RELIGION TO THE RESCUE: 
THE RETREAT, 1869–1936

She often expressed her gratitude to God that she was permitted to come to the Retreat—that here she had learned her way to Heaven. . . . Her delight was in having texts of Scriptures read . . . and in prayer by Christian friends who knelt at her bedside. Her end was perfect peace through Christ. 
Earnest Worker, July 1874

The Retreat was to be the way to Heaven for Cleveland’s fallen women. Its well-to-do founders shared the contemporary view that a woman pregnant but not married had fallen from the grace of God and polite society. They also believed, however, that fallen women could be redeemed by conversion to Christ and by the cultivation of domestic skills and virtues within that most female of institutions, the home. The Retreat closed in 1936, a victim of the Great Depression, but its mission and strategies were carried on through the 1980s by the city’s remaining homes for unwed mothers.

Like many late nineteenth-century social welfare institutions, particularly those that cared for children, the Retreat was a sectarian institution. Unlike sectarian child-care facilities, the Retreat and other maternity homes remained privately funded, committed to religious goals, institutionalization, and women’s work.

PROTESTANT CHURCHES AND SOCIAL WELFARE INSTITUTIONS

Churches acted as social welfare agencies in nineteenth-century cities for both religious and secular reasons. Conversion was a key strategy in their efforts to save the souls and bodies of those they served.
RELIGION TO THE RESCUE

The traditional belief that Christians have a responsibility to care for the less fortunate gained new energy in the nineteenth century. The religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening prompted a burst of activism and perfectionism that infused efforts to ameliorate the lot of the urban poor as well as a multitude of antebellum reforms such as temperance, utopian community-building, and abolitionism. The unwillingness or inability of local governments to provide adequately for the needy also encouraged churches and church-related organizations to assume responsibility for dependent people when cities denied or cut back on aid.1

Protestant welfare activities were also energized by lively competition among denominations and particularly by rivalry with the Catholic church. As German and Irish Catholics arrived in American cities by the hundreds of thousands in mid-century, long-standing animosities surfaced in the “Protestant crusades” of church-burnings, scurrilous anti-Catholic literature, and Know-Nothing political machinations. Less dramatic and more constructive were Protestant efforts to provide for the impoverished of their denominations.2

Although temporarily diverted from the cities to the battlefields of the Civil War, crusading Protestantism enjoyed a vigorous rebirth in the postwar years, “the great age for American Protestant missions.”3 Like the secular state, churches identified Protestant Christianity with their own ethnocentric and class-bound definition of civilization and felt a moral obligation to spread the blessings of both to the heathen. The foreign mission movement sought to evangelize the heathen of Asia and India, and the equally vigorous home mission movement tackled the heathen of southeastern Europe—Jews, Catholics, and other unbelievers—who poured into American ports and cities by the millions in the late nineteenth century.

At the heart of this evangelical Protestantism lay its emotional and intellectual commitment to the individual’s conversion to Christ, which would bring release from the sin of this world and the promise of salvation in the next. In the 1880s and 1890s, the powerful preachers of this gospel included the Young Men’s Christian Association, which proselytized on street corners and college campuses, and the revivalist Dwight L. Moody, who was converted by the YMCA and then began a hugely successful ministry preaching the “simple old-time Gospel of salvation through rebirth in Christ.” Moody inspired the formation in 1888 of the Student Volunteer Movement of college students, the leaders of evangelical Protestantism for the next decades whose motto was “the evangelization of the world in this generation.”4

Evangelicalism had important social welfare repercussions. For Americans who steadfastly believed that poverty resulted from an indi-
individual’s lapse from grace, religious conversion remained a logical solution to dependence. Efforts to provide social services were always accompanied by efforts to proselytize. Dozens of charity groups such as the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor in New York distributed religious tracts along with food and fuel.

Conversion was also a central strategy of caretaker institutions, including those for children, most of which were established by religious organizations. Because public institutions such as the Cleveland Infirmary had a strongly Protestant aura, Catholics founded dozens of childcare institutions before the 1880s. The Cleveland Catholic Diocese opened the city’s first orphanage, St. Mary’s Female Asylum, in 1851, and the diocese built two more orphanages by the mid-1870s.

