Colored Orphan Asylum

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FYS 01 HIS 106 | Professor Andrea Balis

Background

- It was founded in 1836 by two white Quaker women—Anna Shortwell and Mary Murray—with 20 other people.
- It was the first orphanage for African-American children.
- It was originally located on 51st Street and later moved to 143rd Street between Amsterdam and Broadway in Harlem. It then moved to a new location, a larger facility in the Riverdale neighborhood in the Bronx.
- Children received medical care and were taught to read & write.

Social History

- In the mid-nineteenth century (1862), Abolitionist speakers drew large audiences of black and whites in the city. The Abolitionist movement caused increased support for the Emancipation Proclamation in the future. This caused anxiety amongst pro-slavery supporters. Many of these people were Irish and a part of the Democratic Party.
- In March 1863, the federal draft laws occurred. Blacks were exempt from the draft because they were not considered citizens.
- This angered people. The white working class felt that the Abolitionist movement caused blacks to gain more power.
- In the midst of war-time economic distress, whites believed that their political leverage and economic status were rapidly declining as blacks appeared to be gaining power.
- On the first day of the riots, white people intentionally attacked black people because they were furious.
- Anything that dealt with their independence movement, or any institutions and organizations that helped blacks, were targeted.
- The Colored Orphan Asylum was an institution that was affected by the riots.
- This asylum was financially stable and had plenty of food, clothes, and other important provisions.
- This orphanage was a symbol of white charity towards blacks. It signified “black upward mobility”, which was why whites wanted to get rid of it.
- On July 13th the children were sitting peacefully in class rooms, lying in sick beds, or playing in the nursery when an enraged mob came into the institution.
- The mobs had several thousand men, women and children.
- The mob took as many flammable things as they could and set fire to the building.

Economic History

- Rich New Yorkers aided the institution. James Lenox, was a major supporter of the COA.
- The children helped to lower expenses by doing much of the housework.
- Phelps, who was wealthy and donated a thousands of dollars to the COA, was president of the NYS Colonization Society for twelve years.
- In January, five hundred dollars was given to the asylum from the estate of Susan B. Morrison; this was a lot of money at the time.
- To better reflect the mission of the institution was to finish the building. It was generously aided by the $10,225 donation from Samuel Willets with his selling of rail road bonds.
- Many people donated money because of the recognition of the poverty in the city; the Colored Orphan Asylum made a difference by educating children and stopping violence on the streets.

Political History

- The New York City draft riots in 1863 were a violent expression of working-class discontent with the new laws passed by Congress that year to draft men to fight in the ongoing Civil War.
- The asylum was a target for them because the rioters mostly consisted of angry Irish immigrants attacking blacks wherever and whenever they could.
- The CoA was the only organization that helped African-American children, so it was one of the rioters’ main targets at the time. The CoA was a very prominent organization that was wildly endorsed and helped out by many people such as James Lennox, who was widely known as funding an immense amount of aid to the future New York Public Library.
- The first 12 children entered the orphanage during the Civil War because their fathers had been killed in battle or were absent, which made it difficult for mothers to take care of their children.

References

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