

“Alive to the cry of distress”: Joseph and Jane Sill and Poor Relief in Antebellum Philadelphia

IN 1819, JOSEPH SILL left his home in Cumberland County, England, to start a new life in the United States. Lured by the prospect of a prosperous future in the plentiful American economy, Sill was disappointed upon his arrival in Philadelphia, where he discovered that “all business was at a stand.”¹ Sill had arrived at the most inopportune time, when the United States was experiencing its first major downturn in the new boom-and-bust cycle of its changing economic system. A harsh reality greeted Sill in Philadelphia: three out of four workers were reportedly jobless, and the city’s jail contained 1,808 inmates who had been incarcerated for their inability to pay debts. Philadelphia wheat, which had sold for two dollars and forty-one cents a bushel in 1817, was rapidly descending toward the low of eighty-eight cents it would reach in 1820.² Sill never forgot the uncertainty he felt upon his arrival to the demoralized Philadelphia of 1819. Even after he had become a successful merchant, his memories of that earlier time led him to reflect on the precariousness of his own and others’ personal success.

Sill’s appreciation for the fickleness of economic prosperity grew as a result of his work with Philadelphia’s lower-class population. From the late 1820s until his death in 1854, Joseph Sill and his wife Jane concerned

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¹ Joseph Sill, diary, Nov. 8, 1840, 2:260–62, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. For additional biographical information on Sill, see Elizabeth Geffen, “Joseph Sill and His Diary,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 94 (1970): 275–330.

² Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1864* (New York, 1991), 136–37.

themselves with meeting the needs of Philadelphia's poor. Though the Sills were leaders in the antebellum Philadelphia benevolence movement, historians of poverty and poor relief have often overlooked their work. As secretary, vice president, and president of the Society of the Sons of Saint George (SSSG), an English immigrant aid society, Joseph Sill served as the leading figure of the primary relief organization for incoming English immigrants to the city. Sill's work with the poor through the SSSG and other organizations earned him admiration and a place in Henry Simpson's 1859 *The Lives of Eminent Philadelphians Now Deceased*.³ As Joseph and Jane Sill conducted their work with the indigent in both institutional and private settings, Joseph Sill became more convinced that poverty was rarely caused by personal moral failure. Instead, he argued, poverty was more often the result of difficult circumstances in an economic system that was hardly forgiving to those on the margins.

Much of the history of poor relief in antebellum Philadelphia traces an opposite trajectory in the lives and work of benevolent Philadelphians. Priscilla Clement, for example, has shown that antebellum Philadelphians took an increasingly harsh stance toward the poor in their city and that attitudes of humanitarian benevolence that marked Philadelphia's municipal poor relief system in the early nineteenth century were eventually replaced by feelings of anger and frustration toward the poor.⁴ Other historians of poor relief in the North have explored the ways that antebellum poor relief workers used benevolence to differentiate themselves from the lower class. Christine Stansell, for example, has examined middle-class women reformers in New York City who used their encounters with poor women to enhance their image as the bearers of virtue in the urban environment in contradistinction to working-class women, whom they viewed as moral inferiors.⁵ Similarly, Simon Newman argues that members of the antebellum middle and elite classes structured the language and practice of benevolence "to stigmatize and distance themselves from

³ Geffen, "Joseph Sill and His Diary," 312, 329.

⁴ Priscilla Ferguson Clement, *Welfare and the Poor in the Nineteenth-Century City: Philadelphia, 1800–1854* (Rutherford, NJ, 1985). John Alexander also highlights this shift in Philadelphia benevolence, though he states that a harsh approach to charity was commonplace even before the Revolutionary War. See Alexander, *Render Them Submissive: Responses to Poverty in Philadelphia, 1760–1800* (Amherst, MA, 1980).

⁵ Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* (New York, 1986), xii. See also Anne Boylan, *The Origins of Women's Activism: New York and Boston, 1797–1840* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002), 9.

the 'lower sort.'"⁶ For poor relief workers, benevolence provided an avenue both to practice and display the values that set them apart from the urban lower class.⁷

These historians also show how many charitable northerners in the antebellum period came to see the indigent not as victims of unfortunate circumstances, but as authors of their own fate.⁸ As poverty became more closely linked with personal sin in the mind of poor relief workers, charity took on a sharper tone, emphasizing the spiritual reformation of the poor over the imperative to meet their physical needs. Focusing specifically on Philadelphia, Bruce Dorsey contends that antebellum charity organizations offered insufficient spiritual solutions to problems that were social and material in nature.⁹

Dorsey argues, however, that the transition to an understanding of poverty as a spiritual and not an economic problem was not a smooth one. Some Philadelphians, including the women leaders of the Female Hospitable Society, African American mutual relief societies, and the reformer Mathew Carey, spoke out against the increasing tendency to blame the poor for their poverty.¹⁰ What bound these reformers together was a shared understanding that indigence, especially among poor women, was often caused by events wholly outside the control of the poor. Through institutional reports and pamphleteering, these reformers attempted to stem the tide of public opinion that was rapidly destroying the humanitarianism of earlier Philadelphia poor relief.

As Dorsey demonstrates, this small group failed in its task, and, as a result, the idea that poverty was the result of vice prevailed. An uncritical embrace of wage labor by reformers and a failure to understand the plight

⁶ Simon Newman, *Embodied History: The Lives of the Poor in Early Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 2003), 5.

⁷ Clifford Griffin, *Their Brothers' Keepers: Moral Stewardship in the United States, 1800–1865* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1960); Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820–1920* (Cambridge, MA, 1978); Raymond Mohl, *Poverty in New York, 1783–1825* (New York, 1971) and "Humanitarianism in the Preindustrial City: The New York Society for the Prevention of Pauperism, 1817–1823," *Journal of American History* 57 (1970): 576–99; and Michael Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York, 1986).

⁸ Clement, *Welfare and the Poor*, 50–61. See also Stansell, *City of Women*, 19; Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, 16; Mohl, "Humanitarianism in the Preindustrial City," 583–84; and Mari Jo Buhle, "Needlewomen and the Vicissitudes of Modern Life: A Study of Middle-Class Construction in the Antebellum Northeast," in *Visible Women: New Essays on American Activism*, eds. Nancy Hewitt and Suzanne Lebsock (Urbana, IL, 1993), 152.

⁹ Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (Ithaca, NY, 2002), 51–52.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

of poor women, when combined with the rise of evangelical religion, created a new system of poor relief that was insufficient for meeting the needs of the poor. By the 1830s, benevolent Philadelphians had developed a more antagonistic attitude toward the poor, as frustration with the failures of the municipal poor relief system combined with a new belief that the poor were to blame for their poverty.¹¹

Joseph and Jane Sill, who spoke against the tendency to spiritualize poverty in the 1840s and early 1850s, were thus unusual reformers in antebellum Philadelphia. As members of the Unitarian Church, they believed that conversion was a slow process directed by reason, and, like the Irish Catholic Mathew Carey, they rejected the common belief among evangelical workers that spiritual salvation was an essential step in economic improvement. Moreover, Jane Sill, like many evangelical women who worked with poor Philadelphians, was too aware of the gendered nature of poverty to blame impoverished women for their economic situation.

Yet, Joseph Sill struggled to reconcile his attitude toward the poor with his understanding of the causes of poverty. He wanted to believe that the life that he had fashioned for himself rested on more than good fortune. Like most middle-class Philadelphians, he believed that hard work brought economic rewards and that the market tended to compensate those who deserved it. But the men and women he and Jane Sill encountered in their poor relief work belied this overly simplistic model.

