



The Historical  
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Pennsylvania

Collection 2016

Magdalen Society of Philadelphia  
Records

1800-1974 (bulk 1800-1918)  
19 boxes (31 vols. in 17 boxes), 5 lin. feet

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### Abstract

The Magdalen Society of Philadelphia, founded in 1800, was formed to rescue and reform “fallen women” and was the first organization of its kind in the United States. Under the leadership of Episcopal Bishop William White and a number of other clergymen and concerned citizens, the Magdalen Society, through dedication and successful fundraising, began an asylum to reform prostitutes and other wayward women. The asylum eventually became focused on preventing delinquency and providing education to girls. In 1918 the Magdalen Society became the White-Williams Foundation for Girls. This organization, now known as White-Williams Scholars, currently serves both male and female high school students in the Philadelphia Public Schools.

This collection includes records of the Magdalen Society from its formation in 1800 until 1918, when its name and mission changed. Records include minutes of the Board of Managers, the Weekly Visiting Committee, and the annual meetings; lists of women admitted and discharged from the asylum; matron’s diaries chronicling daily events, applications received, and the behavior of the asylum’s residents; photographs of the asylum; deeds; and miscellaneous papers pertaining to the history of the organization.

### Background note

The Magdalen Society of Philadelphia was a private charitable organization founded in 1800. The goal of the Society was to rescue “fallen women,” and it was the first institution of its kind in the United States. The Society was founded by men, many of whom were either clergymen or had strong affiliations with Episcopal or Presbyterian churches. William White, the highest-ranking Episcopal bishop in the United States, was the first president of the Magdalen Society. Robert Wharton, the mayor of Philadelphia, served as the first vice president. The newly-formed Magdalen Society received guidance from its sister institution, the Magdalen Charity of London, and was officially incorporated in 1802. The Society’s stated purpose was “restoring to the paths of virtue those unhappy females who in unguarded hours have been robbed of their innocence.”

The Magdalen Society’s Board of Managers met, usually on a quarterly basis, for four years before they received their first application for aid. The Society had spent several

years raising funds and increasing membership. The Board of Managers felt ill-prepared to seek out women actively, largely because there was no asylum or building that could be used as a refuge and reformatory. From the date of their first application in 1805 until the Magdalen Home opened in 1808, women who applied for aid were either placed in private homes or provided with an employment opportunity. The purchase of the Magdalen Home, located at the corner of Race and Schuylkill Second (currently 21<sup>st</sup>) Streets, enabled the Society to better pursue its intended mission. Mr. and Mrs. David Love were selected to be the first steward and matron of the new asylum and were responsible for overseeing the asylum's residents, referred to by the Board of Managers as "the family."

During the first decade of the asylum's operation there were seldom more than a handful of inmates at a time. Although there were no firm age restrictions, most women were in their teens or twenties. Pregnant women were not admitted, nor were those who were noted as being "diseased." These women were generally referred to the hospital. African-American women were not admitted, nor were African Americans permitted to be members of the Society. The rules for inmates at the Magdalen Home were strict. They were not permitted to discuss the circumstances in which they lived before going to the asylum, they were to read the Scriptures diligently, avoid profane language, and above all, inmates were not permitted to leave the asylum without the permission of the Visiting Committee. In 1811 a tall fence was constructed to help inmates adhere to this rule. Inmates also did sewing, made yarn, and eventually began making and selling articles of clothing.

The Society's male leadership began to encourage women to play a more active role in the Society in approximately 1820. Women were recruited as matron's assistants and were appointed as visitors to the asylum. In 1821 the Board of Managers fired the Loves, whose fondness for smoking pipes nearly burned the asylum down. Instead of appointing a new steward, the Managers chose to look for only a matron, preferably a woman with no family attachments to distract her. Hannah Smith, a widow and proprietor of a dry goods store, was appointed to the position. At this time smoking inside the Magdalen Home was banned.

