

**Archival Silences and Disrupted Families:
Rethinking Male 'Orphans' in Early Colonial New South Wales 1819 to December 1823.**

MOI = Male Orphan Institution also referred to as the Male Orphan School

Abstract:

On 24 October 1823, seven-year-old Thomas Howard was admitted to the Sydney Male Orphan Institution (MOI) by his father, Robert Howard, a labourer of Wilberforce.¹ Beyond a brief entry in the admission register, no official record survives to explain the circumstances of this surrender. As with many children admitted to the institution, the absence of supporting documentation reduces Thomas's experience to a terse administrative notation that obscures the crises preceding it.

This article employs family history methodology not as a supplementary exercise, but as a corrective one. Through detailed reconstruction of the domestic, relational, and penal contexts that preceded admission, it recovers dimensions of these boys' lives that are entirely absent from institutional records. In doing so, it reveals new evidence concerning the circumstances of admission, demonstrating that institutionalisation rarely reflected simple orphanhood or parental neglect. Rather, it emerged from the cumulative pressures of colonial life, including parental illness or death, penal mobility, economic instability, maternal confinement, and the reconfiguration of households through remarriage.

By extending this reconstruction across the cohort admitted between January 1819 and December 1823—the period immediately preceding the institution's relocation to Bonnyrigg in 1824—the article significantly reshapes our understanding of admission to the MOI, revealing it as a negotiated and often strategic response to structural constraint. It further demonstrates that institutionalisation did not sever familial bonds: parents and kin continued to intervene in children's lives, seeking to reclaim custody, direct apprenticeships, and influence their futures. These findings position the MOI within a broader context of informal and institutional care, and constitute a vital social analysis of the colony's earliest male orphans. In recovering lives otherwise reduced to administrative fragments, the article challenges prevailing assumptions about abandonment and foregrounds the fragility, adaptability, and persistence of colonial families.

¹ Thomas Howard, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 24 October 1823, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.9-10.

1. Introduction: Archival Silences, Methodology and Historiography:

The care of orphaned or semi-orphaned children, including Thomas Howard, was the inevitable outcome of the social and demographic character of a penal and military colony. In 1820—with a population of approximately 24,000 and an adult sex ratio of 392 males to 100 females (4 to 1)—New South Wales was not an organic settlement but an engineered social experiment shaped by imperial policy.² The colony's coercive penal nature rendered social and familial bonds contingent upon administrative decision-making rather than personal choice. Relationships formed rapidly, dissolved abruptly, and were frequently reconfigured under pressure of survival. Children moved between households, institutions, and employers. Family life was not merely fragile but administratively permeable, subject to intervention at every level. Transportation (both primary and secondary), assignment, confinement within the Female Factory, illness and economic precarity produced patterns of disruption embedded within the colony's design. The pressure these conditions placed on the existing systems of care is evident in the rapid expansion of the MOI. By July 1820, a request was made to increase enrolments from fifty to eighty boys, with Richard Hill noting both the availability of accommodation and the immediate need to admit additional children, including Robert Brierty and George Wall.³ Such requests indicate that demand for institutional care quickly exceeded initial expectations. Yet, during the period 1819 to December 1823, the Male Orphan Institution's records rarely preserve the complexity of the circumstances that produced this demand.

Archival Silences

When familial disruption necessitated admission to the Male Orphan Institution, a petition or request was submitted to the committee. The original petitions, written during the foundational years of the MOI (1819–1824), have not survived as a discrete archival series. Their absence is not merely unfortunate, but analytically significant. It constitutes an archival silence, emblematic of an institution that reduced complex familial crises—encompassing bereavement, poverty, punishment, and maternal distress—to brief administrative entries. By recording the outcome of the crisis rather than its unfolding, the archive obscures the hardship, tragedy, and grief associated with the institutionalisation of a child, privileging institutional process over domestic experience.

The loss of these petitions may reflect the practical limitations of early colonial record-keeping. In a developing administrative environment characterised by limited personnel, inconsistent practices, and the movement of institutions across sites, documents were vulnerable to loss or disposal. The relocation of the school to Liverpool in late 1824, for example, may have contributed to the fragmentation of its records. That the admission registers for 1819 to 1847 survive, while the accompanying petitions do not, could suggest uneven preservation, reinforcing the contingent and partial nature of the early colonial archive. The absence of these petitions may

² Michael Belcher, "Demographic influences on children and family in New South Wales, 1820-1841," *Journal of Australian Colonial History* 1, no. 2 (1999): 4-5.

³ Suggestion that number of boys to be taken into the school be increased from fifty to eighty, 17 July 1820, SANSW, Reel 6050, 4/1747, fo.88-90.

also reflect more than administrative fragility. It points to the limited value ascribed to the experiences of the convict and labouring poor within colonial record-keeping practices, where the circumstances of admission—rooted in domestic hardship and familial crisis—were of less institutional significance than the fact of admission itself.

The evidentiary value of this lost archive can be glimpsed in rare surviving petitions. Preserved within the Colonial Secretary's Applications for Removal correspondence is a memorial written in September 1825 by Lucy Gardner, requesting admission to the MOI for her son, Francis, born in May 1821 to Lucy and William Adams. Lucy explained:

That your Memorialist is a poor Woman whose husband was some time back sent to Port Macquarie & there died; She had a Son by Said unfortunate Man, a Boy about five years old, who she is unable to maintain. Memorialist on account of child is unable to go to Service & is obliged to work as a char Woman to different Persons which employment is so precarious that it is with great difficulty she can obtain sufficient food for her Child & herself. Memorialist therefore humbly hopes your Reverence will take her sake into consideration & allow the Boy to be placed in the Male Orphan Institution.⁴

Addended to the memorial is a notation by Richard Hill, assistant chaplain, endorsing the application, stating that 'The child is an illegitimate one and as the father is dead, it would be an act of kindness to both mother and child to place him in the Orphan School.'⁵

Gardner's memorial illustrates the complex circumstances behind admission. In a few paragraphs it exposes the economic precarity of widowhood, the constraints placed upon women's labour by childcare, the stigma of illegitimacy, and the moralised language through which assistance was sought and authorised. Without such documents, the material and emotional conditions preceding institutionalisation are lost. The survival of this single application for admission illuminates what the missing archive would likely have revealed at scale: that admission to the MOI was rarely the result of sudden catastrophe, but a cumulative misfortune, negotiated through formal supplication characterised by the language of humility and loss.

⁴ Lucy Gardner, Application for Removal, 11 September 1825, SANSW, NRS 783; 4/333; Roll 2776, fo.13.

