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**“The Suspect Matron”: A History of Sheltering Arms Day Nursery and the Origins of the
American Childcare Worker (1890-1940)**

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Abstract

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By Stephanie Spangler

In the United States, there are more than 11 million children under the age of five that require care outside of the home.¹ Recent scientific studies have proven that the first five years of life are pivotal for neurological developmental.² The most developmentally significant years, for many American children, consequently, are those spent in the childcare system. Despite this proven significance, the childcare worker retains one of the lowest occupational statuses in the United States. Reasons for the marginalization of the childcare worker are multifaceted, but one unstudied explanation is the historical origins of the profession itself. Originating in the late nineteenth century in the form of the “matron” in day nurseries, this occupation has always experienced low wages, long hours, and marginalization.

My thesis will argue that the foundational period from 1890 to 1940 provides a key framework for understanding the marginalization of the profession over the course of the next century. Scholars such as Linda Gordon, Sonya Michel, and Mary Frances Berry have written extensively on the class tensions and conflicting motives between the elite founders of the day nurseries and the poor women for whom they advocated. These works, however, have not included a consideration of the figure of the matron. The matron is not only an essential actor in this childcare narrative, but also a lasting result of the negative influences of the conflicting intentions within the day nursery movement of the early twentieth century.

¹ NAACRA. (2009). *Parent's Perceptions of Child Care in the United States*.

² Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips. *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. 2000.

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Introduction

As the sun began to set one evening in the fall of 1888, a factory whistle pierced the evening air, signifying the end of the shift at the nearby Atlanta Cotton Mills. Waves of workers made their way past the John Barclay Mission on Marietta Street, returning to their homes in the nearby cotton-mill neighborhoods. On this particular evening, peering down on this routine scene of industrial life was a group known as the Order of Old Fashioned Women. Gathered for their weekly sewing circle at the Barclay Mission, these women were of a different world than the cotton mill workers passing by below. They were the wives and daughters of some of the most prominent businessmen, mill owners, and politicians in the city. Despite these stark distinctions, the elite women had taken a keen interest in the cotton mill workers from this part of town.

One member of this sewing circle was unlike the others—Miss Sue Holloway, a charity worker who had served in the cotton mill district for many decades. Unlike the women of the Old Fashioned Order, Holloway had lived much of her own life in poverty. Her lifestyle had more in common with the poor cotton mill workers than the elite women of the sewing circle. She “never owned a lace curtain, or walked on a Russian rug of her own. Squalor, misery, penury and want are to her things familiar”.³ She reportedly told the women of the Order that “her faith and her hope and her acts are her jewels, which all the wealth of the earth cannot buy, and are her passports into that eternal city where all is love.”⁴ Throughout her successful career as a beloved Atlanta public servant, she remained devoted to these personal values of poverty and humility.

³ *Atlanta Constitution*. March 4, 1903.

⁴ *Atlanta Constitution*. March 4, 1903.



Miss Sue Holloway (pictured above) began her career as a neighborhood based charity worker. In 1888, she became the founding matron of Sheltering Arms Day Nursery, then moved to work in the police barracks, and finally returned to neighborhood based charity work until her death in 1904. Over the years, she developed a close relationship with the city's elite and the most destitute poor. Her funeral was a major public event for the city: "hundreds of grown people and children testified their love for the deceased and showed their appreciation for her noble work." The chapel "was crowded to its utmost capacity, and numbers of people, mainly children, remained on the outside crying as if their own mother had passed to the great beyond."⁵ Picture taken from the *Atlanta Constitution*, December 12, 1904.

The poor residents of the cotton mill district knew and trusted Sue Holloway; her presence in their lives was consistent and unwavering. Their partnership with this trusted figure was essential to the Order of Old Fashioned Women gaining access to the poor cotton mill workers and their families. In her obituary, the President of the Order of Old Fashioned Women, Mrs. Dorothy Arkwright reflected, "[Miss Sue Holloway] and all the ills of human kind have been linked together forty years and more. If you wandered at early morn or midnight in the

⁵ *Atlanta Constitution*. December 12, 1904.

haunts of the forsaken, where poverty and woe and misery are wont to dwell, and where sickness and death hover, there you would find her.”⁶ Holloway had a particular passion for issues related to women and poverty. Arkwright continued, “from that good day to this she has served alike Hagar in the wilderness of despair and Magdalene with the frown of public opinion and its mailed hand turned against her!”⁷ Holloway spent much of her life among not only the poor, but also the morally precarious social outcasts of the city. Now, inducted into the Barclay Sewing Circle, Holloway had the opportunity to work with some of the city’s wealthiest and most prosperous women for the benefit of her beloved poor. She “sat among them, full of hope and vigor, and happy as a child chasing a butterfly” at the possibilities that this new partnership could bring to the cotton-mill residents of Atlanta.⁸

Mending children’s clothing by the fire, Holloway and the Order swapped stories from their days spent exploring the cotton mill district. Originally, the meetings had been intended as a sewing circle. The women collectively stitched clothing for the mill children and then ventured out into the neighborhoods to distribute their products. As they spent time in this neighborhood under the guidance of Holloway, however, the women quickly realized that the working poor had needs more pressing than new clothing. In response to the harsh living conditions they observed, the women transformed their sewing circle into a planning committee, where they collectively imagined what their group could do to help alleviate the suffering of the poor.

Of everything that they observed on their trips through the cotton mill districts, the most disturbing were the unattended babies and children. Shifts in the economic and social fabric of the nation had forced working-class women into factories and mills in unprecedented numbers.

⁶ *Atlanta Constitution*. March 4, 1903.

⁷ *Atlanta Constitution*. March 4, 1903.

⁸ *Atlanta Constitution*. March 4, 1903.

Mothers in Atlanta, and around the nation, worked outside of the home for many reasons. Some were single mothers, widowed or deserted by husbands. Others worked to support husbands who were unable or unwilling to serve as the family's breadwinner. And a significant, and growing, proportion of the women worked to supplement the insufficient industrial wages of their employed spouses. At the same time, in the late nineteenth century state level child labor laws and a union-led national campaign against child labor emerged. These legal shifts prevented young children from accompanying their mothers to work, as they had once done. In short, societal forces pushed mothers into mills and factories, while pushing children out of them.

In their desperation to support their families, poor workingwomen sometimes placed their children in unsafe childcare arrangements or left them unattended for hours each day. During their voyages down Marietta Street, the Order of Old Fashioned Women reported finding children locked in dark bedrooms and tied to bedposts for safekeeping.⁹ Other children were "neglected, untrained, and uncared for and left to roam the streets" freely until their mothers' return.¹⁰ The women observed children who were less than five years old caring for their multiple younger siblings. During these long, unsupervised days, the children had limited access to nutritious food or proper hygienic supplies. They occupied their time by wandering the streets, sometimes begging or peddling to supplement their family's income. According to the Order, these circumstances left the children vulnerable to the dangers of the Atlanta streets.¹¹

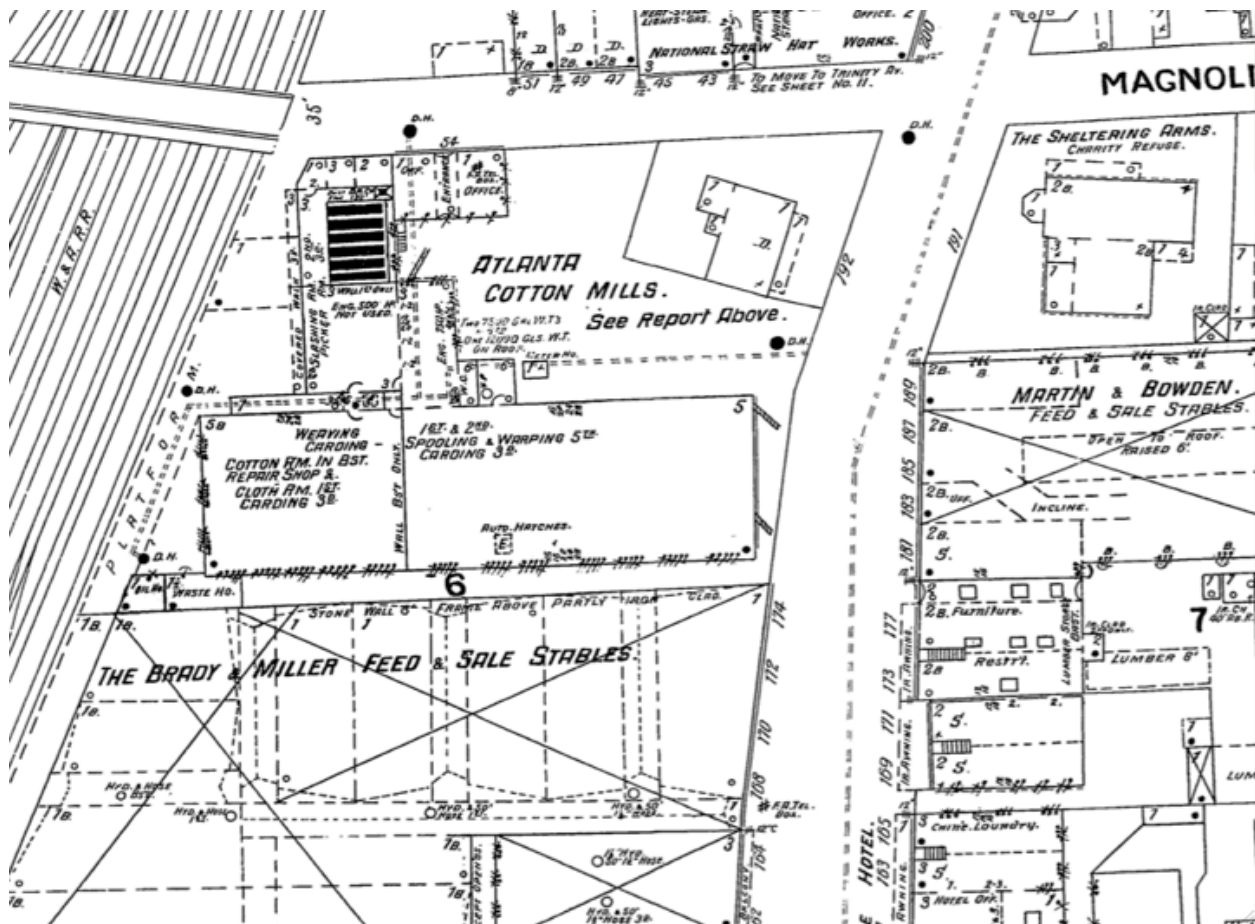
In response to these observations, the Order of Old Fashioned Women partnered with Holloway to found the Sheltering Arms Association of Day Nurseries in 1888. The day nursery

⁹ Based on the firsthand accounts of these founding experiences recorded in their institutional records, it appears that the Order women let themselves into the homes of the poor families without their permission to "look around". If true, this demonstrates the power differential that existed between the two.

¹⁰ *Prospectus of the Marietta Street Mission*. 1890. 6.

¹¹ This historical account was adopted from *A Brief History of Sheltering Arms* by Mrs. William H. Grant, 1947.

allowed working mothers to drop their children off in the morning, and then return in the evenings and pick them up. The Order of Old Fashioned Women comprised the board of managers, which would oversee the policy decisions and fundraising for the organization. Holloway was appointed head matron, meaning she oversaw the daily operations of the nursery. The first Sheltering Arms day nursery began in an abandoned boxcar. From there, it moved to a bar room because of the luxuries of running water and electricity. Over the next forty years, the organization opened four nurseries across the city, expanding into “those industrial portions of the city peopled by the poor, the destitute, the illiterate and the immoral.”¹²



The first Sheltering Arms was located at 191 Marietta Street, across the street from the Atlanta Cotton Mills. The neighborhood was largely industrial. Mills, factories, railroads and stables were compressed within a few blocks. Picture from Sanborn Map Company Collection, Emory University. 1899.

¹² *Prospectus of the Marietta Street Mission*. 1890. 4.

When Sheltering Arms was founded, it served only white women and children. While Sheltering Arms leadership acknowledged the importance of the “negro childcare problem,” they perceived it to be a separate issue to be addressed by some other charitable entity. In the 1920s, a group of black elites founded the Gate City Nursery in southwest Atlanta to address the black childcare needs of in those neighborhoods. The black day nursery leadership differed from their white counterparts in their attitudes and interactions towards poor mothers, tending to be less condescending and more willing to accept maternal employment outside of the home. These distinctions were significant for the ways in which the childcare developed in each of these respective communities. A comprehensive consideration of these important distinctions, however, is ultimately beyond the scope of this thesis.¹³ Because the institution remained segregated until the late 1960s, the analysis of Sheltering Arms from 1890 to 1940 will be restricted to the consideration of the white working poor and their white benefactors.

Wealthy urban women founded day nurseries all over the country at the turn of the century. In 1902, the National Federation of Day Nurseries recognized 250 nurseries in the country, and by 1914 they recognized 618. Despite this rapid growth, historians have largely ignored the institution of day nurseries, and the history of childcare in the United States more generally. A related, robust body of scholarship explores the role of gender in the development of the American welfare state. Scholars have traced the ways in which gendered expectations that women remain in the home constrained the development of their economic opportunities

¹³ For a full analysis of the politics of black day nurseries and their leadership see Eileen Boris’ “The Power of Motherhood: Black and White Women Activists Redefine the Political” in *Mothers of A New World*.

outside of it.¹⁴ These works deal with the institution of the day nursery only tangentially. Scholars present the day nursery as a missed opportunity, as a policy route that the architects of the New Deal failed to take because of their aversion to maternal employment. Progressive Era reformers and the architects of the welfare state ignored childcare as a potential policy intervention because it facilitated female economic independence. They focused instead on pension programs and increased protections for male workers in order to reinforce the structure of the male breadwinners.

