

Jennifer Cote, "Class and the Ideology of Womanhood: The Early Years of the Boston Young Women's Christian Association" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 32, No. 1 (Winter 2004).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

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Editor, *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*
c/o Westfield State University
577 Western Ave. Westfield MA 01086



**Class and the Ideology of Womanhood:
The Early Years of the Boston Young Women's Christian
Association**

By

Jennifer Cote

Shortly after the Civil War, numerous wealthy women of Boston felt they had a problem in their city. Young women were coming there to work, many of whom were without “an arrangement” upon arrival. Some lacked jobs, and thus lacked affordable, adequate shelter; even those with jobs could not always pay for both room and board. Even worse, many of such laboring, lower-class women were likely to fall under the pernicious influences of the preying men and immoral working girls around them. In order to grapple with this problem, one with looming catastrophic results for ideologies of proper womanhood, Boston's elite, socially conscious women with ties to the city's many Protestant churches formed a religiously based organization to help such girls. This quickly became the Boston Young Women's Christian Association (BYWCA).¹ Unconnected to the Young Men's Christian Association, the BYWCA made its mission to help working girls maintain appropriate moral and spiritual character. Within ten years the Association had buildings to house working women, classes for skill development, restaurants to feed them at cost, and an employment bureau to help them find work.²

¹ “An Account of the Origins of the B.Y.W.C.A.,” by M.C. Lamson, 1884, Folder 1, Carton 1, Boston YWCA papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University.

² Timeline located in finding aid, Boston YWCA papers.

Though much of what these women did was consistent with the larger pattern of earlier nineteenth century “ladies benevolent” tending to the less fortunate, the BYWCA was characterized by an idealized vision of the Boston working woman, or, rather, which working women the organization felt were deserving of its attentions. Each applicant to the BYWCA had to present two letters attesting to her character, a custom that effectively excluded the very poor or new immigrants. These working women, presumably educated and from “respectable” homes, were certainly not the only ones who were in need of the BYWCA’s assistance. The membership of the BYWCA was also informed by their understanding of an ideal woman as devoutly Protestant—members had to be “Christian women of Evangelical churches”—and implicitly wealthy.³ This reality complicates our understanding of the motivations of BYWCA members, and suggests that their work, achieved by the manipulation of the Victorian rhetoric of woman as pious, domestic, pure, and submissive, as well as morally superior, effectively reinforced the gender ideology both for themselves and their working class clients.⁴ For them, the concept of appropriate gender behavior was also tied to respectability and its perceived trappings, as they encouraged their clients to be domestic servants in wealthy homes rather than working in the rootless manufacturing sector. The BYWCA leaders essentially attempted to supply themselves with servants (and reinforce their powerful positions at the top of the social hierarchy) while providing working women with “homes” and “families.” That the clients refused to be domestic servants—and the confusion this produced for BYWCA board members—testifies to the wide gap between helper and helped, the difference in their values, and their understanding of what a proper “woman” should be.⁵

³ Board minutes, March 3, 1866, Folder 171 v, Box 23, Boston YWCA papers.

⁴ This concept, known as True Womanhood, is from Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): 151-174. While she discusses this rhetoric for the antebellum era, the discourse is still evident after the war.

⁵ This model is based on that proposed by Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). In her discussion of women reformers in the American West, she argues that it was the assumption of shared values of womanhood that prevent them from making some important connections with their clients. However, they manipulated those same values to act outside the prescribed sphere the values established.

Scholarship on the YWCA is extremely limited. New York City women formed the first YWCA in 1858, and by 1875 there were twenty-eight YWCAs around the country with thousands of members.⁶ In most cities, however, the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) blossomed only in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What little scholarship there is on the organization tends to focus on that era, essentially from the roots of the Progressive Era through the modern age, tracing the way in which the YWCA became an engine for racial equality. *Men and Women Adrift*, edited by Nina Mjagkij and Margaret Spratt, is one such volume. Most of the essays included focus on the twentieth century activities of the organization, with one that briefly mentions the nineteenth century activities of black women in urban areas forming their own groups.⁷ Similarly, Judith Weisenfeld's work, *African American Women and Christian Activism* discusses New York's black YWCA from 1905 to 1945.⁸ Most works discuss the YWCA in a larger context of either women in the city or women as social activists. Joanne Meyerowitz's volume, *Women Adrift*, looks at the Chicago branch of the YWCA, which was founded in 1876.⁹ Such volumes give a brief discussion of the general history of the YWCA, mentioning the Civil War and Reconstruction-era activities of the early organization.¹⁰

The YWCA is also discussed in some books on the history of American working women. Priscilla Murolo's *The Common Ground of Womanhood*, and Anna Firor Scott's *Natural Allies* both provide models for understanding working women's clubs in the nineteenth and early

⁶ Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 46.

