

Finding Missing Ancestors in Institutional Records: Poor Houses, Orphanages and Prisons
EDHGS, January 11, 2022
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1) Types of Institutions:

- Care of the Poor – almshouses, poorhouses and poor farms.
- Care of the Orphans – orphanages, veteran “orphan’s” home and orphan trains.
- Care of the Criminals – jails, prisons, reform schools, military prisons and POW camps.

2) Who sponsored the institutions:

- Cities and counties – jails, poorhouses and orphanages.
- States – prisons.
- Federal government – penitentiaries and military prisons.
- Religious and private entities – orphanages.
- Fraternal organizations – orphanages.

3) Where do you find clues?

- Home – family stories, documents, heirlooms
- Newspapers – news articles and obituaries.
- Court records – probate records, criminal cases.
- Censuses:
 - 1850-1870 - Questions asked about paupers and convicts.
 - 1880 Population Schedule – Question about prison, orphanage or poorhouse.
 - 1880 DDD Schedule – Special Schedule for homeless children, prisoners or indigent inhabitants in institutions.
 - 1900-1940 – Questions about social status not asked.

4) Poor Houses and Poor Farms:

- History of Poor Houses in the U.S.
 - Based on English Poor laws.
 - Colonial New England took care of their own but no one else.
 - Early U.S. history - “Poor Houses”, “Outdoor Relief” and people “Auctioned Off”.
 - 1820s – Move from servitude to shelters. Poorhouses, almshouses, and farms.
 - Mid 1800s – ill, insane and children put into separate institutions.
 - Latter half of 19th century – facilities for Civil war veterans, widows and children.
 - 1900s – institutions would change name to sound more pleasing.
 - Social Security began the demise of “poorhouses”.
- Who were in Poor Houses?
 - Homeless and destitute persons and families.
 - Elderly.
 - The ill, injured, and handicapped.
 - Orphans – parents deceased, child homeless or child is surrendered to the court.
 - Women – unwed mothers and victims of domestic abuse.
- What records were created by Poor Houses?
 - Admission Records – Most common record. Can contains biographical information.

- Annual Reports and Trustee Minutes – May include names of those admitted or died during the year.
- Published Histories – County Histories or histories of a specific institution.
- Burials: Cemeteries on the property or “Potter Fields”. Many graves are unmarked.
- Poor Farms
 - Preferred method to support the poor. More cost effective than “warehousing” poor.
 - Run by counties or town. Records located at those levels.
 - May be found on same land as prisons or other institutions
 - Provides work for inhabitants; mainly in fields and housekeeping.
 - 19th and 20th century viewpoint was people on a poor farm were morally corrupt.
 - Also known as “county farms” or county homes.
 - Died out after Social Security Act passed in 1935.
 - Found in records listing poor houses.

5) Orphan Facilities:

- History of Orphanages in the U.S.
 - First orphanage in U.S. founded in 1729 in New Orleans.
- First private orphanage founded in 1806 by Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton.
- Mid 1800s, Children’s Aid Society founded by Charles Brace.
- Orphan Train is beginning of foster care system in the U.S.
- Around 1900, people started questioning the usefulness of orphanages.
- Traditional orphanages begin closing doors after WWII.
- Today, orphans and at-risk children are in foster care system.
- Types of Facilities for Orphans:
 - Orphanages.
 - Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Children’s Homes.
 - Orphan Trains.
- Main Orphanage Records:
 - Registers and Admission.
 - “Placing Out” or “Bound Out” – children were apprenticed out until 18 or 21.
 - Adoption Records – usually sealed.
- Adoptions?
 - If father died, a guardian was usually appointed to care for children even if the mother was alive.
 - No mother – Family friends or relatives stepped up.
 - No relatives – children sent to orphanage or “bound out”.
 - Placement in orphanages meant to be temporary.
 - Orphan Trains – shipped out from NYC to the Midwest.
 - Adoptions were usually informal. Family or friends took in children.
 - 1917 – Minnesota makes adoption records confidential.
 - Mid 1940s – adoptions became “secret”. Adoptee had no right to original birth record.
 - 21st century – at least 20 states have full or partial adoptee access to records.
- Veterans Orphan’s Homes (Soldiers and Sailors Orphan Homes)
 - Created to take care of the veteran’s children left fatherless after the Civil War.
 - Similar to orphanages.

