
Introduction

In 1836, the “lady managers” of the Cincinnati Orphan Asylum (COA) visited a poor family in a working-class neighborhood to remove an infant for whom they had found an adoptive home. The “babe” was a foundling, and the woman of the household a wet nurse paid by the COA. According to the managers, “the man and his wife were so much disturbed [by the possibility of losing the child] that we had not sufficient resolution to deprive them of it. The woman begged and wept until the neighbors hearing the disturbance came in . . . [to] enquire the cause. The husband said he was a poor man, but would work till midnight rather . . . than part with it.”1 Although recounted

1. Reports of Visiting Committees [hereafter VCR], Cincinnati Orphan Asylum [hereafter COA], vol. 2, 14 September 1836, Papers of the Cincinnati Convalescent Hospital for Children, Cincinnati Historical Society, Cincinnati, Ohio. In the twentieth century the COA became a more specialized institution, the Cincinnati Convalescent Hospital for Children. Admission and dismissal ledgers, annual reports, minutes of the board of lady managers, as well as visiting committee reports from 1834 through 1900 are contained in the Papers of the Cincinnati Convalescent Hospital for Children. For published accounts of the asylum, see Robert L. Black, The Cincinnati Orphan Asylum (Cincinnati, 1954); Steven Edward Anders, “The History of Child Welfare in Cincinnati, 1790–1930” (Ph.D. diss., Miami University, 1981), 72–94; and Timothy A.
from the perspective of the well-to-do women who ran the asylum, the intensity of this poor man’s claim—that his ability and willingness to support the child entitled him to a paternal relationship with it—offers a rare glimpse into the meanings of fatherhood among the nineteenth-century American working class. Living in a city beginning to experience the dramatic changes caused by industrialization and immigration, he was, to use Steven Ross’s evocative phrase, a “worker on the edge.”2 A self-described “poor man,” his wife supplemented the family budget with $1 or $2 a week she earned as a wet nurse, and his status as a worker and a family man was challenged by economic insecurity. Middle-class men were beginning to celebrate the emotional expressiveness of the domestic circle as a relief from the competitive world of work. Yet for this workingman, work and family were not separate spheres; what it meant to be a man depended on the intimate link between his role as surrogate father and his ability to provide for his family. In his world, the language of work and economic relations rather than sentiment defined, but did not diminish, the meaning of fatherhood.

In this essay, we use the unpublished reports and chronological admission and dismissal ledgers of the COA from the 1830s to the 1870s as a case study to examine the roles of working-class parents, especially fathers. Founded by white, Protestant, benevolent women in 1832, the COA quickly became an important source of aid for poor, white children in Cincinnati. Many, if not most, of these were children with living parents who had, at least temporarily, lost their battle with insecurity and sunk into desperate poverty. Although far from complete, and reflecting the concerns of the managers more than of the objects of their benevolence, evidence from the COA documents parents’ involvement in arranging and ending separations, revealing the internal dynamics of working-class families. The enforced mutual dependencies of families in these precarious circumstances insured that either parent’s illness or death, unemployment, alcoholism, or desertion could lead to temporary or permanent separation of children from their families. Not only individual circumstances, but also


broader historical forces—epidemic, war, immigration, and changes in the labor market—had gender-specific effects on bonds within urban families teetering on the edge between respectability and poverty.

We have chosen to highlight relations between fathers and children because, given the paucity of evidence on individual working-class men in their families, this topic has received little historical attention. While middle-class as well as working-class men viewed ability to provide for their families as an essential precondition for acting out their paternal roles, for workers the concrete consequence of a father’s failure as a breadwinner was often separation from children through institutionalization. Thus, it is not surprising that economic realities rather than emotion dominated discussions of working-class fatherhood. Few expressed themselves as passionately as the wet nurse’s husband, but through their actions, such poor but hard-working men demonstrated greater commitment and connection to their children than historians have generally recognized.

**Historiography**

Despite development of a rich body of scholarship on the history of masculinity and fatherhood, working-class manhood has received little attention, and the lived experiences of working-class fathers even less. Based on textual sources produced by and for the middle and upper classes—letters, autobiographical accounts, and prescriptive literature—works in men’s history agree that the nineteenth century was a pivotal period of change in expectations of and about men of the white, Protestant middle class as the ideology of separate spheres created the ideals of the self-made man and the nurturant, domestic woman. Though middle-class men were distanced from their families by this ideological dichotomy and the time spent at work requisite to maintain its material precondition, they also came to see the home and those within it as representing a sort of reservoir for expression and intimacy. The two most prominent works on American fatherhood, Robert L. Griswold’s *Fatherhood in America: A History* and Stephen M. Frank’s *Life with Father: Parenthood and Masculinity in the Nineteenth-Century North*, present a complex picture of middle-class masculinity and fatherhood.3

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3. Early works outlining this understanding of working-class fathers are John
Both works are sensitive to the cultural authority as well as the greater economic resources and leisure time available to middle-class fathers, and both suggest that working-class fathers faced special challenges during this era. Griswold stresses working-class fathers’ greater difficulty combining responsibility for wage-earning and involvement in their children’s daily lives, arguing that industrialization eroded their ability to spend time with or to control their children.4 Frank, too, emphasizes gender and generational conflicts in working-class households arising from women’s wage earning and children’s adoption of new urban and American leisure pursuits.5

As Anthony Rotundo and Stephen Frank have argued, middle-class men found the family a source of highly valued intimacy as well as confirmation of masculine status and privilege.6 COA records offer an opportunity for initial investigation of the ways that family relationships, especially with their children, may have reflected an equally complex blend of meanings for nineteenth-century working-class fathers. Working-class men may well have viewed their families instrumentally as economic units and have struggled to retain their eroding patriarchal authority over wives and children. It is not clear however, why, when their work was so much less satisfying than middle-class men’s and, indeed, working-class men’s own


R.Gillis, Youth and History: Tradition and Change in European Age Relations, 1770–Present (New York, 1974); and Peter N. Stearns, Be a Man: Males in Modern Society (New York, 1979). Recent works in the field share this perspective; see, for example, Mark C. Carnes and Clyde Griffen, eds., Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America (Chicago, 1990); Anthony Rotundo, American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era (New York, 1993); and Michael Kimmel, Manhood in America: A Cultural History (New York, 1996). The basis for this approach lies in a general agreement among family historians that a distinctly “modern” family style emerged in the United States and Europe between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries; see Tamara Hareven, “The History of the Family and the Complexity of Social Change,” American Historical Review, 96 (February, 1991), 95–124. Practitioners of the so-called “new” men’s history have been inclined to view changes in the nineteenth century as emanating from the middle class. Our findings are tangential to these issues, but we do argue that working-class fatherhood in nineteenth-century Cincinnati reflected specific conditions facing the working class.
expectations about the economic and psychic rewards of their labor were threatened by industrialization, they would not also have valued the emotional, human aspects of family relationships. Working-class men’s claims to family members’ labor and patriarchal dominion need not have displaced affective and emotional desires that found outlet within their families.

While labor historians have produced nuanced investigations of work, community, and labor struggles, they too have tended to overlook the qualities and meanings of working-class fatherhood for

7. Susan E. Hirsch confirms the demographic basis for this conclusion in an American context; yet she also argues that working-class families were an important source of emotional as well as economic support for artisan families undergoing industrialization. Roots of the American Working Class: The Industrialization of Crafts in Newark, 1800–1860 (Philadelphia, 1978), 71–76, 53. On threats to male workers’ control in Cincinnati, see Ross, Workers on the Edge.
individual men. In contrast, women’s historians have elaborated on the implications of the concept of maternalism, the values women derived from their family care-taking responsibilities. For middle-class, white reformers, maternalism was the basis for a gendered political agenda, while among poor and working-class women maternal values defined their responsibilities for sick and disabled family members. Yet, as Ava Baron has argued, among labor historians “the conventional wisdom . . . has been that women’s primary roles were as wives, mothers, and daughters; male workers . . . have been examined primarily as workers, not as husbands, fathers, and sons.” Some recent scholarship has, however, begun to bridge this division. For example, Jeanne Boydston and Stephanie Coontz have pointed out the economic importance of working-class women’s child care and domestic management.

