

‘Ministering Angels in Human Form’:
Mathew Carey’s Appeal for Benevolence
Toward Philadelphia’s White Working Poor

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In his familiar 1768 treatise, “The Labouring Poor,” Benjamin Franklin questioned the wisdom of charity, stating, “[G]iving mankind a dependance [sic] on any thing for support in age or sickness, besides industry and frugality during youth and health” tends “to encourage idleness,” and, therefore, “promote and increase poverty, the very evil it was intended to cure.”¹ Since it was widely believed that the fear of not knowing from where one’s next meal was coming would serve as a catalyst to animate a person into productivity, similar murmurs against the indigent frequently drowned out pleas of compassionate aid for them. Gordon Wood illustrates that comparable sentiments to Franklin’s were prominent in the contemporary Anglo world, citing the 1761 declaration by Massachusetts’ Lieutenant Governor, Thomas Hutchinson, that, only “poverty will produce industry and frugality,” as well as the blunt claim by English agricultural writer, Arthur Young, that, “[e]veryone but an idiot knows that the lower class must be kept poor or they will never be industrious.”²

Such attitudes were only strengthened by the War for Independence, for the founders especially frowned on any element in society that fostered reliance of a person’s will on that of another’s. Like Franklin, Thomas Jefferson observed in the 1780s that, “Dependence begets subservience and venality, [and] suffocates the germ of virtue.”³ Since many believed that the poor could not properly manage their own lives, they doubted whether the indigent ever would be able to sacrifice for the republic in displays of disinterested virtue: that quality of selfless,

¹ Benjamin Franklin, “The Labouring Poor,” *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, William B. Willcox, et al., eds., vol. 15, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 104.

² Quotations in Gordon S. Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), 39.

³ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, William Peden, ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1954), 165. In this well-known Query XIX, Jefferson condemned a laborer’s reliance on the vagaries of the manufacturing marketplace.

passionless, responsibility to the public good. Set apart from their more “worthy” social betters, those who depended on charity often were characterized as idle, intemperate, indifferent and most worrisome, impossible to incorporate into any plan for America’s prosperity. Richard Bushman explains that the American founders’ overarching apprehension was that, “[r]epublican principles required that all men be equal – not equal in ability or wealth, [or] even in opportunity to gain wealth. They were to be equal in dominion,”⁴ possessing the liberty to assume sole responsibility for their own lives.

Influenced by the principles behind the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601, which were carried to the colonies and maintained in the early republic, the founders had to work within the legal tradition that demanded that local governments appoint tax-supported overseers to provide care for the indigent. Such taxes, however, often were viewed by communities as useless burdens. For example, during the depression that followed the Seven Years’ War, the number of Philadelphia’s poor ballooned, increasing the tax to support them, as well as resentment of it. In 1766 several of the city’s more prosperous Quaker merchants opened a tax-funded almshouse, known as the Bettering House, to manage more directly the reformation of the impoverished and to encourage their industry in the hope of diminishing their dependence on public funds.

In conjunction with municipal efforts, certain Philadelphia religious denominations also attempted to regenerate the poor through private ventures. While disparate groups usually tended to the needs of their own parishioners, occasionally some joined in ecumenical projects, such as their support of the founding of the Pennsylvania Hospital in 1751, which especially afforded Philadelphia Quakers and Catholics an opportunity to prove their civic spirit. The ultimate goal

⁴ Richard L. Bushman, “‘This New Man’: Dependence and Independence, 1776,” in Richard L. Bushman, *et al.*, eds., *Uprooted Americans: Essays to Honor Oscar Handlin* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 90.

of that charitable enterprise, however, was to diminish the number of sick-poor dependent citizens in the hope that they would be made well enough to become, “useful to themselves, their Families, and the Publick, for many Years after.”⁵ While similar private charities and the tax-supported Bettering House continued to operate, in less than a decade after the ratification of the Constitution, Philadelphia officials once again saw the need to expand “outdoor relief” to the poor in their own homes.⁶

As in the past many decried such assistance, prompting recent Irish Catholic immigrant, Mathew Carey, who became early-nineteenth-century America’s most important publisher and a significant political commentator, to challenge entrenched views about the causes of poverty and the character of those who suffered from it. His public cry for economic and social justice for white laborers, especially disadvantaged working women, for whom he stood at the vanguard of exposing and attempting to ameliorate the feminization of poverty, would not be silenced until his death in 1839. Challenging dominant assumptions about class, religion, ethnicity and gender, Carey encouraged female participation in his well-publicized crusade for the poor and promoted an ecumenical spirit in an attempt to stabilize the city of Philadelphia and the republic at large. Yet, his humanitarianism had its boundaries. Never extending to free, indigent African Americans the confidence he placed in the white working poor to rise and eventually contribute to national progress, Carey limited his benevolence along racial lines. In spite of that bias,

⁵ Benjamin Franklin, *Some Account of the Pennsylvania Hospital*, Leonard W. Labaree, et al., eds., vol. 5 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 284; Russell F. Weigley, et al., eds., *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co. 1982), 82, 101; William H. Williams, “The ‘Industrious Poor’ and the Founding of the Pennsylvania Hospital,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, (October, 1973), 431-443.

⁶ Priscilla F. Clement, *Welfare and the Poor in the Nineteenth-Century City: Philadelphia, 1800-1854* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1985), 39-42. Gary B. Nash, “Poverty and Politics in Early American History,” in Billy G. Smith, ed., *Down and Out in Early America* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 1-37.

however, he remained a dynamic activist until the end. While much scholarly attention has focused on Carey's political and professional activities, little has been devoted to his charitable contributions and what he hoped to achieve through them. Carey believed that by their self-sacrificing efforts for the disadvantaged, all those who served as "ministering angels" to the poor would come to embody the essential principles of disinterested republican virtue, and he had every confidence that those whom they saved through their benevolence would, in turn, develop to display the same; for in the giving and the receiving of properly-directed charity, all participants in the exchange could come to secure, not only their own personal salvation, but the survival of the infant nation as well.

It could not have taken twenty-four-year-old Mathew Carey long to realize that the Americans who adopted him in 1784 were an anxious lot. Obsessively aware of the vulnerabilities and impermanence of historical republics, leading citizens anguished over how best to establish a society which could withstand assault from without and decay from within so that their own republican experiment could prevail. Like John Adams, who feared at the beginning of the Revolution that even though "We are engaged in the best Cause that ever employed the Human Heart . . . , the Prospect of success is doubtfull not for Want of Power or of Wisdom but of Virtue,"⁷ others shared his concern about the need to instill disinterested virtue in the citizenry. United by their worries, the founding generation differed as to whether they could overcome them, and if so, how to go about it. While most of the premier founders "always made a great deal of their [own] virtue and disinterestedness,"⁸ they were divided in their opinions about the

⁷ John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, April 16, 1776, *Papers of John Adams*, Robert J. Taylor, *et al.*, eds., vol. 4, February-August, 1776, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 124-125.

⁸ Gordon S. Wood, *Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 233.

capacity of ordinary citizens to display such self-sacrifice. James Madison especially thought that the population at large was too easily swayed by their corrupt passions and could not always be trusted to care properly for the new nation.⁹ Madison's mentor, Thomas Jefferson, saw it differently. While Jefferson, too, acknowledged a universal inclination toward self-love and felt that desire to be "the sole antagonist of virtue," he also believed that another human affection existed to serve as its positive counterweight. He wrote that, "nature hath implanted in our breasts a love of others, a sense of duty to them, a moral instinct, in short, which prompts us irresistibly to feel and to succor their distresses."¹⁰ Ordinary folk, therefore, only needed to tap into their own individual reserves of goodness in order to become publicly responsible citizens.

Acknowledging elements of truth in each viewpoint, Carey charted a middle way to tackle the issue. Like Adams and Madison, he was somewhat pessimistic about the prevalence of base instincts in the general population. Citing "mankind" as "generally torpid and indolent,"¹¹ Carey did not believe, however, that the condition needed to be permanent. There were ways to refine people's character, and in the process, unify the nation under a set moral code. On the other hand, while he had every confidence that human beings could be stimulated to rise above such stagnant qualities, he did not ascribe to Jefferson's rosy assumption that "nature" would, at just the right moment, appropriately nudge selfish individuals to drink from its enchanted reservoir of love and duty. Carey believed that the inspiration of virtue required a great deal of effort, and it was incumbent upon those who already possessed it to encourage others by example how to become good citizens. He stressed, "It is therefore immensely important to the virtue and

⁹ Drew R. McCoy, *The Last of the Fathers: James Madison and the Republican Legacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

¹⁰ Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Law, June 13, 1814, *Writings*, Merrill D. Peterson, ed. (New York: Viking Press, 1984), 1336-1337.

