

Introduction

On a May evening in 1841, a widow named Charlotte Sears discovered a day-old boy abandoned in the entry of her house on Fourth Street near Avenue D in New York City. She carried the baby to the offices of the almshouse in City Hall Park. There she told the clerk who recorded her story that she did not know “who left it there nor to whom it belongs.” The commissioners of the almshouse, whose responsibility it was to care for the city’s infant castoffs, placed the foundling with a wet nurse and gave him a name. The name they chose was Oliver Twist, after Charles Dickens’s fictional street urchin, who first appeared in print in 1837.

Dickens himself arrived in the United States for an American tour in January 1842. By February he was in New York, where—as was to be expected of a novelist of social conscience—he toured the city’s charitable institutions, its prisons, and its slums. But he did not get the chance to meet his character’s namesake. The New York-born Oliver Twist had spent less than two months with a wet nurse on Sullivan Street and then, like most of the city’s foundlings, he died.¹

Today everybody knows of the fictional Oliver Twist, but nobody remembers the real one. When we think about foundlings, we are likely to think of biblical, mythical, and literary examples: An infant set adrift in a little boat, a newborn deity cast out on a hillside, a baby in a basket on a stranger’s doorstep. Moses was a foundling; so were Oedipus, Hercules, Tom Jones, and, most recently, Harry Potter. Nineteenth-century New Yorkers such as Charlotte Sears knew this literary legacy too. But, unlike us, they lived in a world in which foundlings were as embedded in everyday life as they were in literature. As early as Shakespeare’s time, foundlings were associated at least as much with poverty and unmarried motherhood as with the mythical and magical.²

Nineteenth-century New Yorkers first interpreted the phenomenon of infant abandonment with a set of ideas borrowed from Europe.

Foremost among these was that the foundling was the baby of an unmarried mother impelled by poverty, shame, or both to give up her child soon after birth. The stigma attached to illegitimacy meant that Europeans made a sharp distinction between foundlings and orphans. Orphans, children who had lost one or both parents through death, were simply unfortunates. Foundlings, discarded by living parents, were stained with sin.

This was the prevailing characterization of the foundling in nineteenth-century New York; the focus on the sinning mother shaped the way New Yorkers treated their foundlings. While illegitimacy did often lie behind infant abandonment, in reality, mothers and a few fathers abandoned their babies for a wider range of reasons. Poverty was nearly always one of them, and the case of Drusilla Smith provides one example. In the winter of 1839, Smith brought her five-week-old boy, Charles Smith Pugsley, to the commissioners of the almshouse. The baby was illegitimate. His father, Jesse Pugsley, had taken the route followed by so many young men before the Civil War: he went west, to Illinois, where a man could have a farm of his own and cast off forever the binding ties he'd left back East. The almshouse accepted baby Charles from his mother "on a/c [account] of her poverty."³

New Yorkers abandoned their babies for a variety of reasons, and the city's institutions for foundlings defined their charges in a variety of ways. In this book, a foundling is an abandoned baby, regardless of the marital status of the mother or the method of abandonment, and the term includes children born in the foundling asylums. Children identified as foundlings in this book were aged from newborn to no more than two years old, since that is the way most people and institutions in nineteenth-century New York defined them the great majority of the time.

Antebellum New Yorkers, drawing on their European and in particular their British heritage, not only scorned foundlings as illegitimates, but also took them for granted, understanding them as a sad but fundamentally normal part of the social order. Before the Civil War, when New York had no foundling asylums, none of the city's private charities, including its orphanages, admitted abandoned babies. The taint foundlings bore as presumed illegitimates created one barrier; their physical fragility and the difficulties involved in finding adequate supplies of breast milk for them created another. As a result, the only institution in antebellum New York that would accept foundlings was the

public poorhouse, or almshouse, which was mandated by law to care for the city's destitute and homeless. Yet it had a reputation for terrible squalor.