Historians have noted the masculine subculture in much of the labor movement, and in saloons and fraternal organizations, but working-class men’s relationships were not entirely homosocial. According to Milton Cantor, nineteenth-century workingmen under increasingly restrictive labor discipline became “aware of the separation of work and life, [and] intuitively recognized a separation between time at the work place, and time for both family relations and for leisure were very different things.” Their labor, ethnic, and religious organization incorporated


12. Milton Cantor, “Social Lodges and Fraternal Organizations and the
family members into events and practices that reinforced community solidarity. While women and children may have been peripheral to male-centered groups and events, their participation represented an integral part of the working-class social world, one which may have been more salient for individual men at moments of family disruption, particularly forced separation from children in institutions.

Gregory Kaster has shown that nineteenth-century trade unionists included duty to family as part of the masculine identity they constructed in defense of their declining position and status in the nineteenth century. Extending the notion of manly duty to encompass fraternal bonds within the union movement, their definition of duty to their dependents included patriarchal authority as well as obligation and reinforced class, gender, and racial distinctions. Skilled workers’ emphasis on respectability, according to Kaster, enabled them to distinguish themselves from the “rough” culture of unskilled and immigrant men. COA sources document the devastation caused in the families of the working poor by paternal, and maternal, alcoholism, but differences in family and gender values within the working class may have been smaller than organized skilled workers could afford to acknowledge. On an individual, personal level, the language of fathers’ duty may have carried emotional resonances too unmanly and/or impractical to articulate explicitly.

Few historical works probe the experiential realities behind workers’ invocations of family responsibility. In his examination of letters from Confederate soldiers to their families, James Marten shows that “[c]hildren often invaded the sleep of Confederate fathers” haunted by “grief and longing” for their distant offspring. Although the class status of these soldiers is unclear, their letters highlight the...
## TABLE 1: CHILDREN RETURNED TO THEIR PARENTS AFTER ADMISSION TO THE CINCINNATI ORPHAN ASYLUM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1841</th>
<th>1846</th>
<th>1849</th>
<th>1852</th>
<th>1855*</th>
<th>1858</th>
<th>1861</th>
<th>1865*</th>
<th>1869</th>
<th>1873</th>
<th>1877*</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>1211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children Admitted</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children Returned</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>503</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to Parents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>As Percent of Total</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children Returned</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to Mother</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As Percent of Children Returned to Parents</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As Percent of Total</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children Returned</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>137</td>
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<tr>
<td>to Father</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As Percent of Children Returned to Parents</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As Percent of Total</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ledgers of Children Admitted and Discharged (see note 72).

*One child in 1855, one in 1865, and two in 1877 were returned to both parents. Because the aim was to measure levels of parental involvement, these children were counted in both "returned to mother" and "returned to father" categories.
gender-specific influence of war on the experience of fatherhood, and Marten speculates that wartime conditions sparked, or at least heightened, the intense emotionalism revealed in the letters he cites. Letters to children in the Albany [New York] Orphan Asylum compiled by Judith Dulberger in “Mother Donit for the Best”: Correspondence of a Nineteenth-Century Orphan Asylum indicate that both fathers and mothers were deeply concerned about their children’s welfare and saddened by loss of intimate contact with them. These parents earnestly followed their children’s development and, despite their poverty, sent small gifts of candy, toys, or coins.

Quantitative Patterns of Paternal Involvement

No correspondence exists to reveal parental attachments to the children in the Cincinnati Orphan Asylum, largely because it was a local, urban institution. Ledgers kept by the asylum’s admissions committee did, however, record the names, sex, and ages of children admitted or dismissed from the institution. While this evidence is incomplete, quantification of information in the admission and dismissal ledgers suggests the broad outlines of poor and working-class fathers’ involvement in the lives of children placed in the institution. These statistics indicate a relatively high number of poor

15. Judith A. Dulberger, “Mother Donit for the Best”: Correspondence of a Nineteenth-Century Orphan Asylum (Syracuse, 1996). Almost certainly, loving parents were most likely to make an effort to communicate with or inquire about their children, as attested by their tremendous difficulty in expressing themselves in writing or in finding others to transcribe their questions and feelings. Those emotionally distant from their children, or overwhelmed by the poverty, illness, or alcoholism more rarely wrote or visited absent children.
16. Managers sometimes took time to record comments beside the names of children admitted to the asylum—names of those to whom children were released or comments on the circumstances of the child’s family of origin. Notations at the time of admission were haphazard, and the facts recorded, if any, depended on the record keeper’s access to information, the time at her disposal, and her own inclinations. Information on the disposition or placement of children is particularly sparse because adding these facts required further effort and prior knowledge on the part of the record keeper to locate the original date of admission in unwieldy bound ledgers which listed admissions chronologically. For discussion of methodological issues raised by use of ledgers, see Linda Gordon, Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence (New York, 1989), 12–20. Ledgers of Children Admitted and
GRAPH 1
FATHERS' AND MOTHERS' DIRECT INVOLVEMENT IN REUNION

Year | Percent |
--- | --- |
1841 | fathers 30, mothers 20 |
1846 | fathers 40, mothers 10 |
1849 | fathers 50, mothers 30 |
1852 | fathers 20, mothers 10 |
1855 | fathers 30, mothers 20 |
1858 | fathers 20, mothers 10 |
1861 | fathers 10, mothers 10 |
1865 | fathers 30, mothers 20 |
1869 | fathers 20, mothers 10 |
1873 | fathers 40, mothers 20 |
1877 | fathers 50, mothers 30 |
men directly involved in preserving parental roles as well as the
significance of gender in defining the limits of parental agency. In this
section, we trace general patterns of parental interactions with
institutionalized children. Subsequent sections contextualize these
patterns by examining economic and social conditions in nineteenth-
century Cincinnati and then illuminate choices and constraints
confronting individual poor men as they dealt with the economic and
emotional realities of separation from their children. While statistical
findings show that mothers were preeminent in contacting the COA,
qualitative evidence reveals that fathers were more active and involved
than general histories of nineteenth-century fatherhood might suggest.

In the aggregate for all the years sampled, more mothers than
fathers removed children from the asylum, roughly three to one
whether calculated by the number of children or the number of parents
involved in reunions 17 (Table 1 and Graph 1). Although fathers were a
minority among parents who reestablished their roles in children’s
lives, they were hardly negligible. At least 11 percent of all children
who entered the COA (one-quarter of those returned to parents) left the
institution because of their fathers’ efforts. Moreover, fathers may be
underrepresented because children were listed as “returned to” the
individual who physically came to the asylum for them. In two-parent
households, in other words, allocation of parental duties might have
made mothers rather than fathers more likely to undertake the chore of
retrieving children from the asylum. The hardships encountered by
fathers if a mother were dead, absent, or incapacitated argue that even
though fewer fathers than mothers removed children from the asylum,
these men did so at a high cost to themselves. Given the very young
ages of some of the children returned to their fathers and the added
responsibilities of caring even for children who may have had some
wage-earning abilities, from a purely economic standpoint their fathers

Dismissed are relatively complete and arranged chronologically for years between
1841 and 1877. Ledgers were sampled for the years 1841, 1846, 1849, 1852, 1855,
1858, 1861, 1865, 1869, 1873, and 1877. Years were chosen to obtain information at
regular intervals and include years of important social and economic change.
Beginning and ending dates as well as specific years were also chosen based on the
quality and availability of record keeping.