Joseph Sill's diary helped him to comprehend his changing world and wrestle with his private attitudes, fears, and hopes. Though Sill self-consciously fashioned his life's narrative, he revealed much about his and others' insecurities.¹² His internal conflict over the nature of poverty, as detailed in the pages of his diary, underscores the complexity of the poor relief work of antebellum Philadelphians. His struggle also suggests that his understanding of poverty was deepened by the circumstances and experiences of the poor men and women with whom he interacted in his benevolent activities.¹³ Joseph Sill's status and experience as a middle-

¹¹ Ibid., 51.

¹² On the importance of diaries for middle-class men in fashioning their self-identities, see Thomas Augst, *The Clerk's Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago, 2003), 10.

¹³ Barbara Berg points out the educative role of encounter in the work of women poor relief workers in *The Remembered Gate: Origins of American Feminism, The Woman and the City, 1800–1860* (Oxford, 1978), 170–71.

class Philadelphia merchant, along with contemporary debates about the nature of poverty, had served as the initial foundation of his understandings of poverty. His ideas were transformed, however, in the crucible of his and his wife's intimate encounters with indigent Philadelphians. He developed a more nuanced view of poverty, one that recognized that hard work did not always translate into economic independence, especially for women. Moreover, as he became more aware of the structural causes of poverty, he was less willing to blame poor men and women for their plight.

Joseph Sill could be as judgmental and presumptive about the poor as his middle-class and elite neighbors, but, as his diary reveals, his struggles to comprehend the nature of poverty, and his attitude toward the poor, led him to a deeper understanding of the vicissitudes of life in antebellum America; he also developed a sense of his own moral failure. Sill's diary thus serves as an important window into one man's struggle to come to terms with the reality of poverty, a reality that did not always fit with nineteenth-century theorists' views of the poor.

Joseph Sill and Upward Mobility

Joseph Sill was born in 1801 in Carlisle, England. His father died when he was twelve, and Sill abandoned his schoolwork to support his mother and sister. Like many members of the British underclass, Sill, when he was eighteen years old, sought new work in the United States, a country he believed to be teeming with opportunities. Sill had been promised a position before his departure from England, probably as a clerk for a mercantile house in Philadelphia, but upon his arrival he learned that the opportunity was no longer available, no doubt a victim of the economic crisis of 1819. As his savings ran out, Sill began a desperate search for work, finally procuring a "humble clerkship" on Market Street about a month after his arrival. He later described his three-hundred-dollar annual salary as "the first foundation of my success."¹⁴ Having secured a job, Sill began courting Jane Todhunter, the daughter of the prominent English immigrant merchant Joseph Todhunter. The Todhunters were also leading members of Philadelphia's First Unitarian Church. In 1825, Sill married Jane and joined the Unitarian Church.¹⁵

¹⁴ Joseph Sill, diary, Nov. 8, 1840, 2:260–62.

¹⁵ Geffen, "Joseph Sill and His Diary," 277–79.

Jane Sill was a steady partner in Joseph's entrepreneurial endeavors, and in April 1827, the Sills opened their own mercantile business at 177 Chestnut Street, near the Old State House. Joseph Sill credited Jane with much of the business's success. In his words, Jane, "by her pleasing manners and untiring industry soon got plenty of trade."¹⁶ While indebtedness was a source of strain for the Sills during the first few years of the business, the store soon began turning a profit. By 1840, Joseph Sill could say, "I owe nothing but what I can readily pay, and I have, or ought to have, few cares to trouble me."¹⁷ He wrote, "I look back but a few years, and feel that my Youth was pass'd amidst privation and poverty—that my thoughts then never imagined that I should enjoy in after life a moiety of the comforts that now surround me."¹⁸ With hard work, aid from fellow English immigrants, and, in his mind, the help of Providence, he became a successful Philadelphia merchant.

Sill's status as a middle-class merchant shaped his understanding of himself and his world in critical ways. The antebellum period saw an increase in the number of shopkeepers like Sill who replaced artisans selling their wares from their shops. This new merchant class was comprised of middling men who sold goods that others produced. Sill was part of this emerging class of men who distinguished themselves by their nonmanual labor, but who simultaneously relied on the manual labor of others for their subsistence.¹⁹

Sill, like many members of this new merchant class, identified himself as a self-made man. By doing so, he was invoking an idea of masculine independence that became prevalent in the antebellum period. In his diary, he portrayed himself as an independent merchant who, for the most part, pulled himself up by his own bootstraps from the position of a humble clerkship. He had received small assistances from others, but only enough to help him establish economic independence. In this way, he structured his personal economic and social narrative in accordance with

¹⁶ Joseph Sill, diary, Nov. 8, 1840, 2:262.

¹⁷ Ibid., 260.

¹⁸ Ibid. Emphasis in original.

¹⁹ Stuart Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760–1900* (Cambridge, 1989), 78–83. Sven Beckert refers to antebellum merchants as "lower-middle-class Americans" to distinguish them from the antebellum bourgeoisie. See Beckert, "Propertied of a Different Kind: Bourgeoisie and Lower Middle Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States," in *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class*, eds. Burton Bledstein and Robert Johnston (New York, 2001), 285–95.

the relatively new idea that men could govern their characters so as to achieve success in the marketplace. Sill earned his "moral identity" as a man because he established economic autonomy through his own hard work.²⁰

As Sill was amassing his wealth in the 1840s, he was confronted simultaneously with the precarious situation of many of Philadelphia's poorest citizens. Sill first became involved in benevolence through his participation in the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia. It was through the church that he made his most important contacts for charity work. Philadelphia Unitarians, part of a heterogeneous urban population, pursued limited goals in their poor relief work. They most often confined their reform efforts to English immigrants, and whether or not those whom they aided were English, they typically sought to bring these people into the middle-class fold. In working with the poor, Philadelphia Unitarians like the Sills invited members of the lower class to participate in a project that defined the lives of many in the middle class. At the same time, this project of benevolence was undergoing important transformations in the antebellum period.

Philadelphia Poor Relief in the Antebellum Period

Between 1820 and 1850, major shifts occurred in Philadelphians' responses to poverty. The forces of immigration, economic instability, disease, and seasonal needs combined to create a large class of dependent poor who called on the city or local benevolent organizations for assistance. As changing ideas about the causes of poverty intersected with this reality, city officials and private organizations began to rethink their approach to poor relief. Municipal leaders sought to systematize poor relief through the creation of almshouses for the poor. At the same time, leaders of voluntary benevolent organizations debated the causes of, and proper remedies for, the problem of poverty.²¹

²⁰ Thomas Augst talks about the importance of economic success to the "moral identity" of nineteenth-century men in *The Clerk's Tale*, 5. See also Scott Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge, MA, 2005), 39; and Daniel Walker Howe, *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), 9. Howe talks about Unitarians as being particularly attuned to this new idea (131).

²¹ Clement, *Welfare and the Poor*; Newman, *Embodied History*; and Michael Meranze, *Laboratories of Virtue: Punishment, Virtue, and Authority in Philadelphia, 1760–1835* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1996), 265–72. Works that address the colonial and early national periods include Billy G. Smith, *The "Lower Sort": Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1750–1800* (Ithaca, NY, 1990); Gary B.