The charitable men and women who ran New York's antebellum orphanages, many of whom had been deeply influenced by the religious revivals of the first decades of the nineteenth century known as the Second Great Awakening, surely knew that the foundlings they refused were likely to die.⁴ Twenty-first-century Americans might find this apathy toward the young and vulnerable very difficult to understand. But the ability of these apparently compassionate people to turn their backs on foundlings, to, in a sense, doubly abandon them, marks them as bearers of a worldview that held that the fate of sinners and the very young was in the hands not of compassionate men and women but of God.⁵

Of all young children who lived in nineteenth-century New York, foundlings were the most vulnerable, and their problems and those of their mothers the most closely associated with the social disorganization of large cities. This book is an attempt to understand New York's experience with foundlings in the nineteenth century, and to show how that experience was shaped by New Yorkers' interpretation of the foundling not only as an endangered child, but as a symbol of female sexual transgression and urban social breakdown. The book shows how New Yorkers took a set of European ideas and reshaped them (and in some cases were forced to reshape them) to fit the contours of a social landscape formed by immigration, machine politics, Catholic-Protestant conflict, and the physical and moral anxiety induced in urban leaders by urban growth so rapid that it turned their once-familiar city into a dangerous and unfamiliar place.

New York and Its Foundlings

While in the first decades of the nineteenth century the city was content to let the almshouse cope with its foundlings, after the Civil War four institutions opened to serve them. In the late 1850s, alarmed by the physical and moral dangers they saw developing in their city, a group of city councilmen and almshouse officials began planning the city's first foundling asylum. The Civil War interrupted the progress of their plan.

But in December 1865, after the war ended, they opened their foundling asylum, which they called the Infant's Home. Instead of running it themselves, city officials delegated its supervision to Mary Du Bois, "first directress" of the Nursery and Child's Hospital, an institution that had opened in 1854 to provide twenty-four-hour care to the often-neglected children of wet nurses, which expanded into a children's hospital in 1858. Within less than a decade after the war, three more foundling asylums opened in New York. The New York Infant Asylum, like the nursery a Protestant institution, also opened in 1865, sputtered and failed, then reopened in 1871. The New York Foundling Asylum, run by the Catholic Sisters of Charity, opened in 1869. And in 1869 the city built another foundling asylum, this time keeping it entirely under public auspices. Located on Randall's Island in the East River, the three-story, stone-winged edifice was called the Infant Hospital.

The people who organized the city's foundling asylums were a fascinating and contentious group. Some were religiously motivated. These included Mary Delafield Du Bois of the Nursery and Child's Hospital and Abigail Hopper Gibbons, a Quaker reformer and a leader of the New York Infant Asylum. While the leaders of the nursery and the New York Infant Asylum came from the Protestant community, Sister Irene Fitzgerald, a member of the Sisters of Charity and the longtime head of the New York Foundling Asylum, was an advocate for the city's Catholic, immigrant poor.

Others held the scientific and bureaucratic perspective that began to dominate thinking about the poor after the Civil War. Physician and sanitarian Stephen Smith, a leader of the New York Infant Asylum and a founder of New York's first permanent board of health, had a foot in each camp: as a physician and advocate of sanitary reform, he was a man of science, but he also brought religious tracts to distribute when he worked in army hospitals during the Civil War.⁶ Physician Abraham Jacobi, a refugee from the German revolution of 1848 and a leader of the emerging field of pediatrics, brought his radical interpretation of medicine as a means for uplifting the poor to his work with New York's foundlings. City politicians who supported institutions that served foundlings included "Slippery Dick" Connolly, who was at the center of the Tweed Ring, the corrupt band of politicians that stole millions from the city treasury through bribery and graft. His wife, Mary Connolly, was a lay benefactor of the New York Foundling Asylum. Erastus Brooks, a state senator and the anti-immigrant Know Nothing Party's

candidate for governor in 1856, supported the Nursery and Child's Hospital through his family connection to Mary Du Bois. Also among this group of organizers of foundling asylums was almshouse governor Isaac Townsend, a dreamer who had been impressed by the London Foundling Hospital's programs of music and art. He hoped to replicate London's example in New York by elevating the city's cultural tone along with its moral behavior. The press, too, was a factor in the creation, and the operation, of the foundling asylums, judging, prodding, shedding sentimental tears, and always watching.

New York's experience with foundlings was on a different scale from that of other American cities. During the first half of the nineteenth century, New York overtook Philadelphia as the country's largest city. Its port, the best on the East Coast, drew in not only the commerce that filled the city's banks, but the poor immigrants who filled the city's slums in massive numbers.⁷ New York, more than other American cities, was filled with the needy. During the antebellum years, its streets and stoops began to fill with foundlings.

