

WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO...? TRACKING CHILDREN OF THE PROVIDENCE REFORM SCHOOL

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The purpose of the Reform School, established at Tockwotten in 1850, as distinct from a prison or jail was clearly articulated by the General Assembly. It was designed, we are told,

for the Confinement, Instruction and Reformation of idle and vicious persons...Many of them are without parents or guardians, and are not controlled and brought up in habits of sobriety and industry; and some are quite young and do not commit acts recognized as crimes, but who are growing up in idleness, ignorance and vice, and who perhaps may be rescued from destruction if confined and instructed, morally, physically and mentally, and become good and wholesome members of society...confinement...with as little degradation as possible reformation or the giving of a right direction to the mind, being the main object.^[1]

Did that effort at reclamation, social control, and re-direction succeed? True, there are global claims, statistical compilations, and aggregate, annual summaries that give a general idea. The only way to determine actual outcomes, however, is to follow the children into their post-incarceration lives. We can accomplish this goal by matching names of Reform School inmates with future prison and jail records to get a general sense of success and by studying any individual stories in the Superintendent's Journal.

Part of the richness of records kept by the Superintendents of the Providence Reform School, 1850–1880,^[2] lies in the detailed identifying “tags” which frequently enter the daily Journals. Although the “tags” were used to protect the privacy of inmates, the fact that names are paired with ages, race, middle initials, and place of arrest help us to locate these children in external records. It is not easy. These “tags” are often insufficient to uniquely identify inmates in post-incarceration records when individuals share names, are born within a few years of each other, relocate or appear in shifting family constellations. Variation in reported ages, spellings of surnames, residential locations, and even changes of name are particularly common in the history of children whose lives are unstable.

We have not yet completed an exhaustive search for all of the children who passed through the Reform School in the judicial records, but there are some indications that the school succeeded in its mission. Using the complete list of adults who were sentenced to the State Prison and five-year samples of inmates of the Providence County Jail, State Farm, and the House of Corrections from census

records, we can match some of the Reform School children to the adult prison population. By our assessment, only about 4% of the children were incarcerated as adults, an impressive positive outcome even if we underestimate by half.

Other cases of post-incarceration lives go beyond mere statistics. From the constellation of records that forms the basis of our historic method of reconstruction—social archeology—we get a vibrant sense of how the former inmates struggled to cope with the same harsh conditions that contributed to their delinquency in the first place. These reconstructions suggest that the later lives of many of the children who had been orphaned or neglected or engaged in habits of “...idleness, ignorance and vice...” were still littered with disappointment and turmoil. Some of these stories do not end well but reveal bonds between the former inmates and the Institution. Others take a track of apparent stability without remarkable ascent up the economic ladder; some few moved into positions of respect. All of these stories capture how common people salvaged their lives and survived with some shred of dignity. We have excised some of the stories to illustrate how the information in the Reform School records can provide a texture to the skeletal information available in public records, how they help to explain apparent anomalies in those records, and how they supplement the record with details that provide context for sterile “facts.”

Some of the inmates did not survive into full adulthood. In an undated, handwritten note, inserted into one of the manuscripts the Superintendent listed the deaths of all inmates to that point. Remarkably, the Superintendent recorded very detailed circumstances of their deaths when possible. John Weedan, for example, received medical attention since November of 1860 but died of consumption four months later.^[3]

Saturday March 16th 1861

All are well except one boy #676 John F. Weedan_ who for the past 16 weeks has been in Hospital nearly all times_ At one period, he seemed to be improving and arrangements were made by Supt. for his discharge but of late his disease has assumed a more serious complexion_ His lungs are much affected, and we fear that he may not recover.