⁷ Nina Mjagkij and Margaret Spratt, eds, *Men and Women Adrift: The YMCA and YWCA in the City* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

⁸ Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York's Black YWCA, 1905-1945* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁹ Meyerowitz, 46.

¹⁰ Descriptions of the Boston organization falls into the discussions of the early work of the Y. The BYWCA is also described in a bit more detail in a sociological study, *How Women Saved the City*, by Daphne Spain. Her volume discusses various social reform groups from an ideological and geographical perspective.

twentieth centuries.¹¹ As such, we can understand how the YWCA was and was not such an organization. Women who resided at the YWCA, even though they paid for their rooms, lived by the rules set by the organizers and philanthropists in exchange for food and shelter, retaining little autonomy. Similarly, Sarah Deutsch's study, *Women and the City*, explores Boston women, urban geography, and power, and lays out who working women, and those women that assisted them, were.¹² It is a combination of these two kinds of scholarship—organization-specific history and the history of the negotiation of women, both working- and upper- class, for power—that produces a fruitful understanding of the early history of the Boston Young Women's Christian Association. The BYWCA was an organization that bridged the chasm between wartime and Progressive Era reform, maintaining the rhetoric of womanly virtue when it was no longer fashionable while navigating a potentially radical but ideologically limited course of action.¹³

Lucretia Boyd is given the credit for the founding of the Boston Young Women's Christian Association. In 1858, she approached Mrs. M.C. Lamson to "lay before [her]...the condition of the many working girls in this city who were strangers here and had come simply to earn an honest living." Armed with a book filled with the names of local working women gained from her missionary work in the city, Boyd "said she was warranted in saying that nearly one half of the girls on the lists would be led astray unless something could be done to place some

¹¹ Priscilla Murolo, *The Common Ground of Womanhood: Class, Gender, and Working Girl's Clubs, 1884-1928* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Anna Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

¹² Sara Deutsch, *Women and the City: Gender, Space and Power in Boston, 1870-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹³ *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* by Lori D. Ginzberg is a thorough examination of reform in that era. The BYWCA is among groups such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the "social purity (antiprostitution) crusade" in that they "did use rhetoric reminiscent of antebellum benevolence," although the Y's concerns at this point were not so much with political change or concern with "the improbability of the moral transformation of society" but with the immediate protection of presumably endangered women through non-legislative means. (New London, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1990), 202-3.

additional protection about them.” She then asked Lamson if she would start “some movement” to help these endangered young women.¹⁴

Lamson began to look for other women to form the BYWCA, but met with little encouragement. “Twenty five years ago,” she wrote in her 1884 account of the BYWCA’s origins, “few women thought their duties extended beyond their houses and churches and I begged for help for months in vain, always calling on people.” Attempts to gain support from Boston clergymen and their wives also failed. One man, the Reverend Edwin Johnson, “entirely disapproved of the whole matter, objecting to it on the grounds of it being likely to bring us into connection with the fallen,” Lamson related, illustrating the clerical fear of respectable women like Lamson interacting with those whose virginity—their measure of proper womanhood—was, at best, questionable. Other ministers simply decreed that Lamson’s project “must stop.” Lamson evidently let the matter drop until March of 1866, when, at a meeting of prayer for the fallen, other women wanted to know “what could be done,” and the “old plans of the author [were] presented and accepted.” Despite continued church disapproval, which Lamson attributed to the clergy’s support of the Young Men’s Christian Association, the Ladies Christian Association (this was the original name of the BYWCA) was officially established shortly thereafter.¹⁵

It is hard to know what happened between 1858 and 1866 that allowed for the formation of the BYWCA, as the members themselves left no record. It is quite possible that the legions of women who joined soldier’s aid societies, local women’s auxiliaries of the United States Sanitary Commission, and other Civil War organizations paved the way for the BYWCA. Such groups popularized the understanding that women could perform gender-specific duties outside the home. Women could, for example, organize food drives, make shirts, and knit socks for the soldiers, as these were domestic tasks to begin with, and were tasks that needed to be done for the war effort.¹⁶ The BYWCA functioned in

¹⁴ “An Account of the Origins of the B.Y.W.C.A.”

¹⁵ “An Account of the Origins of the B.Y.W.C.A.”