17. Some families placed more than one child in the COA, but while proportions
varied in particular years, overall the number of children in a family seemed to have
had little effect on which parent sought the return of children.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1841</th>
<th>1846</th>
<th>1849</th>
<th>1852</th>
<th>1855*</th>
<th>1858</th>
<th>1861</th>
<th>1865*</th>
<th>1869</th>
<th>1873</th>
<th>1877*</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of Parents Directly Involved</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As Percent of Parents Involved</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fathers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>86</td>
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<tr>
<td>As Percent of Parents Involved</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ledgers of Children Admitted and Discharged (see note 72).

*One child in 1855, one in 1865, and two in 1877 were returned to both parents. Because the aim was to measure levels of parental involvement, these children were counted in both "returned to mother" and "returned to father" categories.
GRAPH 2
CHILDREN RETURNED TO PARENTS AFTER ADMISSION TO COA

- □ no evidence of return
- ■ children returned to parents

Year
1841 1846 1849 1852 1855 1858 1861 1865 1869 1873 1877

Number
350
300
250
200
150
100
50
0
might have been better off without them. Fulfilling paternal roles must have held an important place in such men’s lives.

Beyond the aggregate, the numbers of children who entered the COA in particular years and the relative proportions of fathers and mothers who reclaimed children varied dramatically by year (Tables 1 and 2). Neither the proportion of children released to parental custody nor the proportion of fathers relative to mothers who reclaimed them fits a smooth pattern of historical change. A consistent, gradual change might be expected if shifting ideologies or economic or emotional valuing of children were the primary influence on parental behavior toward children in Cincinnati’s lower classes. Instead, levels of paternal involvement reflected in release notations have jagged contours over these four decades (Table 2, Graph 2). Proportions of fathers who picked up their children from the COA reflect specific historical conditions at particular moments of time. Crises impinging on working-class families collectively had more immediate effects on which parent was able to reclaim children than changing ideologies or values. In other words, specific historical events resulted in specific gendered changes in parental relations within working-class families, confirming the connection between paternal breadwinning and emotional ties.

Asylum admission peaked during the 1849 cholera epidemic, at the end of the Civil War in 1865, and again during the economic depression and labor turmoil of 1877.18 In each of these years, families were especially likely to be deprived of at least one parent’s labor in the reciprocal duties of working-class child rearing. Greater reliance on the COA in those years indicates that forces beyond their control disrupted the joint efforts of fathers and mothers to care for their children. Separation of children from living parents was a strategy imposed on the working class by harsh necessities, those affecting individual families as well as those that struck more widely.

18. The German Protestant Orphan Asylum experienced similar admission patterns: “During periods of depression and after wars, there generally seemed to be more children sheltered—as many as 179 at one time.” General Protestant Orphan Home [hereafter GPOH], A Century of Service: A Collection of Historical Reminiscences (Cincinnati, 1949). COA admissions declined during the 1850s, despite declining economic conditions. With the building of a city poor farm, managers not only lost public funding but also faced criticism and competition from Infirmary officials. Directors of the City Infirmary of Cincinnati, Annual Report (Cincinnati, 1854).
The historical events separating working-class parents from their children also influenced which parent was better able to resume the care of children. Mortality was not linked to gender during the 1849 cholera epidemic, which occurred at the height of Irish immigration, and fathers and mothers resumed custody in roughly equal numbers, even if a mother’s death left the father to deal alone with wage-earning and child-care responsibilities. When large numbers of working-class families were deprived of fathers’ presence and wages in the years during and after the Civil War and the economic upheavals of the 1870s, disproportionately larger numbers of mothers reclaimed their children, despite the fact that, like fathers, they would have to balance child care and wage earning and that their wages would not be commensurate with those their husbands earned in more secure times. These events were not only more likely to deprive families of fathers’ wages, but as the following section reveals, expansion of the men’s clothing industry after mid-century also offered mothers an opportunity to earn wages sewing at home.

Economic Context

Both general trends and specific events in the economic history of Cincinnati explain the conditions that created the need for the COA as well as the ways that gender shaped parental separations from children. Evidence on the Cincinnati working class is significant, not only because “the Queen City of the West” experienced economic and social trends similar to those in large eastern cities, but also because as the foremost city of the “urban frontier,” it experienced the changes of industrialization in a condensed time frame.19 By the time the Cincinnati Orphan Asylum was founded in the early 1830s, Cincinnati was the central market town for one million people. Its location on the Ohio River, the major route for westward expansion of the nation, had made the city the economic leader of the west, and it was also becoming a major manufacturing city, with steamboat production, metalworking, machine-making and pork-packing added to the usual list of industries such as flour and lumber mills, distilleries, breweries

and tanneries. This stimulated transportation improvements, including significant extensions to canals, turnpikes, and railroads radiating out of Cincinnati. Between 1830 and 1850, Cincinnati experienced its “boom” period. As the brisk steamboat trade brought a flood of immigrants, particularly from Germany in the 1830s and late 1840s and from Ireland in the 1840s, Cincinnati’s population growth made it the fastest growing city in the country.20 This in turn fueled construction industries and consumer goods. By 1850, Cincinnati was the sixth largest city in the nation, and the third largest manufacturing center.21

After 1850, the center of commerce shifted west, leading to the decline of Cincinnati relative to cities such as Chicago and St. Louis. However, commercial activity continued, and Cincinnati’s growth rates in population and economic production were sizeable (if no longer astronomical) in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In 1890, Cincinnati was still an impressive seventh in the nation in industrial production. In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, the meatpacking, soap and candle production, publishing, machine tool, boot and shoe and furniture-making industries were all important at the national level. But Cincinnati’s largest industry in this era, both in terms of value of production and volume of employment, was the men’s clothing industry. By mid-century, the sewing machine became affordable enough for widespread use and helped make Cincinnati the nation’s largest supplier of ready-made clothing. After the Civil War, Cincinnati lost its premier position to New York City, but continued to increase production and remained second in the nation for the rest of the century.

As the boom faded after 1850, immigration declined. Thus, the foreign-born rose from 22 percent of the population in 1825 to 46 percent in 1840, stayed around this level in 1850 and 1860 (47 percent and 46 percent, respectively), then fell to 37 percent in 1870 and to 28

20. Also see Henry A. and Kate B. Ford, History of Cincinnati, Ohio (Cleveland, 1881), Ch. 12. Charles Cist, Sketches and Statistics of Cincinnati in 1851 (Cincinnati, 1851).
percent in 1880. Throughout the period in which the Cincinnati Orphan Asylum was an active institution, then, an extremely high proportion of the overall population was foreign-born. The proportion of foreign-born in the poor and working-class communities that utilized the Cincinnati Orphan Asylum was certainly even higher, since higher-income areas were characterized by greater numbers of native-born residents. Recent foreign immigrants as well as native-born migrants from other parts of the United States would be far less likely than more established residents to have networks of kin and neighbors to help them in times of need and thus avoid having to institutionalize their children.

