

# The Raleigh Female Benevolent Society

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY L. MAREN WOOD

*Revised Constitution and By-Laws of the Raleigh Female Benevolent Society, Adopted July 23d, 1823. With the Reports of the Society, from Its Commencement* (Raleigh: Printed by J. Gales & Son, 1828), pp. 3–4 and 9–13.

## As you read...

### CHARITABLE SOCIETIES

The Raleigh Female Benevolent Society was formed 1821 by a group of Raleigh women to help poor women and children by providing them with jobs and education. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Americans frequently formed “societies” or associations to reform or improve their communities or to provide some public benefit. Visitors from Europe sometimes commented that these associations.

Public associations had traditionally been the work of men, but increasingly in the nineteenth century, charitable societies were organized and run by women. Like Dorthea Dix, the middle-class white women who managed charitable or “benevolent” societies were engaged in public work that was considered an extension of women’s “natural” role in the home. By teaching and caring for the poor, women could contribute to the greater good while still doing the same kinds of work they performed as wives and mothers.

If you look closely at the Benevolent Society’s report, though, you can see that it was in fact an elaborate business run and organized by women. These women were well organized, with managers, “directresses,” and a treasurer; they created job programs and oversaw the manufacture and sale of clothing; and they invested the profits back into the Society. The managers were also in charge of recruiting new members, women to work in the shops, and teachers to tutor the poor children. Charitable societies didn’t help only poor women — it gave middle-class women, too, the opportunity to develop new skills.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What were the stated goals of the Benevolent Society? What assumptions do these goals reflect about American society and about the needs of the poor?
2. What did the managers believe were the benefits of teaching poor children?
3. How did the Society determine which women would receive charity? How did they evaluate potential recipients of charity? What behavior were they looking for in the women who received charity?

4. Why do you think the women of the Society spoke of poor people as “sinners” who needed to repent and show contrition? Do you think poor people would have shared this view of their situation?
5. What words does this report use to describe the women who received charity? What impression do the words give of those women? How did they way they discussed poor women and children help the Society achieve its goals?

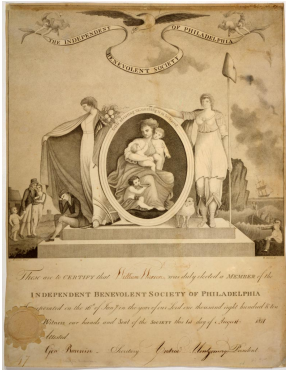


Figure 1. A membership certificate for a benevolent society in Philadelphia, 1814.

## Constitution.

ARTICLE I. This Society shall be located in Raleigh, and shall be called “The Raleigh Female Benevolent Society.”

ART. II. The object of this Society shall be to raise a fund to be applied to the following purposes; to the relief of aged widows and other distressed females<sup>1</sup> who may be considered fit objects of charity; to provide employment to such females as are able and willing to work, and who cannot meet with employers<sup>2</sup>; to give articles of cloathing<sup>3</sup> to orphans and other destitute children; to promote the education of poor children, and cause them to be instructed in some of the most useful domestic employments<sup>4</sup>; to promote order and industry amongst the poorer classes of society<sup>5</sup>, and to discourage idleness and vice as far as practicable.

ART. III. Any female paying one dollar and continuing to pay this annual subscription regularly, shall be considered a member<sup>6</sup>: ten dollars paid, to constitute a member for life--no member to withdraw from the Society without giving notice in writing, to the Board of Directors, three months previous to an annual meeting.

ART. IV. On every anniversary of the establishment of the Raleigh Female Benevolent Society, a Sermon shall be preached by some Minister selected for that purpose, and a collection then made in aid of the funds of the Society.

ART. V. The business of the Society shall be managed by a Board of Directors, consisting of twenty Managers, of which the First Directress, Second Directress, Treasurer, and Secretary, shall be Members; the whole to be elected by ballot annually, on the Monday succeeding the annual Sermon.

ART. VI. Whenever the funds of the Society will permit, a suitable person shall be chosen, (and a reasonable compensation allowed for her services,) to teach such children as are destitute of friends, (or other necessitous children whose parents are desirous that they should receive instruction) useful and domestic employments, reading, &c.

ART. VII. Any five Managers, with the First or Second Directress, shall form a quorum for the transaction of the ordinary business of the Society.