A number of economic crises caused massive unemployment between 1820 and 1850. In addition to the recession caused by the Panic of 1819, Philadelphia was devastated by a depression that overwhelmed the nation between 1837 and 1843; five thousand Philadelphians were unemployed in 1837.²² These economic fluctuations exacerbated difficulties caused by various other conditions that had always been part of life in Philadelphia. Philadelphians faced consistent seasonal changes that drastically affected the availability of work. During the winter, the Delaware River iced over, bringing maritime trade to a virtual standstill. As unemployment increased, lower-class Philadelphians found themselves without sufficient food and fuel to make it through the harsh winters. Sickness and disease also plagued Philadelphia, as yellow fever, cholera, typhus, and smallpox invaded the city. Diseases did not discriminate between rich and poor, but the less sanitary conditions among the lower-class population and their inability to leave the city during outbreaks meant they were more often affected by the epidemics. During periods of illness, a wageworker's inability to work could cause a family on the edge of poverty to fall into financial distress from which it could not easily recover. These factors combined to push many Philadelphians on the financial margins into poverty.²³

Philadelphia's public poor relief system resembled that of Boston, New York, and most other major cities in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Guardians of the Poor collected a poor tax from Philadelphia citizens, which they then applied to the needs of the city's poor. In 1766, the city's Quakers built a large almshouse. The city did not reduce the poor tax, however, and in 1788 it revamped its welfare system, assigning Guardians of the Poor to outdoor relief and the administration of the almshouse. The Guardians constituted a board that met annually to appoint almshouse managers from among their ranks and to set the poor tax. Guardians continued to visit the poor in their homes and provided them with aid.²⁴

Yet, the financial crisis of 1819 led many Philadelphians to question a

Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1979); Clare Lyons, *Sex among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730–1830* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006); and Alexander, *Render Them Submissive*.

²² Clement, *Welfare and the Poor*, 28.

²³ *Ibid.*, 26–30.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 38–42.

poor tax rate that cut into their already shrinking incomes; many also resented the impoverished who benefited from the tax. Even before the crisis, a report on the city's poverty revealed growing frustration with the poor population and the increasing tendency of people to blame the poor for their plight.²⁵ By 1825, the city's poor relief system had reached a crisis point, and a committee appointed to examine the poor laws and their implementation voiced the public's anger. "Under this system we have gone on, for more than fifty years," the committee reported, "and it is found that the burthens upon the community have been increased" and "that the number of paupers has been augmented."²⁶ The committee examined the poor relief laws and found them to be unsatisfactory. According to the committee, a "compulsory public provision for the poor" fostered resentment among those who were taxed and resulted in selfish grasping among those who received poor relief funds. Furthermore, the committee argued that Philadelphia's system of relief stifled a sense of industry, causing the poor to "relax" their "frugal and industrious habits."²⁷ Finally, the committee asserted that the system of poor relief was simply unfair because "by far the greater number of paupers are individuals who have been reduced to want by their own debauched habits, intemperance, or improvidence."²⁸ In 1827, the Guardians of the Poor conducted a comparative survey of almshouses in Baltimore, New York, Providence, Boston, and Salem and came to similar conclusions about the relative inefficacy—indeed the injuriousness—of Philadelphia's outdoor poor relief and almshouse systems.²⁹ In 1828, the city began a massive reorganization of its poor relief system that reflected this harsher opinion of the poor. City leaders eliminated outdoor cash relief, increased the size of the poorhouse, and began to send many more poor Philadelphians there.³⁰

Men and women in voluntary reform groups also debated the nature of and proper solution to poverty. As Bruce Dorsey has shown, the 1820s represented a crucial turning point in religious reformers' attitudes toward the poor, especially among members of groups like Philadelphia's

²⁵ Ibid., 50–51.

²⁶ *Report of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into the Operation of the Poor Laws, Read January 28th, 1825* (Harrisburg, PA, 1825), 4.

²⁷ Ibid., 5.

²⁸ Ibid., 22.

²⁹ *Report of the Committee Appointed by the Board of Guardians of the Poor of the City and Districts of Philadelphia, to Visit the Cities of Baltimore, New-York, Providence, Boston, and Salem* (Philadelphia, 1827).

³⁰ Clement, *Welfare and the Poor*, 55–58.

Provident Society, the Orphans' Society, Bible and missionary societies, and the myriad poor relief groups associated with the city's churches.³¹ In the 1820s, religious poor relief groups lost support, forcing their leaders to reexamine their organizations' approaches.³² Religious groups began to develop programs based on work relief rather than charitable distributions, echoing arguments that the best solution to poverty was the creation of a stable class of free workers who, through hard work and industriousness, would strengthen both themselves and the economy.³³ This period also saw a turn toward the spiritualization of poverty in Philadelphia. In the minds of many benevolent Philadelphians, poverty was the result of moral failure and could be cured by rooting out sin through spiritual reformation.

Nevertheless, not all Philadelphians were willing to blame the poor for their condition. One of the most vocal critics of the Guardians of the Poor's report and of the declining support for voluntary charitable organizations was Mathew Carey, the Philadelphia publisher and advocate for the working class. In pamphlets and reports, Carey launched an all-out war on what he considered to be false perceptions of poverty and the effects of poor relief on the poor.³⁴ To Carey, one of the most egregiously

³¹ For a useful breakdown of nineteenth-century Philadelphia charitable organizations, see John Scharf and Thompson Westcott, *History of Philadelphia, 1609–1884*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia, 1884), 2:1449–91.

³² Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women*, 63.

³³ *Ibid.*, 71.

³⁴ Carey wrote extensively on poverty and issued several pamphlets answering reports from public poor relief officials and private religious groups in which he attacked the prevalent view of poverty as being caused by sin. The titles of the reports provide a useful snapshot of his understanding of poverty. A sampling of these includes: *Essays on the Public Charities of Philadelphia, Intended to Vindicate Benevolent Societies from the Charge of Encouraging Idleness, and to Place in Strong Relief, Before an Enlightened Public, the Sufferings and Oppressions under which the Greater Part of the Females Labour, who Depend on their Industry for a Support for Themselves and Children* (Philadelphia, 1830); *Appeal to the Wealthy of the Land, Ladies as Well as Gentlemen, on the Character, Conduct, Situation, and Prospects of those Whose Sole Dependence for Subsistence is on the Labour of their Hands* (Philadelphia, 1833); *To the Managers of the Union Benevolent Society* (n.p., 1834); *Letters on the Condition of the Poor: Addressed to Alexander Henry, Esq. Containing a Vindication of the Poor Laws and Benevolent Societies: Proofs of the Injustice of the General Censure of the Poor, for Extravagance, Dissipation, etc. Instances of Human Suffering in Philadelphia, Not Exceeded in London Or Paris: Examples of the Gross Inconsistency of the Edinburgh Review, on the Subject of the Poor Laws: With a View of the System and Operation of the Union Benevolent Association* (Philadelphia, 1835); *Reflections on the Union Benevolent Association, Stating its Beneficent Effects on the Manners, Habits, Conduct, and Comforts of the Poor; but the Utter Inadequacy of its Means, to Enable it, on a Proper Scale to Minister that Physical Aid to the Distressed and Suffering, which Humanity Demands; and the Necessity of Raising Funds Adequate for the Purpose. With Suggestions for Alterations Imperiously Requisite, in Order to Carry into Full Operation the Benevolent Views of the Founders* (Philadelphia, 1837).

erroneous assumptions of many Philadelphians was that adequate-paying jobs were available to anyone who sought them. According to Carey, there were fewer labor positions than workers in the city, and even those who were able to find work often earned wages that were entirely insufficient for their families' needs. "Can we wonder at the harrowing misery and distress that prevail among this class under such a deplorable state of things?" Carey asked.³⁵ He refuted each of the false arguments that critics had made about poverty, especially their view of the poor as irresponsible and their belief that poor relief only exacerbated poverty. The "thousands of men who eagerly seek for labour on canals, often in pestilential situations, with death staring them in the face" and the "1000 to 1100 women" who "traveled three, four, six, eight, or ten squares" to procure work from the Provident Society were proof enough that the poor were eager to work for their subsistence. Furthermore, the paltry sums distributed by poor relief organizations, and the fact that they were most often given to the "aged women, superannuated men and women, and destitute children," proved that poor relief most often benefited those who were unable to work rather than provided an opportunity to laze around and drink.³⁶