⁵ Ibid, fo.14.



Thomas's admission to the MOI followed the death of his mother and the progressive incapacity of his father, circumstances that rendered continued familial care untenable rather than undesired. Yet the surviving record suggests that Robert's sense of paternal responsibility persisted beyond his son's institutionalisation. In June 1823—four months before Thomas' admission—Robert was granted fifty acres of land at Kurrajong.⁹ As Michael

⁹ Robert Howard, 30 June 1823, Kurrajong, SANSW, Registers of Land Grants and Leases, NRS 13836; 7/459, Reel 2549, fo.43.

Flynn observes, the grant was secured not for personal advancement but in order to 'provide for his son', reflecting an effort to safeguard Thomas's future within the limits of Robert's declining health¹⁰ In June 1829, Robert obtained permission to temporarily leave the asylum to 'go up the country where he has a farm'.¹¹ The purpose of this visit was to sell his land, which he did for the sum of ten pounds, the transaction marking Robert's final attempt to convert his remaining asset into security.¹²

A petition written by Eleanor Logan, the mother of Henry Logan admitted on 1 January 1819, has also survived. It did so because it was written to the Colonial Secretary's Office requesting for a Ticket of Leave (ToL). Contained within her appeal Logan adds:

That your petitioner has a son of the age of seven years which came with her from England and who she was obligated to bring as her Husband at the same time as her falling into Trouble was abroad he belonging to the Army. That the wages Your Petitioner receives is inadequate for the support of her said son...that [should she receive her ToL] by Industry and a Sober & Honest behaviour she will be enabled to support her Self and Child in a decent credible manner.¹³

Eleanor was, at the time of writing, 'an Assigned Government Servant to John Frith who from her good conduct' supported her ToL application, stating he was 'very willing to part with her owing to her child'.¹⁴ Eleanor knew that her son was about to be admitted to the orphanage against her wishes, and was doing everything in her power to prevent it. This determination contradicts the contemporary official viewpoint of convict mothers, women who Governor King stated 'abandoned [their children] to every wretchedness and vice'.¹⁵

Eleanor's petition reveals a mother whose actions were shaped by circumstance rather than neglect: her poverty while under sentence necessitated Henry's admission, yet she exhibited steadfast determination to prevent his institutionalisation. Eleanor, who had arrived in 1817 from Ireland under a seven-year sentence, did receive her ToL in 1818 and her Certificate of Freedom in December 1823.¹⁶ Despite this, Henry remained in the MOI. This may have been because of the MOI policy that:

It is to be clearly understood when a Child is once admitted unto it, the Parents or Guardians of such Orphan are to have no Control whatever over him, nor be at liberty to remove him from thence, nor from his apprenticeship, until after he has attained his Twenty first Year.¹⁷

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Robert Howard to John Wills, 16 May 1829, Register General, Deeds Registration Branch, Registers of Memorials, SANSW, Reel 1571, Series 12992.

¹³ Petition of Eleanor Logan, 3 December 1818, SANSW, Fiche 3187; 4/1855, fo.165.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Belcher, "Demographic influences on children and family in New South Wales, 1820-1841," 1-2.

King, P.G. Lieutenant-Governor King to Secretaries of the Treasury (Despatch): Library Committee of the Commonwealth Parliament, 1914, p.525.

¹⁶ Eleanor Logan, BDA on-line, accessed 12 February 2026.

¹⁷ Constitution and Minutes including the Rules and Regulations of the Male Orphan Institution, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, 4-5.

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To His Excellency Sir John Macquarie
Esquire, Governor and Commander in
Chief in and over His Majesty's Territory
of New South Wales & its Dependencies
The Assembly Petition of Eleanor Logan
Respectfully Sheweth, That your Petitioner
arrived in this Colony in Her Majesty's Ship the
"Wellington", a tender, a Prisoner for seven years.
That your Petitioner is an African
Government servant to John Smith who from
her past conduct has presented to her making
this Application to your Excellency for a ticket
of leave as will appear by his signature hereto
annexed. That your Petitioner has a son of the
age of seven years which arrived with her from
England and who she was obligated to bring to
Her Husband at the time of her falling into
Cruelty, was absent in belonging to the Army.
That the wages your Petitioner
receives is inadequate for the support of her said
son.
Therefore your Petitioner humbly
prays that your Excellency will be
pleased to grant her a Ticket of
leave when she appears your Excellency
that by industrious and a labor &
blameless behavior she will be
enabled to support her self and
Child in a decent creditable manner
& that for such your Petitioner's
will ever pray as in duty bound she
doth.
Signed by me John Smith
very willing to part with
her and son to her said

Spencer & Co. }
3rd December 1818 }

Image 1: The petition of Eleanor Logan, December 1818. ¹⁸

The rarity of memorials such as those of Logan, underscores the limitations of the surviving MOI archive. Where a child was admitted by a single parent or guardian, no consistent effort was made to document the identity, status or circumstances of absent parent or parents. Admission registers record little beyond a boy's name, age, admitting parent or guardian, address, occupation and a brief notation of discharge. Committee minutes typically note only that a petition was received and either approved or refused. This documentary silence has had historiographical consequences. By preserving the fact of admission while obscuring the context, the early MOI records render familial instability and stressors largely invisible. This has contributed not only to the relative neglect of analysis of this formative period in the institution's history but, importantly, has obscured the extent to which early admissions were embedded in fragile domestic economies and unstable colonial relationships. A case such as Thomas Howard's can, in the absence of detail and context, be read as child desertion or parental neglect, relocating responsibility from colonial conditions to individual or familial failure. Because no justification survives, his institutionalisation carries no historiographical significance. The entry is affectless by design, recording an outcome while withholding its causes.

¹⁸ Petition of Eleanor Logan, 3 December 1818, SANSW, Fiche 3187; 4/1855, fo.165.

Only one substantial body of documentation survives from the MOI's formative years. The 1818 recommendations for admission, submitted directly to Governor Macquarie prior to its opening in January 1819, have been preserved because they form part of the Colonial Secretary's records.¹⁹ Thereafter, the documentation becomes markedly sparse. In the absence of substantive detail, family history methodology operates as a corrective. By reconstructing family trajectories through convict indents, musters, petitions and memorials, newspapers, church records, and applications for release, it restores the circumstances leading to admission that institutional records obscure. Orphan admission is thus repositioned within lived experience, challenging the apparent neutrality of the surviving record.