Cleveland Protestants kept pace. Members of the First Presbyterian Church founded the Protestant Orphan Asylum in 1852. In 1864 the first Methodist orphanage in the United States opened in nearby Berea. In 1869 the Independent Order of B’nai B’rith established the Jewish Orphan Asylum for the children of Jewish Civil War veterans. In these facilities religious services and Bible classes were as mandatory as instruction in carpentry for boys or sewing for girls. Lengthy stays, sometimes four to five years in the Catholic institutions and eight to nine years in the Jewish asylum, acknowledged both the sustained poverty of the children’s parents (most “orphans” had at least one parent) and the difficulties of achieving the desired religious and moral regeneration.

“Women’s Work for Women”

Embarking on missions of their own, Protestant women established separate female institutions that became “women’s work for women.”

Nineteenth-century religion was regarded particularly as women’s sphere, and church-related benevolent activities were often explicitly gender-linked. Women constituted the majority of Protestant church members, their numbers added to by each of the century’s great revivals. Recognizing and reinforcing this, prescriptive literature “insisted that the ‘true woman’s’ very nature was pious; . . . religiosity was synonymous with femininity.” Easily converted herself, the evangelical Protestant woman had a responsibility to convert others. Her most acceptable ministry lay within her own home, her primary sphere, where as wife and especially as mother she might Christianize her family.

Without overtly challenging this limitation, Protestant women expanded their religious domain. Growing numbers became foreign missionaries, but far more supported missionary work at home, mostly
through fund-raising for female missionaries. Gathered into single-sex organizations, women sought to save and uplift heathen women abroad and at home and simultaneously enhance their own status within their churches.  

This women’s work for women became the mission of one of the largest nondenominational organizations of women, the Woman’s Christian Association (WCA). The first WCAs were founded by well-to-do Englishwomen in the mid-1850s as prayer circles. The first American WCA, the Ladies Christian Association of New York City, was established in 1858, coinciding with a series of urban revivals. “Any lady who is in a good standing of an Evangelical church may become an active member,” according to the organization’s constitution. By 1875 the twenty-eight Associations in the United States had this ambitious goal: “The temporal, moral, and spiritual welfare of self-supporting young women.” (The American WCAs united to form the Young Women’s Christian Association in 1893.)

The women borrowed some strategies from the Young Men’s Christian Association, whose workers preached on street corners and in jails, taught Bible classes and Sunday schools, and provided outdoor relief and temporary shelter for the homeless in “friendly inns.” The WCA journal, the Earnest Worker, describes similar activities: street preaching; visits to homes, hospitals, or poorhouses like the Cleveland Infirmary; and prayer meetings and Bible classes. Like the YMCA, the WCA organized on college campuses. The WCAs and then the YWCAs administered day nurseries, employment bureaus, and classes in cooking, sewing, nursing, and other domestic skills.

In the late nineteenth century, the WCAs specialized in building institutions for women. The first twenty-eight associations had founded thirteen homes by 1878, most of them boarding homes for working women. In the decade of the Civil War alone, the percentage of women in the labor force increased from 9.7 to 13.7. They worked in laundries, factories, shops, and offices, and hired themselves out as seamstresses, washerwomen, and domestic servants.

The typical woman worker was young, single, underpaid, and, from the perspective of her middle-class benefactors, sexually vulnerable. Unable to support herself, a woman might become the victim of economic and sexual exploitation by her employer, or she might turn to prostitution to earn a living. Cast adrift from family and church, loosed from the restraints of neighborhood and village, she might too eagerly yield to the temptation of premarital sex, especially if it was accompanied by the promise of marriage.

Victorians used the terms “fallen” and “ruined” to describe women
who had engaged in premarital sex. Fallen meant fallen from God’s grace by breaking divinely ordained rules of female chastity, but as Joan Jacobs Brumberg has explained, ruined also meant “to be less than physically perfect, to be non-virginal. . . . It also suggested . . . truncated marital and educational opportunities—a liability that would be particularly deadly to the economic and social aspirations of the Victorian middle class.” A ruined or fallen woman thus symbolized the fragility of all women’s control over their bodies and their lives, as well as many of the ills of an urbanizing America: its growing commercialization and sexual permissiveness, the weakening of the family, the decay of small-town morality, and the decline of orthodox religion.

