Project Description: “Children of Misfortune: Young and Poor in Early New England, 1675-1820”

“Children of Misfortune” tells an unusual story of early New England by reconstructing the lives of Boston poor apprentices, children whom Boston authorities moved out of problem families and into more respectable ones. Poor apprenticeship, widely used by English and American magistrates in the study period, was similar to other kinds of apprenticeship, in that adults moved children from one household to another within a network of family and community relationships in order to train children for the future. But poor apprenticeship differed in that it showed how local magistrates dealt with those who lived outside known and trusted networks. Magistrates intervened when they believed parents could not provide a proper environment for children because of illegitimacy, abject poverty, parental neglect, desertion, or death. Officials bound out as poor apprentices those children they perceived as being at risk yet capable of useful labor. In poor apprenticeship, magistrates removed children from the networks established by poor people and placed them in households that were part of the magistrates’ established networks. These households could be trusted to share magistrates’ views about ordering society and training poor children for a laboring life.

The lives of Boston’s poor apprentices reveal the vitality of family and community networks across New England in the study period. People were on the move, migrating into and out of Boston, from one New England town to another, and from one state to another, in search of better opportunities. In every community, poor people developed their own networks, often out of sight and barely recognized by local officials, even though their labor was integral to maintaining the households, farms, and shops of more prosperous residents. In early Massachusetts, these more prosperous people might live one hundred miles apart, but they knew each other, or knew about each other, through family, church, commercial, and political activities. Boston officials had kin, friends, and business contacts well beyond Boston: they knew the “better sort” of people in Cape Cod, Salem, Worcester, Springfield, and beyond. By following poor children on their journeys from one family to another, we can see these networks in operation. A poor child orphaned in Boston might move through several households of parental kin and neighbors
before local authorities intervened and moved the child into a family that authorities knew. This host family, by taking in and raising the poor apprentice, affirmed their connection to Boston officials and strengthened the network of respectable people who would raise a child in proper manner. The host family members were usually complete strangers to the child, but the child quickly became part of this new network.

Poor apprenticeship shows that a “proper” family was not the traditional nuclear household that many imagine to be the norm in early America. Poor parents knew authorities might take away their children for a variety of reasons, and some struggling parents surrendered their sons and daughters willingly, accepting family fragmentation in the hope that their children would have a better future. Boston magistrates bound out several thousand poor children in the 1700s; local magistrates in other New England towns bound out thousands more. Breaking up households of the poor and expanding households of the more prosperous was commonplace. Officials and the “better sort” routinely included poor apprentices in their households, along with craft apprentices, adult servants, and slaves. Poor apprenticeship redistributed children and their labor. Children from the margins of society grew up as servants in families that stood at the center or sometimes the very top of the social hierarchy.

Poor apprenticeship shows that, in this early period, a child’s labor was valuable. These bound children had survived the diseases that killed many young people in early America. Sometimes the only ones remaining in what had been families of five or six, these children brought useful and economically meaningful labor to the new households in which they were placed. The poor apprenticeship contract dictated that the master provide the necessities of life, manual labor training, and basic literacy education; at the end of the contract, the master usually provided two outfits of clothing. In return, the child was bound to live with and labor for the master until legal adulthood, often a matter of ten or fifteen years.

“Children of Misfortune” documents these children’s experiences and shows their limited agency in surviving family misfortune, intervention of authorities, and relocation and reeducation in approved households. While some parents maintained contact with their sons and daughters, most poor apprentices built completely new lives based on their masters’ (not their parents’) social networks. Not surprisingly,
most poor apprentices ended up in situations that authorities would have considered appropriate: doing useful manual labor of husbandry or housewifery, serving their betters as servants or laborers, dependent on the networks of the family that had brought them to adulthood. They had taken what officials considered their proper place in a hierarchical society.

“Children of Misfortune” reconstructs the lives of about 100 poor apprentices bound out by Boston officials. Each narrative gives a fresh perspective to early New England history, placing well-known events within the intimate context of a poor child’s life. An orphaned boy partially disabled by smallpox in 1760 served in the Continental Army for three years and afterwards lived a long life as a shoemaker in Hatfield. A poor girl bound to a Revolutionary leader in Hardwick married the illegitimate son of a wealthy business owner in a neighboring community. An enterprising boy successfully left his master in Boston in 1798 to join the crew of the new U.S.S. Constitution. A boy born in the Boston Almshouse in 1799 and bound to a master in Barnstable became so embedded in his host community that he married into a prominent family and erected a poetic headstone for his wife upon her death. Other stories ring with more grief than joy. Indian children were bound out as pillage after King Philip’s War in 1676. A twelve-year-old “Negro” girl, bound to a married couple who had been slaves until the Revolutionary War, was abruptly removed from her foster mother’s care when the husband died, as magistrates considered a widowed former slave woman to be an inappropriate master. A former apprentice who bought land, built a house, and married, died in 1800 less than two months after his marriage when a tree he was chopping down fell on him. The lives of these and other children show the range of human experience: trouble and happiness, prejudice and respect, bad fortune and good fortune.

The humanities disciplines are under pressure to demonstrate their relevance to a public that is increasingly skeptical about their usefulness. If the humanities have value, then humanities scholars should be able to describe that value. Real human stories communicate that value by illuminating our past and broadening its landscape to include those that have been on the margins. The narratives in “Children of Misfortune” show the outlines of a different early America: one where poverty was common, where children were taken from their parents, where children moved into new homes within the
networks fashioned by local officials. As popular organizations like ancestry.com and television shows about family roots demonstrate, Americans are hungry to find people in the past with whom they can identify—not famous forefathers, whose biographies have dominated the literature, but people like themselves who lived in family situations that are still familiar today.

The narratives in this book trace poor apprentices upstream towards their births and downstream into adulthood. I began with the paper contracts (apprenticeship indentures) by which children were bound to masters. I connected these contracts to related documents, such as vitals, land evidence, and tax records. I selected these children because I could find sources with additional information, because they illustrate the wide variety of households that caused official concern, and because they show the range of “proper” households within magistrates’ networks. The records documenting the lives of these poor apprentices are not conveniently gathered in one archive, or even a dozen archives. Reconstructing their lives involves many hours of searching for scraps of evidence in many different places.

Because the direct evidence about Boston’s poor apprentices is scanty, I have also searched for records related to the adults who redirected the lives of these children: the masters with whom the apprentices lived, and the overseers of the poor who decided which children to bind out and which households to bind them into. Because these men left a more substantial trail in the archival records, I am often able to find relevant details of their lives and situate the apprentices within wider family and community contexts. I can even trace the networks connecting masters and magistrates.

I have organized the narratives in chapters that follow life stages of poor apprentices. The narratives in “Family Disasters” highlight the misfortunes that brought children to official attention. Those in “The Almshouse Community” highlight the Boston Almshouse, from which overseers frequently plucked poor apprentices. Those in “Moving Out, Moving Up, Moving Down” highlight economic disparities between master and apprentice. Those in “In the Master’s House” highlight the master-child relationship. Those in “Life after Apprenticeship” highlight adulthood. Collectively, these narratives show how children of misfortune, having circulated from one household to another by official order, emerged as adults expected to behave in ways that officials approved. These children were not
powerful and important in their day, but they remind us that they too are part of “we the people.”

I began “Children of Misfortune” in 2006-07, with an NEH residential fellowship at the Massachusetts Historical Society. I documented all extant Boston poor apprenticeship indentures, analyzed the apprentice system and the office of overseer of the poor, constructed a profile of overseers during the study period, and began reconstructing the lives of individual children. Since then, I have continued to piece together the individual narratives and trace the webs connecting Boston overseers of the poor, the Boston Almshouse, apprentice masters, and parents of poor children. In 2010-11 I wrote an article that focused on Almshouse women, many of whom lost their children to poor apprenticeship; the article subsequently won the best article prize for 2012 in the Journal of the Early Republic. In fall 2011, an internal fellowship at BGSU enabled me make significant progress tracing the poor children’s lives. In June 2013, a fellowship at the Huntington Library enabled me to analyze how poor apprenticeship developed as a legal institution by scrutinizing the changing laws and commentary on poor apprenticeship in justice of the peace manuals published during the study period. In July and August 2013, supported by a Franklin Research Grant from the American Philosophical Society, I did field research in New England, examining town records for evidence of the children as they left poor apprenticeship and entered independent adulthood. The trail often led me in unexpected directions, to other towns, and to other states. As I saw how intensively poor children, masters, and overseers were linked together by family and community networks, I realized I needed more time to trace the networks. I want to spend my upcoming sabbatical year (2014-15) finishing this project: completing the research on the most elusive children; placing each story in its proper social, economic, religious, and legal context; and writing the narratives. An ACLS fellowship would enable me to devote the entire year (rather than just one semester) to the project. The manuscript has been solicited by Cornell University Press, and I have stayed in touch with editor Michael McGandy as it progresses. With a year to research and write, I am confident I will submit the completed manuscript in spring 2015.
Examples of primary documents used in this project:

Almshouse register showing second admission and binding of Thomas Furrs in May 1799, “Alphabetical List of Admissions, 1795-1817,” Boston Overseer of the Poor Records Mss Collection, Box 11, Folder 1, Massachusetts Historical Society.

Letter from Thomas Greenough to Boston overseers of the poor, requesting copy of his indenture, September 8, 1788, “Indentures of Poor Children Bound out as Apprentices by the Overseers of the Poor of the Town of Boston,” 5:100, Boston Public Library Rare Book Division.
This Indenture Sheweth,

That unto the said Elizabeth the indenture owneth, the indenture of Mary McNamara, June 3, 1747, "Indentures of Poor Children Bound out as Apprentices by the Overseers of the Poor of the Town of Boston," 1:119, Boston Public Library Rare Book Division.

Indenture of Mary McNamara, June 3, 1747, “Indentures of Poor Children Bound out as Apprentices by the Overseers of the Poor of the Town of Boston,” 1:119, Boston Public Library Rare Book Division.
Bibliography of Key Primary Sources:

“Boston Town Records,” Manuscript Collection, Boston Public Library, Rare Book Division.

“Boston Overseer of the Poor Records,” Manuscript Collection, Boston Public Library, Rare Book Division.

“Indentures of Poor Children Bound out as Apprentices by the Overseers of the Poor of the Town of Boston [1734-1805],” Manuscript Collection, Boston Public Library Rare Book Division.

Eric G. Nellis and Anne Decker Cecere, eds., The Eighteenth Century Records of the Boston Overseers of the Poor (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 2008).

“Records of the Boston Overseers of the Poor, 1733-1925,” manuscript and microfilm collection, Massachusetts Historical Society.

Reports of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, multiple volumes [transcriptions of the early Boston town meeting and selectmen meeting records] (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1877–)

Bibliography of Key Secondary Sources:


Publications List:

Books


Co-authored with John E. Murray: “‘A Proper and Instruction Education’: Raising Children in Pauper Apprenticeship,” 3-18 (Chapter 1);


Journal Articles and Book Chapters (refereed)


“Mapping the Boston Poor: Inmates of the Boston Almshouse, 1795-1801,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 44:1 (Summer 2013), 63-83. Co-authored with Amilcar E. Challu, BGSU.