While its problems were on a larger scale, New York was neither the first nor the only American city to encounter foundlings and open foundling asylums. The first foundling asylum in New York State was incorporated in 1852 in Buffalo.⁸ During and after the Civil War, foundling asylums opened in Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C.⁹ But New York City had more foundlings and built more foundling asylums than any other American city ever did.¹⁰ Thus New York's experience with foundlings was more like that of London or Paris than that of Boston or Chicago. It served as a testing ground for solutions to what many perceived as a European problem in an American context, and the city's significant engagement with foundlings makes it the best place in which to study the problem of foundlings in the United States.

Foundlings in Europe

To date, there have been only a few, limited efforts to examine the history of American foundlings.¹¹ European historians, in contrast, have produced a wealth of scholarship about European foundlings, and in doing so have unearthed a forgotten problem of enormous proportions.¹² Their work has shown how governments, religious groups,

charitable organizations, and individuals conceptualized the foundling as a product of poverty or sexual transgression. They have also investigated the related issue of social control of women and families by church and state. The policies and practices of the foundling asylums that appeared in European cities from the Middle Ages onward were expressions of their societies' values concerning family honor, female sexuality, and the state's obligations to the poor.

Europe faced the problem of foundlings much sooner than the United States did. When America's British settlers stepped off their boats in the early seventeenth century, Europe already had cities large enough to create the social conditions that produced significant numbers of foundlings, as well as the religious and governmental structures with which to help them. By then, Europe already had foundling asylums that were several centuries old. By the eighteenth century, when the United States was just starting and its cities were still small, infant abandonment was a mass phenomenon in places like London and Paris. It took until the nineteenth century for New York to overtake London as a center of Dickensian urban ills, including the presence of large numbers of foundlings.¹³

In the Catholic countries of Europe, and also in Russia (with variations depending upon time and place), local and national governments, often together with religious bodies, assumed full responsibility for foundlings. Accidentally conceived infants were anonymously absorbed into large, urban foundling asylums. These asylums were at the center of great networks of wet nurses, transporters of babies, physicians, religious officials, and bureaucrats. This was the so-called Catholic System. Its goal was to preserve the honor of unmarried women and families by making babies born outside of marriage disappear.

In the contrasting "Protestant System" there were no central foundling asylums supported by networks of functionaries. In England, foundlings, along with the rest of the destitute, were relegated to the care of the parish, the local governmental unit designated to care for those poor who had established residence within its boundaries. In keeping with the Protestant emphasis on individual responsibility, local authorities sought parents out in an effort to wrest payment from them for their children's care, while the children themselves lived in the almshouse until they were old enough to apprentice.¹⁴ Dickens's description of the early life of his fictional *Oliver Twist* comes very close to the reality experienced by English foundlings.

Foundlings in New York's Almshouse

American poor laws were originally modeled on those of England. In New York, as in English cities, the almshouse was responsible for abandoned babies. Even after the Civil War, when private groups opened three foundling asylums in the city, the almshouse continued to care for foundlings, by this time in its Infant Hospital on Randall's Island. For most of the antebellum period, however, the methods New York's almshouse used to care for its foundlings remained essentially static. Foundlings retrieved from streets and doorsteps were carried to the almshouse by finders such as Charlotte Sears, by the police, or by passersby. In addition, many babies were brought by baby farmers, women who cared for groups of young children in their homes for pay. Single women who lived in middle- and upper-class households as domestic servants often placed their infants, who were unwelcome in the homes of their employers, with baby farmers. If these working mothers were unable to keep up with the payments for their children's board, baby farmers resorted to the almshouse. Once children had been brought to the almshouse, officials placed them with homeless women living in the almshouse, some but not all of whom were able to breastfeed. Whenever they could, almshouse officials sent foundlings to the homes of poor women who worked for the almshouse as wet nurses.

Most foundlings raised in the almshouse did not survive their infancies. A physician paid by the almshouse to care for its foundlings in the 1860s remembered that "all of them died."¹⁵ The almshouse's own grim statistics from the same period report that the mortality of motherless infants in the almshouse, a category that included foundlings, "has always been eighty-five per cent by the records . . . it is believed that not an infant survived a year."¹⁶ Some did survive, but prenatal neglect; the exposure some had suffered on stoops and streets; lack of individual care; exposure to infectious illness in the close quarters of the almshouse, which was packed with the sick and dying; and the difficulties the almshouse had in feeding motherless babies—all of these factors lay behind the appalling death rate. They also suffered from the environmental dangers that all young children in nineteenth-century cities experienced. The overall survival rate of children in American cities at the time was also shocking; according to the estimate of New York's Metropolitan Board of Health, one third of children in American cities died during their first year, a rate the health board described as "frightful."¹⁷