The WCA, therefore, sought to rescue fallen women. Rescue work began in the 1830s and 1840s, when female moral reform societies opened shelters for prostitutes, and it gained strength in the post–Civil War period from the broader-ranging social purity movement, which had made Infirmary administrators wary of providing public shelter for women pregnant out-of-wedlock and had hastened the exodus of women from the poorhouse. WCA members believed—and the evidence bears them out—that women did not fare well in public poorhouses where there were male administrators and male inmates. Unfortunate women would be far better served and saved in private institutions that sheltered only other women, with religious rather than secular purposes. Unlike the poorhouses, these would be “homes,” where religious influences were pervasive and where middle-class women could best serve their own ministries. Such homes institutionalized a “search for female moral authority” as women sought to promulgate their ideal of female sexual purity and moral superiority and gain a measure of control over the behavior of errant inmates within the homes and errant men outside.

**THE RETREAT, 1869–1912**

The Cleveland Retreat, opened in 1869 by the Cleveland WCA, was the product of this female religious zeal and energy. In its first decades, the Retreat sheltered fallen but not necessarily pregnant women.

In 1868 a YMCA missionary urged the women in his Cleveland audience to do “practical work.” Three weeks later an enthusiastic meeting of six hundred churchwomen at the YMCA led to the WCA’s formal organization. Its motto: “Everything we do is religious.” WCA leaders were members of Cleveland’s social elite. Many had wealthy fathers or husbands who provided not only financial assistance and direction but social sanction for their efforts. Flora Stone Mather, for example, was
the daughter of a rich industrialist and the wife of another, and herself endowed both a settlement and a college for women. Other WCA officers, such as long-time president Sarah Fitch, were single women with leisure time and financial independence. The Cleveland WCA also spawned both the local Woman’s Christian Temperance Union and the long-lived Cleveland Day Nursery Association, and for several decades it supported four residential institutions for women.

Although there was no national WCA at this time, the Cleveland group’s objective closely paralleled that of other WCAs: the “spiritual, moral, mental, social and physical welfare of the women in our midst,” especially of “young women who [were] dependent upon their own exertions for support.” 16 The Cleveland WCA justified its work in familiar terms: “In the bustle and activity of the age the women are following hard after the men. Not satisfied with their quiet country homes, many of them press their way to cities. What shall be done to care for these women? Be they never so pure, they are liable to fall into disgrace and sin, and they must be tenderly watched over and cared for . . . They do not realize the snares and pitfalls that lie so thickly about them. They do not know that many men go about ‘like roaring lions seeking whom they devour.’ ” 17

Although the images of women painted here and elsewhere borrowed from Victorian popular literature, they also reflected demographic and economic realities. Women did indeed follow hard after the men during the Civil War in pursuit of jobs made available by departing soldiers or by new commercial needs. The Cleveland Leader, worried about “the difficulties experienced by young women in employment,” suggested that “selling jewelry, books, shoes, sewing machines, and drygoods, and bookkeeping” were appropriate female jobs. Police court records reveal that some women found prostitution more lucrative. 18

The Cleveland WCA set out to save women who had already fallen and, better yet, to prevent the fall of others. The first step was a missionary committee of volunteers and a paid Bible reader who visited private homes and charitable institutions such as the Infirmary and hospitals. But, as WCA historian and member Mrs. Howard Ingham commented: “As the early work of this committee was done, one great need stared it in the face: the need of a safe and inexpensive boarding-house for young women, whose dreary lives in the comfortless quarters to which poverty often drove them, filled tender hearts with pity.” 19 Therefore, the second step toward saving women was the establishment of the Boarding Home for Working Women, which provided daily religious services and strict discipline. Railroad president Stillman Witt, whose wife, along with his daughter, Mrs. Daniel P. Eells, served on the WCA board, donated the
building. Boarders were expected to pay something for their rooms, but the home never became self-supporting and was always sustained by charitable contributions.

Almost simultaneously, the WCA opened the Retreat for women whose needs, although slightly different, were even more pressing: "Those who, from want, or sorrow, or deception, had lost the glory of their womanhood." Retreat founders often claimed that their work was despised, implying that like fallen women, they had become social outcasts for allegedly "encouraging vice." This was not the case. Like its parent WCA, the Retreat received substantial financial gifts and moral support from well-to-do, socially prominent Clevelanders. Its first residence was donated by industrialist Joseph Perkins. Perkins provided ten thousand dollars more when the Retreat moved in 1873 to a site given by Leonard Case, whose fortune also endowed Case School of Applied Science. When the new facility opened, it was visited by Cleveland's elite and described in glowing detail by the local newspapers. Another generous supporter was Cleveland's best-known millionaire, John D. Rockefeller.

