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The Records of the Asylum for Orphan Girls

Arthur Mitchell Fraas

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<http://uniqueatpenn.wordpress.com/2012/05/07/the-records-of-the-asylum-for-orphan-girls-part-iii/>

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The Records of the Asylum for Orphan Girls

Abstract

Extended essay on UPenn Ms. Codex 1623 in four parts. The essay discusses a 2012 manuscript acquisition of the University of Pennsylvania Libraries which details the early history of the Orphan's Asylum at Lambeth. See attached spreadsheet for a list of Girls who entered the Asylum 1758-1760.

Keywords

Manuscripts, Orphans, Lambeth

Disciplines

European History

Comments

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Nothing can more effectually contribute to the Cultivation & Improvement of a Country, the Wisdom, Riches, & Strength, Virtue and Piety, the Welfare & Happiness of a People, than a proper Education of Youth, by forming their Manners, imbuing

01
Tuesday
MAY 2012

The Records of the Asylum for Orphan Girls (Part I)

POSTED BY MITCH FRAAS IN POSTS

2 COMMENTS

[Edit]

Tags

UPenn Ms. Codex
1623

To launch Unique at Penn we will be featuring a five part series on one of our newest manuscript acquisitions here at the library, the original minute books of a prominent 18th century London orphanage.



— 10 May 1758 Minutes of the Asylum for Orphan Girls (Penn MS Codex 1623)

In early 1758, [John Fielding](#), a London magistrate (and brother of *Tom Jones* author [Henry Fielding](#)) wrote a [short tract](#) decrying the condition of girls deserted on the streets of London convinced that they would be forced into a life of prostitution. To remedy this situation he proposed gathering a group of wealthy patrons to fund a "reformatory" to take in these abandoned girls (or, as he tellingly refers to them "objects"), raise them "free from the prejudices of evil habits," teach them the basic skills of domestic service, and send them off to work for the London elite. His plan met with an enthusiastic response and by May 1758, subscribers were found to establish an "Asylum or House of Refuge for Orphans and Other Deserted Girls of the Poor."

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ARCHIVES

- June 2012
- May 2012

AUTHORS

- adminuatpa
- Mitch Fraas
- Nancy Shawcross

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The Asylum, established first in [Lambeth \(South London\)](#) and then later as the Royal Female Orphanage in Beddington operated nearly continuously from 1758 until 1968. While the Sutton (UK) central library holds the [archives of the later incarnation of the Orphanage](#), until this year the 18th century records of the original Asylum were untraced. Through the hard work of many of our staff here (more on this later in the series), the Penn Libraries were able to acquire the first manuscript minute books of the Asylum and make them freely available to the public in digital form through our [Penn in Hand platform](#). These records provide a wealth of information about the social life in 18th century London and the history of philanthropic reform, as well as fascinating details about the history of reading, food, and labor. We'll be showcasing some of these details over the coming weeks.

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About Mitch Fraas

Mitch Fraas is the Bollinger Fellow for Library Innovation at the University of Pennsylvania Libraries. At Penn, Mitch works on a variety of projects cutting across general and special collections, with a special focus on digital humanities. He holds doctoral and master's degrees in history from Duke University and earned his bachelor's degree at Boston College. His doctoral dissertation examined the legal culture of British India in the 17th and 18th centuries, arguing for the existence of a unified early modern British imperial legal culture whether in Philadelphia, Bombay, or London.

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2

THOUGHTS ON “THE RECORDS OF THE ASYLUM FOR ORPHAN GIRLS (PART I)”



jenniferredmond *said:*

May 3, 2012 at 1:24 pm

This is FASCINATING! Thank you so much for digitizing these records, a truly worthy use of the tools of digital humanities.

REPLY

[\[Edit Comment\]](#)



Andre Sledge *said:*

May 8, 2012 at 3:14 pm

I find this applauding for reasons of modern fact finding, through means of

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digitization of historic information, and the important's regarding the topic of early orphanage and support for this type of humane service in the twenty-first century.

