In 2013, The Bryan Museum purchased The Galveston Orphans’ Home, a landmark constructed in 1895. This remarkable building sat vacant for almost a decade before it was restored again and opened as The Bryan Museum on June 14, 2015.

During the 1900 Storm the building sustained severe damage, but all occupants survived. It was rebuilt to its current edifice in 1902 and continued to serve as an orphanage until 1984. In the mid-1980s, the building had a second life as a private home, first for Houston-based architect, J.R. McConnell, and then international businessman, Ross Dinyari, who preserved and restored many of the building’s architectural and aesthetic features.
The Role of The Orphanage

Like many busy seaports, Galveston attracted a substantial immigrant population in the late 1800s. For most, traditional family support was an ocean away, meaning unexpected events such as accidents, long-term unemployment, or the outbreak of the yellow fever epidemic of 1867 could leave families shattered at a time when few public services existed.

In 1879, George Dealey organized the local business community, and together they opened the Island City Protestant and Israelitish Orphans Asylum. The Asylum functioned out of several rental properties, until Henry Rosenberg bequeathed a $30,000 endowment for the construction of a new building at M and 21st. Prominent architect Alfred Mueller designed a gothic-revival style structure which opened in 1895. The orphanage later dropped its religious affiliation and was renamed the Galveston Orphans Home.

Originally intended as a home for Jewish and Protestant children aged 12 to 16, the building accommodated up to forty-six. Within a few years of opening, the founders realized that many widowed parents struggled to provide for their children, and the home started to accept “Half-Orphans,” as these children were described. Starting with a $5 monthly fee to offset expenses, and with a chance for limited visits, a parent brought their child to live at the orphanage. As their circumstances improved, many of these parents reclaimed their children. When the Great Depression and World War II created social upheavals, the Galveston Orphans Home often sheltered over sixty children.

By the 1960’s, foster care for needy children lessened the need for orphanages, and the home saw more abused or neglected children than orphans. In 1984, Galveston Orphans Home merged with other agencies to form the Children’s Center in a nearby residence as a temporary haven for children in crisis.

The Galveston Orphans Home was managed largely by a corps of volunteers known as “Lady Managers”. Often nominated by Galveston’s larger churches or synagogues, these women oversaw the operation of the orphanage and committed to twice-a-month meetings, even though most were married with homes of their own. Generally, they came from Galveston’s socially-prominent families, and it was common to find some of the Lady Managers’ husbands also serving on the Board of Trustees.

The Lady Managers established procedures and rules, and hired and supervised staff. Decisions about admissions, adoptions, and dismissal of children all passed before the Lady Managers. They conducted unannounced “white glove” inspections of the facility, held sewing sessions to help with clothing needs, and in many ways, expected the Galveston Orphans Home to function as smoothly as the home each woman supervised for her own family.

The Lady Managers also encouraged education and vocational training for the orphans to “uplift” them from the poverty that had plagued many of their parents. They encouraged employment for older, male residents often as messengers or office boys at their husband’s place of work in
hopes skills learned could lead to later economic independence. While some girls hoped to become seamstresses or domestic servants, the brightest were encouraged to become teachers. These women wanted to do more than just provide a safe, loving residence for the orphans; they wanted the children to have a better future. By seeking ways to uplift the orphans’ futures, the Lady Managers of the Galveston Orphans Home became a part of the Progressive Movement of the early twentieth century.

Daily Life

Life at the Orphans Home began at 6 A.M., with breakfast at 7 A.M., and older children off to public school by eight; in some years, kindergarteners took their studies at the home. Older children had morning chores: making beds and dressing little ones; seasonally, some orphans worked in the vegetable garden at the back of the property. Afternoons meant play in the fenced yard or ground floor, or a chance for girls to utilize the sewing room. After dinner, all children bathed and the youngest went to bed by 7:30 P.M.; older children completed their studies and were in bed by 9 P.M. Matrons slept in rooms attached to the large dormitories.

As former orphans and half-orphans return and visit The Bryan Museum, they bring a wide range of memories—both pleasant and sometimes not—of their lives here.

Building Layout

Children at the home, lived in three main dormitory rooms (today’s Statehood & Beyond Gallery, Special Exhibit Gallery, and the Library). Each had a bathroom, matron’s room, and closet, with girls in two of these rooms and boys in the third dorm, since girls usually outnumbered boys at the orphanage. The Orientation Gallery was a parlor for visitors, and with all the doors opened into today’s Spanish Colonial Gallery, it became part of the area used for Lady Managers’ meetings. The Spanish Colonial Gallery also served as a library and study area for those needing after-school help. In this room, volunteers provided a Christmas tree each year; also adopting couples could meet potential adoptees here. Those awaiting that introduction sat on the long bench in the hallway. Today’s elevator originally existed as a porch with sinks for washing-up before and after meals. The orphanage office occupied today’s Guest Parlor, while the infirmary was on the top floor above that office, The Texas Masters Gallery on the second floor served different purposes over the years: sometimes a kindergarten classroom, sometimes a sewing room with linen storage, and sometimes a dorm for older teenage girls.
If any Museum guest has personal remembrances of living in or visiting Galveston Orphans Home, we invite you to share those memories. Many orphanage records have been damaged or lost and your participation is important to helping preserve that history. Please call (409) 632-7685 or contact the Front Desk for more information.