The Tatnuck Ladies' Sewing Circle, 1847-1867

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On May 27, 1847, thirty-five enthusiastic female residents of the rural Tatnuck section of Worcester, Massachusetts, dedicated themselves "as a band of sisters" to the welfare, edification, and instruction of each other, and formed the Tatnuck Female Benevolent Society.¹ This benevolent society, or "circle," as it was frequently called in its minutes, joined the ranks of hundreds of female organizations that dotted the American social, religious, and economic landscape by the middle of the nineteenth century. The Tatnuck Circle's activities were largely defined and conducted by its female members throughout its first two decades.²

From these minutes emerge a portrait of women poised at the intersection of rural community and urban culture. Tatnuck is an intriguing example of a rural village situated within the municipal limits of a rapidly industrializing city. Aware of the mounting distinction between their rural community and central Worcester, with its mansions, factories, and slum housing, these Tatnuck women organized their Circle partly out of a rising

1. In 1862, the formal name was changed without announcement from the Tatnuck Female Benevolent Society to the Tatnuck Ladies' Sewing Circle. During the period under study, 1847 to 1867, the organization was referred to in the minutes as "the Society" or "the Circle." For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to it as the "Tatnuck Circle," or "the Circle."

2. The research for this paper focussed upon the Minutes of the Tatnuck Ladies' Sewing Circle, volumes one and two, in the Manuscripts Collection of the American Antiquarian Society, in Worcester, Massachusetts.
consciousness of Tatnuck as a community separate from the rest of Worcester. In doing so, they utilized increasingly sophisticated ways of providing relief, acquiring cash assets, defining the role of male participants in Circle activities, and maintaining the Circle's public visibility — strategies similar to those used by their benevolent counterparts downtown. As a result, the Tatnuck Circle meetings provided its members with a cultural forum for urban assimilation.

This intertwining of rural life patterns and urban influence is the distinctive thread that fashions the Tatnuck Circle's written record for at least twenty years. Its minutes chronicle the seasonally driven social cycle of the Tatnuck area, and the role that the seasons played in expanding and contracting various aspects of the Circle's activities. Within this seasonal context, the minutes provide a subtle record of the ongoing relations between the female members and the "gentlemen visitors" who participated in the Circle's activities during the leisurely winter months. Furthermore, the minutes testify to the interlocking network of charitable organizations that developed rapidly in Worcester between 1847 and 1867. As early as 1849, the Tatnuck Circle began to establish a working relationship with the Worcester Children's Friend Society, an organization for the shelter and protection of the city's destitute children. The Tatnuck Circle's donations to the Children's Friend Society reflect the growing concern of the Tatnuck women for the problems of intemperance and child desertion among the influx of poor immigrants to Worcester's industrial center, just three miles away.

Most significantly, the Tatnuck Circle's written record documents at the grassroots level the groundswell of female action and leadership in charitable causes, particularly during the Civil War. The Tatnuck Circle joined the thousands of other community sewing circles that completed garments for the Worcester Soldier's Relief Society and the Worcester Freedmen's Aid Society. Both of those organizations were managed by prominent female residents of central Worcester, who subsidized their activities partly through fundraising events. After its wartime experience in cooperative relief work, the Tatnuck Circle itself was transformed from a production-oriented and barter-based operation to an integrated player within the network of Worcester's charitable societies, and it concentrated its efforts on acquiring cash assets and public visibility.
American women had been organizing for benevolent purposes since the late eighteenth century. A nascent and increasingly complex body of scholarship is illuminating the context, mission, and demography of antebellum female benevolent organizations. Mary Bosworth Treudley, in her pioneering article, "The Benevolent Fair" (1940), observes that "Pioneer life and urban growth alike combined to free women for participation in every aspect of cultural development." Treudley uses the records of female charitable organizations in Baltimore, Boston, and Philadelphia to analyze attempts made by these urban societies to provide poor women with short-term relief and employable skills. Keith Melder’s "Ladies Bountiful: Organized Women’s Benevolence in Early 19th–Century America" takes a broad view of the movement, perceiving female organized benevolence as an instrument of social integration in a country torn by religious sectarianism, geographic mobility, and urbanization. In her analysis of the demographic dynamics within female benevolent societies in antebellum New York and Boston, Anne Boylan detected a pattern in which the socially conservative sewing circles were usually headed by married women, while the positions of secretary and treasurer were filled by unmarried women. Boylan found no parallel division of labor in the more liberal reform organizations that were dedicated to the eradication (as opposed to amelioration) of social problems. All three of these studies explore the particular aspects of the mission, impact, and organizational dynamics of these early women’s

3. Among the earliest female charitable organizations in America were the female cent societies, in which its members donated one cent per week to missions operating both on the frontier and abroad. For discussions of the struggle of these early organizations to gain the approval of local ministers and male elders, see R. Pierce Beaver’s All Loves Excelling: American Protestant Women in World Mission (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1968); and Florence Hayes, Daughters of Dorcas: The Story of the Work of Women for Home Missions Since 1802 (New York, 1952).


societies. The most comprehensive study to date that integrates these aspects is Anne Firor Scott's *Natural Allies*. Scott examines the records of women's organizations across the country to show that women have organized in part to bypass their legal and traditional constraints, and "to redefine 'women's place' by giving the concept a public dimension."  

All of these historians emphasize the role of women's organizations in providing members with opportunities to pursue social agendas, learn about political processes, and handle money. However, all of these studies have been based largely upon urban organizations; none have seriously scrutinized the impact of the seasonable farm cycle upon rural societies like the Tatnuck Circle. Nor have they considered the role of the rural sewing circle as an important social venue for both men and women. For these reasons, the Tatnuck Circle's activities unfold with the promise of new adventure.