Family History Methodology

The sustained, detailed analysis of multiple 'orphan' boys—such as Gardner, Howard, and Logan—exceeds the expectations of journal conventions that privilege concision and abstraction. This article deliberately resists excessive compression in order to foreground the social and emotional realities obscured by the MOI's depersonalised record-keeping. Family history methodology is employed not as anecdotal embellishment but as a critical tool for recovering context in the face of archival minimalism. To that end, this study examines the majority of the 107 boys admitted to the MOI between 1819 and December 1823, situating their admissions within reconstructed familial and social frameworks. Such depth is not narrative indulgence but methodological necessity: only through sustained analysis can complexity be restored to lives otherwise reduced to a single line entry or committee notation. In doing so, the article also acknowledges the boys themselves. Where earlier biographies and family histories often obscured or omitted institutional experience—frequently out of shame—this study restores that dimension to their narrative, rebalancing the historical record and recognising the significance of their time within the MOI.

In this study, genealogical research functions as a reparative methodology, reconstructing the familial and social contexts obscured by the archival record. It does so in the most intimate of ways, working at the level of individual lives. Through the accumulation of personal narratives, it reveals the interplay of hardship, penal discipline, and social instability that culminated in the fragmentation of families. In restoring these contexts, it challenges the archival flattening that reduces complex societal pressures to individual moral failure.

While previous scholarship has examined many aspects of the Female and Male Orphan Institutions, this analysis is unique in foregrounding personal histories as the primary narrative framework. Arnon HersHKovitz has argued for the formal recognition of academic family history as a rigorous scholarly discipline, demonstrating that when governed by strict evidentiary standards, genealogical reconstruction can operate as historical method rather than anecdotal supplementation.²⁰ By linking individual life stories to the documentary evidence contained within the MOI admission registers, this approach enhances their interpretive value. As Tanya Evans observes,

¹⁹ Recommendations for admission to the Male Orphan Institution, July and August 1818, Reel 6047; 4/1740, fo.253–8.

²⁰ Arnon HersHKovitz, "Genealogy and family history through multiple academic lenses: An introduction to the special issue," *Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 8, no. 1 (2016): 6.

Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Genealogy in the Information Age: History's new frontier," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 91 (2003): 276.

‘family historians disrupt many of the assumptions about the past’, and this study is no exception.²¹ Although the scarcity of documentary evidence has discouraged substantive analysis of this period, the reconstruction of familial biographies enables the ‘discovery of manifold secrets’, revealing pressures that the MOI records themselves reduce to sparse and formulaic entries.²²

Historiography:

Scholarship pertaining to the colony’s orphan institutions is well established. Elizabeth Govan’s 1951 doctoral thesis on early child welfare²³, followed by the studies of K.M. Riordan (1958) and Barry Bridges (1973), provide foundational institutional histories of the Female and Male Orphan Schools.²⁴ These early works outlined the administrative structures and development of the schools but offered limited insight into the lived experiences of the children or the domestic circumstances surrounding admission. Later scholarship introduced greater analytical depth. Beryl Bubacz’s 2007 doctoral thesis reassessed the establishment of the orphan schools and undertook a quantitative analysis of the family and social backgrounds of admitted children.²⁵ Her statistical reconstruction significantly advanced understanding of the socio-economic conditions preceding admission. The present study complements that work by adopting a qualitative methodology that privileges family narratives over aggregate data in order to recover the experiential realities of institutionalisation.

Robert Holden’s *Orphans of History* (1994), though focussed on children associated with the First Fleet, demonstrates the value of personalising histories through biographical reconstruction. By foregrounding what he termed as the ‘anguish of broken families’, Holden emphasises the destructive consequences of transportation for domestic stability.²⁶ His work produced a rich study of the children who, although inextricably linked to the colony’s foundation, are often ‘overlooked, ignored or dismissed as of little consequence.’²⁷

This theme was further explored by Tanya Evans in her analysis of the experiences of poor single mothers who sought relief through the orphan schools and The Benevolent Society’s Asylum during the nineteenth century.²⁸ Drawing upon 147 extant applications to the Sydney orphan schools between 1825 to 1833, Evans revealed the prevalence of widowhood, the absence of male breadwinners, and the fragility of familial arrangements within

²¹ Tanya Evans, "Secrets and lies: The radical potential of family history" (paper presented at the History Workshop Journal, 2011), 51.

²² Evans, "Secrets and lies: The radical potential of family history," 51.

²³ Elizabeth Steel Livingston Govan, "Public and private responsibility in child welfare in New South Wales, 1788-1887" (PhD The University of Chicago, 1951).

²⁴ K.M. Riordan, "The Sydney Orphan Schools 1800-1830: A Study" (B.A. Honours University of New England, 1958).

Barry John Bridges, "The Sydney Orphan Schools 1800-1830" (Master of Education, University of Sydney, 1973).

²⁵ Beryl M Bubacz, "The female and male orphan schools in New South Wales 1801-1850" (Doctor of Philosophy University of Sydney, 2007), 1–2; vii.

²⁶ Robert Holden, *Orphans of History: the forgotten children of the First Fleet* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2000), 5,7.

²⁷ Holden, *Orphans of History: the forgotten children of the First Fleet*, 2.

²⁸ Tanya Evans, "The meanings and experiences of single mothers in nineteenth-century Sydney, Australia" (paper presented at the Annales de démographie historique, 2014).

the colonial poor.²⁹ Evans extends Holden's emphasis on the destructive consequences of transportation, arguing that the colony's punitive regime fractured families through removal, confinement, and enforced mobility. She developed this argument further in *Fractured Families*, her detailed examination of 'the very poorest and often most fractured of NSW families'.³⁰ Although that study focussed primarily on households associated with the Benevolent Society, it makes significant reference to the orphan institutions and analyses families characterised by the absence of male breadwinners and unstable domestic arrangements.³¹ Evans' identification of transportation as a driver of familial fragmentation provides an essential framework for understanding admissions to the Male Orphan Institution during its foundational years.

Together, this body of scholarship has illuminated the institutional framework and demographic characteristics of orphan admissions. What remains less examined, particularly for the formative period 1819 to December 1823, is the granular reconstruction of individual family crises in the absence of surviving petitions and within the constraints of highly abstracted admission records. By examining the majority of the 107 boys admitted during this period, the present study extends existing scholarship by interrogating not only who entered the Male Orphan Institution, but how and why admission unfolded within specific domestic contexts.