¹¹ Mathew Carey, *Annals of Liberality, Generosity, Public Spirit, &c.* (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, May 1, 1834), 4.

happiness of a community, to have instances of laudable actions brought forward as conspicuously and in as strong relief as possible in order to arouse and perpetuate a noble emulation in the career of virtue.”¹²

While it would appear that Carey placed the onus of such a transformation on the performance of the purveyors of virtue, he also emphasized that, at the very least, basic human needs had to be enjoyed by the targeted recipients in order for them to embrace the message. Otherwise, he admonished, those who sought to elevate their character would be as “*miserable comforters!!* as Job found in *Eliphaz, the Temanite*, and *Bildad, the Shuhite*.”¹³ Appalled to find significant numbers of his fellow Philadelphia citizens in the 1790s perishing from disease, hunger and exposure, Carey realized that they were in no condition to listen to self-righteous preaching. As in any method of cultivation, he understood that the seeds of virtue could not be expected to flourish in depleted ground, no matter how ably planted. They required special tending, and he set about to establish the process. In the last decade of the eighteenth century, Mathew Carey began a public appeal, which challenged those in the nation’s capital, who proudly proclaimed their own disinterestedness, to prove their worth in the care of the poor.¹⁴

Carey was especially hard-pressed to counter prevalent opinions about the slothful, intemperate character of the indigent. For example, in answer to a recommendation to raise the wages of workers, Franklin asked his readers to consider whether higher wages would make them less poor. He feared that they would drink more and work less, for some laborers had shown that, “St. Monday is generally as duly kept by our working people as Sunday; the only

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Mathew Carey, *Reflections on the System of the Union Benevolent Association* (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, October 12, 1837), 12. Italics are Carey’s. He maintained this belief throughout his life.

¹⁴ Carey’s primary method of reaching the population was through the dissemination of self-published pamphlets.

difference is, that, instead of employing their time, cheaply, at church, they are wasting it expensively at the alehouse.”¹⁵ While the Elizabethan Poor Law had delineated the difference between “deserving” and “undeserving” poor, with the former categorized as widows, orphans, the sick and aged, and the latter defined as “paupers” with disreputable habits, by the late eighteenth century in Philadelphia, the labels became either “industrious” or “worthless” and, “the distinctions between the [two] tended to melt away.”¹⁶

When he first embarked upon his more than forty-year mission of charity, Carey was struggling himself to establish a livelihood in his new homeland, for his vocational experience to that point had been a chaotic one. A printer by trade, he fled his native Ireland after inflaming English authorities with his pamphlets that exposed the deplorable conditions under which Catholics were forced to live. He first found refuge in Paris, where he met Lafayette and American Minister Plenipotentiary, Benjamin Franklin, who helped the young man hone his printing skills at his press at Passy. After his arrival in America in 1784, his first publication, the *Pennsylvania Herald*, which was funded by a \$400 gift from Lafayette, quickly failed. His next venture, the *American Museum*, a journal designed “eminently calculated to disseminate political, agricultural, philosophical, and other valuable information,” throughout the entire country also faltered by 1792. While not financially successful, the *American Museum* did, however, receive gratifying praise from such distinguished citizens as George Washington, John

¹⁵ Franklin, “The Labouring Poor,” 107.

¹⁶ John K. Alexander, “The City of Brotherly Fear: The Poor In Late-Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia,” in Kenneth T. Jackson and Stanley K. Schultz, *Cities in American History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 81. Robert A. Gross, “Giving in America: From Charity to Philanthropy,” in Lawrence J. Friedman and Mark D. McGarvie, *Charity, Philanthropy, and Civility in American History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 34. For a counter view, see, Monique Bourque, “Poor Relief ‘Without Violating the Rights of Humanity’: Almshouse Administration in the Philadelphia Region, 1790-1860,” in Billy G. Smith, ed. in *Down and Out in Early America*, 189-212.

Dickinson, Benjamin Rush and Timothy Dwight.¹⁷ Not yet prosperous, this recent Irish Catholic immigrant, nonetheless, had gained significant national notice by his display of American patriotism through his journal, published in a city, which historically had proven very inhospitable to many who shared his faith and ethnicity.

Throughout the eighteenth century thousands of Irish immigrants had settled in Philadelphia, residing primarily in Northern Liberties, Kensington, and Southwark. At the time of Carey's arrival, that regional area known as Irish Town contained many of the city's poor, an estimated 10 to 15 percent of Philadelphia's white population, according to historian, Jay Dolan, whose research bears out Benjamin Franklin's recollection that they were, "extremely poor, living in the most sordid wretchedness, in dirty hovels of mud and straw, and clothed only in rags."¹⁸ By the 1790s their overall condition had not improved, and Carey was spurred to action. Perhaps he was inspired by the example of one of his priests at St. Mary's Parish, Father Francis Beeston, whom America's first Roman Catholic Bishop, John Carroll, eulogized in 1809 as one who was always "near the bed of sickness and in the haunts of poverty and distress," and who never refused anyone his charitable assistance.¹⁹ Undeterred by his own uncertain financial situation, Carey decided to do the same. During the year in which his *American Museum* collapsed, he could no

¹⁷ Mathew Carey, *Autobiography*. Reprint: (New York: Eugene L. Schwaab, 1942), 5-10; 23. Note the geographical diversity among the men whom Carey listed. He was proud of the way in which he was able to unify the republic in that regard. Michael S. Carter's article, "'Under the Benign Sun of Toleration' Mathew Carey, the Douai Bible, and Catholic Print Culture, 1789-1791," *Journal of the Early Republic* (2007), 437-469, portrays Carey's literary productions as an attempt to display deep commitment to republican values. His work also highlights Carey's association with many of the brightest luminaries in the early republic.

¹⁸ Jay P. Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008), 25. Dolan explains that before the 1790s, the term *Irish* could mean both Protestants and Catholics. Between the 1790s and the mid-1840s, the label exclusively identified Irish Catholics. See also, Dennis Clark, *The Irish in Philadelphia: Ten Generations of Urban Experience* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1973).

¹⁹ Joseph L. J. Kirlin, *Catholicity in Philadelphia: From the Earliest Missionaries down to the Present Time* (Philadelphia: John Jos. McVey, 1909), 132.

longer bear, “the sufferings and wretchedness of the numerous Irish emigrants who arrived in this city, many of them penniless, [sic] and in a most forlorn situation in every respect.”²⁰

Calling together “the most respectable and influential Irishmen” of Philadelphia to form “The Hibernian Society for the Relief of Emigrants from Ireland,” he and his associates worked to provide the basic essentials of survival to the Irish poor.²¹

It is important to note that while the inspiration of the organization was to give assistance to Irish immigrants, Carey appeared to appreciate early on in his public career that poverty created a distinct culture all its own – a mindset grounded in despair, which transcended religion and ethnicity, preventing its victims from full participation in the new nation. While he may not have realized the full extent of that premise in the 1790s, his activities indicated that his instincts inclined toward it. Therefore, this charitable effort would be only one of many in which he participated to provide for the needs of the downtrodden, not only to assist those who shared his heritage – although he always worked particularly hard to justify their incorporation into American society – but to begin the process of enfolding all disadvantaged white laborers in the promises of the republic.

Carey was hopeful that he could do so. Having known first-hand in Ireland the oppression caused by unbridled power exercised by a few, he invested faith in what could be achieved in America when the many were trusted. Squarely placing confidence in his ability to inspire his new countrymen, he took his benevolent crusade directly to them. In his biography of Carey,

²⁰ Carey, *Autobiography*, 29. In “Death and Life in a Colonial City: A Demographic Analysis of Philadelphia,” *The Journal of Economic History*, (December, 1977), 863-889, Billy G. Smith discusses the disease environment and high mortality rates for immigrants in Philadelphia since the colonial era.

²¹ Carey, *Autobiography*, 29. Priscilla Clement explains that the creation of this society was not unique, given that during the early republic, “various ethnic groups maintained their own charitable organizations in Philadelphia and elsewhere.” *Welfare and the Poor in the Nineteenth-Century City*, 143.