As this "band of sisters" began meeting at each other's houses to pray, sew, and socialize, Worcester was evolving swiftly from a rural county seat to an industrial center. It had been a major stop on the Blackstone Canal, and by 1847 three major railroads ran through Worcester, connecting it with Boston, Providence, and Norwich, Connecticut. The abundance of small streams and ponds provided enough power to support factories producing tools, wire, and blinds. During the 1830s, industrialists Ichabod Washburn, Stephen Salisbury, and William Merrifield constructed steam-driven factories and industrial complexes that attracted young and innovative mechanics and skilled workers to Worcester. Worcester's population more than tripled from approximately 3,600 in 1825 to 12,000 in 1848, when it was chartered as a city. As Worcester's industrial prosperity grew, so did the number of marginal workers who were more directly dependent upon the unpredictable market economy for their daily survival. Many of these workers fell into periodic poverty and had no family nearby upon which to rely for assistance. As a result, a web of benevolent societies was established in antebellum Worcester, beginning with a Female Samaritan Society, in 1827, to provide clothing, bedding, and fuel


assistance for the growing number of Worcester’s poor. Ichabod Washburn was concerned by the great influx of strangers into Worcester, and through his leadership the Evangelical City Missionary Society was established in 1849, to bring religion to Worcester’s destitute, marginal, and transient populace.\(^9\)

Although Tatnuck had been a distinct rural settlement since the late eighteenth century, it was always within Worcester’s municipal limits. Narrowly defined, Tatnuck is the area immediately surrounding the triangular intersection of Pleasant, Mower, and Mill Streets. The Tatnuck Circle drew its membership from a wider area stretching east to west on Pleasant Street from Newton Square to the far west intersection of Pleasant and Mower Streets, and as far south as the intersection of Mill and Fowler Streets, and north to the boundary between Worcester and the adjacent town of Holden. The distance from one edge of the periphery to the other takes between roughly thirty minutes and an hour to walk, a journey on country roads covering some hilly terrain.

Tatnuck was a well established community of small scale farming and manufactured by 1847. As early as 1769, Tatnuck had compromised a separate school district. In 1839, the Tatnuck Library Association was established to support a local district library. But Tatnuck still had no church, and its residents made the three-mile trek to the Worcester Common, or they attended the Second Baptist Church at the intersection of Pleasant and Main Streets.

By 1847, Tatnuck had proven to be a desirable place to cultivate crops and raise families, but it was a community lacking the formal religious and social institutions that were blossoming downtown. Perhaps their distance from these downtown churches and their respective sewing circles inspired the Tatnuck women to form their own circle, but surely the rising population of Tatnuck was another factor. According to the U.S. census for 1850, the population of the Eighth Ward (Tatnuck) was 1,889, quite an increase from the handful of families that settled there in the

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eighteenth century. In essence, the urbanization of downtown Worcester probably served to make Tatnuck residents more aware of their own rural self-identity. By organizing themselves, these Tatnuck women made a formal declaration of their community identity.

The first activity of the Tatnuck Circle was to compose its constitution. Anne Firor Scott observed that "Written constitutions were universal: every society established rules about meetings, the uses of money, and qualifications for potential recipients of charity." On the whole, the Tatnuck Circle's constitution attempted to preserve a semblance of gender-blind inclusiveness, while practically ensuring that the female members would hold the power of the purse-strings. Having established that the Circle would aid the sick and assist families needing proper clothing for church, avoiding the use of the words "poor" or "destitute," the Constitution contained a vaguely worded membership requirement:

This Society shall be for the edification and instruction of any who shall see fit to join it by the payment of twelve and one half cts. annually.

According to this description, apparently membership was open to both men and women. But a later article narrowed the description of membership. Article ten stipulated that if the Circle had an abundance of funds, they can be appropriated "to any other purpose which the ladies may present, by a vote of two thirds of the members." Although women members seem to have had the financial hand in this procedure, no clause formally prohibited men from becoming members. As will be seen, the matter of male membership would not be settled for some six years.

This ambiguity aside, the constitution provided a clear and concise guide to the meeting format and the officers' duties. Its articles formalized the spiritual, intellectual, charitable,
financial, and record-keeping activities of the Circle — as well as the officers' roles in managing those functions. Meetings were to be held on the last Thursday of the month, with the annual meeting to be held in April. The meetings were to include a time set aside for prayer and Bible reading, and they were to close with a song.

Since the president was to preside over the meetings, she was responsible for selecting the religious and literary pieces to be read at the meetings, or for delegating that responsibility to another member. Unlike a church-sponsored sewing circle, the non-denominational Tatnuck Circle had no minister to offer the opening prayer. Although visiting ministers might offer an opening prayer, they did so as invited guests of the Circle. Therefore, the members generally had complete control over the spiritual content of their meetings.

Besides opening the meetings, the president's duties were to keep order during a session, and to make financial requests to the treasurer. The vice president would serve in the president's absence. The secretary was responsible for recording the Circle's transactions, and keeping a list of contributions and their sources. In addition to maintaining the Circle's finances, the treasurer was to deliver funds and goods as needed. Aside from these officers, the constitution provided for elected "directresses" that would oversee the sewing work done by the Circle; this came to mean the maintenance of sewing supplies. Finally, the constitution allowed for the establishment of a prudential committee, that would "seek out the objects of charity and address a note to the President on all proper occasions."\(^{14}\)

Endorsing this formal declaration of purpose and delegated authority were thirty-five charter members, many of whom were linked already by common racial, economic, and kinship ties. These thirty-five women were white, and they shared a common Protestant heritage. They ranged in age from twelve or thirteen to seventy-three. The highest concentration of members (fifteen) were between the ages of thirty-one and fifty. They were the wives, daughters, or sisters of local farmers and small manufacturers. President Joanna Flagg (age 32), Vice President Maria Lauriette Rich (age 33), and secretary/treasurer Abby Goulding (age 21) were all married and each had at least one small child. Three of the four members of the Prudential

\(^{14}\) Ibid.
Committee were in their forties and fifties. This reflected the belief that "elderly ladies" could better assess the worthiness of a petitioner.\textsuperscript{15}