In her work, *The Politics of Parenthood*, Mary Frances Berry epitomizes this “road not taken” approach to the study of childcare history. She argues that the American tradition of “mother-care” has hindered the development of a national childcare system. Because the public favors mother-care over childcare, political support for care outside of the home equates to an attack on family values. This political association has crippled the efforts for federal support of childcare. For women, the mother-care tradition and the failed federal childcare system have resulted in continued marginalization and inequality. Women’s rights have been defined not as individual workers, but in terms of their responsibilities to their children and families. Because of its political implications for the fabric of society, the history of childcare is “really an issue of power, resources, and control among adults.”¹⁵ Access to affordable childcare, Berry argues, has been consciously limited to discourage female economic independence.

While the restriction of childcare access is an important story to tell, to focus on it exclusively ignores the reality that childcare institutions continued to operate in the United States

¹⁴ Some of the most influential works within this historiography include Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in United States*; Joanne L. Goodwin *Gender and the Politics of Welfare Reform: Mothers’ Pensions in Chicago*; Linda Gordon, *Pitied but Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare 1890-1935*; Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work: Women, Child Welfare, and the State, 1890-1930*; Gwendolyn Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917-1942*; and Ruth Sidel, *Keeping Women and Children Last*.

¹⁵ Mary Frances Berry, *The Politics of Parenthood*. 49.

throughout the twentieth century. Despite the fact that policy makers and political leaders discouraged maternal employment, women continued to work outside of the home in ever-increasing numbers. In effect, the moral objections of policy leaders were largely irrelevant to the daily reality of working mothers. How workingwomen, particularly low-income women, met their childcare needs in these politically hostile environments is largely an untold story.

When childcare is not presented in historical narratives as a missed opportunity, it is ignored entirely. In her piece “What About the Working of the Working Mother?” in the *Journal of Women’s History*, Eileen Boris laments that “the new scholarship on women and the state mostly has focused on mothers’ pensions and maternal and child health, not labor standards or work-related issues.”¹⁶ She cautions women’s historians to remember that “women’s place in the family is crucial to her place in the labor market; home and work intersect.”¹⁷ Although Boris does not connect her argument directly to childcare, childcare constitutes one of the “work-related issue” that Boris mentions. Because it is essential to maternal employment, childcare is directly related to that intersection of home and work. In neglecting the study of childcare, historians have imagined women first as mothers, and second as workers; they have failed to recognize the interdependency of these two roles. Consequently, scholars have fallen into the same stereotypical construction of women as exclusively mothers that the architects of the welfare state did nearly eighty years ago.

More recently, a small group of scholars have begun to take the history of childcare more seriously. Two works published within the last ten years trace the history of childcare in the twentieth century: Sonya Michel’s *Children’s Interests/Mothers’ Rights* and Elizabeth Rose’s *A Mother’s Job*. Michel traces childcare policy on the national level, beginning with the charitable

¹⁶ Eileen Boris. “What About the Working of the Working Mother?”104.

¹⁷ Eileen Boris. “What About the Working of the Working Mother?”104.

day nurseries and tracing their development through the founding of Head Start in the 1960s. Rose focuses more on the grassroots story of the operations of childcare institutions, using the city of Philadelphia as a case study. She utilizes institutional records, survey responses from working mothers, and local level data to construct a picture of what life was like within a day nursery.

Much of this new scholarship centers on the class dichotomy between the elite founders of the day nurseries and the poor women for whom they advocated. Even this emerging literature of the history of childcare has not included a robust consideration of the figure of the matron, the historical predecessor to the childcare worker. Unlike the wealthy philanthropists who focused on fundraising and political advocacy for the day nursery, matrons like Sue Holloway ran the daily operations of the facilities. They were responsible for watching over the children and interacting with the mothers each day. Despite these extensive responsibilities for the development of young children, the matron never achieved the status of a professional. Low wages, long hours, and marginalization came to characterize the childcare workers for the duration of the twentieth century, long after the extinction of the day nursery. While many explanations have been offered for this low-occupational status, few have explored the impact of the historical origins of the profession on its current status.¹⁸ The foundational day nursery period from 1890 to 1940 provided a framework of marginalization that ignited the devaluing of the work over the course of the next century. Modern childcare workers are not professionals, in part, because of the historical context in which their profession developed.

The first major barrier to the professionalization of the matron was the charitable origins of day nurseries themselves. In their inception, institutional childcare was a last resort for the

¹⁸ These alternative explanations have largely revolved around inherently female nature of the work (see Joffe's *Friendly Intruders*). The work is devalued because it is a traditionally female occupation.

destitute poor. As a result, the very concept of group care became associated with poverty and despair in the minds of many middle and upper class Americans. Day nurseries enabled maternal employment, a condition that threatened “traditional” family structure.¹⁹ As a result of these associations with dire poverty and “dysfunctional” families, a public distrust of childcare emerged. This suspicion of the institution transferred to the matrons, who were seen as surrogate mothers, enabling other women to evade their duties as caregivers. Their very existence symbolized the erosion of the traditional familial structure. Because of this, critics of the day nursery viewed matrons as necessary evils to be tolerated, not valuable professionals to be respected.

The matron was also the target of suspicion and resentment within the day nursery. Although some of the wealthiest women in the city founded and directed the day nurseries, matrons were of a much lower socioeconomic status than their employers. In fact, the class distance between the day nursery clients and the day nursery matrons was often minimal. Consequently, elite boards of managers treated the matrons as “servants.” Matrons had no influence on policy decisions. Despite this lack of input, matrons were expected to instruct mothers on proper household management and childrearing practices handed down from the board. Families did not accept this “spiritual guidance” without reservations and resistance. In fact, these “character-building” policies often left matrons at odds with the mothers. Working mothers regarded matrons as unwelcomed intruders in private family matters. Within these class-based conflicts, power rested with the philanthropic directors and the working mothers, not with the matrons. Their position left them in the “crossfires” of the class tensions between these

¹⁹ The term “traditional family” refers to the general structure of the American family in which a husband is the breadwinner and the wife stayed in the home. This structure emerged early in the 19th century and lasted about 150 years (1830s to 1980s). For a comprehensive explanation of the historical evolution of role of the “good provider,” see Jessie Bernard’s “The Good Provider Role: Its Rise and Fall.”

groups, leaving them in a precarious position of little authority.

A final barrier to the professionalization of the childcare worker was their lack of “expertise” in a particular field of specialized knowledge. The major qualification for day nursery matrons was a kind disposition. Caring for the children of the poor was considered work of the heart, not of the mind. Day nursery founders thought of matrons as babysitters, filling in for incapable or unavailable mothers. They were not experts in child development. Their work was not specialized, and much of it was seen as “common sense” or based on maternal instinct. At this same point in history, in contrast, other female occupations, such as social workers and kindergarten teachers, became organized as professions. These new female professionals entered the day nursery scene in the 1920s, further narrowing the area of expertise for the matron. They assumed the more intellectual components of her job, relegating the matron to a mere custodial caregiver.

A history of day nurseries in the United States serves as a reminder that while all citizens have a stake in the cultivated growth of the future workforce, not everyone contributes equally to its development. Economist Nancy Folbre argues that those “individuals who devote relatively little time or energy to child-rearing are free-riding” on the work of mothers and childcare workers.²⁰ Our society systematically underinvests in childcare workers and disregards their role in training a public good: children. While this disinvestment is political, social, and economical, it is also historical. Within the context of the day nursery between 1890 and 1940, the framework was set for understanding childcare as custodial, unspecialized, women’s work. This foundation has led to over a century of underpaid, overworked childcare employees. The occupation remains remarkably nonprofessional, even as science has increasingly shown the importance of development in a child’s early cognitive years. Only by understanding the historical foundations

²⁰ Nancy Folbre. “Children as Public Goods”.

of this framework for the marginalization of the matron and the subsequent childcare worker, can we begin to change it.

Section 1: Tainted Work

Caring for other people's children was inherently tainted work. At the turn of the twentieth century, the day nursery matron faced heavy scrutiny for overseeing the children of working mothers. The matron never enjoyed a professional status, in part, because of societal anxiety over her position as a "surrogate mother." Her very existence threatened the traditional family structure, breaking down women's domestic roles by facilitating their entrance into the formal labor market. Critics of day nurseries regarded matrons as dangerous meddlers in the sacred relationship between mother and child. Even those who cautiously supported day nurseries saw her as an unsustainable social intervention; she was an unfit substitute for mothers' care in the home until a better solution could be reached. Rather than a respected professional, the matron was an enabler of the degradation of modern family life.

The skepticism surrounding matrons reflected a larger distrust of the institution of the day nursery. Replacing the large-scale orphanages of the nineteenth century, day nurseries kept families together by providing a safe place for poor children to stay during the workday. Rapid industrialization pushed women out of the home and into the factories and mills in ever increasing numbers. At the same time, emerging child labor laws prevented children from working alongside their mothers in the factories as they once had. Despite thousands of women entering the work force each year and a serious shortage of childcare options, day nurseries struggled to gain support. Most of these nurseries were concentrated in northern urban centers and served primarily immigrant communities. African-Americans and Catholics also utilized day

nurseries at above average rates. Overall, however, considering the rapidly increasing number of women with childcare needs in the United States, the number of day nurseries remained low.

Among middle and upper class white Americans, discomfort with institutionalized group care led to suspicion of the day nurseries. Day nurseries were a place where only the most desperate of the poor would take their children. Sensationalized stories about deserted women and widowed mothers reinforced the notion of day nurseries as something for only the most destitute, a last resort for those with no opportunity for maintaining a “proper” childcare arrangement in the home. By the turn of the twentieth century, “institutional care had become associated in the eyes of middle-class parents with poor dysfunctional families.”²¹ This association became a reiterating cycle, stigmatizing the institutions to the point where only those in the most desperate of circumstances would enroll their children. In the eyes of many middle and upper class Americans, day nurseries were places of poverty, desperation, and immorality.

Day nurseries faced heavy scrutiny even within the poor communities they served. Whenever possible, women relied upon systems of families and neighbors to fulfill childcare needs without institutional care. When they did enroll their children in day nurseries, it was often only temporarily until other arrangements could be made. Day nursery records indicate that attendance was sporadic, suggesting mothers would enroll their children in between other, more preferable childcare provisions. Despite their low socioeconomic status, working mothers were not passive recipients of day nurseries’ charity. They actively navigated the system to their

²¹ Mary Frances Berry. *The Politics of Parenthood*. 119.

benefit, minimizing the negative associations while maximizing services offered.²²



One of the major sources of discomforts for those considering day nurseries was the high staff to child ratio. Day nursery children were classified into four categories—“bed baby,” “runabout,” “kindergarteners,” and “school children.” The matron had jurisdiction over all these groups of children, leading some to question her ability to provide quality care to all. Pictured above is a group of “runabouts” from the Sheltering Arms’ Osgood Sanders Day Nursery. Sheltering Arms Collection at the Sheltering Arms Headquarters. Nd.

Beyond their negative reputations at the community level, day nurseries also struggled to gain political support on the national landscape. By the start of the twentieth century, a group of elite, well-educated, white women known as the maternalist reformers had become a dominant national force in public advocacy.²³ They focused primarily on issues related to women and

²² Elizabeth Rose. *A Mother’s Job*.

²³ Sonya Mitchel first coined the term “maternalist”. For a detailed discussion of the complexities of the maternalist reformers, see Michel’s collection of essays, *Mothers of A New World*.

children, arguing that their gender made them particularly suited to solve problems related to that population. Public advocacy became an extension of their private roles as mothers.

Maternalists worked to relieve the suffering of poor mothers and children first through private charity; they founded a variety of charities and institutions to support the poor. They then turned their attention to governmental interventions. During the first several decades of the twentieth century, maternalist reformers used their newfound public authority to redefine the relationship between poor women and children and the government. They were integral in the founding and administration of both the Women's Bureau and the Children's Bureau. The maternalists were also intimately involved in the passage of the Sheppard-Towner Maternal and Infant Protection Act of 1921 and the Aid to Dependent Children program in the Social Security Act of 1935.²⁴ These new agencies and pieces of legislation brought poor women and children higher on the national agenda than ever before.

Although the reformers achieved progress for poor women and children, their movement also had profound limitations. Rather than challenging the structural status quo, the maternalists used their newfound authority to reinforce existing gender and class inequalities. They looked down on poor women and took great care to establish themselves as distinct from this underclass. Maternalists had broken out of gendered restrictions by working outside of the home, pursuing higher education, establishing alternative family structures and actively participating in public life. However, they continued to impose strict gender regulations on poor women. "For women of education and high status, they supported careers, public-sphere activism, and economic independence," writes Linda Gordon. "For poor women, they recommended domesticity and

²⁴ For more detailed description of the involvement of the maternalists in the creation of the welfare state, see Kathryn Kish Sklar. "The Historical Foundations of Women's Power in the Creation of the American Welfare State" in *Mothers of A New World*. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 43-93

economic dependence on men.”²⁵ Gordon explains this contradiction as “a class double standard.”²⁶ Sonya Michel argues that this double standard was necessary for the maternalists to maintain their authority in the public sector. Because the distinctiveness of women as mothers and homemakers was the primary source of authority for the maternalist reformers, it was essential for them to continue to advocate for these traditional roles. Changes that challenged that structure would be a direct affront to their own justification for existence in public life.²⁷

Maternalists also had an abysmal record on racial inclusiveness. White reformers barred elite black women from their new charitable associations and governmental appointments, and also restricted access to their program for poor black mothers and children based solely upon their race. Despite the fact that “colored women [were] ready, willing, and able to stand shoulder to shoulder with white women in rendering service”, white maternalists were unwilling to accept them into the coalition.²⁸ As a result of this exclusion, black women formed their own clubs and associations to work towards social reform. Because of continued racism, these associations and their reformist voices were not incorporated into the state, but remained private agencies. Because of this constant oppression, racial unity was far more important to black reformers than class differences. Black maternalists did not view their subjects as morally inferior because of their poverty or employment outside of the home. Consequently, black maternalists were willing to endorse childcare and other measures that enhanced female economic independence.²⁹

²⁵ Linda Gordon. *Pitied, but Not Entitled*. 107.