ART. VIII. The general Board shall meet monthly, on the last Monday in the month, at 10 o'clock, A. M.

ART. IX. It shall be the duty of the First Directress, and in her absence of the Second, to preside in all meetings, give the casting vote in all balloting, to receive and decide on all recommendations, and to regulate all disbursements.

ART. X. The Secretary shall be required to keep a record of the proceedings of the Society at its annual meetings, (and of the Board at their several meetings) in a book provided for the purpose.

ART. XI. It shall be required of the Treasurer to keep a regular account of all expences and disbursements; to make Reports to the Board when called for, and to furnish Annual Reports. No money to be paid by the Treasurer, but under a warrant signed by the First or Second Directress.

## REPORT Of the Managers and Treasurer, read at the Annual Meeting, July 28th, 1823.

Three years have now elapsed since the formation of this Society, and its plan has been tested by the beneficial result of its operations. Let not those whom science has enlightened, or who are raised by wealth above the humble recipients of their bounty, disdain the “simple annals of the poor,” or turn a deaf ear to their claims.

The Managers, in making their annual Report<sup>7</sup>, trust that no one will impute to them ostentatious motives in the details which they deem it their duty to lay before the public, or in persisting in the farther prosecution of a plan which has for its objects the benefit of a necessitous portion of the community, amidst which they live. Let not the coldly cautious say, that this “labor of love is unavailing,” for the Managers gratefully acknowledge, that through the blessings of Providence, much good has been done by the means afforded them.

The Managers beg leave, through this medium, to state the real and regular objects of the bounty of this Institution, whose claims none can do away, for they are imperious, and merit to be heard.

Aged Females<sup>8</sup>, some of whom are advanced to that period of existence when the “years are drawn high” in which life has no joys, “for they have no pleasure in them.” To age, and consequent infirmity, that relief has been extended, which its desolate condition required from the hands of benevolence. Without the means of support, without friends, surely the aged have a sacred claim upon charity. To use the words of a pious writer on this subject. “They are like the sea-weed, floating, though fixed on the bottom of the ocean, too loose to sink, too fast to be removed, until the hand of time plucks them up by the roots, and casts them on the shores of eternity.”

2dly. The Widow’s weeping claim all will allow who feel for suffering humanity. Is there any who will disallow it? For few there are, who, in themselves or friends, have not had cause to sympathise with the widow and the fatherless. He who was her earthly stay, is gone, and she is left to the world’s cold charities. Perhaps sickness is added to penury, and it may be, that a numerous offspring look up to her for bread. To these unfortunates, the hand of benevolence cannot fail to be extended. They are relieved from present want: are furnished with employment; and their children “are snatched as brands from the burning.” Perhaps the good effects do not stop here, for so mercifully is the cup of life mingled, that the sufferings, bodily and mental, which the bereaved widow has endured, have been the means of bringing her to the Throne of Grace. where, throwing her wants, her cares, her expectations upon God, she has trusted in his mercy to inspire the hearts of her fellow-mortals to relieve her. May the means never be wanting to assist such objects of benevolence.

3dly. Indigent Females, who have families, and who are compelled to labor hard for subsistence. These have been furnished with employment, and promptly paid for their services. and thereby enabled to assist their husbands in the performance of a sacred duty. Too frequently it happens, that the companions of these necessitous females lay not their hands to the laboring oar, or perhaps their united exertions may not be adequate to provide the positive necessaries of life.<sup>9</sup> Let those who are surrounded by the comforts, nay, luxuries of life, enter into the “cheerless hut of poverty,” and they cannot then withhold their mite from a Society calculated to alleviate the difficulties of these children of calamity.