Not only were almshouse officials responsible for the care of abandoned infants, but they often had to assign them names. Some foundlings arrived at the almshouse with notes attached to their clothing that bore their names, but in many instances they did not. The names chosen by the commissioners of the almshouse—*Oliver Twist*, for example, or *Phineas T. Barnum*, *Henry Foundling*, or *William Unknown*—seem careless, a reflection of the reality that they did not expect these children to live long enough to need usable names.¹⁸

Those foundlings who survived their infancies remained in the almshouse or were returned to it by their nurses. The almshouse was then responsible for raising them. In the mid-1830s, the almshouse opened Long Island Farms, a nursery for its foundlings and other destitute and parentless children. It was located on what is today the Queens shoreline, opposite Roosevelt (then Blackwell's) Island. In 1847 the almshouse replaced Long Island Farms with a new set of nursery buildings on Randall's Island. Foundlings remained at these almshouse nurseries until they were old enough to be apprenticed, usually before their teens. Then, unlike French, Italian, or Russian foundlings, who were marked by their association with large-scale church and state-run foundling systems, American foundlings disappeared into the population. This makes them difficult to trace, but it demonstrates how the decentralized, patchwork, and sometimes chaotic nature of American charity, particularly before the Civil War when the federal government played no part in social welfare other than the distribution of military pensions, had an unintended benefit: it allowed those foundlings who managed to survive the extraordinary dangers of their childhoods to escape the stigma that blighted the lives of their European counterparts.

The Discovery of the Foundling

This system—infancy in the almshouse or with a hired wet nurse, childhood in the almshouse or, by the 1830s, at one of the almshouse nurseries, then indenture—was in place when New Yorkers began planning their first foundling asylum. By the 1850s, public officials and reformers had begun to identify infant abandonment as a pressing problem, and the almshouse system, in place since the end of the American Revolution, no longer seemed adequate. These urban leaders, who had previously been content to ignore the high death rate of foundlings, were

moved to action, most immediately by a rise in their numbers. They were also forced to act by the press, which, eager to feed the sentimental and pathetic story of the foundling to its broadening readership, published the work of urban investigators who turned up foundlings in the city's darkest corners.

There were also larger religious, political, scientific, and social forces at work. During the first half of the nineteenth century, most of New York's charities, which had not, as yet, turned their attention to foundlings, were infused with religious enthusiasm stimulated by the Second Great Awakening. By midcentury, however, as the material needs of waves of poor immigrants became overwhelming and as sanitary reformers began to bring scientific values to urban problems, pragmatic goals began to take precedence over spiritual ones among the city's charitable community.¹⁹ Traditional indifference toward the welfare of young children, born out of religious submission as well as the inability of science and medicine to do much for the very young, was gradually replaced by a more attentive and compassionate perspective. People who lived in the nineteenth-century United States saw the welfare of children move out of the private domain of families and closer to the center of public debate.

This momentous change did not begin in the United States, nor did it start in the nineteenth century. It is a Western phenomenon that began perhaps as early as the seventeenth century, and it took on speed during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. It can be seen as a dimension of the age of reform, a product of the same focus on humanitarianism and individual rights that also produced the movements to free the slaves, to grant equal rights to women, and to make the love of wives and mothers—not the power wielded by fathers and husbands—the force that held families together.²⁰

The awakening of New York's reformers and public officials to their responsibility toward the foundlings who died on the streets and in the care of the almshouse was also a product of their alarm about the physical and moral dangers that young children faced in large, crowded, industrial cities. Their city was growing with bewildering rapidity, and by the 1840s reformers and city officials had begun to worry about the growing numbers of poor and vagrant children in the city: little match-sellers, rag-pickers, boot-blacks, newsboys, crossing sweepers, thieves, and prostitutes. Would foundlings who managed to struggle past infancy join these "embryo courtezans and felons," as New York's first

chief of police called them? Or, if they reached adulthood, would they join the “dangerous classes”?²¹ Charles Loring Brace, the founder of the Children’s Aid Society, thought so.²² The Children’s Aid Society began collecting poor city children, some of whom lacked homes or parents, and sending them west on so-called orphan trains to be resettled in the homes of rural families.²³ The first orphan train left the city in 1854, just before almshouse officials began to worry about foundlings. In later years, the foundling asylums themselves sent foundlings west on Brace’s trains or patterned their own western placement programs on Brace’s model.