The number of women residing at the Magdalen Home remained small through most of the 1830s and 1840s. A new building was built on the asylum property in 1845, and a new brick wall replaced the board fence that isolated the Magdalens. Nevertheless, the Home usually had many vacancies, and those who entered typically stayed for short periods. In 1848 the Board of Managers decided to take a more aggressive approach to seeking out potential inmates and hired a man named Oliver Brooks to bring women into the Home. Brooks visited brothels and other likely locations for prostitutes, but died shortly after his appointment without achieving much success. In 1850 the Board of Managers proposed to city officials that certain offenders be sent to the asylum rather than to prison.

It was at this time that the Board of Managers chose to review some of their policies. It was decided that inmates should remain at the asylum for at least a year, so that their rehabilitation could be completed. Older women were discouraged from applying for

help and were sometimes refused admittance. Younger women, less hardened and not quite as corrupt, were thought to be easier to reform. Ann McDonald, who served as the asylum's matron from 1838 until her death in 1877, was charged with helping to implement these new policies, which she accomplished with a moderate degree of success.

Elizabeth Freeberger became the matron of the Magdalen Home in 1878. Under her leadership the asylum slowly evolved into an institution more focused on wayward or homeless girls, rather than prostitutes or "fallen women." By the early twentieth century the Society accepted runaways and abused girls. Education and vocational training became an integral aspect of the Society's programs, although religion was still heavily stressed, but reform became less necessary as efforts were focused on preventing delinquency instead of rehabilitating delinquents. In 1908, after thirty years of service, Freeberger resigned from her position. Her replacement, Ethel Claxton, served five years before resigning and was succeeded by a number of short-lived substitute matrons.

The twentieth century brought many changes to the Magdalen Society. In addition to the change in the asylum's inmates and the comings and goings of the matrons, the Society began to experience turbulent times financially. The Board of Managers, realizing that they were not producing results on their own, sanctioned the formation of a Women's Advisory Board to help guide the progress of the Society, tackling many diverse and pressing issues. After more than a year of advising the Board of Managers, the members of the Women's Advisory Board requested information about how they could become full-fledged members of the Magdalen Society.

In 1914 the City of Philadelphia condemned the Magdalen Home, which forced the Board of Managers to begin looking for another site. Other financial difficulties stemming from poor membership and lack of donations made it necessary for the Magdalen Society to reduce the number of girls living in the asylum. The Board was also having difficulty filling the matron's position. Believing that they could not secure a reasonably priced property in Philadelphia, the Board of Managers began to look for properties in the suburbs. Under pressure from the City to leave the building at 21<sup>st</sup> and Race Streets so that the Municipal Court could expand their offices, in June of 1915 the Magdalen Home was vacated and the residents were placed at Fairview Farm, in Montgomery County. It was around this time that the Women's Advisory Board, perhaps disheartened, abandoned their work and dissolved their committee.

Still under considerable financial strain, in 1917 the Magdalen Society explored the possibility of changing their name and their mission. Their new role would be to act as a clearinghouse for other institutions for girls and to work with the Philadelphia Public Schools' Placement Bureau. In 1918 the Magdalen Society changed its name to the White-Williams Foundation for Girls, in honor of former president Bishop William White and George Williams, a Quaker philanthropist and former chairman of the Society's Board of Managers. The White-Williams Foundation, now called White-Williams Scholars, currently gives scholarships to low-income public high school students who are academic standouts.

## Scope & content

Records of the Magdalen Society of Philadelphia reflect the evolution of nineteenth-century attitudes toward prostitutes and other wayward women, with particular emphasis on the reform efforts of evangelical Protestants. Minutes of the Board of Managers relate the history of the Society from its inception to its 1918 change into the White-Williams Foundation for Girls, and demonstrate the convictions of the all-male Board that governed the Magdalen Asylum. Matrons' diaries, mostly written during the late-nineteenth century, tell the stories of many girls and young women who were taken in by the Magdalen Home and describe the matrons' efforts to change their habits through education, hard work, and prayer.

Records of the young women who were admitted and discharged by the asylum provide background information about the prostitutes, vagrants, and other "fallen women" who were deemed suitable for the asylum. The Society's successes and failures in reforming these women can also be discerned through a close reading of these records. A small group of papers relates to the purchase and maintenance of the Society's property and asylum; of particular note are photographs of the former Magdalen Home, taken in 1974, shortly before its demolition.