James Green explains, “Throughout his life, when faced with a special problem or injustice, Mathew Carey’s immediate reaction was to appeal to the public.”²² Understanding the power of popular opinion, Carey realized that his first challenge would be to recast enduring views about the attributes of poverty and the characteristics of those who suffered from it.

One of Carey’s first attempts was to change how the poor were portrayed. A self-published 1796 pamphlet told the true tale of his visit to the dilapidated cottage of “a sober, honest, and exemplarily industrious,” gardener, Timothy Cavenough, who had broken his neck while picking cherries for his employer. Evocative of the literary sentimentalism of the age,²³ Carey’s story implored his audience: “the Sons and Daughters of Humanity” to “Check not your tears, tender readers – Let them flow freely,” at the condition of Timothy’s poor widow, Elizabeth, and their children, “one of them, two years old, a cripple from birth, [who] was creeping about,” and the other nearly four months. As Carey initially tried to comfort Elizabeth from, “stores of morality and religion,” he quickly realized that far from requiring his self-righteous piety, she already possessed her own “honor and marks of refinement.” With only eleven dollars left to sustain her family, she attempted to pay four dollars to a fellow laborer, Robert Lapsley, for work he had done for her husband. Amazingly, to Carey, the man refused. “He cast an eye on the money. It was his, he saw, by the clearest right . . . [and] the sum was great enough to be an object of some consequence.” But he would not take what was owed him from the sole source of her sustenance. At that point in his narrative, Carey’s transferred his admiration for Elizabeth’s virtuous

²² James N. Green, *Mathew Carey: Publisher and Patriot* (Philadelphia: The Library Company of Philadelphia, 1985), 29.

²³ For examples of literary language used in the period: Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Emory Elliott, *Revolutionary Writers: Literature and Authority in the New Republic, 1725-1810* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Michael T. Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

character to Lapsley, explaining that even when “charitable persons” raised sixty dollars for the family, and Elizabeth tried once again to settle her debt, Lapsley still refused her. As a fellow member of the working class, he sacrificed from his own need to give the young widow a chance to survive the erratic nature of the marketplace.²⁴

At the end of his story, Carey left his readers wondering how the Cavenough family ultimately would prevail. His pathetic tale of accidental poverty, which preceded numerous others penned in the 1820s and 30s after his retirement from business, argued that circumstance, not vice, had placed those workers in their unfortunate condition. Equally, if not more important were the extraordinary examples of virtue highlighted in the selfless acts of Elizabeth Cavenough and Robert Lapsley, whose characters were as noble as what their social betters believed themselves to be. Yet, his melodrama is equally significant in what it did not convey: whether their virtue alone would be enough to sustain them and workers like them in the face of constant economic uncertainty.

While Carey’s sympathy for the Cavanough’s plight was grounded in his belief that the inherent nature of the poor was no different from that of other Americans, it had visceral roots as well. More than ironic was his mention of their handicapped child; for Carey, too, had suffered a similar fate. Dropped by his nurse as an infant, Carey acquired a limp that plagued him until his death. Even in his 70s Carey could recall, “the taunts and jeers and nicknames of my school and play-fellows . . . reminding me of a misfortune of which I have felt the disadvantage almost every day of my life.”²⁵ Such humiliation produced a “timidity and backwardness,” which never

²⁴ Mathew Carey, *Fragment. Addressed to the Sons and Daughters of Humanity. By a Citizen of the World*. (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, July 20, 1796), 3-8.

²⁵ Carey, *Autobiography*, p. 3. Carey’s disability was exacerbated in the same leg by a bullet taken in a duel with Colonel Eleazer Oswald in January, 1786. Unable peacefully to resolve their

completely went away.²⁶ Having to endure both physical and emotional limitations, he learned with the aid of others, how to prevail in a precarious world in order to rise to become one of early America's most notable citizens. He believed that with similar encouragement, others in disadvantaged situations could accomplish the same.

While his charitable aims expanded in the 1790s, so also did his professional fortune. Undaunted by the collapse of the *American Museum*, Carey immediately turned to book publishing, through which he eventually earned the reputation of managing the era's "greatest publishing and distributing firm" in the United States.²⁷ By 1822 he was able to retire with an annual income of \$6000 and devote full vigor to his benevolent crusade. Until that time he participated in charitable projects and worked to establish a successful career, which served as an example to those who questioned the usefulness of charity, of what confidence, molded through compassion, could achieve. Were it not for the beneficence of men like Franklin and Lafayette who encouraged Carey, he might not have realized his great success. Understanding as much, he labored to amass his fortune, while he simultaneously employed it in the service of the disadvantaged.²⁸

exchanged written and verbal insults over political and personal differences, they and their seconds met in New Jersey, resulting in Carey only being "winged" and Oswald unhurt.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Earl L. Bradsher, *Mathew Carey: Editor, Author and Publisher* (New York: The Columbia University Press, 1912), vii. See also, Kenneth W. Rowe, "Mathew Carey: A Study in American Economic Development," in *The Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science*, vol. LI (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1933) and Michael Carter's 2007 *JER* article, "Under the Benign Sun of Toleration." After his retirement Carey eventually ran out of funds because of his charitable endeavors and had to turn to his son for financial assistance. David Kaser, "The Retirement Income of Mathew Carey," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, (October, 1956), 413.

²⁸ Carey, *Autobiography*, 10. He especially credited Lafayette's assistance as "a most extraordinary and unlooked-for circumstance, which changed my purpose, gave a new direction to my views, and, in some degree, coloured the course of my future life." By 1786 Carey was still referring to Franklin as his "benefactor," and offered to do "any job, however trifling," for

Such professional resolve most likely stemmed from the same source which inspired his benevolence. His Christianity, strengthened by his encounters with Catholic persecution in Ireland, neatly intertwined with the classical republican creed of disinterested self-sacrifice in the American pursuit of political and cultural virtue. While Carey remained a loyal Catholic to the end, his faith, however, was not one of strict dogma; rather, it lay simply in Christ's admonition, "Whatsoever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me," and he often reminded his readers that the poor "are as dear to the Almighty as the proudest of his creatures."²⁹ The increased political egalitarianism of the age mirrored Carey's sense of spiritual equality in that he believed that God did not discriminate among mankind by denomination or class, but only in how they honored divine commandments in the humane manner in which they treated one another. Carey was astute enough to realize that his appearing as an American Christian rather than a transplanted Irish Catholic would enable him to cast his charitable appeal to a much wider audience in order to promote republican unity. He thus made sure that his printed pleas were always devoid of any Catholic imagery and rife with biblical verses, such as,

"his Excellency." In two extant letters to Carey, Franklin did not address his offer, however; nor did he endorse the *American Museum*, as Carey had requested. MC to BF, April 20, 1786 and June 10, 1788. BF to MC June 10, 1788 and February 9, 1789. Unpublished. Housed at *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Yale University.

²⁹ Mathew Carey, *Letters on the Condition of the Poor: Addressed to Alexander Henry, Esq.*, (Philadelphia: Raswell and Barrington, Feb. 15, 1836), title page. Mathew Carey, *A Plea for the Poor* (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, January 24, 1832), 4. He anticipated an ecumenical trend employed by Protestants in the nineteenth century to sway the citizenry at large to support a variety of benevolent causes. Seymour Martin Lipset, "Religion and American Values," in *Protestantism and the American Founding*, Thomas S. Engeman and Michael P. Zuckert, eds. (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 77-105.

“Thus spake the Lord of hosts, saying Execute true judgment, *and shew mercy and compassion every man to his brother.* Zech. vii, 9.”³⁰

Carey believed that the post-revolutionary era presented a unique cause for optimism that, with effort, social harmony could prevail. Like Bishop John Carroll, who was hopeful that because of the Revolution, Catholics “had acquired equal rights and privileges with that of other Christians,”³¹ Carey saw the new American republic, forged by political guarantees of increased equality, as an opportunity to make the world anew, free of the religious tyranny he had experienced in Ireland. Apparently, thousands of his former countrymen believed the same, for the 1790s witnessed an increase of Irish Catholics to the United States in greater numbers than during the previous two decades. With the ratification of the Constitution new immigrants, who were more politically savvy than previous generations, hoped that the newly-constructed Federal government would be able to neutralize local prejudices which had worked against Catholics during the colonial period.³² Their dreams in Philadelphia, however, were not immediately realized; for the immigrants, for the most part, were placed in the lowest rank of society. Those above them, while needing their labor, resented their presence, causing class tensions to remain

³⁰ Mathew Carey, *Essays on the Public Charities of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Clark & Raser, 1830), 43. Italics are Carey’s. As will be depicted, his claim for such universality would be tested during the 1793 yellow fever epidemic.

³¹ Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1985), 106.

³² Jason Kennedy Duncan, “‘A Most Democratic Class:’ New York Catholics and the Early American Republic,” Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Iowa, 1999, 178, 162. See also, Maurice Joseph Bric, “Ireland, Irishmen, and the Broadening of the Late Eighteenth Century Philadelphia Polity,” Ph.D. Dissertation, The Johns Hopkins University, 1991. Bric asserts that the Irish immigrants of the 1790s became the symbol of “awakened democracy” due to the invigorated political awareness they carried with them from Ireland, iii, and Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

high throughout the decade, and prompting historian John K. Alexander to label Philadelphia in the 1790s, “the city of brotherly fear.”³³

Carey understood that such class and ethnic distrust not only damaged Philadelphia, as well as the entire American republic, but it also diminished the furtherance of Christ’s kingdom. As an enlightened Catholic, he wrote that “reason, common sense, and religion,” should combine to accomplish “suspension of discord” and “angry passion.”³⁴ Influenced by Enlightenment ideals and in an attempt to conjoin reason and religion, Carey often interwove passages from the Bible with secular references from Shakespeare and Greek and Roman civilizations. While such an approach had practical application in justifying benevolence, Carey’s intent was not for pragmatic means alone. Unlike certain Enlightenment thinkers such as Franklin, who sought to promote virtue solely to produce a more stable and productive citizenry, Carey believed that his charitable attempts and the reception of them had spiritual consequences as well.³⁵ Time and again, his pleas contained threats of divine judgment for economic injustice, such as, “He that *oppresseth the poor*, to increase his riches, shall surely come to want. Prov. xxii. 16.”³⁶ In his employment of biblical condemnation for those who shirked their religious obligation to help the unfortunate, Carey sought to regenerate the targeted givers of charity as well as those who received it. Since the personal salvation of all participants in the exchange was at stake, as well as the ultimate survival of the nation, he utilized language which would appeal to all Christians.

³³ Alexander, “The City of Brotherly Fear,” 79-97.

³⁴ A Catholic Layman [Mathew Carey], *To the Members of St. Mary’s Congregation* (April 19, 1814). One-page, printed letter. In addition to enduring prejudice from Protestants, Catholics argued among themselves as to how extensively they should embrace enlightened, republican ideology. Carey’s parish suffered through violent schisms regarding that issue. Dale B. Light, *Rome and the New Republic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996).

³⁵ Edwin S. Gaustad, “The Nature of True – and Useful – Virtue: From Edwards to Franklin,” in Barbara B. Oberg and Harry S. Stout, eds., *Benjamin Franklin, Jonathan Edwards, and the Representation of America Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

³⁶ Carey, *Essays on the Public Charities of Philadelphia* (1830), 38. Italics are Carey’s.

In that vein, and at the same time he helped to form the Hibernian Society, Carey joined with men of a variety of Protestant denominations in order to elevate the downtrodden through ecumenical Christian education.

Defying those who claimed that educating the poor would make them “idle, vicious, and proud,” Carey banded together with a diverse religious group of twelve other men, headed by the first Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Reverend William White, to organize the Sunday School Society in 1790 and incorporate it in 1796.³⁷ Another one of the Society’s founders, Dr. Benjamin Rush, a nominal Presbyterian, believed with Carey that the republic could be enhanced by ensuring that poor children of “both sexes be carefully instructed in the principles and obligations of the Christian religion,” in order to make them “dutiful . . . and, in everything that relates to this country, good citizens.” Rush proposed that by elevating the “manners and morals” of the poor, America would be fortified.³⁸ While Carey never appeared to venture as far as Rush in hoping to convert them into “republican machines,”³⁹ he did, however, see the utilitarian benefit of universal Christian education in erecting a strong national foundation. His

³⁷ For opponents’ opinions see Alexander, “City of Brotherly Fear,” 85. John K. Alexander, *Render Them Submissive: Responses to Poverty in Philadelphia, 1760-1800* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1980). In this work, Alexander writes of the leaders of the 1790 Sunday School Society that, “with the exception of Mathew Carey, all were men of some wealth,” 154. Carey had not yet established his publishing firm. Carey wrote in his *Autobiography* that their founding of the Sunday School Society led to the formation of hundreds of other such schools throughout the United States, 30. Benevolent education was a significant way to bind the republic together in a common cause.

³⁸ Benjamin Rush, “To the Citizens of Philadelphia: A Plan for Free Schools,” in L. H. Butterfield, ed. *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, vol. 1, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 413-414. In “Rearing the Republican Child: Attitudes and Practices in Post-Revolutionary Philadelphia *The William and Mary Quarterly*, (January, 1982), Jacqueline S. Reinier explains that “Rush argued that patriotic republican citizens could be formed in ‘nurseries of wise and good men’” in methods, “grounded in Christianity.” 157.

³⁹ Benjamin Rush, “Thoughts Upon the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic,” in Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr., ed. *Critical Issues in Education: An Anthology of Readings* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2006), 60.

participation in the founding of the Sunday School Society, which led to another 1790s ecumenical venture with White and Rush, the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons,⁴⁰ enabled him publicly to encourage compassionate cultivation of those whom many of his contemporaries easily could have discarded. In the summer of 1793, however, in the worst yellow fever epidemic in the history of the United States, Carey exhibited a similar callousness toward a significantly neglected segment of Philadelphia's working poor – African Americans.

From late July, 1793, when the first fatalities occurred, until November, when the weather turned cold enough to kill the mosquitoes which transmitted the disease, hysteria reigned. The epidemic eventually claimed the lives of almost ten percent of the population of Philadelphia and tested the limits of Carey's humanitarianism. As a member of the city's Committee of Health, which sought to control the ravages of the fever, Carey discovered that death under the most hideous circumstances, like his opinion of God's judgment, was no respecter of a person's place in society. While the poor, due to their crowded and unsanitary living conditions, suffered the most, those who "lived high" also succumbed in record numbers.⁴¹ Many of those who could afford to escape the city did so, often not stopping even to bury their dead. More than forty years after the episode Carey still could recall with disgust, that "corpses of the most respectable citizens . . . were carried to the grave on the shafts of a chair, the horse driven by a negro,

⁴⁰ Jacqueline S. Reinier, *From Virtue to Character: American Childhood, 1775-1850* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 139.

⁴¹ J.H. Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead: The Great Plague of Yellow Fever in Philadelphia in 1793* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949), 8-63. Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 122. Mathew Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia*, 4th ed., (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1794), 74. Billy G. Smith, *The "Lower Sort": Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1750-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 52-53.

unattended by a friend or relation, and without any sort of ceremony.⁴² Not able to flee, the indigent sick had almost no one to care for them. Often barred from the Pennsylvania Hospital and the Bettering House, the dying poor congregated in the streets, where their fallen, decomposing bodies lay unattended for days. The city-appointed Guardians of the Poor, the only official agency responsible for them, were hard-pressed to know what to do especially during the height of the epidemic, when dozens were dying daily.⁴³

Carey recalled decades later that to his astonishment he experienced, “some of the most tranquil and happy hours of [his] existence . . . [since] for the first time in ten years, wholly free from the cares of business, [he] had no money to borrow – no notes to pay – and [his] mind was fully occupied by the duties to which [he] devoted [himself].⁴⁴ Called away from the city on business during mid-September, he returned and joined with “a band of brothers” to provide personal care to the sick and dying. He remembered his time of service as an accomplishment that far outweighed any professional achievement. And yet, despite his recollection of his virtue being an end in itself, his participation in this grim episode may have been one of his most successful business ventures, and the one which could have provided him the financial foundation to launch his successful publishing firm.⁴⁵ Assuming the role of chief historian of the crisis, Carey’s five-edition chronicle of the epidemic, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever*,

⁴² Carey, *Autobiography*, 26.

⁴³ Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead*, 56.