Starting with the Panic of 1837, every decade through the 1870s was punctuated by financial panics, leading to falling wages and rising unemployment, causing hunger and homelessness among the working class. These devastating effects on the poor citizens of Cincinnati were evident in the growth of charitable institutions, including the Cincinnati Orphan Asylum. The worst of the economic depressions of the nineteenth century was that of the 1870s, which was most severe in the middle of the decade, from 1873 to 1877. Intensifying long-term trends, falling prices during the depression gave manufacturers an incentive to cut costs by shifting towards a more unskilled labor force. Mechanization and de-skilling of production eroded craft workers’ control over production as well as their economic security, as they were replaced by the semi-skilled and the unskilled—that is, immigrants, women, and children. Skilled workers were impoverished; unskilled workers fared worse. Introduction of women

22. Four other private orphanages opened in Cincinnati before the Civil War: St. Joseph’s Orphan Asylum (Catholic, English language, serving many Irish immigrants and Irish-Americans), The New Orphan Asylum for Colored Youth (the only local asylum for African-American children), St. Aloysius Orphan Asylum (Catholic, German), the German Protestant Orphan Asylum. In 1860 another white, Protestant institution, the Children’s Home, was added to the list. In the 1850s, city fathers created two public institutions, the House of Refuge (punitive) and the Infirmary (poor farm); these were open to both white and black children. Anders, “History of Child Welfare.”


and children into the manufacturing workforce was a response to heads of household unable to earn a sufficient wage. Unskilled workers had been coping this way for a long time; now skilled workers followed. A study by the Bureau of Labor Statistics of Ohio families headed by skilled workers from 1879 to 1882 showed that supplementary wage earners contributed 34 to 43 percent of total family income. If semi- and unskilled workers had been included in the survey, surely more than half of family income would have come from wives and children.25 Despite the declining status of artisans during industrialization, more fathers whose children became inmates of the COA were probably unskilled rather than skilled workers.26

Cultural background, and the related variable of economic status, influenced whether women participated in the labor force.27 German-born women were less likely to participate in the labor force (26 percent of Cincinnati’s female labor force in 1860 was German-born, compared to 36 percent of the total labor force), and Irish-born women were more likely to work for wages (30 percent of the female labor force in 1860 was Irish-born, compared to 21 percent of the total labor force). Adjusting for the overall higher numbers of German-born compared to Irish-born Cincinnatians, this means that Irish-born women worked at paid labor at roughly twice the rate of German-born women in 1860 (14 percent of the German-born labor force was female, compared to 28 percent of the Irish-born labor force). Families of both nationalities figured among those forced to rely on the COA in hard times.

The occupations available to Cincinnati women in this era were severely limited, although the options did expand some as the decades of the nineteenth century passed. Occupations varied by nationality: U.S.- and British-born women workers were most likely to work in the sewing trades, while German and Irish-women were most likely to work in domestic service.28 Overall, domestic service was the most common female occupation before the Civil War. Servants generally

25. Ibid.
26. The importance of fathers’ ability to find work and of having two living parents is confirmed in David J. Rothman, Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic (Boston, 1971), 261–62.
### TABLE 3: WOMEN’S WAGE WORK, 1860–1890

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>1860</th>
<th>1870</th>
<th>1880</th>
<th>1890</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Service</td>
<td>40.2%</td>
<td>46.9%</td>
<td>34.9%</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sewing Trades</td>
<td>32.0%</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laundry</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel/Restaurant Workers</td>
<td>2.75%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boot/Shoe Workers</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous Manufactures</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housekeepers</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cotton/Wool Mill Operatives</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cigar/Tobacco Workers</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical/Sales Workers</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Others (less than 2%)</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Occupational data include all wage-earning women listed in the census, including African Americans whose children would not have been admitted to the Cincinnati Orphan Asylum. The non-white population of Cincinnati was 2.3% in 1860, 2.7% in 1870, 3.2% in 1880, and 3.9% in 1890.

The daughters of working-class families could enter white-collar occupations such as teaching, clerical, and sales, but it is extremely unlikely that mothers of children admitted to the Cincinnati Orphan Asylum could have done so.
lived in their employers’ homes, depriving their own families of essential domestic labor and imposing the necessity of institutionalizing children. The most common jobs in which women could earn wages in their homes—taking in boarders, doing laundry, and sewing for the ready-to-wear garment trade—were dominated by women living without husbands, typically mothers with children. Laundresses and seamstresses were the lowest paid workers in the city, earning less than domestic servants because they paid their own room and board.29 From 1860 to 1880 the men’s clothing industry, the city’s largest employer, employed 33 percent to 17 percent of all workers in Cincinnati manufacturing (both men and women). This accounted for 21 percent (1860) to 10 percent (1880) of male manufacturing workers, and for 76 percent (1860) to 47 percent (1880) of female manufacturing workers. This equates to a men’s clothing workforce of 5,715 men and 4,960 women in 1860, and 3,743 men and 4,896 women in 1880. While domestic service remained a mainstay of female employment, work in the garment trades remained almost as important, and manufacturing jobs began to open to women workers. (See Table 3.) Though severely exploitive, work in manufacturing and the needle trades may have been seen as an opportunity by poor mothers, enabling them to avoid separations from their children. Child labor paid enough to supplement the family wage economy but not enough to support a household. About half of the child manufacturing workforce in 1880 was concentrated in four industries: printing and publishing, men’s clothing, carriage and wagon-making, and tobacco and cigar-making.

Child Welfare Institutions in Nineteenth-Century Cincinnati

Not only poverty and economic insecurity, but also epidemics and ethnic and religious rivalries led to the creation of at least six charitable child-caring institutions in Cincinnati between 1828 and 1864, as well as two public institutions in the early 1850s. The COA originated in 1832, when members of Cincinnati’s Female Auxiliary Bible Society

who visited the poor found orphaned children with no one to care for them in the wake of a devastating flood and the nation’s first cholera epidemic. It is unclear whether the managers modeled their asylum on the first orphanage in Cincinnati, St. Peter’s (renamed St. Joseph’s in 1854), founded by the Catholic Sisters of Charity in 1828. Relations between these two orphanages fluctuated over the years. In early years, COA managers enjoyed cordial relations with the Sisters of Charity, exchanging visits and calling on the sisters for advice in their new venture. Periodic friction between the two arose later over charges that the Protestant COA proselytized Catholic children and because, unlike the COA, the Catholic asylum received no public funds. To accommodate the growth of the city and the influx of immigrants in the 1850s, St. Joseph’s Orphan Asylum, which cared primarily for native-born and Irish Catholic children, moved to larger quarters in the outlying village of Cumminssville. As Germans became the fastest growing ethnic group in Cincinnati in the 1830s, John Martin Henni, the priest assigned to the city’s first German Catholic parish, joined German laymen to organize St. Aloysius Orphan Society in 1837. Concerned to preserve the faith and language of German orphans, St. Aloysius was supported not only by contributions from the laity but also by a German Catholic newspaper, the Wahrheitsfreund. By the beginning of the Civil War, the German asylum housed both boys and girls on its sixty-acre site north of the city in Bond Hill. Thus, by the 1860s, both Catholic asylums were located a considerable distance from the crowded basin district where the poor and working-class families who relied upon them resided. Members of Cincinnati’s eight German Protestant churches did not join to found the German Protestant Orphan Asylum until the cholera epidemic of 1849. In 1851, the German Protestant Orphan Asylum admitted its first ten children at a site in Mount Auburn, the same neighborhood where the COA would relocate when it moved from the basin district of Over-the-Rhine in 1861. Though outside the basin, Mt. Auburn was
relatively accessible to city residents.

