnings: Education in Colonial South Carolina*, (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1985), 34-36.

² Murray, John E., *The Charleston Orphan House: Children’s Lives in the First Public Orphanage*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 13-18.

³ Bellows, Barbara L., *Benevolence Among Slaveholders: Assisting the Poor in Charleston, 1670-1860*, (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University, 1993), 121-123; 135-137.

⁴ Child Welfare League of America, Inc. “Report of Survey of the Charleston Orphan House,” (unpublished manuscript, January 1948), typescript, 2; 82-100.

dedication of the Oak Grove home. The City of Charleston relinquished its authority over Oak Grove in 1978 to the private, non-profit Carolina Youth Development Center.⁵

Scope and Content Note

The collection consists of two separate series based on the type of material. The first series contains correspondence arranged chronologically. The second series contains reports and publications arranged alphabetically. The City transferred the majority of its Orphan House Records to the Charleston County Public Library in 2002 to facilitate research. The material in this collection is that which the City retained as it contained correspondence between City Council and the Commissioners of the Orphan House or was a report presented to City Council. Subjects of mention include building improvements, expenses, food supply, requests for the admission of children, and race-related issues.

Related Material

Butler, Nic. *Records: Commissioners of the Orphan House, 1790-1959*. [Charleston, S.C.: s.n., 2013]. Charleston County Public Library: The Charleston Archive. Retrieved <https://www.ccpl.org/finding-aids-charleston-archive>.

Charleston Orphan House and Oak Grove Resident Files, *ca.* 1911-1969. City of Charleston Records Center. [Charleston, S.C.]. Please note that access to these files is restricted until the records reach seventy-five years of age.

Folder List

Box Folder

Correspondence, 1800-1920

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| 1 | 1 | Charleston Orphan House Correspondence, 1800-1816: correspondence re: grounds improvements, orphan admission requests, anniversary celebration |
| | 2 | Charleston Orphan House Correspondence, 1817-1820: correspondence re: building and grounds improvements |

⁵ "Statement in Re: Sale of Charleston Orphan House Property, 160 Calhoun Street, and Construction of New Orphan House as of February 18, 1852," (unpublished manuscript, n.d.), typescript. Cauthen, Jennings, "Realty Exchange Reports No Bids For Charleston Orphan House Land," *The Charleston Evening Post* (Charleston, South Carolina), 20 October 1949: 2. "Ancient City Orphan House to be Closed at Ceremony Today," *Charleston News and Courier* (Charleston, South Carolina), 6 September 1951: 12.

Box	Folder	
1	3	Charleston Orphan House Correspondence, 1821-1824: correspondence re: building improvements, City Bake House, personnel
	4	Charleston Orphan House Correspondence, 1825-1829: correspondence re: bread supply, orphan admission requests, grounds improvements
	5	Charleston Orphan House Correspondence, 1830-1832: correspondence re: repair of baths, orphan admission requests, bread supply
	6	Charleston Orphan House Correspondence, 1833-1837: correspondence re: staff salaries, age limit of children, orphan admission request, supplies
	7	Charleston Orphan House Correspondence, 1838-1839: correspondence re: grounds improvements, High School of Charleston, removal of child to the Poor House
	8	Charleston Orphan House Correspondence, 1840-1849: correspondence re: Orphan House fund, education
	9	Charleston Orphan House Correspondence, 1850-1859: correspondence re: Charleston High School, African American infant, staff salaries, property sale, contracts
	10	Charleston Orphan House Correspondence, 1860-1865: correspondence re: property donation, staff salaries, orphan admission request
	11	Charleston Orphan House Correspondence, 1866-1869: correspondence re: equipment, staff salaries, orphan admission request, disabled orphan
	12	Charleston Orphan House Correspondence, 1871-1875: correspondence re: orphan admission requests, request of German Church to use Orphan House drain, Dr. William H. Huger
	13	Charleston Orphan House Correspondence, 1876-1879: correspondence re: orphan admission requests, building repairs
	14	Charleston Orphan House Correspondence, 1880-1889: correspondence re: budget, orphan admission requests
	15	Charleston Orphan House Correspondence, 1890-1920: correspondence re: Dr. T. Grange Simons
2	OS-1	Charleston Orphan House Correspondence, Oversized, 1800-1809: papers re: donations, Orphan House wall, rations, cultivation of garden

Box Folder

- 2 OS-2 Charleston Orphan House Correspondence, Oversized, 1810-1815: papers re: grounds improvements, slave sale and purchase, food quality, education, South Carolina College, Charles Kempmier
- OS-3 Charleston Orphan House Correspondence, Oversized, 1816-1819: papers re: equipment purchase, slave purchase, orphaned infant, building repairs, grounds improvements
- OS-4 Charleston Orphan House Correspondence, Oversized, 1820-1825: papers re: bath installation, marble tablet for chapel, hospital schoolhouse, orphaned infant
- OS-5 Charleston Orphan House Correspondence, Oversized, 1826-1829: papers re: expenses, food quality, personnel
- OS-6 Charleston Orphan House Correspondence, Oversized, 1830-1832: papers re: slave sales, expenses, slave labor, building repairs, food quality
- OS-7 Charleston Orphan House Correspondence, Oversized, 1833-1837: papers re: expenses, removal of white child from the care of an African American woman
- OS-8 Charleston Orphan House Correspondence, Oversized, 1838-1839: papers re: building repairs, orphan admission requests, expenses, financial irregularities
- OS-9 Charleston Orphan House Correspondence, Oversized, 1840-1849: papers re: expenses, orphan admission requests, fireplaces and use of coal
- OS-10 Charleston Orphan House Correspondence, Oversized, 1850-1859: papers re: apprenticeships, personnel, building repairs, statue
- OS-11 Charleston Orphan House Correspondence, Oversized, 1860-1888: papers re: infant abandoned at church house of African American family

Reports and Publications, 1848-1967

- 1 16 By-Laws of the Charleston Orphan House, 1861
- 17 Charleston Orphan House Commissioners' Annual Report, 1881 (2 copies)
- 18 Charleston Orphan House Commissioners' Annual Report, 1883
- 19-21 Charleston Orphan House Commissioners' Annual Reports, 1886-1888
- 22-24 Charleston Orphan House Commissioners' Annual Reports, 1894-1896

Box Folder

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|---|-------|---|
| 1 | 25-32 | Charleston Orphan House Commissioners' Annual Reports, 1902-1909 |
| | 33 | Charleston Orphan House Commissioners' Annual Report, 1911 |
| | 34-35 | Charleston Orphan House Commissioners' Annual Reports, 1914-1915 |
| | 36 | Annual Report of the Charleston Orphan House Board of Commissioners, 1922 |
| | 37 | Monthly Report of the Charleston Orphan House, July-December 1948 |
| | 38 | Oak Grove Board of Commissioners (Charleston Orphan House), Annual Reports, 1966-1972 |
| | 39 | Oak Grove (Charleston Orphan House) Commission Manual, 1967 |
| | 40 | Report of the Study of the Charleston Orphan House, Oak Grove, for Reaccreditation, Child Welfare League of America, 1964 |
| | 41 | Report of the Survey of Charleston Orphan House, Child Welfare League of America, 1948 |