¹⁶ Lori D. Ginzberg analyzes the opening for political activity that occurred after women worked publicly during the Civil War. For other accounts of the women’s auxiliaries of the United States Sanitary Commission, see Judith A. Giesberg, *Civil War Sisterhood: the U.S. Sanitary Commission and Women’s Politics in Transition* (Boston: Northeastern

the same way. The members, prior to the Progressive-era concepts of “social housekeeping,” brought their domestic skills and innate moral superiority into the streets of Boston. As guardians of the home, a notion repeatedly stressed in Victorian sentimental rhetoric, these women of the middle- and upper- class extended their roles to a much larger family of working women.

What remains perplexing is why the opinion of the clergy had no effect on the BYWCA women in 1866. Some members claimed that clerical disapproval was due to the latter’s support of the YMCA as the only necessary organization of its kind; perhaps this allowed them to dismiss the clergy’s opinions so readily.¹⁷ It may also have been because they perceived their mission to be of utmost importance, regardless of clerical opinion. According to historian Peggy Pascoe, women often organized as a means of exerting “moral authority” in their communities, since they had little actual political power. This authority was always contested “in their relationships with the men who held the power and could ignore their influence.”¹⁸ By identifying the clerical reaction as a gendered one in itself, in which men of the cloth supported their working “brothers” and insisted this was enough, the women of the BYWCA had all the more reason to form their own organization to help their laboring “sisters,” thereby challenging clerical power. The BYWCA carefully defined its actions within a perceived domestic realm and kept in accordance with expectations of piety; as such, they stayed technically within the bounds of womanhood as examples of moral and religious perfection while operating distinctly outside of those limitations.

Class figured significantly in the popular rhetoric of women as purveyors of moral authority. Only the wealthier female Bostonians could claim that mantle, as they understood themselves as able to prevent the possible ruin of less fortunate women. A look at the roster of the important members of the BYWCA in its first few years attests to their financial standing (see Fig. 1). The BYWCA was set up in a corporate fashion, with a single president, followed by six vice-presidents, a secretary, a treasurer, and an assistant treasurer. A group of fifteen to

University Press, 2000), and Jean Attie, *Patriotic Toil* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

¹⁷ “An Account of the Origins of the B.Y.W.C.A.”

¹⁸ Pascoe, xxvii.

twenty managers or directors made up the rest of the executive board. Mrs. Henry F. Durant was president from the very beginning and stayed until 1905. She lived on fashionable Mount Vernon Street in Beacon Hill, although she moved according to the account in the Third Annual Report to the newly constructed and equally prosperous Back Bay.¹⁹ Several other members of the BYWCA lived in these areas, with addresses along Walnut Street, Newbury Street, and

Fig. 1 Chart of Residency

	Beacon	Back Bay	South End	Suburbs	Undetermined	Misc.
1st report 1867	Pres, 2 VP, 4 D	2 D	1 VP, S, 3 D	2 VP, 6 D	1 VP, T, 2D	1 D-North End
2nd report 1868	Pres, 3 VP, 4 D	1 VP, AT, 1D	1 VP, S, T, 4D	1 VP, 6 D	3 D	1 D-North End
3rd report 1869	2 VP, 5 D	Pres, 2 VP, AT, 5 D	S, T, 2 D	2 VP, 3 D	2 D	1 D-North End 1 D-Scollay Sq.
4th report 1870	3 VP, 2 D	Pres, 1 VP, AT, 5 D	1 VP, S, 4 D	1 VP, 5 D	2 D	1 D-North End 1 D-Scollay Sq.
5th report 1871	4 VP, 1 D	Pres, 1 VP, AT, 4 D	1 VP, S, T, 2 D	3 D	3 D	1 D-Scollay Sq.
Pres: President of BYWCA VP: Vice President S: Secretary						
T: Treasurer AT: Assistant Treasurer D: Director/Manager						

20

Commonwealth Avenue. A large number of members lived in the South End, an area that was rising in prosperity immediately after the Civil

¹⁹ Few figures were as consistent as Durant was in their devotion to powerful positions in the BYWCA as President Durant, and there was considerable turnover among the managers. Miss Helen A. Brigham, for example, resigned after three years of work with the BYWCA, cited "home duties" as her reason, and the Association, "recognizing these duties to be paramount," let her go without complaint (Board Minutes, April 4, 1871, Folder 171v, Box 23, Boston YWCA papers). Frequently they would issue notes asking those resigning to reconsider; some did return, but many did not.

²⁰ Residences found in First through Fifth Annual Reports, 1867-1871, Folder 15v, Box1, Boston YWCA papers.

