The Confederate Post

By Patricia A. Kaufmann

Charleston Orphan House

The cover shown in Figure 1 is a 3-cent star-die entire tied by March 1 [1861] circular date stamp of Augusta, Ga. It is addressed to Mrs. Eliza Woodruff, care of Mrs. Roberts, Orphans House, Charleston, S.C., which address has been crossed out and readdressed "care of W. T. Easterline, Esq., Bamberg, S.C., C.S.A."

The cover was forwarded with a 3-cent dull red 1857 issue canceled by a grid and double circle cancel of Charleston, S.C., March 4, 1861. Both uses denote Confederate use of U.S. postage before the Confederate Post Office Department took control of its own postal operations on June 1, 1861. Before that, the United States Post Office Department provided postal services in the seceded states and, thereafter, the Confederate States.

South Carolina seceded from the Union on December 20, 1860. It was one of the first states to form the Confederate States of America on February 4, 1861, along with five other states—often misstated as six other states, erroneously and prematurely including Texas.

Isabella Ann Roberts Woodruff (1837-?) was a widowed school teacher from Charleston. Her papers are housed at the University of North Carolina Libraries and Duke University. The correspondence primarily deals with observations of a social and political nature regarding the period in South Carolina before, during and immediately following the Civil War.

There are many letters from Charles V. Holst, a friend and later the husband of Isabella. Many letters were also exchanged between Isabella and her best friend, Countess Aniela N. Pinkind, another widow.[1] Aniela Niecieska Pinkind was a singer and violinist. She married music writer J.P.Temple, then Thomas C. Pinkind of Maryland, who died of yellow fever in 1858, Charleston.[2]

Oldest Municipal Orphanage in the United States

The Charleston Orphan House was established by City Ordinance, ratified on October 18, 1790, "for the purpose of supporting and educating poor orphan children, and those of poor, distressed and disabled parents who are unable to support and maintain them."

This was the first municipal orphanage in the United States in the richest city in the nation at that time. Charleston's fortunes were basically built on cotton and the slave trade to pick it before the cotton gin was invented. Charleston Orphan House was established at the instigation of John Robertson, a philanthropic citizen and member of City Council.[3] (Figure 2)

The institution was governed by a board of 12 commissioners or trustees who were annually elected by City Council. The day-to-day operations of the Orphan House were administered by a paid staff of women and men. The institution was funded by a public endowment consisting of annual appropriations from City Council, returns on investments, and charitable donations and bequests.

Figure 2. Charleston Orphan House, 1865, right after the war.

Figure 3. Charleston Orphan House, circa 1900.

Figure 4. Charleston Orphan House, 1944, near the end of its existence.

Founded during an era in which most African-Americans in South Carolina were held as chattel slaves, the Orphan House admitted only the poorest white children of European descent. Although the institution was officially created in 1790, the Charleston Orphan House was housed in temporary quarters during its first four years.

Its first home was a large, preexisting structure located at the corner of French Alley and Ellery Street. There, President George Washington breakfasted with the commissioners on May 7, 1791, viewed the children, and perused the institution's records. The cornerstone of the first permanent Orphan House, located on the north side of Boundary (now Calhoun) Street, was laid on November 12, 1792. It formally opened on October 18, 1794.

Around the age of 14, most children of the Charleston Orphan House were destined to serve an apprenticeship or indenture with a business or family outside the Orphan House. The children were referred to as "inmates" and doubtless many felt like convicts.

To obtain a child for such purposes, individuals communicated their requirements to the Commissioners of the Orphan House, who would then select an appropriate child. In both cases, the children in question were indentured back to their family or to an unrelated individual for a specified period--usually until they reached the age of majority.[4]

Between 1849 and 1859, the number of residents in the Orphan House tripled. To accommodate the growing need for space, the

commissioners of the institution oversaw a significant expansion and refurbishment of the physical space and its administration in the mid-1850s.

In August 1853, the children and staff moved into temporary quarters in the city's recently purchased Alms House on Columbus Street.

After a little over two years of construction, they returned to the refurbished campus in mid-October 1855. Following their return to the Orphan House, the commissioners instituted numerous physical and administrative changes that were codified into a new set of institutional by-laws in 1861.

On August 24, 1863, a few days after the Union army commenced bombarding the city of Charleston, the commissioners ordered the immediate evacuation of the children and staff by train to a temporary facility in Orangeburg, S.C.

On September 22, 1863, the commissioners received a request from Confederate General Beauregard and his staff, asking to use the Orphan House as a military hospital. The commissioners readily agreed, noting, however, that the door to the library was to remain locked. Confederate sick and wounded were not the only occupants of the near empty house.

In the latter months of 1863, most of Charleston's remaining citizens abandoned their homes and stores in the southern part of the city beyond the range of U.S. artillery fire. After several shells struck City Hall, the offices of the mayor, city council, sheriff, and
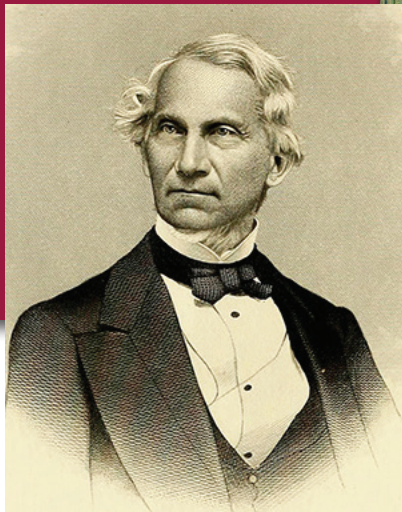
Figure A. Christopher Memminger, a former "inmate" of Charleston Orphan House, grew up to serve as CSA Secretary of Treasury, shown here on a Confederate $5 bill.

