

**Economic Exploitation at the Indianapolis House of the Good Shepherd  
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**Initial Establishment of HGS in Indianapolis**

The Sisters of the Good Shepherd are members of a Catholic order, devoted to the conversion of penitent women. The order was founded in 17<sup>th</sup>-century France and began its global expansion in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, establishing itself in the United States with the building of a House of the Good Shepherd in Louisville in 1843. The House of the Good Shepherd, or HGS, offered a safe place for quote-unquote “fallen” women to be protected, supported, and healed.<sup>1</sup> By 1900 there were 39<sup>2</sup> such institutions in the US. Our research group at the Indiana Women’s Prison has been looking specifically at the HGS in Indianapolis, which was founded in 1873 and closed in 1967. My focus has been on the financial aspects of the institution, and today I will be talking about how laundry work performed by inmates was key to securing sustainability in the institution’s opening decades, from its founding to the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This paper relies on archived documents from the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, found at the Archdiocesan Archives in Indianapolis, and various newspaper articles from the period. Of the archival sources, the most important has been the Annals, a yearly record of major occurrences and accomplishments at the House of the Good Shepherd kept by the Sisters themselves.

**Purpose**

The Indianapolis House of the Good Shepherd served many interests. The Sisters’ mission was to offer a place of retreat and devote care, protection, and guidance to women and girls “whose wayward tendencies have surpassed the disciplinary resources of their parents.”<sup>3</sup> These might be young people

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<sup>1</sup> Cloistered life led here Indianapolis Good Shepherd, who never leave the six acres...

<sup>2</sup> Michelle J and Lori Record’s paper

<sup>3</sup> Indianapolis Star. Jan 24, 1909.

involved in prostitution or petty crime, or behavior that transgressed racial and sexual taboos (for example, one white teenage girl was brought to the house after eloping with a black man.) The house was to act as a place of privacy and safety, withdrawn from danger and disruption. Therefore, the House was in part a social welfare institution. Women and girls could show up at the door requesting help or admittance, but in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century they were also placed there through a variety of channels such as courts, the police, or even their families.<sup>4</sup>

The HGS maintained a symbiotic relationship with the city of Indianapolis. It could not have survived without the support of city authorities. In 1869 the City council directed the conveyance of a partially erected building and the property that it resided upon to the Sisters of the Good Shepherd.<sup>5</sup> This was done upon the agreement that the Sister's would construct on that property, within five years, a building "to be used as a home for friendless females."<sup>6</sup> They would also receive the city's "female prisoners, for one half the compensation that would otherwise be required for them."<sup>7</sup> Father Bessonies, an Indianapolis Bishop who helped found the Convent and establish the Sisters in the city, claimed that the House relieved the city of the burden of deviant young women who otherwise would find themselves "in the station house or jail."<sup>8</sup>

In addition to providing services that would benefit the city, the house was also intended to protect and rehabilitate the inmates within. It provided both refuge and religion, a "vital factor in the rehabilitation of transgressors."<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the Sisters claimed that after a year or two spent in the house, a young woman or girl could be placed in a good family or factory.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the HGS offered women both housing and an opportunity to become proficient in skilled work. Nevertheless, it is clear

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<sup>4</sup> Part of survey

<sup>5</sup> "Council proceeding" Indy Journal 3 Aug 1869, also Annals "This Indenture=Nov 27 1876 City conveys back to

<sup>6</sup> "Council proceeding" Indy Journal 3 Aug 1869, also Annals "This Indenture=Nov 27 1876 City conveys back to .....

<sup>7</sup> Annals pg. 4

<sup>8</sup> Annals pg. 82

<sup>9</sup> Survey

<sup>10</sup> Annals pg. 82

that – like many 19<sup>th</sup>-century institutions – the HGS relied on the labor of its inmates as the internal motor for its sustainability and growth. The work of inmates allowed the Sisters to expand the institution’s capacity, which in turn allowed the House to take more inmate-laborers into a self-perpetuating system. As a result, the Sisters came to look at inmates first and foremost as sources of labor-power. The need for the institution to retain productive workers was in tension with the purported mission of helping girls in trouble and preparing them for working lives on the outside.

### **Early Years of Establishment in Indianapolis**

According to the Annals of the House of the Good Shepherd, the Sisters first arrived in Indianapolis in March of 1873. Initially their means were so meager that they relied daily on the kindness of others for most of their meals and other necessities such as beds, bedding and wash-stands.<sup>11</sup> Their first washing job occurred a few days after their arrival. A young man knocked on their door and asked that some washing be done for him in time to attend a party the next day. The Sisters did not have a wash-tub or wash-board, but they took his bundle and by some unstated means, secured what was necessary to do the washing.