Nevertheless, the Retreat was chronically in debt and always in need of donations. Consequently, its board lavished praise on the institution's male benefactors even as it portrayed other men as wicked seducers. The main danger to women, board members insisted, was men: "Stepfathers, fathers, physicians, and clergymen, . . . married men . . . libidinous lovers." The 1873 annual report described one pathetic eighteen-year-old who had found refuge at the Retreat: "Banished from home by her father because one whom she had fondly and foolishly trusted had basely abused her confidence and deprived her of woman's priceless dower." Retreat founders protested the double standard: "We would not excuse vice in woman more than in men, but are impelled to ask, why a man should go unscathed and be allowed to walk uncondemned and with the mein of innocence among his fellow men, aye, and among virtuous and refined women too, while his surely no more guilty companion in sin is a branded criminal?" Such public utterances may have been more moderate than what was said in private, but the Retreat's energies were directed more at changing the women inside its walls than the men outside.

The Retreat was in the vanguard of the wave of rescue home—building that soon followed in Cleveland and elsewhere. The Sisters of the Good Shepherd opened their convent for wayward women in 1869 (to which Joseph Perkins also gave money), and the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine founded St. Ann's Infant and Maternity Asylum in 1873. In 1878 the Cleveland WCTU sponsored the Open Door for homeless
women, both “respectable” and “disreputable.” The WCA opened at least two similar institutions in other cities. The Sheltering Arms in Pittsburgh, opened in 1872, was dedicated to the “work of reform among those girls who, having strayed from the paths of virtue, manifest a desire to return”; and a White Cross home was opened in St. Louis in 1888 to aid and protect “young women who have been tempted or betrayed under promise of marriage and who desire to lead pure lives in the future, and to procure suitable homes for their children.” In the 1880s, the Salvation Army and Charles Crittenton initiated their chains of homes for unwed mothers.

These institutions shared the Retreat’s goal: spiritual conversion and physical reclamation. The WCA *Earnest Worker* captured that mission in this poetic tribute in 1874:

A blest Retreat in mercy lent  
Poor fallen woman to restore,  
If she but heed the Savior’s voice,  
“Go sin no more, go sin no more.”

Christ’s admonition to Mary Magdalene was often repeated by rescue workers, and “Go sin no more” became the motto of the Florence Crittenton homes. The Salvation Army Rescue’s mission, although expressed more prosaically, was identical: “To provide a home for fallen girls who wish to reform; . . . to teach them habits of industry and self-help . . . to lead them to Christ for salvation.” The Retreat’s reports scrupulously recorded conversions and spiritual awakenings. “It is believed by the Matron that many of the inmates have really become humble Christians and though rejoicing with trembling, they still hope greatly and give fervent thanks,” boasted the minutes of an 1879 meeting. The presence of the two Catholic homes, St. Ann’s and the Convent of the Good Shepherd, probably meant that few Catholic women were forced to submit to this energetic Protestant missionizing.

Crucial to conversion was the presence of other women whose pious practices and principles provided models of female Christianity. Most important was the matron. The Pittsburgh Sheltering Arms’ 1874 report claimed, “It is the aim of the Matron to teach these girls to earn an honest living and to govern all their actions upon Christian principles . . . to throw around them the beauty of Christianity.” At the Retreat and the Florence Crittenton Home, matrons were aided by women on the boards of managers who visited the homes, taught classes, or gave fund-raisers and parties there. In the Salvation Army and Catholic homes, the role of Christian exemplar was played by female religious, Army officers, and nuns.
The proper environment was also crucial, for woman could reclaim and be reclaimed best within her domestic sphere. Although the first Retreat was rather modest, the second building was a massive and imposing brick edifice with Italianate elements in a style popular for both public institutions and private homes of the wealthy, designed to inspire awe in passersby and generosity in philanthropists. High stone walls enclosed the home and grounds. The cloistered privacy hid the inmates’ guilty secrets and preserved their families’ good names. Thus sheltered from the world, the Retreat, like the private homes of middle-class Victorians, could create a “Christian atmosphere” where the institution’s chief goal of spiritual reclamation could be achieved by daily prayers, Bible classes, or the embroidering of samplers with pious mottos: “Through Christ we hope”; “God is our refuge and our strength.”