War.²¹ Some members lived in the growing, increasingly affluent suburbs of Cambridge and Brookline; others resided in Charlestown, Newton, and other areas just outside the metropolitan center.²² This information, and the references that pepper the board minutes and annual reports to husbands who were doctors or other professionals, indicates that the BYWCA executive board were indeed members of the city's upper class. Their status allowed them to venture into reforming the conditions of laboring women: asserted by class, their "moral authority" was unquestionable. Their class status affirmed their tacit acceptance and approval of gendered domestic ideology; the acceptance of these ideas—and the perception that all women innately shared them—produced difficulties for a number of the BYWCA women, even while it allowed them to leave the traditional domestic arena for larger projects.

In a circular issued in early 1866 by the Ladies Christian Association, the women put forth their ideas for helping the working "girls" of the city. "Intelligent Christians among us," it read, "have long deplored the dangers that beset this class of persons...it has been proposed to provide an establishment for their accommodation which shall combine some of the advantages of a cheerful Christian home."²³ In a carefully worded self-compliment, the women of the Ladies Christian Association thus confirmed their intellectual capabilities in launching such an endeavor, and pledged to the reader that their intentions were domestic and pious. "It will be the object of this enterprise," the circular continued, "to aid them to good religious privileges—to surround them with elevating influences."²⁴ As such, the women of the BYWCA clearly saw themselves as particularly able to help working women due to their moral superiority and their ability to "surround with...influences" those who may not have been as pious or

²¹ In Thomas H. O'Connor's work, *The Hub: Boston Past and Present* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001), he argues that the South End did not develop into an immensely prosperous area due to the filling in of the Back Bay, which became the area in which the fashionable and wealthy lived.

²² First through Fifth Annual Reports, 1868-1872.

²³ Draft of Circular in Board Minutes, 1866?, Folder 171v., Box 23, Boston YWCA papers.

²⁴ Draft of Circular.

cultured as they. In this circular, there was no mention of assisting women with employment or of any other form of stepping outside of women's traditional roles. The circular also addressed the objections the writers expected from their readers, such as lack of funds, cost, and the difficulty of getting money from the public unless one followed a "prudent and judicial course." The circular confirmed that the ambitious women of the Ladies Christian Association would model their organization after the YMCA, but took pains to assure the reader that they would not provide "a House at present, but Rooms only."²⁵ These words were undoubtedly carefully chosen. At its core, the circular simply suggested that the women forming the BYWCA had extended their maternal and Christian concerns to a slightly wider family.

This wider family, however, had a very narrow membership. In the circular, the Ladies Christian Association was very specific as to whom it would assist. "[We will] welcome under this house-roof," the circular read, "the daughters of New England, coming as they will with credentials or letters of introduction."²⁶ In a theme that was constantly repeated over the first ten years of the BYWCA, the Ladies Christian Association swiftly distanced itself from the numerous female immigrant workers in the city, and even set itself apart from women coming from the rest of the country. By stating that "daughters" were "coming," the Association also ruled out assisting those born in the city. In the November 5, 1866, minutes of the BYWCA (the transition from Ladies Christian Association to Boston Young Women's Christian Association occurred in March), an inserted circular noted that the women the organization helped were "daughters of highly respectable American parents, who leave their homes in the country, and come to Boston without friends or acquaintance."²⁷ Such "inexperienced girls" were from "homes full of domestic contentment, neatness, and happiness."²⁸ The Association clearly defined those worthy of their help as those young women from respectable homes. A private home in the country

²⁵ Draft of Circular.

²⁶ Draft of Circular.

²⁷ Circular inserted in board minutes, November 5, 1866, Folder 171v, Box 23, Boston YWCA papers.

²⁸ Board Minutes, 1865, Folder 171v, Box 23, Boston YWCA papers.

appealed to the mid-nineteenth century fascination with pastoral escape, and life in the unspoiled land outside the city limits. Such a life implied a certain level of economic stability, and, to the BYWCA, a certain way of raising one's children. A country home was understood to be a good home. A Boston tenement house, the very opposite of a rural home, was not. As such, the women and girls from such physical structures and their attendant families were considered beyond the ability of the BYWCA to assist. Calling for letters of recommendation of character also suggests the appropriate rearing of ideal clients: these girls and women had to either be literate themselves or intimately connected with those who were. Presumably, these clients shared the Protestant Christianity of the women of the BYWCA, but were in danger from the "temptations of the city," not already "fallen." The clients the BYWCA chose to assist fit the prevailing middle class vision of True Womanhood in every way but one: they held jobs outside the home. When these women were not working in domestic service, they were of increasing concern to the BYWCA. The BYWCA was very insistent in the first few years that it was not a reformatory, and its ideal version of an untroubled but endangered clientele supports that notion.