The list of charter members, combined with census records and local histories, serve to unearth patterns of family ties and community prominence.\textsuperscript{16} For example, member Mrs. Judith MacFarland lived on the MacFarland homestead at the corner of Pleasant Street and what is now called Chamberlain Parkway, in a household including her unmarried daughter Caroline, who also was a member, and her married daughter (and member) Maria Chamberlain. A nearby neighbor was member Elizabeth Blair (Judith MacFarland’s sister-in-law), whose own household included longtime members Mary MacFarland (Elizabeth’s sister) and Sarah MacFarland (who perhaps was a niece). Over its first decade, the Circle frequently met at Mrs. Urana Gates’ house on Pleasant Street, a few blocks away from Tatnuck Square. Her sixteen year-old daughter Ellen was a charter member, and she retained an affiliation with the Circle until at least 1917. Surely, many of these early members were related at least by marriage. Mrs. Olive Moore, Mrs. Lucy Moore (with her daughters Ann and Ruth), and Mrs. Mary Moore lived within several blocks of each other on Pleasant Street, east of Tatnuck Square. Similarly, Mrs. Phila Johnson, Mrs. Nancy Johnson, and Mrs. Phoebe Johnson lived within the Tatnuck periphery.

This sketch reveals a group of women already bound by kinship and/or neighbor ties. In her study of rural women in nineteenth-century New York, Nancy Osterud observed that “This network of family and neighbors was a crucial resource for women who played a vital role in the provision of mutual aid.”\textsuperscript{17} If this crucial network was already established in Tatnuck, it is interesting to consider why these women felt the need to formalize those ties at that particular time in history. Perhaps they wanted to take a more definitive and public role in shaping the social life


\textsuperscript{16} Member list, 1847, Tatnuck Ladies’ Sewing Circle. For the sake of clarity, married women will be called by their first names, although they were frequently referred to in the records by their husband’s first names, i.e., Mrs. James Jones.

of Tatnuck, and to transmit their benevolent values to future generations of members, regardless of kinship ties. Surely the influx of new settlers to Tatnuck would have given these purposes an air of immediacy. And perhaps the changing socio-economic landscape of Tatnuck, and Worcester at large, with its strangers, booms, and busts, created an atmosphere of uncertainty that inspired the seed of institutional benevolence to bloom among both friends and strangers.

One charter member who was a newcomer to the neighborhood was the abolitionist Abby Kelly Foster. She and her husband Stephen had recently bought a farm at the intersection of Mower and Cataract Streets, about a five minute walk from Tatnuck Square. Abby gave birth to their daughter Alla on May 19, 1847, just eight days before the first meeting of the Tatnuck Circle. Perhaps this energetic agent for the American Antislavery Society could rest in bed no longer, and the Circle meeting offered an opportunity for social contact. Her early affiliation with the Circle did not last long; her name does not appear again in the minutes until she hosted a Circle meeting almost fourteen years later. Undoubtedly she was busy throughout those years, planning and participating in a local antislavery fair (which was held in April of 1848), as well as the first national women's rights convention (which was held in Worcester on October 26 and 27, 1850). Until the outbreak of the Civil War, Abby and Stephen Foster traversed the northern and midwestern states lecturing for the American Antislavery Society. In the 1860s, she became a sporadic member, who would use her occasional participation in the Tatnuck Circle to drum up contributions for the Worcester Freedmen's Aid Society. Although an afternoon of social diversion might have appealed to her, on that May day in 1847 she must have had little patience for a group of women who would not declare their sympathy for the plight of the slave until the Civil War was well underway.

The dynamics of the Circle's early meetings were captured by the eager hand of the secretary/treasurer, Abby Goulding. Her highly-descriptive accounts of the Circle's activities befit an enthusiastic young woman in her early twenties. True to the prevailing custom, she was extremely careful about her use of prepositions based upon gender. According to her record, the Circle met "with Mrs B.," or it met "at Mr. B's." This usage reflects a society in which married women had few legal property rights. Perhaps this pervasive atmosphere of male ownership encouraged the Circle members to seek out a more
public space when the opportunity arose a little over a decade later.

In an early meeting, Abby provides a rare glimpse into the division of labor within the Circle, as well as the members' conscious attempt to develop a regular order of business:

There are a considerable number of patch work squares, which have been contributed by the members of the Society and sewed by the young 
*ladie*s. For the future the ladies will attend to reading in the Bible and prayer, immediately before tea, will be favoured with singing after tea.18

This passage encapsulates several important aspects of the Circle's activities. The younger women sewed the patchwork squares together, perhaps while the older and more experienced tailors sewed shirts. The meeting format suggests that the spiritual gravity of prayer and contemplation should precede the enjoyment of tea and singing. This decision would have additional implications at those longer evening meetings, in which men arrived to have tea. From this description, the female members' expressions of spirituality would be veiled in privacy before the arrival of the gentlemen guests.

Abby Goulding's record gives a fascinating account of how the Tatnuck Circle quickly became a clearinghouse for garments sewn by the members, coordinating an intricate mixture of cash, barter, and goodwill. For example, at one meeting, the Circle received thirty-five cents for a knitted cap donated by member Elizabeth Blair. In turn, the Circle presented "the making of a child's dress and the knitting of two pairs of children's stockings," to Mrs. Parkhurst, a needy non-member.19 At another meeting, Abby Goulding reported that

The ladies . . . made three caps and a pair of chemises for which we furnished the cloth for Mrs. Harwood [a non-member] for which the society

18. Tatnuck Ladies' Sewing Circle minutes, October, 1847.
19. Ibid., December, 1847.
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received $1.00 . . . to be appropriated for the Choctaw Indians.20

This rather breathless account shows the Circle's simultaneous endeavor to address local needs, obtain hard currency, and contribute to a frontier mission.