2. Institutional Framework and Eligibility 1799 to 1819:

Early Provisioning:

The years 1819 to December 1823, which form the focus of this study, encompass the first four years of operation of the MOI. Although the institutional history of the orphan schools has been well documented, it is important to situate the MOI within earlier colonial experiments in child relief. It was not the colony's first orphan institution. A female orphan school was in operation on Norfolk Island by 1796 under the patronage of Lieutenant-Governor Philip Gidley King³² and, in Sydney during the 1790s, the Reverend Richard Johnson established a voluntary fund to support the construction of an orphan asylum.³³ Johnson's efforts were shaped by his deeply moralised views of convict parenthood. In his view, the parents of convict children were 'miserable wretches...lost to all sense of virtue and religion', and therefore a poor influence on their offspring.³⁴ Portia Robinson's analysis of the first generation of native-born Australians demonstrates that such attitudes became deeply embedded within official understandings of colonial childhood. Robinson argues that it was widely

²⁹ Evans, "The meanings and experiences of single mothers in nineteenth-century Sydney, Australia," 77. Her statistical analysis revealed that 38 per cent of applications were submitted by mothers, 23 percent by fathers and the rest by others engaged with support of the child.

³⁰ Evans, "The meanings and experiences of single mothers in nineteenth-century Sydney, Australia," 75.

Tanya Evans, *Fractured families: Life on the margins in colonial New South Wales* (UNSW Press, 2015), 14.

³¹ Evans, *Fractured families: Life on the margins in colonial New South Wales*, 87.

³² Norfolk Island was settled just six weeks after the arrival of the First Fleet in Port Jackson. King acted as the settlement's first commandant.

³³ *Historical Records of New South Wales. Hunter and King. 1800, 1801, 1802*, ed. F.M. Bladen, vol. 4 (Sydney, NSW: Charles Potter, Government Printer), 113. Norfolk Island was settled just six weeks after the arrival of the First Fleet in Port Jackson. King acted as the settlement's first commandant.

³⁴ George Mackaness, *Some Letters of Rev. Richard Johnson, BA, First Chaplain of New South Wales, 1954, Part II*, 10. No. 26. Source : Letter from Rev. Richard Johnson to the Secretary, Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. *Journal of S.P.G.* for 1797."

believed that convict parents 'led lives of indescribable vice, dissipation and criminality, neglecting and abandoning their unwanted children and making no attempts to provide for them.'³⁵ Governor King repeatedly referenced the 'neglected state of the children' in his correspondence, warning in May 1800 of the 'distressing prospect of the Rising Generation' unless intervention prevented them from 'becoming the inheritors of their abandoned parents' profligate infamy.'³⁶ Three months later, he described the colony's children as 'abandoned to every kind of wretchedness and vice' and subsequently wrote to Richard Johnson of observing numerous children 'going about the streets in a most neglected manner.'³⁷ Robinson emphasises that King's repeated criticisms of convict parents played a significant role in establishing the enduring perception that the colony's early children were broadly neglected and abandoned.

The Female Orphan Institution (FOI) had opened in George Street, Sydney, in August 1801 under the direction of Governor Philip Gidley King. Established to provide care for girls considered vulnerable to neglect and moral corruption, the institution was intended to accommodate up to one hundred girls and represented the colony's first formal provision for the care of destitute youth. Supported by public funds and administered under colonial authority, the FOI reflected broader concerns among colonial officials about the regulation and protection of young girls within an unstable and rapidly expanding settlement. Once again, however, archival silences obscure our understanding of the institution's earliest operations. No extant rolls, admission registers or petitions requesting admission survive for the first intake of thirty-one girls, leaving identities and circumstances uncertain.³⁸ By 1813 the George Street premises were deemed unsuitable and construction commenced on a new facility at Parramatta. When the girls relocated, the vacated Sydney premises were used to accommodate the first intake of male orphans.

Despite the establishment of the Female Orphan Institution in 1801, no comparable provision existed for boys for nearly two decades, leaving vulnerable male children dependent upon informal arrangements within households and the wider community. This disparity reflects the gendered priorities of early colonial society, in which girls were considered particularly at risk of moral corruption, while boys were more readily absorbed into labour and domestic service. Before 1819, boys in need of care were typically absorbed into private households, either through kinship ties, charitable intervention, or under more transactional arrangements in which their placement secured a full adult ration.³⁹

³⁵ Portia Robinson, *The hatch and brood of time: a study of the first generation of native-born white Australians, 1788–1828* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1985), 42.

³⁶ *Historical Records of New South Wales. Hunter and King. 1800, 1801, 1802*, 4, 87. P.G. King to Lieutenant Kent, 23 May 1800.

³⁷ King, P.G. Lieutenant-Governor King to Secretaries of the Treasury (Despatch): Library Committee of the Commonwealth Parliament, 1914, p.525.

King to Rev. Richard Johnson, 7 August 1800, H.R.N.S.W., 4, p.135.

³⁸ Bubacz, "The female and male orphan schools in New South Wales 1801-1850."

Beryl M Bubacz, "The Role of the Orphan Schools in Colonial Society" (M.Ed. Sydney University, 1966).

³⁹ John Hunter, *Governor Hunter's remarks on the causes of the colonial expense of the establishment of New South Wales*. (London, 1802), 70.

Identifying the colony's early male orphans is challenging. Early records, memorials, and correspondence often contain incidental references that illuminate informal and community-based arrangements for children classified as orphans, though rarely in a systematic or sustained manner. A list of persons approved to receive land grants in 1818, for example, includes six individuals who, despite being adults, were nevertheless described as orphans.⁴⁰ Apart from providing invaluable identification of the three as having been 'orphaned', this document indicates that orphan status could function as a recognised basis for securing indulgences such as land. The first of these, John Cunningham, was born in the colony in 1797 to convicts Bryan Cunningham (arrived 1793) and Catherine née Baker (arrived 1796).⁴¹ Catherine appears to have died in 1800, when John was three, after which Bryan partnered with Frances Waller. Two years later Bryan himself died, leaving John effectively orphaned and, it seems, in the care of Frances.⁴² When she died in 1811, John was fourteen, after which the record falls silent.

William Whitton, also identified as an orphan in 1818,⁴³ was born in 1799 to First Fleet convict Edward Whitton and Ann Slater. Following Edward's death in 1802, his thirty-acre grant passed to Ann, who later married John Norman.⁴⁴ When Ann died in 1806, her two children—Mary Ann and William—were left effectively orphaned, and appear to have remained in Norman's care along with the family's landholding. Norman's death in 1818 removed this final layer of support. Yet a petition written by William in 1824 suggests that, despite the chain of care, continuity had been maintained: he described himself as in possession of fifteen acres of land which had been 'bequeathed to him by his Father', and noted that he had 'from early Youth been used to the pursuits of a Farmer.'⁴⁵ While the specific mechanisms of care remain unclear, the preservation of both livelihood and property suggests that informal arrangements could, at times, sustain not only the child but also the economic basis of future independence.

