1872 Miss Louisa Lee Schuyler - The State Charities Aid Association

To say that Louisa Lee Schuyler was a humanitarian and a pioneer in social work would be an understatement. Miss Schuyler was the driving force in the movement to reform the poor house system in New York State. She was born into a life of wealth and privilege on October 26, 1837, the daughter of George Lee and Eliza (Hamilton) Schuyler; and great-granddaughter of General Phillip Schuyler and Alexander Hamilton. She founded The State Charities Aid Association on May 11, 1872, which was based in New York City and consisted of volunteer members; men and women, from all walks of life. Her involvement with the Sanitary Commission during the Civil War had taught her the great value and importance of organization. She had read the official reports about the deplorable conditions of the poor houses and alms houses in the state and knew that something had to be done about the inhumane treatment of the poor. She also knew that the “say-so” of one woman wouldn’t change anything; she needed a league of educated citizens united in a common goal.

The association’s purpose was to raise the awareness of the general public to the abuses and sufferings of paupers in the poor house system; to visit every institution of charity supported by public funds in the state of New York; to report findings of mismanagement and corruption, and to make recommendations to the State Commissioners of Public Charities (later renamed The State Board of Charities). Miss Schuyler formed the association first; wrote the by-laws; encouraged her friends to join the association; visited the Westchester County Poor House and Bellevue Hospital with a few of her volunteers; and then, wrote a letter that included a complete report of the association’s findings of both institutions to the State Board of Commissioners. The association immediately received the approval of the State Commissioners and was given the right to visit and inspect the charitable public institutions under the powers and authority already held by the State Commissioners of Public Charities. There were three committees whose purpose it was to focus on the interests of the dependent classes. The categories were divided into: Children (all aspects of their welfare), Adult Able-Bodied Paupers (in poor houses and alms houses), and Hospitals (that included a sub-committee representing the Insane).

Led by Miss Schuyler, Chairman of the Committee on the Insane, the State Charities Aid Association pushed for and eventually forced the passage of The State Care Act, Chapter 126, Laws of 1890. Miss Schuyler started the first Training School for Nurses in connection with Bellevue
Hospital in 1873, and was instrumental in After Care of the Insane which was implemented in 1906. In 1907, she was appointed as one of the original Trustees of the Russell Sage Foundation, and in 1908, she organized the first committee of physicians and laymen for the prevention of blindness. Honored by her forty years of charitable work, she was the first woman to receive an honorary degree of laws (LL.D.) from Columbia University in 1915. Miss Schuyler died at the age of eighty-eight on October 10, 1926, in Highland Falls, Westchester County, New York.

The following First Annual Report of the State Charities Aid Association was addressed to The Board of State Commissioners of Public Charities of the State of New York, on March 1, 1873.

First Annual Report of the State Charities Aid Association

“The objects of our work are of a twofold nature. 1. To promote an active public interest in the New York State Institutions of Public Charities, with a view to the physical, mental and moral improvement of their pauper inmates. 2. To make the present pauper system more efficient, and to bring about such reforms in it as may be in accordance with the most enlightened views of Christianity, Science and Philanthropy.” (54)

