

## 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](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](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](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](mailto: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](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.ga-adoptionreunion.com/resources/otherStates.html>.

New York State's registry: [http://www.health.ny.gov/vital\\_records/adoption.htm](http://www.health.ny.gov/vital_records/adoption.htm).

### 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

Adoption.com hosts a free adoption reunion database at <http://registry.adoption.com/> and state-specific search and reunion online forums at <http://reunion-registries.adoption.com/search/state-reunion-registries.html>.

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-19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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.*

- **Brooklyn Hebrew Orphan Asylum.** Holdings include admission and discharge records, 1879-1960. A searchable index of the 1879-1953 records is available at <http://cjh.org/p/61>.  
**American Jewish Historical Society I-230**
- **Hebrew Infant Asylum of the City of New York.** Holdings include admission and discharge records, 1895-1908.  
**American Jewish Historical Society I-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 I-42**

- **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, 12<sup>th</sup> Floor  
 New York, NY 10005  
 Phone: (212) 425-3333  
 E-mail: [jcca@jccany.org](mailto:jcca@jccany.org)  
 Website: <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.

<http://www.soloff.com/hnoh/>

## **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>>).

Sources: "Orphan Train History." *National Orphan Train Complex, Inc.*

<http://www.orphantraindepot.com/index.html>; "The Orphan Trains." *The Children's Aid Society.*

<http://www.childrensaidsociety.org/about/history/orphan-trains>; "The Orphan Trains: About the Program" *PBS' American Experience.* <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/orphan/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](mailto:lukasw@childrensaidsociety.org)  
Website: <http://www.childrensaidsociety.org>  
(\$25 Research Fee)

### New York Foundling Hospital

Address: Record Information Department  
Attn: Yvonne Wintz  
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](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):

- Inskeep, Carolee R. *The Children's Aid Society of New York: An Index to the Federal, State, and Local Census Records of Its Lodging Houses, 1855-1925*. Baltimore, Md: Clearfield Co., 1996.
- Inskeep, Carolee R. *The New York Foundling Hospital: An Index to Its Federal, State, and Local Census Records (1870-1925)*. Baltimore, Md: Printed for Clearfield Co. by Genealogical Pub. Co, 1995.

## 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](mailto:orphantraindepot@gmail.com)  
Website: <http://www.orphantraindepot.com/>

## Further Reading on Adoption and Orphanage History and Research

Askin, Jayne. *Search: A Handbook for Adoptees and Birthparents*. Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1998. [not available at the Center for Jewish History – please use <http://www.worldcat.org> to find the nearest locations for this book]

Bernard, Jacqueline. *The Children You Gave Us: A History of 150 Years of Service to Children*. New York: Jewish Child Care Association of New York, 1973.

**American Jewish Historical Society HV 883 .N7 .B47**

Bogen, Hyman. *The Luckiest Orphans: A History of the Hebrew Orphan Asylum of New York*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992.

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

Bracken, Jeanne M, and JoAnne W. Deitch. *The Orphan Trains*. Carlisle, Mass: Discovery Enterprises, 2002. [not available at the Center for Jewish History – please use <http://www.worldcat.org> to find the nearest locations for this book]

Brown, T. A. *Adoption Records Handbook: Birth Family Searches Made Easier with Self-Help Tips, Registries, Search Angels, Pro Se Legal Forms, Etc.* Las Vegas: Crary Publ., 2008. [not available at the Center for Jewish History – please use <http://www.worldcat.org> to find the nearest locations for this book]

Drake, Paul, and Beth Sherrill. *Missing Pieces: How to Find Birth Parents and Adopted Children: A Search and Reunion Guidebook*. Westminster, Md: Heritage Books, 2008. [not available at the Center for Jewish History – please use <http://www.worldcat.org> to find the nearest locations for this book]

Friedman, Reena S. *These Are Our Children: Jewish Orphanages in the United States, 1880-1925*. Hanover, N.H: University Press of New England [for] Brandeis University Press, 1994.

**Genealogy Institute HV 983 .F75 1994**

Hacsi, Timothy A. *Second Home: Orphan Asylums and Poor Families in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997. [not available at the Center for Jewish History – please use <http://www.worldcat.org> to find the nearest locations for this book]

Holt, Marilyn I. *The Orphan Trains: Placing Out in America*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992. [not available at the Center for Jewish History – please use <http://www.worldcat.org> to find the nearest locations for this book]

Johnson, Mary E. *Waifs, Foundlings and Half-Orphans: Searching for America's Orphan Train Riders*. Westminster, Md: Heritage Books, 2005. [not available at the Center for Jewish History – please use <http://www.worldcat.org> to find the nearest locations for this book]

O'Connor, Stephen. *Orphan Trains: The Story of Charles Loring Brace and the Children He Saved and Failed*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001. [not available at the Center for Jewish History – please use <http://www.worldcat.org> to find the nearest locations for this book]

Tillman, Norma M. *The Adoption Searcher's Handbook: A Guidebook for All Persons Involved in Adoption Searches*. Nashville: Norma Tillman Enterprises, 2010. [not available at the Center for Jewish History – please use <http://www.worldcat.org> to find the nearest locations for this book]