

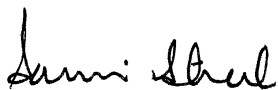
Mighty Oaks from Little Acorns Grow: The Role of the Vanderbilt Aid Society in the  
Establishment and Development of Vanderbilt University, 1894-1930.

By  
Charlotte Roland

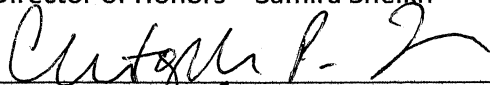
Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Department of History of Vanderbilt University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For Honors in History

April 2016

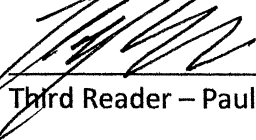
On the basis of this thesis defended by the candidate on 28 April 2016  
we, the undersigned, recommend that the candidate be awarded HONORS  
in History.



Director of Honors – Samira Sheikh



Faculty Adviser – Christopher Loss



Third Reader – Paul Kramer

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**“Let us be in a position to furnish aid”**  
An Introduction to the Vanderbilt Aid Society

In 2009, Morel Enoch Harvey, then president of the Vanderbilt Aid Society, led the group of women in one final vote: the vote to disband.<sup>1</sup> Founded in 1894, the nineteenth-century group felt itself growing out of place within the twenty-first century goals of Vanderbilt University. Chancellor Nicholas Zeppos’s introduction of a new initiative, the Opportunity Vanderbilt program, to prioritize grants and scholarships within student aid packages instead of loans like those offered by the Society confirmed the distance that one hundred and fifteen years had put between the Aid Society and the school it existed to serve. As the Vanderbilt Aid Society Celebration pamphlet stated bluntly, “this new direction does away with the sole mission of the Vanderbilt Aid Society.”<sup>2</sup> In many ways, Vanderbilt University had outgrown its need for the small gathering of Nashville women paying annual dues for the benefit of the cash strapped collegian.<sup>3</sup>

This incompatibility was not always so. In 1894, Chancellor James Kirkland had suggested the formation of the Vanderbilt Aid Society, believing that the group could engage local women in supporting the University’s educational mission at a time when it lacked the resources to do so for itself.<sup>4</sup> The disbanding of the Aid Society over a century later highlights the shifts in ideologies regarding student aid that had taken place in the intervening years. As Vanderbilt’s financial aid offerings expanded throughout the twentieth century, a new conceptualization of how financial aid should be given had been

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<sup>1</sup> Vanderbilt Aid Society Celebration Pamphlet, 1944, Vanderbilt Aid Society Collection (hereafter referred to as VASC), Box 1: Folder 1, Vanderbilt University Special Collections.

<sup>2</sup> Vanderbilt Aid Society Celebration Pamphlet, 1944, VASC, 1:1.

<sup>3</sup> As Vanderbilt University achieved national acclaim, the Vanderbilt Aid Society remained exclusively Nashville women. It did not become an alumni association and it did not include men.

<sup>4</sup> Vanderbilt Aid Society Celebration Pamphlet, VASC, 1:23.

introduced, with the idea that no student should be obliged to take on personal debt in order to finance their education.<sup>5</sup> While the application of this philosophy prompted the Vanderbilt Aid Society's closure in 2009, it was a philosophy markedly different from the one that had inspired its founding. Although student aid was a topic of concern in 1894 as in 2009, the nineteenth-century philanthropist favored student loans as the primary method of aid provision because of the way in which they uniquely complemented the Progressive Era understanding of philanthropy as a means to uplift the deserving poor.<sup>6</sup>

By the middle of the twentieth century — well before the Aid Society's official dissolution — increasingly comprehensive state and federal legislative efforts had eclipsed the small-scale loans offered by the Aid Society. But, until the middle of the twentieth century, the Vanderbilt Aid Society provided essential student loan support, filling a role into which the government had yet to fully step. This support was especially timely given the financial strain experienced by Vanderbilt University in this period. The University spent the decades following its 1873 creation struggling to establish itself within an increasingly competitive field of American higher education, burdened by high operating costs and a dwindling endowment too small to offset them.<sup>7</sup> The student loans provided by the Vanderbilt Aid Society supported the University as a time when its future was uncertain.

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<sup>5</sup> This idea is by no means universally accepted. Many parties still believe in student loans as part of student financial aid, but the idea is gaining support.

<sup>6</sup> Charles W. Eliot, "The Question of Scholarships," *The Nation*, March 6, 1879. The Nation Archive. <http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nih&AN=14082260&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>7</sup> Robert A McGaw, *A Brief History of Vanderbilt University* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University, 1973), 40.

The turn of the twentieth century was not a trying time for Vanderbilt University alone, however. Other newly established colleges and universities faced similar obstacles and also wrestled with financial solvency.<sup>8</sup> These challenges were part of a larger shift in American higher education. The price of university education was rising as the importance of a college degree rose with the nation's economic shift away from agriculture. By 1944, one British writer would note, "In American industry, for instance, all the responsible and industrial positions are normally held by university men and women."<sup>9</sup> The state of American industry, emerging in the decades before, pushed questions about student aid to the forefront, as higher education for the average student became both a better investment and a more expensive one.

Well before 1944, students recognized the value of their degrees, as one student who received a Vanderbilt Aid Society loan wrote, "my degree is the means of securing to me an income of nearly three times the amount I could have earned before attending college. Aside from increased ability to make money, I feel that my intellectual horizon has been broadened and I know that I gaze upon 'a new heaven and earth.'"<sup>10</sup> This declaration of gratitude captures both the financial benefits of higher education as well as the value of learning as access to an entirely new world. Universities marketed their programs as providing a better life with the added benefit of better employment. In addition to upward

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<sup>8</sup> "In Aid of Universities," *The Economist*, August 26, 1944. The Economist Archive. <http://find.galegroup.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/econ/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECON&userGroupName=nash87800&tabID=T003&docPage=article&docId=GP4100677829&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Testimonies from Students Aided, VASC, 1:4.

mobility and intellectual cultivation, universities contributed to democratic citizenship,<sup>11</sup> contributions that the Aid Society conceptualized collectively as an “investment in human personality.”<sup>12</sup> These three uses of a university degree are closely tied to a Progressive vision for society, in which higher education could do more than elevate income; it could allow one “to gain that which stands for more than silver or gold.”<sup>13</sup> Universities and the people who supported them believed they provided meaningful personal fulfillment and community growth by providing higher education.

Despite this, some Americans remained skeptical about the importance of higher education. One reporter in *The Milwaukee Sentinel* argued that higher education did more harm than good when it drained the students’ energy. He posited, “would the marvelous and magnificent enterprises of Commodore Vanderbilt have been less so by a college education? Better judgment about many things he would have had; but would he not have had less energy?” He concludes this argument stating, “more men are found sitting at the base of the mountain of some great enterprise because they are too indolent to climb than are there through lack of wisdom how to make the ascent.”<sup>14</sup> But this was a sentiment that few shared, for the priority that Progressivism placed on education and the economic shifts of the country had combined to encourage a general public opinion that was supportive of universities. Americans began to wonder less about whether student aid was necessary and

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<sup>11</sup> Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Could Be* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 149.

<sup>12</sup> Testimonies from Students Aided, VASC, 1:4.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> “Drawbacks of a College Education,” *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, November 29, 1896. Nineteenth Century Newspapers.

<http://find.galegroup.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/ncnp/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=nash71688&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&docId=GT3012886273&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0>.

more about how to provide it. While discussion moved toward consensus about the value of college education, how to accommodate students who could not afford such education remained contentious. Some argued that aid should be given only to theological students, while others defended its necessity to scholars pursuing diverse fields of study.<sup>15</sup> One group of philanthropists favored the pure generosity of scholarships and grants, while a second preferred the personal responsibility undertaken with a loan.<sup>16</sup> Debate escalated about whether aid should be awarded for merit or in consideration of financial need.<sup>17</sup> With the financial constraints plaguing many institutions, Vanderbilt University among them, schools could little afford to shoulder any of these student aid costs themselves, regardless of the form that that aid took. This dilemma spoke to the tension that existed between the benefit of university education and the problem of financing it, as well as between student aid providing a handout in the form of a scholarship or a hand up in the form of a loan.

For Vanderbilt University, it is into this tension that the Vanderbilt Aid Society stepped. The Aid Society intervened as a way for private Nashville women to relieve this institutional burden by providing funds for small student loans. It had begun when an undergraduate at Vanderbilt University, faced with a thirty-five dollar tuition hike,

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<sup>15</sup> "Assisted Education," *New York Evangelist*, August 17, 1899. American Periodicals. <http://login.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/docview/125287848?accountid=14816>.

<sup>16</sup> "The Encouragement of Scholarship," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, August 20, 1895. Nineteenth Century Newspapers. <http://find.galegroup.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/ncnp/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=nash71688&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&docId=GT3006975311&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0>.

<sup>17</sup> Charles W. Eliot, "The Question of Scholarships," *The Nation*, March 6, 1879. The Nation Archive. <http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nih&AN=14082260&site=ehost-live>.



appealed to Chancellor James Kirkland for help. Unwilling to allow the student to abandon his studies because of a lack of funds, Kirkland petitioned a local parishioner, Elizabeth Boddie Elliston to extend a fifty dollar loan to the student.<sup>18</sup> This personal arrangement encouraged Kirkland, only a few months later, to formally request the establishment of the Vanderbilt Aid Society as a group of area women charged with raising funds to then be turned over to the University administration and loaned out in small sums to meet the immediate financial needs of the students.<sup>19</sup> Less than a year later, a similar student testimony prompted one beneficiary to write to the Society:

The \$50 loan which I received from your loan fund in September, 1895, was a 'friend in need' to me. I had exhausted my own funds in two previous years at college, and after having made every effort to secure means for another year in college... I was on the point of giving it up for good, when you promised me fifty (\$50) dollars on which to begin the session, thus making the entire year possible. I remember that I reached Vanderbilt with 15 cents on which to prosecute a year's work in college. When I remember what that year was to me, I am grateful to those ladies who made it possible for me to be there.<sup>20</sup>

The Vanderbilt Aid Society was a 'friend in need' to both Vanderbilt University and the students who attended it. The loans given by the Vanderbilt Aid Society held few stipulations. Aid was initially given only to undergraduate students and explicitly denied to students in the theological department, as those students faced no tuition costs.<sup>21</sup> Although Vanderbilt University was founded under the authority of the Methodist Church — and remained so until 1914 — the Society's constitution detailed that Methodist affiliation was not a requirement for loan consideration. The Society itself was comprised entirely of

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<sup>18</sup> Lyle Lankford, "Women Who Opened Doors," *Vanderbilt Alumnus*, August 5, 2009, <http://news.vanderbilt.edu/vanderbiltmagazine/women-who-opened-doors>.

<sup>19</sup> VASC, 1:1.

<sup>20</sup> Testimonies from Students Aided, VASC, 1:4.

<sup>21</sup> By 1940, the Vanderbilt Aid Society would pass a constitutional amendment to include aid to graduate students but, during the time of this study, it remained for undergraduate students alone.

women, but they granted loans to male and female students alike. With these limited restrictions, the Vanderbilt Aid Society financed the aspirations of individual students who received the loans, while allowing the university to accommodate talented students who lacked the means to attend without detracting from the university's already stretched resources. It seemed a perfect solution.

The women of the Vanderbilt Aid Society offered this assistance because they were moved by the personal stories of the students who had hopes of attending Vanderbilt University and for whom the hope was almost — but not quite — financially possible. As one student later wrote, "It would be impossible for me to estimate the value of the loan made to me in prosecuting my education. The absence of it might have caused me to leave off entirely the completion of my course, or at least would have retarded it several years."<sup>22</sup> But such individual testimonies of students were only part of a larger Progressive vision that the women held for Nashville and the greater American South.

This collective vision included a society in which higher education was accessible and attainable.<sup>23</sup> At Vanderbilt, this translated into "a vision of a day when no Vanderbilt student would be deprived of a broader and more useful life because of a lack of adequate training."<sup>24</sup> They imagined a community in which generous philanthropists aided worthy students who then, having been helped past their immediate financial challenges, rose to a position of success from which they could then help another. Higher education expanded the contributions that each man or woman could make to their society. It gifted the student

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<sup>22</sup> Testimonies from Students Aided, VASC, 1:4.

<sup>23</sup> Geraldine Joncich Clifford, review of *A Generation of Women: Education in the Lives of Progressive Reformers*, by Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, *American Journal of Education*, 88, no. 4 (August 1980) 498-502.

<sup>24</sup> "Tributes to Mrs. Thomas Tyne and Mrs. Claude Walker," VASC, 1:24.

“a broader and more useful life” and it gifted society the outworking of this usefulness. This vision was rooted in Progressive philanthropic values.<sup>25</sup> At its simplest, Progressivism was the belief that industrialism had compromised American society and that political and philanthropic interventions were necessary to restore it.<sup>26</sup> These interventions, while pursued through a range of organizations, programs, and agendas, so focused around issues of morality, social justice, and democratic virtue that the years between 1890 and 1920 would be defined as the Progressive Era.

For the women of the Vanderbilt Aid Society, student loans prioritized these qualities in a way that grants and scholarships did not. Loans required accountability and a degree of self-help that countered what was understood as the empty charity of grants and scholarships. Empty charity encouraged laziness and even pity, while loans matched the Progressive Era understanding of philanthropy as a means of enabling the deserving poor to stand on their own. With this in mind, the women of the Vanderbilt Aid Society created a loan fund built by annual member dues and cyclically sustained by loan repayments. The loans, which were disbursed and managed by the university administration, were only provided in small amounts, usually under \$100, so as to avoid dependency. These loans would help Vanderbilt transition from a fledgling institution backed by a singular gift from Cornelius Vanderbilt and toward an established university of regional significance.

This study will focus on this transition during late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because it is this period in which the Aid Society was most valuable to Vanderbilt University. During this time — from the Society’s founding in 1894 up until the 1930s —

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<sup>25</sup> For further discussion of Progressive values in higher education, see chapter two.

<sup>26</sup> Daniel T. Rodgers, “In Search of Progressivism,” *Reviews in American History*, 10, 4 (December 1982): 113-132.

the newly minted Vanderbilt University sought to solidify its position within the growing network of American universities and colleges, a network that was undergoing important transition by the start of the twentieth century.<sup>27</sup>

The first transition is that, in response to increasing demand for higher education, institutions shifted from the college model of the nineteenth century to the new university model. The concept of the American research university began with the 1876 founding of The Johns Hopkins University, lauded as an extension of the academic mission of its institutional predecessors.<sup>28</sup> With a focus on graduate education and scientific research, The Johns Hopkins University would serve as a model for what would become the university movement. Colleges across the country refashioned themselves as universities and new schools were named ‘universities’ more often than ‘colleges’. This university ideal carried a high price tag, however. The new features and expanded offerings of the early twentieth century university added to the university’s appeal as well as its costs.<sup>29</sup> The university promised coursework in the liberal arts, sciences, and professional studies and it emphasized research rather than concentrating exclusively on teaching.<sup>30</sup> Such a center of “recognized intellectual superiority” required enormous capital.<sup>31</sup> In a reflection of this trend, Vanderbilt University was founded as a university and the Vanderbilt Aid Society

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<sup>27</sup> For further discussion of transitions in higher education, see chapter one.

<sup>28</sup> Jane Robbins, “Toward a Theory of the University: Mapping the American Research University in Space and Time,” *American Journal of Education*, 114, 2 (February 2008): 243-272.

<sup>29</sup> Laurence Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1965): 158.

<sup>30</sup> “The American University,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 1888. Nineteenth Century Newspapers. <http://find.galegroup.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/ncnp/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=nash71688&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&docId=GT3006803673&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0>.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

was created to support students and to serve as a booster for the University in Nashville and beyond.

The second transition that was taking place within American higher education was the rise of the middle class. It was this rise that supported the democratization of the university. John Thelin's comprehensive history of American higher education addresses this evolution of the university and the role of the middle class within it.<sup>32</sup> By avoiding a common reliance on a narrative of continual reform in which universities followed the simplistic trajectory of becoming larger, more cosmopolitan, distanced from religious influences, and less restrictive of student behavior, Thelin focuses instead on how the university and the nation developed together. This emphasis includes how the country and the college responded to the challenges of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — a time in which the middle class, strengthened by industrialization, boasted higher wages and more urban living spaces. The general rise in incomes experienced by the middle class established a new market for higher education. This segment of society could now feasibly consider higher education in a way that would have been unreasonable only years prior.<sup>33</sup>

This middle class prosperity is especially evident in the city of Nashville, which was experiencing a turn-of-the-century boom as the "Athens of the South." Don Doyle chronicles the city's post-Reconstruction development as it rose to pre-eminence as the civic and cultural mecca of the American South.<sup>34</sup> This rise was publically proclaimed with the city's

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<sup>32</sup> John R. Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 103.

