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Elements in Eighteenth-Century Connections

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THE LONDON FOUNDLING HOSPITAL AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY OBJECTS OF CHARITY

Recovering the Digital Archive

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Abstract: The Foundling Hospital was established in London in 1739 to save impoverished infants from destitution and abandonment by separating them from their mothers and raising them in an institutional setting. The Hospital, which also housed an art collection, concert series, and fashionable park, became a monument to the largess of the benefactors willing to support the reshaping of supposedly unwanted babies into “worthy” citizens useful to their nation. In 2024, the Coram Foundation digitized parts of its voluminous archive from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, making these records available to the public in unprecedented ways. Through a close examination of the material artifacts of the Hospital, this analysis of the first few decades of this institution makes visible the uneasy tension between the perspective of the benefactors and the experiences of foundlings from the moment of separation from their birth parent(s) through their years associated with the Foundling Hospital.

Keywords: benevolence (charity), childhood, archive, Foundling Hospital, Thomas Coram

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Contents

Introduction	1
1 Reception Day	14
2 Foundlings	41
Conclusion	64
Works Cited	71