“Again another question: Has not the time come for the officers in charge of our County Charities to be appointed and not elected? How can a man with no especial fitness for the position be expected, during his short term of office, to understand the best way of treating several hundred human beings suddenly placed under his care? He is at once obliged to grapple with this great question of pauperism, not as a theory, but practically - a subject to which, in its separate branches, philanthropists have given lives of study and of work. But he is called upon to deal, not merely with single branches, but with the whole question - with the best method of caring for pauper-children, how to keep them from following in the footsteps of their intemperate parents; with the most enlightened treatment of insanity; with the vexed questions of diet-lists for sick and well, of ventilation, and sanitary science, and hospital management; with occupation for the blind, and instruction for the idiot; with the labor question as affected by work-houses. How can one man, who has previously given no study to the subject, fit himself in one, two or three years to fill such a position? And then, when perhaps he may have gained some little knowledge of the subject, the next turn of the political wheel whirls him off and puts in another beginner as his successor. Can we not have carefully selected persons, thoroughly qualified, appointed to fill these positions for long
terms of office? Are not the great improvements in our City Charities due to the adoption of this
plan? The advanced methods of treatment used in our State Asylums are undoubtedly due to the
fact that those in charge are pre-eminently fitted to hold the permanent positions they do. In a large
city like ours, where the care of the poor is an enormous business in itself, taking the whole time of
those having the supervision of it, good salaries should be paid, for the work is no light task; it
demands and should have first-class ability. But in the country, where the supervision required is
comparatively slight, taking perhaps a few hours a week, or two or three days a month, we are
certain that benevolent and capable citizens can be found to fill these offices without pay, from
motives of humanity alone. And even these should be held strictly accountable for the good
management of their trust to a supervisory board like your own, as well as to their own county
supervisors, for too many safeguards cannot be placed round those who have human beings in their
keeping. The streets are out of order, and our carriages break down; the gas is poor, and our eyes
pain us every evening; the sewerage is defective, and we tremble for the health of our children;
criminals go unpunished, and our lives are in danger; taxes are exorbitant, and we feel it in our
pockets; and when these abuses become so great as to be unbearable, we rise in our might, unite
with other indignant citizens, drive out the thieves, and insist upon reform. But who knows what
goes on in those far-away great buildings called hospitals and poorhouses? There is a class of
persons who, if abused, cannot defend themselves - whose sufferings we do not see, whose cries we
cannot hear, who have no influence or power to help them break their bonds. At least, let us see to
it that those who have the lives of these unfortunate fellow-beings under their control shall be fitted
for the position, and shall also be responsible to some authority above them. With this reform, and
with the intelligent co-operation of our citizens as Visitors, we may feel that our duty toward these
helpless people has been in some degree fulfilled.” (54)

THE STATE CHARITIES AID ASSOCIATION OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK
1872-1893

“Voluntary, Unofficial Supervision Of Public Charitable Institutions In Co-Operation With Official
Boards, As Illustrated By The Work Of The State Charities Aid Association Of New York. By Miss
Louisa Lee Schuyler, Member of the Association.

The following are named as direct results of the work of the State Charities Aid Association. And,
in stating them, we wish it borne in mind that what has been accomplished is equally due to the co-
operation of the local authorities. In addition to this, and where this has not been attainable, the co-operation of the State Board of Charities and the State Commission in Lunacy have been invaluable. At times the association as been obliged to carry its reforms single-handed, but these instances are fortunately rare.

1. A higher standard of care has been introduced into every poor house and almshouse in the state. This means better nursing, special diet for the sick, improved hospital accommodation, separation of the sexes, suitable food, proper clothing, and many little comforts for the aged and infirm. It is impossible to enumerate the small and the great benefits conferred upon the inmates of these institutions through the presence of a few humane and intelligent visitors, commanding the confidence and respect of their own communities and sure of a powerful backing from headquarters.

2. Training-School for Nurses, 1873. - This school, attached to Bellevue Hospital, one of the largest pauper general hospitals of the city of New York, was established by our New York County Visiting Committee, who raised the necessary $20,000 with which to begin it, opened the training school on the first day of May, 1873, and to whom is due its efficient management and great success. At first governed by a special committee, the school increased so rapidly in importance that it was soon incorporated as a separate society, merely reporting annually to the parent association in recognition of its origin. The whole number of patients nursed by this school, from 1879 to 1893, is 50,059. Its graduates number 424; of these, 45 are now holding positions in hospitals, 19 as superintendents of training schools, 10 as matrons, and 16 as head nurses.