Figure B. Christopher Gustavus Memminger, 1880 engraving.

other municipal employees were removed to the Orphan House by December of 1863.

Shortly after the occupation of Charleston by U.S. forces in February 1865, the Orphan House became a barracks for African-American soldiers. The commissioners of the Charleston Orphan

House regained possession of the building in October, immediately after U.S. officials gave permission for the mayor and city council to reorganize municipal government.

After an absence of 26 months, the children returned to their Calhoun Street home in early November 1865 and soon settled into a familiar routine. Enrollment peaked at 334 children shortly after the Civil War.[5]

During the second quarter of the twentieth century, the purpose and identity of the Charleston Orphan House began to move in a new direction. The advent of new social services sponsored by federal and state agencies eroded the traditional role of the municipal orphanage, and the commissioners increasingly viewed the aging facilities of the Orphan House as an impediment to its mission. (Figure 4)

In 1947, the board asked the Child Welfare League of America to conduct a survey of the institution and to make recommendations. The league's report, delivered on February 26, 1948, identified the old structure on Calhoun Street as an obsolete and financial burden to the continued success of the institution. The commissioners unanimously agreed to pursue a cottage system of housing at a new, more spacious facility located outside the city. (Figures 5)

In 1951, the property was sold and the Orphan House itself was demolished. The purpose changed somewhat during this transition. The name was changed to Oak Grove, the facilities were moved to North Charleston, and non-orphaned, emotionally disturbed children were accepted as residents.

In 1978, the City removed itself from the direct involvement with the Oak Grove facility. Oak Grove became the private, non-profit Carolina Youth Development Center located in North Charleston.[6]

Researchers investigating the history of the Charleston Orphan House, or searching for ancestors who once lived under its roof, should be aware that, although the official name of the institution was the "Charleston Orphan House," numerous writers have incorrectly referred to it as the "Orphan Asylum." In many cases, such references were clearly meant to indicate the Orphan House on Calhoun Street, but the existence of a separate "City Orphan Asylum" invites confusion.

The beautiful old orphanage stood a magnificent four stories high with a center section measuring 40' x 40' and two side wings each measuring 65' x 30'. One wing housed the boys and the other the girls, with administrative offices and the school in the center section. It was the largest building in the city for many years. It was torn down in 1951 for to accommodate a Sears parking lot. The statue on the top—"Charity"—and the bell are in the Charleston Museum.[7]

SIDEBAR: *Many distinguished citizens of Charleston were placed in the Orphan House as children. Christopher Gustavus Memminger (1802-1888), Confederate Secretary of the Treasury and founder of the Charleston Public School system, was admitted in 1807. (Figures A and B)*

Memminger was born in Nayinghen in the Dukedom of Württemberg, Germany, the only child of Christopher Godfrey and Ebarhardina Elisabeth Kohler Memminger. Christopher was an infant when his father, an officer in the Prince-Elector's Battalion of Foot Jaegers, was killed in the line of duty. He immigrated with his mother and her parents to Charleston, S.C., to escape Napoleon's continuing wars, but there his mother died and four-year-old Christopher was placed in the Orphan House.

At age eleven, he was adopted by Thomas Bennett, later governor of South Carolina, and was reared in an atmosphere of refinement and opportunity and went on to have a distinguished career as a lawyer and statesman.

Endnotes:

[1] Isabella Ann Roberts Woodruff, Duke University Library, Perkins Library, OCLC WorldCat, http://www.worldcat.org/title/papers-1768-1865/oclc/41546366. Accessed February 27, 2017.

[2] Sofge - Family History & Genealogy Message Board, http://boards.ancestry.com/surnames.sofge/rss.xml. Accessed February 27, 2017.

[3] Susan L. King, The Charleston Orphan House Charleston, Charleston County, South Carolina, Volume 2: 1860-1899.

[4] Records of the Commissioners of the Charleston Orphan House, 1790-1959. Charleston County Public Library. https://ccplarchive.files.wordpress.com/2007/09/fa_orphan_house.pdf/ Accessed February 27, 2017.

[5] Brief History of Orphan House, The Post and Courier, March 15, 2013. http://www.postandcourier.com/news/brief-history-of-orphan-house/article_d1d8303e-448f-5388-ab1b-ad888bdaccf8.html/ Accessed February 27, 2017.

[6] Records of the Commissioners of the Charleston Orphan House, 1790-1951. Charleston County Public Library. http://www.ccpl.org/content.asp?id=56693&action=detail&catID=10364&parentID=5402/ Accessed February 28, 2017.

[7] The Orphanage: 1900, SHORPY, Historic Photo Archive & Fine-Arts Prints. http://www.shorpy.com/node/9247/ Accessed February 28, 2017.