Carey fought the unsympathetic view of poverty that had caused many Philadelphians to stop giving to charitable organizations or to cease supporting municipal efforts that approached poverty as a humanitarian issue. He sought to infuse poor relief with caringness and simultaneously tap into the ideas of capitalistic individualism that had driven many reformers to criticize the poor relief system in the first place. Carey hoped to remind Philadelphians of their obligations to provide support for those who genuinely wished to participate and flourish in the market economy but who were unable to do so because of poor wages or lack of employment opportunities. Invoking "fears of downward mobility," Carey also appealed to upwardly mobile men and women for support of poor relief programs by arguing that they could be close to poverty themselves.³⁷ "When you consider the vicissitudes of life," Carey proposed, "it is not impossible that at a future day—heaven avert such a catastrophe!—some of you may be reduced as low as those ill-fated women" who were brought

³⁵ *The Subscribers, a Committee Appointed by the Town Meeting of the Citizens of the City and County of Philadelphia, on the 21st Ult. to Ascertain Whether Those Who are Able and Willing to Work, Can in General Procure Employment . . .* (Philadelphia, 1829), 1.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁷ Buhle, "Needlewomen and the Vicissitudes of Modern Life," 155.

low by poor wages.³⁸

As benevolent Philadelphians themselves, the Sills would have been familiar with Carey's widely published and discussed work. And like the Irish Catholic Carey, they were outside the evangelical community that directed the spiritualization of Philadelphia charity. The Sills also had a personal connection to Carey through his son, Henry Carey, who was a member of the First Unitarian Church from 1833 to 1836 and maintained close ties with Philadelphia Unitarians even after he left the church.³⁹

Joseph and Jane Sill's work with the poor exemplifies the uncertainty that the elder Carey evoked in his attempts to encourage charity.⁴⁰ Like the middle-class audience for whom Carey was writing, Joseph and Jane Sill were members of an upwardly mobile community. They understood Carey when he discussed the dangers of the market economy because they had experienced such perils themselves. Perhaps inspired by Carey, but probably driven by personal conviction, the Sills undertook their own poor relief work in earnest in the 1830s and 1840s. They focused their energies on voluntary poor relief efforts that brought them into direct contact with the poor, usually in the homes of the people they were called upon to assist. The Sills' involvement with charitable groups like the Society of the Sons of St. George and the Vaughan Charitable Association and their individual acts of charity reveal a sensitivity to the needs of the poor in the unstable economy of antebellum Philadelphia.

*The Sills' Poor Relief: The Society of the Sons of St. George, the
Vaughan Charitable Association, and Friendly Visiting*

The Sills conducted their work with the poor in three arenas. Joseph Sill was a leader in the Society of the Sons of St. George (SSSG) and the First Unitarian Church's Vaughan Charitable Association, and both Joseph and Jane Sill personally visited the homes of the poor. Joseph Sill initially believed that work was readily available for those who sought it

³⁸ Mathew Carey, "Female Wages and Female Oppression," Philadelphia, July 23, 1835, in *Miscellaneous Essays* (Philadelphia, 1830), 2, quoted in Buhle, "Needlewomen and the Vicissitudes of Modern Life," 155–56.

³⁹ Elizabeth M. Geffen, *Philadelphia Unitarianism, 1796–1861* (Philadelphia, 1961), 153.

⁴⁰ The Sills were not the only ones whose charitable endeavors were motivated by both sympathy and anxiety. As Mari Jo Buhle argues, middle-class women of Philadelphia responded to Carey's rhetoric by "following Carey's advice to the letter." See Buhle, "Needlewomen and the Vicissitudes of Modern Life," 157.

and that benevolent Philadelphians had a responsibility to help able-bodied men find work and to assist widows and orphans who could not care for themselves.

Sill was an active member in the SSSG from the early 1830s until his death in 1854. The SSSG, founded in 1772, was one of many ethnic-specific groups in antebellum Philadelphia concerned with easing the entry of foreign immigrants into American society. Like the St. Andrew's Society for Scots, the Hibernian Society for Irish immigrants, and the French and German Societies, the SSSG provided material assistance for newly arrived immigrants.⁴¹ It also served as a source of collective experience and wisdom for new immigrants unfamiliar with American customs and as a site where older immigrants could steer recent ones toward available work opportunities. The charter of the SSSG prioritized aid to artisans over unskilled workers.⁴² In reality, though, almost all applicants for aid—both skilled and unskilled—received assistance.

The SSSG's leaders included a president, vice president, treasurer, secretary, and a committee of stewards. Sill served as steward, secretary, vice president, and president in the organization; his first official post was as a steward. The role of steward reflected the members' belief in the need for close relationships between the givers and recipients of aid. A steward's responsibilities involved visiting applicants for aid, assessing their situations and determining their needs, and then delivering the needed assistance or money. The stewards were under strict orders to provide assistance only to English immigrants. If investigation into an immigrant's situation revealed he or she was not English, all aid was cut off; stewards usually referred such cases to the appropriate immigrant aid society, such as the Hibernian or Scots society.

The SSSG not only served the needs of English immigrants, it was also a social club for the city's Englishmen. The majority of the SSSG's leaders were also leaders in the First Unitarian Church; the eminent John Vaughan, Sill's father-in-law Joseph Todhunter and brothers-in-law William and John Todhunter, and even the famous artist Thomas Sully belonged to both the Philadelphia Unitarian Church and the SSSG. Like Sill, Vaughan and the Todhunters were established merchants.⁴³

⁴¹ For information on the ethnic groups that provided assistance to new immigrants, see Scharf and Westcott, *History of Philadelphia*, 2:1464–69.

⁴² *Rules and Constitution of the Society of the Sons of St. George* (Philadelphia, 1772), 19.

⁴³ Almost half (twelve out of twenty-six) of the Unitarian members of the SSSG were merchants. See Geffen, *Philadelphia Unitarianism*, appendices B and C.

The Philadelphia Unitarian Church maintained a “strong English tone”—an ethos cultivated by the constant influx of new church members from England—even after a New England pastor ascended the church’s pulpit in 1825.⁴⁴ The SSSG provided a space for English immigrants to practice social graces, to develop business networks, and to maintain their social status. The highlight of the year for the SSSG was the annual St. George’s Day dinner, when society members met to toast the queen—even while they praised their adopted homeland—and to practice the wit and gentility that marked them as cultivated men. Yet, Sill was sometimes troubled by the social atmosphere of the SSSG. “Amongst the Englishmen who compose the Society,” he wrote in his diary, “there are unfortunately not a few who are disposed rather to spend the [organization’s] funds in drinking and riot, rather than in charitable purposes.”⁴⁵ Though Sill criticized fellow members of the SSSG, he often saw the SSSG as a place that provided useful business and personal connections nonetheless.

The SSSG’s leaders assumed that newly arrived immigrants would follow their example of upward social mobility and would readily find work in Philadelphia. A large number of the immigrants who arrived in the city were displaced wool workers from England, and the SSSG’s leaders took it upon themselves to secure employment for them in the factories in and around the city. Most Philadelphia textile manufacturers ran their factories directly and relied on family labor or management. For these manufacturers, many of whom were English immigrants, the economic, social, and geographic distance between them and their workers was less distinct and less hierarchical than in regions like New England.⁴⁶ One of the SSSG’s goals was to use the business connections of the group’s leadership to foster relationships between immigrants and the textile factory owners who could provide them with steady work. The SSSG’s leaders distributed money to families in need, but always with the understanding that their aid was a temporary gift while the male head of the household pursued steady employment.

Sill conducted his work for the SSSG in the homes of the poor. In this intimate setting, Sill and those he assisted shared an understanding that

⁴⁴ Geffen, *Philadelphia Unitarianism*, 133.

⁴⁵ Joseph Sill, diary, Jan. 23, 1833, 1:283.

