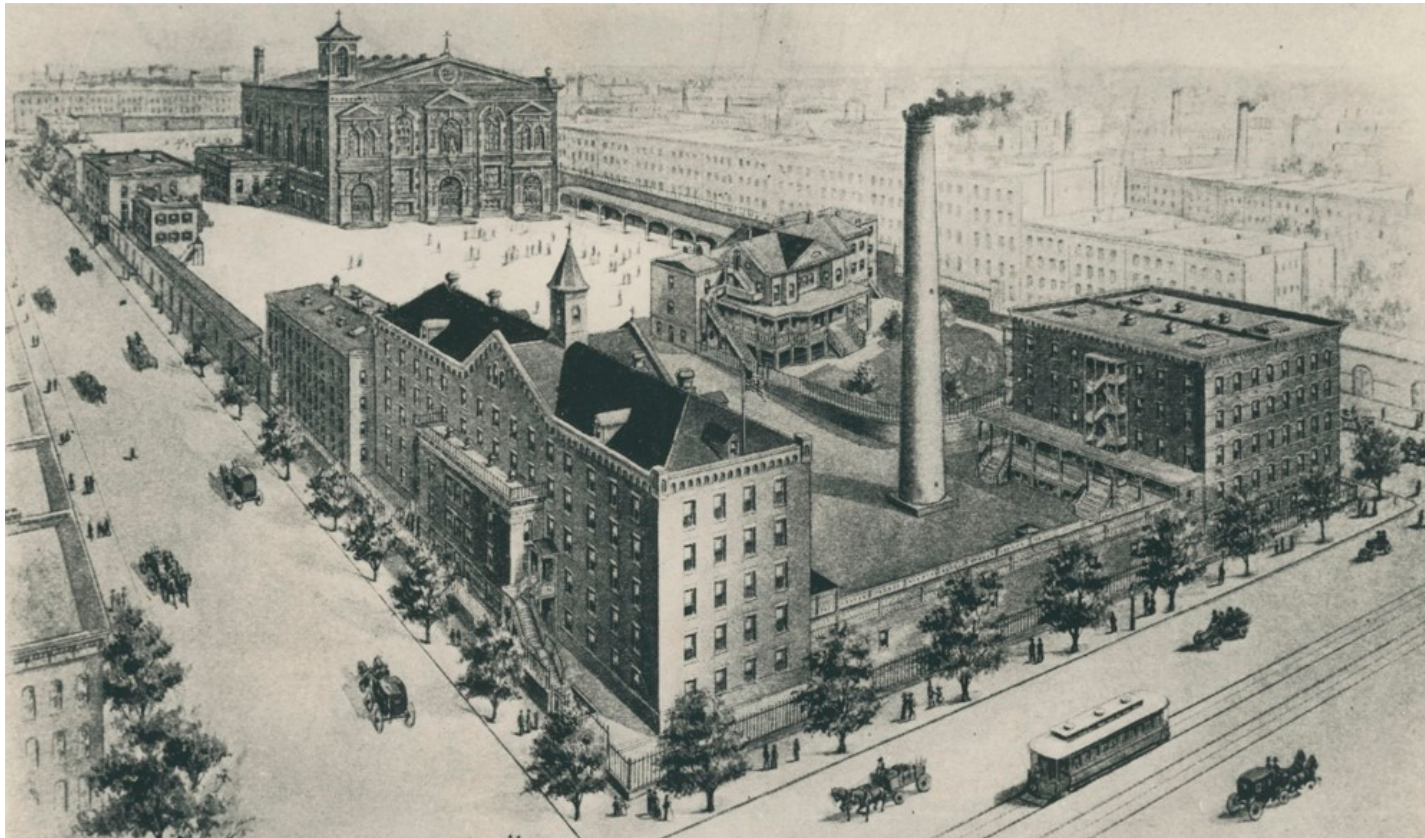


St. Joseph's Orphanage

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St. Joseph's orphanage, New York

Construction has a way of uncovering historical gems that were thought to be lost. Recently, a parking lot was torn down in Yorkville, a neighborhood in Manhattan's Upper East Side. Hidden behind the structure was the eight-story neoclassical façade of the St. Joseph's Orphanage chapel, which was built in 1898 (see links below for more information about the find).

