and relocation and reeducation in approved households. Experiences and shows their limited agency in surviving family misfortune, intervention of authorities, the center or even the very top of the social hierarchy. This book spotlights people who had conflicting ideas about how families should be constructed. The current family values debate has its roots in the early American past. Parents, magistrates, and masters held different levels of power in their society and wielded different kinds of authority over children. The sheer numbers of poor apprenticeships challenge present-day assumptions about the dominance of a supposedly traditional nuclear family in the past. Boston magistrates bound more than 1,500 children into households throughout New England between 1676 and 1817; local magistrates in other New England towns bound out thousands more. When these children were taken from parents, those parents lost the right to raise their offspring in a household of their own making. When magistrates bound poor apprentices, they broke up households of the poorer sort and expanded households of the better sort. Officials expected those better sort households to include unrelated servants, slaves, and apprentices as part of their larger “family.” When masters took in poor apprentices, they agreed to raise and educate them according to prevailing Anglo-American family norms. Thus, children whose parents were poor European-Americans, European immigrants, Native Americans, and African Americans—that is, children from the margins of society—grew up as servants in families that stood at the center or even the very top of the social hierarchy. This study documents these children’s experiences and shows their limited agency in surviving family misfortune, intervention of authorities, and relocation and reeducation in approved households.
“Children of Misfortune” reconstructs the life stories of about 100 poor apprentices. Scholars have written very little about poor children in early America, partly because (until recently) children have not been considered appropriate subjects of scholarly study and partly because reconstructing the lives of poor people is so laborious and time-consuming. 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 ready to take in apprentices. I have organized the narratives in chapters that follow life stages of poor apprentices. 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. By detailing the experience of growing up poor, these micro-histories broaden the landscape of early America.

This book is not just for academics, but for a broad audience. 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 track children 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 have also searched for records related to masters with whom the apprentices lived and overseers of the poor who decided when and where children should be bound. Because these men left a more substantial trail, I am often able to find relevant details of their lives and situate the apprentices within wider family and community contexts. I can show the overseers’ social, economic, and political status when they bound out the child. I can show the master’s family situation when the poor apprentice entered and left his household.

Travel support from a Franklin grant would enable me to finish the archival research. The relevant records are not available in one repository. I have spent many hours searching for scraps of evidence in various town, county, state, and regional archives. I have also gathered information from on-line databases and published records. I can complete the trace in one month in local archives holding unpublished documents pertinent to the people in this study. By December 2013, I expect to complete the book manuscript, which has been solicited by Cornell University Press.

**Publications Pertinent to the Project:**


Most Significant Publications not Related to this Project:


Additional Relevant Information:

This microhistorical project requires unusual mobility for this month of research. To finish the archival work, I have to go from one local archive to another in towns scattered throughout Massachusetts and Maine (which was part of Massachusetts in the 1700s). Because the poor apprentices were placed in towns throughout these two states, I have to go those towns to find documents that have not been microfilmed, digitized, or gathered into regional archives where I have already worked.

Budget Statement:

Travel: $5,000.00  
Subsistence: $1,000.00

Reasons for Requested Budget Allocation:

TRAVEL includes $1,000.00 for car rental, $1,000 for fuel, parking, and tolls, and $3,000 for lodging for one month.

I need a car because public transportation is not available to reach all the town halls I need to visit during this month of research. I will be in local archives ranging from western Massachusetts to southern Maine (which was part of Massachusetts in the 1700s).

I will rent a car locally in Ohio for $1,000 for the month, eliminating airfare to/from Massachusetts and other transportation in Massachusetts and Maine.

I calculate $1,000 for fuel, parking and tolls. Fuel: $600.00 for 12 fill-ups over 30 days, at $50 per fill-up for a compact car. Parking: $200 in parking fees in cities where free parking is not available near the
archive. Tolls: $200 in turnpike, highway, and bridge tolls between Ohio and Massachusetts/Maine over 30 days.

I calculate $3,000 for lodging, averaging $100 per night (including taxes).

SUBSISTENCE is all meals for 30 days. $1,000 for subsistence is about $33.00 per day.