⁴⁴ Carey, *Autobiography*, 27. This recollection was penned in an age when successful men like Carey looked back and tried to justify their “interested” rise in business. Bruce Allen Dorsey, “City of Brotherly Love: Religious Benevolence, Gender, and Reform in Philadelphia, 1780-1844,” Ph.D. Dissertation, Brown University, 1993, 240-241.

⁴⁵ Gaustad, “The Nature of True—and Useful—Virtue.” Franklin would have seen no shameful contradiction here, believing that virtue, at times, could be very economically useful.

which first appeared in November, 1793, sold so prodigiously that rumor had it that its success may have been what saved him from bankruptcy after his *American Museum* failed.⁴⁶

Despite allegations of his profiting from the crisis, Carey seized the occasion to broadcast central themes of his emerging mission of charity.⁴⁷ Emphasizing that those who remained to care for the sick and dying exhibited virtuous benevolence in its highest form, he highlighted that that quality resided significantly in those who possessed less than perfect social pedigrees. Going to some length to tell the story of a “courageous servant girl” who helped to “bury a corpse, crawling with maggots,” because no one else – not even a man – would touch the body, he marveled that the only request she made in lieu of payment was that no one tell her employer for fear of dismissal. Strongly suggesting divine deliverance for the girl’s disinterested service, he reserved his most glowing praise for two individuals of non-English heritage, who came to manage Bush Hill Hospital, the city’s main repository for the afflicted poor, after it had fallen into a deplorable state. Carey explained that, Pennsylvanian, Peter Helm, whom he labeled “a plain German,” and Stephen Girard, “a wealthy merchant and native of France,” tended those suffering by dressing sores and performing “all the menial offices for the sick.”⁴⁸ Their personal and managerial skills so improved Bush Hill and the condition of its patients that Carey portrayed their brave self-sacrifice, in the face of very likely death, as a poignant example that virtue was not bound by class or ethnicity.

⁴⁶ Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead*, ix. Powell discusses Carey’s attempt to explain his absence from the city in September and to deny that he prospered from his *Short Account* in a subsequent pamphlet, *An Address of M. Carey to the Public* (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, April 4, 1794). His *Short Account* rapidly went through four editions in 1793-1794. In 1830 he reprinted his narrative in a fifth edition.

⁴⁷ For example: Nash condemns him for financially benefitting from the episode, *Forging Freedom*, 124. Powell exonerates him, *Bring Out Your Dead*, ix; 293-4.

⁴⁸ Carey, *Autobiography*, 25; *A Short Account*, 25; 61-62. Capitalizing on an opportunity to take a swipe at the English, he proclaimed that Philadelphians handled this epidemic much better than Londoners had during their great plague in the seventeenth century, 87-88.

Nor, for Carey, did denominational affiliation determine true Christian charity. As he lauded the ministering service of leaders from a wide array of churches throughout the city who cared for the poor and dying, only in the end to perish themselves, he especially lamented the passing of one of his favorite priests at St. Mary's, Father Francis Fleming, for whom Carey published his 1790 sermon on St. Patrick.⁴⁹ Yet, in an ecumenical vein he concluded that differences in theology or places of worship mattered little in God's service; for only, "a meek and humble heart is the temple wherein He delights to be worshiped."⁵⁰

Carey's self-proclaimed intimacy with the pleasures of the divine, however, had a rather limited prismatic range; for he failed in the 1793 crisis, just as he would throughout his entire career of benevolence, to address the sufferings of the black community. Not only did he inaccurately describe the level of black mortality, he also denied the many and varied benevolent contributions of African Americans during the epidemic. In fact, in his first edition of his *Short Account*, Carey even accused certain nurses, whom he labeled, "some of the vilest blacks" of demanding exorbitant prices for their services and frequently stealing from the sick and dying.⁵¹

Reverends Absalom Jones and Richard Allen countered him in their 1794 publication, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People*, that, "we have suffered equally with the whites, our distress has been very great, but much unknown to the white people,"⁵² and pounded the theme of self sacrifice on the part of African Americans by providing examples of blacks who displayed their virtue in a variety of significant ways. Stunned by Jones's and Allen's

⁴⁹ Carey, *A Short Account*, 73; Kirlin, *Catholicity in Philadelphia*, 132.

⁵⁰ Carey, *A Short Account*, 93.

⁵¹ In his 1830 edition he reported that there were examples of "coloured and white nurses who extorted from their patients," 68.

⁵² A.J. and R.A. [Absalom Jones and Richard Allen], *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793: and a Refutation of some Censures, Thrown Upon Them in Some Late Publications* (Philadelphia: William A. Woodward, 1794), 15.

defensive reaction, Carey answered them in his 1794 pamphlet, *An Address of M. Carey to the Public*, that he had, in fact, praised individuals such as those who drove the death carts, and even mentioned the services of Jones and Allen in particular.⁵³

With that, historian, Phillip Lapsansky writes, “Carey had missed the point,” and asks, “[i]f the selfless efforts of this unnamed mass of most humble Philadelphians could be minimized and dismissed, what hope was there for the wider acceptance of blacks as free men and citizens?”⁵⁴ His question lends insight into the seemingly perplexing contradiction between Carey’s cold indifference to the plight of free blacks in this instance and the fact that he had published anti-slavery tracts and writings by noted black authors in his *American Museum* and later joined the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery in 1797. Like numerous other founders, who had equally strong abolitionist credentials, and yet appeared unable at times to shake racist tendencies, Carey’s behavior begins to make sense in the context of republican anxiety about the uncertain survival of the nation and what qualities were required to sustain it. While Carey most likely would have decried many assertions in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, he never extended the confidence he placed in the promise of refinement for the white working poor to blacks in comparable circumstances. It is fair to suspect that he, like Jefferson, feared that blacks possessed inferior reason to whites, and therefore, lacked the necessary virtue to enable them to become worthy citizens.⁵⁵ It may be too much to claim that Carey viewed African

⁵³ Carey, *An Address of M. Carey to the Public*, 5.

⁵⁴ Phillip Lapsansky, “‘Abigail, a Negress’: The Role and the Legacy of African Americans in the Yellow Fever Epidemic,” in J. Worth Estes and Billy G. Smith, eds., *A Melancholy Scene of Devastation: The Public Response to the 1793 Philadelphia Yellow Fever Epidemic* (Canton, MA: Science History Publications, 1997), 69.

⁵⁵ Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in Peden, ed., 139. For a similar view see, Sally F. Griffith, “‘A Total Dissolution of the Bonds of Society’: Community, Death and Regeneration in Mathew Carey’s Short Account of the Malignant Fever,” in Estes and Smith, eds., *A Melancholy Scene of Devastation*, 45-59.

Americans as disposable members of society in this era; yet, his virtual silence on their behalf as they confronted challenges similar to those which plagued poor whites, leaves the impression that he doubted their ability to rise and contribute to American advancement.

While Carey failed to appreciate the virtue of the black community, he eventually came to invest hope in another disenfranchised segment of the republic – white working women – and focus on what they could contribute to the prosperity of the new nation. By the early decades of the nineteenth century, such progress was doubtful due to several severe economic traumas. The effects of the Embargo of 1807, coupled with the depression that followed the War of 1812, especially debilitated Philadelphia’s economy. By the Panic of 1819, many Philadelphians had become so guarded of their own precarious finances that they simply stopped paying their poor taxes and donating to benevolent organizations.⁵⁶ Frustrated by the contraction of public spirit during the financial crisis of 1819, Carey hoped to inspire commitment to republican principles by encouraging stimulation of American economic self-sufficiency through increased manufacturing. Praising the nation’s vast natural resources, he believed that all classes and geographical regions could become unified in the pursuit of expanding industrial output and distribution, which ultimately would increase financial security.⁵⁷ Most especially, he encouraged the employment of young white women, which he believed would improve their

⁵⁶ Clement, *Welfare and the Poor in the Nineteenth-Century City*, 149-150; Dorsey, “City of Brotherly Love,” 113-118.