St. Joseph's Orphanage was founded in 1859 by Rev. Joseph Helmsprecht, C.S.S.R., pastor of Holy Redeemer Church. The School Sisters of Notre Dame were given the responsibility of the day-to-day operation of the orphanage and educating the children. This continued in this capacity until the orphanage closed in 1918.

Various documents, housed in the School Sisters of Notre Dame North American Archives, vividly describe what life was like for the sisters and children who lived at St. Joseph's.

The Foundations of St. Joseph Orphanage

"The feast of the Annunciation brought us a mission, the like of which we had never yet taken over in America. It is an institute for physically and morally neglected children. The Reverend Father Joseph Helmsprecht, C.S.S.R. in New York recognized this need and he succeeded—surely through the intercession of St. Joseph, in whose honor this institution was founded—in collecting \$22,000. He bought a small country house with a rather large garden in Yorkville, six miles from the city of New York on the Hudson River. It has a healthy and at the same time beautiful surroundings. In the poor, protective children's homes the good Father personally searched for German children who for the most part, due to idleness and begging, had been picked up by the police and brought to such houses. Their parents are either dead or among the cast-outs of humanity. Therefore, children without faith, without any Christian education, with many afflictions in body and soul were given over to us here—lovable only in holy faith...

The institute opened with 16 children; now it already numbers 40, occasionally also foundlings whom their mothers had thrown away. Most of the older children had forgotten their mother tongue and had never learned how to pray. Many of them were known only by their assumed names; others did not know whether they had been baptized. Three of them had only one eye through neglect... Two sisters who had been separated for five years, each in a different institution, came

together in our house, without recognizing each other for several days. How touching was the scene when they found and recognized each other!..." *Source: A letter written by Mother Caroline Friess to the Central Council of the Louis Mission Society, dated May 31, 1859.*

Life at the orphanage

Orphanages in the 19th century are often remembered as bleak places where children received minimal care. However, when reading the chronicles of St. Joseph's Orphanage, it is clear that the sisters who worked there made a real effort to provide a home for the children under their care. The sisters made sure the children got an education and adequate healthcare; they celebrated holidays; and worked hard to provide a clean, safe home for the children. The following excerpts were taken from the chronicles of St. Joseph's Orphanage.

1861: "At the beginning, the sisters trusted the people too much as far as cleanliness and sincerity is concerned. They admitted the children without investigating them, trusting the conscientiousness of those who brought them. Unfortunately, in this way, scabies were brought into the house as also garment lice. With great effort and work, constant washing, inspecting and changing clothes this vermin was finally eradicated. The sisters, therefore, having become wise by experience examined each new child thoroughly before allowing to mingle with other children."



The St. Joseph orphanage chronicle.

1870: “During the Christmas week of 1870, our children received many presents from generous benefactors of the house. The boys received small toy guns and musical instruments which they liked very much. At once, one offered to be the captain who would teach them drill exercises, which were very helpful for the boys to acquire good posture and practice instant obedience...”

1871: “On Feb. 18, 1871, we noticed in the morning toward 11 o’clock that the basement became filled with water which soon reached a height of 2 ft., so that the vegetables became covered with water. By the next morning it had reached 5 ft. The damage was enormous. The potatoes became rotten as they were in the water for already 8 days. The tall kerosene can toppled over, the canned beans became rotten, the sauerkraut in barrels swam on the water. Twice we tried with buckets to carry off the water, but all our efforts were in vain, until the workmen dug up the street and discovered that the wooden board that covered the water duct had decayed and hindered the water from flowing. In all the misfortune we were lucky, that the water from the sewer pipe could still run off. Besides the loss of our vegetables, oil, etc. and pay to the workmen amounted to about \$30.