²⁶ Linda Gordon. *Pitied, but Not Entitled*. 107.

²⁷ Michel, Sonya. “The Limits of Maternalism: Policies toward American Wage-Earning Mothers During the Progressive Era” in *Mothers of A New World*. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 277-320

²⁸ Linda Gordon. *Pitied, but Not Entitled*. 201.

²⁹ See Eileen Boris’ “The Power of Motherhood: Black and White Women Activists Redefine the Political” in *Mothers of A New World*.

Unlike their black counterparts, white maternalists refused to endorse the day nursery as a legitimate social intervention. By providing women with a safe place to leave their children during the day, day nurseries facilitated the demise of the traditional family. The proper role for a poor, uneducated woman at the turn of the century was in the home. Workingwomen were a threat to the moral fiber of the country. If women worked outside the home in large numbers, the social order of American society may unravel. Men “might lose their authority in families and households— and possibly, as a result, in the nation.”³⁰ Absent mothers could cause widespread child abuse and neglect, juvenile delinquency, and truancy. Expanded childcare may allow women who did not need to work to skirt their duties as mothers and earn extra cash to spend on frivolous, feminine expenses.³¹ As a result of these fears, maternalist saw single motherhood as the most significant threat the fabric of modern society. Despite evidence that the economic structure of the “traditional family” was unreliable at best, these reforming women failed to consider any system that challenged the gender norm of women as economic dependents.

Even in communities where one might expect support, backing for day nurseries was fragile. Many famous settlement workers of the time, including Florence Kelly, publicly denounced day nurseries, arguing that they facilitated the exploitation of women by the capitalist system. In her landmark work, *Twenty Years at Hull House*, Jane Addams asserts “with all the efforts made by modern society to nurture and educate the young, how stupid it is to permit the mothers of young children to spend themselves in the coarser work of the world!”³² Forcing women to perform a double shift of mothering and wage work set their families up for failure. Maternal employment, settlement workers argued, negatively impacted the mother’s ability to perform her more important duties: raising young children.

³⁰ Linda Gordon. *Pitied, but Not Entitled*. 12.

³¹ Mary Frances Berry. *Politics of Parenthood*. 156.

³² Jane Addams. *Twenty Years at Hull House*. 174.

Instead of day nurseries, maternalists and settlement workers endorsed a national system of mothers' pensions.³³ Mother's pensions were government subsidies given to women whose husbands could not support them. These allowances, in theory, permitted women to support themselves and their children without working outside the home. Support for mothers' pensions was rapid and widespread.³⁴ Within a few short months of the idea being introduced in Congress, over ten states had implemented pensions programs. Although extremely popular in theory, the implementation of these pensions left much to be desired. Women were required to submit to intensive investigations into their family situation and personal character in order to be eligible. Many did not qualify. For the few who actually received mothers' pensions, the amounts were so minimal that they were forced to work anyway. Regardless, the pervasive national support for the mothers' pension movement symbolized a strong and consistent support for policies that encouraged more traditional family models.

By portraying women's mothering work as inherently in conflict with their wage work, maternalist reformers reduced the options available to women who needed or wanted to financially support, as well as to care for, their children.³⁵ Their criticism was far-reaching, impacting even those who worked directly for day nurseries. As a result of this political hostility, day nursery leaders themselves were ambivalent about their organizations. Conceding day nurseries to be a flawed intervention, they framed the institution as something to be tolerated until a better solution could be reached. The ambivalence of the leadership left the institutions vulnerable to attack. Day nurseries lacked the political capital that other social movements of the time garnered. Despite growing into one of the most integral social services of the twentieth

³³ For a comprehensive history of mother's pensions, see Goodwin's *Gender and the Politics of Welfare Reform: Mothers' Pensions in Chicago* and Theda Skocopol's *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: the Political Origins of Social Policy in United States*.

³⁴ Mark H. Leff. "Consensus for Reform: The Mother's Pension Movement in the Progressive Era."

³⁵ Rose. *A Mother's Job*. 9.

century, day nurseries adopted an apologetic tone in describing their services, and never developed the confidence necessary to push for the professionalization of day care.

The Stigmatization of Sheltering Arms

At first glance, Sheltering Arms appears to be an anomaly in the national narrative of the day nursery. Atlanta's elite embraced the association of day nurseries as the darling charity of the early twentieth century. Sheltering Arms received positive praise from businessmen, politicians, and newspapers alike. According to the *Atlanta Constitution*, it was "one of Atlanta's most praiseworthy institutions."³⁶ The women of Sheltering Arms "aid[ed] the poor through [the day nursery] better than through any other charitable association ever organized in this city."³⁷ And in all of Atlanta, a "better charity does not exist than Sheltering Arms."³⁸

Sheltering Arms received generous support from the major institutions of the city. From 1890 to 1910, the Exposition Cotton Mill was the biggest supporter. The mill provided the day nursery with six rooms and annual funds of approximately \$4,800.³⁹ The "mills people [were] very appreciative of the good accomplished [by Sheltering Arms]." According to the Sheltering Arms Annual Report of 1915, the leadership of the mill "contributed most liberally to its support—the nursery being the social center of their community."⁴⁰ Large-scale support also came from the city and county governments. The Treasurer's Report of 1922 reported a gift of \$2,700 from the city of Atlanta and \$1,800 from the county.⁴¹ These three institutions annually combined to contribute over 40 per cent of the operating budget of 1922. With fierce competition

³⁶ *Atlanta Constitution*, May 6, 1902.

³⁷ *Atlanta Constitution*, January 14, 1898.

³⁸ *Atlanta Constitution*, July 12, 1898

³⁹ Annual Report of Sheltering Arms Association, 1915.

⁴⁰ Annual Report of Sheltering Arms Association, 1915.

⁴¹ Annual Report of Sheltering Arms Association, 1922.

for the limited public support in this time, the continued financial support of Sheltering Arms is a testament to its popularity.



The majority of women who utilized Sheltering Arms were employed at a cotton mill, like the one pictured above. A close working relationship existed between the owners of the cotton mills and the day nurseries. For nearly two decades, the mills provided substantial financial support to Sheltering Arms. In eastern Atlanta (the neighborhood that came to be known as Cabbagetown), Sheltering Arms even ran a day nursery located on the premises of the Exposition Cotton Mill. Picture taken from Sheltering Arms Collection at the Atlanta History Center.

Another sizable portion of the operating budget of Sheltering Arms came directly from public donations collected on a single day of fundraising. Each year, the association hosted the famous Sheltering Arms' Tag Day. On that day, debutants and maidens of Atlanta's high society stationed themselves outside every office building, hotel, restaurant, department store or central place. They stopped each passerby, and asked, "Have you been tagged?"⁴² Citizens would then donate any sum in exchange for a Sheltering Arms pin to wear on their clothing. Each year, Tag Day raised more money than the annual contribution of the mills, city, and county combined. In

⁴² *Atlanta Constitution*, April 7, 1908.

1922, it yielded \$8,790.97, nearly half of the annual operating budget.⁴³ For the leadership of Sheltering Arms, this annual financial outpouring demonstrated that Atlantans “generously smiled upon their venture and desired its success.” The population of the city “entered the spirit of the day; our paths were made easy; our badges were taken with a smile, and our bonnets filled with money.”⁴⁴ The day was “a glorious success” each year.⁴⁵



Ads like this one ran in the *Atlanta Constitution* to drum up support prior to Sheltering Arms’ Tag Day. The event began as an experiment, and it was one of the first fundraisers of its kind in the United States. After raising record-breaking amounts, the organizers grew the event into one of the most popular annual occasions in the city. Image published in the *Atlanta Constitution*, April 16, 1909.

The women of Sheltering Arms were remarkably innovative in their fundraising efforts.

Social events and fundraisers for Sheltering Arms Association were wildly popular among Atlantans. One of the most unique fundraising efforts of the association was the weekly operation of Sheltering Arms restaurant. Each week a group of Atlanta citizens ranging from firemen to business leaders would plan the menu, cook the food, and serve as waiters.⁴⁶

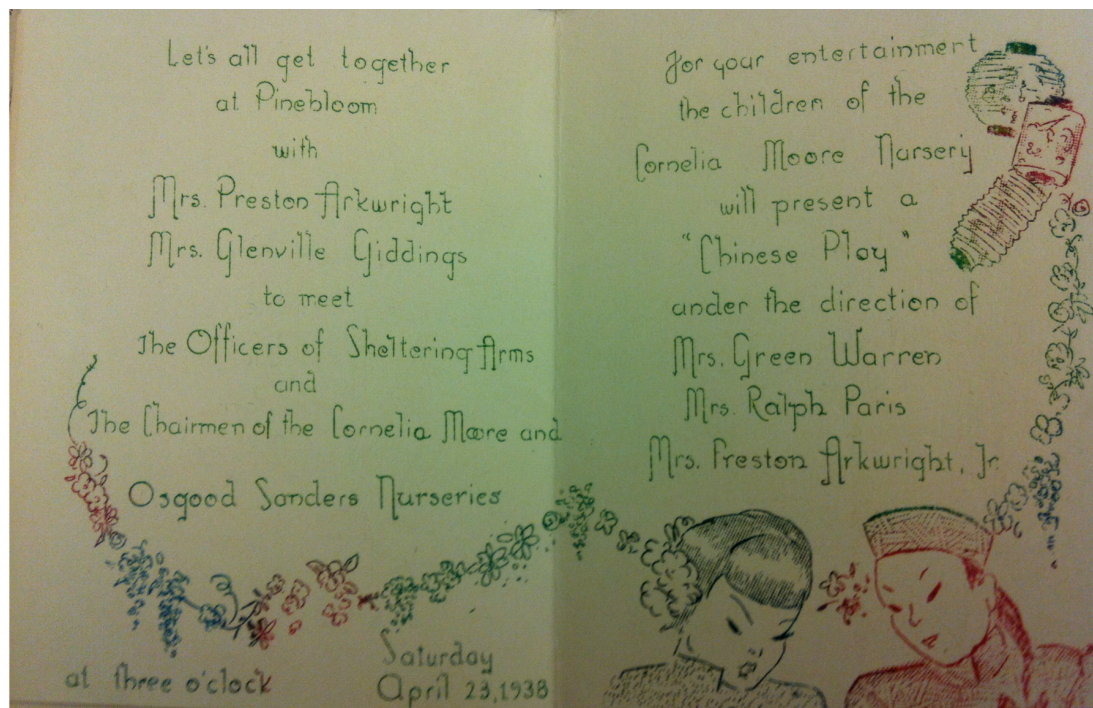
⁴³ Annual Report of Sheltering Arms Association, 1922.

⁴⁴ *Atlanta Constitution*, April 7, 1908.

⁴⁵ *Atlanta Constitution*, April 7, 1908.

⁴⁶ *Atlanta Constitution*, December 4, 1900.

Sheltering Arms also hosted other popular events such as bazars, bake-sales, and even cooking classes. Discussions of these events were often featured prominently in the high society section of the *Atlanta Constitution*. Much of the public support for Sheltering Arms came not necessarily as a result of support for the mission of the organization, but rather from a social desire to belong to the elite circle of high society women who had endorsed the trendy cause.



Invitations like this one were sent out several times each year to the members of the Sheltering Arms Association. Events were often a combination of business matters with entertainment provided by the children. Sheltering Arms Collection at the Atlanta History Center. 1938.

These elite fundraisers for Sheltering Arms were ironically disconnected from the populations serviced by the organization. Rather than hide this disparity, Sheltering Arms highlighted it as an important part of its self-narrative. Stories of desperation and immortality among the clientele were used to intrigue and elicit donations from potential funders. One of the most frequently used stories involved a girl and a kitten. During one of their journeys into the

mill district, the Old Fashioned Women recalled finding a two-year old covered in dirt in a rundown home in the mill district, tied to a bedpost in order to keep him safe while his mother worked at the factory.⁴⁷ On another instance one of the first Sheltering Arms Presidents recounted her encounter with a four-year-old child, whom she found sitting by a dirty bed with a sick kitten in her arms:

“‘What is the matter with the kitten?’ she was asked.

‘It’s sick and hungry, but I can’t leave to get him anything, because I can’t leave the baby.’

‘Baby? Where is the baby?’ asked the lady.

‘There,’ and the little one pointed to the bed. The lady could see nothing. The cover of the bed was drawn up. The lady went over and removed it. There she found not a kitten, but a little infant almost stifled with heat.

‘Why did you have the baby covered like this?’ she asked.

‘To keep the flies off,’ replied the little one.

“The lady took the baby to the window and revived it as best she could until the doctor was summoned. He found the baby ill from want of air. Investigation proved that the father was in the hospital. The mother was working out by the day, and had no one to leave the infant with except the 4-year-old child.”⁴⁸

Sheltering Arms used dramatic stories like this one to justify its existence to the public.