Thursday March 28th 1861

Weedan died at forty minutes past five o'clock this afternoon without a struggle passing very quietly away_ His mother & friends visited him this afternoon. His views of the future and of his preparation for its realities have been somewhat contradictory. Now looking upon it feeling that all would be well & again seeming in doubt saying “It was hard telling what the future will be” said he at one time, “Christ is the way but I can't always see the way, still sometimes I think I see it. I pray to god hard to show me the way” Today he has been quite wandering in his mind and but little to be understood_

1. Providence Association of Mechanics and Manufacturers, Memorial, p. 3, 1847, in Rhode Island Historic Society, manuscripts collection, MSS 214, sg3, series 3 (hereinafter, RIHS ms), foldered with First Annual Report.
2. RIHS ms. This collection contains eight volumes of Reform School records. Vols. 1-3, Daily Journals; Vols. 4-7, biweekly Reports; Vol. 8, Minutes of Trustee Meetings.

3. RIHS ms, Vol. 1, Journal 1858-1865. These Journals are unpaginated, so references must be searched by date of entry.

In other cases the record is more perfunctory, as when he noted "Monday July 8th 1861 No 6 James Hayes died this morning."

Some of the inmates enlisted in the Civil War and did not return. We learn of the death of John Williams, one of the earliest children received, from the Journal:

Wednesday March 19th 1862

Supt. was today informed by Mr. Church of the death of No 5 John A. Williams. A letter from his Foster Parents at Hampton, Conn speaks of him as a most worthy & Christian son & young man. He was a member of the 8 Conn & Reg. & went with the "Burnside Expedition" to Roanoke Island, where he after two weeks severe sickness of "Typhoid Fever" died & was buried. the chaplain officiating at his grave & his companions after three volleys leaving him at rest in his narrow home

The death of No 744 Lyman D. Leach at Andersonville Prison, however, has only been discovered in the National Park Service database.

In a most interesting illustration of cross-over information from one record source to another, the unnoticed death of No 63 Joseph Hull comes to life from entries in the Journal which actually focus on the saga of his brother (No 20 James Hull) trying to pay a visit. Their shared stories begin with the 1850 census where they both appear as inmates of the Providence County Jail^[4] along with several other minors known to have been among the earliest inmates of the Reform School. Over a decade later in August 1862, James Hull stopped in for a visit on his way to Warren from Hartford to visit his brother. Joseph, a mariner was away at sea, and so reports James on his return trip to Hartford. In September, Joseph drops in for a visit with the Superintendent and reports that his marriage and family (one child) are doing well. On December 24th, James reappears on another trip to Warren: "He is on his way to visit his brother No 63 Joseph Hull of Warren who was so severely wounded by being shot a day or two since while in a drinking frolic at Warren." On January 3rd, Joseph Hull died of tetanus, most likely the result of the gunshot. None of this contextualizing information would be available without the Reform School Journal.

In two other instances of death while children were residents at the Reform School, we learn of the care and compassion provided to the children and their families.^[5]

Saturday July 19th [1873]

No 1703 Samuel C. Liscomb died at 5:35 o'clock this morn. Some after 5 o'clock Mr. Shumway found him lying partly upon the floor his head hanging upon the bedstand and with Mr. W. Packard laid him upon the bed and reported him to the Supt as dead. Supt at once went to his room and found him in a fit (epileptic) to which he has been subject since he was five years old. He was very rigid but warm and the beating of his heart gave evidence that life was not extinct. He continued this

4. 1850 U. S. Census, Providence, Ward 1, Providence Co., RI, roll 844, p. 85. All citations of U.S. census records refer to NARA microfilm.

5. RHIS ms, Vol. 3, Journal 1873-1875.

for some 15 or 20 minutes when with a single respiration and he had passed away. Efforts for his restoration being without avail.

Dr. Leonard our Physician came soon after and found him dead. Trustees Messrs Snow and Tourtellot came at 9½ o'clock and with Carson Potter viewed the body and deemed an inquest necessary. His mother and friends were notified at Bristol. His body brought there for burial. The funeral was in our chapel at 2 o'clock this P.M. all the children were present. Services by Rev. Mr. Donglan. They were made very solemn and appropriate after which the body was taken to Bristol accompanied by the Supt & Mr. Chace and left with his friends there. The coffin a very neat one was furnished by Messrs Knowles & Boyer.