Within this domestic and familial environment, the matron and the board could discipline inmates just as mothers discipline children. “The life at the Retreat is in every sense a home life. Our girls live together as one family, and the superintendent endeavours to be a true house mother to them all.” This was not always easy, as the 1879 minutes of the Retreat board noted: “As a rule, the inmates [there were forty-six] have been law-abiding and well behaved, but in some cases discipline has been a necessity. . . . ‘Eternal vigilance’ is the price of good order in a family such as ours.” (The term “inmate” did not suggest, at least to the Retreat managers, that the institution was a jail. Victorian women described their family members as inmates of their own homes.) The regimen also imposed discipline: the “girls are required to devote their forenoons to housework. In the afternoons they sew for their personal outfits. During four evenings each week, they study, under efficient teaching; one evening is devoted to a prayer meeting, and the remaining one to recreation.” Girls who did not conform might be dismissed.

The regimen nurtured woman’s domestic instincts and skills. The care of infants, for example, encouraged mothers to develop their “God-given desire for maternity.” Although these tasks were supposed to have spiritual value, they also had practical implications for inmates and for the institution. Women were taught domestic skills at the Retreat so that they could earn a living. “The instruction which is given in housework, in sewing, and in the care of children, is in most cases, very much needed, and makes possible and probable a life of virtuous independence,” claimed a Retreat annual report. At the White Cross home, “All inmates are expected to share in the household duties. Only the matron is paid for work. All girls are taught plain sewing, nursing, and cooking.” Mothers at the Retreat, like women in other YWCA classes, were trained chiefly in domestic service, and annual reports regularly recorded
the large number of women who left the Retreat to go into service. Consequently, the YWCA has been charged with being primarily a producer of domestic servants for its middle-class patrons, but such training made sense, given women’s limited job options. Moreover, domestic service was considered an honest occupation, certainly more honest than prostitution, and working and living in someone else’s home was better than having no home at all. In addition, inmates occasionally were able to raise money for the Retreat by selling their “fancywork,” and their free labor held down the home’s expenses.

According to the home’s annual reports, about equal numbers of women went into service as “returned to friends.” Very few married. This speaks volumes about the social realities of being ruined and then abandoned. Marriage would clearly have been the first choice of home founders and inmates, but it was clearly not the choice of the men involved.

During its first twenty years, the Retreat had a varied clientele. In the tradition of the antebellum moral reform societies, the Retreat’s first targets were prostitutes, for Cleveland already had flourishing red-light districts. The Retreat missionaries “visited the haunts of vice” in search of prostitutes who would be “willing to leave a house of sin,” and Retreat officers claimed to have found two such women in 1875. The missionaries probably found more recruits in the city workhouse and Infirmary than in brothels and saloons. Like the Protestant Orphan Asylum, the Retreat in its very earliest years received funds from the city because the home’s missionaries had removed some women from the public facilities. These women may have been prostitutes, but it is far more likely that they were simply destitute and therefore, by WCA standards, in danger of sexual exploitation. “It is comforting to know,” commented the Missionary Committee, “that these weak and degraded women have opportunities of hearing the gospel invitation lovingly and persistently.” A missionary also reported visits to women who were thus far guilty only of “low dances and . . . bad company”—working-class women whose relaxed behavior with men appeared promiscuous and dangerous by middle-class standards.

Women, therefore, entered the Retreat and other rescue homes for a variety of reasons and stayed varying lengths of time. Some simply needed shelter, perhaps having been banished from their homes. Some needed long-term medical care. One young woman with tuberculosis came to the Retreat after two years of “sin and shame”; the institution could not heal her body, but at her death, “her fearful burden of sin she laid at the cross.” (Such death-bed conversions were, of course, triumphs for the institution.) The home also had a small paying clientele, probably young women committed by parents because they were incorrigible, pregnant,
or potentially delinquent. Some received temporary or transient care; others stayed for months.

Most early inmates, however, were not pregnant, as is indicated by the low ratio of births to inmates during the home's first decade. By 1879 the institution had cared for 556 women but only 260 children. The Retreat did not begin to specialize in the care of unwed mothers until the 1880s. Prostitutes proved difficult to reclaim, better left to police and anti-vice squads. Indigent women might receive outdoor relief. Other institutions such as the WCTU's Training Home for Friendless Women or the Catholic Convent of the Good Shepherd cared for delinquent or pre-delinquent women who were not criminals. Women pregnant out-of-wedlock, on the other hand, were being removed from the Infirmary by unsympathetic male officials, and a few hospitals provided medical care but could not satisfactorily reform or reclaim women. Moreover, by the end of the century the growing rigidity of sexual norms meant that a pregnancy out-of-wedlock was a mark of shame not only to middle-class families but to working-class families with social aspirations or families from conservative religious traditions.