More work came to them after the Mother bought a sewing-machine on an “Installment plan.”<sup>12</sup> Passerby’s could see them working in their out-door shed.<sup>13</sup> In these early years, because there were not many young women and girls living in the house yet, the Sisters had to do most of the work. Even Mother Anselm “often sewed nearly all night, trying to fill orders.”<sup>14</sup>

Their first experience in the “Laundry business”<sup>15</sup> was with one of their first benefactors, Mr. John Rheums, who kept a Gent’s Clothing House. For the first year he supplied them with all the work they could do. Nevertheless, they continued to struggle financially and at two separate times they had

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<sup>11</sup> Annals pg. 10-11

<sup>12</sup> Pg. 14 annals

<sup>13</sup> Annals pg. 11

<sup>14</sup> Annals pg. 14

<sup>15</sup> Pg.15 annals

no money to pay the gas bill, causing it to be shut off.<sup>16</sup> They remained poor yet doing all they could to remain frugal, even cutting matches in half to preserve them longer.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, they continued to admit young women and children and made plans to move into a permanent residence that was being constructed on Raymond Street. Progress on the new building was slow, and toward the end of 1873 the Sisters had to sell a piece of land that had been given to them in order to pay the contractor.<sup>18</sup> In March of 1874 the building was still under construction when, in the bitter cold, the Sisters and the sixteen young women and children that were then in residence moved into it.<sup>19</sup>

Desperate for additional income, in 1878 the house began to take female prisoners from the city of Indianapolis, fulfilling the agreement made in transferring the property to the Sisters. As a means of confining them, the prisoners had cells with iron bars.<sup>20</sup> They were let out during the day, as Father Bessonies put it, to earn “their bread by the sweat of their brow.”<sup>21</sup> It was with regard to the prisoners that I found the only mention of corporal punishment in the Annals. The house doctor, Dr. Brennon, arrived at the house to find five prisoners surrounding one of the Sisters, who was on the floor. He ran back to his buggy to get his horse whip and then whipped them. The Sisters recalled that, at that time, the remunerations received for keeping the prisoners was their “only means of support.”<sup>22</sup> However, the Sisters also had a great deal of trouble controlling the prisoners, and after 1881 they no longer took them, focusing instead on women committed to the house voluntarily, by families, placed there by county courts, police, or other institutions.

### **Division of Labor and separation of classes**

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<sup>16</sup> Annals pg. 15

<sup>17</sup> Annals pg. 15

<sup>18</sup> Annals pg. 20

<sup>19</sup> Annals pg. 22

<sup>20</sup> Pg. 49

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<sup>22</sup> Pg. 50

As the institution grew, four classes of inmates were created within the HGS. The first is the Nun or Virgin Sister. Each Sister had specific individual duties that she carried out daily. These duties, such as instructing and assisting the women in their duties, contributed to the maintenance and structure of the house.

The second is the Big Class, made up of women who were trying to reform their character which had slipped from a path of virtue. So far I have seen no evidence that any class other than the Big Class did laundry work. The third was the Magdalens. Mostly these young women were previously members of the Big class that then chose to devote “themselves exclusively to the service of God in religious life.”<sup>23</sup> They followed the Carmelite Rule, but were always under the immediate direction of one of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd. The Magdalens earned money for the House by doing embroidery work. Their fine sewing skills were admired by the prominent families in the city.<sup>24</sup>

The fourth were the Preservates who attended the Angel Guardian School. This class was dedicated to girls between 10-15 years’ old who were considered to be in danger of becoming bad. They may possibly have been taken from off the streets, from unfit parents, or from destitution.<sup>25</sup> The thought behind accepting these girls into the home was that “prevention is better than cure.”<sup>26</sup>

### **Developments/Renovations**

In 1881, the year the House stopped taking the city prisoners, the Sisters erected a new laundry. By 1887 another story was added to the building,<sup>27</sup> as well as steam power, after the advice of business man and benefactor John Rheums. The Sisters had begun planning a new building that was to have two wings, one being a Monastery for the sisters and the other for the use of the Magdalens, until a

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<sup>23</sup> Annals pg. 88; Newspaper article Feb 26<sup>th</sup> 1889

<sup>24</sup> Annals pg. 116

<sup>25</sup> Annals pg. 88; newspaper article Feb 26<sup>th</sup> 1889

<sup>26</sup> Annals pg. 83

<sup>27</sup> Annals pg. 77

monastery of their own could be built. This new building was estimated to cost around \$30,000, yet the Sisters only had \$1,000 on hand.