Sheltering Arms saved urban children from the “devil’s playground, the streets of the city.” The

⁴⁷ *Atlanta Constitution*. March 23, 1943.

⁴⁸ *Atlanta Constitution*. May 9, 1911.

children, abandoned for long hours by their mothers, were “neglected, untrained, and uncared for and left to roam the streets.”⁴⁹ Without Sheltering Arms, they were destined to a life of despair.

Atlanta’s admiration for the work of the organization was closely connected to their fascination with these types of stories as perverse spectacle. The pathetic circumstances of the cotton mill women provided a tabloid like appeal to the press and the public. The conditions of poverty in which the children of Sheltering Arms lived fascinated Atlantans. The *Atlanta Constitution* ran a series of popular stories of women in dramatic circumstances that turned to Sheltering Arms as a last resort for their children. Headlines such as “Here is a Baby No One Wants: It Is Sick and Crying in Poor Mother’s Arms!” and “Mother Ends Life with Poison!” ran above stories of Sheltering Arms’ women and children. In 1897, the *Atlanta Constitution* ran a series of articles on Eva Duke, a Sheltering Arms mother who worked at a cotton mill on Marietta Street. She was “alone in Atlanta and could not work and look after the infant.” She lamented, “I get only three dollars a week and I am not able to pay anyone to take care of the child. The Lord knows I do not wish to see it thrown around as if it wasn’t a human being. Someone ought to help me.”⁵⁰ Sheltering Arms became synonymous with poverty, amoral behavior, and family turmoil—and Atlantans could not get enough of it.

Despite its dual standing as a chosen darling of Atlanta’s high society and a perverse spectacle for the masses, the language utilized by the press, business community, and day nursery itself reveals ambivalence about the institution more consistent with the national narrative of day nurseries. Even its closest supporters did not endorse Sheltering Arms as an acceptable long-term social intervention. They saw it as a stopgap solution to the shifting structures of an industrial society until a more sustainable solution could be determined. This

⁴⁹ *Prospectus on Marietta Street*. 1898.

⁵⁰ *Atlanta Constitution*. June 25, 1897.

mentality can be observed in an exchange between the leadership of Sheltering Arms and a generous citizen on Tag Day in April of 1919. Curious about the cause, the man inquired as to the nature of the day nursery. When it was explained to him that the nursery was for workingwomen whose husbands could not support the family, the man expressed concern. He asked, ““But how can a woman who works from 4 in the morning until 6 in the evening be fitted to look after her child when she comes home; how can she be expected to live with such labor and responsibility? Does it not look as if we had not yet begun a rational system of social welfare?”” Rather than countering the man’s accusations, Boiling Jones, president of the Sheltering Arms society, agreed. She asserted that the system of day nurseries results in “little tragedies of everyday life; there is scarcely a child in them who does not represent the sacrifice of the mother and a life of drudgery for her child.” She acknowledged the shortcomings of a system that requires mothers to work long, demanding jobs and then come home to care for her children. In her mind, the day nursery was not a permanent solution, but it “must continue until our community provides a better and more economic method” of caring for poor women and children.⁵¹

⁵¹ *Atlanta Constitution*, April 9, 1919.



Two children sit on the back steps of the Cornelia Moore Day Nursery. Original caption reads: “A poor brother and sister waiting for their mother to return from her job in the mills”. Many of the images used in Sheltering Arms publication, like this one, were intended to highlight the poverty of the clientele in order to elicit sympathy from potential funders. Sheltering Arms Collection at the Sheltering Arms Headquarters. 1923.

The ways in which Sheltering Arms explained its work to the public reflected its ambiguous self-concept. In all mission statements, governing documents, and public relations materials from 1888 to 1920, Sheltering Arms emphasized that the organization only served mothers who *had* to work out of economic necessity. Only mothers who are compelled to work to “earn daily bread for their families” were accepted.⁵² Sheltering Arms carefully reviewed the economic circumstances of each family, a policy intended to quell fears that day nurseries were facilitating women working outside of the home in cases where it was not absolutely necessary. Beginning in 1918, the charity also assigned each family a “welfare worker” that worked with the families to return them “as quickly as possible to a more proper family structure.”⁵³ This

⁵² *Atlanta Constitution*. April 12, 1901.

⁵³ *Atlanta Constitution*. May 20, 1910.

included helping widows to remarry and supporting police efforts to locate husbands who had deserted their families. Implicit in these policies was an acknowledgement that the structure of the female breadwinner was an unacceptable issue that ought to be rectified as quickly as possible.⁵⁴

To those who charged that day nurseries were destroying the traditional family, Sheltering Arms argued that their work was in fact an attempt to keep the family together. Day nurseries did not facilitate the permanent separation of mothers and children. Sheltering Arms constantly referred to their ability to keep mothers and their young children together. Rather than taking children away, Sheltering Arms kept the family intact. Part of the mission statement of Sheltering Arms was to “aid the working mother and her child to conserve the family and to raise the ideals of the family life.” Sheltering Arms women made clear they were not a replacement for home life. In the evenings, a mother would return for their child and “take him home—his *real* home, for which no substitute can ever be found.” The importance of the “real” family became a central component of the curriculum: “Always before these children is held the ideal of their own home. That is the basis on which all the work is done. The whole effort of the day is directed toward that hour when the mother, or perhaps the lone father, comes to the nursery for the child, knowing that while he or she worked to keep the home together, he was safe that that he was learning the simple but immensely important fact that he was part of a family group.” Even though economic realities forced children into nontraditional structures, Sheltering Arms emphasized the sanctity of the “real” family as the central unit over and above all else.

Sheltering Arms women also promised the public that their interventions into the lives of working mothers and their children were creating more productive citizens. In a grant proposal to the city government, Sheltering Arms justified its funding as follows: Unlike many charitable

⁵⁴ Rose. *A Mother's Job*. 29.

institutions of a similar nature, this particular charity enables those who benefit by it to contribute toward the industrial progress and general welfare of the city.” Their interventions steered vulnerable populations onto the right path: “Atlanta could not support a better cause. Instead of filling our jails, these children will be good citizens some day with your help.”⁵⁵ The women of Sheltering Arms were not weakening the fabric of society, but strengthening it. The reality of industrial society was that working women and nontraditional families existed. Sheltering Arms did not endorse their lifestyle, but it also refused to deny their existence. Instead, the organization attempted to capitalize on their presence in order to create more productive and well-rounded citizens.

The Impact of Public Suspicion on the Matron

This public and private suspicion of day nurseries like Sheltering Arms had a profound impact upon the work of the matron. Even those who understood the necessity of providing childcare viewed it as inherently tainted work. The work was tainted for two primary reasons: it dealt with poor women in dire circumstances and the nature of group childcare threatened the traditional structure of maternal authority. Because the matron was breaking the sanctity of the family, she became the object of public suspicion and ridicule. Viewed as a surrogate mother, her role was a direct affront to the more traditional childcare structures of the past century. Because the leadership of day nurseries like Sheltering Arms viewed their institution as a temporary intervention, the matron was viewed as a temporary figure. To professionalize the role of the matron would mean acknowledging the permanent erosion of the traditional family structure.

⁵⁵ Letter from Sheltering Arms to Atlanta Community Chest. Nd.

Section 2: Caught in the Crossfires

Governance Structure within Day Nurseries

Perhaps more so than any other organization founded within the Progressive Era, the day nursery was an institution founded by, of, and for women. The governance structure of Sheltering Arms contained no men for at least the first fifty years it was in operation. The structure of Sheltering Arms—which is largely indicative of the composition found at most day nurseries across the nation—was comprised of three main levels of membership: the board of managers, the matrons, and the working families. Each of these levels consisted of a distinct socioeconomic class of women with a clearly defined set of responsibilities and vastly differing visions of proper childrearing techniques. Oftentimes these differences of class and perspective resulted in cultural clashes and tensions that colored the operations of the nurseries and, in particular, the work of the matron.

At the highest level of the organizational structure stood the board of managers, which also represented the highest socioeconomic class in the city. In order to gain acceptance onto the board of managers of Sheltering Arms, members paid annual dues of five dollars.⁵⁶ The Association served dual purposes: it was both a social club and the governing body of the organization. Members were divided into committees such as the Infant Committee, the Hygiene Committee, and the Special Occasions Committee.⁵⁷ These committees set the policies and guidelines of the nurseries. Committee members saw their jobs as an extension of their roles as early twentieth century housewives, meaning they supervised work rather than actually doing it themselves. Managers set policies and regulations, inspected day nurseries, advised the matrons on their duties, sewed clothes for the children, and brought special gifts to the nurseries.

⁵⁶ Eight Outstanding Facts about Sheltering Arms Association of Day Nurseries. Nd.

⁵⁷ For more information on the creation and operation of committees, see Committee Reports in Sheltering Arms Annual Reports of 1909, 1922, and 1939.

However, they rarely spent time actually in the day nurseries and had little to no direct relationship with the working mothers themselves. Another important role for the board was fundraising. The managers spent a great deal of time planning large-scale events and high society occasions to drum up support and awareness for the organization in the city.⁵⁸



Sheltering Arms events provided an opportunity for high society women to come together socially. Plays performed by Sheltering Arms children were social gatherings intended for not the working mothers, but the elite members of the Association. The entertainment usually followed a business meeting or annual election of new members. This picture is the annual spring play, located in the backyard of the Osgood Sanders Nursery. Nd.

A roster of Sheltering Arms' Association members reads like a "who's who" of Atlanta high society. The first President of the organization was Mrs. Dorothy K. Arkwright, the wife of Preston K. Arkwright, the CEO of Georgia Power. Another prominent member was Mrs. Asa Candler, wife Mr. Asa Candler, the CEO of Coca-Cola and the mayor of Atlanta. The high-society social scene and charity circles of Atlanta were intimately connected, "and many of the

⁵⁸ Fundraising efforts of Atlanta elite are discussed more extensively in Section 1. The methods were innovative and diverse. See pages 20-23 for description.

women prominent in one are prominent in the other.”⁵⁹ The *Atlanta Constitution* observes, “a hurried glance over the list of these institutions and their women officers reveals the fact that the names upon them are the same ones that appear most frequently in the society columns of the daily press.”⁶⁰ The elite women of Sheltering Arms had an increased sense of civic engagement and charitable obligation that many prominent women across the country shared.

The composition of Sheltering Arms’ leadership yielded a great deal of political and social capital for the organization. The women employed their husbands’ power and wealth to advocate for their own social agenda. Sheltering Arms utilized their influence within the city government to garner the support necessary for various initiatives and objectives. In an internal transitional memo from 1912, the outgoing President suggested that “the President or her representative” should go in person to see Mr. George Hope in the Grant Building when dealing with the city council. Hope had “for many years given immediate and valuable help as his wife was a member of the Sheltering Arms for many years before her death two years ago.” He could be counted on to direct “the Sheltering Arms representative to the right person in the City Council, speaking personally to them in advance, so that there is no undue delay.” He used whatever “magic he possesses in the City Council chambers” to advance the cause of Sheltering Arms.⁶¹ Through connections such as this one, Sheltering Arms was able to secure regular financial support from the city for the nursery and to obtain necessary permits and permissions.

When disagreements occurred, the board also wielded their political influence to confront the male establishment of the city. Much like Progressive Era women all across the nation, Sheltering Arms’ leadership felt compelled to utilize their burgeoning authority to campaign for

⁵⁹ *Atlanta Constitution*, November 2, 1898.

⁶⁰ *Atlanta Constitution*, July 12, 1898.

⁶¹ Internal Memo Re: City and County Councils. 1912.

causes related to the well being of women and children.⁶² For instance, in 1898, Sheltering Arms publically opposed the city council's decision to eliminate the "police matron" who had cared for the women and children who came into the police station. She added a "feminine touch" and aided wayward women and girls on their return to moral lifestyles. In response to this cut, the women resolved to go "as citizens and taxpayers of Atlanta" before the council to ask that the position be reinstated. If the council refused, they planned to continue to the state legislature. Central to their mobilization plan was their newfound self-concept as both active participants in civic life and their position as women. Mrs. Frank R. Logan, president of the Sheltering Arms Society, stated, "I do not see why if women are locked behind bars we should not have a representative among the turnkeys. There is no use to discuss this matter. It is as plain as the nose on your face." If women were to be incarcerated, women deserved to have representatives on staff. The mood was "most enthusiastic" and Mrs. Frank R. Logan and others had "no doubt that our request will be granted."⁶³ Their actions were characterized by an optimistic sense of entitlement as citizens and as women, which was indicative of the sense of civic empowerment that permeated the highest levels of governance at Sheltering Arms.

Matrons were of much lower socioeconomic status than these politically active elites who employed them. In fact, the socioeconomic difference between the day nursery matrons and their clients was often negligible.⁶⁴ As an unmarried, female participant in the formal labor market, matrons faced the same stigmas and low wages as many of the nursery mothers. In 1916 the NFDN reported that matrons, on average, received twenty-five dollars per month. Although wage data for Sheltering Arms is limited, an advertisement placed in the *Atlanta Constitution* in

⁶² See Section One, "Tainted Work" for an extensively discussion on the evolution of this "maternalist" perspective and it's role in shaping the relationship between women, children, and the state.

⁶³ *Atlanta Constitution*, June 17, 1898.

⁶⁴ Rose, *A Mother's Job*, 59.