⁴⁶ Philip Scranton, *Proprietary Capitalism: The Textile Manufacturer at Philadelphia, 1800–1885* (Cambridge, 1983), 10.

the market should be driven not only by shrewdness in business, but by sentiment, or the belief that personal honesty and trustworthiness were as essential as ingenuity in the business world. Sentiment was the mark of middle-class integrity, and sentimental relationships served as a bridge between unemployed men and their benefactors.⁴⁷ Sill believed his role was to help men who were interested in helping themselves, men who had the drive to succeed but needed a little assistance to improve their prospects. Thus, his poor relief work might best be described as paternalistic benevolence.⁴⁸

Sill praised the "industrious" poor he aided and hoped the assistance he offered might "in some instances lay the foundation of a competency or a fortune." He bought equipment for women who earned their livings by spooling, provided money for men and women to start their own businesses, and found positions for skilled tradesmen with master artisans and small textile producers. Many of his clients also found jobs as wage laborers in local textile factories.⁴⁹ Ironically, however, even while Sill was assisting displaced weavers who were being driven into wage labor, he simultaneously benefited from the economic situation that was creating their impoverishment. The goods he sold in his shop were most likely produced on the very machines that displaced many of the workers he was helping, or by the workers themselves, who earned poor wages for the weaving and piecework they did in their homes.

Nevertheless, as with most SSSG leaders, Joseph Sill argued that men who showed industry and sought independence would be able to find work and establish financial stability. He also believed that the increased use of machinery for textile work, instead of displacing workers, could actually be used for their benefit. In an 1833 diary entry, he contemplated *The Hill and the Valley* (1832), "one of a series of tales intended to illustrate Political Economy." Written by Harriet Martineau, an English Unitarian with ties to the Unitarians of the United States, *The Hill and the Valley* aimed to show the progress brought about by technological innovation.⁵⁰ Sill seemed to agree with Martineau that labor, instead of

⁴⁷ Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women*, 20–21.

⁴⁸ On the rhetoric of self-help among reformers and the recipients of their assistance, see Sandage, *Born Losers*, 237–38.

⁴⁹ Joseph Sill, diary, Apr. 2, 1844, 5:224–25; Dec. 12, 1844, 6:36–37; and Mar. 9, 1850, 9:175.

⁵⁰ For more on Martineau's politico-social worldview, see K. J. Fielding and Anne Smith, "Hard Times and the Factory Controversy: Dickens vs. Harriet Martineau," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 24 (1970): 404–27.

being degraded by the introduction of new technology and methods of efficiency, was improved by it. "The Hill & the Valley, contrast the families of a Recluse, and a Manufacturer, in which is very ably shewn the unproductiveness of the one, & the productiveness of the other," Sill recorded. "The meaning of Capital & Labour is clearly defined, & their relative connexion & dependance made apparent; while it is strikingly urged that Machinery does not interfere with, but rather enhances Labour—&c &c."⁵¹ Sill, at least initially, intended that his work in the SSSG incorporate immigrant workers into the Philadelphia economy by providing them with positions that were enhanced, not harmed, by industrial advancement.

In addition to his involvement with the SSSG, Sill participated in the Vaughan Charitable Association, the benevolent arm of the First Unitarian Church. It was named for John Vaughan, a friend of Joseph Priestley and perhaps the best-known Philadelphia Unitarian. Vaughan had assisted Joseph Sill upon Sill's arrival in the United States. Established in 1841 in response to the prolonged depression that had begun in the late 1830s, the association collected alms from church members and then used the funds to buy food, clothes, and fuel for the city's needy residents. The Vaughan Sewing Circle, run by the women of the church, made clothes for the poor.⁵²

The Vaughan Charitable Association's leaders, like many of their counterparts in Philadelphia, displayed a certain ambivalence about the causes of poverty. On the one hand, they sympathized with those who believed that "almost all cases of poverty and distress" were caused by "ignorance and improvidence" and "the want of ability to economize and manage to get on in the world."⁵³ On the other hand, they also believed that wealthy men who disregarded the "natural laws" of economics and created "disastrous effects" that fell "most heavily on the poor" were often a cause of poverty.⁵⁴ Like other benevolent Philadelphians, the leaders of the Vaughan Charitable Association argued that while poverty was sometimes the result of improvidence or vice, it was also caused by an economic system gone awry and especially by bad luck or circumstances that had

⁵¹ Joseph Sill, diary, Jan. 15, 1833, 1:277.

⁵² Geffen, *Philadelphia Unitarianism*, 201.

⁵³ Records and Minutes [of Annual Meetings, Financial Reports, and Societies of the Church, 20 January 1823 to 7 February 1907], 125, quoted in Geffen, *Philadelphia Unitarianism*, 201. These minutes have been lost since the publication of Geffen's book.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

nothing to do with character.

As Joseph and Jane Sill conducted their work in the SSSG and the Vaughan Charitable Association, they also began visiting the poor who fell outside the boundaries of these organizations. As the Sills' reputation as a benevolent family of means spread, poor Philadelphians began to approach them directly for assistance. In the closeness of a mixed urban environment, the Sills developed intimate connections with those they helped, and they offered much of their aid in their home. On one November morning in 1842, as winter arrived and the financial depression lingered, Sill noted that he had been "almost over-run with applicants for charity" and that "scarcely half an hour passed throughout the whole day without some English man or Woman" presenting an application "either for Charity or advice."⁵⁵

The Sills, more often Jane than Joseph, also frequently entered the homes of the poor to assess their needs and to offer assistance based on those needs. The close relationships the Sills established with those they assisted brought them face-to-face with the daily struggles of poor Philadelphians and allowed them to appreciate the inaccuracy of the common assumptions among nineteenth-century northerners—mainly that work was readily available to those who sought it and that poverty was usually caused by vice.

Joseph and Jane Sill's Poverty Encounters

While he had experienced firsthand the harsh consequences of the Panic of 1819, Joseph Sill's own financial success had led him to believe that material achievement was possible with enough hard work and, perhaps, assistance from a few important individuals. Having succeeded himself, he attempted to help other English immigrants on their path to dignity or even success. Sill quickly discovered, however, that his task would not be as easy as he supposed. Considering the poor English wool workers who entered Philadelphia's port, colleagues who were devastated by the destructive depression of 1837–42, and the poor women Jane Sill assisted, Joseph Sill saw clearly that the economic system that had benefited him could destroy others.

The many English textile workers who approached Sill for aid revealed to him the costs that came with the machinery that he had praised in the

⁵⁵ Joseph Sill, diary, Nov. 23, 1842, 4:161–62.

early 1830s. Sill himself had emigrated from Carlisle in Cumberland County and thus frequently met with immigrants from that region. Cumberland County was a major wool- and cotton-processing area, and the industrialization of the textile industry there displaced many workers. As a result, weavers and wool combers left the region to find work in the United States; as early as 1820, the SSSG recorded a case of assistance to a muslin weaver who was unable to find work. By the time Sill began his work with the poor, wool and cotton workers were flooding into Philadelphia.⁵⁶

The case of James Bell taught Sill an important lesson in the unexpected consequences of machinery's efficiency. In 1841, Sill was approached by Bell, whose wife had recently died and who was left with the care of two young children. Bell was a gingham weaver who earned three dollars per week in the United States, hardly enough to sustain his family.⁵⁷ As a recent immigrant familiar with the situation of textile laborers in England, Bell told of many weavers from Carlisle who attested to the fact that workers could earn only six or seven shillings a week in the English textile industry.⁵⁸ This situation was due to new weaving machinery, the improvements of which were so great "that a handloom Weaver can scarcely procure the necessities of life, after the most assiduous toil." Sill was distressed to hear that "many are compell'd to seek relief from the Poor Houses in consequence of it."⁵⁹

Sill was beginning to appreciate the error in Martineau's claims about the wholly happy results of improved machinery. Before his encounters with poor British weavers, he had assumed that the increased use of machinery would benefit workers. Not only would mechanical looms lighten the load of weavers physically, but they would also create an effi-

⁵⁶ Minute Books, Jan. 2, 1820, vol. 2, Records of the Society of the Sons of St. George, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. On the role of English immigrants in shaping the Philadelphia textile industry, see Scranton, *Proprietary Capitalism*, 95. The commentator Edward Freedley remarked in 1857 that "the majority of the operatives . . . are English or Anglo-Americans." Quote from Freedley, *Philadelphia and Its Manufactures* (Philadelphia, 1857) in Scranton, *Proprietary Capitalism*, 94. Scranton also remarks that "Philadelphia may well have drawn a substantial share of British textile migrants, carrying with them both their skills and cultural traditions and installing elements of the British productive relations into the city" (95).