Although the BYWCA leaders rarely were specific about who the wrong kind of potential clients were, apart from vague references to those who were not "daughters of New England," it seems fairly clear that women perceived to be ineligible for their domestic ideal were not within the organization's pale. Many were innately outside it altogether by virtue of ethnicity or religion. Evidence of the bias against Catholics was very clear in 1867, when the superintendent of the scattered BYWCA rooms reported that she "would be grateful to the ladies connected with the Association, if they would discourage as much as possible, the attempt made by Irish Roman Catholic girls, to frequent the rooms in search of employment—the object of this organization being to benefit principally our New England girls, over whom we can exert a lasting influence."²⁹ The BYWCA deemed Irish Catholic girls unworthy of their help, as they were already too corrupted and would not heed the influence of the Association, but instead waste its time. Unless it was assured that clients would join Protestant congregations as good New England women, following the BYWCA's influence and advice, the organization would not help them find work, regardless of their need.

²⁹ Board Minutes, May 6, 1867, Folder 171v, Box 23, YWCA papers.

Irish Catholic girls could never hope to be seen as “daughters of New England,” even if born in the area, because of their religion: it maintained their position as “strangers in the land” to Protestant “native” women such as the board of the BYWCA.³⁰ Immigrants and Catholics were well outside of the small circle of women on whom the BYWCA bestowed their benevolence. They were problematic and dangerous enough outside of the walls that the BYWCA provided.

The ideal women that the BYWCA assisted were those whose ethnicity and religion was such that they could be seriously endangered by the poorer, immigrant working class, and which made them worthy of sending back into the home. Despite the BYWCA’s own manipulation of the ideologies of womanhood to allow its members to work extensively outside the home, their reasons for doing so were often to allow and encourage less fortunate women to go back in. “The Association would not,” stated the Third Annual Report in an attempt to clarify things for a “confused public,” “willingly encourage young women who otherwise would remain at their homes, or at suitable places in the country, to enter upon city life, and encounter its perils.”³¹ By affirming the home as the proper arena of women, they maintained the established, gendered system of power with its emphasis on the glorification of hearth-tending, native-born women.

For the members of the BYWCA, one of the major threats to their clients was the pernicious influence of all those who did not fall within the BYWCA’s narrow interpretation of worthiness. The organization’s repeated references to the city’s “temptations” highlighted the kind of dangerous places—and dangerous people—that confronted Christian country girls who worked in Boston. A major threat to these women was the need to “take their meals in saloons” and to reside in inappropriate boarding houses.³² In order to battle these dangerous places, the women of the BYWCA quickly furnished rooms in a building on Chauncy Street, and requested local families “of known respectability” to board working girls.³³ As the BYWCA explained:

³⁰ John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1955).

³¹ Third Annual Report, 1869.

³² Board minutes, November 5, 1866.

³³ Board minutes, May 7, 1866, Folder 171v, Box 23, Boston YWCA papers.

Suitable boarding places for the young women are the first grand requisite. Many who are in [disreputable boarding places]...are made to feel that their situation is one of extreme peril. Their room-mates are not of the right kind, and exert an influence unfavorable to what is elevating and refined. Some of these have come to us say, 'that their life in boarding houses is one unbroken scene of temptation and that those who are kept from evil almost wonder at their own escape.'³⁴

This passage illustrates the seeming paradox of the BYWCA. As a group that declared its mission to be facilitating the "temporal, moral and religious welfare of young women, who are dependent upon their own exertions for support," it focused a great deal on the domestic, instead of the working conditions of their clients.³⁵ The BYWCA carefully delineated a difference between those who were aware (and deprived) of "what is elevating and refined" and those who were "not the right kind," and took pains to separate their clients from dangerous immigrants, Catholics, and other unworthies.

After only a few months, the BYWCA began to discuss purchasing a boarding home to replace the scattered accommodations they provided to very limited numbers of women. This house would also contain a restaurant to alleviate the need to eat in saloons. The BYWCA explained their ambitions and reasons for undertaking such a massive project in late 1866:

Many of them [working women] are obliged to live at very great distances from their work...All of these young women are deprived of Christian sympathy, of friendly advice and assistance; of care in case of sickness; and are left to themselves without any means of education or self culture...the YWCA [wants] to

³⁴ Second Annual Report, 1868.

