Elizabeth Schuyler was born 258 years ago, on August 9, 1757, to two New York aristocrats, General Philip Schuyler (the first United States Senator of New York) and Catherine Van Rensselaer. Elizabeth was described by a close friend as having, “a loving nature, blended with a rare sense of justice...all these (she) dedicated to the care of orphan children.”

In 1780, Elizabeth married the young and dashing Alexander Hamilton, an improbable match for someone of her prestigious background. An emigrant from the West Indies, an illegitimate child, poor, abandoned by his father, effectively orphaned when his mother died a few years later, Hamilton was not exactly the son-in-law the Schuylers had expected for their daughter. However, Hamilton was intelligent, charming, had attended King’s College (today’s Columbia University) and had influential friends. At the time of their marriage, Hamilton was an aide-de-camp to General Washington during The Revolutionary War and later became the Secretary of the Treasury in George Washington’s administration. It was, on her part, love at first sight and on his part, his love for her was expressed in the many letters he wrote to her. Several months before their marriage, while he was away at war, he wrote, “...you become dearer to me every moment. I am more and more unhappy and impatient under the hard necessity that keeps me from you.” Their personal relationship was one of love, mutual respect and common interests. He also shared her love of children and throughout their lives they cared for orphans and children in need, along with their own children. They provided a home to George Washington Lafayette, the son of their friend and Hamilton’s former fellow officer, The Marquis de Lafayette when he was imprisoned during the French Revolution. When, after twenty-four years of marriage, Hamilton was killed in 1804 in a duel with his long time political enemy, Vice President Aaron Burr, Elizabeth was desolate. Yet, in spite of the dire financial circumstances in which his death left her, she remained very active throughout her fifty years of widowhood by helping others with her time, raising funds from her influential friends, or lobbying the New York State Legislature for funds which were granted.

Less than two years after her husband’s death, on March 15th, 1806, Elizabeth and a small group of women had gathered to form the Orphan Asylum Society to care for children who were orphaned from epidemics of cholera and yellow fever. Their mission was clear, “To help the afflicted and the needy others have forgotten; to provide them with the education and training they need to become productive, contributing members of society: to help them realize their capacity for happiness and success which belongs to all human beings....” On May 1, 1806 they opened the doors of the Society’s first home, a rented two-story frame house on Raisin Street. Twelve orphans were admitted in the first six months and by the end of the year, 200 orphaned children had been admitted... and the rest, as they say, is history!

PHYLLIS BARR
Archivist/Historian