1901 lists the salary of the matron at thirty dollars per month.⁶⁵ By 1937, the Sheltering Arms Annual Report lists the average pay for a matron as \$50.⁶⁶ In addition to these salaries, the matrons were most often given the use of several rooms within the day nursery free of charge. By modern standards, the wages and working conditions of the matrons were definitively low. Matron's wages (when room and board were included) compared favorably, however, to many factory and mill alternatives available to women at the time period in question. Despite the long hours, the job of matron compared favorably to other unskilled opportunities for women in this period.

In contrast to the professional, masculine title of the board of "managers," the title of "matron" signified the domestic and maternal nature of this role.⁶⁷ The matrons were responsible for the daily operations of the nursery, meaning they greeted the children as they came in the morning and supervised their care throughout the day. The matron, however, also had substantial administrative responsibilities within the context of her day nursery. She oversaw a staff that often included a cook, a janitor, and at least one assistant matron.⁶⁸ She also kept close records on each child and their families, and she referred families to various social services when needed. Oftentimes, this wide variety of custodial duties kept the matron busy from six in the morning to six in the evening.

Despite the matron's on the ground perspective and substantial leadership within the individual day nurseries, the board of managers excluded her matron from any governance decisions within the organization. They treated the matrons as mere wage-earning employees, not stakeholders in the larger mission and development of the organization. No significant

⁶⁵ *Atlanta Constitution*. January 27, 1901.

⁶⁶ Sheltering Arms Annual Report of 1937. 7.

⁶⁷ Anne Durst. "Of Women, By Women, For Women."

⁶⁸ The Department of Public Welfare Visitation Report. 1937.

opportunities existed for input from the matrons in forming policies. At Sheltering Arms, matrons did not participate in board meetings or publicity efforts. The board meetings were held during the day, when the matrons were unable to leave their duties within the nurseries to attend.⁶⁹ They, by design, had no role in the governance of the organization.

The second-class status of the matron was evident even at the national level of the day nursery movement. Each year prior to 1919, the National Association of Day Nurseries held a conference and invited boards of managers from day nurseries all across the country to attend. Matrons were explicitly barred from participating.⁷⁰ In 1919, for the first time, matrons received invitations. However, they did not attend sessions related to political strategy, policy setting, and fundraising. Instead, local experts gave them lengthy lectures on the implementation of proper nutrition and hygiene techniques in their day nurseries. Even at the national level, matrons were custodial caregivers, not policy makers. This stringent distinction of roles led to the systematic devaluing of the matron's perspectives and insights across the nation.⁷¹

In the eyes of the board of managers, the most important criterion for a successful matron was obedience to the policies set forth by the board. Article 4 of the Sheltering Arms Constitution emphasized that the matron must “preserver order and see that the rules are properly enforced. She shall be provided with a suitable book, in which she shall keep a careful and accurate record of the admission and departure of each and every inmate. She shall make a full written report at each monthly meeting.”⁷² The matron was expected to closely adhere to rules that she had no say in developing, and then report back to the board with carefully kept records. Based on these criteria, Miss Donaldson, a matron at Osgood Sanders Day Nursery, was

⁶⁹ Diane Bellum, “A History of Quality, Affordable Child Care that Empowers Families and Strengthens Communities,” 4.

⁷⁰ Rose, *A Mother's Job*.

⁷¹ Rose, *A Mother's Job*.

⁷² Sheltering Arms Annual Report 1922. 5.

considered a smashing success. Her time with the organization had been characterized by “five years of *faithful adherence* to the plans laid out by the board.”⁷³ This adherence characterized her as qualified in the eyes of the board. The matron was not considered a professional who could craft her own institutional objectives, but a mindless servant to the determinations of the board of managers. This passive, “servant” status deprofessionalized the status of the matron.

Despite this lack of a voice in the determination of policies, day nursery matrons were at the frontlines of enacting the often-controversial day nursery guidelines. Most of the families had never met the board members; for them, the matrons were the face of the organization. The matrons offered informal advice to the mothers, informed the mothers of required training sessions, and enforced strict hygiene and attendance policies. Before the introduction of the social workers in the late 1920s, matrons were even expected to investigate the home lives of the children and provide full reports on the circumstances of families to determine their “worthiness.” The board predetermined the admission and hygiene standards, the content of the meetings, and the regularity of these visits, but the matrons were the face of these policies to the poor working mothers.

The final group of membership within the day nursery governance structure were the working mother themselves. In northern cities, many of the mothers were recent immigrants to the United States. In the south, including Atlanta, the women were primarily former country people who had moved to the new urban centers in search of work. Their existence was financially precarious; sudden crises such as illness, injury, or rent increases could drive a family into financial ruin. This economic uncertainty and the volatile nature of the labor market often drove mothers and children into the workplace. Because women were most often forced to work out of financial desperation, they had to take whatever jobs they could find. As a consequence,

⁷³ Sheltering Arms Annual Report 1915. 9. Emphasis added.

the workingwomen of Sheltering Arms filled some of the most dangerous and low-paying jobs in the market.⁷⁴

Sheltering Arms families were “Atlanta’s industrious poor,” comprised primarily of women working at the Atlanta Cotton Mills. Although a few were fathers “of motherless homes,” most were young mothers with several young children to support after the death or desertion of a husband.⁷⁵ Others were the wives of “worthless husbands” who could not or would not support their families due to illness, drunkenness, or laziness. Some Sheltering Arms families did have working fathers, but the husbands’ industrial wage alone did not cover the needs of the family. Sheltering Arms parents rose early and took their children to the day nurseries by 6:00 AM six days of the week. These parents would then work ten to twelve hour days in hazardous conditions at primarily factories and mills. As the city grew dark each evening, “the factory whistle blew... and through the doors of the nurseries passes a stream of mothers and a few lone fathers.”⁷⁶ In the evenings, additional tasks and household chores kept the poor busy well into the night, leaving only a few hours to sleep before repeating the cycle the next day.

⁷⁴ For a more comprehensive portrayal of the working mother, see *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in America* by Alice Kessler-Harris, particularly section II, “The Idea of Home and Mother at Work: the Civil War to World War I.”

⁷⁵ *Atlanta Constitution*, April 13, 1916.

⁷⁶ *Atlanta Constitution*. March 1, 1936.



Two Sheltering Arms children pictured in front of the first public housing units in the United States, Techwood Homes. The housing units were constructed in 1933, and were located just northwest of downtown (less than a quarter mile from the original Sheltering Arms on Marietta Street). As public housing units continued to be built around the city, Sheltering Arms opened new centers in those same areas. Providing affordable childcare to those in public housing became an institutional priority. Sheltering Arms Collection at the Sheltering Arms Headquarters. 1938.

In order to utilize the day nurseries, Sheltering Arms families had to pay a small fee, which was dependent on the number of children they had and what the family could afford. In 1923, “parents pay 10 cents per day for the care of children, except in extreme cases, or when there are several children in one family, when a reduction is made.”⁷⁷ In exchange for this fee, the mother received consistent, quality care and three nutritious meals a day for her child. However, many of the mothers who sought institutional childcare for their children did so hesitantly. Mothers were fearful to place their children in large groups to be cared for by strangers; matrons had to work relentlessly to win the trust of these working-class mothers.

⁷⁷ Sheltering Arms Annual Report 1923. 19.

Already having sacrificed so much, many working mothers were unwilling to relinquish control over the upbringing of their own children to strangers without significant assurances.⁷⁸

The Struggle for Control within the Day Nurseries

The day nursery had a top down governance structure: the board of managers set policies that the subordinate matrons were compelled to enforce upon poor mothers. This structural hierarchy, in theory, allowed managers to force the lower classes to conform to white-middle class ideals of mothering and family. However, influence in the nurseries did not always flow as intended. At times, matrons ignored the directions of the managers. The working mothers, the least powerful of all within the governance structure, found ways to resist the unwanted intrusions of day nursery personnel into their personal life. Both the matrons and mothers were able to confront the governance structure of the nursery, and establish channels of influence from their lower structural positions.

The source of these conflicts within the day nursery ran deep; oftentimes at the center of these struggles were differing ideological perceptions of what proper motherhood ought to be. The workingwomen's definition of a "good mother" fundamentally differed from that of their wealthy benefactors'. Wealthy mothers devoted all of their energy to their child's emotional and psychological growth, relying upon experts to supplement their innate maternal instincts. Working mothers, on the other hand, took great pride in their ability to provide for their children financially as well as psychologically. To them, wage work was an extension of their role as caretakers, not an abandonment of that responsibility. Being a good mother was marked "by the sacrifices they made to provide economically for their children rather than by their continuous presence and involvement in all aspects of their children's lives."⁷⁹ Many working-class mothers

⁷⁸ Anne Durst. "Of Women, By Women, For Women." 146.

⁷⁹ Rose. *A Mother's Job*. 6.

saw their paid work as contributions of love and devotion to their children. They resented being labeled the object of elite benevolence for what they considered fulfilling a mother's role of providing.

The conceptions of what constituted a "proper" childhood also varied across class lines. In the minds of workingwomen, childhood was a suitable time to contribute economically to the family. Children begging or selling wares on the streets added to the fiscal wellbeing of the larger familial unit and taught them character lessons. To the wealthy benefactors of Sheltering Arms, however, this type of behavior was evidence of child neglect and abuse. Children, they believed, ought to be protected at all times and engaged in distinct, age appropriate pastimes. Within the context of the day nursery, these conflicting visions of childhood came to a head particularly over the issue of school-aged children. Many working-class parents believed that school-aged children could take care of themselves and their younger siblings. Managers, on the other hand, thought that the older children ought to attend afterschool programs within the nurseries to ensure their protection.⁸⁰ At Sheltering Arms, matrons often had to explain to poor mothers the concept of "afterschool care" and attempt to refrain mothers from withdrawing all their children when the oldest one reached school age.

⁸⁰ Rose. *A Mother's Job*. 52.



A matron oversees a group of school age children completing crafts at the Cornelia Moore nursery of Sheltering Arms. Afterschool care was an important component of the mission, but this age group was one of the most difficult for the nurseries to reach. Working mothers viewed their children as self-sufficient and did not wish for them to be enrolled in day nurseries. Photo taken from the Sheltering Arms Collection of the Atlanta History Center. Nd.

As a result of these conflicting conceptions of motherhood and childhood, there was a constant struggle over the establishment and implementation of day nursery policies and guidelines. Day nurseries had become popular with wealthy benefactors, in part, because the institutions afforded an opportunity to exhibit social control over the lower classes of society. By providing affordable childcare, day nurseries lured parents into a dependency that they then utilized to push a particular social agenda. Because the working poor were thought to be particularly vulnerable to moral corruption, the wealthy benefactors of day nurseries made their character development a top priority. The managers employed two primary methods of influence: child-focused and mothers-focused interventions.

Day nurseries used the child as the central means of gaining influence over the entire family's moral and spiritual development. The daily routine of the nursery included many strategic decisions intended to civilize the child. When the child first arrived, the head matron performed a health inspection. He was then scrubbed from head to toe and given standard issue nursery clothing. Throughout the day, the child had "tasty food full of vitamins and calories any growing youngster needs to grow and thrive." Underlying this emphasis upon cleanliness and nutrition relied upon the assumption that the homes of the children were deficient in these areas. Managers who wrote the curriculum assumed that such lessons were not being taught in the home. Through this daily routine, the poor children learned principles of cleanliness, hygiene, and nutrition "at a formative time in their lives when, without the nursery, they would be growing up under the *jungle law of the street urchin*." The board believed the structured daily routine civilized the children to a lifestyle superior to that present in the working-class homes from which they came.

More explicit religious lessons and character building exercises were also incorporated into the daily curriculum of day nurseries. According to Sheltering Arms, a mother did not need to worry about her child's emerging sense of ethics while she toiled in the factory because the day nursery "buil[t] character in her children while she [was] away."⁸¹ Sheltering Arms did "not aim to give bodily nourishment alone, but also to give food to the mind and heart."⁸² In 1912, a report of the Baby Committee outlined the ways in which matrons employed "music, dancing, sewing lessons, supervised play, club days, and story-telling" to develop "self-help, self-sufficiency and individuality" in the children.⁸³ Managers designed curriculum to "help to develop right attitudes, and to guide the emotional, physical and social development which will

⁸¹ *The Atlanta Constitution*. April 18, 1918.

⁸² Sheltering Arms Annual Report 1909. 7.

⁸³ Sheltering Arms Annual Report 1912.

stay with the child throughout life.”⁸⁴ These carefully crafted and explicit lessons on moral conduct and traditional values socialized the children to upper-middle class norms.

Another target for the social reforms of the managers were mothers themselves. According to the Sheltering Arms Annual Report of 1915, the primary purpose of the day nursery was “to lead the mother to value her children, more and more, so she will do her best to improve herself, as well as her children.”⁸⁵ Attempts to influence the mother took several forms. Sometimes matrons offered informal advice; managers encouraged matrons to urge mothers to act according to middle and upper class standards. This included giving advice on proper housekeeping techniques and home economics. Matrons even often offered unsolicited relationship advice, encouraging mothers to leave abusive husbands, seek formal divorce from men who had been absent from the home for many years, or to remarry as quickly as possible.

At Sheltering Arms, the monthly Mother’s Meetings were the most direct method of addressing the parents. The meetings were a requirement for all parents of children at Sheltering Arms. One Friday evening each month, mothers would be asked to stay at the nursery after picking up their child for these gatherings. At the Mother’s Meetings, Sheltering Arms served tea or other simple refreshments to the women. The matron ran the meetings with an agenda developed by the managers. According to Sheltering Arms leadership, the meetings created a space for “the tired mothers to gather” and be “told cheerful news of their babies, and how to care for them.”⁸⁶ At these informal meetings, matrons provided parents with updates on their children’s progress. But more importantly, they offered the mothers instructions on child rearing and proper Christian living. The matron tried “in a social way” to “draw nearer to these women and to lead them to a proper comprehension of what life really means; to create an interest for

⁸⁴ Sheltering Arms Annual Report 1941, pg. 7.

