

## **General Convention of The Episcopal Church 2024 Archives' Research Report**

**Resolution No.:** 2024-D046  
**Title:** The Commemoration of Sister Sophi and Her Companions, the Deaconesses of The Order of St. Katherine, of the Appleton Church Home  
**Proposer:** Baker, The Ven. Stannard  
**Topic:** Church Calendar, Lesser Feasts/Fasts

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**Directly Related:** (Attached)

None

**Indirectly Related:** (Available in the [Acts of Convention](#) database, searchable by resolution number)

2018-C046 Refer a Resolution to Commemorate the Appleton Deaconesses (Referred)

*In preparing this report, the Archives researched the resolutions in the Acts of Convention database for the period 1973 through 2022, selecting “direct” resolutions that have a substantive bearing on the proposed legislation. The “direct” resolutions are attached and “indirect” resolutions are available in the Acts of Convention database. Committee members who require other research assistance should contact the Archives through the [Research Request Form](#).*

# D046 - The Commemoration of Sister Sophi and her companions, the Deaconesses of The Order of St. Katherine, of the Appleton Church Home

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**Final Status:** Not Yet Finalized

**Proposed by:** Baker, The Ven. Stannard

**Endorsed by:** Woodall, The Rev. Dcn. Carolyn, Maddux, The Ven. Carole

**Has Budget Implications:** No

**Cost:**

**Amends C&C or Rules of Order:** No

**Requests New Interim Body:** No

**Changes Mandate Of Existing Ib:** No

**Directs Dfms Staff:** No

**Directs Dioceses:** No

**Directs Executive Council:** No

**HiA:** No House Assigned

**Legislative Committee Currently Assigned:** No Committee Assigned

**Completion Status:** Incomplete

**Latest House Action:** N/A

**Supporting Documents:** Yes

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## Resolution Text

*Resolved*, the House of \_\_\_\_\_ concurring,

That this 80th General Convention recognize the ministry of Sister Sophjenlife “Sophi” Pettison and her companions, honoring their devotion and perseverance in feeding, housing, nursing, educating, and nurturing the faith of orphaned and destitute girls through works of mercy for more than six decades after the American Civil War, by adding them to the calendar of Lesser Feasts and Fasts (or other such calendar as may be adopted for the use of the Episcopal Church) with the following text propers:

Sister Sophi and her companions, founders of the Appleton Deaconess house

Suggested date of Commemoration: September 15 [Sophi’s birthday]

## Explanation

## **September 15: Sister Sophi and her Companions, the Appleton Deaconesses**

In 1836, the Lutheran Church in Kaiserswerth, Germany, revived the office of deaconess to help address the needs of the poor, the sick, the afflicted and the uneducated. Soon afterward, the Episcopal Church followed suit in the United States. In 1855, Maryland Bishop William Whittingham set aside two women as deaconesses for a ministry to serve the poor in Baltimore, and this Order became known as the House of the Good Shepherd. Less than a decade later, on December 20, 1864, Alabama Bishop Richard Wilmer called three women into service as deaconesses to run an orphan's home and set them aside for such ministry using a special liturgical service. The Wilmer deaconesses would serve as a model for Rev. John W. Beckwith, who served during the Civil War under Bishop Wilmer both as a priest in Demopolis, Alabama, and as a chaplain dispatched to minister to Confederate troops.

Rev. Beckwith was called in 1868 from the rectorship of Trinity Church in New Orleans, Louisiana, to be ordained as the second Bishop of Georgia. His close friend William Appleton of New York offered to build him a church in his new diocese. Instead, Beckwith asked Mr. Appleton to fund an orphanage for the daughters of Confederate soldiers. With Appleton's support, Bishop Beckwith moved forward in Macon, Georgia, to build the Appleton Church Home, named in honor of its primary financial benefactor. He asked Margaret Jennings, a Confederate widow, Trinity parishioner, and companion in his mission work in New Orleans, to assist him by administering the planned orphanage as a deaconess. Mrs. Jennings answered Beckwith's call and arrived in 1870 before the Church Home opened in July. Bishop Beckwith designated her publicly as Sister Margaret, a deaconess working under his direct supervision.