REPLY

[Edit Comment]

LEAVE A REPLY

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02 *The Records of the Asylum for Orphan Girls (Part II)*

Wednesday
MAY 2012

POSTED BY MITCH FRAAS IN POSTS

4 COMMENTS

[Edit]

“to preserve poor friendless girls from Ruin and to render them useful Members of the Community

Tags

UPenn Ms. Codex
1623

John Fielding and the other charity benefactors leased an inn for use as the physical location of the Asylum for Orphan Girls in May 1758 but they did not admit any actual girls into the Asylum until July. In the meantime, they hired staff, advertised the charity, and decided who exactly to admit into their care. Though there was apparently some disagreement on the ages of those girls to be admitted (as their minutes [record](#)) they agreed on a broad definition of who they intended to serve:

That the Objects to be admitted into this Asylum be Orphans and other deserted Girls of the Poor within the Bills of Mortality from the age of ~~ten to fourteen~~ eight to twelve years.

- That the Objects to be admitted into the Asylum be Orphans and other deserted Girls of the Poor within the Bills of Mortality [\[1\]](#) from the age of ~~ten to fourteen~~ eight to twelve years.

What can we say then about these girls, “Objects” in the minds of their benefactors, and what brought them to the Asylum?

Surprisingly, the records of the Asylum reveal that of the 54 girls admitted between 1758 and 1761, only 8 were orphans in the truest

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ARCHIVES

- June 2012
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AUTHORS

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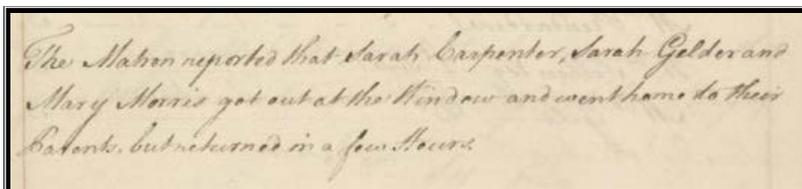
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sense (i.e. both parents no longer living). The rest were either brought to the Asylum by a mother or a father or had a living parent elsewhere. The Asylum offered free room and board as well as training towards becoming a domestic servant in an elite household and as such must have seemed an attractive opportunity for those on the lower rungs of London society.^[2]

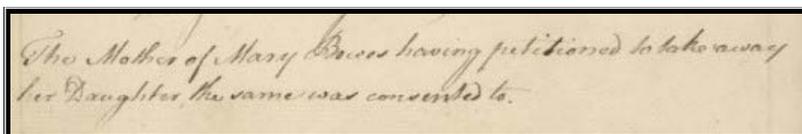
There was clearly a demand for places at the Asylum as the trustees turned away girls at nearly every open day. In February 1759, for instance, 17 of the 27 who petitioned for admission were refused. The trustees recorded their observations on each child in their minutes and displayed a clear preference for those who appealed to desertion by a husband, illness, or a surfeit of other children to care for. Others the trustees refused with the simple note "Parents very well able to maintain them." These brief justifications for taking or refusing a prospective charge are fascinating and can be found throughout the records as well as collected in the chart below.

Despite the fact that most of the girls in this early period did indeed have living parents, the Asylum treated them as orphans, greatly restricting communication with parents – seeking to "save" girls from the supposed contamination of their upbringing. Unsurprisingly then, some girls sought to visit their families just outside the Asylum's walls as in August 1759:



- The Matron reported that Sarah Carpenter, Sarah Gelder and Mary Morris got out at the Window and went home to their Parents, but returned in a few Hours.

Just days after this breakout, nine-year-old Mary Bowes left the Asylum out the front door. In this instance and in some others parents appeared to take their children home, citing a change in financial circumstance or giving no other reason at all.



- The Mother of Mary Bowes having petitioned to take away her Daughter, the same was consented to.

The trustees, unhappy at this subversion of their intentions, had decreed that the parents of all future girls to be admitted would have to pay a bond to secure the cost of clothes provided by the

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Asylum. The trustees also decided to turn away the youngest girls who were most connected with their parents by limiting admissions in 1759 to only those between 10 and 13. Finally, in 1760 the Asylum board made the decision to restrict new admissions to [only those without both mother and father](#) and further created a system wherein all girls presented to the charity would have to be sponsored by one of the Asylum's benefactors, thereby solidifying patronage ties between girls, their families, and wealthy local elites.

For those interested in digging into the lives of the early Asylum "orphans" I have provided a complete list of the named applicants to the Asylum below:

Girls Seeking Entrance to the Orphans Asylum : Sheet1

Published by [Google Docs](#) – – Updated automatically every 5 minutes

[1] The "Bills of Mortality" were a result of early attempts at reporting deaths from epidemic illnesses like the plague in London but in this usage refers to the geographical reporting area covered by these bills. These boundaries within greater London are not intuitive to the modern reader – see a list of parishes [here](#) as well as a map of the area [here](#).