In 1864, another group of wealthy, evangelical, white Protestants, this time men, founded the Children’s Home. Impetus for this endeavor grew out of earlier efforts by devout Quaker women who became familiar with the plight of poor children as they operated a Sunday and day school and on their visits to the city prison, where they found children incarcerated with their mothers. Yet male businessmen were, from the founding of the Home, its active leadership. Influenced by Charles Loring Brace’s New York Children’s Aid Society, the merchants and manufacturers who operated the Children’s Home aimed to place Cincinnati’s poor children—especially those of immigrant, Catholic parentage—in “good Christian [Protestant] homes in the country.”33 Significantly, none of these religiously and ethnically based benevolent institutions admitted African American children. In 1844, following one of Cincinnati’s periodic anti-black riots, blacks founded the New Orphan Asylum for Colored Youth.34

Each of these institutions reflected not only growing need for child welfare institutions and Cincinnati’s religious and ethnic subcultures but also the organizational patterns of their founders. The COA’s lady managers belonged to a generation of evangelical Protestant women who created life-long careers for themselves in benevolent work.35 The independence cultivated by their high social status, their experiences of motherhood and household management, as well as their ongoing interactions with the families of poor children, contributed to their flexible, personalistic approach to managing the COA.36 Well-to-do, white, and respectable, these women presided over large households, but had generally passed the age where they had small children of their own. Beyond their own domestic skills and experience, the first generation of managers could also rely on their

connections to Cincinnati’s male business and political leaders. Husbands of the twelve original managers included three merchants, a banker, an attorney, and two physicians. Clarissa Davies, a moving force in the asylum’s work until her death thirty years later, was the wife of mayor Samuel Davies. Other dedicated supporters of the COA were Rebecca Burnet, married to Ohio Supreme Court justice, later, United States senator Jacob, and Mrs. Jared Mansfield, widow of the Surveyor General of the Northwest Territory. Sarah Worthington King, the wife of former state senator Edward King and daughter of Ohio’s first governor, was a founder of the COA, although her involvement was brief, and she later became a Catholic convert who brought several Catholic sisterhoods to Cincinnati. In succeeding decades, new generations of leaders were also solid and prosperous. During the 1850s and 1860s, managers included Caroline Stille, who ran a boarding house, as well as Elizabeth Jones and Julia Probasco, both married to wealthy civic leaders.37

Given its founders’ prominence and connections, it is not surprising

37. Federal Manuscript Censuses 1830, 1840, 1850, 1860, and 1870, Hamilton County; The Cincinnati Directory for the Year 1834 . . . to which is Appended a Statistical Account of the Towns of Covington and Newport, Ky. (Cincinnati, 1834); and Black, Cincinnati Orphan Asylum, 13–23, 66–69. For detailed biographical information on Sarah Worthington King Peter, see Margaret R. King, ed., Memoirs of the Life of Mrs. Sarah Peter, 3 vols. (Cincinnati, 1891); and Frances Harmon,
that the COA began as a quasi-public institution, receiving payment from township trustees for pauper children referred to the institution. When Cincinnati created its public Infirmary (poor farm) in 1851, the COA lost these public funds, and admissions dropped temporarily. A year earlier, another public institution, the House of Refuge, was founded at the behest of the city’s native-born male elite. A reformatory, whose welcoming name belied its punitive purpose, the House of Refuge housed boys under sixteen and girls under fourteen years old who had been committed by the courts, township trustees, or parents until their majority.38 Despite the growing number of private and public child-caring institutions, reflecting the city’s religious and ethnic diversity as well as differing attitudes toward relations between economic classes, the poverty and disease attendant to urban life created continuing need for all these institutions. By the 1860s and 1870s, the social costs of the Civil War and economic depression caused a rise in admissions at the COA beyond even its earlier levels. Amid this array of private and public institutions, white parents unable to support their children could exercise some limited choices. Since COA managers did not systematically keep track of the ethnic or religious origins of children admitted to the asylum, evidence on these points is impossible to quantify. Many immigrant Catholics may have chosen to place their children in asylums run by their own religious and ethnic communities. The Catholic nuns who managed St. Joseph’s Asylum, many of whom were immigrants themselves, were known for their sympathy and encouragement of family reunions. Moreover, orphanages with ties to specific ethnic groups, St. Joseph’s to the Irish, and the two German asylums to segments of the German population, were centers of ethnic pride and identity. Their parades and fairs, reported in the Wahrheitsfreund, and the English language Catholic Telegraph not only raised money to support the asylums, but also celebrated ethnic culture.39 But parents who hoped to visit their children often may also have considered geographical proximity to

38. Alphonso Taft, Address Delivered on the Occasion of the Opening of the Cincinnati House of Refuge (Cincinnati, 1850), 15.
their neighborhoods when deciding where to place their children, making the COA an attractive option despite religious and ethnic differences. It seems unlikely that many parents, even those whose children exhibited the most severe misbehavior, would willingly release them permanently to the House of Refuge, which one visitor to the city described as “a large pile of buildings constructed of stone, enclosed with a high stone wall, state-prison-like.”

Both the Children’s Home and the COA attempted to cultivate assimilation to bourgeois, white, Protestant religion and culture. Yet they differed from the Infirmary and the House of Refuge whose goals were oriented toward reforming rather than nurturing children. The poor farm was located far from the city’s working class districts, and its distinctly unsympathetic view of the poor did not encourage parental visiting. In a dispute arising in the early 1850s, as the Infirmary took over the COA’s earlier public funding, Infirmary directors charged that “benevolent ladies of distinction” (almost certainly COA managers) encouraged sloth because of their sympathy for the dissembling poor. The House of Refuge prohibited visits on the grounds that the “reforming power” of refuges in other cities had been disrupted “by the interference of imprudent or vicious parents and friends.” Qualitative evidence from the COA and Children’s Home reveals that the benevolent women and men who ran them were far more sympathetic to the individual circumstances of poor parents, permitting, even encouraging, parental visits and family reunion after separation. Even the Children’s Home, which promoted a program of removing poor children from the dangers of urban life and, in some cases, the influence of their failed parents, was more likely in practice than in its public pronouncements to honor and protect family ties.

The COA, too, placed children as servants or adoptees in private homes, but its managers made greater efforts to continue supervision

40. Justina Segale, a Cincinnati Sister of Charity who operated the Santa Maria Institute, a social settlement house serving Italian immigrants in the early twentieth century, mentioned a Catholic family which placed its children in the Children’s Home in order to be able to visit them more frequently. Segale, Journal J2, 5 February 1907, Sisters of Charity Archives, Mount St. Joseph, Ohio, p. 93.
41. Ephriam Newton to Mrs. Sarah Stevenson, 23 August 1864, CHS.
42. Directors of the City Infirmary of the City of Cincinnati, Annual Report (Cincinnati, 1854), 55–56.
43. Taft, Address, 20–21.
44. See day books, 1870–1900, Papers of the Children’s Home, CHS.
than the Children’s Home, and in the long run, placing children in the COA may have posed fewer dangers of unwanted permanent separation of children from parents.45

Qualitative Evidence On Paternal Roles

Despite the absence of correspondence, anecdotal evidence of parental and community involvement with children placed in the asylum are scattered throughout the voluminous records kept by its tireless managers. Each week two managers served on a visiting committee, spending hours, sometimes entire days, at the institution twice a week and recording their experiences for the next week’s committee. The admission committee, too, recorded in the ledgers not only the names and ages of children admitted and dismissed, but also details of family relationships and circumstances the managers thought relevant or unusual. Not social work professionals concerned with social scientific categories or case studies, the managers were devout Protestants concerned with reporting on the “interesting individuals” who came into their custody. Thus COA records show the struggles of both fathers and mothers to preserve their families intact despite economic difficulties, as well as the managers’ willingness to accommodate the circumstances of parents they judged sympathetically. Unlike other evidence on working-class fathers, unpublished COA ledgers and reports recorded parents’ behavior as well as their own explanations of the reasons for institutionalizing and, in some instances, reclaiming them.46

The relative flexibility of the COA managers in negotiating with

45. The managers accepted children’s desire to “know who they are, and, if they have any relatives.” History of the Cincinnati Orphan Asylum, 1832–1882 (Cincinnati, 1882), 60.

