

**FOUNDLINGS, ASYLUMS, ALMSHOUSES AND ORPHANAGES:
EARLY ROOTS OF CHILD PROTECTION**

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ABSTRACT: *Today, the United States has entire industries devoted to clothing, educating, feeding, and amusing children. While most Americans agree, at least in principal if not with their pocketbooks, that the physical and emotional health and welfare of children should be a national priority, such concern was not always the case. Society's interest in the plight of children, including their very survival, is a relatively recent phenomenon. To appreciate this phenomenon and the concomitant rise in the number of facilities devoted exclusively to the care of children in the contemporary United States, this paper explores the earliest roots of institutions for child protection. It begins with events such as the fall of the Roman Empire and the rise of Christianity and proceeds through changing economic and social expectations as exemplified by the rise of cities and the early part of the Industrial Revolution. Future research efforts will expand on this theme and time frame.*

INTRODUCTION

Historically, when societies faced serious economic problems, competing demands for resources, or implicit cultural expectations, those with the lowest social status fared poorly. Infants, being dependent rather than productive members of society, were vulnerable to abandonment, abortion, cannibalism and infanticide. One well-known example of such practices is the story of Moses, abandoned by his desperate mother by being set adrift on the Nile. This story was not set out by scribes to teach the lesson that infant abandonment is wrong. Instead, it emphasized that this child was, as his mother had hoped, saved.

Even today, children who survive infancy are hampered by low status. In many societies they are bought and sold as chattel, or mutilated with tattooing, scarification, or ritual operations to increase their value as property. Some are crippled for the purposes of

begging, forced to labor under inhumane conditions, serve as brothel slaves, or they may simply succumb to abuse and neglect. Male children who survive infancy often become tied to the economic survival of the family unit (either through the fruits of labor or the spoils of war) and their worth increases with age. Female children, however, are often considered liabilities and they may be discarded, albeit leaving sufficient numbers to guarantee procreation of the social unit.

Many civilizations have histories of practices that ignored or destroyed rather than nurtured a majority of infants. Overt abuse and neglect, if not outright infanticide, held many populations in check. For example, it was accepted historical practice among nomads of the Middle East to sacrifice their first-born for ritual purposes, as in the case of Abraham preparing to sacrifice Isaac. This practice was later modified when a ritual animal (scapegoat) was substituted for the first-born, thus saving the child from a sure death. But

children remained an encumbrance to the nomadic lifestyle, a drain on the limited food and water available to the tribe. On the Arabian peninsula, nomads buried infants and even older daughters alive for population control until Mohammed outlawed the practice in the 8th century (deMause, 1974).

In China, Confucius introduced the idea of male sovereignty with the child as a father's property. Jesuit records of Chinese history tell us that children were considered an asset in China before 232 BCE. After that date, war and famine were rife in China and abandonment and infant drowning became commonplace. The practice of female infanticide survived until recently in some parts of rural China, primarily because male children were preferred and strict family planning measures under the communist regime limited the family to one child.

In ancient India, male children were prized as warriors and were counted as part of the family wealth. Female infanticide was sanctified in the *Mahabharata* and the status of surviving females was low. In 1871, the government passed the Infanticide Act, the official effort to suppress the practice of female infanticide (Garrison, 1965). Yet today, female fetuses continue to be aborted in India, a legacy of these historical and cultural practices and a by-product of new technology (sonography) that can determine the gender of a fetus early in gestation (Venkatram, 1995).

Western cultures also practiced infanticide. It was common for ancient Greeks and Romans to murder their own children, both for economic reasons and for the glorification of the power of the male head of household. Infant death by exposure was practiced in both Greece and Rome. In Athens, infants were left to the elements near Cynosarges, an academic gathering place. In Sparta, puny or ill-formed children were left in a chasm under Mount Taygetus. Even Romulus, founder of Rome, was purported to be an exposed infant, although he survived. A typical place in Rome where infants were left to the elements was the Colonna Lactaria in the Forum Olitorium, a vegetable market. If an infant was not taken home and raised as a slave by a citizen, he or she was doomed to die of exposure (Payne, 1916; Rousselle, 2001).

