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Richmond's Home Fires

No. 7 - "How Richmond's First Children's Institution was Organized"

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The oldest children's institution in Virginia and the second oldest in the United States had its beginning in Richmond in 1805. It is now known as the Memorial Home for Girls. The only older children's institution in the country is St. Paul's in Baltimore; and it is only two years older. I have already told you how the city's first charitable organization, the Amicable Society, was organized under the presidency of Anthony Singleton in 1788, to continue for 67 years. Richmond's second charitable organization began in 1805 and has continued until the present day - 137 years - and still is going strong.

Mrs. James Wood, a charitable lady of the city, found a homeless, friendless child on a doorstep, in that fifth year of the last century. Mrs. Wood quickly discovered to her horror that in all the city there was no institution for this little girl, or for others in like straits. Eventually, the child was cared for in a private home; but Mrs. Wood and other ladies whom she interested in the subject began to plan means for developing a refuge for friendless girls.

The interest of these ladies led to the organization in 1808 of the Female Humane Association. It was sponsored by, and affiliated with, the Amicable Society, which, as has been mentioned, had been formed in 1788 as a sort of combination of the present-day Family Service Society and Travelers Aid Society. The Amicable Society from time to time contributed money to the Female Humane Association.

It was not until 1811 that the new institution actually was put in operation, under the leadership of Mrs. Wood, Mrs. Edward J. Carrington and Mrs. Philip Norbourne Nicholas. The home was built on a lot on the outskirts of the city which was given by Mr. William Duval.

In the beginning, the Female Humane Association limited its service to the provision of shelter, food, and instruction in reading, writing, arithmetic, sewing, spinning, knitting and domestic service.

Religious fundamentals were earnestly taught. While Monumental Episcopal Church was the church of the Home, the institution was non-sectarian and the girls attended any church they wished.

Admission to the Home at first was limited to Richmond girls; but later was extended to the State of Virginia.

The little institution had a hard struggle to exist. One of its early money-raising devices was the first fair for charity which ever was held in Richmond. So popular was this fair, "displaying things to please the palate, the eye and the mind," that every article was sold out. Proceeds from fairs, however, are at best temporary.