⁵⁷ Gingham is a cotton cloth woven in a checked or striped pattern. According to Bruce Laurie, the average income of textile workers in 1850 was \$210 per year, which put them "near the bottom of the occupational pyramid." Bell's \$156 per year was thus an extremely low wage for the time. See Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850* (Philadelphia, 1980), 20.

⁵⁸ Equivalent to about four dollars per week.

⁵⁹ Joseph Sill, diary, June 24, 1841, 3:96.

ciency that would benefit textile manufacturers and provide even more work for laborers. On the contrary, Sill discovered that machinery increasingly replaced workers. The number of unemployed weavers he encountered illustrated the negative effects of the mechanization of the textile industry.

Sill met other English immigrant textile workers who had difficulty finding well-paid, steady labor, even though they were eager to work. The Sills visited a pregnant mother of two who lived in a dank cellar. Her husband was a weaver who kept his loom in their cellar home, but he had only "occasional work" and was "obliged to take Goods for his labour." Like many lower-class antebellum Americans, the weaver's family had adapted to the market economy by resorting to a system of barter and exchange. The Sills gave clothes to the family, an irony that was apparently lost on them.⁶⁰ Textile workers in the Philadelphia area, especially those who were hand weavers, were notoriously underpaid, even in comparison to other poorly paid occupations.⁶¹ A particularly poignant case for Sill was that of a cloth draper he assisted who "had been all round the Country in search of work, but in vain; altho' he had walked until his feet were all swelld & scar'd."⁶²

The economic insecurity of the antebellum decades was also brought all too close to home for Sill as several of his colleagues became impoverished. The economic depression of 1837–42 was particularly trying for middle-class Philadelphia merchants like Sill. In that city, the nadir of the depression occurred in late 1841 and early 1842. By 1841, Pennsylvania had the highest total debt of any state, owing \$33,301,013 to its creditors, which did not bode well for Philadelphia's working and middle classes.⁶³ Many merchants, who were intimately bound to the world of credit, were devastated by the economic collapse.

The case of William Ferguson was a powerful example to Sill of the precariousness of life in the market economy. In November 1843, a "mis-

⁶⁰ For more on the effects of the transition to an industrialized market economy and the response of laborers to these changes, see Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York, 1990).

⁶¹ Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia*, 16–20.

⁶² Joseph Sill, diary, Nov. 26, 1841, 3:224.

⁶³ For an explanation of the causes of the panic, see John Joseph Wallis, "Constitutions, Corporations, and Corruption: American States and Constitutional Change, 1842 to 1852," *Journal of Economic History* 65 (2005): 211–56. I am grateful to Dr. Wallis for this reference. For information on the bank panic, see Scharf and Westcott, *History of Philadelphia*, 1:657–59. Sill reflected on the events of the Bank Panic in his diary, Feb. 8 and Mar. 16, 1842, 3:319, 378.

erable looking man” called upon Sill to ask him for assistance. The man introduced himself as William Ferguson, who, twenty years earlier, had been Sill’s colleague in one of his first clerkships. Ferguson had begun “a manufacturing concern” in Ohio, but was left penniless when it burned down. He had heard the woolen mills in Baltimore were hiring, but he had no money to complete his journey there and called on Sill for assistance. Sill felt empathy for Ferguson and did what he could to help, but Ferguson’s fate concerned him. That evening, Sill wrote in his diary that, “I could not get rid of the impression that his case might have been mine, and for aught I know, just as deservedly!”⁶⁴

The suicide of the Philadelphia tailor Browning, who was also a business colleague of Sill’s, reinforced Sill’s growing awareness of the fickleness of the market and its harsh treatment of even the most upright Philadelphians. Browning’s rising debt—and his inability to pay his creditors—caused such distress that he slit his throat in March 1842. Sill, who was one of the debtors to whom Browning owed money, was shaken by the event, partly because just a few days before he had wrestled with whether to call in the notes Browning owed him. The “melancholy event” of Browning’s suicide, combined with Sill’s own uncertainty during the depression, caused him to question the associations he had often made between personal morality and economic success. He had come to understand more fully Carey’s argument that “the vicissitudes of life” often fell equally heavily on saints and sinners.

Through Jane Sill’s work with the poor, Joseph Sill also came to appreciate Carey’s emphasis on the uniqueness of women’s experience of poverty. Jane Sill’s involvement in Joseph’s work with the poor increased during the early 1840s. By 1844, Jane had assumed complete control of most of the family’s visiting duties and Joseph began referring to many of the families she helped as “Jane’s poor.”⁶⁵ Jane probably also relieved Joseph of some of his visiting duties as a steward of the SSSG. In 1843, a committee consisting of Joseph Sill and two other SSSG members recommended that society members “invite their female relatives,” whose “instrumentality would, in many instances, be more productive of good to the indigent and afflicted,” to help the stewards distribute aid.⁶⁶

Jane Sill’s experience was similar to that of many benevolent women of

⁶⁴ Joseph Sill, diary, Nov. 9, 1843, 5:68. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁵ Joseph Sill, diary, Jan. 13, 1844, 5:135.

⁶⁶ Minute Books, Oct. 23, 1843, vol. 3, Records of the Society of the Sons of St. George.

the antebellum period. Like the women leaders of the Female Hospitable Society, her intimate encounters with poor women taught her that indigence, especially for women, was usually the result of circumstance, not individual vice. Yet, unlike the leaders of the Female Hospitable Society, she did not give in to the spiritualization of poverty or the tendency to push women workers into the male-centered paradigm of the independent laborer.⁶⁷

Jane Sill's involvement with the Moyamensing House of Industry reveals an understanding of poverty that called less for individual reformation than for environmental reform. In September 1848, the Sills attended the groundbreaking ceremony of the new almshouse constructed for the largely ignored poorer classes of southeast Philadelphia.⁶⁸ The House of Industry, started by the Philadelphia Society for the Instruction and Employment of the Poor under the leadership of the Sills' friend William Mullen, was more than a site of personal reformation for the poor. It also served as a sort of community center for the Moyamensing District.⁶⁹ Poor Philadelphians could visit the house to receive free medical advice, medicine, clothing, and meals and to use the bathing facilities. The House of Industry also ran an industrial school for both black and white Philadelphians and offered free temporary lodging. Jane Sill became one of the "Lady Managers," part of a mixed-sex group of managers who directed its affairs. Unlike many other benevolent groups, the leaders of the Philadelphia Society for the Instruction and Employment of the Poor repudiated spiritual conversion as the society's primary goal. They believed that "confidence in the old technical religious methods such as distributing tracts and holding prayer meetings and securing Bibles" was misguided. Instead, they argued that the environmental causes of poverty must be dealt with before individual reform could take place.⁷⁰

Jane Sill's work with poor women had an important influence on Joseph's beliefs about poverty. While her work complemented Joseph's, it also challenged some of his assumptions about poverty, labor, and dependency. In entering the homes of poor women and seeing firsthand the circumstantial causes of their poverty, she helped Joseph understand

⁶⁷ Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women*, 66–67.

⁶⁸ Joseph Sill, diary, Sept. 25, 1848, 8:302.