³⁵ Constitution of the Boston YWCA in board minutes, March 3, 1866, Folder v, Box 23, Boston YWCA papers.

provide [a] HOME with meals at cost...[a] Library and reading room, evening schools, rooms for social intercourse and lodging rooms...[as well as] to provide employment...[and to] surround the young women with Christian influences, and to shield them from temptation.³⁶

With this one statement, the BYWCA made very clear that it was interested in helping working women for many (sometimes contradictory) reasons. They were concerned about physical health: the women had to walk too far, and lacked care if their health failed. More significantly, their moral health was endangered by present circumstances. Not only could a long walk cause illness, it could also be fraught with peril brought on by the unsavory individuals one passed. Creating “suitable boarding” logically suggests that current boarding houses were inappropriate and dangerous, “unsuitable” to the women the BYWCA desired to help. The threatened women needed the Association’s “Christian sympathies” and “Christian influences” in order to maintain their piety and chastity. The BYWCA’s class-based self-perception of moral superiority is tangible in this statement. Their desire for proper “womanly” activities is very clear as well. By citing the provision of “rooms for social intercourse,” they suggested that women should not be conversing without supervision; similarly, the statement expressed dissatisfaction with working woman’s lack of “education or self culture,” a reference to women’s roles as the keepers of refinement and elegance. The stress the statement placed, however, on education, evening classes, and a library provided considerable opportunities for self-advancement and occupational betterment. The decision to help with finding employment for the women also suggests that in some respects the BYWCA understood the work situation that their clients faced, even if its idealized version of who those women were (or could be) was not in touch with the realities of their lives.

The BYWCA investigated a number of possible buildings for their boarding house, ruling out some on Marble Street because “there are two very undesirable houses near them—all the tenants are tenants at will.”³⁷

³⁶ Board minutes, November 5, 1866.

³⁷ Board minutes, June 13, 1867, Folder 171v, Box 23, Boston YWCA papers.

This indicates that the organization was looking for a neighborhood with steady residents, as those who had not contracted for the duration of their stay contradicted the middle- and upper- class notion of establishing a permanent home as life's goal. People who slandered their understanding of domestic and familial life by their inconstant dwelling patterns were potentially a great threat to the BYWCA's attempts to encourage such a feeling among its "inmates." Such individuals were outside the BYWCA's definition of respectability, and potentially endangered the clients the organization was trying to protect.

The Association decided upon two buildings on Beach Street in Boston's South End as the spaces they wanted to serve as the boarding houses. The president's husband, Henry Fowler Durant, and the husband of a director, Frederick Jones, negotiated the price and purchased the buildings. By the early fall of 1867, the houses belonged to the BYWCA, and the Association began to furnish them by assigning local churches particular rooms to provide for, decorating them in "excellent taste, without creating the impression of an unnecessary or lavish expenditure."³⁸ By late fall, the houses were open, and they were supervised by Mary Foster, the woman who had supervised the earlier, more scattered accommodations originally provided by the BYWCA. Mary Wiggin was hired as housekeeper (or matron), for her "motherly temperament."³⁹ Thus, the BYWCA's experiment began.

The houses were meant to be a Christian home, with the inmates and BYWCA members as its family. Using such language made the boarding house an extension of the domestic arena—the building was a *home* to working women, and the founders were mother-figures. The BYWCA preferred to take in younger women whom they saw as more at risk and in need of "home influences," placing them in positions as "children" to the BYWCA.⁴⁰ The annual reports contain numerous quotes from parents who praised the Boston Y for saving their daughters from "impending ruin," essentially praising them as surrogate mothers for girls who had left home.⁴¹ The "social housekeeping" of the

³⁸ Second Annual Report, 1868.

³⁹ Board minutes, December 15, 1867, Folder 171v, Box 23, Boston YWCA papers.

⁴⁰ Third Annual Report, 1869.

⁴¹ Second Annual Report, 1868; Board Minutes, October 21, 1867, Folder 171v, Box 23, Boston YWCA papers.

Association had extended to include physical structures, but still fit the same domestic pattern.

Bible study classes and prayer meetings were held regularly in the Home, which had been a practice in the less centralized rooms, as well. The secretary noted in her minutes in early 1868 that, “three of the inmates have expressed an anxiety in regard to the salvation of their souls, and one other a hope of forgiveness,” a struggle which the members watched with great hope and pride.⁴² The 1871 annual report discussed a young woman who was from a “happy home, surrounded by all the comforts and many of the luxuries of life” but whose family was struck with sudden financial difficulties compounded by typhoid infecting her sister. Rather than take pity upon the situation, the writer reflected that the young woman’s “Christian patience” was “delightful to watch.”⁴³ While this piety was one of the chief goals of the BYWCA, as the discourse on women maintained that they were the upholders of religion, in the records left, piety among clients seemed to be the exception rather than the rule. The writer of the 1868 report lamented, “I regret that so few find their way into the Bible class.”⁴⁴ In 1870, the board decided to rewrite the Home’s rules with “the necessity of enforcing some, such as attending church on the Sabbath,” selecting a (Protestant) church they preferred and becoming a “regular attendant” every Sunday, and staying for “at least half of the day.”⁴⁵ Meeting minutes in subsequent years reflected that most women conformed to the rules and that the Bible class had been “productive of good results,” but also mentioned the increasing troubles outside of religious ambivalence that the Home faced.⁴⁶

Non-religious classes and lecture series were also held in the Beach Street buildings. Mrs. George W. Warren, a director, taught geography

⁴² Board minutes, May 4, 1868, Folder 171v, Box 23, Boston YWCA papers.