<sup>33</sup> Burton Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978), 289.

<sup>34</sup> Don Doyle, *Nashville in the New South, 1880-1930* (University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 214.

playing host to the 1897 Tennessee Centennial Exposition. Doyle's emphasis on social history within Nashville sets the stage for a city on the rise to raise Vanderbilt University along with it and to benefit from doing so. But, in order to draw the new middle class into the world of higher education, Vanderbilt would need to distance itself from its reputation as a place reserved exclusively for the sons – and sometimes daughters – of Southern elite. This distancing took place through democratization as Vanderbilt worked to rebrand itself as a place open to the nation's brightest, not merely its wealthiest. While Vanderbilt would wrestle with this image for decades to come, the financial aid initiative of the Vanderbilt Aid Society was a concerted effort by the University to make room for this new class of students that, according to Helen Horowitz, were asking more and more of their institutions.<sup>35</sup>

Although the Vanderbilt Aid Society was necessary to Vanderbilt University's early formation, it is entirely absent from the existing histories of the school. The one exception to this is the treatment that the Aid Society received within a short article published by Lyle Lankford, Senior Officer for University History at Vanderbilt in *Vanderbilt Magazine* following the Aid Society's dissolution in 2009.<sup>36</sup> Lankford's work, while mainly descriptive in nature, focuses on the way in which the Aid Society enabled the educational achievements of students with limited financial means. In this, Lankford overlooks the relationships between the Vanderbilt Aid Society and Vanderbilt University. The Aid Society's provision of student loans as a contributing factor in Vanderbilt University's ability to weather early financial storms is ignored. As a result, Lankford's account not only

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<sup>35</sup> Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 21.

<sup>36</sup> Lankford, "Women Who Opened Doors."

understates the importance of the Aid Society within Vanderbilt's own history but also misses the way in which connections between institutions of academia and their communities benefitted both groups. This is a symbiosis that, once highlighted in the relationship between the Aid Society and Vanderbilt University, demands a reconsideration of academia as an Ivory Tower — an isolated world all its own. Lankford's account perpetuates an understanding of universities as existing in conjunction with their communities rather than altering this narrative to reflect the true dependence of the university on its community. For, universities, even private ones like Vanderbilt, were social goods and they relied on all kinds of charity to operate.

While the Vanderbilt Aid Society operated within the sphere of American higher education, the Progressive Era also played a formative role in shaping the actions of the group.<sup>37</sup> Progressives rallied around a shared desire to correct the issues that they believed industrial development had wrought in America. They identified problems around them and organized in efforts to set things right again. Within this common Progressive agenda, however, individuals sought diverse means by which to pursue these changes. Under the umbrella of Progressivism, one group pursued the Progressive vision through political avenues, while another organized within voluntary associations.

Progressive efforts, while divided between the political and the social, worked around a set of shared values. Among these values are included independence, a strong work ethic, frugality, and spirit of community responsibility. Within philanthropy and specifically educational philanthropy, these values were distilled into a singular

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<sup>37</sup> Lawrence J. Friedman and Mark D. McGarvie, *Charity, Philanthropy, and Civility in American History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Barry D. Karl, "The American Private Philanthropic Foundation and The Public Sphere, 1890-1930," *Minerva*, 19, 3 (1981): 236-270.

glorification of the self-made man — or woman — who was in need of aid for a time but who then transcended this moment of dependence to come to a place of supporting himself. This is the one the Society sought to help, while aiding Vanderbilt University at large and creating tangible benefits for themselves in the process in the form of friendships and engagement in the male world of higher education.<sup>38</sup>

While the histories of American higher education and Progressive philanthropy inform the role of the Vanderbilt Aid Society, they cannot completely explain it. Not only do they fail to critically examine the Society itself, they also more generally overlook the connections between educational philanthropic groups and the ideologies that motivated them, between student aid and university development, and between universities and the communities that sustained them.<sup>39</sup> This study will draw those connections by tracing the themes of higher education, Progressive philanthropy, and Vanderbilt University's own institutional history.

This study will rely primarily upon the Vanderbilt Aid Society Collection within Vanderbilt University's Special Collections. It is here that the Society compiled their organizational records within two boxes of material, in addition to a small scrapbook. The collection is comprised of a variety of formal documents including publically distributed pamphlets, society photographs, their constitution and by-laws, meeting minutes, membership and leadership records, loan recipient names, and financial reports. Within this study's time period of discussion between 1894 and 1930, these materials are rather

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<sup>38</sup> Barbara Solomon argues that American higher education has a history of excluding women. See: Barbara Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

<sup>39</sup> John R. Thelin and Richard W. Trolinger, *Philanthropy and American Higher Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).



evenly dispersed, with perhaps slightly more documentation chronicling the society's first decade of operation. Considered in entirety, the Vanderbilt Aid Society collection provides a comprehensive foundation for an analysis of the Society's origination, management, and evolution.

The Society's conscious preservation of documents relating to its formal operations ensures that sanctioned Society decisions were carefully recorded. More personal and informal details of the Society's functioning, however, are notably absent. As a result, biographical information about the women of the Society, interactions between Society members, personal beliefs and attitudes of those involved, and sources of internal dissention are all excluded from the sanitized historical record provided by the Collection. Even the newspaper clippings offered within the scrapbook have been neatly trimmed to include only the sentences that the Society chose to be part of their historical legacy. Had more informal and interpersonal documents been available, this study could have provided a more complete picture of the significance of the group to Nashville, Vanderbilt University, Vanderbilt students, and the women of the Society themselves. The Collection's revision excludes valuable information but it also sheds light on the relationship between the university and the Aid Society. The Aid Society was always subordinate to the University itself — even in its history. It existed only to support Vanderbilt and it is remembered only in the ways that it does.

Considering the selective preservation of Society documents in the Collection, this study will supplement the Collection's limitations with external primary sources. These magazine articles, correspondences, speeches, and opinion pieces provide a broader basis for considering the themes raised by the Aid Society Collection itself. These themes include

the role of student aid and Progressive philanthropic values in shaping the relationship between universities and the communities that supported them.

This study will trace this theme throughout three chapters. The first chapter will establish the Vanderbilt Aid Society as encouraging Vanderbilt University's effort to remain competitive within an increasingly crowded field of American higher education. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a time of expansion and growth in higher education. This expansion was coupled with a degree of institutional volatility, however, as colleges and universities were founded as quickly as they were dissolved. The Aid Society stabilized Vanderbilt University's position within this jockeying.

The study's second chapter will demonstrate how the Vanderbilt Aid Society encouraged a connection between local Nashville women and Vanderbilt University by capitalizing upon Progressive Era philanthropic engagement. Progressive Era patterns reveal that women found means of community involvement through voluntary associations and charitable commitments. This chapter argues that the Vanderbilt Aid Society directed this engagement to the benefit of Vanderbilt University and its students.

The Vanderbilt Aid Society was supportive of Vanderbilt University's achievement of regional significance, but the University was not the sole beneficiary of the Aid Society's efforts. The women themselves benefitted as well. The third chapter will argue that the social relationships displayed within the Aid Society created a mutually advantageous intersection of town and gown between Vanderbilt University and Nashville. It did this by fostering and leveraging female friendships within an organization designed to support the University. Women remained largely excluded from the world of higher education beyond

the role of student,<sup>40</sup> but participation in the Aid Society was a means for these women to actively commit to the success of Vanderbilt University. Comprised of white, Protestants belonging to the elite social circles of Nashville, the Aid Society effectively linked Nashville's most prominent women with Nashville's most prominent university. As this chapter will demonstrate, this connection was profitable to both parties, as the women gained valuable social capital and Vanderbilt University gained an external source of student aid.

Together, these three chapters will position the Vanderbilt Aid Society as integral in the establishment and early growth of Vanderbilt University. By engaging Nashville women through Progressive Era values in the provision of financial aid for university students, the Vanderbilt Aid Society forged a cooperative partnership between the university and the city. This relationship would steady Vanderbilt University within an environment of financial challenges and ideological shifts of American higher education around the start of the twentieth century.

Historiographies that neglect the Vanderbilt Aid Society, therefore, neglect the organization that facilitated Vanderbilt University's initial development and growth. This study's correction of that neglect emphasizes that universities do not exist as closed loops but rather co-depend on the communities in which they are placed. This encourages a revision of internal institutional histories to include a broader consideration of the people, beliefs, and events that brought them to where they stand today. Vanderbilt University Chancellor Alexander Heard stated in a 1973 address that, "the evolution of a university comes inexorably out of its own life. Anything that has happened in the last ten years that

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<sup>40</sup> Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 5.

we view with encouragement is really a product of something that went before.”<sup>41</sup> The encouragement of Vanderbilt University’s success is the product in part of the Vanderbilt Aid Society.

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<sup>41</sup> McGaw, *A Brief History of Vanderbilt University*, 40.

## **Chapter One: “The true function of student aid is to aid”**

### **The Vanderbilt Aid Society in Aid of Vanderbilt University’s Educational Mission**

In 1895, Western Reserve University president, Charles E. Thwing, published an article in the *Forum*, a newspaper specializing in editorial pieces on social issues. In his piece, “Cost of Collegiate Education,” Thwing observed the changing face of American higher education. Remarking how the university of 1895 differed from its predecessors, he discussed everything from course offerings to professor salaries. After expounding upon these developments, Thwing concluded simply, “the college is part of the community.”<sup>1</sup> Of all the speeches and all the books written on the topic since, it is this remark that is most essential to understanding the role of the Vanderbilt Aid Society in the early establishment of Vanderbilt University. Thwing’s reflection presents the relationship between the university and society as one of co-development rather than co-existence. The significance of this relationship, however, is one that many early historians of higher education underestimated, for although the university did not exist outside of society, it was often studied as if it did.<sup>2</sup> The fallacy of this perspective is particularly exposed when examining the Vanderbilt Aid Society within Vanderbilt University’s early decades of operation.

As American society changed with its entrance into industrialization and urbanization, the American university responded to these changes with an evolution of its own. This study will establish the Vanderbilt Aid Society as a central part of Vanderbilt University’s reaction to the societal changes taking place around it. The Society was a means to stabilize the young university within a culture and a system of American higher

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<sup>1</sup> “Cost of Collegiate Education,” *The Daily Inter Ocean*, January 21, 1895.

<sup>2</sup> Horowitz, *Campus Life*, Introduction.

education that were both in flux. In this role, the Aid Society supported the transition that Vanderbilt University underwent at the turn of the twentieth century.

Vanderbilt University was able to pursue such changes — and so establish itself as a regionally renowned institution — because of the work of the Vanderbilt Aid Society in providing loans to Vanderbilt students. Founded in 1873, Vanderbilt was a university still wrestling with the challenges of institutional infancy. Its endowment was overextended and tied up in the declining value of Vanderbilt railroad bonds.<sup>3</sup> It wrestled with its marriage to the Methodist Church, resulting in a costly legal separation by the Tennessee Supreme Court in 1914.<sup>4</sup> The university sought to expand its facilities and program offerings in order to build a reputation as a credible university, but it had to do so within financial limitations and unexpected setbacks.<sup>5</sup> By providing a private source of financial aid amidst these challenges, the Aid Society allowed the University to approximate the emerging university ideal. Because the Society was funded by private wealth, it was able to do this by backing student recruitment and enrollment without detracting from the university's already limited resources. The Vanderbilt Aid Society, therefore, enabled Vanderbilt University's participation in the higher education reforms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries during a period of rapid urbanization, industrialization, and immigration.

As industrialization altered the physical landscape of the country with the rise of cities and factories, so the turn of the twentieth century altered the landscape of higher education in America. The university that stood before Professor Thwing was a far cry from

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<sup>3</sup> McGaw, *A Brief History*, 23.

<sup>4</sup> McGaw, 21; Bill Carey, *Chancellors, Commodores, and Coeds: A History of Vanderbilt University* (Nashville: Clearbrook Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> McGaw, *A Brief History*, 28.

the one that Harvard President James B. Conant would comment on forty years later. In his 1935 address to the University's Board of Overseers, Conant posited, "What kind of thing is the university?" before following that it is a thing "comprehensible only in terms of its history."<sup>6</sup> What Conant understood, and what this chapter will demonstrate, is that the American university of the 1930s was a direct product of the series of changes within higher education that took place in the years before. These are changes that are represented within the institutional context of Vanderbilt University and its' commissioning of the Vanderbilt Aid Society.

### **Increasing Demand for Higher Education and Transitioning from College to University**

If the university is a business, American universities at the turn of the twentieth century experienced both demand and supply shocks.<sup>7</sup> Students rushed to attend college, as wealthy businessmen were eager to establish them. Unprecedented numbers of scholars sought collegiate education and new colleges were founded across the nation to provide it. As Frederick Rudolph, a historian of American higher education, aptly termed it, it was an age of "college mania."<sup>8</sup>

Boosted by fortunes amassed in the prosperity of industrialization, wealthy entrepreneurs were eager to cement their legacies with colleges and universities bearing

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<sup>6</sup> "Aid Poor Students, Dr. Conant Urges," *The New York Times*, January 15, 1935. ProQuest Historical Newspapers. Accessed April 13, 2016. [http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/cv\\_1733709/docview/101583626/6265E5C8A5E54DB7PQ/504?accountid=14816](http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/cv_1733709/docview/101583626/6265E5C8A5E54DB7PQ/504?accountid=14816).

<sup>7</sup> Jane Robbins, "Toward a Theory of the University: Mapping the American Research University in Space and Time," *American Journal of Education*, 114, 2 (2008).

<sup>8</sup> Natalie Naylor, "The Ante-Bellum College Movement: A Reappraisal of Tewksbury's Founding of American Colleges and Universities," *History of Education Quarterly*, 13, 3 (1973).

their names.<sup>9</sup> Cornelius Vanderbilt was no exception. At the encouragement of his second wife, Frank Crawford, he allocated one million dollars to the establishment of Vanderbilt University.<sup>10</sup> Crawford herself was an “unrepentant confederate” and pushed her husband to invest in the South’s post-war recovery by investing in a university for the South.<sup>11</sup> This spousal encouragement speaks to the increasing social value placed on higher education, for Crawford believed the university to be powerful enough to catalyze the region’s revival. Furthermore, Crawford’s contribution to founding Vanderbilt would point to the role of the women of the Vanderbilt Aid Society who followed in her example. Rather than seeking to assume financial power herself, Crawford employed the existing balance of male authority to fulfill her own philanthropic aims. She guided the application of money controlled by men towards her personal charitable convictions. The women of the Aid Society would use the same logic to preserve the university Crawford worked to found. Crawford’s effort and her husband’s eventual gift support the role of universities as a way for entrepreneurs like Vanderbilt to lend permanency to the changeable nature of capitalist competition.

Alongside these industrialists, Protestant denominations sponsored numerous colleges and universities during the nineteenth century. Driven by denominational competition and a desire for a highly educated pastorate, colleges and universities tied to particular denominations were prominent amongst the “multiplying and scattering of colleges” taking place.<sup>12</sup> Such a dramatic increase in the supply of universities shaped the growing network of American higher education. It was a network far more extensive than

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel A. Wren, “American Business Philanthropy and Higher Education in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century,” *The Business History Review*, 57, 3 (Autumn 1983).

<sup>10</sup> T. J. Stiles, *The First Tycoon: The Epic Life of Cornelius Vanderbilt* (New York: Knopf, 2009), 531.

<sup>11</sup> Stiles, *The First Tycoon*, 559.

<sup>12</sup> Naylor, “The Ante-Bellum College Movement.”



ever before and continuing to grow even more so. The American Association of University Presidents presented this growth as a national imperative, reporting that, “the day is yet far distant when this country can safely cease to enlarge its educational facilities.”<sup>13</sup>

Institutions of higher education had multiplied across the country so quickly that their continued success seemed tied to the nation’s success. But, despite this importance, it was the increasing demand at the close of the nineteenth century that would serve as one of the major impetuses of change within American higher education.

