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Our Rich History: Covington Ladies Home celebrating 130th year, serving senior women with quality care
By Bill Stolz  
*Special to NKyTribune*

2016 marks the 130th year of operation for the Covington Ladies Home located at 702 Garrard Street in the Licking Riverside Historic District. The organization, originally called the Home for Aged and Indigent Women (still visible in the stone above the main entrance today), was founded in 1886 by Covington resident Ellen B. Dietrick, an early advocate for equality and education for women, with the goal of providing care for women over the age of 60. Today, 130 years later, the mission of the Covington Ladies Home is the same, “to serve senior women, regardless of their economic circumstances, by providing high quality personal care in a community based and homelike environment.”

In February 1884, the Ohio River reached a level of 71 feet, devastating Covington and surrounding communities. Dietrick, concerned about the plight of many women and families displaced by the flood, joined with other Covington women to form the Women’s Educational and Industrial Union.

The Union provided training classes and an employment bureau for women in need. Particularly concerned about women over 60 with no family or financial support, Ellen created the Home for Aged and Indigent Women with the goal of providing care and shelter. The Home became an independent organization in 1887 and was incorporated by the Kentucky General Assembly in March 1888.

Ellen Battelle Dietrick was born in Morgantown, Virginia (now West Virginia), to Reverend Gordon Battelle (1814-1862) and Maria L. Tucker (1818-1899) in 1847. Gordon Battelle was a Methodist minister, educator, and delegate to the West Virginia’s Constitutional Convention in 1861. At the outbreak of the Civil War, he volunteered for service with the First Virginia Volunteers (a Union unit), but, sadly, died in 1862 of Typhoid Fever, possibly contracted while conducting sanitary visits in Washington, D.C. Ellen married William A. Dietrick, a bookkeeper for various iron works, on August 11, 1868, in Wheeling, West Virginia, and they had two children: Louise (1869-1972) and Marguerite (1872-1962). The Dietrick family moved to Covington about 1876 and stayed until 1892, when they moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts. By the 1890s, Ellen gained national prominence through her articles and opinion pieces, as an advocate for equal rights and suffrage for women. She died unexpectedly on November 25, 1895, from an infection after surgery. Her passing was noted in newspapers across the United States.
The first Board of Lady Managers consisted of prominent Covington women, including Charity Warner (1830-1895), Susan “Sue” Crawford (1828-1894), Augusta W. Ford (1840-1907), and Dietrick. Charity Warner was elected as the first president of the Board and served until her death in 1895. The original charter required men to assist with financial and legal issues, so Jonathan Hearne, Frank Ford, and Joseph Chambers were appointed. Hearne, a prominent businessman and philanthropist, quickly became a champion and benefactor. When Hearne died in 1905 he bequeathed $10,000 (roughly $266,000 today) as an endowment to the Home.

The first location was a house on the northwest corner of 10th and Russell Streets. The first residents, three “inmates” (as described in the early newspaper accounts) and a matron, moved in on January 6, 1887. The November 23, 1893, Kentucky Post reported 18 women living there and stated “the Home for Aged Women, at the corner of Tenth and Russell Streets, today, presents inside and outside, an air of bustle and animation going on which proclaims that something unusual is going on.”

The Home, from the very beginning, has been self-sufficient, raising funds and receiving donations of food, furniture, clothing, and other supplies. Funds were raised annually through financial contributions and community events like “Preserve Day,” where jars of preserves or canned fruits and foods were donated, or “Tag Day,” with individuals receiving a tag when making a financial donation.

The original building quickly became crowded, so in 1889 the Board began raising funds to purchase a property on which to build. The current property at 702 Garrard was purchased from Amos Shingle.

Shinkle donated a portion of the sale back to the home for the construction. The new building was designed by Cincinnati architect H.E. Siter to house up to 50 residents and was completed in 1894 at a cost of $20,000.

Then in 1972, the name was officially changed to the Covington Ladies Home.

There have been many other firsts in the history of the Covington Ladies Home, including plumbing, electricity, radio and television, elevators, and private rooms. Since its founding in 1886, the residents, staff, and board members have experienced many changes, from the automobile to the computer age, and witnessed events, from the local to the international level, that have shaped the world we live in today. Now into the 21st century, the dreams of Ellen Dietrick are still going strong at 702 Garrard Street.

To commemorate the anniversary, Bill Stolz will present “The Covington Ladies Home: 130 Years and Counting” on Monday, May 23, at 6:30 p.m. in meeting room 3 of the Covington Library. Bill will share the history of the Home along with a variety of local, national, and world events witnessed by the residents since the Home’s founding in 1886.

*Bill Stolz is Local History and Genealogy Librarian at the Kenton County Public Library.*