Abby Goulding was re-elected as secretary/treasurer of the Tatnuck Ladies' Circle in May of 1848, but her association with the Circle came to a mysteriously abrupt end just two months later, when her elegant hand was replaced by the awkward script and terse entries of forty-two year-old Sophia Cook, the wife of local farmer Sumner Cook. No explanation for the change was given, until the meeting entry for November, 1848, noting "Mrs. S. S. Cook to replace Abby Goulding, who resigned."21 Abby made her final appearance at a Circle meeting in March of 1849, during which she paid thirty-five cents "due to the Society for the past year."22 The manuscript census forms add further mystery to her situation. She and her husband, Luther G. Goulding, along with their six year-old son Albert were listed as residents of the Fifth Ward across the city in the southern section of Worcester; Luther was recorded as a landless laborer.

This evidence seems to signify a loss of fortune. According to Tatnuck historian Fannie Williams, Luther Goulding was a Tatnuck citizen of some prominence; he was a charter member of the Tatnuck Library Association (1839).23 Abby's apparent fall from grace within the Tatnuck Circle remains a puzzle. Why did the safety net which she helped to construct fail to offer at least a tangible expression of sympathy? Perhaps her fellow members believed that she still had a husband to support her, despite the economic loss. Perhaps the members were irritated at her failure to pay any of her Circle-related fees for a year, although economic hardship could have been a factor. It may be that some of the members found her refined manner, as

20. Ibid., March, 1848.
21. Ibid., November, 1848.
22. Ibid., April, 1849.
evident in her written record, to be pretentious, given her economic reality.

Abby Goulding's departure aside, the Circle's leadership would remain fairly stable throughout the 1850s. Maria Rich, the Circle's first vice-president, was elected president in 1850, and she would be re-elected in 1857 and 1858. Mary McFarland, the Circle's only unmarried president during the Circle's first two decades, served in that office for 1851 and 1852. Mary MacFarland already had leadership experience; as a teenager she was the Tatnuck district collector for the Ladies Missionary Association at the Old South Church. She and her married sister Elizabeth Blair hosted several meetings at their house. Subsequently, Mrs. Mary Noyes served as president, from 1853 to 1856. Sophia Cook's record reflects few changes instituted by those presidents, although the Circle began to contribute to some of the new local charitable organizations, like the Worcester Children's Friend Society and the City Missionary. But perhaps the most dramatic development in the Circle's activities during the 1850s was the subtle shift in the role allowed the male customers and guests.

From its earliest days, local men appeared in the Tatnuck Circle's meeting records, as customers, and at certain meetings as evening visitors. Their visibility within the Circle's activities was largely dictated by the seasons that in effect controlled and defined the nature of work and leisure in rural Tatnuck. According to the entries, the meetings held from the spring through the early fall (April to September) were afternoon gatherings attended only by female members. The entries for meetings held in those months record the number of "ladies" present, which members read the opening prayer, and the charitable contributions made by the Circle members to various causes. In general, the entries from October to March describe expanded meetings that began in the afternoon and ran into the evening.

During the afternoon, the female members would attend to the regular business of the meeting (prayer, sewing, and voting on appropriations), and in the evening the male guests would be admitted to the Circle gathering for tea and entertainment, which included singing. During 1849-1850, the shorter afternoon

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24. Old South Church records, in Manuscripts Collection, American Antiquarian Society. Mary MacFarland was a collector from 1824 to 1831.
meetings attracted about twenty members, while the evening festivities were attended by from forty to sixty people. Since many of the male guests were local farmers, their free time was tied directly to the growing cycle. Cultural historian Jack Larkin observed that in the rural north, "Between spring and the fall harvest, visits were shorter, and gatherings less frequent." Winter, on the other hand, was a "contradictory season, a time of growing discomfort and greater leisure." 25

The membership lists for the years from 1848 to 1852 provide some clues to understanding the identities of the "gentlemen visitors" and their relationship to the female Circle members. During those years, names of local men appeared on the membership lists, alongside those of the women. They must have contributed the twelve and a half cent membership dues; however, the annual meeting minutes mention only the presence of female members. Apparently, the men were given honorary membership status, since they were never present when the actual business of a meeting was conducted. The 1848 membership list includes thirty-three women and sixteen men. Ten of the men were spouses of female members, while six were bachelors ranging in age from nineteen to fifty. In only one case was a bachelor a female member's son. In the remaining five cases, the bachelors were local boarders.

This basic pattern is repeated in the membership list for 1849; in fact, of the 16 male members listed for that year, apparently 11 of them were single. The manuscript census for 1850 clarifies the place of these bachelors in Tatnuck community. Among these bachelor members were twenty-five year-old Samuel Gleason, a sash and blind maker who boarded with member Mary Corbin and her husband Simeon; Charles Houghton, a twenty-one year-old farm hand living with sporadic Circle participant Martha Baily and her husband Silas; and Caleb Rogers, a middle-aged carpenter boarding with member Phoebe Johnson and her husband Clark. Although these men must have welcomed the social entertainment provided by the Circle, at least some of these bachelors also were customers, buying shirts and stockings produced by the female members.

The nature and the ebb and flow of these male memberships are puzzling, and any policy regarding them was

never recorded in the meeting minutes. No male names are recorded on the list for 1850, but during the presidency of Mary MacFarland the ranks of male membership swelled again. In 1851, 25 women and 14 men are listed as members, while 21 women and 13 men are listed the following year. Perhaps Mary MacFarland's fundraising experience encouraged her to seek out contributions from men as well as women.

Male visibility in Circle activities declined drastically, however, with the election of Mrs. Mary Noyes in 1853. Only one male name appears on the member list for that year; no men would appear on a member list again in the period studied. Within Mrs. Noyes' administration, men dropped out of the meeting record all together. Secretary Sophia Cook, who was always careful to count the number of "ladies" and "gentlemen" present at meetings, mentions only "ladies" in her entries for meetings held between January 1856 and December 1858. With absolutely no explanation, Sophia Cook described the January 1859 meeting attendance, "16 ladies present in the afternoon and 24 ladies and gentlemen in the evening."26 From that time, men would be welcome as guests, but they would never be allowed the honorary membership they had been granted a decade earlier.