The increase in demand for higher education during this period had both individual and collective origins. One personal factor motivating the greater interest in colleges and universities was that of industrial wealth. Though often lacking college educations themselves, these newly wealthy industrialists were eager for their children to boast the hallmarks of their success of which a collegiate experience was one. Income redistribution and class mobility may have upset the American social order, but higher education remained an enduring status symbol.<sup>14</sup> One writer for *The Nation* describes this group of men eager to provide their children with the higher education they never received. He stated that, “After they have got over the effects of the first sweets of wealth, the fine houses, the numerous horses and vehicles, and the yachts and the diamonds for the wives, they turn their attention to ‘social position’ for the ‘boys’ and...they send them to Harvard.”<sup>15</sup> But it was not Harvard alone to whom this social prestige applied. The industrial elite placed a social premium on higher education achievement. The men here to

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<sup>13</sup> Frank Aydelotte, “The American College of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century,” *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors*, 112, 5 (May 1926).

<sup>14</sup> Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education*, 168.

<sup>15</sup> “Rich Collegians,” *The Nation*, 1886. The Nation Archive.

<http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nih&AN=14002156&site=ehost-live>.

whom industrialism had given “the first sweets of wealth” did not desire higher education out of concern for the financial position or workforce position of their sons, but rather from a desire to provide them with a “social position” afforded by a university degree.<sup>16</sup> In this way, the class of new money contributed to the increase in demand for American higher education.

Personal and collective factors shaped this increase in demand as it was experienced within Nashville and Vanderbilt. Vanderbilt’s student body was largely regional, drawn from in and around Nashville.<sup>17</sup> The Louisville-Nashville railroad had brought economic prosperity to the area, as had Nashville’s emerging role as a civic and cultural center of the South.<sup>18</sup> The city was home to a population of recently wealthy individuals and, for these families, the act of sending their sons to Vanderbilt was a public testament to the prosperity they had found in Nashville.

These men and others contributed to popular discourses surrounding higher education, out of which there arose a consensus around three features an institution must possess to be a true university. It must offer coursework in both the liberal arts and the sciences, it must claim at least one professional school, and it must offer a PhD. Rejecting the singular instructional focus of the college, the university must be committed to research as well as to teaching.<sup>19</sup> With these standards as a guide, the university was increasingly

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<sup>16</sup> “Rich Collegians,” 1886.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Conkin, *Gone with the Ivy: A Biography of Vanderbilt University* (University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 56.

<sup>18</sup> Don Harrison Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-1910* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 1990), 24.

<sup>19</sup> The American University,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, February 09, 1888. Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers.

<http://find.galegroup.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/ncnp/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=>

avored as the frame for American higher education, although the college also flourished during this period. While the terms are often employed interchangeably, the university and the college were conceptually distinct.<sup>20</sup> One writer for the *Boston Daily Advertiser* described the university as such:

A true university ought to be the intellectual centre of a country, a place not only where a student can study the arts and sciences, but where the most intellectual men of the country can assemble and have time apart from their teaching, to do original work of their own. And it must have money and reputation enough to attract the best men, the men who are recognized as leaders in the various branches of learning.<sup>21</sup>

This author's idealistic understanding of the university reflects the preferential enthusiasm that the university generated over colleges. The university was imagined as an encompassing mecca of higher education in a way that the college never was. A home for 'original work' and 'study of the arts and sciences,' it was understood as a center for the pursuit of knowledge on a grander scale than the nation had undertaken before.

This definition of the university is reinforced by the same *Boston Daily Advertiser* writer's later criticism of the university movement. He argues that the schools established in this "craze of founding universities" had failed to live up to the true ideal of the university, citing Transylvania University of Kentucky, the East Tennessee University, and the Upper Iowa University as mere imitations of the university and, as such, unworthy of the name.<sup>22</sup> They lacked the renown Americans idealistically imagined their new universities would garner. A different reporter for the *Boston Daily Advertiser* echoed

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<sup>20</sup> Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education*, 103-4.

<sup>21</sup> "The American University," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, February 09, 1888. Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

similar complaints as to the misapplication and miscommunication of the university ideal in America. He states, "There is among Americans a notable fondness for high-sounding names, not clearly comprehended, but forced to do service as ministers to vanity. In this service, some have been racked beyond limits of endurance. Perhaps none of suffered more than the ill-fated 'university.'"<sup>23</sup> These authors saw the reality of American universities as having fallen short of the theory of the university. They remained hopeful about the future of their institutions of higher education, but universities would need supportive communities and philanthropic participation to make such a rise possible.

Theory was not the only distinction between university and college. Universities boasted expanded facilities and course offerings. One author for *The Daily Inter Ocean* enumerated the features unique to the university, stating, "the laboratory is a wholly new creation and the library in its present extensive relations is also new."<sup>24</sup> Though these features may have drawn higher education closer to the ideal of "recognized intellectual superiority," it also substantially increased expenditures.<sup>25</sup> In 1926, Vanderbilt University spent \$4,000,000 on their arts and sciences programs, much of which was given to laboratory and classroom construction.<sup>26</sup> This highlights the fact that the university of the early twentieth century operated at a higher cost than the nineteenth-century college had. Additions like laboratories and libraries meant that the transition of American higher education towards the university example demanded greater financial resources from educational institutions. These costs were, partially, passed on to the student, as tuition

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<sup>23</sup> "The American University," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, February 09, 1888. Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers.

<sup>24</sup> "Cost of Collegiate Education," *The Daily Inter Ocean*, 1895. Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers.

<sup>25</sup> "The American University," 1888.

<sup>26</sup> McGaw, *A Brief History of Vanderbilt University*, 40.

charges rose steadily from the close of the Civil War into the mid-twentieth century, but the universities themselves faced a widening gap between the cost of running the university and the portion of the costs offset by tuition payments.<sup>27</sup> W. S. Tyler discusses this fundamental discrepancy between university expenses and university revenues. While focusing on the example of Amherst College, Tyler maintains that his conclusions “are in a large measure applicable to other colleges.”<sup>28</sup> He asserts that, “the college bills of the students pay only a little more than half of the running expenses” and “the cost of instruction has increased in a much greater ration than the charge for tuition.”<sup>29</sup> Such a net loss, for colleges as for universities, was unsustainable over the long term and so laid the groundwork for the need for community support of institutions of higher education.

These same tensions between the university ideal and the difficult realities of funding this ideal are reflected in the metaphor used by one *Boston Daily Advertiser* author. With the frog representing the typical college of the late nineteenth century and the ox representing the true ideal of the university, the author states:

It is a new example of the old fable of the frog and the ox. The frog envied the size of the ox, and thought that by puffing himself full of air he might become his equal. And so we see balloon-like universities springing up around us on all sides with no foundation but a little money and a big name.<sup>30</sup>

This criticism supports the distinction between the college and university during the late-nineteenth century by contrasting the two in humorous relief. The college ‘frog’ was

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<sup>27</sup> W. S. Tyler, “College Expenses,” *The Congregationalist*, February 14, 1877. Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers.  
<http://find.galegroup.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/ncnp/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=nash71688&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&docId=GT3004403928&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> “The American University,” 1888.

portrayed as profoundly different from — and inferior to — the university ‘ox’. It was this perspective that would characterize the university movement, as institutions of higher education and philanthropists responded to the increased demand for higher education by seeking to “puff not up the frog, but give good pasture to the ox.”<sup>31</sup>

The Vanderbilt Aid Society provided this good pasture through financial aid, a contribution that was especially significant considering how desperately Vanderbilt needed it. Despite the university’s successful start, by the 1890s the University was in danger of remaining an institutional frog.<sup>32</sup> It bore the name of one of the most successful businessmen in America, but it lacked a local foundation and funding. The Vanderbilt Aid Society provided both by connecting Vanderbilt University with Nashville philanthropists while supplementing and preserving the little money the University did have.

The Aid Society, therefore, was especially integral to Vanderbilt’s pursuit of the university ideal at the time, for the ideals of the university came at a high cost and these costs were particularly burdensome for a new institution. The university had opened with an endowment of \$600,000 that made it in 1877 “an exceptionally privileged institution, rich beyond any comparable university save the very oldest private colleges in the Northeast.”<sup>33</sup> But, by the final decades of the nineteenth century, this was no longer true. As Chancellor Kirkland stated in an 1893 speech, “the opinion largely prevails that Vanderbilt is rich and in need of nothing. I wish indeed this was so; but candor compels me to undeceive you. We are poor and in need of many things...it is absolutely impossible for a

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<sup>31</sup> “The American University,” 1888.

<sup>32</sup> McGaw, *A Brief History of Vanderbilt University*, 40

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

university to hold its position today without an income of several hundred thousand.”<sup>34</sup> In 1893, the university endowment was comprised almost entirely of railroad bonds bequeathed to the school by Cornelius Vanderbilt and the returns on these bonds were declining. Born out of this financial crisis, the Aid Society allowed the University to offer financial aid to students without draining its current revenues.

In this, the Aid Society was both a reflection of the university movement and an effort to mitigate the effects of it. By offering small loans to Vanderbilt students, the Vanderbilt Aid Society was a directed attempt to counter the increasing tuition brought about by the changes taking place in higher education. Partially relieved from the pressure of constricted funds, Vanderbilt could now devote itself to its university aspirations. The Aid Society freed up endowment funds for the laboratories and libraries, professor salaries and graduate programs that, piece by piece, built the university ideal.

### **Rise of the Middle Class and the Democratization of the University**

The increasing demand for higher education was not the sole impetus for change — and therefore motivation for founding the Vanderbilt Aid Society — within American higher education. Industrialization combined with urbanization to raise incomes to a level that resulted in the establishment of a middle class that could attend university. The Vanderbilt Aid Society was Vanderbilt University’s way of taking advantage of this change to provide for its own institutional future.

Barriers remained, however, to a middle class entrance into the world of higher education. Higher education had long been considered a world reserved for the elite, due in

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<sup>34</sup> Carey, *Chancellors, Commodores, and Coeds*, 120.

part to the opinion most Americans outside of the upper classes of society held for much of the nineteenth century that higher education was not particularly necessary. This ambivalence that all but the elite held towards higher education is expressed in an article in *The Youth's Companion* entitled "Gifts to Universities."<sup>35</sup> Explaining the need for private funding for universities, the author states:

The common schools may depend for their support upon the general feeling that they are necessary. No community can afford to be without them. But the value to the average man of the university is not so palpable. The higher learning is the possession of a few; its' benefits reach the great majority indirectly through the advance of science and the increase of knowledge.<sup>36</sup>

This statement exemplifies the perceived distance between the university and non-elite. Those outside of the elite, including the new industrial middle class, did not feel remote from the value of education in general. Indeed, they largely supported secondary schooling. But they did feel remote from the world of higher education. They did not believe the university to be necessary because they did not believe it to be immediately relevant to their lives. This supposed uselessness of higher education among a growing middle class perpetuated the reputation of the university as reserved for the elite.<sup>37</sup>

The university was rendered further inaccessible to the middle class by its reputation as a place of profligate expenditures. Although the middle class may now have been able to afford tuition at the nation's colleges and universities, they certainly could not match the extreme luxury in which college students were purported to live. Reports — often extraordinary — of collegiate living expenses were popular among local and national

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<sup>35</sup> "Gifts to Universities," *The Youth's Companion*, 1897. American Periodicals. <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/americanperiodicals/docview/127129773/A5A749A2981D47BCPQ/1?accountid=14816>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Olivier Zunz, *Philanthropy in America: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 9.



newspapers and magazines. One article in the *New Haven Palladium* details the expenses of a male student at Yale University, describing how “none but the finest goods are worn and usually the most approved tailors make them.”<sup>38</sup> The dormitory rooms receive more elaborate detail, as the author stated, “As you enter one of these rooms you can scarcely believe you are in a college dormitory. High ceilings, soft curtains, pictures, Turkish rugs, open fireplaces, bric-a-brac strewn about give the room a look of elegance more characteristic of fashionable bachelor quarters.”<sup>39</sup> The popular portrayal of male collegians was as ones who “found unlimited means of disposing of the money with which they are supplied by obliging parents”.<sup>40</sup> The consequential exclusivity of the university applied to female students as well. An article in *The Milwaukee Sentinel* imagines that if a middle class student were to attend university, “she would be shut out of the college life as completely as though she did not attend the institution.”<sup>41</sup> These images barred middle class engagement in higher education despite rising incomes from industrialization. It sustained an image of the university and university life as inaccessible to all but the wealthiest of Americans.

If universities were to incorporate the middle class, they would have to distance themselves from their reputations as havens for the children of the elite. This was achieved

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<sup>38</sup> “Collegiate Costs: The Expense of Giving a Young Man a College Education,” *New Haven Palladium*, March 30, 1885. Nineteenth Century Newspapers.

<http://find.galegroup.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/ncnp/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=nash71688&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&docId=GT3004246960&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> “College Girls’ Expenses: What the Freshman is Likely to Cost Her Parents this Year,” *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, September 12, 1894. Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers.

<http://find.galegroup.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/ncnp/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=nash71688&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&docId=GT3003325350&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0>.

through the universities' pursuit of democratization.<sup>42</sup> Theorists, academics, and the lay observer began to discuss the degree to which the university embodied, or failed to embody, American democratic principles. One article in *The Milwaukee Sentinel* focused on the collegiate experiences of women, as the author admits, "Now colleges are democratic places. Nowhere else is a woman so honestly taken on her merits instead of her possessions," before also conceding that, "any woman of limited means planning on attending university "should be prepared for a good deal of renunciation."<sup>43</sup> The seeming contradiction here between the university as democratic and the university as socio-economically stratified is characteristic of the university as this time. It may have had democratic aims of higher education for the deserving, but it retained the old markings of higher education for the elite alone.

This concern over the democratic nature of the university was fueled by the rising cost of college. As tuition charges steadily increased, so did voices opposing the undemocratic nature of the university. One author in *The Daily Picayune* memorably compared education to different types of food in his argument for the democratization of higher education. After describing elementary education as "mental daily bread," the author states, "Let us, continuing the simile of mental food, class the college as pie, not as an omelet soufflé or a charlotte russe. Pie is not as cheap as bread, but it is not expensive and every boy who is worth the expense and whose friends are able to give it to him should have the advantages of higher training."<sup>44</sup> This vivid comparison is effective in asserting

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<sup>42</sup> Democratization is typically associated with a later period in American higher education. There is, however, evidence of this trend in earlier decades.

<sup>43</sup> "College Girls' Expenses," *The Milwaukee Sentinel*. Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers.

<sup>44</sup> "A Wise Cheapening of College Charges," *The Daily Picayune*, 1891. Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers.

that though the university may be a luxury, it should not be an unattainable one. The author here represents the growing concern that the rising cost of college was placing the benefits of higher education at the level of Charlotte Russe, out of reach of many of the nation's most promising students. This concern was heightened by the linkage of the democratization of the university with the continued success of the nation. Professor Charles E. Thwing connected the democratic university with American prosperity as he writes that if attaining a college degree was not possible for whoever wanted to, "we should indeed despair of the future of this republic."<sup>45</sup>

Democratization was, therefore, imperative and Vanderbilt University responded to this with the expansion of financial aid opportunities. In universities across the country, student aid had long been provided for theological students, but the financial assistance provided for other courses of study had been minimal.<sup>46</sup> The expansion of scholarships, grants, and loans was the university's answer to the public's criticism of its exclusivity. Donors increasingly established financial aid funds in their names. Colleges and universities developed programs for student employment.<sup>47</sup> Companies offered scholarship competitions.<sup>48</sup> These financial aid efforts were often too small and limited to truly open the university to all classes, but they did garner significant attention. Orlando Lewis, a professor at the University of Maine, wrote of the student of limited means:

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<sup>45</sup> "A College Education," *The Atchison Daily Globe*, 1895. Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers.

<sup>46</sup> For more on financial aid for theological students see: "Art. VI - Theological Education in American in the Light of Recent Discussion," *The Methodist Review*, 1903; George B. Steward, "Financial Aid to Theological Students," *New York Observer and Chronicle*, 1901; M. W. Jacobus, "Student Aid and Minister Waste," *Outlook*, 1901; "Assisted Education," *New York Evangelist*, 1899

<sup>47</sup> "Correspondence", *The Nation*, March 6, 1879. The Nation Archive.

<sup>48</sup> "Cosmopolitan Magazine Competition," *The Idaho Avalanche*, 1893. Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers.