[2]The manuscript records now at Penn record a few telling details about the parents of some of the girls. For example, we know that eight-year-old Mary Garvie's mother was a "Chare Woman," a description given to those who worked occasionally in household service for pay. Likewise, some 12 of the 54 girls admitted during this period had a father serving as a soldier or sailor in Britain's global wars of the 1750s (e.g. nine-year-old Sarah Monies' father, "a soldier gone to Senegal.") – one of the less reputable professions in the eyes of the moral elite.

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About Mitch Fraas

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4

THOUGHTS ON “THE RECORDS OF THE ASYLUM FOR ORPHAN GIRLS (PART II)”



[jenniferredmond](#) said:

May 3, 2012 at 1:34 pm

Do the records have any details as to the nationality of the parents or children? i.e. are they all English or are they Irish, Welsh, Scottish or other nationalities?

REPLY

[\[Edit Comment\]](#)



[uniqueatpenn](#) said:

May 3, 2012 at 1:55 pm

Thanks Jen! Since all the orphans had to be from within the boundaries of the Bills of Mortality they seem to have all lived in London but we know that at least six of the girls were either born in Ireland or had parents born there because the records mention them having Irish home parishes.

REPLY

[\[Edit Comment\]](#)



[jenniferredmond](#) said:

May 3, 2012 at 2:03 pm

So interesting, I must delve in deeper, this is really fascinating stuff for a women's history uber nerd

like me! 😊

[\[Edit Comment\]](#)



jenniferredmond *said:*

May 3, 2012 at 1:34 pm

Thank you also for all this hard work!

REPLY

[Edit Comment]

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07
Monday
MAY 2012

The Records of the Asylum for Orphan Girls (Part III)

POSTED BY MITCH FRAAS IN POSTS

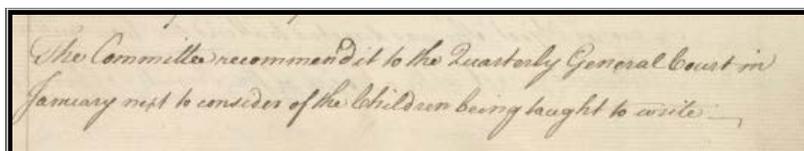
1 COMMENT

[Edit]

Tags

UPenn Ms. Codex
1623

Here at Penn we have a [strong interest](#) in the history of reading and book culture. Librarians, faculty, and students have used our collections over the years to study the history of how people read and disseminated texts. I was struck then by the richness of the Orphan's Asylum records for shedding light on reading practices and book culture in the mid-18th century and thought I would share several examples which might inspire further research.



— The committee recommend it to the Quarterly General Court in January next to consider of the Children being taught to write

Along with learning how to spin and sew, the trustees felt strongly that reading and writing should form an essential part of the education of the girls living at the Asylum. The female benefactors of the institution were among some of the most eager to include reading and writing in the curriculum. For example, just as the first girls entered the Asylum, Mrs. Fielding and the Duchess Dowager of Somerset [presented a gift](#) of various "useful" books to the institution for the instruction of the new charges. Unfortunately the exact titles of these books remain unknown but we can guess at their nature from later purchases. When benefactors like Mrs. Fielding thought of what the Asylum's charges should read they did not turn to 'dangerous' novels like those of her brother-in-law [Henry](#). Instead, they provided a standard slate of devotional and didactic books increasingly common in educational settings across the British world [\[1\]](#).