## Overview of arrangement

Series I	Administrative	
	a. Minutes	11 vols., 1 folder
	b. Financial	4 vols., 1 folder
	c. Miscellaneous	6 folders
Series II	Magdalen Home	
	a. Property records	3 folders
	b. Records of admissions and discharges	4 vols.
	c. Matrons' Diaries	10 vols., 1 folder
	d. Minutes of Weekly Visiting Committee	2 vols.
Series III	Artifacts	
	Magdalen Society seal and die	1 box

## Series description

### Series 1. Administrative, 1800-1919 (Boxes 1-10)

#### a. Minutes, 1800-1916

Minutes of the Magdalen Society of Philadelphia include minutes of annual meetings and minutes of the Board of Managers. Minutes of the annual meetings contain summaries of the Society's work, including the admission of members, the election of officers, admission statistics for the asylum, financial reports, and occasional reports on the doings of Magdalen Societies and other related organizations in other cities. Investment summaries, physicians' reports, and topics addressed by speakers at the annual meetings were also included. Newspaper clippings and annual reports

were sometimes fastened into the volumes, and the constitution, by-laws, and articles of incorporation are included in the earliest volume.

Minutes of the Board of Managers, who usually met on a quarterly basis, include committee reports, resolutions suggested and passed, policy changes, application and admission statistics, and financial reports. In addition to these business concerns, the minutes also contain some effusive passages about the role and goals of the Magdalen Society. Many of these passages are rather dogmatic treatises that discuss the role of evangelical Protestantism in reform efforts. Occasionally references are made to specific inmates at the asylum and their progress there.

b. Financial, 1832-1919

Ledgers of the Magdalen Society include records of investments, ground rents, donations, salaries, and cash transactions. Money given to the asylum's matrons for purchasing groceries and incidentals is reported, as are amounts paid for plumbing and repairs to the asylum.

c. Miscellaneous, 1884-1918, n.d.

Miscellaneous papers include a typed copy of the Board of Managers' bylaws, a draft of the constitution of the Women's Advisory Board, papers and articles about the history of the Magdalen Society, and a fundraising brochure. Also included are papers pertaining to the Society's transformation into the White-Williams Foundation.

**Series 2. Magdalen Home, 1809-1974 (Boxes 2, 11-17)**

a. Property Records, 1809-1974

These records include documents relating to the purchase and maintenance of the Society's property on 21<sup>st</sup> and Race Streets, including deeds and surveys. Photographs of the Magdalen Home, taken in 1974 shortly before the asylum's demolition, are also included.

b. Records of Admissions and Discharges, 1836-1910

These volumes typically include the name of the inmate and the dates of her admission and discharge. Early entries list the inmates' names and give both dates, but in later entries admissions and discharges were recorded on separate pages or in separate sections. Beginning in the 1870s ages and religions were frequently recorded. Occasionally brief notes were added to the records. Sometimes the name of the person -- usually a relative or guardian -- bringing the woman to the asylum was recorded. Reasons for discharge were consistently provided and included improper conduct, job placements, release to friends or family, release to probation officers, or being sent to the almshouse or the House of Refuge. Some women were noted as having escaped from the asylum, and several died and were buried on the asylum's grounds. There are few other details offered, but comments include "not a bad girl" and "feeble-minded." The volume covering the years 1908 to 1917 is indexed.