“His four years of college life may have to be extended through five from lack of funds, but if he has pluck and seriousness he can win the battle. He can count upon having the respect of president, faculty, and students, and in his hours of hard work he can console himself with the thought that his enforced labor is very probably developing within him the qualities of pluck, endurance and thoughtfulness that late on in life will stand him in excellent stead.”<sup>49</sup>

Lewis and thinkers like him were not concerned with total equity. They admitted that the lower-class or middle-class students would face more difficult challenges than his wealthier peers. But, they were interested in the possibility that any student who possessed “pluck and seriousness,” “endurance and thoughtfulness” should have the university open to him through financial aid – and that he should be respected in that endeavor. Another writer to *The Nation* similarly praised the democratic influence of financial aid as he states, “the system [of financial aid] is in the highest degree democratic; because it gives poor young men of capacity honorable means of obtaining a college education and because it is a constant protest against the unworthy idea that poverty implies inferiority.”<sup>50</sup> He continues that, “the college with its scholarships is the only place where these ‘caste distinctions,’ these accidents of birth, are reduced to the lowest amount.”<sup>51</sup> ‘Reducing accidents of birth’ is the foundation of the democratic meritocracy. Within higher education, financial aid was increasingly pursued as the best way to build and preserve that foundation.

This interest in democratization and subsequent rise in financial aid took root at Vanderbilt University. In 1922, Vanderbilt University issued a report for the College of Arts

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<sup>49</sup> Orlando F. Lewis, “The Self-Supporting Student in American Colleges,” *The North American Review*, November, 1904. American Periodicals.

<sup>50</sup> “Correspondence,” *The Nation*, March 6, 1879. The Nation Archive.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

and Science that included financial aid opportunities.<sup>52</sup> The report listed a diversity of loan, scholarship, and grant opportunities including the Dudley Fellowship in Chemistry, the Whitthorne Scholarships, the Taylor Scholarships, the Elliston Scholarship, the Freshmen Mathematics Prize, the E.W. Cole Fund, the Martha Bodge Fund, the James Garland Carter Fund, and the University and Alumni Loan Fund – among others.<sup>53</sup> The Vanderbilt Aid Society provided the largest of these in both number and amount.<sup>54</sup> As a result, the Aid Society led the financial aid initiative at Vanderbilt and so constituted the University's most significant response to the national discourses on democratization. While Vanderbilt would retain a reputation for an elite student population well into the twentieth century, the Aid Society is significant as one of the first efforts driven by the Vanderbilt administration to respond to this reputation and to work towards developing the institution along not just the university ideal but the democratic university ideal.

### **Popular Characterization of College Students and Addressing Anti-Intellectualism**

The popular characterization of college students served as a third impetus for the changes taking place within higher education. Greater attention was devoted to higher education as the public became increasingly interested in the university world. This included an interest in the lives of the students within that world. The exclusivity of the university impacted the ways in which these students were popularly cast. Although financial aid had nudged the university towards democratization, certain stereotypes of the average college student

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<sup>52</sup> Register of Vanderbilt University for 1921-1922, Nashville, 1922.

[https://books.google.com/books?id=JMPOAAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summ ary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false/](https://books.google.com/books?id=JMPOAAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summ ary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false/).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> VASC, 1:1.

remained. Some distinctions were present between the reputations of students at individual institutions, but 'the college student' was more often than not talked about in general terms. As such, the popular notion of 'the college student' merits analysis because of the way in which it prompted colleges and universities to employ financial aid initiatives to counter what was largely a negative characterization.<sup>55</sup>

The typical college student of the late nineteenth century was imagined as financially irresponsible and frivolous in his expenditures. After visiting a college campus, one author affirms that, "the thousand little ways of spending money easily and carelessly... are characteristic of 'the Harvard man'<sup>56</sup> of a certain type."<sup>57</sup> Although the author places the caveat on this statement that reports are probably exaggerated, it remains clear that many believed university students to be "sons of vulgar rich men."<sup>58</sup> Through statements like these, Americans perpetuated an image of universities as populated by "the gilded youth."<sup>59</sup>

The identity of university students as indulgent was widely understood as secondary to that of their identity as scholars. The subordination of their intellectual identity was contrary to the university ideal that highlighted academic achievement. Students were widely typified as unconcerned with academics, an image that paralleled the rise of 'college life'. It is during this period in the late nineteenth century that non-academic pursuits became entrenched in the understanding of what it meant to 'go to university'. Fraternities, social clubs, student organizations, and athletics all gained

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<sup>55</sup> Horowitz, *Campus Life*, 156.

<sup>56</sup> 'The Harvard man' refers more generally to a university student. As the oldest and most prominent of the American universities, Harvard was used to represent established American universities.

<sup>57</sup> "Rich Collegians," *The Nation*, 1886. The Nation Archive.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

prominence.<sup>60</sup> The “empty hurly-burly of college life” had eclipsed the intellectual ideal that these institutions had once espoused.<sup>61</sup>

The university as well as its students was increasingly associated with anti-intellectualism. It was believed to have not only failed to provide academic enrichment, but to have instead cultivated anti-intellectual tendencies and habits.<sup>62</sup> George Ade describes this concerning perception of the university in his tale of the “grey-haired agriculturalist” sending his son off to university. He states that, “When the first vacation came, the old man discovered with horror that his young scholar had *only* acquired the Harvard walk, a passion for athletics, and the habit of a large expenditure upon dress.”<sup>63</sup> George Ade’s son is representative of the American stereotype of college students. This stereotype is extended in *Stover at Yale*, a 1912 novel that follows young Dink Stover’s introduction to the social complexities of undergraduate life at Yale University. One of Stover’s peers captures the spirit of anti-intellectualism with his cry, “Oh, father and mother pay all the bills and we have all the fun!”<sup>64</sup> And so, the university was understood as prioritizing empty distractions among students over and above the attainment of true knowledge.

Universities were self-conscious of these changes and of how the public imagined the students who attended their institutions.<sup>65</sup> In a bulletin published by the American Association of University Professors, Frank Aydelotte admitted that most undergraduates

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<sup>60</sup> Frank Aydelotte, “The American College of the Twentieth Century,” *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors*, 1926.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 304.

<sup>63</sup> “American Impressions – The Universities and Their Presidents,” *The Economist*, January 16, 1909. Emphasis is mine.

<sup>64</sup> Owen Johnson, *Stover at Yale* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1912), 230.

<sup>65</sup> Karabel, *The Chosen*, 20.

“have not learned thoroughly the things which they are supposed to have learned.”<sup>66</sup> He follows this concession, however, with the assertion that, “this [anti-intellectualism] is, after all, the rubbish on the glacier; below it the current is flowing slowly but irresistibly in the direction of saner and more real values.”<sup>67</sup> These ‘saner and more real values’ were the academic values of education and, in order to return to them, universities needed financial aid programs.

Universities sought to use financial aid programs to attract the types of students who would restore the integrity of the ideal of the university. Institutions recognized that the purity of their intellectual pursuits had been compromised by the public characterization of the university student as childishly distracted from — if not entirely apathetic toward — academics. By expanding financial aid opportunities, they attempted to remedy this corrupted image. Universities effectively placed their hopes in the self-supporting student and the societies and organizations that would pave his way.

The self-supporting student was conceptualized as inherently more academically focused than his wealthier counterpart.<sup>68</sup> He was imagined as devoted to academics even to the point of suffering. One author in *The Nation* describes the students that benefitted from such financial aid as, “the poor fellows who are holding on to college by the skin of their teeth, and scorning delights and living laborious days as the only means of avoiding instant ruin.”<sup>69</sup> The student who accepted financial aid stood in opposition to anti-intellectualism

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<sup>66</sup> Frank Aydelotte, “The American College of the Twentieth Century,” *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors*, 1926.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Horowitz, *Campus Life*, 20.

<sup>69</sup> “Rich Collegians”, *The Nation*, July 08, 1886. The Nation Archive.

<http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nih&AN=14002156&site=ehost-live>.



by the simple fact that he had to make sacrifices in order to attempt to obtain higher education. As a result, universities and colleges sought to increase the academic validity of their institutions by expanding financial aid.

Vanderbilt University was not exempt from the anti-intellectualism entrenched in its institutional peers. This was a reputation Chancellor Kirkland bemoaned in 1917, as he responded to a sharp-witted call for an abbreviated chapel service that was published in the student newspaper, *The Hustler*, stating, “The days are passing when the college student will chew off a bit of truth, swallow, and digest it. What delights college students most, I perceive, is some sort of mark and chess race on Dudley Field. Such things are enjoyable, it seems, but we would hardly say that they promote intellectual activity.”<sup>70</sup> In this seemingly benign clash between students and administration, Kirkland acknowledged a spirit of anti-intellectualism among Vanderbilt students whom he casts as more interested in games and empty diversions than any meaningful academic engagement. Financial aid welcomed less wealthy undergraduates into the student body who, because of their financial constraints, were projected as having the gravitas Kirkland and others believed Vanderbilt lacked. In this way, the Vanderbilt Aid Society was an effort by Vanderbilt University to stem the tide of anti-intellectualism within its walls.

## **Conclusion**

In a letter to the editor of *The Nation*, Frank Aydelotte of Bloomington, Illinois wrote a passionate letter concerning the state of higher education in America. He closed with the remark that, “We [American Higher Education] must work out our own problems, but we

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<sup>70</sup> Carey, *Chancellors, Commodores, and Coeds*, 146.

have not solved them yet.”<sup>71</sup> The university at the turn of the twentieth century faced many problems of its own. Its’ grand university vision was compromised by the rising expense of university operations, and undemocratic university system, and the negative popular characterization of college students. Vanderbilt, alongside its competitors, grappled with these problems and financial aid was no cure all for them. Even so, financial aid was a central feature of Vanderbilt University’s response to higher education challenges.

By the 1930s, Vanderbilt could still stand with Aydelotte in concluding that they had not solved all the problems that had confronted them in the late nineteenth century. But, they could say that they had worked out some of them, by using the Vanderbilt Aid Society as a means of engaging in the larger transitions of American higher education. These are transitions that would significantly shape the universities — among them Vanderbilt University — of today.

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<sup>71</sup> “Correspondence: The Rhodes Scholarship,” *The Nation*, 1910.

## **Chapter Two: “How shall a man get his education when he cannot pay for it from his own means?”**

### **The Vanderbilt Aid Society as a Progressive Aid Society**

In Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville’s account of his American travels in the 1830s, he famously remarked that, “Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations.”<sup>1</sup> The American impulse towards civil and voluntary organization, Tocqueville argued, was responsible for ensuring the nation’s stability and full exercise of democracy.<sup>2</sup> What Tocqueville could not anticipate, however, was the role that this pattern of community engagement would play in supporting the development of American higher education.

For Vanderbilt University at the turn of the twentieth century, developing a relationship with Nashville society was vital to its stability and continued growth. By leveraging Progressive Era philanthropic values, the Aid Society rallied Nashville women to the aid of Vanderbilt University and the students who attended there. Incorporating Progressive ideologies into its student loan structure and organizational mission enabled the Vanderbilt Aid Society to serve as a connection point between Progressive Nashville philanthropists and the new university. The relationship that resulted between the two groups over the subsequent years — a relationship solidified in the Vanderbilt Aid Society — would lend Vanderbilt University necessary community backing as it transitioned away from its early difficulties and towards a cemented position within American higher education. The dependence of the Vanderbilt Aid Society on the ideologies of the

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald Gamm and Robert D. Putnam, “The Growth of Voluntary Associations in America, 1840-1940,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 29, 4 (April 1, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Progressive Era, and particularly those ideologies regarding philanthropy, is essential to understanding how the Vanderbilt Aid Society managed to support Vanderbilt University by linking it to Nashville women.

### **History of the Progressive Era**

By the end of the nineteenth century, America was a profoundly different nation than the one Tocqueville had observed. Industrialization and urbanization had transformed the country with unprecedented prosperity as well as novel challenges. As Americans hailed the rise of cities, booming economic production, and unprecedented riches, they also worried about the plight of the urban poor, labor conditions, political corruptions, environmental destruction, and the other harrowing hallmarks of this new industrial age.

The American affection for forming associations, however, had not changed. Americans channeled their concern over the changes wrought by industrialization and urbanization into widespread social and political engagement — a set of responses that became the Progressive Movement. These Progressives, through a myriad of organizations, programs, and agendas, sought to restore morality, social justice, and democratic virtue within the trappings of the new Industrial Age. American politics and society would be so defined by these efforts that the period between 1890 and 1920 would come to be known as the Progressive Era — the age of reform.

Although the Progressive Movement would become notably political with presidents Theodore Roosevelt, William Taft, and Woodrow Wilson claiming association, it was first a social movement.<sup>3</sup> Progressives pursued reform through direct social action and

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<sup>3</sup> Barry D. Karl and Stanley N. Katz, "The American Private Philanthropic Foundation and the Public Sphere 1890-1930," *Minerva*, 19, 2, June 1981.

the primary feature of this social arm of the movement was philanthropy.<sup>4</sup> The period witnessed a dramatic rise in both the number of philanthropic organizations formed and the number of people involved in such organizations.<sup>5</sup>

With the rise in wealth brought by industrialization, an increasing number of Americans also had the means to engage in philanthropy where they had not before. Higher incomes and greater leisure time among the nation's most well-to-do citizens supported the feasibility of philanthropy as a means of social change. And so, in a bit of irony, the wealth of industrialization enabled efforts to correct the ills of industrialization. As one ladies magazine put it, "It is cruel to assure the helpless slaves of the needle that there is no hope for them; that they must submit to toil on for ever with the bare privilege of living. While men who have the power to relieve them reason thus, their case is hopeless indeed! But there will yet be found a few able and ready to help them."<sup>6</sup> Progressive philanthropists saw themselves as those 'few and able' among the masses of greedy capitalists. By their philanthropic efforts, Progressives hoped to rectify — or at least mediate — the harm caused by "the evils of the city home" and "that restless spirit of enterprise."<sup>7</sup>

As the Progressive movement expanded, so did their mission. More broadly, Progressives sought the betterment of their society as a whole — a betterment that they increasingly believed necessitated expanded educational opportunities. While historians have traditionally focused on the Progressive expansion of secondary education in what would come to be known as the high school movement, many Progressive philanthropists

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<sup>4</sup> Stanley N. Katz, "Philanthropy's New Math", *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Edward N. Saveth, "Patrician Philanthropy in America: The Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," *Social Service Review*, 54, 1 (March 1, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> "Home philanthropy," *Ladies Wreath*, 1846.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

also sought to support higher education through the provision of financial aid to needy students. It is this burst of educational philanthropy within American universities and colleges that saw the birth of the Vanderbilt Aid Society.

The Vanderbilt Aid Society did not explicitly ally itself with Progressivism, nor did it declare any particular political inclination or ideological association for that matter. Nevertheless, the Vanderbilt Aid Society was a Progressive institution in that Progressive ideologies motivated their philanthropic engagement with Vanderbilt student loans and shaped the design of the aid they provided. The efforts of these women — driven by and organized around a Progressive vision of society — supported Vanderbilt through its early establishment.

The placement of the Vanderbilt Aid Society within the larger movement of the Progressive Era is extended, in part, by the consistency between characteristics of Progressive women and Vanderbilt Aid Society women. Demographically, the women of the Aid Society were typical of Progressive philanthropists. Although Progressivism was a dominant enough feature in American society to define decades, it would be a mistake to consider it universal. By no means did all Americans ascribe to the ideals of Progressivism nor did Progressives pursue political and social reforms unopposed. However, while Progressives never presented themselves as a unified, cohesive body, there were certain commonalities among them. In general, Progressivism took hold in cities where the problems of urbanization were most concentrated. While the Progressive Era widely engaged the emerging middle class, Progressive philanthropists were typically members of the upper classes.

Both the location and the social status of the women who participated in the Aid Society are consistent with Progressives in general. The women of the Vanderbilt Aid Society hailed almost exclusively from prominent, established, and wealthy Nashville families. Their semi-annual Society gatherings were lavish affairs hosted by the members themselves.<sup>8</sup> The local *Nashville Banner* regularly reported on the floral arrangements, food, afternoon entertainment, and décor of the Society meetings. This further justifies an assumption of the upper-class status of the Society members, as other women would have been incapable of hosting such affairs and thus implicitly discouraged from joining.

The women of the Vanderbilt Aid Society were also city residents and so demographically consistent with Progressives in general. Although the South experienced industrialization and urbanization later than parts of the North and Midwest, Nashville was undergoing extensive growth and development around the turn of the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Hailed as the “Athens of the South,” Nashville was becoming a cultural center among the Southern states.<sup>10</sup> The city proclaimed its modernity and sophistication at the 1897 Tennessee Centennial Exposition. It also boasted a number of universities and colleges, including Vanderbilt University and Fisk University, as well as Ward Belmont College, David Lipscomb University, Peabody College, Roger Williams University, and Meharry Medical College.<sup>11</sup> As a result of the city’s burgeoning economic, cultural, and educational development, Nashville was more engaged in Progressivism than other Southern cities.