The creation of New York’s foundling asylums was equally stimulated by anxiety about the behavior of foundlings’ mothers at a time when American society, particularly the urban middle class, was elevating the innocence of children, the purity of women, and the sanctity of motherhood to new heights.²⁴ Foundlings were seen as the embodiments of illicit sexuality and also, seemingly, were evidence of an explicit rejection of maternal values. For reformers, to whom the sexuality of abandoning mothers loomed larger than their poverty, the foundling was the hidden made visible and, as such, was both symptom and symbol of the moral, cultural, and physical decay this group of leaders associated with big cities. All of the foundling asylums except the publicly run Randall’s Island Infant Hospital made the moral reform of the so-called “fallen woman” their central goal, an expression of their administrators’ belief that the foundling was, above all else, evidence of the mother’s wrongdoing.

Focused on the fallen woman, foundling asylum administrators wanted to use their institutions not just to save children from the street, but to combat abortion and prostitution, both of which were on the rise at midcentury. Reformers argued that by relieving women of the products of their sin and keeping their secrets, foundling asylums could rescue fallen women from what they saw as an inevitable downward spiral into prostitution. At the same time, physicians associated with the American Medical Association’s midcentury antiabortion crusade argued that foundling asylums could combat abortion by giving women a place to deposit their unwanted babies.

Despite their commitment to moral purity, the foundling asylums quickly became enmeshed in the city’s interreligious tensions and reliant on the largesse of its corrupt machine politicians. This was, in part, the result of New York’s peculiar system of social welfare. During the nine-

teenth century, overwhelmed by poor immigrants, New York City and New York state developed the practice of delegating public funds to private religious charities, including the foundling asylums. New York's Catholic and Protestant charities competed bitterly for these public dollars, and the Catholic and Protestant foundling asylums were vigorous participants in these interethnic battles. The New York Foundling Asylum discovered just how dangerous this dalliance with power could be in 1871, when city comptroller Richard Connolly, husband of its benefactor Mary Connolly, was implicated in the scandal that brought down the Tweed Ring. The ring's stolen dollars had benefited the Foundling Asylum, along with many other city institutions. The resulting public reluctance to spend public money on private religious institutions made funding unstable for all of the foundling asylums for the remainder of the century.

Some of Europe's foundling asylums lasted for hundreds of years; New York's, for no more than a few decades.²⁵ This was partly a function of when they were founded. Infant abandonment was generally a byproduct of life in large cities. New York only began to see foundlings in significant numbers when it began to resemble a European city in size, density, and squalor. By the time New York opened its foundling asylums, Europe's were starting to close. By the late nineteenth century, and particularly by the first decades of the twentieth century, New York's foundling asylums began to close, too, because they had learned what European foundling asylums had learned before them: that gathering large numbers of infants together in an institution led to many deaths.

During the first decades of the twentieth century, three out of New York's four foundling asylums closed. At a time of rising expectations for children, their tragic failure to keep their infant charges alive was central to their failure. They were doomed also by the city's rising population, by their inability to attract stable sources of funding, and by the obsolescence of their goals and methods. By the early twentieth century, the Victorian vision of the fallen woman was fading fast. Physicians and professional social workers had taken over the care of the sick and poor. And as foster care became the norm, the foundling asylums' crowded wards became obsolete.

The epidemic of foundlings receded, too, in the face of such developments as the popular acceptance of adoption and the passage of laws to facilitate it, better educational and occupational opportunities for

women, and the creation of a federal social safety net during the Progressive and New Deal eras. From World War II to the present, birth control, abortion, and the recent society-wide destigmatization of illegitimacy have led to fewer *Oliver Twists*.²⁶ The occasional baby is still abandoned today in the United States, but—while infant abandonment persists in China and other parts of the world—there is no epidemic of foundlings in the West as there was in the nineteenth century.

If there are voices missing from this story, they are those of the foundlings themselves. Most died before they were old enough to speak. Their voicelessness, combined with the mystery of their origins, made them blank templates on which anyone could project their direst anxieties. To New York's reformers and public officials the appearance of foundlings, physically fragile, morally compromised, and tragically unwanted, in growing numbers on the city's streets meant that social disorder, sexual squalor, and disease were rising in their city. The work that follows is an attempt to see what an epidemic of abandoned babies meant to New Yorkers at an anxious time.