The other individuals identified in the 1818 land grant approval list include John McManus, who was born in 1797 to First Fleeters James McManus and Jane Poole.⁴⁶ He was described as an orphan despite the fact that his mother was still alive, once again indicating that paternal absence alone justified the term's usage. A similar pattern is evident in the case of Thomas Williams of Parramatta, who identified as an orphan after his father's death in 1803.⁴⁷ He was born in 1799, the son of Thomas Williams and Ann Davis (arrived 1790) and, with his sister, was raised by his mother and her partner, Simon Moulds. John Ryan, of Pitt Town was also allocated a grant of sixty-acres in 1818 on the grounds of being an orphan.⁴⁸ He experienced a more conventional trajectory

⁴⁰ IT appears from the nature of this list that petitions, now missing, were written explaining favourable circumstances favouring the allocation of the grant. Other comments included 'Has a large family', Came Free

⁴¹ John Cunningham, On list of persons to receive grants of land in 1818, 10 September 1818, SANSW, Fiche 3266; 9/2652, fo.45.

NSW Regsity of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Marriage of Bryan Cunningham and Catherine Baker, 1798, V1798427 3A.

⁴² Ibid., Death of Bryan Cunningham, 1802, V18021624 2A.

⁴³ William Whitton, Of Windsor. On list of persons to receive grants of land in 1818, op. cit.

⁴⁴ NSW Regsity of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Marriage of John Norman and Ann Slater, 1803, V1803547 3A.

⁴⁵ William Whitton, Of Wilberforce. Memorial, 31 July 1824, SANSW< Fiche 3116; 4/1840A, no. 1048, fo.241-2.

⁴⁶ John McManus, On list of persons to receive grants of land in 1818, op. cit.

NSW Regsity of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth of John McManus, son of James and Jane, 1797, V1797643 1A.

⁴⁷ Thomas Williams, On list of persons to receive grants of land in 1818, op. cit.

⁴⁸ John Ryan, op. cit.

of familial loss. Born in 1798 to First Fleeter John Ryan and his Second Fleet wife, Sarah Woolley, he lost his father by 1800 and his mother in 1809. Thereafter, he and his siblings appear to have been in the care of William Mason, his mother's second husband who, in October 1809, received a grant of forty-acres to be held in trust for Sarah's 'orphan children.'⁴⁹ The sixth and final individual, William Clarke, has not been definitively identified. None of these boys appears in any systematic register of care, nor is there evidence of official oversight of their upbringing. Instead, their early circumstances—and the networks that sustained them—are recoverable only through detailed family history reconstruction, pieced together from dispersed and incidental references. Their identification as orphans emerges not from dedicated records of child welfare, but from unrelated administrative processes such as land allocation. These cases therefore point to a broader absence within the colonial record: while orphanhood was recognised and could be mobilised for advantage, the early colony appears to have maintained no comprehensive system for recording or ensuring the care of such children. At the same time, they demonstrate that, through careful reconstruction, it is possible to recover aspects of these boys' lives and the informal networks that sustained them, offering a more grounded understanding of orphanhood in the pre-institutional period.

The elasticity of the meaning of orphanhood in the early colony is further illustrated in the case of William Christy [Christie], whose February 1810 memorial offers another instance of an individual explicitly defining himself in these terms. Christie was born in the colony in 1794 to First Fleeter John Summers and Jane Christie, who arrived in 1793. In his memorial, William described himself as having been 'left an Orphan at an Early Period' and 'Indebted to the Humanity of Others for Succour and Preservation.'⁵⁰ Yet his father did not die until 1820, indicating that, like John McManus and Thomas Williams, paternal absence was sufficient for William to understand himself as effectively orphaned. Central to this experience was his upbringing under the care of his guardian, William Aspinall. A second memorial, written circa 1823, records that William had been 'brought up with his guardian Mr William Aspinall [sic]...from his ninth year to the present,' and that his conduct had earned the 'Goodwill and protection of his guardian and others.'⁵¹ Aspinall, who had arrived in the colony in 1790 and formed a relationship with William's mother by 1803, assumed a sustained role in his upbringing. William's language conveys a strong sense of gratitude, reflecting not only awareness of dependence, but the extent to which such care was essential to survival. This case demonstrates both the flexibility of the term and the reliance of children on improvised networks of support.

The case of James Nockles, pre-dating the MOI, extends this analysis by revealing that orphanhood in early New South Wales was not solely a colonial phenomenon, but was also shaped by the movement of children within wider imperial networks. Arriving as an orphan aboard the *Almorah* in 1817, he had been retained on the vessel out of charity before the ship's master successfully applied for him to remain in the colony.⁵² His circumstances

⁴⁹ Flynn, *The Second Fleet: Britain's Grim Convict Armada of 1790*.

⁵⁰ William Christie, Memorial, February 1810, SANSW, Fiche 3002; 4/1821, fo.62.

⁵¹ William Christie, Memorial for land at Bathurst, circa 1823, SANSW, Fiche 3043; 4/1829 no. 53.

⁵² James Nockles, Orphan boy brought out per "Almorah". Permission sought for him to stay in Colony, 11, 13 October 1817, SANSW, Reel 6047; 4/1739, fo.260; Reel 6005; 4/3497, fo.96.

reflect the maritime character of New South Wales, where the movement of ships resulted in the circulation of dependants, and where responsibility for vulnerable children could shift across the empire.

A letter written in August 1810 by John Thomas Campbell, secretary to the governor, reveals a more convoluted case in which competing claims to the guardianship—and property—of an orphan were formally contested. It records that Ann Baker had died earlier that month, leaving a six-year-old son, Abraham, and a property at the Rocks.⁵³ Two men subsequently claimed the right to become the child's guardian and assume possession of Ann's estate. One of these claimants, Abraham Lee—a convict who had arrived aboard the Second Fleet—was the child's natural father and produced documentation showing his sale of the house at No. 105 The Rocks to Ann Baker for £14 in November 1804.⁵⁴ The second claimant, George Tilly, was acting as administrator of Ann Baker's estate. Both men submitted memorials outlining their claims; however, these documents have not survived. The matter was referred to the Bench of Magistrates, which awarded custody to Tilly and his wife. The decision is striking. Despite Lee's dual claim as both the child's father and the provider of the property, guardianship was not accorded to him. Instead, it was granted to Tilly, whose administrative position appears to have carried greater weight. Yet in the absence of the competing memorials, the reasoning behind this outcome remains obscure. What can be observed, however, is that paternal connection did not guarantee custodial rights, and that guardianship could be determined through discretionary processes. In this instance, the child's custody emerges not as a straightforward matter of kinship or welfare, but as the outcome of a contested and only partially recoverable legal negotiation.

