“Children of Misfortune” tells an unusual history of early New England by reconstructing the lives of poor apprentices bound out by Boston officials. These children, taken from their birth families and moved into more prosperous and respectable ones, put well-known events into a fresh context. A cluster of Indian children were bound out as “pillage” to English masters after King Philip’s War in 1676. Two siblings were separated from their mother, their “grievously” sick father, and each other just as Boston overthrew Governor Andros and ended the Dominion of New England in the 1690s. An orphan disabled by disease in the 1750s was bound into a Hatfield family that oversaw his training as a shoemaker; alongside his former master, he served in the Continental Army for three years. A poor girl bound to a Revolutionary leader in Hardwick married the illegitimate son of a wealthy business owner in 1791. An enterprising boy successfully left his master in 1798 to join the crew of the new U.S.S. Constitution. A “Negro” girl, bound in 1800 to a married couple that had been enslaved until the Revolutionary War, was abruptly removed from the household when the husband died, as magistrates disapproved of an unmarried black woman (although free) as master. A boy born in the Boston Almshouse in 1799 and bound to a master in Barnstable married into a prominent family. Indian wars, the Glorious Revolution, the American Revolution, the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts, the building of a new nation—these events read differently when embedded in the lives of poor children.

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 those children they perceived as being at risk yet capable of useful labor. A contract stipulated that the master provide the necessities of life, training in manual labor, and literacy.
education. The child was bound to live with and labor for the master until adulthood, often a matter of ten or fifteen years. In this way, magistrates removed children from the networks established by poor people and placed them within the magistrates’ own networks. These new households could be trusted to share magistrates’ views about ordering society by training poor children for a laboring life.

This study reveals the importance of social networks across early New England. 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. The “better” people might live one hundred miles apart, but they knew each other through family, church, commercial, and political activities. Boston officials had kin, friends, and trusted business contacts throughout and beyond New England. 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 (complete strangers to the child). 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.

Poor apprenticeship demonstrates 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, and some struggling mothers and fathers 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 prosperous was commonplace. Children from the margins grew up as laborers in families that stood at the center or sometimes the very top of the social hierarchy.

“Children of Misfortune” is both story-telling and critical analysis. Without sacrificing either scholarly rigor or engaging narrative, it makes early America widely accessible to present-day readers.
Historical scholars have given early American children relatively little attention, mainly because those young people generated so few primary documents. In sharp contrast, social scientists give today’s children enormous attention. My analysis of poor apprenticeship reveals the institution as a precursor to orphanages, foster parenting, and adoption, thus providing the back-story to institutions that now occupy the attention of sociologists and family studies experts. Poor apprenticeship also predated and helped prompt public schools, and this study provides context for the rise of educational institutions in the nineteenth century. Poor apprenticeship had its dark side in the forced labor of children and it looked shockingly similar to slavery in some cases. The pronounced racial bias in Boston poor apprenticeship underscores this linkage and gives us new material for understanding race relations in early America. Economists and labor specialists will also appreciate how this young work force expanded the labor pool of local communities in early America. For social scientists and humanities scholars in general, the narratives carry the analysis in powerful ways. Short, personal stories engage readers at every level through the universally understood dramas of trouble, loss, and endurance. The children’s stories give the book a language that translates across time, culture, and discipline.

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 scholars should be able to describe that value. This is a history-as-humanities project. Real human stories communicate the value of the past by illuminating and broadening its landscape to include those that have been on the margins. This study gives readers people of 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 recognizable today. The narratives in this book trace poor apprentices upstream towards their births and downstream into adulthood. I began with the official contract that bound the child to the master. Other records about the lives of these poor apprentices are scattered and thin, and I have supplemented them with evidence about the masters and the magistrates, who left a more substantial archival trail. The long search to reconstruct these lives has brought to light many
connections and has revealed previously unknown networks that bound New England families and communities.

I began “Children of Misfortune” with an NEH residential fellowship in 2006-07 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. I have regularly presented conference and seminar papers that develop particular sections of the book. In 2010-11 I wrote an article that focused on Almshouse women, who often 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 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. 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 these networks. I intend 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 uninterrupted year at the National Humanities Center would enable me to finish the project while exchanging ideas with others scholars. Cornell University Press has solicited the manuscript, and I intend to submit the completed manuscript in spring 2015.