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<sup>8</sup> Edwin Mimes, *History of Vanderbilt*, Vanderbilt Aid Society Collection, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, 1946, 253-254.

<sup>9</sup> Don Harrison Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-1910* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 1990), 49.

<sup>10</sup> Christine Kreyling, *Classical Nashville: Athens of the South* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1996) xvi.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Ellen Pethel, “Athens of the South: College Life in Nashville, A New South City, 1897-1917” (doctoral thesis, Georgia State University, 2008), 1, [http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/history\\_diss/20](http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/history_diss/20).

This further supports the identification of the Vanderbilt Aid Society as a Progressive organization.

Progressives also boasted higher than average college education levels, particularly among those involved in educational philanthropy. Although the remaining records of the Vanderbilt Aid Society obscure such bibliographic details as the educational achievements of its' members, a large number of the women in the Society were the wives of central figures in the academic or administrative departments of the University. Because their husbands were overwhelmingly college educated, these women would have at least been exposed to the ideals of Progressivism and certainly not precluded from Progressive engagement by their educational histories.

And so, although the Vanderbilt Aid Society did not nominally identify with the Progressive movement, the economic status, location, and education levels of its members support their placement within Progressivism. While this demographic analysis has removed potential obstacles to labeling the Vanderbilt Aid Society as Progressive, it has not demonstrated that the Aid Society espoused Progressive ideals. To do so, one must examine the particular features of Progressive philanthropy, how those features were distinct from earlier philanthropic efforts, and whether those features were present in the work of the Vanderbilt Aid Society.

### **Defining Philanthropy**

While the need for financial aid for students was not the direct product of industrialization or urbanization, the accessibility of higher education to a broader range of income brackets was included within Progressive social concerns. The ideal of the Progressive imagined



society included higher education and the freedom of the dedicated individual to pursue his personal goals despite circumstantial obstacles — a freedom that required student aid. The women of the Vanderbilt Aid Society, inspired by the desire to see this Progressive vision realized within their community and at Vanderbilt University established a loan fund to provide just that.

Philanthropy was seen as the Progressive woman's social tool for addressing the troubles she witnessed around her. It was also a socially acceptable way for women to participate in civic life through an outlet that was not obviously political. Indeed, philanthropy was considered endowed with a higher moral capital than politics and, as such, was a superior form of engagement. The resulting centrality of philanthropy within the Progressive reform agenda and increased participation in philanthropic organizations across the country elevated philanthropy within national discourses. Americans began debating and promoting philanthropy on the public stage. Out of these discourses, came a concerted effort to define what philanthropy truly meant within the context of the new modern world. As more people organized around philanthropic efforts, Progressives increasingly desired to differentiate the work that they were doing from what others had done before them. Progressives saw themselves as facing new challenges wrought by industrialization and urbanization, and they wanted their contributions to seem new as well.

Progressives defined philanthropy, in part, by what it was not. Philanthropy was not charity. Distinguishing between charity and philanthropy enhanced the Progressive sense that their efforts were different than those of their predecessors. By casting charity as increasingly uninvolved and strictly monetary, Progressives, by contrast, cast philanthropy

as fully and personally engaged in the betterment of society. Although prior to the Progressive Era the terms 'charity' and 'philanthropy' had been used interchangeably, the distinction between the two was an expression of the priority that Progressives placed on reform. Both charity and philanthropy concerned themselves with relief of personal suffering, but only philanthropy was motivated by a greater desire for improvement of the flawed social infrastructure. One popular ladies magazine clarified the Progressive effort to distance philanthropy from charity, as May Mount stated:

Philanthropy and charity in the Christian sense mean the same thing — love of fellow-men; but in time the terms become differentiated until to-day philanthropist conveys to the average mind one who serves his neighbor in the way of helping him to help himself, and so reach a higher standard of manhood; and charity means the giving away of one's substance to relieve a person in need. An act of philanthropy is progressive; it sets in motion machinery which goes on turning out wise, or better, or healthier men and women. An act of charity ends with the deed.<sup>12</sup>

This distinction was somewhat problematic for the Vanderbilt Aid Society. The Society's sole purpose was monetary as they were explicitly established "to raise funds to be loaned to worthy students to assist them in their course at Vanderbilt University."<sup>13</sup> Their contributions were purely financial and Progressives often dismissed such donations as charity.<sup>14</sup> The remnant of this charitable model highlights variation within adoption of Progressive values. Progressive engagement existed on a spectrum, and pre-Progressive philanthropic ideas could certainly exist within an Aid Society still devoted to Progressive principles. The charitable, rather than philanthropic, orientation of the Society could also

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<sup>12</sup> May Wilkinson Mount, "Women in Philanthropy: The American Woman in Action," *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly*, July 1900.

<sup>13</sup> "Constitution and By-Laws of the Women's Aid Society for Students of Vanderbilt University", VASC, 1:1.

<sup>14</sup> "Women in Philanthropy: The Co-Operato," *The Phrenological Journal and Science of Health*, July 1899.

testify to the practical limitations of attempting to provide non-financial support for student aid that is, at its very heart, financial in nature.

Despite this financial focus, the Vanderbilt Aid Society can yet be considered philanthropic, as opposed to charitable, because of its support of higher education. Vanderbilt University was the ‘machinery which goes on turning out wise, or better, or healthier men and women’ to which Mount referred. Therefore, the efforts that fueled this machinery — namely, the Vanderbilt Aid Society — were themselves philanthropic in nature. The Society enabled students to pursue degrees from Vanderbilt University that would not alleviate immediate personal suffering in the way that Progressives understood charity, but would instead make it possible for them to lead more prosperous and productive lives. And so, despite operation in a manner that Progressives more often associated with charity, the Vanderbilt Aid Society supplied Progressive philanthropy complicated by its financial emphasis.

Another characteristic of philanthropy during the Progressive Era was that it was distinctly gendered. Philanthropists before the Progressive Era had gendered philanthropy by arguing that women possessed an inclination towards philanthropy that men did not.<sup>15</sup> Feminine sentiments and capabilities were generalized in the form of a “national female heart” bent toward philanthropy.<sup>16</sup> Women even described themselves as more capable of philanthropy. Because women assumed the roles of mothers and caretakers within the family, they argued, the assumption of these roles within larger society was a natural and nearly effortless shift.<sup>17</sup> After listing women’s historical achievements in politics, science,

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<sup>15</sup> “Feminine Philanthropy,” *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine*, August 1870.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Imogen Mercein, “Female Philanthropy: Second Paper,” *The Ladies’ Repository*, August 1858.

and literature, Imogen Mercein states with regards to philanthropy that, “however woman’s rights or capabilities on other points may be questioned — we here can claim not only equal but superior ground.”<sup>18</sup> By the time of the Progressive Era, philanthropy had already been deeply gendered in the discourses of the preceding decades.

Progressives altered these discourses, however, in order to incorporate the entrance of powerful men into the philanthropic sphere. As titans of industry like Andrew Carnegie increasingly directed their wealth toward Progressive projects, the discourse around philanthropy had to shift as well.<sup>19</sup> They argued that women were uniquely suited to the practical side of philanthropy rather than arguing that women were uniquely suited to philanthropy in general.<sup>20</sup> While male philanthropists were endowed with particular abilities for funding and management roles, female philanthropists were naturally gifted in their devotion to the execution of philanthropic projects. The distinction between male and female roles in Progressive philanthropy incorporated the rise of male philanthropic participation while retaining the gendered view that characterized pre-Progressive philanthropy.

This gendered distinction is reflected in the Vanderbilt Aid Society. Only women were allowed to be Society members, emphasizing the female responsibility for philanthropy. The money that the Society raised was then turned directly over to the bursar of the University and never lent out by the women of the Society themselves. Chancellor James Kirkland had initiated the Society’s founding and had written the Society’s Constitution. The exclusively male University administration had sole discretion

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel A. Wren, “American Business Philanthropy and Higher Education in the Nineteenth Century,” *The Business History Review*, 57, 3 (Autumn 1983).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

over the application of the funds raised by the women. In these ways, the Vanderbilt Aid Society is consistent with the gendered understanding of Progressive philanthropy. The men engaged in the executive, technical components of the work of the Society, while the women remained the ‘face’ of aid program and conducted the day-to-day responsibilities of building the fund.

Another feature of Progressive philanthropy within the Vanderbilt Aid Society was the influence of Protestantism. Protestantism and philanthropy have been ideologically linked since Protestantism’s sixteenth-century beginnings. Although Protestantism held that ‘faith alone’ and not good works provided salvation, good works<sup>21</sup> remained a natural expression of a heart devoted to God.<sup>22</sup> Progressives remained religiously motivated toward philanthropy, desiring to be welcomed into heaven as ‘good and faithful servants’.<sup>23</sup> With this Biblical imperative towards philanthropy and the church’s longstanding role as a provider of social aid, Christianity had had a profound impact on philanthropy in the years leading up to the Progressive Era — an impact that would persist throughout the Progressive Era.

Although desire for social reform remained the central motivation for Progressive philanthropists, this desire was shaped and supported by Protestantism. In an article for a ladies’ magazine, Imogen Mercein praised the philanthropic work of one “Mrs. Howard,” as she stated, “It was the soul-subduing, heart-impelling religion of Jesus which dwelt in her

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<sup>21</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Translated by Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1905).

<sup>22</sup> Deuteronomy 15:8, Proverbs 19:17, Isaiah 58:7, Isaiah 58:10, Matthew 5:42, Luke 12:33, Luke 14:13, 1 John 3:17

<sup>23</sup> Matthew 25:23

as a continual well-spring of benevolent action.”<sup>24</sup> Some Progressive philanthropists extended this religious motivation and interpreted Christ as a Progressive figure, thus identifying their own efforts as an extension and fulfillment of His earthly ministry. This more radical belief is evident in the statements of Donald Richberg, a journalist for *The Nation*. After defining the three propositions of Progressivism as “less autocracy and more democracy, less privilege and more service, less coercion and more cooperation,” Richberg concludes, “in the language of the Carpenter [Jesus Christ] who preached democracy, service, and cooperation against the autocracy, privilege and coercion of the master men of Rome and the priest of Jerusalem: ‘And whosoever would be first among you shall be servant of all.’”<sup>25</sup> And so, in both radical and personal ways, Protestantism functioned as a motivating impulse towards Progressive philanthropy.

While the Vanderbilt Aid Society documents do not include such insight into the personal religious motivations of the members, they do indicate that Protestantism influenced the Society as it did other Progressive philanthropists. When founding the Society, Chancellor Kirkland recruited members from the most prominent Protestant churches in Nashville.<sup>26</sup> Although in order to avoid isolating any potential donors, the Society did not associate itself with any one denomination, the Society recruited new members through Protestant church congregations and women’s associations within them.<sup>27</sup> Considering also that most of Nashville’s elite families were Protestant, the vast majority, if not entirety, of Aid Society women were likely Protestant themselves. The absence of explicit religious language from the Society’s documents should not be

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<sup>24</sup> Mercein, “Female Philanthropy: Second Paper.”

<sup>25</sup> “More Light on ‘Progressivism,’” *The Nation*, March 26, 1924.

<sup>26</sup> Aileen Bishop, “The Founding of the Vanderbilt Aid Society,” VASC, 1:20.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

understood as indicative of the absence of Protestant ideologies from the Society. Rather, it is the possible result of the selective preservation of the Society records, at the exclusion of more personal documents. Based on the affiliations of the Society members themselves, Protestantism heavily influenced the Vanderbilt Aid Society as it did Progressive philanthropy more generally.

Protestantism shaped Progressive Era philanthropy beyond motivations; it also influenced how, and to whom, aid was given. Supported by Protestant ideals, Progressive Era philanthropists focused on defining who was 'worthy' of their aid. This classification of aid recipients by their relative 'worth' was an extension of older distinctions between the deserving poor and the undeserving poor.<sup>28</sup> The deserving poor were those whose poverty was not a consequence of their own action or inaction. Those who were deserving of aid were those who experienced poverty only because providence had willed it. Progressive Era philanthropists maintained this definition, although they often added additional conditions to what it meant to be 'deserving'. For the Progressive philanthropist, it was not enough to have experienced difficulty through no fault of your own; one had to also display certain character traits that were believed to indicate aid worthiness. These traits were largely products of traditional Protestant and American values, including an independent spirit, a desire to work hard, honesty, and social respectability. This Progressive narrowing of the definition of the 'worthy' aid recipient is particularly visible in educational philanthropy and the work of the Vanderbilt Aid Society. `

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<sup>28</sup> Katz challenged the widely held belief that poverty was a consequence of the bad choices of the poor. See: Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (New York: Pantheon, 1990), 11.

Such a concern with an aid recipient's worthiness is derived, in part, from an understanding of philanthropy as an investment. Progressive philanthropists considered it imperative that they analyze their charitable giving with the same careful scrutiny that they applied to their business investments. Notable philanthropists including Andrew Carnegie and John Rockefeller criticized the misapplication of charitable funds.<sup>29</sup> In his famous "Gospel of Wealth," Carnegie instructed philanthropists to "consider all surplus revenues which come to him as simply trust funds, which he is called upon to administer."<sup>30</sup> Statements like Carnegie's reflect the Progressive philanthropist's concern with not just giving, but giving in the most productive manner.

The Progressive understanding of philanthropy as an investment is neatly represented in a promotional pamphlet published by the Vanderbilt Aid Society. In it, the Society asserts that, "investments in human personality cannot fail and dividends accruing from such investments are of far greater value than we can estimate."<sup>31</sup> This sentiment captures Progressive philanthropists' conception of aid as rooted in both sound investment and a profound confidence in the human spirit. It is this balance between financial considerations and reform-mindedness that distinguished Progressive philanthropy and the work of the Vanderbilt Aid Society.

By viewing philanthropic gifts as investments first and foremost, Progressive philanthropists placed greater emphasis on aid recipients and determining who qualified as a 'good' investment. The regular appearance of 'worthy student' in both formal and informal Society records indicates their belief that aid is something that is earned rather

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<sup>29</sup> Soma Hewa, "The Protestant Personality and Higher Education: American Philanthropy beyond the 'Progressive Era,'" *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 12, 1 (October 1, 1998).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> "To the Friends of Our Day," VASC, 1:9.



than something to which one is entitled because of the circumstances of their life. Need was not a necessary and sufficient condition for aid. It became the philanthropist's responsibility to distinguish between the worthy and the unworthy students. The very idea of the 'worthy' aid recipient implied that there are also 'unworthy' recipients. The Vanderbilt Aid Society exemplified Progressive notions of philanthropy as an investment by defining the 'worthy student.'

The first requirement of this worthy aid recipient was proximity. Progressive Era philanthropists prioritized aid within concentric circles around the philanthropist themselves. The Progressive philanthropist should focus on himself before his family, his family before his community, his community before his country, and his country before the world. This order was more than a suggestion; Progressive philanthropists viewed it as the morally responsible order in which to engage in aid. The author of one *Ladies' Magazine* article criticizes philanthropists who defy this order by focusing their generosity beyond their community while those within their community suffer. The author states:

True, our benevolent men are marvelously long-sighted. Justice may sit neglected upon their door steps, weeping tears of blood beneath her bandage, while charity draws their attention afar-off, clothed in fanciful garments, and clouded in the purple distance. But this will not always last...In our benevolent enterprises we shall sometime learn that the satisfaction of restoring the honest and worthy to their rights at home, will satisfy the heart better than those far off and doubtful charities that appeals.<sup>32</sup>

As this author vividly describes, the 'worthy' recipient of Progressive aid was not the one "clouded in the purple distance" but the one closest to the philanthropist himself.

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<sup>32</sup> "Home philanthropy," *Ladies Wreath*, October 01, 1846. American Periodicals. <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/americanperiodicals/docview/90589932/D27AF1E6A9F34C3BPQ/1?accountid=14816>.

Progressive philanthropy depended on this ordered extension of aid from one's own person outward.