Retreat policies adapted to this new clientele. By the 1890s a minimum six-month confinement was required, and in 1902 the average stay was more than eight months. By the turn of the century, the Retreat had become a large congregate facility that could accommodate about ninety to one hundred women and children. In 1912 the facility received fifty-three girls, and fifty-four babies were born (one girl apparently had entered the previous year, or someone had twins). About half the children left the institution with their mothers, and about half were put up for adoption by the Retreat or by the Protestant Orphan Asylum. Adoption was encouraged because it would more effectively hide a woman's shame and because she was more likely to get a job if she did not have a child with her.

THE PERSISTENCE OF THE RELIGIOUS IMPULSE, 1913–1936

The Retreat, and the other maternity homes, remained committed to religious goals and strategies through the Depression despite financial difficulties and criticism from social workers. In contrast, the care of children became less sectarian and less committed to institutionalization as it became publicly funded.

In 1909 the first White House Conference on Dependent Children signaled Progressive reformers' vital interest in children by setting in motion the two most significant trends of future child welfare: a shift from
institutional to noninstitutional care and an increase in the public funding and management of child care. The official position of the conference was that “home life” was best for children. So that poverty would no longer compel a child to be institutionalized, many states, including Ohio, passed mothers’ pension laws that were supposed to provide a widow or deserted mother with a stipend sufficient to allow her to keep her children at home rather than having to place them in orphanages. In addition, child-care agencies began to place children in foster homes rather than institutions.

During the 1920s the Cleveland orphanages responded to these trends. The three largest facilities moved to the suburbs and replaced their large congregate facilities with “home-like” cottages for fewer children. Each orphanage received a new, nonsectarian name. The Catholic orphanages merged into Parmadale, the Jewish Orphan Asylum became Bellefaire, and the Protestant Orphan Asylum became Beech Brook. Although in reality most children still were institutionalized because their parents (or more often their single mothers) were poor, the orphanages began to redefine themselves as homes for “troubled” or “problem” children. They retained religious training and financial dependence on sponsoring religious organizations, but shortened lengths of institutionalization.46

The Depression dramatized the high costs of these institutions. Accordingly, the policy preferences of the reformist 1910s for public, noninstitutional child care became the economic necessities of the financially strapped 1930s. By 1929 Cleveland’s orphanages were already overflowing with children whose parents could not support them. When private charities ran out of funds, a public agency, the Cuyahoga County Child Welfare Board, was established to take financial responsibility. Most dependent children were cared for in foster homes or in their own homes, not in the expensive orphanages.47 More significant public support came from the federal social insurance programs and Aid to Dependent Children, set up by the Social Security Act of 1935. These and other income maintenance measures were supposed to prevent the destitution that earlier had forced parents to place their children in orphanages.

In contrast, during these same decades maternity homes changed few policies despite their membership in the secular Federation for Charity and Philanthropy. Instead of shortening confinements, the homes adopted a mandatory lengthy stay. Reversing its practice of placing illegitimate children for adoption, the Retreat endorsed keeping both mothers and children together in the maternity home for six months after confinement, in addition to an unspecified number of months prior to childbirth. Board president Mrs. Robert D. Beatty told the Federation in
1925, “At the end of this [six-month] period, the mother will not give up her baby, and this love for her child is a big element in character-building—working for her child gives the mother an aim in life which makes her stronger.” This policy of redemptive maternity, best articulated by Kate Waller Barrett of the National Florence Crittenton Mission, was employed at the other maternity homes as well.

The Retreat continued to affirm its goal of spiritual reclamation: “the care and training” of unwed mothers. That care still entailed a six-month confinement; the training was still in domestic skills, which was all the home could provide. Girls were not allowed to leave the institution to take courses in secretarial work, for example. Mrs. Beatty explained that such training was impractical for a clientele that often had not even finished grade school. More important, bookkeeping and stenography classes “would interfere with our training. . . . In our institution, and we think in most of the other institutions, girls are trained in all branches of housework, such as cooking, serving, cleaning, laundry work, nursery work, and sewing.” These were not simply job skills but the means of reclamation: “All [inmates] are taught to sew, . . . to darn, repair, and make their own and their baby’s clothes. . . . We feel that a girl gains much in self-respect by being neatly dressed.” And, Mrs. Beatty concluded, “self-respect is a great step in reformation.”

