



Stephen Girard

Forgotten First Philanthropist

American Business and Humanitarian Genius

– by Steven H. Biondolillo –
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If Stephen Girard (1750-1831), the practically forgotten French-American patriot and founder of Philadelphia's Girard College for Orphans, were alive today, he would marvel at the numbers in the 183 years since his death who've counted themselves among his children — some 26,000 sons and daughters — as well as the multitudes who constitute his total progeny — the offspring of his sons and daughters—a number large enough to populate a major American city.

We can imagine Girard's heart swelling with pride at what his progeny have contributed to the life of these United States, because among his sons and daughters alone have been an untold number of productive citizens — captains of business and industry, renowned practitioners of the professions, widely respected scholars and teachers, accomplished artists and artisans, master tradesmen, military and political leaders, men of the cloth, and dedicated public servants.

We can imagine Girard contemplating their countless contributions great and small, then quietly declaring, "My actions have spoken for me."

In order to grasp the magnitude of Girard's far-reaching vision, prolific accomplishment, and monumental impact, we must first grasp his multi-dimensionality. For 183 years Stephen Girard has borne four principle titles: banker, merchant, mariner, philanthropist. In today's brand-conscious culture, however, his titles would be pared to these: Stephen Girard — American Business Pioneer and Father of Philanthropy; or, Stephen Girard — American Business and Humanitarian Genius.

Of these descriptions, the modest Girard would have liked least the label "genius." But consider this definition of the word: genius — one who aims at a target no one else can see and hits it.

This would certainly describe Stephen Girard, the entrepreneur. As a banker, mariner and merchant, Girard was among the early American business leaders both to see and realize the incredible value of integrating the full business cycle, from finance and resource acquisition to production and

distribution. As a result, Girard accrued an unprecedented fortune, becoming the nation's first multi-millionaire and, by the time of his death, its wealthiest citizen.

His business achievement, however, was even more impressive than these couple of facts suggest. According to Michael Klepper's and Robert Gunther's book, *The Wealthy 100: From Benjamin Franklin to Bill Gates — A Ranking of the Richest Americans, Past and Present*, Stephen Girard's fortune, as a percentage of the Gross National Product, makes him the fourth wealthiest American of all time, outdone only by Rockefeller, Vanderbilt, and Astor. Bill Gates—the richest businessman today—stands a somewhat unimpressive number 31 on the list, while Benjamin Franklin barely makes the cut.

Next, consider Girard's critical contribution to the people of Philadelphia during the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793. When most prominent Philadelphians fled the city, Girard remained and tended personally to the sick and dying. Historians rightly consider this to be one of Girard's greatest humanitarian accomplishments.

Utterly underappreciated, however, is the fact that Girard's contribution during the yellow fever epidemic was also a business achievement. What Girard did was step into the incoherent world of 18th century medical practice and help organize it, establishing along the way a prototype of the modern hospital. He aimed at a target no one else could see and hit it.

Lastly, what can one possibly say about a man so convinced of this nation's vast potential that he personally, along with John Jacob Astor, financed one of its wars — the War of 1812. As history has proved and his legacy demonstrated, Girard's actions in 1812 were motivated, not primarily by the thought of profit, but, by a profound patriotic impulse.

But as brilliant as Girard was in the business arena, his grandest achievement lies squarely in the philanthropic realm. Girard College for Orphans opened its gates in 1848. Its development was directed by Girard's landmark will of 1831 — a will so sound and powerful in its conception and detailed in its directives

that, to this very day, it is studied in law schools throughout America. To this very day, Girard College for Orphans, founded with Girard's estate of \$7.5 million (until 1831 and for years to come, the largest in American history), is the most generous, most prescient, and most profound contribution to human service in the history of the United States.