⁸⁵ Sheltering Arms Annual Report 1915. 18.

⁸⁶ *The Atlanta Constitution*. April 3, 1901.

right living, to let them feel that we are working not *for* but *with* them and thus create in them a willingness to assist us in the helpfulness and development of humanity.”⁸⁷

Based upon the structure of the day nursery, mothers might appear to have little opportunity to establish agency. Dependent upon the services provided, these women would seem to have little or no opportunity to push back against the socialization processes being forced upon them and their children. Sheltering Arms portrayed the relationship between day nursery staff and mothers as one of thankful deference. Sheltering Arms portrayed mothers as desperate for advice and agreeable to all social interventions. In Annual Reports and publicity publications, the mothers were likened to “tired children,” a comparison that suggested a lack of power and independence.⁸⁸ The women were allegedly thankful for any advice on childrearing or morality that they could get. The mothers were “most anxious to show and express their gratitude for our work, and our mothers’ meetings have been a happy example” of this opportunity to give thanks.⁸⁹ According to the elite benefactors, the working mothers were passive vessels, happy to receive whatever advice or aid could be spared.

In reality, day nursery families did not accept this “spiritual guidance” without reservations and resistance. In fact, the emphasis upon character development in the context of the day nursery often left matrons at odds with families. The emphasis upon moral uplift was insulting and hostile to the day nursery families. Overextended and underappreciated mothers resented the institutionalized attempts to mandate their families’ moral development. Mothers challenged and resisted the label of dependents and objects of charitable benevolence that was placed on them within the day nurseries.⁹⁰ Rather than passively accepting the terms established

⁸⁷ Sheltering Arms Annual Report 1909. 9.

⁸⁸ Sheltering Arms Annual Report 1925. 8.

⁸⁹ Sheltering Arms Annual Report 1925. 15.

⁹⁰ See survey of day nursery mothers in Rose’s *A Mother’s Job*. 55-70.

by the board of managers, mothers utilized day nurseries on their own terms and rejected attempts to pass judgment on their lifestyles.

When they felt their rights had been violated, minor annoyances on the part of the working mothers erupted into open conflict. In the summer of 1906, Mrs. Lillian Moffett, a widow at 127 Walton Street, worked at Schlesinger Candy and Cracker Factory and boarded her little boy at Sheltering Arms. She accused the Sheltering Arms staff of neglecting and abusing her child. Portraying herself as a helpless victim, she lamented, "I am all alone, and I hardly know what to do." Despite these self-characterizations as powerless, Mrs. Moffett skillfully launched a full campaign against Sheltering Arms. She reported the abuse to the head matron of the nursery, and when the matron refused to acknowledge any wrongdoing, Mrs. Moffett reported her to the police. Mrs. Moffett organized interviews with local newspapers and encouraged other mothers to come forward with similar stories. Her campaign in press, the legal system, and the political arena demonstrate that the working mothers of Sheltering Arms were anything but "tired children." They were unwilling to stand for violations of their rights, and understood the proper channels to pursue claims when they felt they had been violated.

At the center of these conflicts over the nature of childhood and the definition of a good mother stood the matron. Elite leadership and poor mothers rarely interacted. The matron was the one negotiating these tensions on the ground. To poor mothers, the matron was the face of the condescending policies of the board. She was the one dispensing informal advice and leading mothers' meetings. She had no voice with the board in their development of the policies, but was forced to act as the face of those rules. The matron often found herself in the uncomfortable position of imposing class-based standards on women who were of much the same class

background as herself. Overtired and resentful mothers did not defer to as experts in morality by families, but rather challenged them as unwelcomed intruders in private family matters.

Oftentimes the relationship between the matron and the mother became tense over issues that were beyond the control of the day nursery worker. To watch over other people's children is an inherently precarious position, and one that is ripe with potential to offend. In 1937, Ethel S. Beer published an article in the *Journal of Educational Sociology* entitled "Social Psychiatry and the Day Nursery." In it, she explores the difficult position the matron faces in dealing with "problem children." Problem children are those who have difficulty in adjusting to life in the day nursery for whatever reason. These children often caused tension ridden situations for mothers and matrons. For example, the matron may identify a "mentally deficient child who is unable to progress in habit formation beyond the infant level."⁹¹ When the day nursery matrons "feels duty bound" to suggest that the mother seek medical attention for the child, "the family resents the idea."⁹² After the exchange, "the mother probably is insulted at what she considers interference into her private affairs. To her way of thinking there is something wrong with the day nursery that cannot take her child."⁹³ Working mothers, like those who came to Sheltering Arms, were overworked, underpaid, and constantly living on the edge of financial ruin. These anxieties, combined with a protective instinct toward one's children, lead to quick resentment of the matron at the first sign of any problem.

At times, the matron did find opportunities to sidestep the authority of the board in order to ally herself with the working mother. Although she was required to make consistent and extensive reports to the managers, the matron had ultimate jurisdiction over what transpired within her nursery. Perhaps the best example of this bending of authority is the admission

⁹¹ Ethel Beer. "Social Psychiatry and the Day Nursery." 208.

⁹² Ethel Beer. "Social Psychiatry and the Day Nursery." 208.

⁹³ Ethel Beer. "Social Psychiatry and the Day Nursery." 208.

policies of the day nursery. At the outset of Sheltering Arms, the board of managers set very strict guidelines regarding who was “worthy” to attend the day nursery and who was not. Only widows could attend. Women with children out of wedlock, wives whose husbands had deserted them, or mothers with alcoholic or lazy husband were not eligible to attend Sheltering Arms. The managers believed that admitting such families would encourage immoral behavior and reinforce deviant family structures. Matrons were expected to make thorough investigations into the background of each family and determine whether they were “worthy” of admission.

Matrons resented this policy on numerous levels. Overworked for the entire day in the nursery, matrons had no time to go out into the community and investigate family backgrounds. The matrons had little patience for these time consuming home inspections. Additionally, they were untrained as to how to conduct these types of investigations, and the managers offered little support on this front. Further, sympathy for the workingwomen moved many matrons to look the other way during the admissions process.⁹⁴ Matrons saw firsthand the struggles of these mothers to make ends meet. They were unwilling to hold mothers and children accountable for the misdeeds of the fathers. As a result, the matrons took the admissions policies handed down from the board and molded them to fit their needs. They looked the other way, filed fictitious reports on home visits, and allowed ineligible children to attend their nurseries. Ultimately, these practices became institutionalized and the managers readjusted their admissions policies.

The matron found small ways to assert herself within the rigid governing structure. But when she did achieve this, it was on grossly unequal terms of power. From the perspective of the elite board of managers, the matron was a powerless servant who had no voice in the development of policies. She was a mindless employee who acted as she was told. From the perspective of the working mother, the matron was an unwelcome intruder, a representative of the establishment

⁹⁴ Anne Durst. “Of Women, By Women, For Women.” 148.

that was attempting to regulate her life and pass judgment over her lifestyle. The matron found herself caught in the crossfires of the class warfare waged within the nurseries. Power rested with the mothers and managers, leaving the matron as a scapegoat for the frustrations of both sides.

Section 3: Work of the Heart, Not of the Mind

Caring for children in the context of the day nursery was considered work of the heart, not of the mind. The daily oversight of the children was “carried on by a noble band of young women, who since childhood have worked and culled flowers in the beautiful garden of Doing Good.”⁹⁵ The women were considered the epitome of female sensitivity, embodying patience, unselfishness, and kindness in their treatment of the children. The Sheltering Arms Annual Report of 1909 described their matrons as “generous, big-hearted Christian women [who do all they can] to advance the cause of the children, and for their health and happiness.”⁹⁶ Emphasis upon the caring nature of the work contributed to its marginalization. The matron was not accepted as an expert, but rather was viewed as a surrogate mother performing routine custodial duties. Despite this nonprofessional status, by the 1920s, the matron oversaw a highly trained staff that included a social worker and kindergarten teacher. Unlike the matron, these women managed to establish themselves as professionals. The presence of these certified professionals further usurped what little authority the matron did have, leaving her with even less of a claim to expertise.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the major qualifications for day nursery matrons were a caring disposition and strong work ethic. Mrs. Warren Candler, an early benefactor of Sheltering Arms, put out an advertisement in a 1901 issue of the *Constitution* in search of the “services of a woman whose whole heart is absorbed in training these little ones of our less fortunate sisters.”⁹⁷ Her ideal job candidate was “a very motherly and kind woman in charge of the babies, caring for them while their mothers work all day in the factory.”⁹⁸ The perfect

⁹⁵ Sheltering Arms Annual Report, 1909. Page 8.

⁹⁶ Sheltering Arms Annual Report, 1909. Page 10.

⁹⁷ *Atlanta Constitution*. 27 January 1901.

⁹⁸ *Atlanta Constitution*. 27 January 1901.

applicant also needed to be hardworking. Despite idealized images of day nurseries as sanctuaries from harsh street lives, the actual working conditions were exhausting. Matrons worked long hours, caring for large numbers of children in overcrowded rooms with underequipped facilities.⁹⁹ The salary did not align with the high demands of the job. The pay was “\$30 a month” plus “the use of several rooms [within the day nursery] as a home.”¹⁰⁰ What the job lacked in monetary pay, however, Mrs. Candler argued, it makes up for in “moral wages.” The real pay would be “twice the amount” received in wages because a matron “lives a true Christian life among these people” and “there is no work so encouraging as work among children and one that will pay so large dividends.”¹⁰¹ These moral wages, according to Mrs. Candler, made up for the inadequate pay and harsh conditions. In fact, according to Mrs. Candler, many of the matrons shared “their small salaries to relieve the pressing wants” of those in her care. By emphasizing the caregiving, feminine nature of the work, Mrs. Candler excused away the lower wages of the job.

Matrons’ daily tasks revolved primarily around the management of the children’s physical wellbeing. The childcare workers put the children “to sleep, kept [them] clean, and generally protected and made [them] happy.”¹⁰² Emphasis was placed upon the children’s nutrition, health, and personal hygiene, rather than their intellectual development. When day nursery workers did directly instruct the children, it was exclusively in “practical matters,” such as sewing, cooking, personal hygiene, and housekeeping. Matrons did not offer educational instruction intended to enhance the cognitive capacities of the children.

⁹⁹ Rose, *A Mother's Job*, 59.

¹⁰⁰ *Atlanta Constitution*. 27 January 1901.

¹⁰¹ *Atlanta Constitution*. 27 January 1901.

¹⁰² *Atlanta Constitution*. April 11, 1909.



A group of children enjoy lunch at Osgood Sanders Day Nursery with the matron overseeing their progress. The nutrition of the children was a major priority of Sheltering Arms, with the assumption being that children were not receiving proper food in their homes. When Sheltering Arms joined the National Federation of Day Nurseries in 1912, the organization set strict nutritional guidelines for what was to be served at every meal. Sheltering Arms Collection at the Sheltering Arms Headquarters. Nd.

Very few firsthand accounts of matrons' daily experiences exist. A speech made by one of the Sheltering Arms children at a Sheltering Arms fundraiser gives a rare glimpse into the work of the Sheltering Arms matron through the eyes of a child. According to little Bessie Whalen, Mrs. Jackson led the children through a highly regimented daily routine. Like clockwork, Mrs. Jackson led close to forty children through meals, prayers, and housework. For her, the physical appearance of every child was a point of pride; she "sew[ed] buttons and mend[ed]" the children's outfits every night and "when these children come back in the morning, Mrs. Jackson saves their clothes and puts a clean blue check apron on them."¹⁰³ According to Bessie, when asked about the construction of a new nursery, Mrs. Jackson "talked more about the bathtubs they are going to have than anything else." The new facilities made her "so glad

¹⁰³ *Atlanta Constitution*. July 6, 1900.

because some of the moms don't wash the kids, especially the boys.”¹⁰⁴ Bessie marveled that “there are so many of us I don't see how she cares for us all, but she does. [Mrs. Jackson] can do anything anybody else can.”¹⁰⁵ This firsthand account demonstrates that her affectionate temperament had won her the respect of the children, but also solidified her position as an unskilled worker focused on custodial duties.

Matrons had no specialized training. Few completed any secondary or higher education. Many had been driven into the workplace by economic or personal crisis, rather than choice. Matrons often worked for only a short period of time until their economic positions improved or they married. A select few worked in the nurseries for decades, raising generations of children and becoming staples in the community. But for the most part, acting as a matron was temporary work. National day nursery advocates called for the professionalization of the day nursery matron, arguing that an elevated occupational status “was essential to interest young women of good education in the work,” in order to secure, “a higher type of personnel”.¹⁰⁶ To them, the day nursery represented a serious opportunity to connect poor families to social services and influence the moral development of future generations. This work ought to be in the hands of a more advanced caliber of workers. However, efforts to develop standardized training failed to get off the ground. Standards of entry into the role of the matron remained remarkably low.

This is not to say that the work of the matron was considered entirely worthless. The board women of Sheltering Arms praised “the consistent care of noble, consecrated women like Miss Nannie Porter, whose mission it is to love and bless little children”.¹⁰⁷ The managers marveled at the ability of the matron to care for so many children simultaneously. Normally,

¹⁰⁴ *Atlanta Constitution*. July 6, 1900.

¹⁰⁵ *Atlanta Constitution*. July 6, 1900.

¹⁰⁶ Rose. *A Mother's Job*. 59.