The *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* also contains incidental references to orphaned children, offering brief glimpses into their circumstances. In 1808, for example, the orphan John Bowman was reported to have drowned while in the service of storekeeper William Baker of the Hawkesbury.⁵⁵ The notice indicates that, at approximately twelve years of age, Bowman was already engaged in labour within a private household, likely in exchange for his maintenance.

A further example is the *Gazette's* account of Elizabeth Mann, an orphan who died aged seventeen in 1806 'after a long and very painful illness' caused by 'the joint afflictions of insanity and a severe paralytic affection.'⁵⁶ The notice records that Mann had been in the care of Robert Sidaway (arrived 1788) and his partner Mary Marshall (arrived 1790), describing her as 'an unfortunate daughter of adversity' who, 'in the benevolence of a friend...found an asylum, a careful guardian, and an ample ministrations to her necessities, until it was the will of Heaven to terminate her sufferings.'⁵⁷ Born in 1789 to First Fleeters John Richardson Mann—later known as "Muffins" due to his job hawking fruit and cakes—and Mary Finn, Elizabeth was effectively orphaned following

⁵³ Abraham Baker, Son of Ann Baker, deceased; orphan. Re guardianship, 18 August 1810, SANSW, Reel 6002; 4/3490C, fo.161.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Flynn, *The Second Fleet: Britain's Grim Convict Armada of 1790*, 400.

⁵⁵ "Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser," (New South Wales : 1803–1842). 25 September 1808, p.1.

⁵⁶ "Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser." 5 October 1806, p.2.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

her mother's death in 1793.⁵⁸ Her father's circumstances, including poverty and the later care of a disabled partner, limited his capacity to support his children. The *Gazette's* language, while heavily inflected by contemporary zeal and sentiment, nevertheless points to the value of informal, privately assumed guardianship that was sustained and compassionate.

Before 1819, the placement of orphaned boys within private households was frequently structured through transactional arrangements, whereby their care was secured in exchange for the allocation of a full adult ration from the government store. Such arrangements aligned with broader provisioning practices in the early colony, in which rations functioned as a key instrument of labour management and social support.⁵⁹ By 30 June 1799, twelve orphaned children were being victualled and maintained within private homes in Sydney, six in Parramatta and 'Toongabbee' and five in the Hawkesbury.⁶⁰ By December of that year, those figures had increased, with sixteen children in Sydney, eight in the Parramatta district and six in the Hawkesbury.⁶¹ In September 1817, £3 5s was paid for the quarterly upkeep of orphan William Sleightford and £6 10s for two-quarters of upkeep for John Davis. The same two boys appear to have been supported over some time, with regular payments made for their maintenance.⁶² While no further details survive due to the scarcity of records, these payments point to a form of organised yet ad hoc provision for orphan boys in the years preceding the establishment of a dedicated institution—arrangements that, while structured, remained inherently fragile.

This fragility is evident in the case of six-year-old George Coleson, whose mother died in childbirth in May 1818 and whose father subsequently departed the colony. Placed in the care of Jane Dew, George initially remained within informal networks of support. However, when Dew's husband died in 1821, she herself was described as 'an object of charity,' her own destitution precipitating George's admission to the MOI in January 1822.⁶³ Informal care, while often compassionate, therefore remained vulnerable to the same societal shocks that destabilised biological families.

The case of eight-year-old John Pounds further illustrates the instability of informal care. Admitted to the MOI in January 1819, he was recorded simply as the son of 'McCarty and Pounds, Father left the Colony Mother dead, The boy with the Widow Shrieves, poor.'⁶⁴ This record, which preserves the surname of John's parents but not their Christian names, encapsulates the archive's indifference to personal identity even as it records institutional custody. John's father, John McCarthy, was a soldier who departed the colony with his regiment;⁶⁵ his mother,

⁵⁸ Mollie Gillen, *The Founders of Australia* (Sydney, NSW: Library of Australian History, 1989), 126-7; 306-7.

⁵⁹ Hunter, *Governor Hunter's remarks on the causes of the colonial expense of the establishment of New South Wales.*, 70.

⁶⁰ State of the Settlements at Sydney, Parramatta etc. In *Historical Records of New South Wales. Hunter 1796–1799.*, ed. F.M. Bladen, vol. 3 (Charles Potter, Government Printer, 1895), 684.

⁶¹ State of the Settlements in Sydney, Parramatta etc. in New South Wales, 31st december, 1799. In *Historical Records of New South Wales. Hunter 1796–1799.*, 3, 749.

⁶² Payment from Female Orphan Institution Fund for John Davis and William Sleightford, 22 November 1817 to 28 November 1818, SANSW, Reel 6038; SZ759; fo.416,446,482,530.

⁶³ Jane Dew, Object of charity, 8 September 1821, SANSW, Reel 6016; 4/5781 p.69

⁶⁴ John Pounds, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 1 January 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, FO. 1–2.

⁶⁵ Pamela Statham, *A Colonial Regiment. New Sources relating to the New South Wales Corps, 1789–1810* (Canberra, ACT: Central Printery, ANU, 1992), 312.

Frances Pounds, was a convict transported for life in 1801.⁶⁶ When she died in July 1816 John was left an orphan at the age of six.⁶⁷ Prior to his admission to the MOI, John was in the care of Ann Shrieves (née Chapman), an emancipated convict and washerwoman widowed in 1817. Ann's employment as a washerwoman entailed long hours of physically demanding labour for very modest pay.⁶⁸ Often undertaken within the home, washing was a skill transmitted through female family and community networks and provided one of the few means by which women with limited economic opportunities could support themselves and their children.⁶⁹ Terri Rolfson characterises this work as being repetitive, arduous, labour-intensive and poorly paid, describing it as 'the epitome of gendered labour.'⁷⁰ Among the women whose sons or dependants entered the MOI, washerwomen comprised the largest occupational group, accounting for 16 percent.⁷¹ A further 7 percent were employed in the Female Factory, 7 percent were sempstresses, 5 percent were in service, 4 percent were bakers, and smaller numbers were landholders and dealers. Individual cases also included a publican, fisherwoman, blacksmith, nurse and shoemaker.