3. Hospital Book and Newspaper Society, 1874. - Boxes for the reception of fresh daily newspapers are placed, by this society, at the railway stations, the ferry slips, the exchanges, etc., in New York city, whence the papers are collected every day and taken to the hospitals, to be immediately distributed through the wards. In 1892 these daily papers numbered 158,417. Books and pamphlets are received at the office of the society, and are sent every week to hospitals, asylums, poor-houses, prisons, life saving stations, light houses, etc., often forming the nucleus of a small library. During the year 1892 the society distributed 7,716 books, 15,944 magazines, and 54,020 illustrated and weekly papers. The Hospital Book and Newspaper Society, at first a committee of the association, is now a branch with independent membership and treasury.
4. Farming Out the Poor Abolished, 1875. - In one of the counties of the State of New York there yet remained, when the visiting committee of that county was organized, a remnant of the barbarous system of farming out the care of the poor to the lowest bidder. The abuses connected with this practice can well be imagined. Through the exertions of our visiting committee, this system was speedily and completely abolished.

5. Temporary Homes for Children, 1877-85. - In 1875 the New York State Board of Charities secured the enactment of a law, known as ‘the Children's Law,’ which made obligatory the removal of all children over two years of age from the poorhouses and almshouses of the state. In this great reform the board had the full sympathy of the members of the association throughout the state, who have also been active in promoting the enforcement of the law. To provide a suitable place (the poorhouse being very properly forbidden) where temporary lodging for children could be had, pending their removal to homes in families, the visiting committees of Ulster, Westchester and Queens counties established three Temporary Homes for Children, in 1877, 1880 and 1885.

6. Tramp Act, 1880. - In several counties it was found to be the direct pecuniary interest of the Overseers of the Poor to encourage vagrancy, as they received from the county treasury fifty cents per capita, often more, for each night's lodging given a tramp. It required three years to obtain the necessary remedial legislation; but since the enactment of this deterrent measure, the State of New York has been less attractive to tramps. (Laws of New York, 1880, Chap. 176.)

7. First Aid to the Injured, 1882. - The serious condition in which accident cases were received at the hospitals in New York city, owing to ignorance of what should be done before a physician could be summoned, induced the organization, by the Hospital Committee of the association, of a Society for Instruction in First Aid to the Injured, modeled upon the English societies of like nature. This society, since its formation, (at first as a committee of the association,) has given 264 courses of lectures, of which 62 were to pay-classes and 202 to free classes, to the police, railroad employees, working girl's clubs, and to members of the Young Men's Christian Association and Young Men's Institute, making a total of 6,595 persons thus instructed, of which number 3,545 received diplomas qualifying them to render first aid to the injured. During the eleven years of the existence of the society, it has received over one thousand testimonials from members of the police force and others, attesting the value of the instructions received.
8. **Trained Nurses for the Insane, 1885.** - Acting in co-operation with the Bellevue Training-School for Nurses and the City Commissioners of Charities of Kings County, the Association secured for six graduates of that school a special course of training at the Kings County Insane Asylum. Later, one of these nurses was the first principal of a training-school for nurses for the insane, established at the Hudson River State Hospital.

9. **Municipal Lodging Houses, 1886.** - The association obtained the passage of an act for the establishment, by the New York city authorities, of one or more municipal lodging houses, with the object of diminishing the number of tramps and vagrants at present sheltered without charge by the city in the police-station houses, and of providing decent lodging for respectable persons in temporary distress; labor to be exacted in return for shelter. The act, being permissive and not mandatory, has never been put in operation. An amendment will doubtless be applied for by the Committee on Adult Able-bodied Paupers, to remedy this defect.

10. **State Care for the Insane Act of 1890. State Care Appropriation Act of 1891.** - For over fifty years it has been the policy of the State of New York to provide hospital treatment and care for its dependent insane. State asylums were first established for acute cases of insanity, to be succeeded later by state asylums for the reception of chronic cases from the poorhouses. Seven large state hospitals have thus been erected and equipped, for the purpose of giving the insane skilled medical treatment and suitable care. It was owing to an infringement, in recent years, of this humane policy, a backward step of the legislature, through which county after county was authorized to retain its milder cases of insanity, until one-third of all the counties of the state had been exempted from the general law, that brought about the necessity, in 1888, of applying for legislation which should restore to the state its old-time policy, and at one stroke completely abolish the poorhouse system of caring for the insane.” (55)