Among other Federation members and especially social workers, however, the financial crisis of the Depression inspired increased dissatisfaction with institutional care in general and some outspoken criticism of maternity homes in particular. A 1932 study of maternity homes in Cleveland and elsewhere criticized their rigid regimen and the limitations of exclusively domestic training: “Regularity of rising hours, say 6 a.m., early morning feeding of babies . . . 7 a.m. breakfast after which each goes to her room or dormitory and makes her own bed. This completed, each girl takes her assigned duty in the various departments of the home. Under the supervision of the staff, [the girls do] the cooking, housekeeping, laundry. The nursery usually is given to a girl who desires that work or who wants to follow nurse maid’s work when she leaves the home. Those who have lighter duties assist with the ironing on laundry days.” A more general report in 1934 charged that homes prohibited outside excursions except occasionally to church, censored inmates’ mail, limited intellectual stimulation to visits from social workers or ministers, and did not even allow women to give birth in a hospital unless absolutely necessary. This report urged “greater flexibility in planning for unmarried mothers,” such as placement in foster homes.

To make matters worse, the Federation’s 1936 Bolt Report also uncovered disturbing rates of recidivism, which cast serious doubts upon
the homes' historic claims to reclaim and reform. (See Table I.3.) Some women given maternity home care during their first illegitimate pregnancies had second illegitimate children; two even had a third. Three of the thirty-four second-time offenders so identified (but none of the third) had been first confined at the Retreat.  

But the homes' most serious difficulty was finances. Cleveland homes in 1935 were full and in fact recorded a slightly larger percentage of registered illegitimate births in 1935 than in 1931. Although the number of clients held steady, the homes' sources of income declined, and like other private agencies, they ran larger and larger deficits. In 1919 the Retreat had built a new but smaller facility that housed only fifteen women and twelve children, and although its fees were the same as the other homes' (fifty dollars for a Cleveland resident; seventy-five dollars for a woman from outside the county), its small size meant that it could not generate much income.  

Unlike the other homes, the Retreat was not part of a national agency from which it could receive referrals. (It had incorporated separately from the YWCA in 1921.) The Retreat's endowment income had begun to fail as early as 1927, forcing it to ask for contingency funds from the Federation. In 1936 the president of the Retreat's board made a last plea before the Federation on behalf of the Retreat and other maternity homes where "young girls" could "receive good care, discipline, and training." If social workers did not make better use of the Retreat, she warned, it would close and its remaining endowment would go unused. Three months later, the Retreat closed its doors forever, and its remaining inmates were placed in the Florence Crittenton Home.

**Conclusion**

The other maternity homes—St. Ann’s Loretta Hall, Booth Memorial Hospital, Mary B. Talbert Home, and the Florence Crittenton Home—survived the Depression. In them the mission of the spiritual reclamation of fallen women, first institutionalized at the Retreat in 1869, survived into the last decades of the twentieth century.

Like those elsewhere, Cleveland’s maternity homes continued to be administered and financially sustained by religious organizations—the Catholic church, the Salvation Army, and the National Florence Crittenton Mission. These three organizations still run the majority of existing maternity homes, although the National Florence Crittenton Mission has become the Florence Crittenton Services, a nominally secular agency.

Despite changes in policies and clientele, especially after World War
II, the homes remained explicit about their religious purpose. Unaffiliated with any specific church, the Florence Crittenton Home nevertheless received funds and services from the women’s groups of local Protestant churches, and local ministers conducted regular church services in the home throughout its existence as a maternity home. When the home’s first secular social worker was hired in 1949, she discovered that “bible study classes were a regular part of the program, and actually the only formal program functioning at that point. These were under the supervision of a young woman minister of the Pentecostal Church.”56 The home offered a spiritual life program until 1970, when it discontinued services to unwed mothers.