For some days as heretofore in hot weather Samuel's fits had been more frequent and severe and the event of the morning had been expected. All was done for him which could be and we feel that no duty to him was unperformed. His mother and grandmother are very poor. They expressed much gratitude for what has been done for the poor boy as did also the authorities of Bristol, who took charge of his remains. Their courtesy, through Wm Spooner Esq will not soon be forgotten.

Wednesday Feb 18th [1874]

At 8½ o'clock last eve the supt went to the Hospital and found Dannie Carr quite distressed and evidently failing fast. Great trouble in breathing &c. the most active exertions were made for his relief which for a time were partially successful but soon after midnight they ceased to give any relief and he sank rapidly till one ½ o'clock when he died. He has been considerable sick of scarlet fever for a week but was not looked upon as dangerous till last eve when he passed away as above.

The whereabouts of his parents is unknown. He has a grandmother residing in Pawtucket who will be notified this morn. A letter written, not speaking of him as dangerous, has been sent to his address.

Thursday February 19th 1874

The funeral of little Dannie [Carr] was at 10 o'clock this morn Rev. Mr. Church of the Hope Street Methodist Church officiated. All the children with the exception of two or three in the hospital were present and most of the officers. His grandmother and six other of his relations were present. The body was taken to Pawtucket and placed in the tomb of the Catholic cemetery.

What strikes an empathetic reader is less the details of the illnesses and medical attention than the services provided for the struggling poor.

There are tales of future survival no less knotted with despair on the one hand and institutional compassion on the other. The story of Joseph Watson is one such.^[6]

Friday Oct. 5th 1860

No 64 Joseph Watson visited us today. He has been away from the state Prison three weeks, where he has been for two years. has been to Boston and expended the little money furnished him, in looking for employ & walked back to Providence. Is quite discouraged tired out and without shelter he passed the last night about six miles from the city by the side of a hay stack. He refused food, but was finally

6. RHIS ms, Vol. 1, Journal 1858-1865.

induced to take a little, when he left to see if he can find employ in the city. Supt. gave him a small amt of money as he left, which only seemed to aggravate his feelings____. He burst into tears and seemed well nigh in an agony of mind as he exclaimed, "Money will do me no good. What I want is a friend. No one cares for me. I am a ruined man. Would that there was help for a poor Discharged Prisoner &c &c. He took a line to several labor might be found & went out to tell his story and see what he can find.

and the brief entry for Peter Dailey is another.

Thursday July 18th 1861

No 82 Peter Dailey visited us this afternoon. very destitute. Supt gave him a pair of shoes & a small sum of money when he left to ship if he can or go to his friends at Cranston. Has lost one eye or he would enlist.

Many reports receive only passing attention with more or less information about employment and location:

Saturday July 2nd 1859

#210 James Malone visited us today. He has just returned from a sea voyage and looks quite like a sailor. Says while on his way to and from China he often thought of the Reform School, of instruction which he recd. how especially the hymns he used to sing and sometimes wished himself back again.

Friday Augt 31st 1860

No 252 B. B. Palmer visited us this morning is a carpenter by trade & works in Warwick. His appearance & representation not altogether satisfying.

Wednesday February 27th 1861

#272 Thomas Aldrich visited us today_ April 6th 1857 Thomas was placed with Amos C. Barstow, esq. with whom he remained two years and learned the moulder's trade. Since has worked at his trade in Trenton, N.J._ Millbury Mass. and Worcester. At present is stopping without employment in this city. Appears well__

April 8th 1861

#32 Stephen Smith & #354 Andrew Hunt visited us this afternoon. Both reside in the City & appear well as reported by ass't Supt., Supt. being absent.

Supt. visited #570 Eugene Keefe at Worcester, Mass. He is employed at the "Bay State House" and is doing well. # 653 Pat. Nelligan visited his friends today

Tuesday April 9th 1861

#556 Robert J. Williams visited us today. He is residing with his Parents at Woonsocket and employed in a livery stable appeared well.