⁵⁷ Rowe, “Mathew Carey: A Study in American Economic Development,” 50-64. Seeing similarities between Ireland’s “natural advantages” and those in the United States, he worked to realize economic prosperity in his new homeland, which could not be achieved in Ireland due to English exploitation of its people and resources. Mathew Carey, *View of the Very Great Natural Advantages of Ireland*. . . . (Philadelphia: M. C. Carey & I. Lea, 1823).

lives, those of their families who would no longer have to support them, and the community as a whole.⁵⁸

By the late 1820s Carey was not as hopeful. Not only did the economy not improve as he had envisioned, he also discovered that Philadelphia's poor rates were much higher than those of Boston, New York, and Baltimore. Personally investigating the situation as a Guardian of the Poor, Carey became especially impressed with the dire needs of thousands of female laborers and their families, who suffered from lack of adequate food, shelter and clothing. Learning that the women's distress resulted due to repeated outbreaks of disease and the increase of male unemployment, which forced women to seek paid labor at rates much lower than what their husbands had earned, Carey shifted the focal point of his benevolence to plead the cause of white female laborers, especially those involved in the garment industry, who did piece work as seamstresses, spoolers, spinners and laundresses. Coming to understand how the women workers slipped into dependence – a fearful plight in a republic – Carey, buoyed by his faith, set out to ameliorate their want.

In his efforts, he comfortably became part of a burst of benevolent concern, sculpted by the evangelical emotion of the Second Great Awakening. Finding that the activities of the men and women who attempted to save their own souls, while tending to others' temporal and spiritual needs, reflected his own charitable aims since the 1790s, this enlightened Catholic expanded his ecumenical network. Historian, Bruce Dorsey explains that, “[e]vangelicals, who felt uneasy about the theological, emotional and social excesses of revivalism found in benevolent societies

⁵⁸ Mathew Carey, *Essays on Political Economy* (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1822), 458-460. Gerda Lerner, “The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson, 1800-1840,” in Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth H. Pleck, *A Heritage of Her Own* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 182-196. Cynthia J. Shelton, *The Mills of Manayunk: Industrialization and Social Conflict in the Philadelphia Region, 1787-1837* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 60-61.

a way to express the soul-winning zeal of their evangelical identity.”⁵⁹ While Mathew Carey may never have defined himself as such, his charitable endeavors in the 1820s and 30s simply continued what had been a life-long commitment to ensure earthly as well as eternal salvation for all those, regardless of denomination, who gave and received benevolent aid. It is important to note, however, that while many evangelical benevolent workers of the period tended to view poverty as a result of victims’ sins, Carey sharply differed with them in that regard. From his earliest charitable efforts until his death, he firmly believed in the inherent goodness of the poor and sought to alleviate their many distresses so that, with refinement, they could rise to display their own virtue.⁶⁰

Increasingly freed from the pressures of business by the 1820s, Carey embraced the religious urgency of the age and with renewed vigor set about to regenerate the lives of those who were struggling. Refining his focus, he initially utilized formerly-employed reasons to aid the poor in general to justify female assistance; yet, he quickly realized that women workers faced unique obstacles in overcoming their poverty. Through repeated visits to the homes of female garment workers, he discovered that some women, who once were “accustomed to living in affluence,” found themselves forced to become their families’ sole breadwinners because their husbands had been unable to find employment for many months.⁶¹ As he continued to investigate the

⁵⁹ Dorsey, “City of Brotherly Love,” 98.

⁶⁰ For examples of those involved in charity work who did and did not view the indigent in a similar way, see Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002) and Trisha Posey, “‘Alive to the Cry of Distress’: Joseph and Jane Sill and Poor Relief in Antebellum Philadelphia,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, (July, 2008), 215-243.

⁶¹ Mathew Carey, *Report of Female Wages*, (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, March 25, 1829) in *Miscellaneous Essays*, (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1830), 268. Mathew Carey, *To the Humane and Charitable*, (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1833), 1.

conditions of their lives, however, he came to realize that the vast number of indigent female workers were widows with small children.

By the late 1820s thousands of Elizabeth Cavenoughs struggled alone to provide for themselves and their families. While Carey discovered them existing in the same squalor that he found his fellow Irish thirty years earlier, the women were not defined by their ethnicity. Seeking to display to his readers that in America there were no guarantees of permanent plenty, he portrayed the workers as, “widows of men once in opulence,” or those “who formerly lived in ease and affluence,”⁶² and warned that, given the vagaries of the economy, anyone’s fortune could fail, regardless of one’s particular background. Meeting countless individuals for whom that were true, Carey personally understood the experience in the example of his wife, Bridget Flahavan. In spite of her family’s descent into poverty during the Revolution, Bridget eventually was able to rise, however, and become a virtuous wife and mother and display her own disinterested service as, “a doer of good in secret . . . but a ministering angel to the sick and the poor.”⁶³ Carey hoped to provide opportunities for other disadvantaged women to do the same.

Met with skepticism in his assertion that almost all Americans were at risk of slipping into destitution, Carey found himself once again forced to disprove the typical accusation of workers’ indolence as a reason for their poverty. As a variation on that theme, he instructed the public how a woman’s employment opportunities were different from a man’s. In dozens of self-published appeals he explained, that a woman faced a particularly vicious competitiveness in the marketplace because, “by the law of her being [she] is excluded from paths in which coarser man may make a livelihood; and, by the custom of society is OBLIGED TO ACCEPT LESS THAN

⁶² Ibid., 2. Mathew Carey, *Wages of Female Labour* (Mathew Carey: Philadelphia, [1829]), 1.

⁶³ Carey, *Autobiography*, 24. Hezekiah Niles’s eulogy of Bridget Flahavan Carey: *Register*, XXXVII, 120-21, October 17, 1829.

HALF OF WHAT THE MOST STUPID OF THE OTHER SEX CAN EARN.”⁶⁴ In order to keep their ill-paying jobs, women often labored from “five to six in the morning till eleven o’clock at night, . . . and not losing a day in the year by sickness,” still found their wages so low that after paying for rent and fuel, they had only “the miserable pittance of *nineteen dollars and fifty cents* to purchase food and clothing for themselves and their families” for the entire year.⁶⁵ No wonder many perished in the winter months especially from exposure and malnutrition, for outdoor relief was too paltry to save them, or from disease, which spread rapidly in the slums or the almshouse, where they might go for assistance. Time and again, Carey admonished, “This is no ‘fancy sketch’ – no imagining portrait drawn to excite compasion [sic] or horror. It is a tremendous reality, revolting to every honourable or humane feeling.” When he claimed that Philadelphia’s “foul stain” rested on those who neglected the plight of the women, rather than on the character of the workers themselves, he met firm opposition.⁶⁶

In an age in which a woman’s reputation mattered desperately, Carey needed to address the early republican conviction that virtuous feminine chastity grounded the nation in proper moral behavior, and deny allegations that female laborers were unworthy of assistance because of their perceived “fallen” character.⁶⁷ He acknowledged that because the workers were so poorly

⁶⁴ Carey, *Letters on the Condition of the Poor*, 8. Capitalization is Carey’s. Like the “courageous servant girl” in his *Short Account*, these women were portrayed by Carey as virtuously performing tasks, which men would have refused to do, for the betterment of their families and community.

⁶⁵ Carey, *Wages of Female Labour*, 1. Italics are Carey’s.

⁶⁶ Ibid. Carey’s foes appear not to have been from any one particular group. His diary, (1822-26), housed in the Rare Book Room, University of Pennsylvania Library, reveals that, at times, he indulged in self pity as he confronted general opposition to his efforts to save Philadelphia: “a community in which there is not the shadow of public spirit,” and which suffered from “priggish apathy” and “sordid meanness!” December 15, 1822.

⁶⁷ For discussion concerning “proper” feminine behavior in the early republic and anxiety about the possibility of seduction, see, for example: Ruth H. Bloch, “The Gendered Meaning of Virtue in Revolutionary America,” *Signs* (1987), 37-58; C. Dallett Hemphill, *Bowing to Necessities: A*

compensated and, therefore, often unable to procure the necessities of bare existence, some women did face the choice between “starvation and pollution.”⁶⁸ He further explained, however, that because of their low wages, working women were not viewed by “prudent young men of the laboring classes” as acceptable marriage partners. Consequently, the men “frequently seduced the young women, whom otherwise they would have taken as wives, and who, in their turn, would become seducers.”⁶⁹ While Carey’s portrayals castigated greedy employers for their shameful exploitation of the female workers, forcing some into prostitution, he never denounced the women who deviated from “the path of virtue.”⁷⁰ In addition, he cautioned those who smugly condemned the female laborers’ alleged lack of morality, declaring, “let those who pass a heavy censure on them, and are ready exaltingly to cry out, with the pharisee in gospel, ‘Thank God, we are not like one of these,’ ponder well what might have been their conduct in similar circumstances.”⁷¹

Carey depicted only the miserable conditions under which the female workers were forced to work and live as pathetic, but he never denigrated the character of the women themselves.⁷² He believed that the noble qualities he witnessed in Elizabeth Cavenough more than thirty years

History of Manners In America, 1620-1860 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Linda K. Kerber et al., “Beyond Roles, Beyond Spheres: Thinking About Gender in the Early Republic,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, (1989), 565-585; Jan Lewis, “The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic,” *William and Mary Quarterly* (1987), 689-721; Rosemarie Zagari, “Morals, Manners and the Republican Mother,” *The American Quarterly* (1992), 192-215.