From the Circle's inception, the female members placed a high priority on formulating members' roles through the constitution and meeting minutes. Their deliberate measures to make the men's role in the Circle an informal one is all the more striking. Apparently these Tatnuck women were trying to preserve their rural heritage, in which male relatives and neighbors were welcome evening guests at sewing bees, while keeping within their own written code.27 These female members wanted to keep the democratic tone set by their constitution, but they did not want to place themselves in a position where men could demand fiscal power as members.

The extant financial record of Circle receipts for the 1840s and 1850s outlines a parallel shift in the financial role played by local men, from customers to contributors. Between 1849 and 1852, roughly half of the garment purchases involved

26. Tatnuck Ladies' Sewing Circle, minutes, January 1859.

male customers, most of whom were single. By the fiscal year 1853–1854, four purchases involved men, while thirteen were made by women. Perhaps the women members began to use their clout "on the ground floor," to make purchases for their own families. From 1855 to 1860, when the systematic financial record ends, all of the customers named were women.

In contrast, only one transaction involving men was recorded in 1854–1855, and in that case it was a contribution made by "several gentlemen to assist in making out a donation to a sick lady." This receipt entry underscores another facet of the male role in the Circle, the willing and generous provider of cash donations. As the male customers faded away and the male members vanished into obscure ambivalence, the male benefactor gained a distinct profile in the records of the Tatnuck Circle. In fact, the funds of these generous male evening guests were aggressively solicited during the Civil War, at the height of the relief effort. The Tatnuck women were learning that they needed cash in their quest to nourish Worcester's growing charitable web.

With purse strings firmly in hand, the women of the Tatnuck Circle proceeded to contribute to a variety of causes, including several new ones. They contributed a mixture of cash and sewn goods to a variety of charitable causes, as well as to individuals who were considered to be worthy of help (including themselves). Their contributions were driven by a combination of Christian idealism, material practicality, and an emerging awareness of the severity of a variety of urban problems.

The earliest non-local charity receiving the attention and contributions of the Circle was the missionary work of Mrs. Benton and her sister, Miss Harriet Goulding. These sisters were first mentioned in a meeting entry for December of 1847:

We were much gratified to hear some missionary letters read, two from Mrs. Benton of the Syrian Mission, and one from her sister, Miss Goulding at the Choctaw Nation.

28. The total number of purchases for these years varied from between ten and twenty sales.

29. Tatnuck Ladies' Sewing Circle minutes, financial accounts.

30. Ibid., December 1847.
Although the Tatnuck Circle was not dedicated solely to the promotion of mission work, missionary activity was regarded by its members (and by society at large) as a cause worthy of support by women’s benevolent societies. Rev. David Kimball expressed the prevailing sentiment quite well in his speech to a gathering of female missionary societies, in 1819:

Women are under strong and peculiar obligations to promote Christianity. It raised them from their low and servile state to their present condition.  

In a practical sense, the direct letter appeals made by these missionary sisters inspired the Tatnuck Circle members to donate money and sewn goods. Even though Mrs. Benton seemed to write the Circle more often, the mission of Miss Goulding captured the collective imagination and energy of the Tatnuck women. While the Circle sent Mrs. Benton one skein of yarn, its members eagerly sewed pillowcases, a bed quilt, and clothing for Miss Goulding. In addition, they sent the maiden missionary various purchases, and one dollar, which represented about one-tenth of the Circle’s annual treasury balance.

Perhaps the Circle members were inspired by the immediacy of Miss Goulding’s mission on the not-so-distant frontier. The Choctaw tribe was generally viewed by white American Protestants as a missionary success. According to Native American mission historian Michael C. Coleman, the Choctaws were quick to adopt Christianity, at least superficially, and since 1818 they had welcomed missionaries from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. After the tribe was forced to move to Oklahoma by the federal government in the 1830s, the Choctaws requested missionaries to teach in their schools.

Most likely, it was the image of Miss Goulding devoting her life to blazing new trails for Christianity on the frontier that inspired the Circle members. The missionary profession had been

31. Rev. David Kimball, quoted by R. Pierce Beaver, All Loves Excelling, p. 32.

32. See minutes, December 1847, March 1848, May to August 1848, and March 1850.

33. See Michael C. Coleman, Presbyterian Missionary Attitudes Toward American Indians, 1837-1893 (Jackson, Mississippi, 1985), pp. 52-74.
open to single American women for less than thirty years.\textsuperscript{34} Essentially, Miss Goulding was perceived by these women as an adventurous, exercising her spirituality in ways that would never be allowed to conventional women such as themselves. Her status as a single woman with no husband to protect and provide for her must have made the Tatnuck women all the more resolved to make her life as comfortable as possible.

On the local front, the plight of orphaned, abandoned, and abused children among the rising number of Worcester's urban poor was systematically addressed by the Tatnuck Circle in its ongoing contributions to the Worcester Children's Friend Society. Similar to the Tatnuck Circle, the Society was established out of concern for the poverty which was emerging in the city. Anstice Miles, a carpenter's wife who lived a short walk from downtown Worcester, visited poor families in the area and witnessed firsthand the physical and moral degradation of children in households with absent, intemperate, or negligent parents. In January of 1849, Mrs. Miles held a meeting of Worcester's male and female leaders at her house. Under her leadership, they formed the Worcester Children's Friend Society, which was dedicated to placing destitute and unsupervised children in decent homes.\textsuperscript{35}

The Society operated within a gender-defined division of labor. The female elected officers and the Board of Managers worked with the hired matron to administer the ongoing management of the Society. Financial support and public visibility were drummed up by the women who served on the Board of Assistant Managers, who solicited donations from their church congregations. A board of "gentlemen" advisors worked in tandem with those female boards, offering legal and financial advice, as well as emergency financial assistance when necessary. Through the generosity of a male benefactor, the Society soon received a house on Shrewsbury Street, which became an "Orphans' Home," providing temporary housing for the Society's charges until more permanent homes could be found for them among local families.

\textsuperscript{34} See R. Pierce Beaver's discussion of single female missionaries, in \textit{All Loves Excelling}, pp. 59-84.