Significantly, when publicizing the objects of the Appleton Church Home, Bishop Beckwith named not only the need to educate and train orphan girls for a better life, but also to develop "by organized training women's work...to utilize Christian women in works of mercy." This illustrates the important role of deaconesses in establishing Episcopal community ministry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Accepting the call of a deaconess offered many women an opportunity for a safe and stable place in American society after the Civil War left them widowed or facing greatly-reduced circumstances. Serving the poor and the marginalized in the name of Christ both enriched and empowered these women, giving them dignified work to perform when leisure was not an option.

For the first three years of Appleton's operation, Sister Margaret ran the home virtually by herself. She designed uniforms for both herself and the little girls, sewn from "Confederate gray" fabric. As a deaconess, she added a white collar and head covering to this uniform. Over time, she and Bishop Beckwith identified two other women with whom they had worked in New Orleans to join her. In 1873, Beckwith called Miss Katherine Burt to begin working at Appleton as a postulant, and within six months, named her as a full deaconess. That same year, Beckwith formally designated the deaconesses of Appleton Church Home as the Order of St. Katharine, in memory of Katharine (Kate) Appleton Geary, daughter of William Appleton. Kate Geary had taken great interest in the success of the Church Home and died in 1873 while in Hong Kong doing missionary work. In 1875, Mrs. Sarah Godwin Marks came from New Orleans to Appleton as the Order's third deaconess.

On St. Luke's Day, October 18, 1882, Bishop Beckwith performed a ceremony for "setting apart deaconesses for work in the church," in the chapel at Appleton. Beckwith followed the service order developed by Alabama's Bishop Wilmer. Rev. C.J. Wingate presented Sister Margaret and she, in turn, presented her faithful co-workers, Sister Katherine, and Sister Sarah. Each of the women professed to the Bishop her intent as one "who, following the example of devout women, recorded in the Holy Scripture and written of in primitive times, desired to devote herself to the relief of the suffering and destitute, and came forward to ask his benediction and the prayers of the church, that she might have grace to do her duty as becometh so honorable and difficult a work." Bishop Beckwith prayed over them, and then standing, exhorted a greeting in the name of the Lord.

The deaconesses in The Order of St. Katharine served without financial compensation and dedicated their lives to serve, care for, and educate poor and destitute girls at the Appleton Church Home. Between 1889 and 1924, six more women were set apart as deaconesses in this order: Mary Frances Gould, Maggie Perkins, Louise Aydelotte, Elenor Henry, Katie Campbell, and Sophjenlife "Sophi" Pettison. They each dedicated their unique talents and strong Episcopal faith to Appleton as administrators, caregivers, and teachers.

Sister Sophi served as the last deaconess in the Order, and when she retired in 1935, the diocese hired priests and lay administrators to operate the facility. In 1975, Appleton transitioned to a group home model and then to an outdoor therapy program. The Church Home property became the parish of St. Francis Episcopal Church. In 1991, Appleton ended its residential programs altogether and shifted its focus to serve girls and boys in afternoon and summer programs. Since 2014, under the direction of a lay missionary, Appleton Episcopal Ministries has partnered with parishes to develop and fund numerous community ministries throughout middle Georgia. Beginning in 2016, Appleton Episcopal Ministries initiated an annual commemoration of the Deaconesses of the Order of St. Katharine, and in 2017, the Diocese of Atlanta recognized the Appleton deaconesses as the first saints in that diocese.

Today Appleton actively promotes racial reconciliation and truth-telling in all of its programs and serves children and families in nine Episcopal parishes across the southern end of the Diocese of Atlanta. However, there are hard truths in its history with which the church must reckon. When Appleton Church Home opened its doors in 1870, its original purpose was to house the orphaned daughters of Confederate soldiers. Enrollment files show that the Church Home quickly transitioned to take in white girls from Georgia families, regardless of their affiliation with the former Confederacy. Records document that Bishop Beckwith had been a slaveholder, that as a widow, Sister Sarah owned enslaved persons, and that at least two of the deaconesses - Sister Kate and Sister Mary Frances - came from slaveholding families. Beginning in late 1894, Bishop Cleland Nelson temporarily redirected Sister Mary Frances to oversee an ecumenical outreach program around the state of Georgia to help black residents improve their homes and home lives as part of the larger Episcopal Church's efforts to minister to blacks throughout the segregated South. More than three decades after Sister Sophi retired as the last deaconess, Appleton finally integrated its residential program.

Support Documents:  
[Sister Sophi Propers](#)