⁴³ Fifth Annual Report, 1871.

⁴⁴ Second Annual Report, 1868.

⁴⁵ Board minutes, May 2, 1870, Folder 171v, Box 23, Boston YWCA papers; Board minutes, November 6, 1871, Folder 171v, Box 23, Boston YWCA papers.

⁴⁶ Board minutes, March 6, 1871, and September 4, 1871, Folder 171v, Box 23, Boston YWCA papers.

and gave lectures on astronomy. A man who was likely the husband of vice president Mrs. Joseph Sawyer offered to teach bookkeeping and writing lessons, although he desired to teach in his rooms but was told to come to the Home.⁴⁷ Although bookkeeping was a useful and marketable skill, it was not until the domestic science school began in the late 1870s that the BYWCA offered anything along the lines of real occupational training.⁴⁸ Singing classes appear to have been held off and on since the beginnings of the BYWCA. Lectures given at the home covered a number of topics, but special note was made in the third annual report of one based on “‘True Woman,’ founded on the twenty-eighth chapter of Proverbs,” in particular. The lecture filled the parlors with residents, and “made a strong impression on the girls, and they often speak of it.” The writer noted that the speaker, Reverend Walker “gave some valuable suggestions on woman’s true work and mission, and the dignity of labor. As I listened, I felt that he was talking to those who were to wield a mighty influence in our land—these young working *women*, whom your Christian benevolence is shielding and perhaps moulding.”⁴⁹ Again, it is evident that the women of the BYWCA were intent on encouraging the established gender ideology among their clients. As much as the writer complimented the working women in that statement, she mentioned first the “true work and mission” of women, work that presumably did not involve factories or shops. In many ways, the early classes and lectures offered by the BYWCA reflected the ideal of “culturing” women to be conversational wives, rather than active working women.

The employment agency that the BYWCA operated from the very beginning was the only real example of the BYWCA helping working women better their lives *as* working women, rather than just encouraging them to be the housewives they were not, or could not, be. Occasionally

⁴⁷ The note in the minutes says that Warren taught “geography, bordering on astronomy” and gave lectures. It is hard to determine what this meant, exactly, but because the inmates took a trip to the Cambridge observatory, it appears that Warren taught both. Board minutes, November 4, 1867, Folder 171v, Box 23, Boston YWCA papers. The man is named only as Mr. Sawyer. Board minutes, November 1, 1869, Folder 171v, Box 23, Boston YWCA papers.

⁴⁸ The timeline in the finding aid to the BYWCA collection gives that date of the training school for domestics as 1879; the bulk of the collection materials on the school date to later in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

⁴⁹ Third Annual Report, 1869.

in the annual reports and board minutes, the members reported on a few of the jobs that their inmates held. Some were hired by the BYWCA itself to work in the restaurant or as chambermaids in the house; others labored in printing offices, telegraph offices, paper box factories, and dentist offices; others “tend[ed] stoves” or sewed. One former inmate reported to the BYWCA that she now worked for the treasury department in Washington, D.C., but such upward mobility was rare.⁵⁰ The jobs residents held did not fit into the BYWCA’s understanding of women’s labor. “It seems to us much better for many who ask us to help them,” read the third annual report, “to accept positions in families instead of wearing themselves out in shops and stores for small wages. But usually they feel such positions are more degrading.”⁵¹ BYWCA members saw women’s only really acceptable work as domestic service in other people’s homes. This fed into their high regard for all things domestic, as well as into their desire for working women to be supervised and benevolently influenced at all times. Their desire for the Y inmates to be domestics was also quite possibly an outgrowth of their own desires for native-born servants. With the influx of Irish immigrant women into the Boston area, they quickly dominated the field of domestic service as native-born women went into the factories and shunned work in private homes. The desire for native servants, however, did not abate.⁵² “Much has been said,” the 1873 report read, “about the desirableness of getting young girls, such as the home cares for, to go into families to do domestic work.”⁵³ Despite the BYWCA’s encouragement (at one point, it declared furnishing women situations in families “the most important part of the work of the Association”), there were few inmates who heeded their advice to become domestics.⁵⁴ In many ways, the BYWCA’s acceptance policy influenced their

⁵⁰ Board minutes, February 7, 1868, and January 3, 1871, Folder 171v, Box23, BYWCA papers.