\textsuperscript{35} See the handbill bound into the bound volume of \textit{Annual Reports of the Worcester Children's Friend Society, 1849-1884}, in the American Antiquarian Society.
Although no overlap has been found between the membership of the Worcester Children's Friend Society and the Tatnuck Circle, at least some of the Circle's members must have been approached by the female collectors for the Society at their respective churches, as every major congregation had a collector. Besides, Mrs. Miles herself should have represented an urban adventurousness to the Circle members, battling vice and poverty. In any event, the Circle made the relatively large donation of five dollars to the Society in 1849. Although it was no monetary match for the Ladies Benevolent Society of Old South Church, which regularly donated twenty-five dollars a year to the Society, the Tatnuck Circle sewed outfits, sheets, pillowcases, and clothing for the Orphan's Home throughout the 1850s. An extremely telling example of the rural perception of Tatnuck by the increasingly urban citizens of central Worcester is revealed in Society secretary Marcia Knowlton's praise of the support received from outlying communities:

Our wants are scarce whispered abroad, when the hearts of many are awakened; the echo passes over hill and dale; Tatnuck, Princeton, New Worcester, and Ware Village respond to our call; their sewing circles no less prompt than those of our city, all send in their boxes of ready made, new clothing.36

Although Tatnuck was a community removed from the front lines of the Worcester Children's Friend Society, the Tatnuck women were sophisticated enough to realize the immediacy of the needs of the urban orphans.

This common realization of urban social problems undoubtedly fueled the Tatnuck Circle's support of the ecumenical movement to improve the moral and material welfare of Worcester's poor. In 1849, representatives of Worcester's Congregational and Baptist churches met to create and fund the post of City Missionary, allowing a minister to work with the poor on a full-time basis.37 Several years later, in 1854, industrialist


37. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg traces a parallel development in New York during the 1850s. She believes that the widespread establishment of the city missionary position was a crucial step in the professionalization of social work. See her
Ichabod Washburn funded the construction of the Memorial Church (known as Mission Chapel) at the intersection of Bridge and Summer Streets in the heart of Worcester's urban district. One of the early city missionaries was Rev. William T. Sleeper (1855–1856), who with his wife occasionally visited the Tatnuck Circle. Perhaps through his attempts to cultivate financial support, the Circle donated money and sewing to the City Missionary throughout the 1850s and 1860s. The City Mission was an ideal religious cause for the Circle to support, as it was ecumenical and it aided Worcester's poor.38

But the women of the Tatnuck Circle adhered most closely to the adage that "Charity begins at home." By far, the most frequent type of charity recorded in the minutes of the Tatnuck Circle was that bestowed upon local people, including some of the members. Some of the contributions were one-time emergency gifts, such as a shirt to "a Mr. Brokew who was so unfortunate as to loose [sic] his trunk filled with clothing," and a shirt to a Mr. Bramin, who had lost part of his hand.39 In other cases, the Circle made steady contributions of sewn articles and money to a recipient over several years. A prime example was a "Mrs. Mirick," who received Circle aid throughout the 1850s. She was probably Sabrina Myrick, a single parent who had two little girls.40

Not surprisingly, the Tatnuck Circle placed a high priority upon aiding the health and welfare of its own members. Between 1849 and 1851, it funded the furnishings of a sick room, purchased a cot bed, and bought bed ticking and a furniture patch used to upholster "a chair to be used in sickness."41 Circle members occasionally voted to give financial help to ill members;


38. Rev. Sleeper returned to work as pastor of the Mission Chapel in 1875. Under his leadership, the City Missionary Society was incorporated to lend assistance to fledgling congregations in Worcester. Through its financial aid, in 1914 the lot was procured for the Tatnuck Congregational Church. That sanctuary would provide the Circle with its twentieth-century meetingplace. See Charles Nutt, History of Worcester and Its People, II: 899.

39. Tatnuck Ladies' Sewing Circle, minutes, August 1849 and April 1852.

40. 1850 manuscript census, I: 390.

41. See Tatnuck Ladies' Sewing Circle expenditure records. We can assume that the sick room furniture was taken from house to house, according to need.
the Circle presented several monetary gifts to Mary Maynard, a single woman who was a member of the Circle. But the most common (and least explained) form of charity was the "gratuitous" sewing done for each other in the course of a meeting. It may be assumed that if a member asked for help in providing clothing for her children, it was done at a Circle meeting. Essentially, the Circle provided a formal, ongoing sewing bee for any member who was temporarily overwhelmed by sewing projects.

All of these causes were free of controversy. The issue of slavery, however, was to cause a problem. The only appropriation that was rejected was for $2.58 to assist a slave.42 Yet, in their own subdued way, the women of the Tatnuck Circle did show an interest in at least the religious welfare of Worcester's Afro-American community. In November of 1854, the Circle voted to contribute five dollars to "an African clergyman residing in the City of Worcester."43 Just a month earlier, on October 29, 1854, Asa Butman, a federal marshall who had arrived in Worcester to search for runaway slaves, was literally driven out of town by a local mob. It is difficult to determine whether there was a relationship between the governmental attempt to enforce the federal fugitive slave law and the financial support to a recognized religious leader of the local Black community, but that certainly is a possibility.

The Tatnuck Circle received an infusion of new leadership from Mrs. Mary Houghton, who was president from 1859 to 1860, and who served as secretary from 1860 to 1863. During Mary Houghton's presidency, a landmark event occurred in the history of the Tatnuck Circle, as the local Lyceum Hall was opened and became an alternative meeting place for the Circle, which was formally named "Tatnuck Ladies' Sewing Circle" at that time.

As the nation's turbulence erupted into Civil War, the Tatnuck Circle worked to coordinate its war effort with other "circles in the water." At first, the Tatnuck Circle joined in a cooperative effort with the Old South Circle. In August of 1861, the members appointed a committee of two members to forward a ten dollar donation to the Treasurer of the Old South Circle, and

42. Ibid., Receipt Record, 1851-1852.

43. Ibid., Expenditure Record, 1854-1855.
to "ascertain what was necessary to have done for the soldiers." For the next year, the Tatnuck Circle worked independently, producing socks and a quilt for the local soldiers.

