

Finding Missing Ancestors in Institutional Records: Poor Houses, Orphanages and Prisons
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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, news clippings.
- Newspapers – news articles, criminal and obituaries.
- Court records – probate records, criminal cases.
- Censuses:
 - (a) 1850-1870 - Questions asked about paupers and convicts.
 - (b) 1880 Population Schedule – Question about prison, orphanage or poorhouse.
 - (c) 1880 DDD Schedule – Special Schedule for homeless children, prisoners or indigent inhabitants in institutions.
 - (d) 1900-1940 – Questions about social status not asked.

4) Poor Houses and Poor Farms:

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

- (b) Annual Reports and Trustee Minutes – May include names of those admitted during the year.
- (c) Published Histories – County Histories or histories of a specific institution.
- (d) Burials: Cemeteries on the property or “Potter Fields”. Many graves are unmarked.

- Poor Farms
 - (a) Preferred method to support the poor. More cost effective than “warehousing” poor.
 - (b) Run by counties or town. Records located at those levels.
 - (c) May be found on same land as prisons or other charitable institutions.
 - (d) Provides work for inhabitants; mainly in fields and housekeeping.
 - (e) 19th and 20th century viewpoint was people on a poor farm were morally corrupt.
 - (f) Also known as “county farms” or county homes.
 - (g) Died out after Social Security Act passed in 1935.
 - (h) Found in records listing poor houses.

5) Orphan Facilities:

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

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

6) Main Records in Correctional Institutions:

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

7) Finding the Records:

- Determine what the correct institution is:
 - (a) City Directories – what institution is in the city or county.
 - (b) State Manuals – history of the institution in that area.
 - (c) County Histories – history of institutions in that county.
 - (d) Local societies and libraries – history of institutions in that area.
- Determine where the records are:
 - (a) The institution itself.
 - (b) State Archives or State Library.
 - (c) Religious or Fraternity Archives.
 - (d) State Historical Society.
 - (e) County Historical Society.
 - (f) Public Libraries.
 - (g) National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections.
 - (h) Family History Wiki.
 - (i) PERSI (Periodical Source Index).
- Online Databases and Links:
 - (a) Family Search (www.familysearch.org)
 - (b) Ancestry (www.ancestry.com)
 - (c) US GenWeb (www.usgenweb.com)
 - (d) Cyndi's List (www.cyndislist.com)
 - (e) Olive Tree Genealogy (www.olivetreegenealogy.com) – Good for almshouses (poorhouses) and orphans
 - (f) Black Sheep Ancestors (www.blacksheepancesters.org)
 - (g) Digital Public Library of America (www.dpla.org)
 - (h) Internet Archive (www.archive.org)
- County Histories and State Manuals
 - (a) County Histories are found in public libraries, county historical societies and online.
 - (b) State Manuals are found in state libraries and state archives.

8) Tips for researching institutional records:

- (a) Govt. institutions are easier to access than private institutions.
- (b) Privacy concerns create time frames to release information.
- (c) Private institutional records usually found in organization's archives.
- (d) Penal records are usually considered open records.
- (e) Military prison records are found in a service member's file.
- (f) Poorhouses usually housed more than just the poor.
- (g) Don't forget to look for "Auctioning Off" the poor or "Bounding Out" orphans.
- (h) Remember not all orphans were parentless.
- (i) Remember the sponsors of the institutions – where to look for the records.
- (j) 1880 DDD Schedules – finds paupers, homeless children and convicts in institutions.
- (k) Check "Reclaim the Records" to see if they have access to any records.
- (l) Think outside the box to see who might have records.

INSTITUTIONS: PART II TERMINOLOGY

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| Almshouse | A house built originally by a charitable person or organization for poor people to live in within a particular community. |
| Inmate: | Anyone residing in an institution. Not just for correctional facilities. |
| Jail: | Jails are correctional facilities usually run by local law enforcement and/or local government agencies, and are designed to hold inmates waiting for trial or serving a short sentence. |
| Outdoor Relief: | Poor relief where assistance was in the form of money, food, clothing or goods, given to alleviate poverty without the requirement that the recipient enter an institution. |
| Orphan: | A child who is separated from one or both parents because of death or disappearance of, abandonment or desertion by, or separation or loss from. |
| Orphan Train: | Movement that was a supervised welfare program that transported orphaned and homeless children from crowded Eastern cities of the United States to foster homes located largely in rural areas of the Midwest . |
| Orphanage: | An orphanage is a residential institution, or group home, devoted to the care of orphans and other children who were separated from their biological families. |
| Pauperism: | Pauperism is a term meaning poverty or generally the state of being poor, but in English usage particularly the condition of being a "pauper", i.e. in receipt of relief. From this springs a more general sense, referring to all those who are supported at public expense, whether within or outside of almshouses, and still more generally, to all whose existence is dependent for any considerable period upon charitable assistance, whether this assistance be public or private. |
| Penitenary: | A public institution in which offenders against the law are confined for detention or punishment, <i>specifically</i> : a state or federal prison in the U.S. |
| Poor Farm: | A farm that housed, supported, and employed the poor at the public's expense. Created when poor houses were overfilled. |
| Poor House: | Typically a government-run facility where people often ended up when they were poor, blind, crippled, or otherwise disabled, or when they were elderly or homeless and didn't have family that could care for them. |
| Potters or Paupers Field: | A place for the burial of unknown, unclaimed or indigent people. |