Although Ann Shrieves's guardianship entitled her to a government ration, she was nevertheless described as poor and may also have been in declining health. She died in 1820, aged forty-five.⁷² Ann Shrieves's circumstances highlight the limits of informal care. As a widowed washerwoman reliant on physically demanding and poorly paid labour, even the additional support of a government ration was insufficient to secure stability. Her guardianship of John did not remove him from conditions of precarity, but instead extended those pressures into another household similarly shaped by poverty and economic necessity. In this context, John's admission reflects the inability of even compassionate and subsidised guardianship to withstand the cumulative demands of survival in the colony.

James Scott aged seven was also admitted to the MOI by a guardian, Thomas Matcham Pitt. The recommendation for admission states:

A very nice boy but small for his age. Is quite destitute and a real object of charity. His mother died on her passage to this Country from Scotland following her husband who is a prisoner and the Father is recently sent to the Coal River for thieving.⁷³

⁶⁶ Carol J. Baxter, *Musters of New South Wales and Norfolk Island 1805–1806* (Netley, S.A.: Society of Australian Genealogists, 1989), 86. The census lists Frances Pounds as arriving on the vessel Earl Cornwallis, a prisoner with a Ticket of Leave, residing with John McCarthy, soldier.

⁶⁷ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Death of Francis Pounds, 1816, V18163615 2B, aged 43.

⁶⁸ Karen Laughton, "Children and Empire: The Institutionalisation of Children and British Colonisation in New South Wales, 1750–1828" (Phd Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia, 2017), 160.

⁶⁹ Terri Gibb Rolfson, "Women and the Labour of Laundry in the English Eighteenth Century" (Master of Arts University of Alberta, 2021), 123.

Rolfson, "Women and the Labour of Laundry in the English Eighteenth Century," 123.

⁷⁰ Rolfson, "Women and the Labour of Laundry in the English Eighteenth Century," 123.

⁷¹ Tanya Evans observes that many poor unmarried women in Sydney worked as domestic servants during the later period (1825–1833). In contrast, only 5 percent of the mothers identified in this study (1819–1825) were employed in domestic service.

Evans, *Fractured families: Life on the margins in colonial New South Wales*, 87.

⁷² NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Death of Ann Shrieves, 1820, V18204741 2B.

⁷³ James Scott, Mother dead, father at Coal River. Recommended for the new orphan school, SANSW, Reel 6047; 4/1740, fo. 253-4.

James was the son of James Scott senior, transported for life in 1815, and Johanna (Joan) Lawson, who followed her husband to the colony with their three children: James(3), Margaret (11), and William (16).⁷⁴ The family's attempted reunification ended abruptly when Johanna died aboard ship in October 1816, leaving the children motherless.⁷⁵ Following their father's secondary transportation to Newcastle in June 1818, the children entered the household of Thomas Matcham Pitt and his wife Elizabeth.⁷⁶ Crucially, it was only James who was admitted to the MOI on 1 January 1819. Margaret and William Scott remained with the Pitts, even after Thomas Matcham Pitt's death in January 1821. By 1822, William was employed as a labourer and Margaret as a servant, their earning capacity likely securing their continued place within the household.⁷⁷ James, by contrast, was too young to contribute economically and therefore more vulnerable to institutional placement. His admission reflects, not only the selective displacement of the youngest and least economically viable child, but that informal care could itself destabilise already fragile family structures.

Against the pattern of fragile and often unsuccessful guardianship arrangements, one case stands apart: a boy who formed such a close bond with his guardians that he adopted their surname and was, in effect, absorbed into the household as a son rather than a dependent. Edward Travers Mortimer, born in April 1809 to William Travers and Elizabeth Davis, lost both parents as a baby and was taken into the care of William Mortimer and his partner Sarah Webb. By the time of his birth registration in 1809, he already bore the middle name 'Mortimer,' reflecting his integration into their household.⁷⁸ Mortimer and Webb, who had no children of their own, cared for Edward until his admission to the MOI, and by 1820 he had been released back into their care.⁷⁹ Significantly, the discharge record refers to Mortimer as the boy's father, suggesting that the relationship had evolved beyond temporary guardianship and effectively become a familial bond.

Early provision of care often extended beyond biological parents to encompass grandparents, step-parents and blended households. James Flood's admission to the MOI in January 1819 followed the deaths of his father, Joseph Flood in 1808, and his mother, Ann Gorman in 1814.⁸⁰ Yet the brief notation in the admission records that his 'parents [were] both dead' and that he was 'with Patrick Caffrey, a poor man,'⁸¹ obscures the complex

⁷⁴ There is some debate that Joan Lawson was James Scott junior's mother, however my research indicates that it is probable, given the MOI admission notes and reference to her death and children on board the Surry.

⁷⁵ "Johanna Lawson, died 1816," Australian Royalty. A family tree of colonial Australians., accessed 9 December 2025, <https://australianroyalty.net.au/tree/purnellmccord.ged/individual/X21808/Johanna-Lawson>. The log of the vessel Surry reads: 'Remarks on Sunday 20th October: At 2¼ am Mrs Joan Scott, Passenger, departed this Life after a short illness leaving three small children on board.' The reference is Mitchell Library CY 113.

⁷⁶ Sadly, Thomas Matcham Pitt died in 1821, and in a twist, his wife Elizabeth married William Scott who had worked as a property overseer for the Pitt family. <https://marymatchampitt.wordpress.com/thomas-pitt-and-family/>

⁷⁷ "William Scott," The Mary Matcham Pitt family history website, 2017, accessed 19 February, 2026, <https://marymatchampitt.wordpress.com/thomas-pitt-and-family/george-matcham-pitt/william-scott/>.

⁷⁸ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth for Edward M. Davis, 1809, V18092493 1A.

⁷⁹ Edward Travers Mortimer, Admitted to the Male Orphan School; William Mortimer his father, 1 January 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7298, fo.3–4.

Edward Travers Mortimer, Taken home at his father's request, 22 September 1820, op. cit.

⁸⁰ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Death of Joseph Flood, 1808, V18082324 2A.

Op. cit., Death of Ann Gorman, 1814, 277/1814 V1814287 7.