Genius — one who aims at a target no one else can see and hits it. What Stephen Girard saw in founding his school for orphans most could not see:

- The necessity of military and other forms of ultimate service that would leave thousands of young children without fathers;
- The possibility of economic devastation — depression and recession — that would leave families without breadwinners;
- The unfortunate potential for social chaos and disease — like the crack cocaine and AIDS epidemics — that would leave legions of abandoned and neglected children in their wakes; and
- The critical importance of providing for and educating indigent children as the single best way to ensure a safe and vital democracy.

This last point alone might have been Girard's most profound insight: that the greatest threat to a democracy is its disenfranchised children, who must be provided with democracy's greatest promise—opportunity—or otherwise be capable of attacking and undermining civil society. In 1831, in Stephen Girard's world and will, disenfranchised children were defined as being “poor, white and male.” (Remember, just a few years earlier the nation's Founding Fathers chose not to resolve the issue of slavery. Furthermore, Horace Mann had yet to create the concept of public education, and the sons and daughters of the wealthy were educated privately. Yet, here was Stephen Girard providing educational opportunity for orphans!) Today, Girard College is a safe and supportive home for male and female “functional orphans” of all races.

In the world of modern philanthropy, many consider the most profound gift to be the “planned gift,” as planned gifts

are typically directed at those institutions dearest to a donor's heart, and made from the entire pool of money and other resources aggregated by the time of the donor's death. Topping this category of philanthropy is the rare gift called an “ultimate gift.” An ultimate gift is a gift so large that it is capable of changing the very status of the cause or issue at which it is directed. The philanthropic-industry-leading Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's far-reaching humanitarian aim to eradicate certain basic diseases in the Third World may be the best current example of an ultimate gift.

But while the Gates gift may or may not rank one day near the top of the as-yet-unwritten 100-year retrospective “Ranking of the Most Philanthropic Americans,” it is clear that Stephen Girard will have pride of place. After all, Girard's philanthropy helped shoulder the building of the country in which the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has come to be.

Perhaps the most profoundly misnamed philanthropic society in America today is the United Way's impressive and important Tocqueville Society. The United Way is considered by many to be the nation's largest and most effective contributor to community-based organizations providing human services to at-risk populations. The Tocqueville Society is its group of high-net-worth donors, each of whom contributes a minimum of \$10,000 annually.

Unfortunately, the United Way has fielded the wrong Frenchman. It's time to retire Alexis de Tocqueville, social critic, and install Stephen Girard, business leader and philanthropist. More than any other American in history, Stephen Girard has forestalled an untold amount of social and economic desperation. His philanthropic gift might have built one or more monuments to himself in the form of libraries, museums, and park preserves; instead, over the past 183 years it has made possible the productive lives of 26,000 of America's disenfranchised sons and daughters, whose progeny now number in the millions. Imagine that... and how another handful of bequests like Girard's could alter the destiny of the nation.

Stephen Girard—Forgotten First Philanthropist, American Business and Humanitarian Genius: remember him!



About the author. Recognized for coining the term “signature event,” Steven H. Biondolillo is the nation’s leading developer of branded, large-scale special-event fundraising programs. He is the founder and president of Biondolillo Associates, Inc., headquartered in Boston.

Among the firm’s landmark walkathons are national leaders in the areas of breast cancer and hunger, and among its “signature events” are many national “firsts,” including the first film and video production festival for children, holiday ornament fundraising campaign, CEO-driven literacy/mentoring program, and service corps focused on the cardio-vascular health and wellness of the American public.

Additionally, Biondolillo has developed what is widely regarded to be the nation’s premiere training program in the field of special-event fundraising, and has trained over 13,000 nonprofit staff and volunteers. Since 1984, fundraisers developed by Biondolillo have raised more than \$1 billion.

Until 1982, Steven was an elite wrestler and medalist in national and international competition. His op-ed pieces on amateur sports and child welfare have appeared in numerous publications, including *The Wall Street Journal*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Atlanta Constitution*, *Miami Herald*, *Boston Herald*, *Boston Globe*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and *Union Leader*, and the second edition of his book, *Macaroni and Cheese Manifesto*, was published in 2013. Also in 2013, Steven was inducted into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame.