U.S. Adoption and Orphanage Records

History of U.S. Adoption Laws
Before World War II, almost half of all adoptions were handled privately, and, sometimes, there were few records involved. Adoption records in most states were open to the public or to “interested parties.” After World War II, many states began regulating adoption more strictly, offering greater privacy protection to birth parents and evaluating prospective adoptive homes more closely. In the last several decades, the adoptees rights movement has lobbied to open access to birth and adoption information to adoptees. The accessibility of information continues to vary from state to state. For a basic overview of the types of information found in adoption records and the range of state policies concerning access to each type, see http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/infoaccessap.cfm.*

Locating Adoption Records
There are several records relevant to birth parent or adoptee searches: birth certificates in state or city repositories, case files of adoption agencies, and records of the courts that approved the adoptions. To find your state’s laws concerning access to adoption records, use the Child Welfare Information Gateway’s State Statute Search at http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/state. To learn whether you can access case files or to request non-identifying information about birth parents, such as their national/ethnic heritage, religion, etc., contact the agency or lawyer that handled the adoption.

New York State law allows the release of non-identifying information only. Original birth certificates are only available upon court order. New York State maintains a mutual consent registry by which identifying information (i.e. current names and addresses) may be exchanged between the adoptee, birth parents, and/or birth siblings upon consent of all parties. For more information on this registry, visit http://www.health.ny.gov/vital_records/adoption.htm.

If you have identified your birth parents and would like to conduct genealogical research on their families, please see our fact sheet on “Starting Your Family History Research.”

Adoption Agencies
To find the public or private adoption agency that handled the adoption, use the Child Welfare Information Gateway’s National Foster Care and Adoption Directory. http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad

Jewish Adoption Agencies
For cities other than New York, contact the local Jewish Family and Children’s Agency. The Association of Jewish Family and Children’s Agencies website provides a list of all JFCA’s at http://ajfca.org/.

Louise Wise Services
Louise Wise Services was the most recent successor to several other adoption organizations, including the Free Synagogue Child Adoption Committee and the Jewish Girls Service. Louise Wise Services is now defunct as well. Spence-Chapin now holds the adoption records for private adoptions finalized through Louise Wise Services. Records for children adopted from foster care are stored at the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) Records Warehouse.

Spence-Chapin
Address: 410 East 92nd Street
New York, NY 10128
Phone: (212) 369-0300
Website: http://www.spence-chapin.org
Contact: Gladys Ramos (212) 360-0259
gramos@spence-chapin.org

Administration for Children’s Services
Address: 150 William Street
New York, NY 10038
Phone: (877) 543-7692
Outside NYC: (212) 341-0900

* A word of caution - some links in this document are not available via all browsers, such as Internet Explorer.
Birth Certificates
When an adoption is finalized, a new birth certificate for the child is customarily issued to the adoptive parents. The original birth certificate is then sealed and kept confidential by the state registrar of vital records. While, in the past, most states required a court order for adoptees to gain access to their original birth certificates, currently about half allow easier access to these records. To find your state’s laws concerning access to original birth certificates, use the Child Welfare Information Gateway’s State Statute Search at http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/state.

If you are looking for a birth certificate issued prior to 1942 (when the Uniform Vital Statistics Act required adoptees’ original birth certificates to be sealed), you may order it by mail or online (for a fee) from the Vital Records Office of the state in which the individual was born. To find contact info for each state’s Vital Records Office, see http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/w2w.htm. For links to online birth records (indexes, images, or both) by state, visit http://germanroots.com/vitalrecords.html.*

*Some of these links will take you to Ancestry.com, which requires a fee to view records.

Mutual Consent/Reunion Registries
A mutual consent registry is a means of connecting next-of-kin by birth (who wish to be contacted) through matching information. These registries allow individuals directly involved with an adoption to indicate their willingness or unwillingness to have their identifying information disclosed, to submit information on a sought individual and be notified when potential matches join the registry, and to exchange identifying information upon mutual consent. Most registries require consent of at least one birth parent and an adopted person over the age of 18 or 21, or of adoptive parents if the adopted person is a minor, in order to release identifying information.