Tatnuck Hall, courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society

This modest one-story cottage was purchased by the Tatnuck Lyceum Corporation in 1860, and moved from its original location to Willard Avenue, two blocks east of Tatnuck Square. The Tatnuck Circle used the "Lyceum Hall" for meetings and parties until the Tatnuck Congregational Church was constructed in 1914.

The Tatnuck Circle's affiliation with the Worcester Soldiers' Relief Society began in October of 1862, when a Circle representative picked up twenty-three skeins of yarn at the Soldiers' Relief Society's headquarters in downtown Worcester. The Soldiers' Relief Society was formed shortly after the war began in April of 1861, and it was run by locally prominent

44. Tatnuck Ladies' Circle minutes, August 8, 1861.
women, to coordinate the production of military clothing and hospital supplies by local women's clubs, and to arrange for their delivery to national distribution agencies like the United States Sanitary Commission. Throughout the war, the female leaders of the Soldiers' Relief Society publicized their charitable work, holding several successful fund-raising parties and fairs.

In its effort to make the most efficient use of its resources, the Worcester Soldiers' Relief Society developed a piecework system in which a committee cut purchased cloth into shirt patterns. Local societies like the Tatnuck Circle took the pre-cut cloth, sewed it into shirts at their meetings, and returned the finished goods to the downtown "Relief Rooms." The goods were then boxed by the Soldiers' Relief Society's packing committee, for shipment to national distribution agencies, and in some cases to individuals like Clara Barton, who were working on the front lines.

Through this system, the Tatnuck Circle produced shirts, underwear, socks, sheets, slippers, towels, and handkerchiefs over the next year and a half. In January of 1863, the Tatnuck Circle also worked on its own to prepare, pack, and send a box of hospital supplies to the Massachusetts 25th Regiment, which was stationed at New Bern, North Carolina. Many Worcester men were enlisted in that regiment, including former Old South pastor Horace James. On January 8, the Circle members appropriated ten dollars for the endeavor, and two days later a box packed with such staples as sugar, farina, condensed milk, and bandages was sent by train to the soldiers at New Bern.

The Tatnuck Circle's relief effort entered a new phase in March of 1863, when its members voted to give the substantial sum of eight dollars to "the Contrabands" through the Worcester Freedmen's Aid Society. Mary Houghton's annual report for 1862-1863 stressed the Circle's ongoing support of "the soldiers who have gone from us to sustain our government from the machinations of traitors," but she added:

We have been mindful of another class of brethren, who are innocent sufferers from this unholy war, and our hearts have melted within us, when we thought of the poor bleeding sons of Africa bound in chains and slavery.

45. Ibid., April 23, 1853.
With this decided shift in the Circle's charitable agenda, it is hardly coincidental that Abby Foster's name appeared on the membership list for the first time since 1847.

The Worcester Freedmen’s Aid Society was established early in the war to coordinate local donations of money and clothing for the freed slaves. Like the Worcester Soldiers’ Relief Society, its female administrators furnished yarn and pre-cut garments to various societies and individuals. The Tatnuck Circle once again proved to be a "ring in the water," radiating clothing and towels. It continued to finish clothing for the Freedmen's Aid Society until the end of 1867.

In the final year of the war, Abby Foster put her substantial fund-raising skills to work within the Circle. She hosted a long evening meeting in February of 1865, which drew forty-three men and women. At that meeting, the members voted to contribute ten dollars to the Freedmen's Aid Society. A year later, she hosted another evening meeting, attended by sixty people, at which the members voted to donate another five dollars to the Society. Although she had travelled countless miles to raise thousands of dollars for the abolitionist cause, this belated recognition by her neighbors of the freedmen's plight must have been satisfying.

Although war-related relief work dominated the Circle's activities at least until the end of 1866, the Tatnuck women also found time to sew for the Worcester Children's Friend Society, as well as for each other. In 1863, the Circle contributed five dollars to "the Mission School." This might have been the industrial school formed under the aegis of the City Mission by Reverend Samuel Souther, who was City Missionary from 1856 until his resignation to enlist in the army in 1863. At the grassroots level, the Circle also gave financial help to Mrs. Putnam, a poor single parent. In addition to giving her money, the Circle hired her in 1862 to clean the Lyceum Hall. This practical charity was designed to help the destitute woman and to ease the Circle's own housekeeping chores.

Several financial points from the Circle's annual report for 1865-1866 underline signs of change in how the Circle viewed its mission and its money. First of all, the expenditures for sewing supplies was a mere $1.20 for calico thread. In the 1850s the Circle frequently spent half of its operating budget (roughly

46. Ibid., May, 24, 1866
$10 of a total $20) on cloth, notions, and needles.\(^{47}\) Undoubtedly, the years of doing piecework for the various relief societies freed up some of the Circle's own funds. A second sign is found in the major expenditures. The Circle donated $5 to both the Freedmen's Aid Society and the Worcester Children's Friend Society (as in past years), but the single largest expenditure was a seven dollar cupboard purchased for the Lyceum Hall. The Circle had purchased various pieces of crockery over the last six years, and a cupboard would be a welcome addition. Finally, at the annual meeting held May 24, 1866 the members voted to double the annual membership dues, to 25 cents.

At the twentieth anniversary meeting, held the next year, in 1867, Secretary Lizzie Moore paid homage to the Tatnuck ladies who "organized a society for benevolent purposes, and social intercourse."\(^{48}\) She stressed the living history of the Tatnuck Circle, embodied in the six charter members who had maintained their memberships, two of whom were largely house-bound but who had retained their memberships in the Circle. The young secretary also pondered the memory of past members:

"Many still reside in this village, though strangers to the society for many years; some have gone from this, and are active in other places; others have passed from these scenes of earth... a few other names very still more interesting to me, because unknown would be the only word I would add in writing a history of all."\(^{49}\)

Lizzie Moore singled out charter member and eight-term president Maria Rich for special recognition: "To her is owing much of the prosperity, which has attended this society.\(^{50}\)

Once this homage was paid, the Circle members turned to crafting new policies to meet the needs of the time. First, the office of Directress (sewing materials manager) was abandoned, as all future sewing work would be provided by each member, unless

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\(^{47}\) See for example, Ibid., and Expenditure Record for 1853-1854.