- Homes were set up by Union Veteran groups and the Confederacy Veteran groups.
- Orphan Trains:
 - Main Participating Orphanages:
 - a) Children’s Aid Society.
 - b) New York Foundling Hospital.
 - c) New York Juvenile Asylum.
 - Children went from New York and the East mainly to the Midwest and Texas.
 - Where are the Orphan Train Records?
 - a) Orphan Train Heritage Society of America – www.orphantrainriders.com
 - b) National Orphan Train Complex –FamilySearch Wiki has great article
 - c) New York Juvenile Asylum – at Columbia University in New York City
 - d) Iowa GenWeb – list of states with Orphan Train Rider Projects, www.iagenweb.org
 - e) Wisconsin Historical Society, www.wsgs.org
 - f) Cyndi’s List – Lots of websites related to Orphan Train research, www.cyndislist.com/orphans.html#Orphans
- What happened to the children?
 - a) Children were “ordered” from the orphanages.
 - b) Small, ill or handicapped children were left behind.
 - c) Some ran away from abuse while others were adopted by loving couples.
 - d) Siblings were often split up between different families and different towns.
 - e) Children were instructed not to contact people back in their old homes.
Their past was erased.
 - f) Some were adopted even though a parent still lived.

6) Main Records in Correctional Institutions:

- Local and county jails records
 - Jail registers.
- Prisons and Penitentiary Records
 - Admission Records.
 - List of Escapees.
 - Bertillon Records – identifying measurements of criminal. Precursor to fingerprints.
 - Pardons and Parole Records.
 - Execution Lists.
- Juvenile offenders – reform school records. Purpose of school was to “rehabilitate” children
 - Admission Records.
 - Placement Records.
- Military prisons
 - Similar to regular prison records.
 - Found in service member’s military file in the National Archives.
- Main POW camps records
 - Roster of Prisoners.
 - Hospital, Death and Cemetery Records.

7) Finding the Records:

- Determine what the correct institution is:
 - City Directories – what institution is in the city or county.
 - State Manuals – history of the institution in that area.
 - County Histories – history of institutions in that county.
 - Local societies and libraries – history of institutions in that area.

- Determine where the records are:
 - The institution itself.
 - State Archives or State Library.
 - Religious or Fraternity Archives.
 - State Historical Society.
 - County Historical Society.
 - Public Libraries.
 - National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections. (NUCMC)
 - Family History Wiki.
 - PERSI (Periodical Source Index).

- Online Databases and Links:

- Family Search (www.familysearch.org)
- Ancestry (www.ancestry.com)
- US GenWeb (www.usgenweb.com)
- Cyndi's List (www.cyndislist.com)
- Olive Tree Genealogy (www.olivetreegenealogy.com) – Good for almshouses (poorhouses) and orphans
- Black Sheep Ancestors (www.blacksheepancestors.org) – correctional institutions
- Digital Public Library of America (www.dpla.org)
- Internet Archive (www.archive.org)

- County Histories and State Manuals

- County Histories are found in public libraries, county historical societies and online.
- State Manuals are found in state libraries and state archives.

8) Tips for researching institutional records:

- Govt. institutions are easier to access than private institutions.
- Privacy concerns create time frames to release information.
- Private institutional records usually found in organization's archives.
- Penal records are usually considered open records.
- Military prison records are found in a service member's file.
- Poorhouses usually housed more than just the poor.
- Don't forget to look for "Auctioning Off" the poor or "Bounding Out" orphans.
- Remember not all children in orphanages were parentless.
- Remember the sponsors of the institutions – shows where to look for the records.
- 1880 DDD Schedules – finds paupers, homeless and orphaned children, and convicts.

Think outside the box to see who might have records!