One volume, the 1878 to 1910 register, overlaps with the other admission and discharge records. This volume was kept by Elizabeth Freeberger and generally contains more substantive information than the other admission and discharge records. Each inmate's occupation, age, nativity, and dates of admission and discharge are included. Each entry also includes remarks that sometimes refer to the circumstances of the woman before her arrival at the asylum or her fate after leaving. One inmate was brought to the asylum by her family, who disowned her after she was "seduced by her father's coachman." Many women were noted as having married or gained employment since leaving the asylum. One woman, who came to the asylum afflicted with guilt for cohabitating with a man, later married the man in the asylum's parlor. Although most women remained at the asylum for a year or so, this volume notes a few women who stayed for as many as twenty years. This volume also contains an eleven-page history of the Magdalen Society and an index.

c. Matrons' Diaries, 1829-1834, 1878-1917

The Magdalen Society's matrons kept diaries to record daily events at the asylum. The earliest diary, 1829-1834, provides a brief glimpse of life at the Magdalen Home. Most days are simply noted as passing with "no particular occurrence." Visits paid to the asylum are noted, as are sicknesses and deaths, but little information about the daily routine of the matron or the inmates is offered. Accounts kept at the back of the volume include amounts spent at the market and payments received for clothing orders that were completed by the inmates.

Diaries from 1878 until the close of the Magdalen Home in 1915 were kept with much greater attention to details. Most of these entries were made by Elizabeth Freeberger, the asylum's matron from 1878 until 1908. Many entries include insights into the character of the inmates and Freeberger's opinion about the likelihood of their reformation. The Society's emphasis on morality and piety is clearly evidenced in these diaries.

Freeberger's opinions are easily inferred from her writing. While visiting a young woman staying in a Catholic refuge she became so incensed and disgusted by the rhetoric of the nuns that she abruptly left. She referred to Catholics in disdainful terms and at one point lamented that the Magdalen Society might be forced to accept pregnant girls in order to compete with the Catholic charities. Other prejudices are also evident. In 1878 she visited a young woman who had a three-week-old infant. The woman had been living on the street until she was taken in by an African American family. Freeberger noted that this woman was not as degraded by homelessness or having a child out of wedlock as she was by living with a "colored family."

Apparently a devout evangelical, Freeberger sometimes despaired at the condition of her young charges: "Can there not be something done, to reach more of these fallen ones?" Prayer meetings, services led by ministers, and the activities of the asylum's Christian Endeavor meetings were all faithfully recorded in the diaries. Freeberger expressed great pleasure when girls were shown the way of the Lord. In 1897 she described one girl who was sick with guilt for her sins and feared that God could

never forgive her. After several intense hours of prayer and soul-searching, Freeberger and the girl prayed for salvation, and the girl wept hysterically and suddenly knew she was saved. Freeberger described the room as being “illuminated.”

Applications made to the asylum were generally recorded as they were made. Applicants deemed too old, too diseased, too drunk, or too corrupt were generally referred to other institutions or simply sent away. Pregnant or “feeble-minded” applicants were also refused. Girls were brought by family members, referred by the local magistrates, or sent by the Society for Preventing Cruelty to Children. Inmates who misbehaved were usually either sent home or sent to the House of Refuge. Girls who were thought to be a flight risk were sometimes locked in their rooms. The diaries contain descriptions of attempted escapes and bad behavior, including one particularly incorrigible girl who was constantly “flirting out of the windows, with those she knew, and also with those she did not know, sending notes over the walls and under the gates, receiving them in return, together with cigarettes, chewing gum, candy, etc.”

Daily tasks, including washing, ironing, sewing, and housecleaning, are all noted in the diaries. Yearly housecleaning, an arduous task, was rewarded with cake and ice cream. In addition to physical work and scripture reading, it seems that some girls also received some basic education and vocational skills. Prayer meetings, included a service conducted by John Wanamaker, were recorded often. Recitals, readings, and prayers led by the Magdalens were among the evening activities, and special treats included “magic lantern” slide shows and stereoptican presentations. Highlights of Matron Freeberger’s days included visits from former and reformed Magdalens. After one former Magdalen visited, Freeberger noted the woman’s “real name” in the diary, perhaps indicating that the asylum’s residents sometimes used fictitious names.

Occasionally there are references to including letters or copies of letters in the diary. This correspondence does not exist in this collection.

d. Minutes of Weekly Visiting Committee, 1878-1912

The Visiting Committee was responsible for ensuring that inmates were well-adjusted and making good progress. Magdalens who wanted to leave the asylum either temporarily or permanently had to apply to the Visiting Committee for permission. Consequently, the Committee’s minutes contain reports about individual women, with some information about their history and their progress at the asylum. Among those mentioned is an alcoholic who was placed at the asylum by her husband, a woman from a “house of ill fame,” a woman who had an affair with a married man, and a girl who was “ostensibly selling fruit etc., but really practicing vile arts.” Minutes comment on the good or bad behavior of those applying for release and state whether release was granted.