\(^{48}\) Ibid., May 9, 1867.

\(^{49}\) Ibid.

\(^{50}\) Ibid.
the Worcester Children’s Friend Society needed specific items. Second, the meeting fee was increased to ten cents per meeting. Most significantly, the Circle members redefined their role in local charity. Lizzie Moore declared:

   The society was organized for charitable purposes, and as charity begins at home, it was thought best to contribute the funds on hand and what we get this year, for the benefit of the Hall building.  

That decision was not based simply on community goodwill; it was also rooted in a sense of survival. Apparently, Circle members had realized that the Hall was more than an increasingly comfortable home away from home; it had become a crucial locus for public visibility. The Circle membership was graying, and literally dying off. Age analysis of the membership list for 1867 reveals that half of the sixteen members were over the age of fifty. No members were within the 31 to 40 age range that had been the highest age concentration back in 1847, when the Circle had been formed. There were only four members below the age of 31, and without exception they were the daughters of members. The Circle needed to attract the interest of the many newcomers settling in Tatnuck.

In honor of its twentieth anniversary, the Circle held a tea party and invited the residents of Tatnuck. Lizzie Moore reported, “About 130 took supper at eight o’clock, a good time was enjoyed generally.” The Circle received $10.75 from meeting fees, membership dues, and a collection taken during the evening supper. A little under half of this relatively impressive sum covered the necessities of coffee, tea, and the costs of cleaning up the hall. But more importantly, the Circle cultivated a potential harvest of new and promising female faces who might give the Circle a future afternoon of their time.

In conclusion, it should be noted that over the two decades of its existence, the Tatnuck Circle's mission to aid the "worthy" poor, and to provide moral and cultural edification of its members, had not changed dramatically; but its means of attaining those goals had undergone substantial changes. Although the rural

51. Ibid.
52. Ibid.
seasonal cycle still determined the meeting cycle of the Circle, its members used increasingly urban strategies to further their social and charitable goals. These strategic changes are evident particularly in the role allowed men in the Circle's activities, in the Circle's shift from independent producer to cooperator within the local charity network, and in its increasingly public attempts to attract new members. These shifts best exemplify the Tatnuck Circle's adaptation to the socioeconomic changes wrought in those two decades.

As the primary cash holder and, in many cases, the emotional partners of female members, men served a variety of social and economic functions in the Circle's early years. As buyers of garments produced by the female members, local men provided the Circle with its initial flow of cash. At the same time, some of these same men, along with other male friends and spouses, enjoyed the winter evenings' entertainment, as gentlemen guests of the Circle. The admittance of male members on an apparently honorary basis would seem to have been a logical step, considering that the constitution did not forbid it. But perhaps the possibility of male members petitioning for a voice in appropriations made the female members withdraw the opportunities for male membership, and, for several years, male participation in evening meetings. When the men were allowed to return, they did so as guests and willing contributors. By the early 1860s, both female members and their gentlemen guests recognized that the Tatnuck Circle provided a sociable service worthy of financial support. At the same time, the female members were able to keep their fingers firmly on the Circle's purse-strings.

Under the control and direction of its female members, the Tatnuck Circle had undergone a shift from a fairly independent operator producing goods for charitable consumption on an ad hoc basis to a cooperative player within the increasingly specialized network of local charities. Perhaps it was not a coincidence that the Tatnuck Circle's Prudential Committee, devoted to seeking out worthy causes, disappeared from the minutes after 1852. By that time, the Worcester Children's Friend Society and the City Missionary had been established to advise local groups on how best to contribute time and money to ameliorate poverty in Worcester. This trend accelerated during the Civil War, with the development of the piecework system by local relief groups like the Worcester Soldiers' Relief Society, that maximized the energy of local groups like the Tatnuck Circle. By
the end of the war, the Circle had developed a working niche within the network of local charities that provided direct advice on precisely what items were needed at a given time, thus cutting down on the time needed for planning.

Through their cooperative relief work within this charitable network, the women of the Tatnuck Circle learned how these central Worcester charities raised money and established public visibility. The examples set by the Worcester Children's Friend Society, the Worcester Soldiers' Relief Society, and the Worcester Freedmen's Aid Society showed that charitable organizations could be managed by women and supported financially by male contributors. The Civil War relief societies in particular used public space and fundraisers to raise consciousness and cash, methods that the Tatnuck Circle members adapted to solidify their own social position within Tatnuck.

As a result of this cooperative relief experience, the Tatnuck Circle employed increasingly public strategies to attract new members. The Lyceum Hall provided the Circle with a large and unfettered space to hold its longer winter gatherings. But just as important, it made the Circle's activities more accessible to the influx of female newcomers settling with their families in Tatnuck. The local population had jumped from nearly 1,900 in 1850 to almost 3,200 a decade later. With the privatization of the home, how many of these "new" women would feel comfortable paying an afternoon call at the home of a "venerable citizen?" And, in turn, how comfortable would the long-time members feel in entertaining these female strangers without first "sizing them up?" In any event, the Circle's role in defining Tatnuck's social self-identity became increasingly tied to its affiliation with the Lyceum Hall.

The Tatnuck Circle survived well into the twentieth century, when in 1982, its nine elderly members voted to disband, explaining that they were too old to carry on alone. Worcester Telegram reporter Sibyl Farson reflected, "There are no younger members to pick up the gauntlet and do a little embroidery on it."

Although the farms have disappeared into neatly manicured lawns, and the mill ponds have been filled, a leisurely


stroll through the rugged hills of Tatnuck reveals that the area is still dominated by domestic concerns. Amid the farm houses and hilly groves, the eye can almost glimpse the women trudging through the slush, work baskets in hand, to the next meeting of the Circle.