

## Recovering women

January 08, 2013 2:15 AM Aidan Smith  
asmith41@tulane.edu

New Orleanians may know the [Poydras Home](#) only as a facility for senior citizens. Historian Pamela Tyler wants to tell them more, to retrieve the stories of those who benefited from the charitable organization's good works as well as those women whose leadership made it all possible.



Pam Tyler, center, reviews historic photographs with undergraduate students in the Newcomb Archives. In addition to her research at Tulane, last semester she taught a course on the History of Women in New Orleans. (Photo by Jackson Hill)

Founded in 1817 by a small group of concerned women as a haven for orphaned girls left destitute in a city plagued by epidemics, poverty and a lack of social services, the community was first known as the Female Orphan Society. Wealthy French merchant Julien Poydras, an early supporter, donated a home at St. Charles Avenue and Julia Street.

In 1857, needing to expand the facility, the all-female board of managers undertook a major construction project and built the Poydras Home at Magazine Street and Jefferson Avenue in uptown New Orleans.

As the trend toward foster care for children progressed in the mid-20th century, the mission gradually evolved from sheltering homeless girls to providing elder care.

As a visiting historian at the [Newcomb College Institute](#), Tyler immersed herself in the Poydras Home records, preserved by the [Louisiana Research Collection](#) at Tulane University. Her research reveals that the Poydras Home may be the oldest continuously women-led organization in the country.

“This institution, which provided care for thousands of girls over the years, has been operated by a volunteer board of managers, who, to this day, are all women,” Tyler says. “They created it, nurtured it, financed it, managed it, and, on more than one occasion, saved it. They knew ridicule and skepticism, particularly in the early years when they challenged ideas about gender propriety. Theirs is a story I am eager to tell.”

Her book, *More Durable Than Marble: A Bicentennial History of the Poydras Home and the Women Who Made It*, will be available in preparation for the organization's bicentennial celebration.

*Aidan Smith is external affairs officer for the Newcomb College Institute.*