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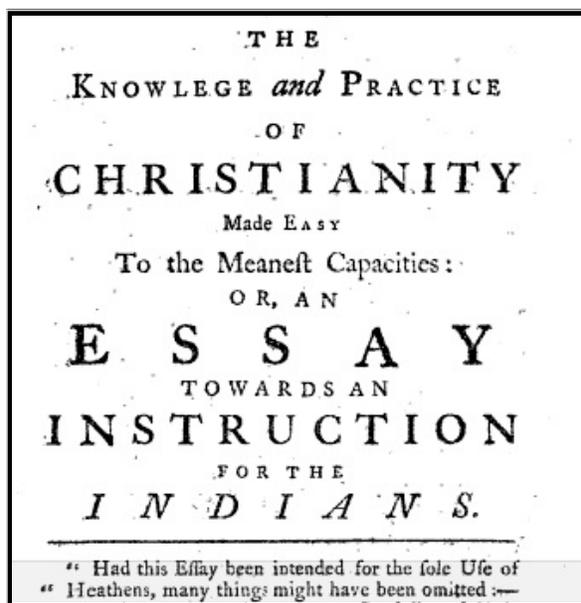
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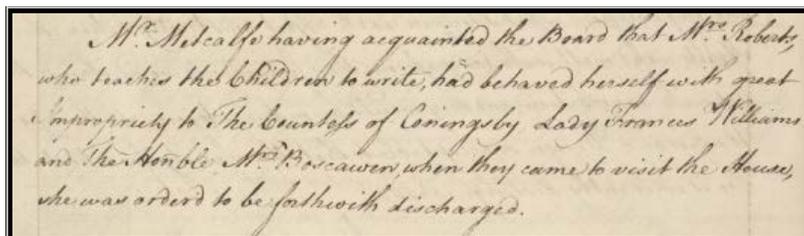
The kinds of religious reading deemed appropriate for the orphans was self-consciously designed for those of lower status. In June 1760, for example, the Asylum [received a gift](#) of the following book:



- The Knowledge and Practice of Christianity made easy to the meanest Capacities; or an Essay towards an Introduction for the Indians. Courtesy NYPL and Google Books

First published in 1740, this text had reached its [ninth edition by 1759](#) which included a publisher's note stating that a subsidy could be provided for those buying more than 12 copies for distribution to "poor Families, Children, and Servants.

Beyond providing books for the use of the Asylum's "objects," the benefactors of the charity kept a close eye on the ways in which the children were learning to read and write, frequently finding the Asylum's instructors wanting [\[2\]](#). In one mysterious 1760 incident involving a writing teacher named Sarah Roberts they even ordered a summary dismissal:



- Mr. Metcalfe having acquainted the Board that Mrs. Roberts, who teaches the Children to write, had behaved herself with great Impropriety to The Countess of Coningsby Lady Frances Williams and the Honble Mrs. Boscawen, when they came to visit the House, she was ordered to be forthwith discharged.

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The Orphan's Asylum trustees and benefactors also did a great deal of writing themselves. They wrote notices about the charity to be placed in London newspapers and occasionally published longer summaries of the work of the charity. Indeed one of the first acts of the trustees was to order the publication of a 37 page "Abstract of the proceedings of the guardians of the asylum." Fielding and the other trustees approached the London printer Richard Francklin (who had previously published Fielding's own tract on the need for an orphanage) and [had 500 copies printed](#) for distribution [3]. For those interested in the history of printing it is likely no surprise that out of those 500 copies, only one is [cataloged as surviving today](#) (at the library of the Archbishop of Canterbury less than half a mile from the Asylum). Most of the Asylum's publishing – forms, slips, tickets, and other ephemera – met this same fate after joining the sea of print then swirling around enlightenment London.

[1]

For more on specific books bought or given to the Asylum see:

[August 23, 1758](#): The trustees provided "3 Dozen of Common Prayer Books for the use of the Children." The Asylum also took pains to acquire finer editions of many of these texts for example: "[a Folio Common Prayer Book & Bible, and six Common Prayer Books octavo](#)" (roughly a dozen folio editions of the book of common prayer were published in the 1750s alone).

[October 4, 1758](#): "They have also each of them a common Prayer Book, and the New Testament, and other good Books are likewise provided for them."

[November 21, 1759](#): "...fifty of the Church Catechism made use of at Christ's Hospital be provided for the use of the Children of this Charity." Possibly some edition of [this text](#).

[January 9, 1760](#): "that twenty four bibles be provided for the use of the Children of this Charity"

[January 14, 1761](#): "That the following Books be given to the Children when they are put out apprentice. Vizt. The Old & New Testament; A Common Prayer Book; and the new Whole Duty of Man."

[2]

Benefactors visiting the Asylum in February 1761 claimed that the then writing master James Sketchley was ["not qualified" for the job](#).

[3]

Richard Francklin actively published out of Covent Garden from the 1730s to the 1760s. The [ESTC](#) lists at least 55 imprints under his name.

