

Ebenezer Wright (1830/31 - 1900)

Ebenezer Wright was born in either 1830 or 1831 in Ludlow, Massachusetts to Rev. Ebenezer and Harriet (Goodell) Wright. Ebenezer, Jr. was baptized on May 15, 1831 by his father, who was a practicing minister in Ludlow at the time.

Not much is known about Wright's early years. By 1855, when he was 23, Wright lived and worked at the State Almshouse in Monson, Massachusetts. The State **Almshouse** opened in 1854 and "provided residence for **paupers** without settlement [legal residence] in the **Commonwealth** [of Massachusetts] from 1854 to 1872."

On November 15, 1860, Wright married Mary Dickinson Cowles in Amherst, Massachusetts. The couple had eight children, only four of whom survived to adulthood. At the time of their marriage, Wright lived in New York City and worked as the superintendent of the New York Juvenile Asylum's **House of Reception**, located at 71 W. 13th Street. He continued to live there for at least the next three years. Wright also worked as a teacher at the Massachusetts State Primary School for Dependent Children in New York.

The New York Juvenile Asylum (NYJA) was founded in 1851 by a group of prominent businessmen and professionals concerned about homelessness among low-income children in New York City. In order to protect the children from the dangers of the city (and to also protect society from **vagrant** children), the Asylum, like similar institutions at the time, was "designed to house, educate, reform, and find placement for the numerous homeless and runaway boys and girls found daily on the streets of New York." Children were trained in useful skills such as cooking, housekeeping, woodworking, shoemaking, sewing, tailoring, and even **telegraphy**. The children were also taught how to maintain an **honorable** life, which "thereby would diminish the sources of pauperism and crime."

When they arrived at the NYJA, each child was assigned a case number. After a few days of testing and observation, staff sent **eligible** children to the Asylum, where they received six hours of schooling a day, as well as moral, religious, and **vocational** training to prepare them for their new homes. "Without the preparation of a good training-school, they would not be tolerated, nor would they stay in decent homes, but would quickly return to their old **haunts** and ways." In 1881, children spent an average of seventeen months in the training school.

Some of the children who entered the Asylum were sent west via the railroad, nicknamed "**orphan trains**." It was thought that sending the children west would be better for them, both physically and morally. The children that were sent west from the Asylum were **indentured** to farmers. From 1855 to 1898, the Asylum exclusively sent children to Illinois—which was the only state at the time that accepted indentures. The Asylum had a permanent agent stationed in Illinois to assist in placing children with families. On June 24, 1867, Wright was made the Western Agent in Chicago, Illinois.

After only about four years in Chicago, Wright and his family relocated because of the **Great Chicago Fire** of October 8-10, 1871. In 1872, Wright chose to relocate his family and the Agency to Normal, Illinois. It was reported that Wright chose to move his family to Normal because of the educational opportunities available to his own children. Wright and his family settled in a house on the south side of Willow Street, from which he operated the Agency for the next eighteen years. The house was located on several **acres** of land and improvements were made on the home, including a two-story addition so that there was enough room for the Wright family and the children who were waiting placement with other families.

The guardian taking in the child was known as the employer, the child was the **apprentice**, and the two entered into a contract or indenture. Typically, the contract specified that the child must attend school at least four months of the year, be clothed properly, and attend church and Sunday school on a regular basis. At the age of majority (21 for boys/18 for girls), the young person was given a specified amount of money (\$100 for boys and \$50 for girls) and a new outfit. The children were first placed with a guardian for a trial period of two to three weeks. Some children were removed from homes multiple times before they were “permanently settled.” Wright visited the children once every two years. However, he preferred to visit more often.

The Asylum intentionally moved children into Protestant Christian homes in Illinois’ rural communities, regardless of the child’s religious affiliation. Wright concluded his 1874 report by saying that, “nowhere else can a greater number of elevating influences be brought to bear upon an individual child than in a well-ordered Christian family, where it is also surrounded and acted upon by the industrial and educational forces of a cultivated community.” Additionally, Wright responded to criticisms about the fact that the Asylum almost always placed children with farm families. In his 1880 report, he wrote that:

“...it is rare that anything more favorable for health...can be provided than country life and farm work. It secures a sound physical basis, a pure and sturdy character, and a knowledge of the material world...”

Much of Wright’s time was spent preparing paperwork. He answered letters and wrote detailed monthly and annual reports for the Asylum. The annual reports included letters from the apprentices. They were distributed to all of the children and served as the “Facebook” of the day, allowing them to follow the lives of their siblings or former friends. Wright also shared success stories of children who were placed by the Asylum.

One such success story Wright recounted was how he had met a gentleman at dinner in an unnamed hotel he was staying at in 1873. The man told Wright that his parents had died and left him “friendless and homeless,” wandering about the streets of New York. The man stated that he soon fell into a group of boys that led him into a life of “**pilfering** and thieving.” On one such instance of trying to take a pair of shoes from a wagon, the man was caught by a police officer and brought to the Asylum. The man believed that was the most fortunate day of his life. He remained at the Asylum for a year until he was apprenticed to a farmer in Illinois. After serving in the Army during the Civil War, the man was hired as a clerk in a store, and eventually became a partner in the business and raised a family of his own. He gave full credit to the Asylum for how successful his life turned out to be.

In his final report for the Asylum, Wright reflected back on his thirty-three year career. He reported that of the 6,055 children placed in Illinois by the Asylum from 1855 until 1899, all but about 500 of those children had been supervised by him. He was proud of the fact that the Asylum was the only “child saving” institution that maintained an agency in the west.

Ebenezer Wright passed away at his home at 645 W. 61st Street in the Englewood neighborhood of Chicago on January 14, 1900. His death was caused by a “**stroke of apoplexy**.” His body was brought back to Bloomington for burial, and he was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to two of his children.

Discussion Question: What do you think would have been the hardest part of being sent from New York to Illinois on an “Orphan Train”? What do you think about children being placed only with farm families?