State Registries
Many state governments maintain mutual consent registries to facilitate access to information from adoption records. For a comprehensive listing of state registries, visit http://www.gaadoptionreunion.com/resources/otherStates.html.

The International Soundex Reunion Registry
The International Soundex Reunion Registry is the largest non-profit mutual consent registry.
Address: P.O. Box 371179
Las Vegas, NV 89137
Phone: (888) 886-4777
Website: http://www.isrr.org

Online Reunion Registries, Databases, and Forums

For a list of links to mutual consent registries (including free and fee-based services), visit http://reunion-registries.adoption.com/ and http://www.adopting.org/adoptions/national-world-adoption-reunion-registries.html.
History of U.S. Orphanages
The first American orphanage was founded in New Orleans in 1729. However, for the next century or so, orphanages were only established sporadically, as most orphaned or abandoned children were either left to live on the streets or placed in public almshouses, where they lived among dependent adults, some of whom were criminals. Beginning in the mid-19th century, the influx of immigrants and, especially, the Civil War yielded an unprecedented explosion in the number of dependent children in the U.S., a crisis that resulted in both public policy reforms that mandated these children be placed in separate institutions and the proliferation of orphanages. In New York City, for example, the number of orphanages “grew from eighteen in 1860 to thirty-one in 1870, and to fifty-six by 1895” (Friedman, Reena Sigma. These are Our Children. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994, p. 3). In the late 19th century, social reformers began to call attention to issues of crowding and substandard treatment in orphanages and to advocate for de-institutionalizing the care of orphaned, neglected, and abused children. Following World War II, most states began to replace orphanages primarily with foster care and adoption and, to a lesser extent, with smaller temporary residential treatment centers or group homes for special needs children. By the late 1960’s, the traditional orphanage system was virtually defunct.
Sources: Bernard, Jacqueline. The Children You Gave Us. 1972; Bogen, Hyman. The Luckiest Orphans. 1992; Friedman, Reena Sigma. These are Our Children. 1994.

Locating Orphanage Records
Orphanages were operated by state and local governments, religious groups, and private benefactors. The types, extent, and locations of records kept by each of these groups vary considerably. To find orphanage records, first determine what orphanages existed in the region and time period your ancestors lived. Local histories and directories often contain this information. The Hebrew National Orphan Home Alumni website features a list of Jewish orphanages in the U.S. by state and city (with contact info and/or links for some) at http://www.soloff.com/hnoh/. Once you locate the orphanage, determine if it is still in operation. If the orphanage or its successor is still operating, it will likely have records. The records of a state-operated establishment may be held by the state archivist or the state’s Department of Social and Welfare Services. Records of closed orphanages operated below the state level may be held by the town, city, or county clerk, the local agency responsible for currently operating orphanages, or a local historical society or research library. If the orphanage was operated by a religious group, its records may be found at the group’s headquarters. Court records of placement can sometimes be substituted for incomplete or nonexistent orphanage records.

Primary Records
New York City Orphanage Records at the Center for Jewish History
Each of the orphanages listed here has a different institutional history, but they all eventually merged with the Jewish Childcare Association of New York (see below section for more details). Note: All records dated after 1925 are restricted for privacy reasons.


- **Hebrew Infant Asylum of the City of New York.** Holdings include admission and discharge records, 1895-1908. American Jewish Historical Society 1-166

- **Hebrew Orphan Asylum of the City of New York.** Holdings include applications for admission, admission and discharge records, and residents’ public school, medical, and conduct records, 1860-1942. A searchable “Index of Children, 1860-1900” is available at http://cjh.org/p/61. American Jewish Historical Society 1-42

Ackman and Ziff Family Genealogy Institute • Center for Jewish History
15 West 16th Street, New York, NY 10011 • (212) 294-8318 • http://genealogy.cjh.org
· **Hebrew Sheltering Guardian Society of New York.** Holdings include admission and discharge records, 1898, 1907-1942.  
  American Jewish Historical Society  I-43

· **Home for Hebrew Infants.** Holdings include admission and discharge records, 1922-1943.  
  American Jewish Historical Society  I-232

**Jewish Childcare Association of New York (JCCA)**

The Jewish Childcare Association is the successor to:

- Brooklyn Hebrew Orphan Asylum
- Children’s Day & Night Shelter
- Children’s Service Bureau
- Childville
- Daughters of Zion Hebrew Day & Night Nursery
- Edenwald School for Boys & Girls
- Fellowship House for Boys
- Friendly Home for Girls
- Girls Club of Brooklyn
- Gustave Hartman Home for Children
- Hartman-Homecrest
- Hebrew Benevolent & Orphan Asylum Society
- Hebrew Infant’s Asylum
- Hebrew National Orphan Home
- Hebrew Orphan Asylum
- Hebrew Sheltering Guardian Society
- Home for Hebrew Infants
- Israel Orphan Asylum
- Jewish Children’s Clearing Bureau
- Jewish Youth Services of Brooklyn
- Pleasantville Cottage School
- Wayside Day Nursery

Address: 120 Wall Street, 12th Floor
New York, NY 10005
Phone: (212) 425-3333
E-mail: jcca@jccany.org
Website: [http://www.jccany.org](http://www.jccany.org)

**Orphan Cemetery and Census Data**

In addition to its U.S. Jewish orphanage directory, the Hebrew National Orphan Home Alumni website hosts a number of resources relevant to orphan research, including a database of orphans and foundlings buried in New York area cemeteries and lists of children living in Jewish orphanages as enumerated in various federal and state censuses.  

**Orphan Trains**

The Orphan Train Movement was conceived by the Rev. Charles Loring Brace of the New York Children’s Aid Society with the aim of taking orphaned, abandoned, abused, and runaway children off the streets of the city and finding them homes in more rural areas in the Midwest and West. On September 20, 1854, the Children's Aid Society sent out the first train of 46 children, all of whom were placed in homes. Soon afterwards, other charities in New York and Boston followed suit, and, by the end of the 1800’s, charities in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois began sending children to states farther west. Between 1854 and 1929, an estimated 200,000 children were relocated to new homes via the Orphan Trains. “This period of mass relocation of children in the United States is widely recognized as the beginning of documented foster care in the United States” (“Orphan Train History.” *National Orphan Train Complex, Inc.* n.p., n.d. Web. 10 May 2012. <http://www.orphantraindepot.com/index.html>).

Locating Orphan Train Records
Records of Orphan Train transfers may be found at the charities that participated in the project or in the deed books, justice of the peace dockets, guardians’ records, county order records, and board of supervisors’ minutes of the courthouses in the counties that received the children. County deed books are especially useful, as they were commonly used to record adoptions (usually males under ten and females) and apprenticeships (usually males ten and over).

The New York Children’s Aid Society & The New York Foundling Hospital
The New York Children’s Aid Society and the New York Foundling Hospital were the most prolific participants in the Orphan Trains project.

New York Children’s Aid Society
Address: Attn: Records, Lukas Weinstein
150 East 45th St.
New York, NY 10017
Phone: (212) 949-4847
E-mail: lukasw@childrensaidsociety.org
Website: http://www.childrensaidsociety.org
($25 Research Fee)

New York Foundling Hospital
Address: Record Information Department
590 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10011
Phone: (212) 206-4170
Website: http://www.nyfoundling.org

Records of the Children’s Aid Society and the Foundling Hospital are housed at the New York Historical Society. For guides to these collections, which include Orphan Train records, see http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/nyhs/childrensaidsociety_at.html and http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/nyhs/foundling.html.

Many of the children who lived in these charities’ boarding facilities were later transferred to adoptive families via the Orphan Trains. Thus, one potential source of information on Orphan Train riders is the census records for these institutions. The following census record indexes are not available at the Center for Jewish History (please use http://www.worldcat.org to find the nearest locations for these books):


The National Orphan Train Complex
The National Orphan Train Complex is a museum and research center dedicated to preserving the history of the Orphan Train Movement. They maintain a rider registry and online resources.

Address: P.O. Box 322
Concordia, KS 66901
E-mail: orphantraindepot@gmail.com
Website: http://www.orphantraindepot.com/

Further Reading on Adoption and Orphanage History and Research


**American Jewish Historical Society**  
HV 995 .N52 .H433 1992


**Genealogy Institute**  
HV 983 .F75 1994