Rheums advised the Sisters that with improvements to the laundry they would be put in a better position, “to accomplish more work and liquidate their debt.”<sup>28</sup> With the addition of the steam plant and second story of the laundry, they were equipped to be able to do far better and a great deal more work than they formerly were able to do. It wasn’t long before they succeeded in “securing a very profitable trade.”<sup>29</sup> “Each month they “netted a neat little amount, which served to further the work on the new building, at least to a good extent.”<sup>30</sup> Two years later, in 1889, the new building was finished<sup>31</sup> and “by laundry-work” they liquidated their heavy debt.<sup>32</sup> The addition of the new building expanded the capacity of the whole institution to 300 inmates.<sup>33</sup>

The labor of the inmates in the Big Class was unpaid, with all profits being put toward the sustenance of the classes,<sup>34</sup> maintenance and expansion of the institution, and the paying-off of debt. It is worth noting the role of these women’s unpaid labor in the city’s competitive economy. A colleague of mine, Christina Kovats, has written about an Indianapolis laundry owner who defended his business against complaints of mistreatment and of low wages paid to his workers. He defended himself by pointing at his competitor in the laundry business, the House of the Good Shepherd, writing:“ They

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<sup>28</sup> Annals pg. 82

<sup>29</sup> Annals pg. 78

<sup>30</sup> find

<sup>31</sup> Annals pg. 88 Also They were building the laundry and the new building at the same time. Pg. 83 “building going on nicely” (1888); “While laundry in course of erection” pg. 85 (1888).

<sup>32</sup> Annals pg. 82

<sup>33</sup> Annals pg. 83

<sup>34</sup> Annals pg. 154

canvass from house to house for laundry work, have a large number of girls to whom they pay nothing whatever, whom they compel to do men's work, and keep them at it all hours."<sup>35</sup>

This was not an isolated sentiment. In Chicago a protest against the city's support of the HGS stated that the fulfillment of its contracts "compels girls, many of tender years, to work long hours at hard work wearing away at the vitality of their lives."<sup>36</sup> The bill of injunction went on to accuse that these same women "are compelled to work at laundry and linen machines who would not be permitted by law" and that the products are that of the "forced and sweated labor of youthful criminals."<sup>37</sup>

Working conditions were dangerous at the Indianapolis HGS. During the year 1888, a child by the name of Colette put her hand in the mangle just as the steam was turned on. Her hand and part of her arm had to be amputated. She did not remain long at the house after her return from the hospital. It is a matter to consider why a girl that was living at the house would then return to the world after her hand was amputated. It is unclear whether she chose to leave or if disablement left her without value to the Sisters. It's apparent in other cases that the Sisters saw loss of productivity as a serious burden on the institution.

In 1908, for example, a child in the Guardian Angel School in the HGS was diagnosed with Diphtheria. It was reported and resulted in a quarantine, which brought the House's business activities to a halt. According to the annals, "this meant immense loss," and the Mother Superior was panicked about the financial ramifications of the quarantine.<sup>38</sup> However, the panic was misplaced because, as the Sisters put it, quote "Fortunately for us the child had died during the night" unquote.<sup>39</sup> After the child's

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<sup>35</sup> "A Laundry mans defense," Indianapolis News, 30 Aug 1899; Christina Kovats. Indiana's Magdalene Laundry. Pg.

<sup>36</sup> To protest...

<sup>37</sup> To protest...

<sup>38</sup> annals pg. 177

<sup>39</sup> Annals pg. 177

death the Health Commissioner relinquished the quarantine stating that the Sisters “depend on charity and their daily income of customer work and washing” and they and their children would starve if quarantined.”<sup>40</sup> This shows how fragile the balance was between the Sister’s mission and that of the internal motor that was the inmates work which made it possible.

The House’s financial needs also came before the individual Sisters’ opportunities to pursue their spiritual calling. Their Out-Sister, Mary Dominic, often expressed that she wanted to go to the novitiate in Louisville to prepare for receiving the white habit of the cloistered Sisters. Mother Anselm, only to satisfy Mary Dominic, told her that she could go only after she collected such a sum of money that was so great the mother never thought Mary Dominic would succeed. The Mother did this because she did not want to “lose her services as an Out-Sister.”<sup>41</sup> Finally, in 1877, Mary Dominic succeeded in collecting the sum and was permitted to go, causing an “immense sacrifice.”<sup>42</sup>

The HGS offered a residence for the pursuit of spiritual reformation and of protection for women of specific circumstances. In addition to charitable donations, this House was sustained by the work performed by the women residing within, mainly that of the laundry. This work supported the classes, liquidated debt, and created opportunities for expansion. This expansion both extended and undermined the intended mission of the House, blurring lines of well-being and spiritual acquisition with that of labor and profit.

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<sup>40</sup> Annals pg. 177

<sup>41</sup> Annals pg. 46a

<sup>42</sup> Annals pg. 46a