⁵¹ Third Annual Report, 1869.

⁵² See Faye E. Dudden, *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth Century America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1983) for an analysis of domestic service.

⁵³ Sixth Annual Report 1872, Folder 15v, Box 1, Boston YWCA papers.

⁵⁴ Board minutes, September 4, 1871.

understanding of why the inmates preferred factory and shop work—they perceived the reluctance of the inmates as a result of their rearing and status, which did not fit well with the mistress-servant relationship. “In the domestic circle,” stated the sixth annual report, “certain ideas obtain as to the relation of ‘mistress and servant,’ and the position of the latter, which make a situation of this kind often inconsistent with the self-respect of the intelligent and sensitive. One who has been well brought up and accustomed to a home, with all its charm and equal privileges cannot go out and work in a family.”⁵⁵ In this statement, the BYWCA affirmed that those who they helped were of a dignified sort, while branding those who did domestic service (the Irish Roman Catholic girls) as ignorant and lacking self-respect, and thus able to serve a family. While the BYWCA continued to marvel that women preferred shops and factories to domestic service with all its comforts of home, it at least made some attempt to understand why their girls were always refusing offers.

Problems began to occur with the inmates shortly after the opening of the Beach Street houses. The BYWCA had limited space, and frequently mentioned in board minutes the large numbers of women they had to turn down. Some of these rejected numbers were undoubtedly made up of those, like the Irish Catholics, who the BYWCA did not feel obliged to help. Another problem, perhaps stemming from the lack of religious practice by some inmates or other rule infractions, was the presence of those who were threatening to the Home. The minutes from March 1871, reported that “a few [boarders] had been requested to seek other homes.”⁵⁶ One can only imagine what happened in order to convince the BYWCA that their influence was not working and would not work in the future upon clients who were once thought to be ideal. The Association’s decision to revise their rules in 1870 also seems to indicate problems among the inmates. Most discussion in the minutes centered on the need for Christian worship to be enforced among inmates, but laws were also established regulating the movement of the inmates. Their ten o’clock nighttime return rule was, if broken without good reason, punished by expulsion from the house. Minute notes documented other problems with inmates. “The room no.8,” read one

⁵⁵ Sixth Annual Report, 1872.

⁵⁶ Board minutes, March 6, 1871.

report, “[needs]...sundry repairs, the paper having been torn off the walls.”⁵⁷ Although there is no explanation as to why the paper was removed, or what happened to the woman who removed it, the occasion serves as a reminder that, like the women refusing domestic service, the inmates were not always the ideal the BYWCA wanted them to be.

As a benevolent organization, the Boston Young Women’s Christian Association was undoubtedly successful. Its continued presence in the city, as well as its historical significance as the first Y to offer women gymnasium activities, attests to its power as a political force for women in need. The importance of the BYWCA, however, was not so clear in its first years of existence. Members’ perception of women deserving of assistance was extraordinarily narrow and idealized, a perception that was shattered by the frequent rejection by the inmates of the values of the BYWCA leadership. While the members of the BYWCA became demonstrably active in the public world by manipulating the gender ideology of Victorian America, which allowed them to take their domestic roles outside the home, the activities they pursued effectively encouraged the restricting effects of that ideology for other women. There is no doubt that the BYWCA tried very hard to help working women in the only ways they knew. The pioneering efforts of the BYWCA ushered in a new kind of reform in Boston by creating a unique program of residency and work for those women in need, but not defined as impoverished or treated as charitable causes. According to historian Lori D. Ginzberg, most women after the Civil War “focused their benevolent work on institutional settings, increasingly working alongside men to consolidate the business of benevolence in a new context...the Civil War made possible the emergence of a class-based ideology that seemed to disregard gender and ...encourage a secular ideal of gender sameness.”⁵⁸ Although the BYWCA certainly fits within the framework of an institutional post-war approach to reform, its version was based on older female, Christian values rather than an increasingly popular secular understanding of gender uniformity. It thus serves as a connection between antebellum reform based on women’s innate moral virtue and the women “social housekeepers” of the Progressive Era. Despite their innovative approach to postwar reform, taking place as it did between two very different worlds of reform (as

⁵⁷ Board minutes, November 7, 1870, Folder 171v, Box 23, Boston YWCA papers.

⁵⁸ Ginzberg, 215-6.

well as political and social) activity, the effectiveness of the Association was blurred by their inability to accept working women for who they were, as laborers, multiethnic people, and bound by class to a different understanding of womanhood.