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About Mitch Fraas

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1

THOUGHT ON “THE RECORDS OF THE ASYLUM FOR ORPHAN GIRLS (PART III)”



[jenniferredmond](#) said:

May 8, 2012 at 3:50 pm

Another great post Mitch! I am going to use this as a model for future posts on our blog (<http://greenfield.blogs.brynmawr.edu/> in case you're interested!)

Is there any indication at all what Mrs Roberts said that so offended the women? Female philanthropy and the culture of 'visiting' is fascinating to me (as is nearly everything to do with women's history as you might have guessed by now!)

Thanks for this one, will there be more posts?

[REPLY](#)

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Monday
MAY 2012

Records of the Asylum for Orphan Girls (Part IV)

POSTED BY MITCH FRAAS IN POSTS

2 COMMENTS

[Edit]

Tags

UPenn Ms. Codex
1623

In this penultimate post in our series on the Orphan's Asylum records I thought I would share more about two aspects of daily life for the girls of the Asylum. I was especially pleased in reading through the records to see all sorts of interesting tie-ins with Penn's strong [collections in culinary history](#). See, for example, this typical weekly menu for the girls at the Asylum from March 1760:

	Breakfast.	Dinner.	Supper.
Sunday.	Rice Milk.	Roasted Beef & Garden Stuff.	Bread & Butter
Monday.	Water Gruel.	Rice or Hasty Pudding.	Stewed Raisins & Cheese.
Tuesday.	Milk Pottage.	Boiled Mutton &c.	Bread & Cheese.
Wednesday.	Rice Milk.	Suet or Crust Pudding.	Bread with Butter.
Thursday.	Water Gruel.	Roasted Beef & Garden Stuff.	Roasted Wheat.
Friday.	Milk Pottage.	Suet Rice or Hasty Pudding.	Bread with Butter.
Saturday.	Water Gruel.	Roasted Mutton & Garden Stuff.	Potatoes.

— For transcription click [here](#)

No records survive attesting to the quality of the meals but the Asylum certainly had trouble retaining cooks, dismissing several including a Ms. Jane Cooper for ["having refused to assist at the Wash."](#) The meals all seem typical of the period and heavy on porridges, puddings, and gruels, including Hasty Pudding, now famous as the name of the Harvard performing group but then just a [flour and egg pudding](#). The menus in the Asylum records would make a fascinating historical (or culinary!) project and a great complement to other eighteenth-century cookery guides in our [culinary collections](#).

Beyond meals and learning to read and write (as detailed in the

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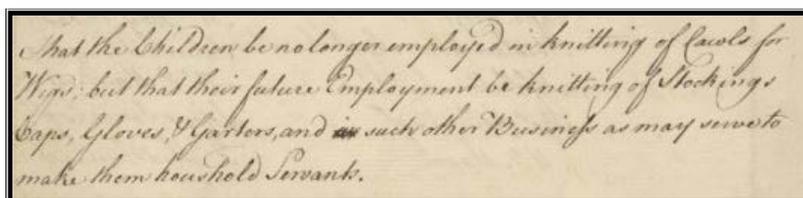
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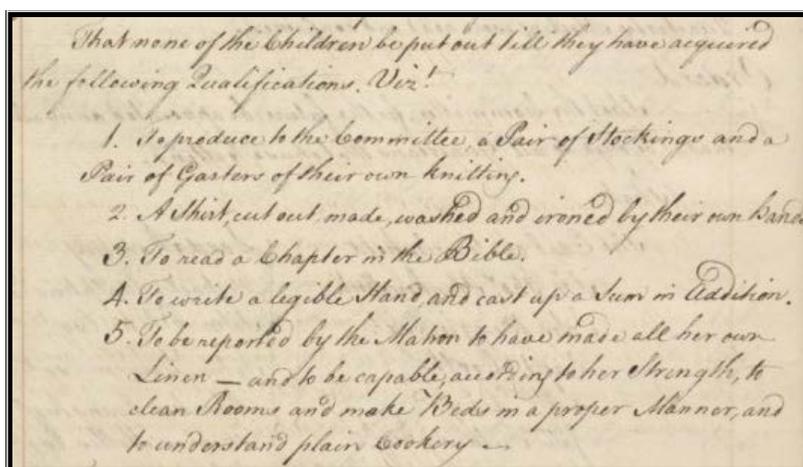
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previous post), the residents of the Asylum spent their days in the chapel for religious instruction, doing daily chores including washing and cleaning, and working on a series of textile-related skills. instruction in other domestic arts. Exactly what this instruction entailed fluctuated over the first years of the Asylum. The trustees first latched on to the idea that it would be “useful” and “advantageous” for the girls to learn how to spin flax, “especially as they are to be sent into the World complete Housewives.” To that end, the charity bought wheels and employed a Mr. and Mrs. Goodwin to teach spinning at a salary of £40/year (double the wages of any other Asylum employee). Unfortunately, within a few weeks the Goodwins were discharged “having repeatedly misbehaved themselves.” In a later experiment, the trustees turned towards having the girls knit caul[s] for wigs. Finally, the trustees abandoned this plan and the logic of making the girls into housewives and turned towards a new mission, creating a set of capable domestic servants:



- That the Children be no longer employed in knitting of Cawls[sic] for Wigs; but that their future Employment be knitting of Stockings, Caps, Gloves & Garters, and such other Business as may serve to make them household Servants.

This shift marked a key turning point in the history of the Asylum, instead of cultivating skilled housewives, the charity was to become a school for creating the next generation of domestic workers for its own wealthy patrons. It is in this context that the trustees decided on a kind of exit exam for the girls of the Asylum:



- That none of the Children be put out till they have acquired the following Qualifications viz.
 1. To produce to the committee a Pair of Stockings, & a Pair of Garters of their own Knitting.

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2. A Shirt cut out, made, wash'd & iron'd by their own Hands.
3. To read a Chapter in the Bible.
4. To write a legible Hand, & cast up a sum in Addition.
5. To be reported by the Matron to have cut out made all their own linen; & to be capable according to their own Strength to clean Rooms & make Beds in a proper Manner & to understand plain Cookery & properly Clean Kitchen & other household Furniture.

Stay tuned for a post later this week from curator of manuscripts Nancy Shawcross on the process of acquiring the Asylum records.

[1] Cauls were the netted substrata which supported wigs. For an illustration of their construction from Colonial Williamsburg see [here](#).

5 March 1760 Menu:

	BREAKFAST	DINNER	SUPPER
SUNDAY	RICE MILK	ROASTED BEEF & GARDEN STUFF	BREAD & BUTTER
MONDAY	WATER GRUEL	RICE OR HASTY PUDDING	POTATOES, OR BREAD & CHEESE
TUESDAY	MILK POTTAGE	BOILED MUTTON	BREAD & CHEESE
WEDNESDAY	RICE MILK	SUET OR FRUIT PUDDINGS	BROTH WITH BARLEY
THURSDAY	WATER GRUEL	BOILED BEEF & GARDEN STUFF	BOILED WHEAT
FRIDAY	MILK POTTAGE	SUET, RICE, OR HASTY PUDDING	BROTH WITH BARLEY
SATURDAY	WATER GRUEL	ROASTED MUTTON & GARDEN STUFF	POTATOES

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About Mitch Fraas

Mitch Fraas is the Bollinger Fellow for Library Innovation at the University of Pennsylvania Libraries. At Penn, Mitch works on a variety of projects cutting across general and special collections, with a special focus on digital humanities. He holds doctoral and master's degrees in history from Duke University and earned his bachelor's degree at Boston College. His doctoral dissertation examined the legal culture of British India in the 17th and 18th centuries, arguing for the existence of a unified early modern British imperial legal culture whether in Philadelphia, Bombay, or London.

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THOUGHTS ON “RECORDS OF THE ASYLUM FOR ORPHAN GIRLS (PART IV)”



[devo3000](#) said:

May 15, 2012 at 12:38 pm

Fascinating collection — it reminds me of Dickens's efforts with the Urania Cottage and the Ragged School Union a century later. Scholars continue to wrestle with the implications for his thinking on class and sexual politics. I'd be interested to hear from a nutritionist or food historian what the long-term implications of this diet would be for development and how representative it was.

REPLY

[\[Edit Comment\]](#)



[jenniferredmond](#) said:

May 15, 2012 at 2:58 pm

I would also wonder if this diet differed from that offered to boys in similar orphanages or if there were other differences in skills learned, competency tests etc. This is a really fascinating collection, would love to come in and see it some time!

REPLY

[\[Edit Comment\]](#)

LEAVE A REPLY

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