Abortion was commonplace in ancient Greece and Rome. The *foetus in utero* had no rights under Greek law and destruction of the fetus for the purposes of population control was an accepted practice. In

Rome, the destruction of one's own children was often viewed as a great and virtuous action. To destroy a child *in utero* was simply more efficient. The great philosophers of both civilizations, including Plato and Plutarch, agreed that there should be a limit to the procreation of offspring. Abortion and infanticide were simply two means of achieving that limitation (Garrison, 1965; deMause, 1974).

The *Jus Quiritium*, early Roman law, contained a portion called the *patria potestas*, which made wives and children chattel. This meant a father could sell, mutilate, or even kill his own offspring at will. Even more common was killing one's enemy's children. The children of Roman nobility were under constant threat of death, not only from their own fathers, but depending upon their father's political stance, from their father's enemies (deMause, 1974).

In the last days of the Republic, exposure and other forms of infanticide and child abuse increased as poverty and corruption increased. Yet Rome continued to seek population growth, a larger number of citizens to rule the Empire. In an effort to stem the practice of infanticide by exposure, Constantine issued an edict in 315 declaring foundlings to be the slaves of anyone who would agree to rear them. To further reduce the problem of loss of subjects to infanticide, Constantine gave poor parents the right to sell their newborn infants as slaves rather than abandon them (Garrison, 1965).

Rome may have fallen into decadence and decay, but she left a legacy that transmitted the *patria potestas* into the far reaches of the Roman Empire. Largely affected were the inhabitants of Gaul and Germany where the concept of children as property was absolute. Infanticide and exposure were moral failings rather than crimes and they were punishable by no more than small fines (blood money). Thousands of children were exposed, abandoned, or sold into slavery in Gaul, Germany, and Britain during the Dark Ages. Not only did the impoverished sell their own children, they stole and trafficked in children of the well-to-do, to be turned into beggars or slaves (deMause, 1974; Garrison, 1965).

A second legacy left by Rome was Christianity. The rise of the Church helped to elevate the status of children, especially in southern Europe. The words of Jesus about the innocence of children were given importance from the pulpit. Art works glorifying the Madonna and child adorned churches.

Roman emperors issued seven edicts against infanticide between 315 and 451 and church councils continued that tradition after the fall of Rome. For instance, the Council of Vaison (442) and later the Councils of Arles (452) and Agde (505) provided that an abandoned child should find sanctuary in a church for ten days. These edicts encouraged poor mothers to leave their newborn infants in a marble receptacle at a church door rather than abandon them to the elements. Should they have chosen to abandon their infants elsewhere, the Council of Constantinople (588) would have likened their actions to homicide. Thus, the practice of abandoning infants on the steps of a church was codified. The Church accepted the responsibility of locating wet nurses for these infants and sometimes found them adoptive parents.

In 325, the Council of Nicea decreed that each Christian village should establish a *xenodochion*, or hostelry for the sick, poor, and vagrant. Some of these *xenodocia* later converted to *brephotrophia*, or asylums

for infants. The first founding of an asylum dedicated to abandoned infants is credited to Datheus, Archbishop of Milan, in 787. The facility had a receiving cradle attached to a revolving door. The depositor rang a bell to announce the arrival of the "little stranger." The door would turn, accepting the infant into the asylum and protecting the anonymity of the depositor (deMause, 1974; Garrison, 1965; Lyman, 1974; Payne, 1916; Radbill, 1955).