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| Prison: | A place of confinement especially for lawbreakers, <i>specifically</i> an institution (such as one under state jurisdiction) for confinement of persons convicted of serious crimes |
| Reform School: | A place where young people who have committed crimes or are uncontrollable are sent to live and be taught to behave in ways that are socially acceptable; a reformatory |
| Workhouse: | 1) A public institution in which the destitute of a parish received board and lodging in return for work (in the UK), 2) a prison in which petty offenders are expected to work. (U.S.) |

References:

PAUPERS:

Poorhouses and Poor Farms

- 1) "History of 19th Century American Poorhouses", Historical Overview. www.poorhousestory.com (has list of poorhouses and records by some states)
- 2) "Poorhouse Admissions 1873-1910", Chester County Archives and Records Services - ccarchives@chesco.org - ANCESTRY
- 3) "Admission Books, 1800-1910", Chester County Archives and Records, ccarchives@chesco.org - ANCESTRY
- 4) "Jersey, Hospital and Poor House Admissions, 1879-1916" - ANCESTRY
- 5) "Chester County, Pennsylvania, Poor House Admissions Index, 1800-1910" - ANCESTRY
- 6) Asylum Project (institutions with a cemetery)
www.asylumprojects.org/index.php/Category:Institution_With_A_Cemetery
- 7) "Outdoor Allowances, 1800-1856", Chester County, PA – Chester Co. Historical Society
- 8) "Miscellaneous Poorhouse Records, 1803-1850", Chester County, PA – Chester Co. Historical Society
- 9) "Poorhouses & Poverty" – Cyndi's List, www.cyndislist.com/poor/locality
- 10) "Almshouses & Poorhouses" – Olive Tree Genealogy www.olivetreegenealogy.com/almshouse
- 11) "Poorhouses By State" – www.poorhousestory.com/otherpoorhouses.htm

ORPHANS OR HOMELESS CHILDREN:

Bound Apprentices

- "Children's Board Book, 1854-1884", Chester County, PA – Chester Co. Historical Society
"Bound Apprentices, 1801-1825", Chester County, PA – Chester Co. Historical Society

Orphans

- 1) "New York, Orphans Placed in the New York Foundling Hospital and Children's Aid Society, 1855-1925" - ANCESTRY
- 2) "New York, Home for Hebrew Infants Records, 1922-1937" – ANCESTRY
- 3) "New York, Hebrew Sheltering Guardian Society Records, 1884-1925" – ANCESTRY
- 4) "New York, Hebrew Infant Asylum Records, 1895-1927 – ANCESTRY
- 5) "New York, Brooklyn Hebrew Orphan Asylum Records, 1878-1969 – ANCESTRY
- 6) "New York Hebrew Orphan Asylum Records, 1860-1934 – ANCESTRY
- 7) "Nevada, Orphans Home Records, 1870-1920" – ANCESTRY
- 8) "Semi-centennial celebration: the Buffalo Orphan Asylum – ANCESTRY

Soldiers and Sailors' Children's Home

- 1) Ohio - Soldier's and Sailors' Orphans Home <https://greenelibraryresource.info/osso.php>
- 2) Indiana – Soldier's and Sailor's Children's Home - <https://www.in.gov/iara/2550.htm>
- 3) Cyndi's List

CONVICTS

1) *Blacksheep Ancestors*

– <https://www.blacksheepancestors.com/usa/prisons.shtml> MULTIPLE STATES

2) BRB Publications (<http://www.brbpublications.com/>– links to free federal, state and county websites including court, jail and prison websites

3) “Prisons, Prisoners & Outlaws” – General Resources, *Cyndi’s List* – www.cyndislist.com

4) U.S. Bureau of Prisons website – <https://www.bop.gov> - Locate inmates from 1982 onward. The National Archives has records from 1870 – 1981.