⁶⁹ Eudice Glassberg, "Philadelphians in Need: Client Experiences with Two Philadelphia Benevolent Societies, 1830–1880" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1979), chap. 7. See also "Moyamensing House of Industry," *Pennsylvania Freeman*, Jan. 4, 1849.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Glassberg, "Philadelphians in Need," 263–64.

that poor relief required more than well-timed assistance. It required rethinking the way the Sills, and the market system that benefited them, harmed laboring women. Joseph Sill's diary reflects his changing understanding of the nature of women's poverty.

Jane Dowell was typical of many of the female clients the Sills met. Jane had "calld upon" the Sills for charity in October 1842. When the Sills visited Dowell in her home, they found her "very busy spooling."⁷¹ Sill did not mention how Dowell became impoverished, and he made no comments on her virtuousness except to say that her "little room" was in "tolerable order." It seems Sill believed that Dowell, like the romanticized fictional needlewoman of the antebellum period, was poor through no fault of her own.⁷² Sill mentioned Dowell's status as a "partial dependant," as if such dependence was natural for poor women. He would have frowned on such a dependence, however, in his male clients.

Similarly, Sill did not condemn women who subsidized his care with assistance from others, a practice that he usually criticized when he observed it among the men he assisted. Mary Lynch, for example, was a widow from Camden who met with the Society of the Sons of St. George to discuss opening a store in the northern part of Philadelphia.⁷³ When Sill visited her a month later to check on the progress of her entrepreneurial endeavors and to deliver cash to her, he was pleased to learn she had received assistance from "a number of American Ladies" and had already opened her own clothing store. He characterized Lynch's situation as a "Widow who is struggling for her Children"—a position of helplessness that allowed her to receive aid from a variety of sources.⁷⁴

Jane's Sill's work with poor women, even though influenced by assumptions about gender roles, increased Joseph Sill's awareness of the ways in which such strictures adversely affected women. Moreover, Joseph Sill, through his encounters with poor weavers and ruined businessmen, was introduced to a group of men who seriously challenged his ideas about poverty and the marketplace. In the 1840s, these challenges led him to reconsider his views of the economy, the poor, and himself.

⁷¹ Joseph Sill, diary, Oct. 28, 1842, 4:133–34.

⁷² Buhle, "Needlewomen and the Vicissitudes of Modern Life," 149.

⁷³ Joseph Sill, diary, Apr. 16, 1841, 2:430.

⁷⁴ Joseph Sill, diary, May 21, 1841, 3:56.

Changing Understandings of Poverty

In an 1840 diary entry, Joseph Sill expressed his new understanding of poverty that was both a result of his work with the poor and his own experiences during the depression. During a snow storm, as he lay "warm and comfortable in his bed," worries began to haunt him. "My mind could not but revert to the dreadful situation of the poor Mariner on the Stormy Sea—to the way-worn Traveller on the open plain, or on the Mountain top, and to the desolate and cheerless abodes of Poverty even nigh at hand," he wrote. The storm of fear continued unabated, and though he "wish'd for its termination," it continued stronger than ever. His thoughts then turned to himself and his own life. "I felt even a chill as if I had been subject to the perils of the cold without, and for a moment thought that some change of fortune would surely reach me," he recorded, "and that I should certainly be call'd upon to endure the dangers which my imagination had pictured so many were enduring at that time." At that moment, when he "felt most secure of worldly abundance," he was also terrified that "some unforeseen event would happen to annihilate these blessings," leaving him with as little as those for whom he had served as benefactor.⁷⁵

Sill doubted his own ability to withstand the ever-present pressures of financial ruin, a fear that only grew in the face of the strength and dignity he had observed among the displaced workers he had assisted. In them he saw a fortitude that he believed he lacked. "I frequently reflect on the different effect that trial & poverty and hard toil would have had on my temper & disposition," he recorded one New Year's Eve, and "I fear that I would not have stood the test as consistently and as temperatively as many of my fellow Creatures." He believed many of these poor people were "more worthy of comfort and happiness than myself" and that if he were in similar circumstances he "should hardly be as patient and resigned as they."⁷⁶

Sill's troubled attitude about how he might react to penury shows how his encounters with poverty had influenced his views of the poor and the causes of their impoverishment. Sill admired the fortitude of those whom he assisted, which outweighed any sort of courage he believed he had. He saw the poor's strength as a sign of virtue. At the same time, Sill learned that poverty and financial failure were often the result of circumstances

⁷⁵ Joseph Sill, diary, Dec. 6, 1840, 2:294–95.

⁷⁶ Joseph Sill, diary, Dec. 31, 1851, 9:495–96.

wholly outside of one's control. Success was little proof of virtue, nor was poverty evidence of its absence.

In emphasizing the circumstantial over the spiritual causes of poverty, Joseph Sill reacted sharply against poor relief workers who tended to invest poverty with spiritual meaning. During one visit to a poor weaver in which he encountered an Episcopal priest administering aid, he accused the priest of preaching "hollow phrases." Sill argued that telling a poor man to "Look to the Saviour!" did little to help the man's economic situation and was only evidence of "set-phrase, mouth-piece Christianity."⁷⁷

In addition to rejecting the spiritualization of poverty, Sill, unlike most middle-class antebellum poor relief workers, began to recognize that the myth of the self-made man was simply that—a myth. Yet, part of the anxiety that he felt during the emotional storm of 1840 came out of his belief that the market economy that had taken hold in the nineteenth century was still the most equitable economic system. For this reason, Sill could not entertain serious ideas about restructuring the economy even when he saw its flaws. When William Henry Channing, nephew of the famous Unitarian William Ellery Channing, visited Philadelphia in 1847, Sill listened to Channing's criticisms of the "mercantile Class" to which Sill belonged. In his speech, Channing argued that the new "third power," the "mercantile class," both oppressed the producer of goods and caused a general rise in prices. Channing's "Associationist" scheme called for a radical restructuring of society, one that more adequately assured the worker a "fair equivalent for his labour." While Sill found Channing's sentiments "persuasive and nearly convincing," he could not fully agree with them.⁷⁸

While Sill increasingly recognized the injustices of the system in which he lived, he always believed the best way to handle them was to offer minor correctives through benevolence rather than to change radically the system itself. Yet, in believing this, Sill created a world for himself in which he could never feel completely comfortable; he had seen too many of the negative aspects of the market economy to be able to do so. The best that he, and others, could do would be to offer assistance to those who wanted to improve their situation—to join the class of non-manual laborers who, he believed, served as the backbone of the market economy.

⁷⁷ Joseph Sill, diary, Mar. 6, 1851, 9:311–12.

⁷⁸ Joseph Sill, diary, Dec. 17, 1847, 8:69.

Just as he was troubled by the market that had rewarded him while it destroyed others, Sill was also worried about the performative aspect of his charitable work. He appreciated the value of demonstrating benevolent activity to the public, for doing so enhanced his reputation as a charitable man. Yet, when he participated in the annual collection of funds for the Vaughan Charitable Association at the First Unitarian Church, he chose to take up the collection in the upper gallery, where few parishioners sat and where he would be out of view from most of the congregation. "I do not like to be conspicuous on these occasions," he confided to his diary.⁷⁹ Debates over the method of collecting the yearly donations concerned Sill and his pastor, who argued that benevolence "should be moved by a spontaneous desire to do good," not a wish to be noticed by one's neighbors.⁸⁰ Sill was aware of the hypocrisy of giving for the purpose of self-advancement. His struggle over how conspicuous to be in his giving was marked not only by a feeling of obligation to give out of sincerity but also by knowing that outward actions could easily be manipulated to present a false front to one's neighbors.⁸¹

Sill recognized the value of public giving, even while he questioned its performative nature, and he also believed that giving offered more private rewards. Sill saw his poor relief as an exercise in self-development, a spiritual discipline that helped cultivate his faith. Yet this self-interested approach to poor relief, which focused on Sill's own spiritual growth, sometimes came at the expense of those whom he assisted. The case of the Barnes family, whom the Sills helped during the winter and spring of 1845, illustrates this fact.