The Vanderbilt Aid Society's exclusive focus on the Vanderbilt community is consistent with the Progressive focus on local philanthropy. The women of the Society concentrated their efforts on Vanderbilt students. There is no indication that they considered extending aid to any other students, even those at one of Nashville's many other universities or colleges. Many of the women lived within a few miles of Vanderbilt University and their children and husbands often worked or studied at Vanderbilt. The Society women directed their aid to those with an intimate connection to their own lives. In doing so, the Vanderbilt Aid Society reflected the importance of locality in defining the 'worthy' aid recipient within the Progressive philanthropic mindset.

The truly worthy recipient was not just one within the philanthropist's own community. Progressive philanthropists — including the Vanderbilt Aid Society — imposed a wide variety of behavioral and moral requirements on those who received their aid. These expectations included gratitude, for the ideal aid recipient should be nothing if not profusely grateful to the work of the philanthropist. In a reflection of this, the Aid Society regularly published short personal statements from loan recipients expressing their indebtedness to the Society. In these reports, one student stated, "if they [the Society] could know the extent of my gratitude, they would feel somewhat repaid."<sup>33</sup> This would have held true for the typical Progressive philanthropist, as they accepted their recipients' gratitude as return for their investment while they awaited evidence of larger social reforms.

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<sup>33</sup> VASC, 1:4.

Progressive philanthropists also sought aid recipients who were of generally good character. As one Vanderbilt Aid Society record keeper noted, “it was the character of the student who came to the University... that impressed Dr. Kirkland with the need of an organization to lend aid.”<sup>34</sup>

In addition to this good character, educational philanthropists in the Progressive Era had considerations of their own. They stipulated that their aid recipients be intelligent, with the Vanderbilt Aid Society stating that it exclusively sought to help “students of fine mind.”<sup>35</sup> They also expected a certain drive or purpose.<sup>36</sup> Nowhere was the Progressive emphasis on the ‘worthiness’ of an aid recipient more apparent, however, than in the construction of the ideal of the self-made man.

Although elements of the ideal of the self-made man existed prior to the Progressive Era, Progressive philanthropy concentrated these various ideological strains into a singular image. The ideal of the self-made man rested on Biblical associations of poverty with purity and deprivation with holiness. It was, in simplest form, the Progressive equivalent to the pre-industrial deserving poor. The ideal of the self-made man was an expression of the particular priority Progressive philanthropists placed on helping those who labored tirelessly — and somewhat, effectively — towards their own sustenance and success. Although he necessarily accepted aid, the self-made man sought aid only when he had exhausted his own options. He never understood or presented himself as abject, but rather balanced his humble circumstances with a hearty self-respect and even pride. It was this

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<sup>34</sup> VASC, 1:22.

<sup>35</sup> VASC, 1:17.

<sup>36</sup> VASC, 1:4.

man that Progressive philanthropists wanted to help — the man who would be redeemed with only a bit of help to “pass over the difficult point.”<sup>37</sup>

Within educational philanthropy, this ideal of the self-made man was applied directly to students. One article in *The Nation* focused on the particular caricature of the self-supporting student. The author describes, “the fellows who are holding on to college by the skin of their teeth, and scorning delights and living laborious days” as they “see all this splendor afar off, and spend few thoughts on it.”<sup>38</sup> The devoted student presented here is the student Progressive educational philanthropists sought to help — help that often came, however, at the exclusion of those who did not fit this profile of the suffering academic but were instead tempted by the more comfortable aspects of college life.

The Vanderbilt Aid Society expressed their adherence to this ideal of the self-made man through their discussion of student work. They encouraged — if not expected — their loan recipients to also work a job while in school. In their constitution, they permitted work scholarships of up to \$150, an amount well exceeding the average loan offered by the Society, if the student could earn a matching sum. This offer financially prioritizes the self-made man ideal above even the loans the Society was organized to provide. This priority was reflected in personal documents as well, for in a burst of philanthropic pride one Aid Society member wrote to an acquaintance that, “it would doubtless be of intent to you to see how almost uniformly the students who borrow from our loan funds are eager to help themselves at the same time.”<sup>39</sup> Such a statement captures the entrenchment of the

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<sup>37</sup> VASC, 1:1.

<sup>38</sup> “Rich Collegians,” 1886.

<sup>39</sup> VASC, 1:19.

Progressive ideal of the self-made man within the Society, as the author praises one who not only is willing to support himself, but jumps at the opportunity to do so.

As more women entered college — and sought aid to do so — the ideal of the self-made man was extended to women as well. Despite popular notions of the female scholar as distracted and self-indulgent, philanthropic organizations applied the same idealized model of the aid recipient to female students as they did male. Female students were expected to be dedicated to their studies and equally dedicated to maintaining their independence through hard work, just as male students.<sup>40</sup> Well into the early decades of the twentieth century, this ideal would prove challenging and even unrealistic because women had fewer opportunities than men for the sort of part-time work that leant itself to student life.<sup>41</sup> As female college enrollment continued to grow, however, so did the availability of aid for female students and, with it, their conformation to the ideal of the self-made woman.

For women as well as men, the ideal of self-sufficiency dictated to whom Progressive philanthropists gave their aid. As a motivating ideology, it reflected the role of Protestantism and older beliefs about what qualified one as deserving of help within Progressive philanthropy. Furthermore, the Vanderbilt Aid Society's incorporation of the ideal of the self-made man and woman situates it within the larger tradition of Progressive philanthropy. Like the other Progressive philanthropic groups operating around them, the Vanderbilt Aid Society selectively gave to those they believed were worthy of it. As a result, the assistance provided by Progressive philanthropists was nearly unprecedented in its extent, but also in the stipulations and expectations it placed upon those who received it.

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<sup>40</sup> Alice Hayes, "Can a Poor Girl Go to College?" *The North American Review*, May 1, 1891.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

The final expectation that Progressive philanthropists held for their aid recipients was for them to return the favor given them. Progressive philanthropists aspired for those they helped to one day help another. As one Vanderbilt Aid Society loan recipient promised, “when I shall have finished, I want to be a member of the Society and help some other girl in her education.”<sup>42</sup> The ultimate fulfillment of the ideal of the self-made man and woman — and the embodiment of Protestant virtue — was the aid recipient’s future engagement in philanthropy. This emphasis within the Progressive community on returning the favor allowed them to understand their efforts as initiating a cycle of benevolence that would continue long after their own donations had ended. By prioritizing among prospective aid recipients a willingness or inclination to one day extend aid to others, Progressive philanthropists sought to extend their influence beyond their immediate temporal and spatial reach.

This cyclical philanthropy was essential to Progressive ideologies. It allowed philanthropists pursuing even the most narrow of initiatives — like that of the Vanderbilt Aid Society providing loans to Vanderbilt students — to understand themselves as part of a larger Progressive movement seeking social reform. By encouraging aid recipients to become donors themselves, the Aid Society women saw themselves as establishing a philanthropic legacy that would ultimately play its small part in correcting the problems plaguing industrial American society. This grand vision lent stability and greater purpose to the limited, localized efforts of Progressive philanthropists.

The Progressive orientation of the Aid Society equipped the Society to function as a unifying point between Vanderbilt University and Nashville women. The incorporation of

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<sup>42</sup> VASC, 1:1.

Progressive ideals into the Aid Society drew Progressively-minded Nashville women into supporting Vanderbilt University and its students. In this, the women of the Vanderbilt Aid Society exercised their philanthropic energies within higher education while strengthening Vanderbilt's position within Nashville society. It was a relationship that — in keeping with the Progressive ideal — worked for the betterment of both town and gown.

## **Chapter Three: “A club is an assembly of good fellows meeting under certain conditions”**

### **The Vanderbilt Aid Society as a Women’s Aid Society**

While the Vanderbilt Aid Society provided financial aid to students at a crucial juncture in the University’s history, its members were by no means the only ones offering assistance to the institution and the students there. Although Progressive Era women’s voluntary associations like the Vanderbilt Aid Society often led philanthropic efforts for higher education, men engaged in educational philanthropy at Vanderbilt University as well. A catalogue for the 1920-1921 academic year testifies to such involvement.<sup>1</sup> It details the scholarships and awards available to Vanderbilt students, many funded by men. Mr. Wilbur P. Allen established the Dudley Fellowship in Chemistry in memory of Dr. William L. Dudley. Col. E. W. Cole provided \$125 a year through the E. W. Cole Fund. Mr. W. P. Boddie also offered \$125 a year through the Martha Boddie Fund and Mr. Boddie himself selected the beneficiaries. Mr. Allen R. Carter established the James Garland Carter Fund with awards of \$195 per year. The Whithorne Scholarship, established by Hon. W. C. Whithorne, paid the tuition costs of two Vanderbilt students. Col. W. F. Taylor offered two students \$50 towards their tuition with the Taylor Scholarship. The only award or scholarship for undergraduate students listed in the catalogue not established by a man was one provided by Elizabeth Elliston, the founder and first president of the Vanderbilt Aid Society. Men funded all of the other awards that were offered.

Men clearly participated in educational philanthropy at Vanderbilt University, but they did so largely as individuals, rather than as groups. The women of the Vanderbilt Aid Society were unique, therefore, not in their interest in educational philanthropy at

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<sup>1</sup> Register of Vanderbilt University for 1921-1922, Nashville, 1922.



Vanderbilt — an interest that men shared — but in their choice to engage in educational philanthropy within a structured organization. They could have individually donated money for scholarships or contributed to a loan fund for students as the men mentioned above did, but the women of the Vanderbilt Aid Society chose to do so collectively, within the confines of a formal group governed by formal laws. This decision asserts that there was some benefit to collective philanthropy for the women of the Vanderbilt Aid Society. This chapter will argue that that benefit was a social one. With this consideration, the relationship between Vanderbilt University and the Aid Society is elevated from one in which the Aid Society is a mere tool for Vanderbilt's development to a relational understanding that recognizes the benefits both Vanderbilt University and Nashville women received from the Aid Society. For, by participating in the Aid Society, women gained friendships ties and a means of participating in the male-dominated world of higher education.<sup>2</sup>

By the close of the nineteenth century, industrialization had brought Americans out of small communities and into new cities.<sup>3</sup> The seeds of Progressivism encouraged a broader consideration of American society and personal investment in its reform. Many an American was now connected to “the fates and struggles of his countrymen”<sup>4</sup> through voluntary associations. The Vanderbilt Aid Society was one such voluntary association. And yet the Society, and voluntary associations like it, while abandoning an isolationist view of

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<sup>2</sup> Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women*, 47.

<sup>3</sup> Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1966), 177.

<sup>4</sup> Don Doyle, “The Social Functions of Voluntary Association in a Nineteenth-Century American Town,” *Social Science History*, 1, 3 (Spring 1977).

the nation, were very much still “little societies formed to the particular tastes of their members.”<sup>5</sup>

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women remained separate from the social spheres enjoyed by their male counterparts. Chancellor Kirkland’s founding of the Vanderbilt Aid Society reinforces the distance that existed between male and female worlds. Aileen Bishop, a member of the Vanderbilt Aid Society, wrote of Kirkland, “it occurred to him that possibly other ladies in Nashville might be willing to help deserving students. The problem was how to reach them.”<sup>6</sup> This statement allows that there was enough intersection between male and female worlds for Kirkland to engage with Nashville women, but the fact that establishing contact with these women posed a problem at all attests to the separate social spheres of men and women in Nashville society. Many of the founding members of the Society that Kirkland planned to contact had connections to the Vanderbilt University, as Mamie Perkins Ransom’s husband served on the Board of Trust and Elizabeth Allen McGill’s husband was a professor of organic chemistry and the dean of the department of pharmacy there.<sup>7</sup> They attended many of the same Nashville churches as Kirkland and his colleagues did. Kirkland’s statement, therefore, testifies to the fact that even with a shared connection to Vanderbilt University and a common membership in local church congregations, men and women did not exist entirely within shared spheres. There existed points of interaction between social worlds that remained gendered.

These interactions shaped how the Vanderbilt Aid Society viewed itself as a social organization, as well as a philanthropic one. The women of the Society devoted significant

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<sup>5</sup> Doyle, “The Social Functions of Voluntary Association.”

<sup>6</sup> VASC, 1:23.

<sup>7</sup> John A. Simpson, *Edith D. Pope and Her Nashville Friends: Guardians of the Lost Cause in the Confederate Veteran* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 122.

time and resources to the group's social functions. Women did not engage in philanthropy for just the pure satisfaction of helping another.<sup>8</sup> Or, if they did, that was not all they received. Philanthropic participation offered tangible benefits, in the form of social connection and civic engagement at a time when women's roles outside the home were limited by custom and law.<sup>9</sup> But, while voluntary organizations including the Vanderbilt Aid Society did offer a degree of social autonomy to women,<sup>10</sup> caveats remained to this new freedom. There existed a dichotomy between philanthropy as a female institution and the dependence of these institutions on male authority.<sup>11</sup> This dichotomy within "organized womanhood in the Progressive Era" is a dichotomy enlightened by an internal analysis of the Vanderbilt Aid Society.<sup>12</sup>

The rise of industrialization heralded new opportunities for many Americans. This is a contested point, however, with regards to the American woman.<sup>13</sup> Scholars of women's history have cited industrialization as removing a central source of female authority in pre-Industrial society. Prior to industrialization, the home had been the center of economic production. Because women typically held authority within the home, such production supported female autonomy.<sup>14</sup> With industrialization, however, this autonomy was

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<sup>8</sup> Bari Watkins, "Woman's World in Nineteenth-Century America," review of *The Feminization of American Culture* by Ann Douglas, *American Quarterly*, 31, 1 (Spring 1979).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Kathryn Kish Sklar, "Organized Womanhood: Archival Sources on Women and Progressive Reform," *The Journal of American History*, 75, 1, (June 1988).

<sup>13</sup> Maxine Van De Wetering, "The Popular Concept of "Home" in Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of American Studies*, 18, 1, (April 1984); Bari Watkins, "Review: Woman's World in Nineteenth-Century America," *American Quarterly*, 31, 1 (Spring 1979).

<sup>14</sup> Watkins, "Woman's World in Nineteenth-Century America."

eclipsed as the home no longer functioned as a center of production and women were no longer empowered within it.

Rather than isolating women, the distancing of economic production from the home motivated women like those in the Vanderbilt Aid Society to seek autonomy and community within female social organizations — many of which were philanthropic in purpose.<sup>15</sup> This organizing impulse, among other factors, fostered the development of what scholar Carroll Smith-Rosenberg would famously term, “the female world of love and ritual.”<sup>16</sup>

For the women of the Vanderbilt Aid Society, this singular female world was instead crafted through a variety of organizational outlets. The women who participated in the Vanderbilt Aid Society rarely did so as their sole means of social engagement. Instead, they were involved in many different groups across Nashville. They created multiple female worlds through a range of charities, clubs, and societies. The Vanderbilt Aid Society was not a singular female world, a haven for the Progressive Era woman, but rather was part of a network of organizations that collectively comprised a philanthropic female world.

The diversity of the social engagements of these women is exemplified in the membership of the Vanderbilt Aid Society. Henrietta (Henri) C. Ewin, a founding member of the Society, also participated in the Ladies Hermitage Association, the Golf and Country Club, the Centennial Club, Vine Street Christian Church, the Housekeeper’s Club,<sup>17</sup> in

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Signs*, 1, 1 (Autumn 1975).

<sup>17</sup> The Housekeeper’s Club was a women’s group focused on municipal reform. They termed such reform ‘municipal housekeeping.’

addition to managing the Protestant Orphan Asylum.<sup>18</sup> Margaret Litton Early Jackson, another founding member, boasted a similarly extensive list of involvement. Jackson was a member within the Vanderbilt Women's Club, West End Methodist Church, the Daughters of the American Revolution, Harpeth Valley Garden Club, the American Red Cross, United Daughters of the Confederacy, and the Centennial Club.<sup>19</sup> An early member of the Society, Mamie Perkins Ransom included the Ladies Hermitage Association, the Centennial Club, the Women's Historical Association, the Nashville Art Association, and the MacDowell Club among her list of social and philanthropic commitments.<sup>20</sup> This multi-dimensional involvement highlights the social benefit of educational philanthropic participation.