The Education of Poor Children is a very important object with this Society. This branch of it has already produced good fruits, where all before was barren and unprofitable. To the children themselves, the advantages are incalculable, and the community will be fully remunerated for its charitable contributions by the improved morals, industrious habits, and regular conduct of these youthful objects of benevolence. A considerable number of children have been taught useful employments, and have been instructed in the common rudiments of learning. They have been taught what will be of advantage to them in time, and still more precious lessons which will point the way to eternity! An able and efficient instructress has been engaged, on the resignation of the one heretofore employed, and the Managers trust, that her knowledge and care will be advantageously exerted in the situation she has accepted. Still further to promote this plan, so replete with importance to the rising generation, an article has been added to the By-Laws, which imposes on the Managers the duty of visiting the School weekly in rotation, to mark the progress of the children in work and in scholastic and religious knowledge, and to report thereon. Many children who have received the first rudiments of education from charity, have become “shining lights” in the world, both for talents and piety. The Managers dwell with peculiar feeling on this branch of their subject, hoping that their exertions, “like bread cast on the waters, will return after many days,” and that the children’s children, of the rising generation, may find blessings in the opportunities thus afforded. It is true the good wishes of the Managers are circumscribed by their funds, but the seed is sown, and they trust to Providence for its increase. The hearts of parents must feel for these objects of attention, and surely a blessing will rest upon the endeavours to bring innocent beings from the “miry clay” of ignorance to the open path of knowledge. The Saviour of mankind<sup>10</sup> disdained not these tender objects, for “he took them in his arms and blessed them.”

It has been observed of this Society, as of others constructed on a similar plan, that the Managers ought to discriminate, so as to bestow the largest portion of their favor on the most deserving.<sup>11</sup> To this they can only answer, that the most deserving may not be the most necessitous and although evil may previously have been committed, yet who shall say what has been resisted. The Managers have the happiness to believe, that some have embraced habits of industry, which this Society has furnished them with the means of acquiring, who before trod the path which leads to destruction. They had erred, and were conscious of it, and have sought a refuge from guilt and woe, in constant employment and reformed habits. They have wept in contrition, and have exulted in the means of returning from the now detested paths in which they formerly walked. Let not this be deemed obtrusive, nor let the virtuous shrink from contemplating the present, and reflecting on the past situation of these unfortunate beings. Perhaps no mother’s precepts or example taught them the way of truth — no “Benevolent Society” supplied the place of maternal care, and

thus they “erred and were deceived.” Let it ever be remembered who has said, that “there is more joy in Heaven, over one sinner that repenteth, than over ninety and nine just persons.”<sup>12</sup>

The following is the Treasurer’s Report, and a statement of work done during the past year, and of articles still on hand. Until these can be disposed of or until the dividend on their Stock becomes due, the Managers, as will be seen, have no funds at their disposal. The principal of the Bank Stock they wish to reserve untouched, lest at any time their resources should fail, for want of charitable contributions; this they hope will not happen, where the general situation of the citizens is such as to permit the exercise of benevolence.

**TREASURER’S REPORT.**

The Raleigh Female Benevolent Society in account with C.A. Devereux, Treas’r.

DR.		CR.	
To money left in the Treasury at the last annual meeting,	\$4 92	By cash paid for raw materials,	\$45 37¼
		By cash paid for Spinning,	240.83¼
Annual subscriptions,	92	By cash paid for Weaving Cloth & trimming,	112 74
Donations,	55		
Collection in Church,	31 40	By cash paid for Knitting,	66 80
Dividend on Bank Stock,	32	By cash paid for Sewing,	29 31½
Fines,	2	By cash paid for Salary of Schoolmistress,	181 25
Articles sold, (the work of the Managers and of the beneficiaries of the Society,)	623	By cash paid for Repairing School house,	34 20
Premium from the Agricultural Society of North-Carolina on a piece of Linen Diaper,	10	Articles purchased for the purposes of the Society, and donations to the indigent, amounting to	146 40¼
	\$850 33		\$856 91¼
		Expended beyond the funds received	6 58¼
			\$850 33

## MANGERS' REPORT.

The Society has received in donations 50 lbs. of wool, and 40 lbs. of Cotton, and there has been manufactured, under the direction of the Managers, six hundred and seventy-eight yards of Cloth, which has been made up in the following articles:

- 2 suits Bed Curtains.
- 21 Table Cloths.
- 26 Toilet Cloths<sup>13</sup>.
- 30 Napkins.
- 7 Coats and Vests.
- 164 pair Stockings and Socks, (Knit by the Poor of the City.)
- 564 yards Curtain Trimming.
- 80 Shirts made by the Charity Scholars
- 219 yards of Cloth, (Now on hand not made up.)
- 1 suit Bed Curtains.
- 18 Counterpanes<sup>14</sup>.
- 4 Table Cloths.
- 9 Toilets.
- 6 pair Pantaloon<sup>15</sup>.
- 5 Vests.
- 20 Shirts.
- 37 pair of Stockings.
- 69 pair Socks.
- 38 pounds of Cotton Yarn.
- 15 pounds of Knitting, Yarn & Cotton.
- 2 Bed Quilts.
- 145 yards Curtain Trimming, and other smaller articles.