**Series 3. Artifacts, n.d. (Box 19)**

This series consists of the seal and die of the Magdalen Society of Philadelphia.



## Separation report

Transferred to the White-Williams Scholars Records, Collection 3025:  
Account book, 1917-1921 (Accession 73:39)

Transferred to the Library:

Ninetieth Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the Magdalen Society, 1890.

The One Hundred and Second Annual Report of the Magdalen Society of Philadelphia,  
1902.

## Related materials

The Historical Society of Pennsylvania:

Children's Aid Society Records, Collection 3026.

Magdalen Society of Philadelphia Annual Reports, Wj. 37.

Pennsylvania Prison Society Records, Collection 1946.

White-Williams Scholars Records, Collection 3025.

Other institutions:

Hanway, Jonas, 1712-1786. "A plan for establishing a charity house or charity  
houses for the reception of repenting prostitutes: to be called the Magdalen  
Charity." 1758. Rare Book & Manuscript Library University of Pennsylvania,  
Philadelphia, Pa.

Philadelphia Society to Protect Children Records, Urban Archives of Temple  
University, Philadelphia, Pa.

## References

Carlisle, Marcia. "Disorderly City, Disorderly Women: Prostitution in Ante-Bellum  
Philadelphia." *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 110 no. 4 (October 1986):  
549-568.

De Cunzo, Lu Ann. "Reform, Respite, Ritual: An Archaeology of Institutions; the  
Magdalen Society of Philadelphia, 1800-1850." *Historical Archaeology*, 29 no.3 (1995).

Ruggles, Steven. "Fallen Women: The Inmates of the Magdalen Society Asylum of  
Philadelphia, 1836-1908." *Journal of Social History* 16 (Summer 1983): 65-81.

## Subjects

Alcoholism – 19<sup>th</sup> century

Charities – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 19<sup>th</sup> century

Charities – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 20<sup>th</sup> century

Child welfare – 19<sup>th</sup> century

Child welfare – 20<sup>th</sup> century

Children – Institutional care – 19<sup>th</sup> century

Evangelicalism – 19<sup>th</sup> century  
Juvenile delinquency – 19<sup>th</sup> century  
Juvenile delinquency – 20<sup>th</sup> century  
Juvenile delinquency – Prevention  
Poor women – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 19<sup>th</sup> century  
Prostitution – 19<sup>th</sup> century  
Prostitution – Religious aspects  
Protestant women – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 19<sup>th</sup> century  
Religion and social problems – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 19<sup>th</sup> century  
Social problems – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 19<sup>th</sup> century  
Social problems – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 20<sup>th</sup> century  
Social reformers – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 19<sup>th</sup> century  
Teenage prostitution – 19<sup>th</sup> century  
Women – Education  
Women – Institutional care – 19<sup>th</sup> century  
Women – Institutional care – 20<sup>th</sup> century  
Women – Social and moral questions – 19<sup>th</sup> century  
Women – Social conditions – 19<sup>th</sup> century  
Women – Social conditions – 20<sup>th</sup> century

Claxton, Ethel  
Freeberger, Elizabeth  
McDonald, Ann, 1790-1877  
White, William, 1748-1836  
Williams, George, 1766-1850

House of the Good Shepherd (Philadelphia, Pa.)  
House of Refuge (Philadelphia, Pa.)  
Magdalen Society of Philadelphia  
White-Williams Foundation

## **Administrative Information**

### **Restrictions**

The collection is open for research.

### **Acquisition information**

Gift of the White-Williams Foundation, 1973 and 1977.  
Accessions 73:39 and 77:61.

Magdalen Society die, Gift of the White-Williams Foundation, 1993.  
Accession 93:735.