¹⁰⁷ *Atlanta Constitution*. July 30, 1898.

“one baby fills the arms and takes all the time of one woman, yet [the matron] has under her care from twenty to forty-four all day at one time, eight of whom could not walk.” Porter could “hold two [children] in her lap, rock the cradle of another and teach eight or ten others the golden text for the next Sunday.”¹⁰⁸ In the opinion of the board of managers, the matron “deserves to be numbered with our noble heroes at the front, of whom we are so justly proud.”¹⁰⁹ Their heroic nature, however, came not from their expertise, but from their position as selfless mother figures. The matron did not shed the role of mother in her job, but rather embodied the status of “super-mothers” caring for more children more efficiently than the average woman. Enhanced maternal abilities, however, were not grounds for professionalization.



Most of the group activities of the matron comprised of circle games such as this one. Oftentimes one adult oversaw as many as 20 children. Their low occupational status left them with little authority to lobby for improved staff to child ratios. Sheltering Arms Collection at Sheltering Arms Headquarters. Nd.

As a result of the custodial nature of their work and lack of specialized training, matrons were seen as babysitters, filling in for incapable or unavailable mothers. They were not experts in child development, but kindly substitutes caring for children until the mothers could pick them

¹⁰⁸ *Atlanta Constitution*. July 30, 1898.

¹⁰⁹ See Theda Skocpol *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in United States* for an explanation of the ways in which mothering and military service were connected in this period.

up and resume these same custodial duties at home. Their work was “common sense” or “maternal instinct.” Unlike those whose work was regarded as professional, the matrons did not obtain jurisdiction over an exclusive body of knowledge regarding which others deferred to their expertise.

The Entrance of the Female Professionals into the Day Nurseries

Social Work

In the 1920s, approaches to charity became increasingly scientific. Poverty was viewed as a solvable problem, one that required training and expertise to address. This shift of charity from womanly benevolence to scientific rationality necessitated a new type of advocate—the social worker. The field of social work arose out of this more scientific approach to poverty.

Previously, elite maternalists took on the work of caring for the poor as an extension of their domestic work, as part of their “social housekeeping”. Their work was motivated by pity and compassion, not highly rationalized expertise. Social work took a completely different approach. New, research-based solutions to poverty did not require feminine sympathy, but an analytical approach. Poverty and social problems were the result of societal institutions and structures, and those who worked with the poor needed to be well equipped with the right tools to understand their complexities.

The social work movement went to great lengths to establish and maintain its status as professional work. Schools of social work were established, where women learned research-based approaches to various social problems. In 1919, the seventeen existing schools of social work merge together to form the Association of Training Schools for professional social work. After rigorous training, the social worker also received a regular salary, and belonged to professional social work associations. The National Social Workers Exchange, the first official

association of social workers, was established in 1917. As the work became more professionalized, it also became less elite. The wealthy reformers of previous decades distanced themselves from this new breed of charity worker. Similarly, the social workers worked to dissociate their profession from the charitable benevolence of their maternalist predecessors. Embarrassed by the association of social work with maternalist charity, women in social work incessantly highlighted the highly scientific nature of their work.¹¹⁰ As a marker of their success, in 1929, the federal census removed social work from the category of “religious and charity workers”— a category that also included “fortune tellers, hypnotists, healers, officials of lodges, and theater owners”— and classifying them as “professional.”¹¹¹

The newly acquired professional status of the social worker was not unchallenged. As criteria for a “profession” became ever clearer, some began to question whether social work fit the necessary standards. Questions arose surrounding what exactly was their body of expert knowledge and what direct control they had over their outcomes. In 1915 at a National Conference on Social Welfare, Abraham Flexner measured the occupation against his own standards of professionalism and found it lacking. He argued, “the social worker was at best the mediator in the problem.” Social workers’ primary purpose was to refer clients to other social services, acting as “mediators among real professionals.” To him, they were “little more than errand boys and girls in the world of social altruism.”¹¹² At least some of the resistance to the professionalization of social work can be attributed to the gendered nature of the work. The emergence of female “experts” on poverty caused many to yearn for the less threatening,

¹¹⁰ For a more detailed description of this process, see Elizabeth Agnew *From Charity to Social Work: Mary E. Richmond and the Creation of an American Profession*, or Roy Lubove, *The Professional Altruist*. Boston: Atheneum, 1973.

¹¹¹ Kunzel. *Fallen Women, Problem Girls*. 39.

¹¹² Kirshner. *The Paradox of Professionalism*. 54.

nonprofessional approach of the maternalists.¹¹³ These constant attacks made social workers painfully aware of the precariousness of their own professional status, causing them to spend an inordinate amount of time defining and defending their right to be classified as “experts.”

Relations between day nurseries and the social worker establishment were contentious in the first few decades of the century. Social workers were harsh critics of the day nursery. On the national level, day nursery leadership was excluded from interagency conferences organized by social workers to discuss child welfare work. Mentions of day nurseries were also omitted from social work textbooks and lectures. The social work establishment “ignored day nurseries because the day nurseries seemed to ignore the importance of social work.”¹¹⁴ This fissure seemed illogical; day nurseries represented enormous untapped potential for social workers. As organizations with a high concentration of “socially deviant” and dependent families, day nurseries were ideal, centralized source of new “cases” for the social worker.

The social worker institution felt that this opportunity for collaboration had been squandered by the outdated approaches of the day nursery. Social workers criticized day nurseries for their continued adherence to maternalist approach to charity. In their opinion, day nurseries were too liberal in their admissions policies. Overworked matrons did not have the time or skills necessary to perform extensive background investigations or manage casework on all of the families, meaning many “unworthy” families were admitted. Social workers argued that these lenient policies enabled mothers who did not need the services to gain admission into the nurseries. They worried these the interventions perpetuated deviant behavior (like single motherhood), rather than rehabilitating the core problems of the poor families. Day nurseries were a remnant of the charitable approach to poverty from which social workers hoped to keep

¹¹³ Kunzel explores the gendered nature of the resistance to social work in the second chapter of her book, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls*, entitled “New Experts and the Girl Problem.”

¹¹⁴ Rose. *A Mother's Job*. 89.

their distance. These sort of nonstandard charity tactics threatened the professional status of the “real” relief work performed by social workers.

In an attempt to mend this troubled relationship, some day nurseries hired social workers to staff their organizations at the start of the 1920s. By hiring social workers to examine the history of day nursery families, managers sought to bring the latest in modern social welfare practice to their institutions.¹¹⁵ Social workers developed a system of casework and outreach that allowed them to closely monitor each of the families utilizing the services. They also increased the partnerships between day nurseries and other social welfare agencies, connecting families to health resources, mental health services, and marriage counseling. Overall, the newly appointed social worker mandated the end the informal, case-by-case approach of the matron and drew up established policies to standardize procedures.

The first record of a social worker at Sheltering Arms was in 1921; at first, the organization employed one woman to travel between the multiple locations. Her duties were “so varied that it is difficult to give anything like a complete resume of the year’s work”.¹¹⁶ She investigated the conditions of each family, ascertained their needs, referred them to the appropriate social services, and monitored their progress. Her daily duties could range anywhere from “help[ing] to secure positions for those out of employment, bring[ing] to bear as much influence as possible in re-establishing homes broken by separation, and giv[ing] needed assistance to Court proceedings when such needs arise”.¹¹⁷ But above all else, the most important contribution of the social worker was her ability to “enable us to care only for those who were in need of help.”¹¹⁸ The social worker’s meticulous casework ensured that the day

¹¹⁵ Rose. *A Mother’s Job*. 91.

¹¹⁶ Sheltering Arms Annual Report of 1922. 7.

¹¹⁷ Sheltering Arms Annual Report 1922. 7.

¹¹⁸ Sheltering Arms Annual Report. 1920. No page.

nursery only accepted children from “worthy” homes. This increased awareness of the conditions of the families they served coupled with access to additional social service references led the managers to consider the social worker an “untold advantage,” and made it “impossible to estimate the great value derived from the services.”¹¹⁹

The entrance of the social workers fundamentally changed the goal of the day nurseries. No longer content to provide a safe haven for the children of working mothers, they now “sought family rehabilitation, a change in circumstances and attitudes that would enable poor mothers to do without charitable assistance, preferably by returning to a ‘normal’ family structure of breadwinning father and stay-at-home mother”.¹²⁰ Social workers also had a profound impact on the experience of the working mother within the day nursery. For the mothers who utilized the day nurseries, the social workers’ presence meant more in-depth investigation into the personal aspects of their lives. The women had less autonomy over their own decisions, and every familial choice was second-guessed. Through the management of cases and the emphasis on deviance correction, social workers reinforced the day nursery’s self-conception as a flawed institution that ought to be used only temporarily in the most desperate of circumstances.

Social workers took on a great deal of responsibility within the day nurseries, taking autonomy away from the matron. Prior to the entrance of the social work professionals, the matron had managed all interactions with day nursery families. Her approach had been informal and relational; day nursery operations had been based not on scientific research, but on their gut feelings and personal sympathies. The social worker took on this role of family relations, and changed the rules that governed it. She conducted home visits, parent meetings, and training sessions based on the latest in social science research. The division of labor within the day

¹¹⁹ Sheltering Arms Annual Report. 1920. No page.

¹²⁰ Rose. *A Mother’s Job*. 89.

nursery was clear. The board of managers declared that the social worker “shall neither be assigned nor assume any daily routine duties in a Nursery.”¹²¹ The time and resources of the social worker were considered too important to be taken up by the custodial duties. Those were left for the matron. This hierarchy of roles was reaffirmed by the pay structure of Sheltering Arms. According to an inspection report of the Department of Public Welfare Visitation Report, Sheltering Arms’ matron’s salary was \$50 per month. The social worker, on the other hand, made \$140 per month plus \$20 for travel expenses to the homes of the mothers.¹²² Although she was technically a member of the staff reporting to the matron, she was also a professional whose expertise and credentials conferred respect that the matron never received.

The Kindergarten Movement

By 1920, the sense that mothers innately knew how to successfully raise children because of their “female sensitivity” was in question. In fact, much of the new scholarship suggested that mothers of all socioeconomic statuses were inherently incompetent. Researchers warned that untrained mothers inflicted permanent psychological damage on their children. Children were recognized as complex human beings, in need of constant training and support. As a result of these increased expectations, even affluent women who could afford to devote themselves to full-time mothering worried about the potential damage resulting from their inadequate parenting skills.¹²³ Because women felt uncertain about how to navigate these new scientific findings, they began searching for professional advice from trained experts on childhood development. For the wealthy, nursery schools became the primary source for this expert advice. If childcare was offered as a gift to the poor in day nurseries, “in the nursery schools it was sold to parents as a

¹²¹ Sheltering Arms Annual Report 1925. 23.

¹²² The Department of Public Welfare Visitation Report. July 1937.

¹²³ Rose. *A Mother's Job*. 104.

high class commodity”.¹²⁴

For poor mothers, the free kindergarten movement was the source of advice on the new field of child development. In 1837, Friedrich Froebel began the kindergarten movement in Germany. He believed in a child-centered pedagogy that emphasized the role of free play and exposure to nature in the development of the child. He wrote not only on theory, but also on specifically outlined activities and manipulative that he believed facilitated the cognitive development of young children.¹²⁵ Kindergarten migrated to the United States between 1848 and 1860. In this first period, the movement remained within the control of the German-Americans immigrants. As the movement developed further in the United States, Americans reshaped kindergarten to meet their own needs.¹²⁶ Kindergarten was eventually recast as an answer to many of the social problems caused by immigration, industrialization, and urbanization. Kindergarten advocates argued that young children were the product of their environments; this meant that “slum children” were the product of vice, crime, and immorality. By providing children with access to free kindergarten, reformers sought to give these same children the opportunity to rise above their circumstances and develop into contributing citizens.

From its outset, the kindergarteners perceived of their work as inherently professional. They were not custodial babysitters, but teachers. At Sheltering Arms, the kindergarten teacher taught “a little child to regard the right of others, to live uprightly and to be happy is the business of the kindergarten.” Her work was not as custodial, but the “formal training of our kindergarten

¹²⁴ Elizabeth Rose. *A Mother's Job*. 102.

¹²⁵ For a more comprehensive history of the pedagogical innovations behind the kindergarten movement, see Shapiro, Michael Steven. *Child's Garden: The Kindergarten Movement from Froebel to Dewey*.

¹²⁶ Elizabeth Dale Ross explores the three waves of the kindergarten movement in her book, *The Kindergarten Crusade: the Establishment of Preschool Education in the United States*. She calls the third wave the wave of Americanization, led by Susan Blow and Elizabeth Peabody. See her chapter two, entitled “The Kindergarten as an Agent of Social Reform.”

children.”¹²⁷ The kindergarten teacher offered instruction for three to four hours each day, leaving the matron to deal with the more custodial duties of feeding, clothing, and cleaning the children. Her exclusive domain was the intellectual development of the children, and all other caregiving duties were distractions from that professional calling.



Part of the kindergarten movement was Froebel’s introduction of “gifts” into the curriculum. Gifts were a collection of action-based playthings intended to facilitate self-directed activity for the kindergartener. Oftentimes instruction took place in small groups, like the group of kindergarteners at Sheltering Arms pictured above. Sheltering Arms Collection at the Sheltering Arms Headquarters. Nd.

