Project Description: “Children of Misfortune: Growing up Poor in Early New England”  
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Book Overview

“Children of Misfortune” tells an unexpected story of early New England: that of poor apprentices, children who were removed from their birth families by means of a system commonly used in England and its American colonies in the early modern era. Poor apprenticeship shared aspects of other child circulation systems, such as craft apprenticeship, guardianship, and private tutoring. But poor apprenticeship shows especially well how community leaders regarded the most vulnerable and potentially troublesome people under their jurisdiction. Local officials removed children from their birth homes for a variety of reasons: illegitimacy, poverty, disorder in the family, parental neglect, desertion, or death. When parents could not provide what local magistrates considered a proper environment for their children, the fate of those children became an official concern. Magistrates turned to poor apprenticeship as a way to raise such children in an orderly manner. The practice reveals children caught between parents’ survival strategies and officials’ goals of policing the family to preserve their preferred social order. This study concludes that most poor apprentices internalized magistrates’ goals, ending up in situations that authorities would have considered appropriate for their “station in life.”

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. This book is not just for academics, but for a broad audience. I still receive emails from people who found ancestors as they read narratives of poor adults that I reconstructed in my book Unwelcome Americans. Everyone loves a story. 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. What better description than real human stories that illuminate our past? The narratives in “Children of Misfortune” broaden the landscape of early America. 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. “Children of Misfortune” will help readers envision ordinary people of the past as ancestors of ordinary people in the present.
Methodology

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 ready to take in apprentices. The records documenting the lives of these poor apprentices are not conveniently gathered in one archive, or even a dozen archives. Reconstructing their lives has involved many hours of searching for scraps of evidence in many different, town, county, state, and regional archives.

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 when they became a public concern: that is, the masters with whom the apprentices lived, and the overseers of the poor who decided which children should be bound out and which households they should be bound 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 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.

I have organized the narratives in chapters that follow life stages of poor apprentices. The narratives in “Family Disasters” highlight the misfortunes which brought children to official attention. Those in “The Almshouse Community” highlight the Boston Almshouse, a shelter from which overseers frequently plucked poor apprentices. Those in “Moving Out, Moving Up, Moving Down” highlight economic disparities in poor apprenticeship. 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.”

Huntington Materials

The institution of poor apprenticeship developed over the study period, and each child in this study was bound out at a different point in this development. The magistrates who bound out Boston’s poor children in 1780 or 1800 were operating under a different set of ideas about poverty, childhood and “relief” than the magistrates who bound out children in 1680 or 1700. At the Huntington Library, I want to read legal manuals that would have been read by Boston’s overseers of the poor. The Rare Book collection includes dozens of manuals written for justices of the peace and other local officials, manuals that circulated in Anglo-America during the period covered in this study. Since binding out poor children was a key element of poor relief in England and its American colonies throughout the 1600s and 1700s, these manuals all include advice and instructions on poor apprenticeship and usually include sample indentures as well. While a few of these manuals are widely available in print and digital versions, the Huntington’s collection gives me the unique opportunity to compare all the manuals, in various editions, side by side. I will be able to see both subtle and obvious changes over time in the administration of poor apprenticeship as prescribed in this body of literature.

These legal manuals show the transmittal of English ideas about poor apprenticeship to the American colonies. A majority of these manuals are of English origin. The Huntington collection includes manuals by John Bond, Richard Burn, Michael Dalton, R.D. Dunning, William Fleetwood,
Thomas Forster, James Harvey, William Nelson, James Parker, Joseph Shaw, William Sheppard, and Edmund Wingate. Burn’s *Justice of the Peace* and Dalton’s *The Countrey Justice* were particularly popular and went through a number of editions. Other manuals are of American origin and focus on particular regions or states. The Huntington collection includes manuals by Augustin Clayton, John Dunlap, Samuel Freeman, William Graydon, William Hening, Richard Starke, and George Webb. Still other manuals are American adaptations of English manuals, such as *Burn’s Abridgement or the American Justice* (Dover, New Hampshire, 1792) and *Conductor Generalis* (New York, 1788), which contains selections from William Nelson’s *The Office and Authority of a Justice of the Peace* (London, 1704). The American manuals and American versions of English manuals are particularly helpful, as they show how American magistrates construed their responsibilities towards poor children. These manuals and the occasional legal treatise on the subject, such as Edmund Bohun’s *The Justice of the Peace His Calling: A Moral Essay* (London, 1684), provide a map through the continually evolving expectations of magistrates’ in their treatment of poor children between 1676 and 1817.

Analysis of these legal manuals will significantly enrich both the general introduction and the individual narratives in the book. I will analyze American abridgements and adaptations of English law and precedent regarding poor apprenticeship, and I will connect those shifts to changes in Massachusetts apprenticeship law that I have already identified. I will analyze the moral expectations of magistrates and masters presented in these manuals, in order to show the prevailing climate of civic responsibility at different moments in this study. Taken as a whole, these manuals show developments in key aspects of binding out: the authority of magistrates over poor children and their parents; the importance of the prospective master’s status, occupation, and literacy; assumptions about the institution of poor apprenticeship, evident in what is prescribed as boilerplate text and what is left blank in the model indentures. I will also be able see more clearly how the manuals refer to each other and draw on each other, noting if and when legal experts arrived at a consensus on various elements of poor apprenticeship.

**Progress to Date**

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 long eighteenth century, and began constructing the lives of individual poor apprentices. Since then, I have continued to piece together the individual narratives. I have also traced the web of relations connecting poor families to Boston overseers of the poor, the Boston Almshouse, and apprentice masters. In fall 2011, an internal fellowship at BGSU enabled me make significant progress tracing the poor apprentices’ lives, and the project is nearing completion. In summer 2013, I will search specific Massachusetts town archives for last bits of evidence about the children in the narratives. The manuscript has been solicited by Cornell University Press, and I have stayed in touch with editor Michael McGandy as it progresses. With the assistance of a fellowship at the Huntington to set the narratives and analysis in strong legal context, I anticipate submitting the manuscript to the press by the end of 2013.