

RESEARCHING ORPHAN TRAIN CHILDREN FROM THE NEW YORK FOUNDLING HOSPITAL

(August 2017, Cathy Lemoine Sturgell)

This might be of interest to those researching ORPHAN TRAIN children In the last several months, I've been doing some research for family friends on their orphan train father/grandfather who was brought to Louisiana in 1907 from the New York Foundling Hospital in New York. Although the family had requested info on him in the past from the Foundling Hospital, I started from scratch since previous inquires had not yielded any results regarding the parentage of the child (born 1902). One of the first things I did was order a birth certificate for the borough of Manhattan even though I was not sure where he was born. I decided to order one only for Manhattan initially and was prepared to order the others if necessary. Unfortunately, I found out several weeks later that one did not exist based on the child's name and date/year of birth that we provided.

We then sent a letter to the Foundling Hospital requesting all available info on the child. The Foundling Hospital responded by providing several sheets of paper about the child including the Indenture contract that was signed by the couple in Avoyelles with whom he resided. The family was also provided with some basic info on several other sheets including birthdate but, unfortunately, nothing about his parentage or the place/circumstances of his birth and/or abandonment. Interestingly, the cover letter that was provided to the family from the Foundling Hospital stated that they were providing all of the information that had been found on the child. However, the cover letter sent to the family contained the following statement: "Enclosed is all the information we have on your father. Record keeping in the earlier years was not as detailed as it is today and much of what you are looking for was not recorded, therefore your father's history cannot be completed because his mother never returned to updated his information".

I responded to the Foundling Hospital by asking how they knew that his mother was the person who dropped him off/abandoned him if they had no other information other than the info provided to us. After all, the papers that we had been sent made no mention of either parent. As I explained to the Records Department representative, we had no idea where he was born and were desperate for any bit of info we could find. After sending us another email response indicating that we HAD been provided ALL info that they had, the email then proceeded to tell me to contact the NY Historical Society and tell them that I had the permission of the NY Foundling Hospital for them (Historical Society) to do a search on the child to see if they could find any additional information. (The reason that permission had to come from the Foundling Hospital is because the Foundling Hospital had to provide info as to whether or not the child

was adopted. If this was an adoption case, all records were still sealed due to NY adoption law. Most of the Orphan Train children were not adopted and, therefore, their records are not sealed.)

This was confusing to me since I couldn't imagine why the Historical Society would be able to provide any additional info on this child. He was born after the 1900 Census and we knew already that he was in the 1905 Census at the Foundling Hospital. After sending an inquiry to the Historical Society as directed, we were provided a response within a few weeks. We were floored with the response! Their info came from the Admission Books of the New York Foundling Hospital. The Historical Society research provided the date and time that the child was dropped off/abandoned at the Foundling as well as the first name of the child's mother! This was invaluable information. It also contained one more VERY important bit of info - the name of the hospital in which the child was born! Therefore, identifying info about the child DID exist yet most people making inquiries are not made aware of this!

After obtaining this wonderful info, I began research on the hospital in which the child was born (the Lying-In Hospital in Manhattan). I quickly determined that this maternity hospital (which has opened in 1902 - same year of the child's birth) had been incorporated throughout the years into the NY Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Hospital complex. I found a web page for the hospital archivist which gave instructions as to how to obtain medical records info on any patient at that hospital prior to 1932.

Several weeks later, we received a response from the archivist at Weill Cornell. The mother was listed in 2 ledgers maintained by Lying-in Hospital. According to the archivist, the child was born one day earlier than the date provided in the Foundling Hospital records. Also, they were able to provide us with the home address listed by the child's mother at the time of the birth. Unfortunately, the name of the father was not identified. I had my suspicions that the parents were not married but had nothing to prove this.

I couldn't figure out, however, why the hospital would not have issued a birth certificate. I began to suspect that the child's first name (the one I had been repeatedly been searching with) might be wrong. Sure enough, after another search without using the child's first name, I found a record of birth in [FamilySearch.org](https://www.familysearch.org) that I believe might be the child. The first name is different. The date of birth matched the date provided by the hospital (one day earlier than the Foundling Hospital), the place of birth matched (Manhattan), the mother's name matched, the father's name was provided as well as the age of both parents. Interestingly, the father's first name is the name listed in the records of the Foundling Hospital as the child's first name. In other words, the child's first name in the Foundling's records does not match the birth certificate. (The parents had different last names so, at this point, I'm assuming that they did

not marry. I've now ordered a birth certificate with the new name and will see where that takes us.)

The point of this story is this Sadly, the Foundling Hospital is aware of additional info that exists on these children and will not provide it unless asked. This man was born 115 years ago for goodness sakes! They don't even tell you that additional info exists unless you push for it. Unfortunately, the wonderful woman from the Historical Society said they cannot take direct inquiries on these Admission books because of the adoption laws. Therefore, if you want them to perform a search for you, it has to go through the Foundling Hospital. Also, I had read somewhere (and can't remember where I saw this) that the Foundling Hospital had made small changes years ago to the records of many of these children so that their biological families could not be easily identified. I can't prove this and I'm not saying that it's true but it is interesting that the date of birth was one day off from the actual DOB and, more importantly, the child's first name was different on the birth certificate vs. the Foundling records. Could this have been caused by mis-information provided by the mother? Yes. However, it made me wonder as to whether or not this 'rumor' may have been true. Anyway ... hope this might be of use to anyone researching one of these children....