⁶⁸ Carey, *Essays on the Public Charities*, (1828), 14.

⁶⁹ Ibid. Carey, *Essays on the Public Charities* (1830), 51.

⁷⁰ Mathew Carey, *Address to the Wealthy of the Land* (Philadelphia: Wm. F. Geddes, April 20, 1831), 13.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² In her work, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), Christine Stansell describes working women as resiliently creative in their survival. Like the women of her study, those whom Carey met received his respect for their honest and hearty resolve to improve their lives.

earlier innately resided in them; and he had confidence that, if appropriately aided, they would develop into productive members of society. In that regard, however, he was particularly challenged to make his case; for as Lori Ginzberg explains, “But if poor women were victims of economic forces outside their control, they were still, by virtue of being women, responsible for their own and their children’s moral standing.”⁷³ Indeed, as stewards of their families’ virtue, proper early republican mothers were entrusted with their children’s education in order to fashion them into worthy citizens.⁷⁴ Many believed that the nation’s future depended on them, and few thought poor women capable of such a mission. Carey insisted, however, that, “the affections of a mother in humble life [were] as strong as those in the bosoms of the most elevated in society;”⁷⁵ only their “goadings of hunger”⁷⁶ diminished proper maternal care and instruction. He admitted that there were “women who have children, and are unable to procure food for them, [who] frequently send them abroad to beg. . . . Hunger pinches them. . . . An opportunity offers to filch and steal,” and they do so.⁷⁷ He was adamant, however, that the children pilfered only because they were desperate, not because they, or their mothers, were inherently morally depraved.

⁷³ Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women in Antebellum Reform* (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2000), 18.

⁷⁴ Countless contemporary writers expounded on the subject. Dr. Benjamin Rush is, perhaps, the best known. See his 1787 classic, “Thoughts upon Female Education, Accommodated to the Present State of Society, Manners, and Government” in Frederick Rudolph, ed., *Essays on Education in the Early Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 130-133. For historical analysis, see for example: Bloch, “The Gendered Meanings of Virtue;” Ruth H. Bloch, “American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother,” *Feminist Studies* (June, 1978), 101-26; Linda K. Kerber, “The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment, an American Perspective,” *American Quarterly*, (Summer, 1976), 187-205; Margaret A. Nash, “Rethinking Republican Motherhood: Benjamin Rush and the Young Ladies’ Academy of Philadelphia,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, (Summer, 1997), 171-191.

⁷⁵ Carey, *Letters on the Condition of the Poor*, 8.

⁷⁶ Carey, *Essays on the Public Charities*, (1830), 9.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

Keenly aware that due to the high rates of hunger, sickness, and mortality among the women workers and their children, his portrayals of their worthy character were crucial to their relief, he embarked upon a new strategy in the late 1820s to end their distress. Rejecting claims like Franklin's that wage increases only encouraged workers' vices, Carey consistently depicted female laborers as industrious and competent, but also emphasized that they were grossly exploited by private employers and the government, who hired them to sew pantaloons and muslin shirts for the army at such a "sorry pittance," that by the early 1830s, 2000 to 2500 full-time workers found it necessary annually to request indoor and outdoor assistance just to survive.⁷⁸ Reminding his readers that the "Lord God of Hosts" forbade anyone to "*grind the faces of the poor*," Carey urged, "We ought never to forget that in alleviating the immediate sufferings of the poor women we are only *palliating* not *eradicating*, the evils of poverty. We must never forget that THE LOW RATE OF WAGES IS THE ROOT OF THE MISCHIEF."⁷⁹

Cleverly capitalizing on Americans' perennial resentment of government officials' salaries, he informed his readers that congressional representatives received eight dollars a day, while an average spooler earned only thirty cents for her labor, and further charged, "Five days' salary of the Vice President is more [than what one woman] working for the army can earn in a year."⁸⁰ In addition to attempting to incite the general public's indignation at such inequity, he joined with 131 leading Philadelphians, women as well as men, in petitioning the Secretary of War to increase the workers' salaries.⁸¹ No doubt exceedingly galled when their request was denied on the premise that it was, "a subject of too much delicacy for the Department to interfere," with the

⁷⁸ Carey, *A Plea for the Poor*, 4.

⁷⁹ Carey, *Address to the Wealthy*, Title page. Italics and capitalization are Carey's.

⁸⁰ Carey, *Essays on Public Charities*, (1828), 14.

⁸¹ Carey, *Wages of Female Labour*, 2. Some of the more well-known listed were, "Mrs. Rush, Mrs. Chew, Mrs. Sarah Barry, Rev. White, Robert Ralston, Alexander Henry, and Nicholas Biddle."

manufacturing process in Philadelphia,⁸² he nevertheless continued to press employers to raise wages, while simultaneously advocating an increase in the poor tax, which by the mid-1830s was only about 70 cents a head.⁸³ While he pushed for institutional changes, Carey also continued to appeal to the public for increased donations for private charity. Often receiving only paltry amounts, he refused to abandon the cause.

Disappointed, but not defeated, he continued his long-standing ecumenical strategy to urge “the pulpit” to unite against the injustices committed against the women workers, hoping that “all honorable members of society, male and female,”⁸⁴ too, would band together in their Christian duty. In that regard he was successful; for his appeals, at least until the early 1830s, were supported by male “citizens of the first respectability,” who worshiped in a wide variety of Christian denominations. However, it was the “ladies” committed to benevolence who became his greatest supporters in his final years; and Carey, in turn, praised their work with mutual admiration.⁸⁵

From the 1790s Philadelphia’s benevolent women had organized to ameliorate a wide range of social ills. Usually responding to traumatic events, such as outbreaks of epidemic disease or severe economic dislocations, charitable women, from a variety of religious backgrounds, tended to the immediate physical needs of the afflicted and often taught them skills to improve their

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Carey, *Letters on the Condition of the Poor*, 14. *Address to the Wealthy*, 28.

⁸⁴ Carey, *Address to the Wealthy*, 25.

⁸⁵ See, for example, Mathew Carey, *Address to the Liberal and Humane*, in *Miscellaneous Essays*, 275. Rev. Ezra Stiles Ely, Thomas Pym Cope, Bishop Onderdonk, and Robert Ralston were supporters to name a few. In “City of Brotherly Love,” Bruce Dorsey wrote, “Women’s associations were more likely than their male counterparts to challenge the hostile attacks leveled (primarily by men) against benevolent societies,” 134.

lives, all the while laboring to redeem their souls.⁸⁶ By the 1820s Carey came to realize that their aims, too, reflected his own; and his newly-forged alliance with certain women's groups, whom he came to call, "ministering angels in human form," strengthened his support of the female laborers. While he encouraged benevolent women's influence within their own homes to inspire their husbands, fathers, and brothers to donate to the cause, he more importantly celebrated their intimate acquaintance of the suffering within "the abodes of wretchedness." Celebrating their selfless acts of charity in an age in which the dictates of fashion compelled women to devote their time and treasure to luxury goods to enhance their appearance, Carey praised their inner beauty, labeling them a "radiant galaxy" whose benevolent work he hoped would "stimulate others to follow their bright example." In tribute to their service, he urged all crusaders – regardless of their backgrounds – to become ministering angels in emulation of the women's tenacious dedication to the cause.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ For examples of women's benevolent activities in this era, see, Anne M. Boylan, "Women in Groups: An Analysis of Women's Benevolent Organizations in New York and Boston, 1797-1840," *The Journal of American History*, (December, 1984), 497-523; Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

⁸⁷ Carey, *Essays on the Public Charities*, (1828), 18. Not all women involved in benevolence and reform came from wealthy families. Women from the upper, upper-middle, and middle classes often enhanced their organizations' treasuries by petitioning the men in their families for financial support. Fears about the "vanity of goods" detracting from virtuous behavior abounded since the eighteenth century. In "The Meaning of Things: Interpreting the Consumer Economy in the Eighteenth Century," in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., (London: Routledge, 1997), T. H. Breen argues that consumption of goods actually empowered women. 257-58. In contrast, Carey believed that "doing good" rather than "having things" was more empowering here and for the hereafter. Unlike some in Richard L. Bushman's study, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), who "justified the purchase of luxury items as a means of raising themselves to a higher plane," xviii, Carey believed that fashionable possessions detracted from any significant elevation. In

By the late 1820s the Female Hospitable Society, the Female Society for the Relief of Sick and Infirm Poor, and the Female Association for Relief of Widows and Children in Reduced Circumstances, were prominent women's groups that were furnishing direct aid to thousands of women workers in the garment industry. Depending on "public beneficence" to support their endeavors, the women found Carey's printed appeals for financial donations critical to their work.⁸⁸ Governess, Mary Snyder and the Secretary, Margaret Silver, of the Female Hospitable Society wrote:

We most earnestly hope Mr. C. will combat the erroneous idea . . . that these charities increase pauperism . . . [for] we can prove *we have been instrumental by timely aid*, . . . in keeping hundreds out of the Alms-House, thereby preserving that principle of honest industry, which is the mutual bond of civil society, and the everlasting barrier between virtue and vice.⁸⁹

But if they relied on Carey to make their case, he, in turn, depended on the women's groups to provide him with additional data to pen his pleas. Deeply admiring the diligence by which they investigated the living and working conditions of the women laborers, Carey deferred to their findings, sending queries to the managers of the Female Hospitable Society who had, "the great opportunity of judging on this subject – in order to test the correctness of my opinions on it."⁹⁰ In an age in which women were celebrated for their supposed superior morality and compassion, Carey, too, praised those qualities; but he also displayed respect for their tough resolve and intelligent approach in confronting the devastating effects of an exploitative marketplace. No

that regard, he was like the men of Pauline Maier's work, *The Old Revolutionaries: Political Lives in the Age of Samuel Adams* (New York: Knopf, 1980), who especially found their true worth in sacrificing for the republic.

⁸⁸ Carey, *Reflections on the Union Benevolent Association*, 10.

⁸⁹ Carey, *Essays on the Public Charities*, (1830), 23.

⁹⁰ Carey, *A Plea for the Poor*, 2. Advice and counsel went both ways. Carey did not limit his association only to women's groups in Philadelphia. See, for example, Mathew Carey, *To the Ladies . . . in New York*, (May 11, 1830) in *Miscellaneous Essays*, 278-282; Mathew Carey, *Address Submitted for Consideration*. . . , (May 15, 1830) in *Miscellaneous Essays*, 282-284.

withering flowers, the women with whom Carey allied witnessed disease, despair, and death in large measure and did not retreat in performing their perceived Christian duty.

Linked in a mutual spiritual crusade, Carey and benevolent women also shared a similar non-judgmental approach in their association with the poor.⁹¹ For example, building upon the principles of the Sunday Schools of the 1790s, Infant Schools were established in the late 1820s and early 1830s, in order “to diminish crime, to increase the comforts of the poor, and to meliorate and elevate the character of society,”⁹² and were efforts in which concerned men and women joined. Hoping to instruct children from two to six years, when Carey believed “the mind is a mere *tabula rasa*,” in the “elements of a plain education, and the seeds of good morals, with the first principles of religion,” he hoped that they would no longer be corrupted by growing up unsupervised in the violent city streets.⁹³ However, he never blamed the indigent for negligent parenting skills. Understanding that the 17-hour working days many women were forced to endure left little time for child instruction, Carey believed the schools would be a “relief” for mothers “from the cares and anxieties attendant on watching over their children.”⁹⁴ In addition, sensitive to the possible “humiliation that is apt to attach to gratuitous education,” and out of

⁹¹ Anne Firor Scott describes benevolent women’s relations with the poor as warmly familial. *Natural Allies*, 15. Carey proclaimed to his female allies that they should “take up the cause of poor women, *con amore*. For it is a holy cause.” Mathew Carey, *A Solemn Address, Addressed to Ladies*, (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, July 23, 1835), 9.

⁹² Mathew Carey, *To the Public* (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, April 12, 1830), 1.

⁹³ Mathew Carey, *The Infant School* (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, December 28, 1827), 1.

Carey wrote that since the Society of Friends had long been “the kind protectors of the coloured race,” they should, therefore, have the “honour of the origination and the chief management” of a separate school for “the coloured population.” *Ibid*, 3.

⁹⁴ Mathew Carey, *Infant Schools* (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, April 3, 1829), 2.

respect for parental dignity, the female school administrators charged a nominal fee, in some cases only 3 cents per week, to engage the poor in their own children's education.⁹⁵

Since projects like the Infant Schools required substantial financial support, Carey understood the absolute need to redouble his efforts to inspire the wealthy especially to save themselves by becoming involved in elevating the poor through monetary gifts and personal visits to counsel and comfort the afflicted.⁹⁶ Charging that most charities were supported primarily by middle-class citizens, he lamented that “in every quarter of the country it appears that inordinate wealth, guarded with as much care as if it were the heart's blood, often becomes a curse,” leading to “destruction.”⁹⁷ Reminding the rich that the Greeks and Romans celebrated “noble disinterestedness” and rewarded “the great heroic virtues of patriotism [and] public spirit,”⁹⁸ his attempts to prick their consciences with the stick of eternal damnation and the carrot of temporal rewards had little effect. In an 1833 national appeal for charitable funds, he only received negligible amounts, even from such well-known social activists as Lewis Tappan and Gerrit Smith, and found that most recipients of his mailings by that period of time simply ignored him.⁹⁹

By the end of his life Carey could have wondered whether his charitable efforts had any lasting effect. Not only were his appeals virtually disregarded by then, two years before his death he also found it necessary to criticize allies such as the men and women of the Union Benevolent Association for their stingy assistance to the Irish districts of Northern Liberties and

⁹⁵ Carey, *The Infant School* (1827), 4. The Infant Schools were administered by a “board of managers of twenty-five ladies and a board of advisers of five gentlemen,” with the men assisting the women only “when called upon” to make recommendations. *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Mathew Carey, *Appeal to the Public* (1829) in *Miscellaneous Essays*, 284.

⁹⁷ Carey, *Annals of Liberality*, 1. Mary Snyder and Margaret Silver, for example, were wives of middle-class men.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹⁹ Carey, *To the Humane and Charitable*, 2. Tappan and Smith each donated \$5.00.

Southwark.¹⁰⁰ With ethnic tensions renewed by the late 1830s, Carey could have despaired as to the overall worth of his mission. Yet, if his responses to former challenges are any indication as to how he may have assessed the merit of his benevolence, he would have been able peacefully to rest. Forty-five years before his death he wrote, “others may have exceeded me in abilities – but none did [more] in zeal to promote the common good.”¹⁰¹ His opinion was much the same in his later years. In the face of disappointing apathy he was able to say, “Thank God, I have the decided approbation of my own conscience,” in regard to his own salvation; for he believed that he had “made more disinterested sacrifices probably than any individual in the U.S. since the time of the war of the Revolution.”¹⁰²

As a transplanted American citizen, Mathew Carey contributed to the strength of the new nation by addressing the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of those whom many discarded. Through repeated visits to the homes of the white working poor, he came to appreciate their inherent goodness and believe that, with compassionate aid, they would rise to become worthy republican citizens. Devoid of self-righteous piety, Carey’s Christian faith inspired him to believe that by their self-sacrificing efforts for the disadvantaged, all those who served as ministering angels to the poor would come to embody the essential principles of disinterested republican virtue; and he had every confidence that those whom they saved would develop to display the same. In an attempt to prove his own virtue and the virtue of those whom many dismissed as impossible to incorporate in the promises of the new nation, Mathew Carey strove to save the souls of all participants in his benevolent crusade as well as to secure the character of the early American republic.

¹⁰⁰ Carey, *Reflections on the System of the Union Benevolent Association*, 12.

¹⁰¹ Carey, *An Address of M. Carey to the Public*, 3.

¹⁰² Mathew Carey Diary, December 1, 1824. Housed at the University of Pennsylvania Library Rare Book Room.