TYPES OF FOUNDLING HOMES AND ORPHAN ASYLUMS

Foundling homes and orphan asylums existed throughout Europe in the Middle Ages (Table 1). Some of these places were called hospitals; many others were not. Facilities specifically designated for

Table 1. Chronology of Cities Opening Facilities for Child Protection: Earliest Record to 1800

787	Milan, It.	1421	Florence, It.	1650	Pernambuco, Braz.*
982	Bergamo, It.	1426	Verona, It.	1660	New Amsterdam, NY*
1000	Siena, It.	1438	Bergamo, It.	1662	Bejing, Ch.
1010	Montpellier, Fr.	1447	Brescia, It.	1662	London, Eng.
1041	Ljubljana, Slo.	1449	Mantua, It.	1664	Erfurt, Ger.
1049	Padua, It.	1450	Cremona, It.	1665	Mainz, Ger.
1161	Florence, It.	1450	Florence, It.	1666	Amsterdam, Neth.
1168	Milan, It.	1458	Lodi, It.	1669	Erfurt, Ger.
1180	Montpellier, Fr.	1468	Como, It.	1677	Brunswick, Ger.
1188	Arezzo, It.	1479	Cremona, It.	1679	Frankfurt, Ger.
1193	Florence, It.	1489	Munich, Ger.	1692	Bremen, Ger.
1198	Rome, It.	~1490	Toldeo, Sp.	1697	Berlin, Ger.
1199	Marseilles, Fr.	1501	Locarno, It.	1695	Halle, Ger.
1200	Einbeck, Ger.	1513	Reggio, It.	1702	Dublin, Ire.
1201	Aix, Fr.	1515	Naples, It.	1704	Prague, Cz.
1201	Navarra, Sp.	1523	Paris, Fr.	1708	Novgorod, Rus.
1201	Parma, It.	1524	Mexico City, Mex.*	1709	Hamburg, Ger.
1201	Toulon, Fr.	1532	Mexico City, Mex.*	1728	New Orleans, LA*
1201	Valema, Czech.	1539	Pistoia, It.	1732	Edinburgh, Scot.
1204	Sassia (Rome), It.	1545	Paris, Fr.	1732	Philadelphia, PA*
1210	Prato, It.	1553	London, Eng.	1738	Ebenezer, GA*
1210	Jerusalem	1563	Lima, Peru*	1738	Rio de Janeiro, Braz.*
1218	Florence, It.	1563	Mexico City, Mex.*	1739	Savannah, GA*
1250	Bellinzona, It.	~1570	Lisbon, Port.	1741	London, Eng.
1258	San Gimignano, It.	1573	Piacenza, It.	1750	Savannah, GA*
1268	Lucca, It.	~1590	Valladolid, Sp.	1778	Baltimore, MD*
1274	Embach, Ger.	1594	Amsterdam, Neth.	1790	Charleston, NC*
1283	Arab world	1604	Hamburg, Ger.	1793	Philadelphia, PA*
1286	Cortona, It.	1618	Dresden, Ger.	1798	Philadelphia, PA*
1294	Taulis, Fr.	1629	Toledo, Sp.	1799	Baltimore, MD*
1316	Florence, It.	1636	London, Eng.	1800	Boston, MA*
1331	Nürnberg, Ger.	1636	Paris, Fr.		
1362	Paris, Fr.	1639	Paris, Fr.		
1380	Venice, It.	1639	Würzburg, Ger.		
1380	Vienna, Aus.	1650	Bogota, Col.*		
1420	Genoa, It.	1650	Mexico City, Mex.*		

Source: Garrison 195; Radbill 1955

*New World Cities

infants and children were founded in many European cities, usually under the direction of the Church. One was also founded in Jerusalem (1210). By necessity, these facilities cared for both sick and well, abandoned or orphaned infants and children (Garrison, 1965).

During the 13th century, monasteries were built with foundling homes attached. These infant refuges utilized wet nurses from the community rather than depending on hand feeding, with each wet nurse assigned to six children. Physicians and surgeons from among the monks served sick infants as best they could in these foundling homes (Radbill, 1955). Sometimes a portion of a general or lying-in hospital was dedicated to receiving foundlings. Garrison (1965) lists such

facilities at Sassia (1204), Nürnberg (1331), Paris (1362), Venice (1380), Florence (1421), and Verona (1426). Other times, hospitals were built with a separate foundling home attached, as in Siena (ca. 1000) and in the Arab world (1283) (Radbill, 1955) (Table 1).

As feudalism began to fail, population growth mushroomed and migration to cities increased. The Hôtel Dieu, the oldest hospital in France and the oldest hospital still in existence (ca. 600), was originally a place of refuge or asylum rather than an institution for the treatment of illness. The facility began accepting foundlings and sick children in 1523 (Garrison, 1965). Placing abandoned infants in hospitals was supposed to

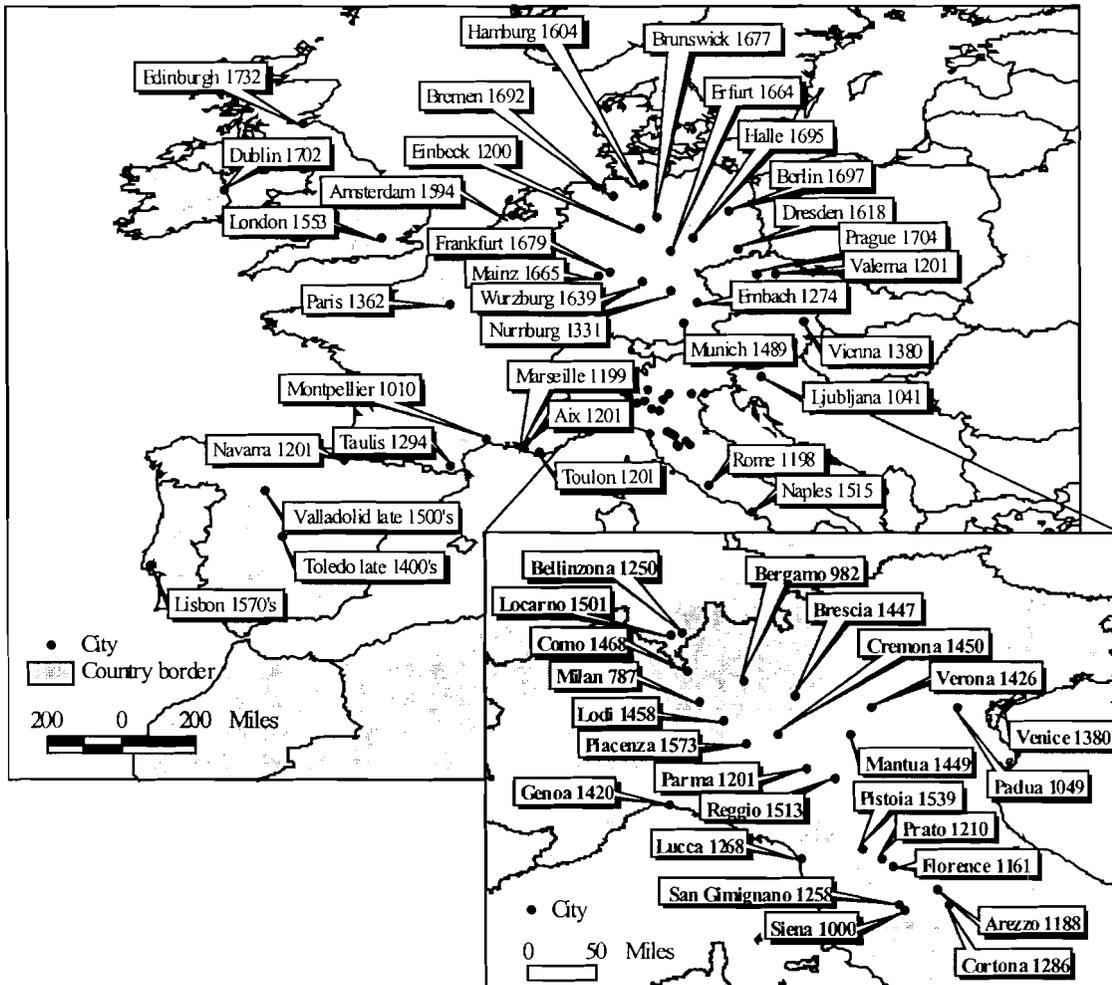


Figure 1. Old world foundling home and orphan asylum locations (including Northern Italy inset) with date of first opening (not shown: Jerusalem 1210, Beijing, China 1662, and Novgorod, Russia 1708).

Sources: Garrison 1965; Radbill 1955.

remove them from the street so they could not be purposefully maimed and sold as beggars. Their fate, however, was not improved as Marvick (1974) claims that not one infant taken to the Hôtel Dieu survived to adulthood.

Transferring abandoned infants to the Hôtel Dieu did not solve the problem of infant exposure and infanticide in Paris. Children of the poor were found dead of cold and hunger in the streets and the drowned bodies of infants were fished out of sewers and rivers of that city in increasing numbers. By 1547, the situation of infanticide had become so rife that the Parliament of Paris found it necessary to decree that nobles must take the responsibility of caring for foundlings left in their domains. This decree was mostly ignored (Garrison, 1965).

Payne (1916) tells the story of a 17th-century woman in Paris who collected foundlings in her home. Eventually, this proved too large a charitable effort for one person to oversee. Her two servants took to drugging and selling these foundlings to peddlers and mountebanks who, in turn, used the infants for money-making purposes. Vincent de Paul, who had once been captured by pirates and sold into slavery, caught one of these opportunists deforming the limbs of a child in order to turn the child into a more effective beggar. Legend claims that Vincent de Paul snatched the child and escaped across the city to safety. Eventually, he interested a number of wealthy ladies with a penchant for charity in his cause--establishing a reputable asylum for foundlings and orphans.

The Foundling Hospital of Paris, also known as *La Couche*, opened its doors in 1636. The facility was badly managed and was nicknamed "Maison de la Mort" or House of Death, for its high mortality rate (New Advent, 2002). The facility was taken over by Vincent de Paul with the help of benefactors and renamed the Hôpital des Enfants Trouvés in 1640. Louis XIII donated 4000 francs to the charity each year and, after his death in 1641, Anne of Austria donated 8000 francs (Garrison, 1965). Because of his efforts to save foundlings and orphans from misery and death, Vincent de Paul was designated the patron saint of orphans and asylums by the Catholic Church.

In June of 1670, the Hôpital des Enfants Trouvés was chartered by Louis XIV and endowed with 12,000 francs per annum. This charter stimulated a systematic transfer of foundlings from the provinces,

where they were clearly unwanted, to Paris. Unfortunately, about 75% of these infants died within three months of arrival, often because of exposure in transit and poor infant feeding practices. Because of high infant mortality, Louis decreed that foundlings must be taken to the nearest hospital and cared for with public funds. Indeed, any wagonner bringing an infant to Paris for the purpose of exposure was subject to a fine of 1000 livres (Garrison, 1965).

Foundling and orphan asylums continued opening in major cities throughout the world during the 17th century as populations continued to grow and migrate (Figure 1). The Church had a vested interest in seeing that foundlings and orphaned children survived in both Europe and the newly conquered lands opened by exploration. Pagan children who could be schooled in the ways of Christianity would be devout followers, forever indebted to the Church for their survival. Yet hygiene was in an abominable state in this early period and medical knowledge had not yet reached the point where it could effectively influence either infant mortality or child survival. It was not expected that many children, even wanted children, would survive infancy.

EARLY EFFORTS AT CHILD PROTECTION IN THE NEW WORLD

When the Spaniards landed in Central America, they found that the Aztecs already had a fully developed hospital system with attendant medical care.

Indeed, native physicians and surgeons had superior medical knowledge and surgical skills compared to those of the average practitioner in 15th-century Europe. The Incas and Mayas also had orphan asylums, but the Spaniards suppressed these institutions and little documentation has survived to tell us about them. Instead, the Spaniards established new schools, hospitals, and foundling homes that focused on saving souls through the teachings of the Church, not on educating the masses or curing the sick.

In 1524, Hernando Cortez is credited with founding the Hospital of the Immaculate Conception in Mexico City, an institution still existing under the name Hospital of Jesus of Nazareth. It, too, later accepted

Roots of Child Protection

foundlings. Over the next 100 years, additional foundling homes sprang up in Bogota, Mexico City, Pernambuco, and Rio de Janeiro (Radbill, 1955).

By 1532, Pedro de Gante had as many as 600 children under tutelage at a large school in Mexico City. A small hospital was attached to the school for the care of sick children. In 1563, Vasco de Quiroga established a teaching institution near Mexico City, including a hospital with wards for children and a foundling home with wet nurses. In that same year in Lima, Peru, Father Luis Ojeda organized a foundling home after he found an exposed infant being devoured by a pack of dogs on the streets of that city (Radbill, 1976).

Dutch records in Albany, New York show that an orphan house existed in the colonies in 1660, probably in New Amsterdam (Radbill, 1976). This is

somewhat surprising given the low population density of the colony at that time. Foundlings and orphans were usually assigned to families in small communities and additional orphans were imported from Europe to serve as indentured servants (Bremner, 1970; Cone, 1979). It might be that the orphan house existed primarily to house imported orphans until they could be sold or bonded out as indentured servants. Facilities founded in the new world dedicated to child protection to 1750 are displayed in Figure 2.

Children continued to find refuge in foundling homes and orphan asylums in the 18th century. Some orphanages maintained a separate room for sick children where they could be nursed by nuns or women with skills as herbalists (Cone, 1979; Garrison, 1965; Finkelstein, 1985). Cone (1979) claims that only eight places of refuge existed for children in the United

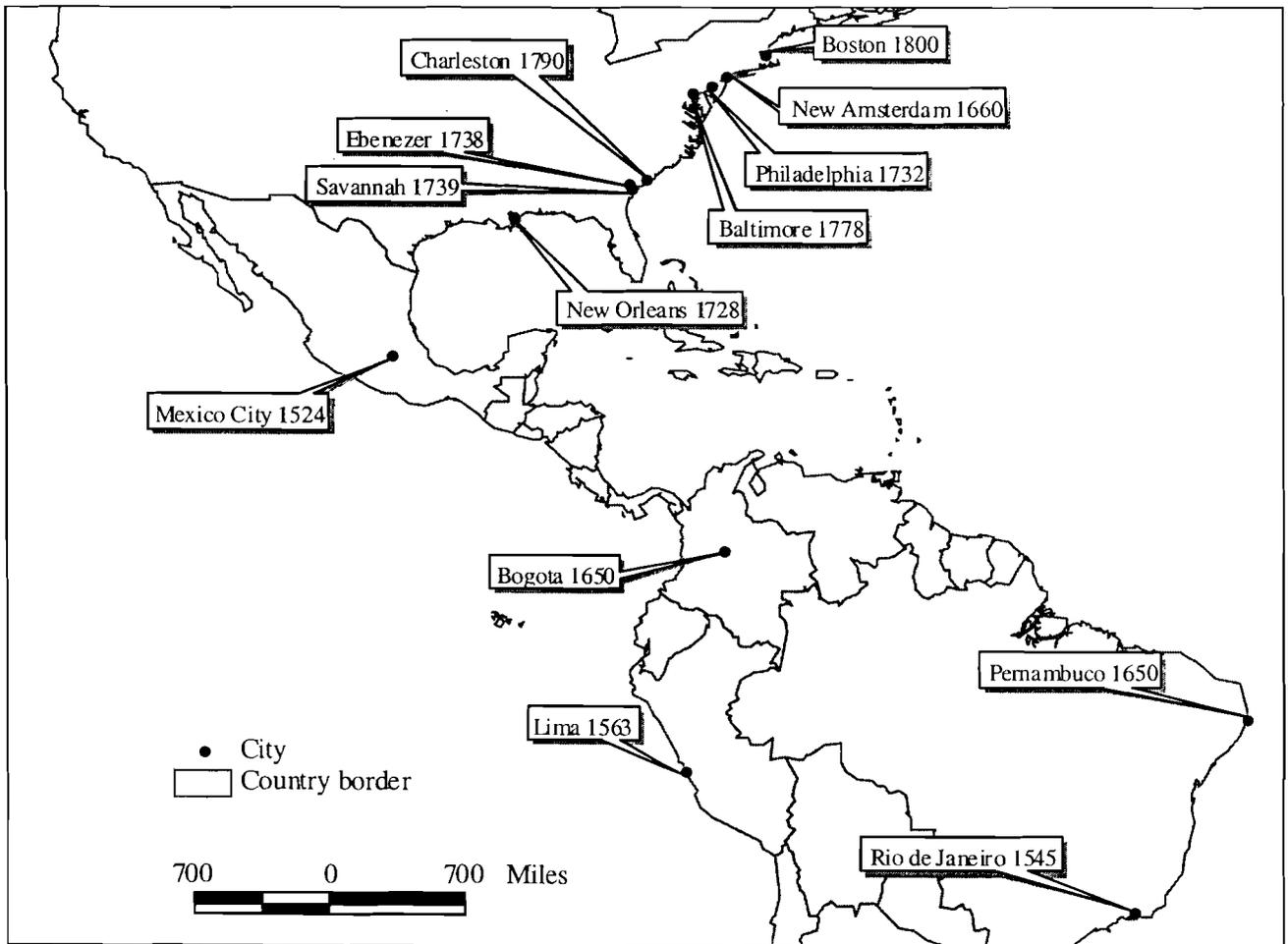


Figure 2. New world foundling home and orphan asylum locations with date of first opening.

Table 2. Places of Refuge Specifically Designated for Children in North America to 1800

1660	Orphan house opened in New Amsterdam
1728-9	Ursuline Orphanage established in New Orleans (girls only)*
1732	Philadelphia Almshouse opens with separate foundling facility
1738	Orphanage established by German settlers at Ebenezer, GA
1739-40	Bethesda Orphan's Home established in Savannah (boys only)*
1750	Savannah Female Asylum founded (girls only)*
1778	Baltimore Orphan Asylum founded*
1790	First public orphanage founded at Charleston
1793	Philadelphia Orphanage founded following a Yellow Fever epidemic (later terminated and the children were sent to the almshouse)
1798	St. Joseph's Orphan Asylum founded at Philadelphia (girls only)*
1799	St. Paul's Orphanage founded in Baltimore (girls only)*
1800	Boston Female Asylum founded (girls only)*

* Still in operation in 1904

Sources: Cone 1979; Garrison 1965; Thurston 1930; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1905

States before 1800, but he does not name them. Twelve were located among historical records and these are listed in Table 2.

Almshouses as well as orphanages served as places of refuge for orphaned or deserted children in the larger towns and cities of the United States. When the number of orphans and foundlings in a community were few, they could be accommodated in local households until they could be bonded out for apprenticeship in a trade. As the number of these children increased and homes could not be readily found, the almshouse became the standard place of refuge. Unfortunately, few had separate quarters for children. For example, Boston had an almshouse as early as 1664, but there are no records to show children as residents until the period 1764 to 1769, when the almshouse housed 72 children in the general population. New York had an almshouse as early as 1700, but children were not housed there until 1736 when they comprised about 15% of the population (Rothman, 1971).

Thurston (1930) provides an excellent discussion of how refuge for children was originally tied to indenture under feudalism, transferred to care in almshouses under the poor laws, and shifted to infant asylums and orphanages in the 19th century. The decline of indenture paralleled the decline of feudalism, the rise of the Industrial Revolution, and the distaste for slavery in the United States. The decline of caring for

children in almshouses, however, was linked with providing children with a "moral" climate in which to grow up—the assumption being that the poor were not moral or they would not be in almshouses.

Removing children from almshouses and placing them in orphanages was an attempt to turn still impressionable children into "worthy" citizens imbued with the work ethic. Orphanages often had work schedules, prayer schedules, and other means of keeping children focused on "correct" ways of living. The greatest concern of reformers of the time was that they not perpetuate another generation of paupers by allowing children to be raised in the slothful climate of the almshouse.

Few official documents describe the numbers of children in individual almshouses, asylums, and orphanages in the United States. An investigation (ca. 1827) of illegitimate infants born in almshouses numbered none in Baltimore, nine to ten in Boston, 80 to 90 in New York, and 269 in Philadelphia (Bremner, 1970). A New York State Assembly report from a statewide investigation in 1823 claimed that 8,753 of 22,111 paupers in New York State almshouses (40%) were children under the age of 14 (Thurston, 1930). By that year, 1,558 almshouses were in existence in the United States, housing more than 130,000 dependent children (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1927). The social (and moral) cost of keeping children in almshouses was of great concern and social reformers rapidly took up

the cause. Over the next half-century, philanthropists and religious orders opened hundreds of foundling homes and orphan asylums.

CONCLUSION

Prior to the Christian era, there is evidence that the world was cruel, brutish and short for many infants and children. Care of foundlings was limited to churches and monasteries from the 4th to 8th centuries (deMause, 1974; Garrison, 1965; Lyman, 1974; Payne, 1916; Radbill, 1955). The historical record describing that period focuses on infants left on church steps or in a turning receptacle in the church door. There is no mention of the care of older children who were abandoned or orphaned, perhaps because the practice of the time was to bond such children to peasant farmers where they could earn their keep.

As early as the 1st century, facilities for older children arose in Europe, perhaps as a result of urbanization and perhaps in response to the waves of disease that decimated the continent. For example, more than 25% of the European population died of the plague in the 14th century. It is likely that many infants and children were orphaned during that period. Problems were so severe in northern Italy that the first boards of health were created in Venice and Florence in the 14th century to specifically address the aftermath of a wave of the Black Death (Ranger and Slack, 1992). It is not far-fetched to believe that part of the overall attempt to contain the disease and deal with its effects would have been to create facilities for the care of foundlings and orphaned infants. Such efforts would not be primarily for the protection of children, but for the protection of society at-large. Plague continued to haunt southern European cities, particularly seaports, for the next half century (Pullan, 1992). In a parallel fashion, facilities for the care of infants continued to emerge, especially in that region.

In the 15th through 17th centuries, both the Church and monarchs became involved in removing foundlings and orphaned waifs from the streets. Foundlings, in particular, fared poorly because being a foundling equated to bastardy and to its corollary, disgrace (McClure, 1981). In England and the

American colonies, strongholds of Protestantism, people despised the bastard because "he was living and undeniable proof that his parents were sinners and lawbreakers; they had transgressed God's laws..." (McClure, 1981, p. 11). In Europe, these prejudices "were offset by the interests of Church and State; the former wanted souls, the latter soldiers" (McClure, 1981, p. 14).

As European colonization reached deep into the Americas, war and infectious diseases, especially smallpox, took their toll on the indigenous population. In response to the annihilation of natives, some missionaries felt compelled to create orphanages where the souls of the surviving children could be saved. By the 18th century, cities sprang up throughout the new world and the growth of facilities for infants and children quickly followed. The way in which abandoned infants and orphaned children were cared for shifted from almshouses to foundling homes, orphan asylums and orphanages. This shift was important as it highlighted the issue of child protection and couched it in terms of social reform. Within the next century, the United States would usher in the Progressive Era, and a concerted effort for infant and child protection would arise.

The authors anticipate continuing their examination of child protection and the growth of child-centered institutions in the western world, particularly in the United States. Their next effort will be to describe the creation and geographic diffusion of medical treatment facilities specifically dedicated to the care of infants and children.

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