As the Industrial Revolution saw America transform from a nation of farmers to a nation of factory workers, the nineteenth century saw a population explosion in cities across the land. While many urban-dwellers found success, many others were left behind in this new economy, leading to rising rates of crime, alcoholism, and other social ills. Sadly, it was not uncommon for children to be neglected, orphaned, or abused. Parental rights were ironclad and could be delegated to others, and physical punishment was considered a normal and even essential practice in establishing obedience. Orphans or children whose parents could not care for them were often placed in what today would be called work camps, which was more about free labor and not protection. Prevailing wisdom said that child neglect was not abuse, but merely a tragic, if unintended, consequence of life.

Slowly, things began to change. The child welfare system can trace its early roots to the animal welfare movement of the nineteenth century, when people realized that children, minimally, should be treated at least as humanely as domesticated animals. In 1829, against this backdrop, Orissa Healy and Eliza Wilcox founded The Ladies Orphan Society to provide shelter, care, and education to the orphaned, neglected, and abused children in the city of Albany.

1829  Orissa Healy and Eliza Wilcox create the Ladies Orphan Society and establish the Society for the Relief of Orphan and Destitute Children
1864  School for Children opens
1891  600 Children in resident and another 600 in foster homes or work placement
1904  Innovative “cottage-type” care begins at new campus on New Scotland Avenue
1933  “House parent” model is established
1937  First social worker hired
1961  Therapeutic services offered
1964  SATRI established
1965  First group home opens
1969  Day Treatment Program established
1975  Neil Hellman School opens
1976  Organization changes name to Parsons Child & Family Center
1979  Child Guidance Clinic opens
1988  Residential Treatment Facility (RTF) opens
1991  Service array expands
1992  Healy House opens
2003  Miriam House opens
2012  Parsons affiliates with Northeast Parent & Child Society in Schenectady, creating parent agency Northern Rivers Family of Services, one of the largest human services agencies in upstate New York
2018  Northern Rivers breaks ground on Behavioral Health Care Center
2019  Behavioral Health Care Center opens; work begins on Academy Place
2020  Academy Place, Northern Rivers’ new 24-bed agency-owned boarding house opens; Wasson, Rathbone, and Lathrop Cottages, housing the former Residential Treatment Facility (RTC), demolished; a new Short-Term Crisis Stabilization Program, North Star, opens in July