1871: “...After school hours our girls were busy with needlework which was sold at appropriate times, like picnics, feasts, etc. for the benefit of the house which at our poverty brought in a little extra money. In this we got some unexpected help by Miss Augusta Andre an excellent needlework teacher, who spent some time of her vacation with us and then taught our children knitting, crocheting, etc...”

1871: “...Our garden is very beautiful, especially the sunflowers are plentiful, the seeds of which when ripe are used as chicken-feed. The corn, also, has grown very well, some more than 10 ft. high. It is used as fodder for the cows. The dried husks are used for the children’s beds...”

1872: "...As usual, on July 4, our children were extraordinarily filled with devotion to fire, whereby we again came into great danger. Several boys ran around with tin cans in which they carried fire. Accidentally, they also came to a barn in which straw was kept, and they were looking for small pieces of wood to keep their fire going. Probably some sparks from the tin lanterns fell on the dry straw. Shortly thereafter, thick smoke and some single flames of fire warned us of the terrible danger. All the neighbors volunteered their help. The fire department, also, came to our assistance. Thus, in a short time the fire was put out. The barn with all its hay and straw was totally destroyed. Thanks to the presence of mind of Rev. Father Theresius, the cows and the rest of the animals were brought to safety, so that not even a chicken was lost. Without the very special help of God it would have turned out very bad for us, because the old house almost would have become a victim of the flames..."

1874: "Easter Sunday April 5, 1874, was very pleasant and joyous. The Easter Bunny surprised our little ones with many colored eggs which gave the children much joy. The sly bunny had hidden the most beautiful eggs this year in the garden under the box-tree and other bushes! What a joy when another egg was found! The little ones as the older ones were full of praise for the good sly Easter bunny."

1874: "...On that day was also [June 29, 1874] was the annual folk fest for which we received much beer, wine, ham, etc. and also many other useful things from benefactors as presents. Our children had made all kinds of items of needlework which could be made use of in a clever way. The greatest results were brought in by the letter-post for which the most lively and clever children were used, who knew how to get their letters to the right person. The envelopes were addressed to certain persons from whom they could expect a contribution. The sealed letter contained a verse, a wish, a small package and the like, and often caused great hilarity. This time this fun thing brought

in \$51...At this occasion, also, 3 swings were erected for the children. The expenses for them nearly reached \$100..."

1874: "On July 4, 1874, we had pretty much fireworks. We all spent a happy evening. Luckily, this time we did not have an accident."

1876: "...The older boys had saved some money which they put together and with these saved pennies of the good children and some assistance we were able to buy a good milk cow..."

1877: "In our populous city of New York is no lack of street bandits, small and large. In this respect one of our boys had a salubrious experience on March 24, which he will never forget. We had sent him to the market to make some purchases. He put his money \$5.00 into the basket, which was rather foolish – but who would think about thieves in daylight. Hardly had our youngster gone a short stretch as those rascals knocked the basket out of his hand and took the money. Before the police arrived those street urchins had disappeared."

1882: "During this month [May] the number of children increased so much that the sisters overburdened with so much work, sewing and mending clothes, could not manage by themselves anymore had to seek outside help. For lack of space, some children sent to them, had to be refused acceptance."

1883: "During the month of Feb., quite unexpectedly we received the visit of the Board of Health. These gentlemen thoroughly inspected every corner of the house, every box; not a single bed remained untouched; even the straw mattresses were opened and diligently inspected. That was a thorough visitation to possibly uncover anything that could be censured. After their inspection, however, the gentlemen expressed their total satisfaction, praised the order and cleanliness they

found everywhere.”