5) “Prisons” or “Federal Prisons” - *FamilySearch Wiki*

Jails

1) Alameda County Arrest, Court and Public Records – <https://california.staterecords.org/alameda> for general information. JAIL RECORDS ARE AVAILABLE BUT NOT ONLINE

2) “Chester County, Pennsylvania, Criminal and Prison Record Indexes, 1681-1911 - *ANCESTRY*

3) “Chicago Police Department Homicide Record Index, 1870-1930” <https://homicide.northwestern.edu/>

4) Contra Costa County Arrest, Court and Public Records – <https://california.staterecords.org/contra costa> for general information. JAIL RECORDS ARE AVAILABLE BUT NOT ONLINE

5) “Tulare County, California, Sheriff’s Office and Jail Records, 1874-1963” – *ANCESTRY*

6) Mug shots taken by Sacramento, California Police Department, 1864-1949. – ACCESS GENEALOGY. (NOT indexed)

State Prisons

1) “Anamosa State Penitentiary, Iowa” <http://www.asphistory.com/>

2) “Arizona, Prison Records, 1875-1929 – *ANCESTRY*

3) “Arizona Department of Corrections: Historical Prison Register” <https://corrections.az.gov/historical-prison-register>

4) “California, Prison and Correctional Records, 1851-1950” – *ANCESTRY*

5) “California Prison Records 1850-1979” – San Quentin and Folsom prisons
www.sos.ca.gov/archives/collections/family-history-resources/

6) “Chester County, Pennsylvania, Criminal and Prison Record Indexes, 1681-1911 – *ANCESTRY*

7) “Clinton 1851-1866, 196-1939” - New York’s first state penitentiary

8) “Colorado State Penitentiary Prisoner Index, 1871-1973” – Male offenders 16 to 25 years old
<https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/archives/corrections-records>

9) “Colorado State Reformatory Prison Records, 1887-1939”

<https://coloradogenealogy.com/history/prisoner-records-available-at-the-colorado-state-archives.htm>

10) “Connecticut – Wethersfield State Prison 1800-1903”

<https://www.ctstatelibrarydata.org/wethersfield-prison-record/>

11) “Georgia, Central Register of Convicts, 1817-1976 - *ANCESTRY*

12) “Idaho, Old Penitentiary Prison Records, 1882-1961” – *ANCESTRY*

13) Idaho State Historical Society – www.history.idaho.gov - pdf on inmates at the Idaho Penitentiary from 1864-1947

- 14) "Indiana Digital Archives – Institution Records: – Prisons and Girl's School (1873-1935)"
<https://secure.in.gov/apps/iara/search/> LOOK UNDER "INSTITUTION RECORDS"
- 15) "Iowa, Consecutive Registers of Convicts, 1867-1970" - *ANCESTRY*
- 16) "Louisiana, State Penitentiary Records, 1866-1963" - *ANCESTRY*
- 17) "Montana, Prison Records, 1861-1968" - *ANCESTRY*
- 18) "Nevada State Prison Inmate Case Files, 1863-1972"
<http://blacksheepancestors.com/usa/nevada.shtml>
- 19) "New York, Governor's Registers of Commitments to Prisons, 1842-1908" - *ANCESTRY*
- 20) "Pennsylvania, Prison, Reformatory, and Workhouse Records, 1829-1971" – *ANCESTRY*
- 21) Aron, Ron. "Jews of Sing Sing" (Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade Books, 2008)
- 22) "State of Tennessee – prisoner lists 1831-1850 and 1851-1870" - *TENNESSEE STATE LIBRARY & ARCHIVES*
- 23) "Texas, Prison Employee Ledgers, 1861-1938" – *ANCESTRY*
- 24) "Utah State Archives Historical Name Indexes" *UTAH STATE ARCHIVES*
- 25) "Wala Walla Penitentiary (Washington State), 1887-1922"
<https://www.digitalarchives.wa.gov/Collections/TitleInfo/314>

U.S. Penitentiaries

- 1) "Alcatraz, California, U.S. Penitentiary, Prisoner Index, 1934-1963 – *ANCESTRY*
- 2) "Alcatraz Inmate Lists" - <http://www.notfrisco2.com/alcatraz/inmates/index.html>
- 3) "Atlanta, Georgia, U.S. Penitentiary, Prisoner Index, 1880-1922" – *ANCESTRY*
- 4) "Atlanta Federal Penitentiary, Inmate Case Files 1902-1921" – *NATIONAL ARCHIVES* www.archives.gov
- 5) "Fort Smith, Arkansas, 1873-1896" – Federal Executions 1873-1896 – *NATIONAL PARK SERVICE* or *NATIONAL ARCHIVES* www.archives.gov
- 6) "Leavenworth, Kansas, U.S. Penitentiary, Name Index to Inmate Case Files, 1895-1936" – *ANCESTRY* or *NATIONAL ARCHIVES* <http://www.archives.gov>
- 7) "McNeil Island, Washington, U.S. Penitentiary, Photos and Records of Prisoners Received, 1887-1939 - *ANCESTRY*
- 8) "U.S. Penitentiary Records, 1875-1963" – *ANCESTRY*
- 9) "Records of the Bureau of Prisons, RG, 129, Series Title List – *NATIONAL ARCHIVES* in Kansas City