Ewin, Jackson, and Ransom typify the social commitments of the women in the Vanderbilt Aid Society. Some of the commitments, like the Golf and Country Club, were more reflective of the personal tastes of the women who joined them. Others were common among all three women, such as the Centennial Club devoted to the beautification of Nashville and municipal reform in the city. Though not affiliated with Vanderbilt University, the overlap between the Centennial Club and the Aid Society emphasizes the devotion of the Aid Society women to the continued growth and improvement of Nashville — a process in which Vanderbilt University certainly played a part. In one membership campaign, the Aid Society suggested that the call for student financial aid should “inspire a generous response from those forward looking members of the community.”<sup>21</sup> This claims a connection between the work of the Aid Society and the future well-being of the Nashville community. This was a connection that the Aid Society recognized and hoped other

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<sup>18</sup> Simpson, *Edith D. Pope and Her Nashville Friends*, 192.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> VASC, 1:23.

prospective members would too. These women were invested in Nashville, and the Aid Society was a way for them to extend this commitment by supporting the establishment of Vanderbilt University because Vanderbilt — if it survived and succeeded — would lend Nashville prominence, growth, and prestige. And so, the women of the Aid Society used the provision of student loans to ensure just that.

For the women of the Aid Society, their involvement was one of their many social opportunities and their engagement with higher education one of their many philanthropic interests. Women were less likely to join the Society out of a singular passion for higher education philanthropy, but more often as part of a broad and varied philanthropic portfolio that ranged from flowers to disaster relief. This shifts the motivation for membership in the Vanderbilt Aid Society away from a driving “belief in the uplifting power of education” and towards a more complicated balance between philanthropic concern and relational engagement.<sup>22</sup>

### **Vanderbilt Aid Society as a Women’s World**

Although Smith-Rosenberg’s argument that women crafted a distinct female culture cannot be applied indiscriminately to the Vanderbilt Aid Society,<sup>23</sup> it is a useful framework for examining the benefits of participation in the Society for its members. While American society remained characterized by male hegemony, female social organizations offered women a means of continued participation. The Society functioned as a way for women to

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<sup>22</sup> Pamphlet “Ladies Aid Society for Students of Vanderbilt University,” VASC, 1:4.

<sup>23</sup> Smith-Rosenberg concludes that the emotional intimacy forged in these societies often developed into sexual relationships between women. There is no evidence that this is the case for any of the women of the Vanderbilt Aid Society. She also claims that, within female societies, women practiced covert hostility towards men, but this claim finds no support in the Society records either.

engage in a culture from which they remained largely excluded. Although women continued to be prohibited from engaging in the growth of Nashville and Vanderbilt through roles in higher education administration or local government, social and philanthropic women's groups like the Aid Society granted women the ability to exert some influence on their city and the University newly established within it. The Vanderbilt Aid Society, therefore, accorded women involvement in higher education and, by extension, Nashville's development, from within the confines of an insulated female world.

Membership in the Vanderbilt Aid Society provided women with the opportunity to engage in relationships within the organization, as well as within broader society. Although their philanthropic energy was focused outwards, the Society provided its members with valuable relational benefits. While the dislocation of industrialization had challenged some female social networks, the Vanderbilt Aid Society was a means of reestablishing those friendships disrupted by the changes of the nineteenth century. It created a social setting conducive for forming new connections as it allowed women to build friendships around shared interests and lifestyles rather than mere physical proximity. An example of these friendship ties between the women of the Society is uniquely preserved in a tribute given upon the death of Mrs. Claude Waller. At the Society's meeting, one member gave a speech praising the life of Waller, stating:

Mrs. Waller's civic and philanthropic interests were far-reaching. Her mind was just and keen, ever responsible to the best in literature and all the Arts. But above all, her heart was atune to the joys and sorrows of her fellow beings. She found richness and enjoyment in the friendship of the old and the young, the serious-minded and the gay.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> VASC, 1:24.

This eulogy reflects the bond that existed between Mrs. Waller and her fellow Society women. Rather than simply contributing money towards a collective fund, the women of the Society knew each other personally. One Society member, in keeping meeting minutes, included that the Society gathering combined her “three local favorites: a charming group of hostesses, a late spring afternoon, and nature at her loveliest.”<sup>25</sup> Such sentiments reinforce the Vanderbilt Aid Society as a tool for forging close friendship ties that encouraged the women who participated in the Society while also incentivizing their philanthropic giving to Vanderbilt University.

The women of the Society were self-conscious, however, of the way in which an emphasis on the benefit of friendship with the Society could trivialize their philanthropic work. One Society record reflects this concern as it explicitly defines “the purpose for which it [the Society] was created – not as a social club, but as a working organization to benefit the youth of the community.”<sup>26</sup> While this affirms the Society’s desire to be understood as more than a chattering group of women, their assertion that they are “not a social club” misses the value that their social connections lent their philanthropic work. By developing friendship ties, the Society added appeal for Nashville women, who were often isolated from male worlds and industrial development, to engage in building Vanderbilt University and its students. In this, the social function of the Society backed the philanthropic mission of the Aid Society, rather than detracting from it as they had feared, and so it is worthy of historical consideration.

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<sup>25</sup> VASC, 1:1.

<sup>26</sup> List of Homes in which the Vanderbilt Aid Society has met since 1894, VASC, 1:19.



This consideration should necessarily include the home as a central instrument for providing such social engagement within the Vanderbilt Aid Society.<sup>27</sup> Friendship ties between Society members were forged away from Vanderbilt University itself, on the comfortable settees of the private home. More than a pleasant nicety, these ties inform motivations for Society members' participation. Women certainly joined the Vanderbilt Aid Society out of a desire to alleviate the financial burden placed on students, but members were compelled by the relationships the group offered as well. And the home was where these relationships took center stage.

The home as an incubator for female friendships was not a twentieth-century phenomenon. The home had long functioned as a social sphere for women's relationships, from casual visits to formal parties.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the turn of the twentieth century did witness a change in the role of the home in fostering female friendships.<sup>29</sup> With the rise in women's associations, clubs, and organizations, the home became a central meeting ground for these new groups. The Vanderbilt Aid Society held all of its meetings in members' homes.<sup>30</sup> There are no recorded gatherings during this time that took place outside of the confines of the home of one of the members and it would not be until the middle of the twentieth century that the Aid Society would convene on the campus of Vanderbilt University itself. Instead, the women gathered over tea in the dining room and entertained each other in their sitting rooms.<sup>31</sup> The home transitioned from a familial retreat

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<sup>27</sup> Unmarked Selections from the *Nashville Banner*, VASC, Scrapbook.

<sup>28</sup> Maxine Van De Wetering, "The Popular Concept of 'Home' in Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of American Studies*, 18, 1 (April 1984).

<sup>29</sup> Kathryn Kish Sklar, "Organized Womanhood: Archival Sources on Women and Progressive Reform," *The Journal of American History*, 75, 1 (June 1988).

<sup>30</sup> VASC, Scrapbook.

<sup>31</sup> VASC, Scrapbook.

occasionally interrupted by friendly visits to a social space occupied by the new passions and pursuits that now occupied these women's lives.

The use of the home for Vanderbilt Aid Society meetings represents the dual nature of the Society as both philanthropic and social. They were devoted to both the business of building up the student loan fund at Vanderbilt as well as to creating a supportive, entertaining social space for each other. The Society was both professional and social and the space of the home could be used for both sides of that coin. In the home, one dealt with matters of business and matters of relationships. The Vanderbilt Aid Society women were not meeting in a space devoted to professional pursuits; they were meeting in the home — a space devoted to an amalgamation of family, friends, and work and a space that was all their own.

This is a dichotomy reflected in the structure of the meetings themselves. All Vanderbilt Aid Society meetings had both a business section, during which a report on the state of the loan fund was given, and a social section of entertainment and refreshments. The social section of the meetings claims the bulk of the records that the Society kept, as each meeting's amusement was described in detail and often published in the local *Nashville Banner*. One such article in April of 1928 is entitled "Vanderbilt Woman's Aid<sup>32</sup> Hears Interesting Talk by Mrs. Leslie Cheek" and describes how Mrs. Clark, "so delightfully and originally gave her impression [of her trip to Japan] that those in the large audience who had toured Japan were made to see new charm and those who knew the country only

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<sup>32</sup> Vanderbilt University was initially named the Women's Aid Society for Students of Vanderbilt University. It changed its name to the Vanderbilt Aid Society a few years following its' founding. Even after this official name change, however, the Society remained referred to informally as the abbreviated Women's Aid.

through books and importations had many things to learn.”<sup>33</sup> A more common social feature was a musical performance with one article praising “a beautiful program of music and readings” and another a “charming musical program immediately following the tea.”<sup>34</sup> The prominence of the social section portion of the meetings in the Society records — and the report of their social activities to a larger Nashville audience — reinforces the identity of the Vanderbilt Aid Society as both a philanthropic organization and a social club.

While the positioning of the home as the center of female engagement in philanthropy allowed women the benefits of friendship, it carried limitations as well. The home was the primary social instrument for the Vanderbilt Aid Society, in part, because there were few public spaces for such a group of women to meet. Beyond social clubs and church halls, many meeting spaces used by male organizations were unavailable to women’s groups.<sup>35</sup> The role of the home within female philanthropic efforts testifies to the restricted social spaces afforded to groups of women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The Vanderbilt Aid Society’s revolution around the home further limited who could be involved in the Society. Entertaining within the home required an amount of space and a level of financial comfort that prevented some women from participating. Although the Society’s by-laws list hostess duties as assigned on a voluntary basis, records indicate that hosting responsibilities rotated regularly throughout the membership. The Society recorded the refreshments, decorations, and entertainment provided by the hostesses each

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<sup>33</sup> VASC, Unprocessed Box, MSS 471.

<sup>34</sup> Vanderbilt Aid Society Collection, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, MSS 471, Unprocessed Box.

<sup>35</sup> Maxine Van De Wetering, “The Popular Concept of ‘Home’ in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Journal of American Studies*, 18, 1 (April 1984).

meeting. One meeting noted, “a silver basket of chrysanthemums was the central adornment of the table and silver candlesticks held yellow tapers, ties with butterfly bows of yellow tulle.”<sup>36</sup> Another meeting described how, “flanking the central arrangement were ivory tapers burning in the silver candelabra and throughout the reception rooms of the home groupings of peonies, daisies, iris and calla lilies were used in profusion.”<sup>37</sup> Providing all of this in the member’s home came at a cost and that was a cost insurmountable for those below a certain socio-economic status. The role of the home within the Society, therefore, imposed financial burdens that would have restricted membership to women of the upper-middle and upper classes.

### **Those Excluded**

While the Vanderbilt Aid Society provided women with female companionship and an outlet for meaningful involvement in higher education, these opportunities were not afforded all Nashville women. The Society remained economically, racially, and religiously restrictive.<sup>38</sup>

The Society was first restrictive with respect to resources. The women who stood to benefit from the female ties of the Vanderbilt Aid Society were those who were financially well-off. As discussed above, the expense of hosting the group was a deterrent itself. The records of one meeting indicate that the hostess, Mrs. Baxter, “apologized for such simple

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<sup>36</sup> “Vanderbilt Aid Holds First Fall Meeting with Mrs. Thomas Tyne,” VASC, 1:17, June 17, 1926.

<sup>37</sup> “Clip from the *Nashville Banner*,” VASC, Scrapbook, May 11, 1955.

<sup>38</sup>The Society was also racially restrictive. Although the group made no explicit note on the race of its membership, Society photographs indicate that the group was entirely comprised of white women at this time. This is consistent with the other Progressive Era women’s organizations in Nashville. While black women organized associations around similar philanthropic goals, they did so separate from white women’s organizations. Philanthropy remained a sphere in which America was racially divided, as did higher education.

refreshments” of “chicken salad, scalloped oysters, coffee, beaten biscuits, sandwiches, individual ices and cakes, almonds, and pink and white mints.”<sup>39</sup> Women who could not afford these luxuries piled on “serving tables veiled with a lace cloth” were unlikely to join the Society, even if the five-dollar a year membership fee alone was feasible.<sup>40</sup> When one of the treasurers for the Society, Mrs. Wallace, resigned from her position, the Society members gifted her with “a massive silver bowl and stool appropriately engraved.”<sup>41</sup> Such details further establish the Society as a group overwhelmingly populated by women who were wealthy and further precludes the membership of women who faced financial challenges. There were heavy implicit costs to Society membership, costs burdensome for anyone not in the upper-middle to upper class of Nashville society.

This economic exclusion is reinforced by an examination of the socio-economic status of the women who participated in the Society. Although the Society was ostensibly open to anyone who could pay the membership dues, it was dominated by women who hailed from the elite families of Nashville. The family of Mamie Perkins Ransom, a founding member of the Society, is described as having “long been prominent in the social life of Nashville and Tennessee.”<sup>42</sup> Henrietta (Henri) C. Ewin, another founding member, was the niece of John Overton who served as an advisor to President Andrew Jackson and, later, as a judge of the Superior Court of Tennessee.<sup>43</sup> The status of these women who founded and comprised the Society throughout its early decades resulted in membership that informally

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<sup>39</sup> VASC, 1:25.

<sup>40</sup> Unmarked Selections from the *Nashville Banner*, VASC, Scrapbook.

<sup>41</sup> VASC, 1:23.

<sup>42</sup> John A. Simpson, *Edith D. Pope and Her Nashville Friends*, 130.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

required an elite social standing within the city — and the economic resources that came with that standing.

The wealth and social standing of members of the Vanderbilt Aid Society is also evidenced in the life of Mamie Perkins Ransom. Ransom exemplifies the class of newly wealthy who benefitted from industrialization and the prosperity it brought to the once-isolated Nashville. Her husband owned the hardwood lumber company of John B. Ransom & Co., the success of which is detailed in a January, 1910 copy of *Packages*, a “published monthly in the interest of the wooden package and package stock industries.”<sup>44</sup> The article, written upon the death of John B. Ransom, describes the company as handling “between 50 and 60,000,000 feet of hardwood lumber per annum, doing an annual business of something over \$1,500,000, and extending its productive operations from the Allegheny mountains to mid-way of this Mississippi delta.”<sup>45</sup> His business’s success boosted Ransom and his family into the upper echelons of Nashville society. With such credentials, Mamie Ransom is another example of the prestige represented within the membership of the Aid Society.

Because the elite of Nashville society held membership in the Vanderbilt Aid Society, membership became associated with social standing, if not an affirmation of it. It was a self-reinforcing conclusion. As the Aid Society expanded into a group of Nashville elite, membership within it became a hallmark of social standing in and of itself. The Aid Society included “the most prominent social leaders” and this prestige imbued Society membership with its own social value divorced from its philanthropic contributions.<sup>46</sup> While this

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<sup>44</sup> “Death of John B. Ransom,” *Packages*, 13, 1 (January 1910).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> VASC, 1:1.

association supported the Society's work by adding to the appeal of membership, it was an association would prove inherently isolating to women of the lower and lower-middle classes.

The female companionship found within the Vanderbilt Aid Society was further limited to Protestant women. The Protestant orientation of the group was present from the Society's beginning, supporting the previous chapter's identification of Protestantism as motivating philanthropy. In seeking to establish a student loan fund, Chancellor Kirkland first pitched the idea of the Society to Protestant churches around Nashville. Desiring that the group not limit itself to a particular congregation, Kirkland included in the Society's constitution that, "any lady may become a member of this society by agreeing to pay the amount of the annual dues." As a result, unlike many aid associations that aligned themselves with a particular branch of Christianity, the Vanderbilt Aid Society remained multi-denominational. In dictating the rules for the determination of the Executive Committee of the Society, Kirkland mandated this denominational diversity as he wrote, "in appointing this committee, the President shall have regard to the various church organizations of the city and, of the members appointed by the President, not more than two call be from the same congregation."<sup>47</sup> By codifying a degree of religious diversity within the Society's Constitution and by-laws, Kirkland displayed a desire that the Society not become another women's church club but rather that it would rally women from different denominations to the support of Vanderbilt University. Kirkland recognized that the University needed the engagement of a broader group of women than a single

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<sup>47</sup> VASC, 1:1.

congregation could provide and so established guidelines for limited religious diversity to ensure that.

Beyond this single requirement, however, the group achieved little greater religious diversity. Protestant affiliation became a de-facto condition of membership and the Society remained comprised of women involved in the larger Protestant churches around Nashville including West End Methodist Church and Vine Street Christian Church.<sup>48</sup> Kirkland herself emphasized the necessity of Protestant church membership, as it allowed women to leverage congregational ties to raise additional support for the student loan fund.<sup>49</sup> The minutes of the Vanderbilt Aid Society's inaugural meeting in 1894 state:

It was resolved that each member of the Executive Committee<sup>50</sup> should be concerned with the enlargement of the membership of the Society in her own congregation. To this end, it was suggested [by Kirkland] that she use any or all of the following means: personal friends, the appointment of a committee of young ladies in her church to solicit names of members, or furnish the Secretary with a list of the names of the persons in her congregation who might become members.<sup>51</sup>

The women of the Society did not require membership within a local Protestant congregation, but they viewed it as an essential arena for their philanthropic work.