At the Catholic facility, even though the approach to unwed motherhood was ostensibly psychological by the 1950s, the Sisters of Charity proudly noted how many of the unmarried mothers in the home had “returned to the sacraments.”57 In 1967 the home’s administrators described its goal this way: “The purpose of the spiritual or religious program of the Home is to help the unmarried mother understand and utilize the support that religious values can bring to her life. The whole program is permeated with a religious orientation since DePaul [formerly St. Ann’s Loretta Hall] is a sectarian agency deeply committed to religious affiliation.”58 The farewell words written by a young woman at DePaul in 1972, more than a century after the Retreat opened its doors, would have reassured the earlier Protestant churchwomen: “All of you will remain in my thoughts and prayers as I leave. All the times we shared together will not be forgotten. Some times were good—others, not so good. But they will always be in my heart. Thanks so much for the love and care you all showed toward me. God bless you and your babies.”59

Salvation Army colonel Jane E. Wrieden, a former head of Booth Hospital who held a master’s degree in social work, spoke in 1949 of the role of religion in her maternity home work: “The important thing is not the religious services or Bible study classes. In daily living together, one personality flows into another, and with us, religion is an integral part of this process. As we try to help these girls and women rebuild their lives, we count as much on the group experience in a Christian atmosphere as on individual counseling.”60 Cleveland’s last maternity home is administered by a church, the Salvation Army, which believes—in Wrieden’s words—that its social work “is an expression of our devotion to Jesus Christ.”61

Anticipating the twentieth-century welfare state, historians have generally emphasized the development of public policy and public institutions such as the Cleveland Infirmary. Consequently, they have focused on the secularization of social welfare: the partial substitution of an environmental for a moralistic outlook and of public subsidies for sermons.
As a result, historians of social policy have underestimated the importance of private agencies and the tenacity of the religious mission that gave birth to them. Historians of women have done likewise. Joan Brumberg argues that rescue homes became secular agencies during the Progressive period, and the home for unwed mothers in Elmira that she examined apparently did. Peggy Pascoe attributes the demise of rescue homes to the collapse of Victorian gender-based moralism in the face of the cultural pluralism of the early twentieth century. (If the Retreat's closing is illustrative, failure of funds is a readier explanation.) According to Estelle B. Freedman, the decline after 1920 of these female institutions that had empowered women in the late nineteenth century explains the post-suffrage weakness of the woman's movement.

Yet maternity homes in Cleveland and their women's work for women lived for several decades past the 1920s. Overtly religious, admittedly self-interested in their proselytizing, and insular in their concern for co-religionists, the homes continued to provide shelter and care for thousands of women and infants. The strength of their religious impulse allowed maternity homes to stay their historic course for most of this century when there were pressures to do otherwise and, more important, to provide care for women pregnant out-of-wedlock when the public sector would not.

This religious orientation has had several implications for that care. Because of the belief that conversion, whether religious or psychological, is best achieved within an institution, maternity homes remained committed to institutionalization long after it ceased to be standard social welfare practice. Because other dependent populations were deinstitutionalized, maternity home inmates constituted a larger proportion of the institutionalized population in 1966 than in 1923: .036 percent in 1966, compared with .011 in 1923.

In 1983 the Catholic maternity home, DePaul, still preferred a three-month confinement, as did the Salvation Army facility for unwed mothers in 1989. This is half the required confinement of the 1930s, but it is far longer than the forty-eight-hour recovery period permitted new mothers by most hospitals today. The escalating expense of institutionalization, particularly after childbirth became medicalized, necessitated a change in homes' clientele from working class to middle class, as will be seen in the case of St. Ann's Loretta Hall/DePaul and the Florence Crittenton Home.

The explicitly evangelical purpose of maternity homes has sustained their privatization and compounded these financial difficulties. In 1966 only 2 of 201 maternity homes in the United States were public institu-
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tions. Public agencies have been understandably reluctant to grant monies that might be used for proselytizing. For their part, the Salvation Army and the Catholic dioceses found it difficult to accept public funds that came with morally offensive strings attached, such as the proviso, in the late 1960s and 1970s, that the receiving agency distribute birth control or abortion information. The Salvation Army endorsed family planning in 1972, but it has continued to oppose abortion, and the National Conference of Catholic Charities has remained opposed to both. Without public funds homes were forced to raise fees and cut back residential services, and during the 1960s and 1970s, they closed in large numbers or provided only outpatient services.

The original goal of spiritual reclamation, made imperative by both past origins and present church support, has seemed increasingly irrelevant in a secular culture. And to interpret premarital sexual activity as sin appears at best strained in a society as sexually permissive as our own.

Like its mission and its female traditions, the Retreat's endowment survived the Depression. The money went to the Cleveland Foundation for use in work with unwed mothers, and the Retreat Memorial Fund from the city's first maternity home allowed the remaining homes to hire some social work staff. These caseworkers and group workers, like the founders and matrons, have been women, substituting one generation of benevolent ladies for another of female social workers.