Sabbath Apr 28th 1861

No 142 Edward Duffee call'd upon us this afternoon & was present at our services. He has just returned from a four year voyage to the South Pacific on board the "Bark Mary Francis" of Warren. she made a fair voyage & brought in 2000 Bbbs of oil. He is well clothed & appeared very well.

For some of the cases, we can find a longer history of the journey from institutionalization to stabilization. The stories of No 685 Mary Elizabeth Blacklock and No 60 Bridget Mitchel serve as two examples.

The Superintendent tirelessly worked to stabilize Mary Elizabeth Blacklock's transition to a post-institutional life.^[7] She was admitted to the Reform School 19 July 1859 and was first placed out with Mr. C. H. Heminway of 20 Thayer Street to replace inmate 691, Jane Corliss in November 1860. She returned five months later when Mr. Heminway evidently enlisted and his wife returned to reside with her parents.

Saturday Apr 27th 1861

No 685 Mary E. Blacklock who has been with Mrs. C.H. Heminway No 20 Thayer St since the 14th of Nov. last returned this afternoon. She has been a very good girl but Mr. H having left with these who have gone to fight if need be for their country, and Mrs. H returned to her parents they had no call for her services & it was thought best for her to return & seek another home.

Mary Elizabeth was placed then with Mr. Chas. H. Bassett at Elmwood but within a week, "No 685 Mary E. Blacklock quite homesick came in from Elmwood this morn. Supt returned her this afternoon." Her adjustment was monitored over the next year, but in April of 1862, she again left her placement, sought refuge in the Reform School but was returned to what, "...seems an excellent [home] and she gives no reason for leaving further than that she thought Mr. B. did not like her." She ran away in August disappearing into the city of Providence until she was found in September. After two months in the institution, Mary Elizabeth was placed with J. Q. A. Roberts in Boston. Reports of her progress seemed positive the following Spring. During the summer, the Superintendent made a home visit and recorded this exchange with Mary Elizabeth Blacklock:

Thursday June 18th 1863

Supt visited Boston to look after [#685] Mary E. Blacklock...[who]... seems to have a good home with [illegible] Roberts & in some respects is doing very well. but being of a chargeful disposition has for some time been expressing a strong desire to return to the school feeling as she said that she had a home here & that the Inst was obliged to care for her till she was twenty &c. The purpose of the visit was to correct this opinion and show her that if not willing to do for herself when she had so favorable an opportunity, she could not expect the city would be willing to further help one who showed no disposition to help herself. She acknowledged her fault & promises to give up the idea of returning & to do us well as she can. She has grown very much & seems in excellent health.

Contacts lasted until August when the Superintendent made his last visit to Boston and reported, "...the girls there doing apparently well." His diligent efforts and persistent monitoring paid off. In 1866, Mary Elizabeth Blacklock married

7. RIHS ms, Vol. 1, Journal 1858-1865.

Philander Cummings of Maine.^[8] The “tags” associated with them both (ages, places of birth) permit us to track them in later census records even though Philander shows up as Philip. They relocated to Chicago by 1870 where we find them with two children.^[9] A third daughter was born in 1873,^[10] and we last find inmate No 685, Mary Elizabeth Blacklock living in Chicago as a widow in the census of 1910.^[11]

Bridget Mitchel, inmate No 60, was one of the first women received into the Reform School. Her low number indicates that she was probably admitted in 1851, although records that would have covered the years of her internment and discharge have been lost. She reappeared ten years after her admission when the Superintendent reported on 30 May 1861:

No 60 Mrs. Charles Henry Stebbins (Bridget Mitchel) visited us today. she is a very fine appearing woman. has a good home in Woonsocket and so far as we could learn has conducted herself properly since leaving the Inst. she had with her a little daughter four years old, an only child.^[12]

About a year and a half later, she paid another visit: “Nov 10th 1862 No 60 Bridget Mitchell now Mrs. Delia Stebbins visited us today. Her appearance is good and she expresses much gratitude for what was done for her here.” The Superintendent then visited her home two weeks later, and all contact ceased until ten years later as reported in an entry that provides the details of her marriage and its collapse:^[13]

Thursday March 14th 1872

No 60 Bridget visited us. Her home is San Francisco Cal. Where she has been for the past 10 or 12 years keeping a gentleman’s Lodging Home and by her own account has done well. She certainly appears well. Some 18 years since was married to Charles Stebbins with whom she lived a few years. He is a gambler and has been away from her most of the time. Has a daughter 15 years old, living with the Parents or mother of Mr. Stebbins.

This entry explains why we do not find the couple living together on the 1870 census,^[14] why daughter Cora Stebbins resides with Angelina Stebbins,^[15] and why Bridget Stebbins is found in San Francisco under her birth name, Bridget Mitchel.^[16]

The life of one inmate from the early years took an unexpected turn after his release from Reform School, if indeed the “tags” have led us to the correct adult.

8. Massachusetts Vital Records, State Archives, Marriages, Boston, 91: 68.

9. 1870 U.S. Census, Chicago, Cook Co., Ill., roll 200, p. 18.

10. 1880 U.S. Census, Hyde Park, Cook Co., Ill., roll 199, p. 17.

11. 1910 U.S. Census, Chicago, Ward 3, Cook Co., Ill., roll 232, p. 12A.

12. RIHS ms, Vol. 1, Journal 1858-1865.

13. RIHS ms, Vol. 2, Journal 1869-1873.

14. 1870 U.S. Census, Smithfield, 1 & 2, Providence Co., R.I., roll 1477, p. 619.

15. 1870 U.S. Census, Providence, Ward 7, Providence Co., R.I. roll 1479, p. 180.

16. 1870 U.S. Census, San Francisco, Ward 8, San Francisco Co., Calif., roll 82, p. 420.

No 84 Charles H. Hunt visited the Reform School as he was transitioning from military service in the Civil War:

Tuesday Feby. 17th 1863 No 84 Charles H. Hunt visited us this afternoon. Has been a lieutenant in our 4th Regt. for the past 18 months and is discharged on account of ill health – He is fast recovering & thinks he may ere long be able to return. His whole appearance was manly and all reports of him have been good.”^[17]

A man of that name with the identical middle initial was a Providence policeman in 1870 and listed his occupation as chief of police there in 1880.^[18] Charles H. Hunt and his wife removed to Oregon where they appear together with their daughter in 1900 and by themselves in 1910.^[19]

These stories are a representative sample of the life trajectories of the Reform School children. Most led undistinguished lives. Like their fellow citizens, they worked, married, raised children, overcame difficulties, and died unnoticed by history. At the same time, they are to be admired for their anonymous struggles to overcome turbulent childhoods and unstable families. They are among the 95% of the 2,725 children redirected by the persistent guidance of the staff at one of Rhode Island’s hidden institutions.

Dr. George Branigan, an Associate Professor at Stonehill College in Easton, Mass., supported by teams of student scholars, has spent three years recovering, transcribing and analyzing the extant record related to the Providence Reform School, 1850-1880, and its inmates. These include journals and reports kept by the Superintendents and letters written to the Superintendents by former inmates. An earlier report on this project appeared in Rhode Island Roots, Vol. 32, No. 2 (June 2006), pp.86-90. He may be reached by e-mail at gbranigan@stonehill.edu.

17. RIHS, Vol. 1, Journal 1858-1865.

18. 1870 U.S. Census, Providence, Ward 1, Providence Co., R.I., roll 1480, p. 312; 1880 U.S. Census, Providence, Providence Co., R.I., roll 1212, p. 265.

19. 1900 U.S. Census, Portland, Multnomah Co., Oregon, roll 1346, p. 173; 1910 U.S. Census, Portland, Ward 9, Multnomah Co., Oregon, roll 1289, p. 41.