Note. — It will be observed by the Treasurer's Report that the Managers have expended \$6 58¼ more money than received; which is now due the Treasurer. There are some debts unpaid, which will more than balance what is owing by the Society.

Having thus presented a detailed view of the objects and the operations of the Society, the Managers would be happy to add, that their resources were commensurate with the claims on the Institution. It will be seen by the Treasurer's Report, that this is not the case, and that in consequence of the work on hand, they have been compelled in some instances, to withhold employment. Most earnestly and respectfully do they solicit their fellow-citizens to aid them in the business before them; their time, their attention, they will cheerfully give, trusting to others to share with them the burthen of pecuniary contribution necessary to render their endeavors fruitful.

The Managers can make no more powerful appeal to the generous feelings of the benevolent, than is presented in this simple statement of the objects and the labours of the Society. They would fain keep alive the hallowed flame which burns on the altar of Christian benevolence, and intreat those around them to aid in sustaining the brightness of its blaze.

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## On the web

### Charities in North Carolina

[http://www.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/SouthernCharitiesProject/state\\_northcarolina.htm](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/SouthernCharitiesProject/state_northcarolina.htm)

The Southern Charities Project provides this list of 16 antebellum charitable societies in North Carolina.

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## Notes

1. “Distressed females” were women who found themselves in dire economic situations for various reasons — orphaned teenaged girls or women who had been abandoned by their husbands.
2. Few jobs were open to women in the nineteenth century. In the North, they could work as servants, but only if they did not have children, because domestic servants lived in the homes of their employers. (In the South, where the wealthy could own slaves, there was no market for white servants.) Some women worked as farm laborers but were paid less than men. A woman might also work as a seamstress, laundress, or occasionally a shop keeper, but these professions required money for supplies and rent. Poor women, in particular, had few opportunities to support themselves and their children.
3. Clothing. At this time *clothing* and *clothes* were often spelled *cloathing* and *cloathes* (or *cloaths*). Confusingly, though, the word *cloths* is spelled *cloaths* later in this report. You can usually tell the meaning from context, though.
4. The girls attending the Benevolent Society school would have been taught reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also the skills they would need to find jobs and support themselves. The curriculum would have also emphasized Christianity in an attempt to instill in the girls the values of the women who formed the Benevolent society.
5. Many middle-class reformers assumed that poor people were poor because they were lazy. In fact, as we’ve seen, the poor had few opportunities to improve their situation, whether through education or employment. The believe that the poor were simply lazy or immoral masked real social and economic inequalities in American society.
6. By implementing a membership fee, the Society not only raised funds for the poor; it also limited membership to women with some money and therefore social standing in the community.
7. At this time, it was considered indecent for women to publish, just as it was for them to speak publicly. One of the reasons why the Society’s managers were apologizing or explaining their motives for writing this report was to reassure their readers that the women were not seeking public attention for themselves. The women were, instead, trying to show the success of their charity and to bring attention to the plight of poor women and children.
8. According the the Managers, elderly women without friends or family need charity because otherwise they suffer in dismal conditions without any hope of relief.

9. According to the Society, these women's husbands have refused to work and the family is therefore destitute.
10. Jesus Christ. By invoking Christian teachings, these women are justifying the role they've taken — suggesting that although they have stepped out of the home and are engaged in public acts of charity, they are only doing as Jesus Christ would have done.
11. Other benevolent societies were more selective about the people they assisted. Some societies denied a person charity if he or she was living an immoral life, perhaps drinking or living promiscuously. The managers of the Raleigh Female Benevolent Society insist that they do not want to judge people based on their past actions and that anyone could reform or repent.
12. The words of Jesus from the Bible, Luke 15: 1–4 (see <http://www.learnnc.org><http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%2015;&version=9>).
13. *Toilet* in the nineteenth century referred to grooming, washing, and dressing. Toilet clothes would have been similar to wash cloths or face cloths.
14. Counterpane is a bedspread, usually decorative.
15. Pantaloons were loose trousers or pants worn by women under their skirts.

## About the author

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### Figure 1 (page 2)

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