Joseph Sill was first introduced to Jonathan Barnes and his wife and two children through Jane Sill. Sill did not indicate the financial status of the Barneses, but it is clear from his diary entries that the Barnes family had few financial resources on which to draw in the face of family crisis. Jane had visited the Barneses and, seeing that both Mrs. Barnes and her daughter Elizabeth were ill, had attempted to provide a nurse for them. Having no success, she decided to bring Elizabeth home with her. Perhaps attempting to assuage his guilt for the "great trial" to the Barneses

⁷⁹ Joseph Sill, diary, Nov. 10, 1844, 5:441.

⁸⁰ Joseph Sill, diary, Nov. 22, 1846, 7:229–30. The debate over how to collect alms in the church spanned two years. See Joseph Sill, diary, Nov. 16, 1845, 6:389–90.

⁸¹ This example fits well with Karen Halttunen's work on ideas of hypocrisy among the middle class in the antebellum United States. See Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven, CT, 1982), 43.

caused by Jane Sill's taking of their child, Sill wrote in his diary that they "deliverd it to her charge with every confidence that it would be better cared for than it could be with them." Elizabeth had little chance of survival, for she was in "a very low sickly condition, with a constant Cough, and difficulty in breathing," a diagnosis confirmed by the family doctor.⁸²

The Sills cared for Elizabeth for the next few days and sent periodic reports to the Barneses, whose second child also became gravely ill while Elizabeth was with them. Elizabeth's father, distraught that he and his wife were losing their final moments with their daughter, visited Elizabeth the day after she entered the Sill household. Sill wrote in his diary that Elizabeth was so attached to Jane that she told her father she did not want to go home with him.⁸³ Elizabeth's mother visited four days later, and that evening Elizabeth died.

Sill's diary entry about Elizabeth's last moments was full of sentimental reflection on the "angel" they had lost.⁸⁴ Sill reflected on the influence Elizabeth's presence had on his and his family's spiritual condition. "We were conscious that this death Scene of the poor Child had not been without its uses," Sill wrote, for "it had made us better Christians!"⁸⁵ His daughter Jane also told her mother that "perhaps God has permitted this little child to die in our house, as much for our sakes, as for hers."⁸⁶

For the Sills, Elizabeth—for whom they "would have done anything"—provided an opportunity for them to become better Christians. In describing Elizabeth's death, Sill invoked common antebellum notions of children and their deaths. Middle-class antebellum Americans considered children to be strong, but vulnerable. Children, as Anne Boylan argues, were "tender shoots" needing tender care and light.⁸⁷ But in moments of serious or fatal illness, they were also called upon to be "quiet, serious, orderly, and reflective," in accordance with common cultural understandings of death and the importance of the deathbed for conversion.⁸⁸ Not only were these young children saved, but their families and benefactors were as well. The deathbed conversion scene, a common one

⁸² Joseph Sill, diary, Feb. 13, 1845, 6:113.

⁸³ Joseph Sill, diary, Feb. 14, 1845, 6:114.

⁸⁴ Joseph Sill, diary, Feb. 24, 1845, 6:131–32.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Joseph Sill, diary, Feb. 25, 1845, 6:133.

⁸⁷ Anne M. Boylan, *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution, 1790–1880* (New Haven, CT, 1988), 165.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 153.

in antebellum literature, highlighted both the moral purity of the child and the salvific effect of this purity on the observers. Many of these deathbed scenes depicted the final moments of young girls' lives, highlighting the innocence, moral purity, and submissiveness of the dying child.⁸⁹

Sill's expression of his and his family's own spiritual renewal at the side of Elizabeth's deathbed was thus typical for its time. Yet, by focusing so intently on Elizabeth's effect on his own family, Sill downplayed the importance of allowing Jonathan Barnes and his wife to grieve for their lost child. Sill's private spiritual enlightenment through Elizabeth's illness and death had come at the expense of Elizabeth's family.

While Sill seemed somewhat insensitive to his treatment of the Barnes family, he was sometimes troubled by the superiority he felt toward the poor and working classes. He self-consciously corrected himself when he had such thoughts. After visiting two destitute families, Sill caught himself as he recorded disdainfully what he had observed. He wrote:

Surely there is an immense variety in the condition of human life; and what an awful contrast between the means of the rich man, and the wants of the Poor! We can hardly conceive how vast the difference is until we leave our own comfortable & luxurious dwellings, and ~~descend~~ enter into the huts and garrets and cellars of the destitute & forlorn.⁹⁰

His shock and disgust at what he had seen had prompted him to write about the vast circumstantial differences between him and those whom he aided. Yet, as his editing reveals, he checked his condescension, attempting to respect the recipients of his aid. The self-respect he had seen among them had helped prompt such a reaction.

⁸⁹ On the significance of children's deathbed scenes in antebellum literature, see Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (New York, 1985), 109–10. Karen Sanchez-Eppler discusses the importance of children's beds, especially the beds of girls, in converting drunk fathers in antebellum temperance literature. While her argument—that temperance literature located conversion in incestuous relationships between fathers and daughters—is not wholly convincing, she makes a strong case that such literature relied heavily on common notions of the importance of children, especially vulnerable children, to the conversion of adults. See Sanchez-Eppler's "Temperance in the Bed of a Child: Incest and Social Order in Nineteenth-Century America," *American Quarterly* 47 (1995): 1–33.

⁹⁰ Joseph Sill, diary, Oct. 28, 1842, 4:133–34.

Conclusion

Joseph and Jane Sill's work with Philadelphia's lower and working-class communities is representative of that of many other Philadelphia Unitarians, many of whom shared the Sills' background and beliefs. As English immigrants in America, they brought with them certain expectations and hopes for a future marked by the establishment of a stable competence in a fruitful land. Such dreams were chastened by the economic instability of the antebellum period and the realization that attaining social status was just as much about self-fashioning as about hard work. Nevertheless, as the case of Joseph Sill demonstrates, some Philadelphia Unitarians were able to accomplish their goals of attaining economic stability and social success, though they also recognized that such advancements were often based more on luck than virtue.

On one hand, this meant that Philadelphians like the Sills saw their work as a shared effort with the poor to create a larger and more stable middle class. Many of the men and women the Sills aided were displaced English artisans struggling to establish themselves with a competence, just as Sill had done as a young immigrant in 1819. They often shared the Sills' social and economic vision even as they reminded their benefactors of everyone's economic uncertainties.

On the other hand, Joseph Sill's approach to charity was also built on assumptions that drove the very economic system he was trying to correct. Creating a larger middle class also meant sustaining a large class of manual workers who could create the goods that merchants like Sill sold, and it was usually these workers who suffered most from the efficiency of mechanization or downturns in the economy. Many of these workers were the objects of the Sills' attention in their poor relief work. Joseph Sill's diary shows his recognition of and struggle with these paradoxes. He experienced intense anxiety over his growing understanding that the market that had allowed him to move forward had simultaneously destroyed others, many of whom had lost their livelihoods—even their lives—through no fault of their own.

Both Sills fought against condescension in their work with those in need, and Joseph, in moments of clarity, was reminded that those he assisted often showed more fortitude, piety, and industriousness than he did. After his death in 1854, Sill's wife described him as "peculiarly alive

to the cry of distress."⁹¹ His struggle over his response to that cry illuminates the complicated interplay between the inner transformation of individual poor relief workers and outward expressions of charity in the antebellum period.

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⁹¹ Joseph Sill, diary, Jan. 1855, 10:590.