46. Ledgers were used to keep track of finances as well as disposition of children. It was important for managers to record parents’ ability to contribute to their children’s upkeep or whether they were paupers, in which case—before creation of the city poor farm—the COA received a public subsidy. Citations to ledgers include volume and date of admission; dismissals are noted on the same line as admissions for individual children. Unpublished visiting committee reports were far more likely to contain unvarnished information than published accounts used to win public support and contributions for the asylum. Each visiting committee passed on a report to guide the next week’s committee. These reports necessarily recorded parental behavior and statements, even if the managers were skeptical of parental motives behind them. Managers were more
The Cincinnati Orphan Asylum and Parental Roles

poor families and the managers’ evident concern for the children under their care attracted many parents when their precarious circumstances made separations necessary. Asylum managers faced a steady stream of concerned fathers and mothers. Monthly visiting days drew parents, relatives, and friends to the asylum. In August 1851, for example, “thirty persons [came] to see different children, nearly every one bringing some Irish cousin or neighbor along with them.”47 A child’s illness could also involve fathers, as it did when both a father and mother stayed with their son as he died, or when the father of twins, one of whom had developed a cough, asked the asylum’s matron “to promise to keep flannel on them.”48 Fathers were frequent culprits in “stealing” their own children from the asylum and threatening adoptive parents who returned children to the COA rather than face continuing harassment.49

We do not argue that all, or even a majority, of working-class fathers valued emotional relations with their children comparable to those nurtured by middle-class resources and ideology. Rather, we believe a substantial minority did act out deeply-held values of paternal responsibility and relationship, even at great cost to themselves. Despite the asylum managers’ sympathy and flexibility, these men were aware of the dangers of institutionalization: illness and death were frequent results of congregate care, and a man’s inability to resume his responsibilities could lead to unwanted permanent

concerned with the immediate situation of individual children than were later child welfare reformers who sought to categorize the causes of dependency. The “lady managers” had a clear sense of their class status as different from those who used their asylum. They were also maternalists who valorized and extended their own motherly skills and values. They were not, however, unsympathetic to either working-class fathers or mothers who seemed to them to be hard working and concerned about their children. In fact, they may have been more likely to criticize women who deviated from their maternal paradigm than of working-class men. Evidence from charity visitors’ reports, police records, and children’s later autobiographical recollections reveal much about family conflicts and emotional distance between fathers and children. See, for example, Christine Stansell, City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860 (Urbana, Ill., 1987), 78–83; and Ellen Ross, Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London (New York, 1993). On similar themes in antebellum American farm families, see Frank, Life with Father, 58–60.

47. VCR, vol. 6, 4 August 1851. See also ibid., 4 September 1851; and vol. 10, 8 November 1863.
48. Ibid., vol. 3, 20 July 1840; vol. 7, 9 October 1853.
49. Ibid., vol. 3, 23 November 1840; vol. 2, 17 January 1837.
separations. Troubled by absence from their children, they acted in ways that appear sacrificial and sometimes impractical, suggesting that they saw fatherhood as much a part of their male identities as their status as breadwinners or workers.

For families on the edge of poverty, death or disability of either parent could disrupt family unity because working-class fathers and mothers had reciprocal responsibilities. Fathers’ roles as wage earners and mothers’ as care givers were both important elements of preserving the family intact. A father’s unemployment could cause economic crisis in his family, leading to a temporary stay in the asylum for his children. In 1865 an unemployed plumber left his five-year-old daughter and two-year-old son at the COA for two months until he found “steady work.” And in 1877, a boilermaker unable to work because of rheumatism came to the asylum with his wife to gain admission of their four sons, ranging in age from thirteen to four years old. Both parents were English immigrants, and according to the managers’ notes, they “are behind with rent and obliged to give up their rooms and the mother will live out and pay something [to the asylum for the children’s upkeep] if she can.” Two months later, the mother retrieved the youngest son, and four months after their admission the older boys were also returned to her, the ledger noting, “Their father has recovered his health and can provide for them.”

S. J. Kleinberg’s report of findings that, in early twentieth-century Pittsburgh, proportionately more fathers than mothers relied on orphanage care when deprived of the other parent’s paid and unpaid labor is not surprising. It was difficult for either parent to operate a household alone successfully, and women’s unpaid domestic labor was

50. Ledger of Children Admitted and Dismissed [hereafter Ledger], vol. 52, brother and sister admitted 6 September 1865; given to father 18 November 1865. No reference to mother.

51. Ibid., vol. 55, four siblings admitted 16 June 1877. The youngest, a four-year-old boy, given to mother 9 August 1877; the older three, given to mother 17 October 1877. Although the father was important to the reunion of this family, these children would be counted as “returned to mother” in the statistical section of this paper because the ledger states “given to mother.”

52. Kleinberg, In the Shadow of the Mills, 127–28. We have not attempted to count numbers of parents of either sex involved in admitting children to the COA. Many parents applied to the township trustees for permission to admit children, and admission records for them noted only the trustees’ willingness to subsidize their institutionalization.
necessary, especially when children were too young to look after themselves. One man brought his two young daughters, eight months and two years old, to the asylum two weeks after his wife’s death. According to the manager who recorded the girls’ admission, the “father has taken entire care of the little girls since [his wife’s] death, but finds it impossible to provide for their wants, all of his time must be spent at home,” a situation which made it impossible for him to earn a living for himself or his children. Having attempted the demanding work of caring for the immediate physical and psychic needs of a toddler and infant, he had found himself inadequate to the task. Six months after their admission to the orphanage, both children died, probably of disease, not an uncommon fate for young children in nineteenth-century institutions.53 One can only imagine the feelings of failure and loss in this struggling father. Well aware of the potential dangers of institutionalization, working-class parents did not undertake separations lightly.

Admission entries in 1877 for a large family suggest the ways that the ability of both parents to fulfill their roles were interdependent preconditions for emotional closeness to develop. A couple with five children placed the older four at the COA and their “babe” with a relative, because the mother was “hopelessly ill” and the father who operated a canal boat “has no way of caring for them.” Several months later, apparently recovered, the mother returned to the asylum for her older children.54 This father had a job, but keeping it required that his wife be able to take total charge of caring for their children. Fathers’ wage earning separated them from their children for short periods of time, but their ability to fulfill this economic role insured that such separations would be measured in hours or days, rather than months or even years. Fathers’ unemployment, as well as death or disability, dissolved households and children’s precarious security within them.

Although either parent’s absence was often the most immediate cause for placing children in the asylum, illness and death, unlike other causes for institutionalization, were as likely to cause maternal as paternal absence. This was especially visible during the cholera epidemic of 1849. In that year, for example, a poor widow “left with five children, two of them twins in the Hospital,” placed her six- and

54. Ibid., admitted 28 February 1877; given to their mother 7 June 1877.
seven-year-old daughters in the COA for several months. An Irish immigrant father, whose wife had died on the passage to America, brought his sons, ages three and five years, to the asylum. Listed in the ledger as “destitute,” and probably too new to the city to have established kin or community networks, he nevertheless picked the boys up a month later. Illness and death were constant sources of family insecurity, however, even during more “normal” years. In 1858, a father left his son in the asylum because his wife was “deranged,” and in May of 1877, a woman left her ten-year-old daughter and four-year-old son because her husband, a peddler, “is hourly expected” to die from consumption. There is no indication of whether the father recovered or the woman found, instead, a way to support her children without him, but she picked up her son in July and her daughter in August, having apparently kept another son with her while the others were in the asylum.

Some conditions of nineteenth-century male experience made it particularly difficult for men to carry out their duties in the reciprocal responsibilities of parenthood. The Civil War, for example, was one event that disrupted families by removing fathers from the home front to the battlefront. Admissions for 1865 are dotted with notes that fathers were “in the Army,” “killed in the Army,” or had “not been heard from since the Battle of Shiloh.” In some instances separation ended when a father returned and could reunite his family. A ten-year-old boy was given to his mother after several months in the asylum in anticipation of his father’s return. A pair of sisters, fourteen and eleven years old, who were brought to the COA by their half-sister because their father was “in the Army, sick in Nashville,” were reunited with their father when he returned to Cincinnati later in the

55. Ibid., vols. 48 and 49, admitted 9 April 1849; given to mother 22 August 1849.
56. Ibid., admitted 9 April 1849; given to father 7 May 1849 “to be taken to Covington [Kentucky].”
57. Ibid., vol. 49, six-year-old boy admitted 9 July 1858. He appears to have been the brother of another boy the same age admitted 6 August 1858. No date of dismissal is noted for either boy. Vol. 55, brother and sister admitted 15 May 1877; four-year-old boy given to mother 11 July 1877; older sister given to mother 17 August 1877.
58. Ibid., vol. 52, admitted 5 May 1865; given to mother 22 June 1865. Admitted 21 June 1865, given to mother 8 July 1865, “his uncle has promised to take him to raise.” Admitted 15 July 1865; given to mother 9 January 1866.
59. Ibid., admitted 13 May 1865; given to mother 5 July 1865.
The economic turmoil of the 1870s, too, seems to have made it more difficult for working-class fathers to be present in their families, and orphanage admissions increased above even the levels of the war years. In 1877, for instance, a mother brought her two-year-old son to the asylum, explaining that “The Father was in the Hospital some time, but 7 months ago went to work on the new railroad in Kentucky. Has not been heard from since.”