1884: “On January 24, our new steam heating system was put in operation. It proved to be excellent. In a short time the whole house felt comfortable, a benefit which appreciated the more since all of us had suffered more or less from the previous cold. The joy of us all was indescribable. But we had the greatest trouble to keep the boys away from the radiators, because according to the kind of the human species, they wanted to examine everything on the engine ‘to see how it works.’ God be praised, our children have now warm dormitories.”

1886: “...Our laundry also was provided with new machinery which considerably lightened the heavy work. As we had only few helpers and had to wash for about 600 persons, which took us all week long, the consent of the Orphan Board, bought 2 washing machines. To our great relief these improvements were made immediately. The machines are driven by steam; the sisters using them must be very careful not to come into contact with the leather belts. Otherwise these machines are very useful. Also in the kitchen an apparatus was installed which makes it possible to prepare coffee, tea, soups with steam power. The ‘ventilator’ in the kitchen is an excellent means of keeping the air clean and fresh, whereby it is prevented that the odor of cooking vegetables, meat, etc. is noticed all over the house.”

1889: “On July 23, 1889, the annual boat ride took place which went along Long Island Sound, which was very much enjoyed by the children. Mr. Stadtler, a friend and benefactor of the orphans, annually supplies the amount for this joyous and special excursion. At the time the number of children amounted to 606, of which 60 were housed at Throggs Neck, West Chester, N.Y.”

1893 [note: Beginning in 1893, the U.S. suffered from an economic depression, the worst in the nation's history until the Great Depression of the 1930s] “Forced by dire want many a poor worker

or unemployed father had to separate from their darlings, and thus daily several half orphans were brought to us who found friendly admittance, although our orphan home is in danger of becoming overcrowded; yet, we let our Lord care for us, He has done so already for a long time and thanks to His fatherly care our little ones never lack food or clothing.”

1896: “The number of orphans is now 870, the highest ever since the foundation of the orphanage...”

1896: “In agreement of the president of the Orphan Board and the Health Department our Rev. Father Rector Wm. Tewes, CSSR, made the plan for the benefit of the children and the improvement of their health, to cover the present garden and the adjacent playground with asphalt. Already in spring the workmen had begun to prepare the ground and during March, April and May, they were working steadily to prepare the playground for the children. The beautiful fruit trees were not removed and provide in summer the most pleasant shade...”

1896: “On November 4, several of our boys became high-spirited. It was election day of a president. Perhaps excited by the many bonfires they jumped over the fence in the evening and ran through the streets of the city. The next morning very early they sent the police to look for the fugitives, who were returned to us. Dirty and hungry the 4 boys gladly returned to the orphanage.”

1898: “Rev. Father Rector Tewes had a beautiful, large hall built for various purposes. The first Sunday of the month is destined to be visitors’ Sunday to give the relatives of the children an opportunity to visit with the children. At this occasion the children had to give a short entertainment with songs and poems.”

1899: “The orphan boy, Michael Farrel, was sometimes mischievous, so that he pretended he had

cut off his finger; one day, unnoticed and without permission he went to the bread-cutting machine and really cut off his first finger and his thumb; by the dexterity of the surgeon, they were re-attached and finally healed.”

1911: “From Albany we got the direction for boys to instruct them in manual labor. The boys of the 4th and 5th grades were to be taught how to do wicker-work (baskets and chairs). The 6th graders had to learn printing for which a machine had to be bought for \$600. The boys of the 7th and 8th grades had to learn cabinet-making for which also expensive preparations had to be made. But only those boys were to be admitted to this type of instruction who had completed their 12th year.”

To be continued...

Although the sisters tried to provide a healthy home for the children, some things were out of their control. Next month we will focus on the two biggest threats to the safety of the children: fire and disease.

Learn more:

- [The Private School vs. the Radical Priest](#)
- [The eerie facade of a Yorkville orphanage chapel](#)
- [In the Heart of Yorkville, Life Has Changed for German Catholics](#)