Minutes of annual meetings (1800-1824), Gift of Philadelphia National Bank, 1986.

### **Alternative format**

Accession 73:39 has been microfilmed and is available in the Society's Library [Balch microfilm #72].

### **Preferred citation**

Cite as: [Indicate cited item or series here], Magdalen Society of Philadelphia Records (Collection 2016), The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

## Box and folder listing

### Series 1. Administrative a. Minutes

Folder title	Date	Box	Folder
Minutes of annual meetings (vol. 1)	1800-1824	1	
Minutes of annual meetings (vol. 2)	1837-1907	1	
Matron's report (removed from volume 3)	1916	2	1
Minutes of annual meetings (vol. 3)	1908-1916	3	
Minutes of the Board of Managers (vol. 4)	1800-1810	3	
Minutes of the Board of Managers (vol. 5)	1810-1818	3	
Minutes of the Board of Managers (vol. 6)	1818-1825	4	
Minutes of the Board of Managers (vol. 7)	1825-1838	4	
Minutes of the Board of Managers (vol. 8)	1838-1850	4	
Minutes of the Board of Managers (vol. 9)	1850-1869	5	
Minutes of the Board of Managers (vol. 10)	1869-1885	6	
Minutes of the Board of Managers (vol. 11)	1885-1916	7	

### Series 1. Administrative b. Financial

Folder title	Date	Box	Folder
Ledger (vol. 12)	1832-1878	8	
Ledger (vol. 13)	1871-1893	8	
Ledger (vol. 14, labeled "Cashbook" on spine)	1893-1909	9	
Ledger (vol. 15, labeled "Cashbook" on spine)	1914-1919	10	
Donations and legacies: Estate of Mordecai Evans	1898-1899, n.d.	2	2
Donations and legacies: Estate of William Warner, Jr.	1908-1909, n.d.	2	3
Donations and legacies	1892-1909	2	4
Miscellaneous	1917	2	5

### Series 1. Administrative c. Miscellaneous

Folder title	Date	Box	Folder
Board of Managers' Bylaws	n.d.	2	6
Constitution of the Women's Advisory Board	n.d.	2	7
Lists of dismissals, monies spent, and letters received	1884-1906	2	8
Publicity	1913	2	9

History of the Magdalen Society	1956, n.d.	2	10
Future plans	1917-1918	2	11

**Series 2. Magdalen Home. a. Property records**

Folder title	Date	Box	Folder
Land records	1809-1910	OS	
Land records	1898, 1914-1915	2	12
Photographs	1974, n.d.	2	13

**Series 2. Magdalen Home. b. Records of Admissions and Discharges**

Folder title	Date	Box	Folder
Records of admissions and discharges (vol. 16)	1836-1886	11	
Records of admissions and discharges (vol. 17)	1878-1908	11	
Records of admissions and discharges (vol. 18)	1908-1917	11	
Register (vol. 19)	1878-1910	12	

**Series 2. Magdalen Home c. Matrons' Diaries**

Folder title	Date	Box	Folder
Matron's Diary (vol. 20)	1829-1834	13	
Matron's Diary (vol. 21)	1878-1881	13	
Matron's Diary (vol. 22)	1881-1885	13	
Matron's Diary (vol. 23)	1885-1891	14	
Matron's Diary (vol. 24)	1891-1898	15	
Matron's Diary (vol. 25)	1898-1906	15	
Matron's Diary (vol. 26)	1906-1908	16	
Matron's Diary (vol. 27)	1908-1912	16	
Matron's Diary (vol. 28)	1912-1916	17	
Matron's Diary (vol. 29)	1916-1917	17	
Papers removed from vol. 29	n.d.	2	14

**Series 2. Magdalen Home d. Minutes of the Weekly Visiting Committee**

Folder title	Date	Box	Folder
Minutes of the Weekly Visiting Committee (vol. 30)	1878-1885	18	

Minutes of the Weekly Visiting Committee (vol. 31)	1885-1912	18
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**Series 3. Artifacts**

<b>Title</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Box</b>	<b>Folder</b>
Magdalen Society Seal	n.d.	19	