Mothers’ unemployment was never listed as the primary reason for a child’s institutionalization if parents lived together and the father could earn wages. Women’s work was so poorly paid that their earnings seem to have been less crucial to family survival if the father were employed. As data on female occupations shows, mothers without husbands present were quite poor. The emotional costs of separation are apparent in the entries on the four-year-old son of a woman described as in “indigent circumstances” when he was first admitted in July of 1849. Although she had “stolen him away” from the asylum, his mother was forced by her poverty to readmit him the following year. In 1865, a woman widowed by the Civil War left her three children at the COA. She supported her family by sewing but could not find work. The youngest child, an eleven-month-old son, died in the asylum about two weeks later of “disease of the bowels,” and his two-year-old sister died three months later of “Hooping [sic] Cough.” The death of her two youngest children may have been what prompted the mother, despite her poverty, to take her remaining daughter, six years old, from the asylum six days after the death of the second child.

The difficulty of combining domestic service with the other responsibilities of parenthood is apparent throughout the ledgers. In 1873, for example, an eighteen-month-old boy was left at the asylum

60. Ibid., both girls admitted 16 February 1865. The fourteen-year-old was given to her sister because “father returning”; the other was given to father 31 July 1865.
61. Ibid., vol. 55, admitted 26 April 1877; given to mother 7 September 1877, no explanatory notation.
62. Richard B. Stott, *Workers in the Metropolis; Class, Ethnicity and Youth in Antebellum New York City* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990), 104–07, makes a useful distinction between women as primary and supplemental workers.
63. Ibid., vol. 48, admitted 31 July 1841; readmitted 1 July 1850.
64. Ibid., vol. 52, three siblings admitted 12 September 1865. The youngest died 28 September 1865; the two-year-old died 30 December 1865. Six-year-old girl given to mother 5 January 1866.
by his mother when his father deserted the family, and his mother, probably seeking domestic work, was “unable to find employment with him.” She was “permitted” to take her son from the asylum less than three weeks later because she told managers that “a relative has promised to assist her.”65 Unable to support and keep her son with her, she apparently had a kin network able to replace what her husband would otherwise have provided. About the same time, a widow who worked as a cook at another local institution, the Home for the Friendless, brought her three-year-old son to the COA, intending to leave him there for six months. When she came for him three months later, the ledger entry stated she “intends to take a room and keep her child with her,” suggesting that even other charitable institutions did not permit domestic workers to keep their children on the premises.66 At the end of the year, another widow left her eleven-year-old son at the COA, in this instance for four years, because she was “not able to get [a] situation with him.”67 In one case, the employer himself, a Dr. Bradford, deposited a servant’s child, a five-year-old boy, at the institution. The managers noted that “The unfortunate mother is now acting as nurse in Dr. Bradford’s family.” Perhaps this mother objected to her employer’s insistence on her separation from her son; in any case the boy was later returned to her.68 Other servants were luckier. In 1865, for example, as many as three women brought children from the asylum to live with them while they were in service.69

Ledgers reveal the human costs of the sex-segregated labor market, showing that few occupations allowed mothers to work at home and thus be available to supervise their children. While historians have recognized traditional paternal authority as contested during industrialization, mothers’ ability to control older children, especially

65. Ibid., vol. 51, admitted 1 March 1873; given to mother 17 March 1873.[?].  
66. Ibid., admitted 14 March 1873; given to mother 2 June 1873.  
67. Ibid., admitted 29 December 1873; given to mother 23 August 1877.  
68. Ibid., vol. 55, admitted 16 October 1877; given to mother 17 January 1878.  
69. Ibid., vol. 52, eight-year-old boy admitted 19 September 1865; given to mother 6 December 1865. The ledger noted, “mother has [a] situation with Dr. Gordon . . . who] permitted her to have [her] son with her and will educate him with his own children.” Five-week-old girl admitted 7 December 1865; given to mother 2 April 1866, mother “has obtained [a] situation as wet nurse with permission to have her child with her.” Four-year-old boy, admitted 25 November 1865; given to mother 26 September [no year listed]. At that time, the mother was listed only as “living at Miss Blackford’s on Front Street—intends on keeping the child with her.”
boys, seems to have eroded as well. For example, in July 1860 the managers agreed to keep the son of a woman “who supports herself by day work, and while thus employed her Boy goes into wrongdoing. She hopes in this way to manage him” until the end of the summer recess from school. The most common jobs in which women could earn wages in their homes—taking in boarders, doing laundry, and sewing for the ready-to-wear trade—were dominated by women living without husbands, typically mothers with children. In the 1860s and 1870s, reflecting the significance of women’s employment in the garment trades, COA ledgers began to mention women like the mother of a two-year-old daughter who “is trying to support herself by sewing.” The managers were skeptical about the plans of a mother of five boys who had “taken a room and thinks she can provide for her children” in 1875. She had originally left her sons at the asylum because her second husband, the father of some of her children, “drank and beat her [and] deserted [the] family.” After two years in the asylum, her boys were between thirteen and four years old, and some of them could enter the workforce and combine their wages with hers to achieve a subsistence. Given women’s low wages, it seems apparent that children’s wages were far more important in mothers’ calculations than in fathers’.

Even among families where one or both parents regained custody of children placed in the asylum, parental desertion was not uncommon. In 1858, for instance, a nine-year-old boy was admitted to the orphanage because he was “deserted by his parents,” although his mother did take him back at some later date. If managers’ notations on desertions are representative of intentional desertions that would have been perceived as such among working-class people, men were more likely than women to desert their families. In September 1858 one mother brought her daughters, ages seven and three years old, to the COA because, “the father does not provide for them.” According to the managers, “the mother wishes to leave them in the Asylum for the

70. VCR, COA, vol. 9a, 21 July 1860.
72. Ledger, COA, vol. 55, 1 May 1877.
73. Ibid., vol. 51, 6 November 1873.
74. Ibid., vol. 49, admitted 14 December 1858; given to mother 13 November 1858[?].
“winter,” but, in fact, she returned for them in November. Three years later, another mother left her infant daughter in the asylum for six months because the father was “intemperate and had forsaken his family.”

Interpretation of parental discord and desertion hinges on the source of the judgment. For example, in 1865, an eight-year-old girl and her ten-year-old brother were moved from the House of Refuge to the COA, having been placed there by public authorities because their mother was “insane” and their father “intemperate.” Nevertheless, this ostensibly irresponsible father removed his children from the asylum less than three weeks later. The contrast between this man’s behavior and the judgments made about him by institutional authorities of higher-class status indicates the difficulty of assessing the managers’ evaluations of parental irresponsibility. The seven- and nine-year-old daughters of another father, a widower listed as having “deserted” his children, were “brought to the asylum by Alpha Knight[?] and John Smith. The father left them with the above men for a few days on the 26th of October [1852] and [by December 15] has not returned.” The man did, however, eventually retrieve his daughters in May 1853. He may, indeed, have temporarily deserted his daughters, or he may have been unavoidably detained outside the city. Whatever the explanation for his seeming irresponsibility, his eventual reappearance calls the managers’ use of the term “desert” into question.