Unlike day nursery matrons, kindergarten teachers were rigorously trained in structured programs of higher learning. Private women’s liberal arts colleges and colleges of education at private universities began adding kindergarten training courses in the late 1880s and 1890s.¹²⁸ Admission into these programs was rigorous, and successful applicants needed to meet a variety of moral and intellectual markers. The training consisted of one year of course work and observation and a second year of practice teaching. Courses covered Froebelian principles, instruction techniques, art, music, ethics, mathematics, and literature. Even at the start of the

¹²⁷ Sheltering Arms Annual Report 1922. 10.

¹²⁸ Barbara Beatty. *Preschool Education in America*. 114.

movement, when qualified teachers were in short supply, the kindergarten community maintained the highest standards in training teachers, insisting that all teachers hold advanced degrees. A successful kindergarten teacher also needed to be well educated, creative, and cultured. Kindheartedness and a love for children did not qualify one to teach kindergarten.



Kindergarten teachers also offered musical instructions to their students. Being musically talented was especially important in gaining admission to the top kindergarten training programs. Here a group of Sheltering Arms children receive piano instruction by using replicas of the keyboard. Sheltering Arms Collection at Sheltering Arms Headquarters. Nd.

Teaching kindergarten was viewed as an ideal female profession. It offered an alternative life path for women who were uninterested or unable to marry. Some argued that it fulfilled the maternal instincts of women who were not able to have children of their own. At a time when women's work outside of the home remained highly stigmatized, kindergarten instruction was considered one of the first noble pursuits for woman outside of the home. Because the work sought to enhance the natural capacity of women to care for and cultivate the growth of young children, it was not a threat to the structure of the traditional family. Outreach to the urban poor was also a commended element of the work. Many regarded going into poor communities as a

kindergarten teacher as a mission to serve God. Churches recruited and supported women to enter kindergarten training schools.¹²⁹ Thus kindergarten teaching afforded women the unique opportunity to work outside of the home without facing the stigmatization associated with violating gender norms.

As a result of their relatively high occupational status, kindergarten teachers enjoyed many advantages over the matrons within the day nursery. While day nursery matrons who were constantly negotiating power dynamics with their challenging clientele, kindergarten teachers received reverence as definitive experts. Their expertise was based on the identification of family deficits. Unlike social workers they did not specialize in “fixing” the poor, but rather in enhancing the cognitive development of all children. Kindergarten teachers were experts in a larger pedagogical movement that applied equally to women of all classes. Even members of the board of Sheltering Arms expressed their reverence for the expertise of the teacher: “What I wouldn’t give if I could have her in my home to teach my children!”¹³⁰ Because of this universality, kindergarten did not face as much resistance from poor mothers. Kindergarten teachers did not delve into issues of marital problems or drunkenness, leaving those topics for the matron and social worker. Kindergarten did not pass judgment over one’s lifestyle, but rather to stress the importance of scientific approaches to early childhood education. Unlike the charity visitor of the past, “the free kindergartener carried information, not the charity basket.”¹³¹

At its foundation, the kindergarten movement had a genuine respect for and belief in the dignity of their clients. Community work was an integral component of the early kindergarten

¹²⁹ For a comprehensive history of kindergarten in academia, see Elizabeth Dale Ross’ *Kindergarten Crusade*, particularly chapter 4: “The Kindergarten and Teacher Training”.

¹³⁰ *Atlanta Constitution*. January 9, 1909.

¹³¹ Shapiro. *Children’s Garden*. 101.

movement in the United States.¹³² Teachers spent half of their days instructing young children, and the other half of the day in the community working with families and agency partners. Although elitist perspectives were certainly present at points within the movement, the early kindergarteners have been noted for their multiculturalist approach to education. Families were valued and respected as they were. The kindergarten teacher sought to supplement, not replace or alter the family. At Sheltering Arms, there was at first “so much prejudice against such an unheard of institution.” But the kindergarten teacher went “to the homes, meet the mothers, then each day corral the little ones and escort them to school and return”. Ultimately, “her charming personality won out and at last the Kindergarten became a most powerful aid in the effort to uplift the Community and each individual life.”¹³³ This “charming” and humble made kindergarten teachers far more popular in working-class neighborhoods than social workers or matrons.

High levels of training and respect resulted in a relatively higher occupational status for the kindergarten teacher. According to the Public Welfare Visitation Report of 1937, kindergarten teachers at Sheltering Arms earned around \$90 per week (in comparison to \$50 for the matron and \$160 for the social worker).¹³⁴ Additionally, the kindergarten teacher had more authority over own working conditions than matrons ever had. Kindergarten associations mandated small class sizes and short learning days; certified teaching assistant were provided if enrollment surpassed a given number. In comparison, matrons often watched upwards of 50 children with little or no help for over ten hours a day. As a result of this their professional status, kindergarten teachers were able to claim an independence that matrons could not.

¹³² Much of this community emphasis and multiculturalism disappeared when kindergarten merged with the public school system, forcing teachers to instruct both morning and afternoon sessions. For a full exploration of this transformation, see O'Connor's “Mothering in Public.”

¹³³ Sheltering Arms Annual Report 1938. 15.

¹³⁴ The Department of Public Welfare Visitation Report. July 1937.

The kindergarten and social work movements did not face the same stigmatization as the day nursery movement. The social worker sought not to support the dysfunctional family, but rather to reform it. As a result, social work was heralded as a champion of traditional values, and was not an enabler of family degradation like the matron. The American public was much more comfortable with kindergartens providing educational instruction, than the day nurseries providing physical and emotional care to children separate from their mothers. The kindergarten teacher did not replace the mother, but enhanced the cognitive understanding of the child. Ultimately, both the kindergarten teacher and the social worker managed to achieve professional status because they did not threaten the gender norms of the traditional family structure.

Conclusion

The Current Status of the Childcare Worker and Its Implications

In the United States, there are currently over eleven million children under the age of five receiving some form of childcare outside of the home.¹³⁵ Recent scientific advances have solidified earlier theories that the first five years of life are absolutely pivotal for neurological developmental. According to the Harvard Center on the Developing Child, “science shows that providing stable, responsive, nurturing relationships in the earliest years of life can prevent or even reverse the damaging effects of early life stress, with lifelong benefits for learning, behavior, and health.” The most developmentally significant years for many children are those spent in the American childcare system, and some of the most formative relationships in young children’s lives are those formed with their caregivers outside of the home.

Despite the high demand for childcare and the scientifically proven significance of early education, the current status of the American childcare system remains largely unchanged from its humble, charitable origins at the turn of the twentieth century. The system’s two most serious modern challenges are affordability and quality. In 40 states, the average cost for a year at a childcare center is more than the annual cost of tuition at that state’s public university.¹³⁶ This high cost is a large burden to working families, and often limits their ability to afford “quality” care. Many childcare centers in operation today lack high standards for universal quality and effective methods of measuring progress. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research’s annual *State of Preschool* report, many of the quality regulations set by individual states fail to meet even the most basic indicators of quality.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ National Institution for Early Education Research. *State of Preschool*: 2011.

¹³⁶ Lynet Uttal, *Making Care Work: Employed Mothers in the New Childcare Market* (Rutgers University Press, 2002).

¹³⁷ National Institution for Early Education Research. *State of Preschool*: 2010.

Quality, however, in the context of childcare, is a complex and ambiguous concept. Many experts disagree about exactly what constitutes a quality early care experience. Some point to class size, building regulations, and accreditation as indicators, but in recent years, the area that has received the most attention has been the quality of the teachers themselves. Many have advocated for the professionalization of the childcare worker as a means of improving educational outcomes for children. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children, one of the current goals of the occupation ought to be “becoming more professional.” To them, this means generating “students prepared in early childhood degree programs who identify and conduct themselves as members of the early childhood profession”.¹³⁸ They ought to “know and use ethical guideline and other professional standards related to early childhood practice” and be “informed advocates for sound educational practices and policies.”¹³⁹

This modern move for the “professionalization” of the childcare worker is nothing new; day nursery advocates called for the professionalization of the matron over a century ago. Because of the legacy of stigmatization for day nurseries matrons, there remain many substantial barriers to the professionalization of the childcare worker. Many still consider the job conducted by childcare workers to be “commonsense” and inherently non-professional. The stigma of the philanthropic origins and the female gender of the profession also play a continued role in this degradation of the field. And as a result, the childcare worker remains one of the lowest paid occupations in the United States. In Georgia, for instance, “cosmetologists earn on average almost 60% more per hour than child care workers.”¹⁴⁰ The average hourly wage of a childcare

¹³⁸ NAEYC. “Program Standards on Professionalization.”

¹³⁹ NAEYC. “Program Standards on Professionalization.”

¹⁴⁰ Marcy Whitebook. “Child Care Workers- High Demands, Low Wages.”

worker is just \$8.50 per hour.¹⁴¹ Another remnant of the day nursery tradition is the poor working conditions; many childcare workers are forced to work long hours with very little support. As a result of these low wages and high demands, there is a high turnover rate in the field and few individuals enter the job with the intent of making it a career.

Rather than discussing improved wages or working conditions as effective methods for professionalizing the childcare worker, policy makers have emphasized increasing credentialing requirements. Currently, in many states, childcare workers only need a high school diploma to instruct in the classroom. Some policy-makers and advocates argue that higher levels of training in early education will result in higher outcomes for children. In the state of Georgia, for example, all childcare professionals are now required to hold Child Development Associates Degrees and to complete at least thirty hours of professional development every year. To emphasize increased credentialing without addressing low pay and lack of respect, however, is shortsighted. By making the field more difficult to enter but not improving the pay or conditions of the occupation itself, these advocates are inadvertently damaging the profession. College graduates are not attracted to the profession in sufficient numbers to meet demand. In order to develop a sustainable model for the profession, “it is important to do both jobs at once—to produce trained, professional personnel and to provide commensurate opportunities for them. Initiatives for change must be taken by agencies and by child care professionals alike.”¹⁴²

Sheltering Arms faces many of these challenges as they attempt to professionalize their own childcare workforce, attempting to move from their charitable origins in the late nineteenth century to a modern childcare leader. Sheltering Arms is dedicated to the establishment of a “well-trained workforce that is equipped to instruct children in accordance with the most current

¹⁴¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics. <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/Personal-Care-and-Service/Childcare-workers.htm>.

¹⁴² Z. Eisikovits and J. Beker, “Beyond professionalism: The child and youth care worker as craftsman,” in *Child and Youth Care Forum*, vol. 12, 1983, 93–112.

research on best practices”.¹⁴³ In order to achieve this goal, in 1999, Sheltering Arms founded the Georgia Training Institute. The Institute’s mission is to “build community capacity to create positive outcomes for children and families in Georgia by providing research-based training in early care and education and family development and by modeling best practices in these fields.”

¹⁴⁴ Courses offered by Georgia Training Institute allow childcare workers to progress towards the Child Development Associate Credential, which all Sheltering Arms employees must earn by 2012. Smaller workshops such as “Engaging Men in the Classroom” and “Working with Children with Special Needs” provide professional development hours related to specific issues. According to their website, “Sheltering Arms has achieved a high degree of staff commitment, training, and longevity. At present, 81% of all 498 Sheltering Arms teachers, family support coordinators, and administrators hold one or more of the following credentials: CDA, early childhood diploma, Associate’s Degree, Bachelor’s Degree, or Master’s Degree.”¹⁴⁵ Sheltering Arms, and Georgia Training Institute, have fully embraced the stance that increased training and credentialing is the key to the professionalization of the childcare workforce.

Not everyone within the early education community is convinced that increased credentialing requirements will lead to increased effectiveness of instruction. Recent research has connected higher teacher IQ and overall education level to improved outcomes; levels of credentialing specifically in early education programs was found to be insignificant. Perhaps the largest critics of the professional development of the workforce are the childcare workers themselves. Many workers feel that classroom experience is the only way to improve one’s abilities and no professional development could make up for that experience. Professional development exercises took teachers out of the classroom, which, in their opinion, was the best

¹⁴³ “Facts About Sheltering Arms,” <http://www.shelteringarmsforkids.com/faqs.html>.

¹⁴⁴ “Georgia Training Institute: Early Childhood Education,” <http://www.georgiatraininginstitute.com/>.

¹⁴⁵ “Facts About Sheltering Arms.”

place for them to be improving their skills.¹⁴⁶ Many teachers not only disliked the trainings, but found them condescending as well. This resentment between trainer and trainee is reminiscent of the struggle between the wealthy philanthropic founders of Sheltering Arms and the matrons that has existed since day nurseries began. Many of the women working in the administration at Sheltering Arms are white and upper-middle class, while most of the teachers are working-class and blacks. Thus, just as in the day nurseries, many administrative decisions are made without consulting the workers, causing them to be interpreted as insensitive demands on the part of the out of touch administration.

According to modern understandings of professionalization, if childcare workers manage to become the definitive “experts” on childrearing in society, they will become professionals. By abandoning their day nursery legacy as babysitters and fully embracing their new identity as teachers, they will obtain higher wages and more occupational worth. In actuality, however, the professionalization of the childcare worker is not that simple. In American society, the sanctity of the family is viewed as one of our deepest, most basic values and traditions. Family is a powerful institution that has traditionally been beyond the grasp of governmental regulations and scientific expertise. Throughout the modern age of the experts, childrearing has remained one endeavor that is still guided by “commonsense” practices and a non-expert, “mother knows best” ideology. Childcare workers and institutionalized day care jeopardize the “expert-free” sanctity of the family. Many families are unwilling to relinquish control of their authority when it comes to their own children. Until these cultural mores shift, childcare will workers remain marginalized and undervalued professionals. Even today they exist uneasily in our society, seen by many as affectionate intruders into the sanctity of the American family.

¹⁴⁶ Interviews with Sheltering Arms Childcare Workers. November 2011.

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