The Vanderbilt Aid Society is an example, therefore, of how women responded to continued social exclusion by creating separate social spaces for themselves in which they reaped the benefits of friendship ties and community engagement otherwise denied them. Within the Society, however, these benefits were informally limited to those who fit the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Vanderbilt University was affiliated with the Methodist Church until 1914. As a result, Kirkland and the women of the Vanderbilt Aid Society did not target Catholic congregations or non-Protestant religious groups as potential donors because they believed them unlikely to financially support a Methodist University.

<sup>50</sup> The Executive Committee was a sub-committee of the Vanderbilt Aid Society. At the Society's first meeting, twenty-six women were appointed to the Executive Committee.

<sup>51</sup> VASC, 1:17.



profile of the typical philanthropic society matron — a woman who was wealthy, white, and Protestant. Progressive philanthropic women may have been willing to work for the upliftment of a broader segment of society, but they remained largely unwilling to pursue such work alongside women of different socio-economic status and religious affiliations.

### **Problematizing the Female World of the Vanderbilt Aid Society**

The world of the Vanderbilt Aid Society was an imperfect haven of female companionship. It was not a purely separate social sphere for women to flourish in glorified companionship. Rather, the Society remained dependent upon its ties to the male world in Nashville and in Vanderbilt University. The continued interjection of the male presence into the female world of the Society reveals the extent to which women remained not in world of their own but subordinate to the authority exerted by male worlds. The Vanderbilt Aid Society was a group of women who found a way to influence American higher education despite exclusion from the dominant spheres of collegiate life. To overlook the continued male presence within the Society is to overlook the challenges the women of the Society faced. The Society was a female world, but it was a female world that existed within a larger culture that still denied women full participation in the promises of the turn of the twentieth century — promises that included the development of American higher education.

Male authority was exerted within the Vanderbilt Aid Society since its founding day. It was Chancellor James Kirkland who envisioned the Society and Kirkland who wrote its first constitution and by-laws.<sup>52</sup> The Society did not determine the interest rates on the

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<sup>52</sup> VASC, 1:1.

loans that it funded,<sup>53</sup> nor did the women decide the size or number of the loans provided.<sup>54</sup> The women were solely responsible for amassing the funds to be loaned out, funds which they “derived wholly through these [Vanderbilt Aid Society] memberships, together with additional gifts and interest on funds.”<sup>55</sup> The interest mentioned here was the product of the investments managed by the male administrators of student loans. Even the entertainment portion of the Society’s regular meetings often featured male speakers.<sup>56</sup> In this way, the exertion of male authority within the Vanderbilt Aid Society undermines the historical understanding of women’s voluntary associations as entirely removed from male influence.

This is evidenced within one of the only interactions documented between the Aid Society and Vanderbilt University administrators of the Aid fund. In a letter to Mrs. Alvin E. Keller, the Secretary of the Vanderbilt Aid Society, Chancellor Harvie Branscomb writes that he had recently been made aware of “a formal action of the Vanderbilt Aid several years ago giving certain directions to the University as to the way in which the loan fund should be used.”<sup>57</sup> Branscomb notes, however, that although the Vanderbilt Aid Society made these requests “several years ago,” he was “not sure that we ever received any copy of the action” and so had not instituted any of the approved changes. Branscomb writes that his “first rule is to conform to the wishes of the donor,” but this letter reveals an instance in which the wishes of the Aid Society had been neglected. Male administrators

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<sup>53</sup> VASC, 1:4.

<sup>54</sup> VASC, 1:1.

<sup>55</sup> VASC, 1:22.

<sup>56</sup> VASC, 1:23.

<sup>57</sup> VASC, 1:1.

exerted supreme authority over the Aid Society fund even when the women attempted to exercise such authority themselves.

One notable exception to the dependent financial posture of many Society members — many of whom relied on their husbands or other male relatives for their financial support — is Mrs. Elizabeth Elliston. The first president of the Vanderbilt Aid Society, Mrs. Elliston held independent wealth having inherited the estate of her husband, W. R. Elliston, following his death in 1870. She devoted much of this wealth to her philanthropic pursuits, Vanderbilt University and the Vanderbilt Aid Society foremost among them. She gave \$5000 to the establishment of the Elliston Scholarship at Vanderbilt.<sup>58</sup> She also gifted plots of land from her extensive plantation to the formation of the campus of Vanderbilt University, selling one tract to Bishop Holland McTyeire for only five dollars in June of 1873.<sup>59</sup> This generosity “made [Mrs. Elliston’s] memory one of Nashville’s sweetest heritages,” but it also countered the standard of men providing the financial backing for women’s philanthropy. She remains the exception within the Vanderbilt Aid Society, however, for few of the members were as wealthy or as independent as Mrs. Elliston.

The notion of the female world of the Vanderbilt Aid Society was further eclipsed by the fact that the Society operated within the male-dominated Vanderbilt University. Although the Aid Society was a private group separate from the University, the Society had no ability to offer loans apart from the University, and so its philanthropic agency was dependent upon the male world of the University.<sup>60</sup> Vanderbilt did allow some female

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<sup>58</sup> Vanderbilt University 1920-1921 Catalogue, 1922.

<sup>59</sup> Lyle Lankford, “Women to the Rescue,” *Vanderbilt Magazine*, August 06, 2009. Accessed April 13, 2016. <http://news.vanderbilt.edu/vanderbiltmagazine/women-to-the-rescue/>.

<sup>60</sup> VASC, 1:4.

students, but it was operated and maintained under male leadership.<sup>61</sup> The Aid Society, therefore, while a women's organization, was powerless apart from the University and the men who built it.

There remained an interesting point of independence, however, between the University and the Aid Society in the allocation of student loans. Although Vanderbilt University would retain a maximum quota system for female students until the early 1930s, the Aid Society did not apply this quota to the division of their loan funds between male and female students. Throughout this study's time period, the Board of Trust dictated that the percentage of female students at Vanderbilt not exceed about one-third of the undergraduate student population.<sup>62</sup> But, for over one-half of the years between 1894 and 1930, more than one-third of the students who received a loan from the Aid Society were female. While the surviving Society records offer no explanation for this incongruence, it does provide evidence of one case in which the dictations of the male-dominated Vanderbilt University were not super imposed onto the decisions of the female Vanderbilt Aid Society. This suggests that the authority of male administrators did not preclude the Society from offering more equitable treatment to female students than the University did.

And so, there are two important limitations to the understanding of the Vanderbilt Aid Society as a female world. For one, it was a female world accessible to only a small segment of Nashville women. Secondly, it was a female world that experienced the continued presence of male authority and direction. Even with these caveats in mind, understanding the Aid Society as a female world informs the historical legacy of the Aid

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<sup>61</sup> VASC, 1:4.

<sup>62</sup> Robert McGaw, *A Brief History of Vanderbilt University* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1983), 38.

Society, the women who participated in it, and its philanthropic impact. The women of the Aid Society valued the philanthropic mission that they were organized around, as they valued the social connections this mission brought them.

Examining these ties within the Vanderbilt Aid Society informs a wider understanding of the women's organizations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It has been well noted that these women engaged in different arenas of philanthropy — educational philanthropy being but one of them.<sup>63</sup> Less prominent in the historical literature, however, are the benefits the philanthropists themselves received from such involvement. Groups like the Vanderbilt Aid Society provided women with valuable community outside of the limited social sphere of the family.

It was also a way for them to connect to the dynamic narrative of higher education in America. The nation's higher education system was evolving, as was Vanderbilt University itself. Aside from the role of an undergraduate student, this was an evolution from which women remained largely excluded. The Vanderbilt Aid Society was, therefore, a rare opportunity for women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to engage in higher education and, in doing so, to engage with each other.

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<sup>63</sup> Kathryn Kish Sklar, "Organized Womanhood: Archival Sources on Women and Progressive Reform," *The Journal of American History*, 75, 1, (June 1988).

## **“Bearing fruit many fold”: A Conclusion to the Aid Society**

Cornelius Vanderbilt, in a letter to Bishop Holland McTyeire regarding his founding gift to Vanderbilt University, wrote, “I tender my personal expressions of extreme regard, trusting that the healthful growth of the institution may be as great as I know it is your desire and determination to make it.” The will of Bishop McTyeire alone, however, would prove insufficient to make the newly minted Vanderbilt University great. In the coming years, the university would also have to rely upon its relationships with the Nashville community and one of the organizations that helped to develop that relationship: the Vanderbilt Aid Society.

In the first decades of its operation, Vanderbilt University struggled to establish itself within the increasingly competitive landscape of American higher education. In addition to the threat of financial insolvency, it faced an extensive fire in 1905, repudiation by the Methodist Church following its split from the Church in 1914, complicated negotiations for land from Peabody College, and the near closure of the school’s doctoral programs at the start of the twentieth century. As University historian Robert McGaw put it simply, “problems multiplied.”<sup>1</sup> While existing historiographies attribute Vanderbilt’s survival of this difficult time primarily to administrative decision-making, the laurels do not rest with university leadership alone. Such a history overlooks the contributions made by the larger community backing Vanderbilt University — a community that was built and strengthened by the Vanderbilt Aid Society.

By engaging Nashville women in providing financial aid for Vanderbilt students, the Vanderbilt Aid Society utilized Progressive Era philanthropic ideologies to establish a

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<sup>1</sup> McGaw, *A Brief History*, 28.

connection between the young Vanderbilt University and the city that surrounded it. It was national unity that Cornelius Vanderbilt had in mind when he donated one million dollars to Vanderbilt University's establishment, as he wrote, "if it shall contribute...to strengthening the ties which should exist between all geographical section of our common country, I shall feel that it has accomplished one of the objects that led me to take an interest in it."<sup>2</sup> But, what Vanderbilt did not anticipate, is that it would be the local connection that allowed the University to weather its early troubles and rise to regional significance.

In addition to supporting this relationship between town and gown, the Vanderbilt Aid Society provided a space for women to insert themselves into the narrative of American higher education. It was a narrative that had long excluded female participation, remaining instead a male-dominated sphere well into the twentieth century. Educational philanthropy, like that provided by the Vanderbilt Aid Society, granted women a means of limited involvement in the nation's burgeoning network of universities and colleges. The Aid Society, therefore, supported not only the aspirations of individual students, but also the social engagement of Nashville women and the greater institutional mission of Vanderbilt University. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the relationship between the Vanderbilt Aid Society and Vanderbilt University was one that encouraged the goals of both parties. But, relationships — as with institutions — change over time.

By 1930, Vanderbilt University could no longer be considered an institution in crisis. Due, in part, to the efforts of the Vanderbilt Aid Society, it had moved past its early troubles

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<sup>2</sup> McGaw, *A Brief History*, 15.

and achieved relative success. It was well-renowned as a regional university, drawing its student body from Nashville and the surrounding areas, and established as a reputable institution of higher education. At \$2,029,086 in 1916, its endowment had grown large enough to shoulder the cost of some students who could not afford full tuition charges and its connection to Nashville society was now a more solidified bond. Although the Vanderbilt Aid Society continued to provide substantial funds for student loans to the University, these changes within Vanderbilt fundamentally altered the development role the Vanderbilt Aid Society had once held as the University became increasingly established.

Other changes were taking place too — changes that undermined the work of the Vanderbilt Aid Society. Following the Great Depression, philanthropic ideologies shifted away from the Progressive model under which the Aid Society had been created. Progressive philanthropy once centered on private organizations offering aid to the deserving poor, but the trauma of the Great Depression had disenchanted many Americans with such a philanthropic strategy. The private sector could not provide adequate aid when even the private sector proved vulnerable to economic shifts. This weakness was evidenced within the Vanderbilt Aid Society, as it sought to counter lagging donations during periods of financial downturn.<sup>3</sup>

These experiences fundamentally altered beliefs about where — and with whom — the responsibility for helping those in need lay. With the introduction of President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal initiative, Americans increasingly responded that the burden of providing aid, including student aid, sat with the government. This slow shift away from private philanthropic organizations and towards more centralized aid efforts was

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<sup>3</sup> VASC, 1:20.



reinforced within higher education by the changing tide of student enrollment. Following World War II, rising incomes combined with the G.I. Bill to create a new rush of students interested in attending universities and colleges. The number of students seeking higher education, however, quickly outpaced the availability of financial aid within local groups like the Vanderbilt Aid Society. In 1921, Mrs. Foster of the Aid Society would write, “the University has grown rapidly within the past three years and the Society must grow also if it is to meet the needs of the present situation.” This “present situation” would soon outpace the reach of the Vanderbilt Aid Society. Small philanthropic efforts could no longer raise the capital needed to meet the demands of a new class of collegians. It was into this dilemma, then, that the government intervened.

The National Defense Education Act provided federal funding for student aid, in addition to supporting other facets of higher education. Following its passage in 1958, the government continued to offer expanded and increasingly comprehensive student aid programs. Vanderbilt University joined with institutions across the country in taking advantage of these federal and state funds for financial aid. As Society member Aileen Bishop noted in a 1961 article in the *Vanderbilt Alumnus*, “now there are so many other loans from the government and from the University.”<sup>4</sup> This had not been so when the Society came into being, but time had changed the nature and volume of financial aid available to the American student.

And so, by 2009, the significance of the Vanderbilt Aid Society to Vanderbilt University had been steadily eclipsed by changing ideologies of philanthropy, the involvement of the government in financial aid for students and, finally, Vanderbilt’s own

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<sup>4</sup> Aileen Bishop, “The Founding of the Vanderbilt Aid Society,” *Vanderbilt Alumnus*, 1961, VASC, 1:23.

institutional success. Chancellor Nicholas Zeppos's Opportunity Vanderbilt program, a grant and scholarship-based initiative was the final installment in a series of developments that had distanced the unchanging Vanderbilt Aid Society from the ever-changing Vanderbilt University.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the Vanderbilt Aid Society was an organization stuck in time. It still reflected the Progressive Era philanthropic values under which it had begun and it was still designed to support a Vanderbilt University yet unable to support itself. Vanderbilt University had outgrown the challenges that it had faced at the turn of the twentieth century, while the Vanderbilt Aid Society looked much the same as it had then. Its constitution, by-laws, financial design, even its meeting agendas, had remained nearly untouched. By 2009, the Vanderbilt Aid Society was no longer as critical to Vanderbilt University as it had been during the University's early years. The local support from the Aid Society had allowed Vanderbilt University to achieve regional significance but, by the close of the twentieth century, the University was rising again to national prominence. It was returning to the national stage on which Cornelius Vanderbilt had imagined it. Although the University carried the support of the Aid Society as an unrecognized part of its history, it was support that was no longer necessary. The Vanderbilt Aid Society had been critical in translating Cornelius Vanderbilt's national vision into a regional success, but the regional success depended on other resources to return its institutional mission to the national scale. It is with this recognition, and with the support of Chancellor Zeppos, that the Vanderbilt Aid Society disbanded.

Although it has since ceased to operate, the role of the Vanderbilt Aid Society in supporting the early establishment of Vanderbilt University has not ceased to be

significant. While historical literature has previously overlooked the contribution the Aid Society made to Vanderbilt University's growth and success, the Vanderbilt Aid Society was vital to the University's initial development as it leveraged Progressive Era philanthropic values to engage Nashville women in supporting the fledgling University and, ultimately, its educational mission.

In doing so, the Vanderbilt Aid Society used the provision of student loans to form a linkage between Vanderbilt University and the Nashville community surrounding it — a connection Vanderbilt would need to rely on in the years to come. The act of each Society member paying her monthly dues into the Vanderbilt Aid Society loan fund constituted a repeated demonstration of personal investment in the survival of Vanderbilt University. Over time, these investments constituted a symbiotic bond between the town of Nashville and the gown of Vanderbilt that supported the University's continuance, while offering students a means of financing higher education and offering Nashville women both friendship ties and a narrow entrance into the male world of higher education.

As historical interest builds for institutions of American higher education and the events that brought these institutions about, one must remember that universities and colleges do not exist in isolation. They are part and parcel of the communities in which they reside. Establishing relationships with those beyond the ivory tower of academia is vital to supporting their educational missions. Although the Vanderbilt Aid Society no longer exists and has been, until now, unrecognized within historical literature, the Vanderbilt Aid Society can rightfully claim a piece of responsibility in bringing Vanderbilt University out of the trials of its first decades and into its current standing within American higher education. And that is a claim that does not deserve to be forgotten.

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