It is also difficult to assess the accuracy of one parent’s portrayal of another in domestic disputes. In these cases, managers’ harsh judgments seem to have been based not on their own gendered preconceptions but rather on what they were told by angry husbands and wives. A Civil War veteran, described as “a steady, hard working man,” employed in shoemaking, left his four- and six-year-old sons at the asylum for six months in 1866 because their mother was “in jail and very worthless.” When he found employment in Kentucky, he took his children with him, “out of reach of their dreadful mother.” He was forced to bring them back a month later, but he told the managers he

75. Ibid., admitted 18 September 1858; given to mother 3 November 1858.
76. Ibid., admitted 16 April 1861; given to mother 10 October 1861.
77. Ibid., vol. 52, admitted 22 April 1865; given to father 13 May 1865.
78. Ibid., vols. 48 and 49, admitted 15 December 1852; given to father 24 May 1853.
planned to take them to his mother in Canada.\textsuperscript{79} Yet it is impossible to dismiss all of the negative comments about fathers. Many women were like the mother of five children, ages two through eleven years, who placed her children in the asylum in 1873 because her second husband, father of some of her children, “drank and beat her [and] deserted [the] family.”\textsuperscript{80} Fewer notations are similar to the managers’ approving comment that two children were removed from the asylum in 1841 because their “father had found the Temperance Society.”\textsuperscript{81} Women who represented their husbands as violent or irresponsible may well have been vindictive, but the information about their husbands that filtered into the COA ledgers includes charges made against parents of both sexes, and the “ladies” were especially censorious of maternal misbehavior.

Some fathers appear in a negative light or, more often, are simply invisible in the documents, but many entries reveal fathers (and mothers) struggling to keep their families together against seemingly insurmountable adversity. Mothers’ difficulties earning sufficient wages to support their children under conditions not conducive to fulfilling day-to-day care-taking duties make the hopes of some of the mothers described above seem impractical. Similarly, some fathers acted on a desire to have their children rejoin them that defies historians’ arguments that nineteenth-century industrialization distanced them from their children or that they valued their children in instrumental rather than emotional terms. For example, in 1849 two fathers, both widowers, left children at the COA but returned for them in spite of the difficulties this imposed.

The father of an eight-year-old daughter and four-year-old son was, according to the managers, “partially deaf [and] not calculated to provide for them.” Two years later he must have found some way to do so, because in 1851 both children were “given to [their] father.”\textsuperscript{82} Three-year-old twins with a younger sibling eighteen months old were

\textsuperscript{79} VCR, COA, vol. 11, 3 March 1866; vol. 12, 19 September 1866, 19 October 1866.

\textsuperscript{80} Ledger, COA, vol. 51, admitted 6 November 1873; given to mother 4 September 1875. See also, vol. 54, admitted 10 May 1877. Son given to mother 18 September 1877; his older sister was given to mother 25 October 1877.

\textsuperscript{81} VCR, COA, vol. 3, 26 December 1841.

\textsuperscript{82} Ledger, COA, vols. 48 and 49, admitted 28 August 1849; given to father 4 September 1851.
the children of “a gun smith apparently a respectable man but having lost his wife recently he was left poor and without anyone to take care of his children.” Yet when the youngest child died in the asylum seven months later, he came for the twins the next day.83 Parents often removed their children from the orphanage shortly after another child died under institutional care.84 Two interpretations of this behavior are possible. On the one hand, such parents may have had alternatives other than institutionalization to take care of their children, in which case these parents’ commitment to maintaining family unity may have been weak. On the other hand, grief for the child who had died and fear for their surviving children may have prompted these parents to take their children out of what they had come to see as the dangerous environment of the institution.85 In the second interpretation parental love and concern would appear to have overridden practical considerations. Certainly, three- or four-year-old twins could only be a burden to a poor widower, even one who possessed the skills of a gunsmith.

A variety of comments in the ledgers hint that fathers were also motivated by love or a sense of responsibility for their children that took precedence over the cost and inconvenience of rearing young children. In 1873 a German widower who spoke little English placed his two-year-old daughter in the asylum. When he came for her six months later, the managers noted that he planned “to keep [her] himself.”86 A blind father surrendered his six-year-old son in 1858, giving managers permission to place the boy in a permanent home. Perhaps the man never meant to keep this bargain, or possibly his bonds to his son overcame practicality. Whichever explanation comes closer to the truth, the boy was returned to his father, probably less than

83. Ibid., admitted 30 November 1849. The eighteen-month-old child died 3 July 1850; older siblings given to father 4 July 1850.
84. Ibid., two brothers, three and four years old admitted; younger died 28 July 1849; older given to father 6 August 1849. On 17 July two girls, three years and nine months old, were admitted to the COA. The younger child died 23 October 1849; older given to father 22 November 1849. Three children, an eight-year-old girl and her six- and three-year-old brothers, admitted 17 February 1852. Six-year-old died 8 July 1852; mother returned for the other two 2 August 1852.
85. Frank, Life with Father, 21–22, provides a useful review of the literature on parental responses to children’s death.
86. Ledger, COA, vol. 51, admitted 7 September 1873; given to father 16 March 1874.
a month later. A father’s interest in his children could also extend through lengthy separation, as it did in the case of a man who gave up all claims to his daughter and two sons, previous inmates of the COA, when he brought them back to the asylum in September 1858. The girl, three or four years old, was “given” to a minister in Indiana three months later. The boys, however, were still in the asylum when the father came for them again in 1860. In 1849 another man left his three-month-old son in the asylum and nine months later agreed to pay the managers a dollar a week for the child’s support. When the boy was a little over two years old his father resumed his care.

Conclusion

The vulnerability of the nineteenth-century working class to poverty and social dislocation required parents to adopt economic strategies that included institutionalization of children, permanent and temporary, during hard times. Varying proportions of fathers and mothers reclaiming their children from the COA can be interpreted to suggest strong ties between working-class parents and their children. Years of greatest crisis for working-class families, not surprisingly, were those in which the largest numbers of children were placed in the asylum. The significance of economic conditions that is revealed in quantifiable evidence of children’s institutionalization should not, however, overshadow what qualitative evidence in the COA’s records reveals: the emotional costs of separation for parents or children, or the everyday efforts of working-class parents to maintain intimate connection with their children.

Mothers’ larger representation among parents removing children from the COA may indicate closer relationships with or greater sense of responsibility for children. Yet women’s limited ability to earn wages had more immediate significance in their children’s lives than the domestic ideology that motivated the COA’s elite lady managers.

87. Ibid., vol. 49, admitted 29 September 1858; 20 October 1858[?].
88. Ibid., readmitted 18 September 1858. The three-year-old daughter was given to Rev. Mr. Montgomery, Milford, Decatur County, Indiana 2 November 1858; sons given to father 26 July 1860.
89. Ibid., vols. 48 and 49, admitted 1 August 1849; given to father 17 October 1851.
In a two-parent household, a father’s wage earning may have marginalized him from the emotional ties between his children and their mother fostered by the hours they spent together. His wages, however, also insured that he would be a continuing, if perhaps less frequent or intense, presence in his children’s lives. Even if fathers had less opportunity than mothers during the course of the day to develop intimacy with their children, many working-class fathers seem to have shared their wives’ commitment to their children. In fact, male workers involved in both national and local struggles for shorter working hours in the nineteenth century argued that expanded leisure would allow them to spend more time with their families. In a letter to the *Cincinnati Enquirer* on 2 December 1865, one worker claimed that he was fighting for the eight-hour day “to allow the poor workingmen some little recreation during God’s sunlight with his family.”90 They were poor men, to be sure, but substantial numbers of them worked hard at their expected roles as breadwinners and took on additional responsibilities in the face of family disruptions in order not to part with their children.