⁸¹ James Flood (junior), Recommended for the Male Orphan Institution, 11 August 1818, SANSW, Reel 6047; 4/1740, fo. 257–258.

domestic history preceding his removal. Ann Gorman had arrived in the colony in February 1796 with her newborn son William, born at sea in December 1795 to her Irish partner William Quinn.⁸² Lacking family support and secure employment, she formed a de facto relationship with fellow convict Joseph Flood. Their first child was born in 1797, followed by four more before Joseph's death in 1808, the same year that James was born.⁸³ Ann subsequently partnered with Patrick Caffrey, who fathered two further children—Catherine in 1810 and Hugh in 1813—before Ann's death in 1814.⁸⁴ By the time of James's admission, Caffrey, a waterman residing in King Street, Sydney,⁸⁵ was responsible for a household that included his own young children, a stepdaughter, and stepsons ranging from infancy to early adulthood.⁸⁶ Nowhere do the MOI records acknowledge Caffrey as James's stepfather, nor do they hint at the layered kinship structure into which James had been born. This archival silence obscures the extended familial networks and economic pressures that shaped James's admission. Rather than reflecting simple orphanhood, his institutionalisation emerged from the cumulative strain placed upon an already composite and fragile family.

In May 1824, seven-year-old David Parker was proposed for admission to the MOI. David was in the care of his grandmother, First Fleeter Hannah Smith of Richmond.⁸⁷ The son of Hannah's daughter Harriet and her husband Stephen Parker, David was born in February 1817 at Richmond.⁸⁸ Both he and his sister Sophia were proposed for the orphan schools, possibly in response to Hannah's declining health; she was approximately sixty-two at the time and died two years later in 1826. Stephen Parker had died in 1822 in a boating accident—an inquest noting that a boy, possibly David, had survived.⁸⁹ It appears that soon after Stephen's death, Harriet formed a relationship with John Deaves, and relinquished her children into Hannah's care. Notably however, there is no record of David's admission to the MOI, and his subsequent arrangements for care, particularly following his grandmother's death, remain unknown.

William London was admitted in the MOI's first intake in January 1819 by his step-father, Maurice Halligan.⁹⁰ William's father, Patrick John London, a soldier, died in 1810, soon after the family's arrival.⁹¹ William's mother subsequently formed a relationship with Halligan, and the three resided in the Parramatta district until Sarah's death circa 1818. In July 1818, Halligan—effectively the only father William had known—applied for his

⁸² Ann Gorman, BDA on-line, accessed 15 February 2026

⁸³ James Flood, *Find a Grave*. Find a Grave®

https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/256948037/james-flood?_gl=1*1c8cbj7*_gcl_au*MTIzNDE2NzcwMTc3MjkyODMyMQ..*_ga*MTAyODk5MzU0LjE3NDg4NDA0NTU.*_ga_4QT8FMEX30*cZrIODA3ODQwLTRIMTMtNDhINi04ZGE1LTg2NGZkMjFINDk5ZiRvMjQ2JGcxJHQxNzc2MzE1MTE1JGoyMCRsMCRoMA..*_ga_4RKCQD74Y*cZrIODA3ODQwLTRIMTMtNDhINi04ZGE1LTg2NGZkMjFINDk5ZiRvNjEwJGcxJHQxNzc2MzE1MTE1JGoyMCRsMCRoMA..

⁸⁴ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Death of Ann Flood, 1814, V18143254 2A, aged 36.

⁸⁵ James Flood (junior), Admitted to the Male Orphan School; Hugh Cafray his parent/guardian, January 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo. 3–4.

⁸⁶ It must be noted that in 1820 Caffrey applied to the MOI for the admission of another child (unnamed). That application was deemed inadmissible. Ref: Patrick Caffrey, Memorial re admission to the Male Orphan Institution deemed inadmissible, 12 April 1820, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo. 16.

⁸⁷ David Parker received into the Male Orphan School, 1 May 1824, SANSW, Reel 6031; 4/3511, fo. 51.

⁸⁸ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth of David Edward Parker, 1817, V18174097 1BV.

⁸⁹ "Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser." 30 August 1822, p.2.

⁹⁰ William London, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 1 January 1819, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo. 3–4.

⁹¹ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Death of John London, 1810, V18102486 2A.

admission to the MOI and, three months later, Halligan married Margaret Rowe.⁹² This remarriage, occurring so soon after Sarah's death, reshaped the household into which William had been anchored, rendering institutional placement both a recalibration and a significant emotional rupture. William's subsequent absconding from the institution in October 1823, and the flogging he received as a result, suggests that this placement may have been both difficult and deeply distressing.⁹³

John Wilkinson was admitted to the MOI in January 1819 by Ann Foulcher.⁹⁴ Born in August 1810, he was the son of John Wilkinson and his partner, Sarah, whose surname is obscured by the shifting family relationships that characterized John's early life.⁹⁵ It is likely that Sarah died when John was still very young. Wilkinson senior remarried in 1815 and, upon his death in 1818, John came under the care of his stepmother, Ann Downs Wilkinson.⁹⁶ In July 1818, Ann married Robert Foulcher and, the following year, arranged John's admission to the MOI.⁹⁷ Seven years later, on 30 August 1826, John was released back into the care of the Foulchers after Robert petitioned for the return of 'our Boy for the purpose of his Father teaching him his Business of a Blacksmith'.⁹⁸ The language of the petition suggests continuity, given that John was reclaimed and reintegrated into a reconstituted household. John's childhood, like that of other boys enrolled in the MOI, unfolded through successive layers of guardianship—biological parents, stepmother, stepfather, and institutional care—each reflecting adaptation to bereavement and remarriage within a fragile domestic economy. His admission to the MOI resulted from cumulative familial transition rather than abandonment, with institutional care functioning as one stage in an ongoing chain of responsibility.

Timothy Diggen's narrative further illustrates both the invisibility and variability of pre-institutional orphan care. He was admitted to the MOI in April 1819, yet by that date he had already been orphaned for nearly five years. The admission register records no enrolling parent or guardian and lists the parents simply as 'none', creating the impression of a child entirely alone, severed from all familial and social ties.⁹⁹ In fact, Timothy was the son of John and Margaret Diggen, who came free in 1809 when John arrived with the 73rd Regiment. Two daughters were born in the colony before Margaret died in November 1813 aged twenty-six.¹⁰⁰ John died at Windsor the following year aged thirty, leaving three children without parents.¹⁰¹ The surviving record is silent as to who cared for the Diggen children between 1814 and their eventual admission to the orphan schools—Timothy to the MOI in April 1819 and his sisters to the Female Orphan School by 1822.¹⁰² That silence is itself revealing. For five years, Timothy must have been maintained within some form of informal arrangement—whether through neighbours, military associates, or district provision—yet no documentation survives to record the nature of

⁹² Op. cit., Marriage of Maurice Halligan and Margaret Rowe, 1818, 2277/1818 V18182277 3A.

⁹³ William London, Resident at Male Orphan Institution. Absconded and flogged, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo.60.

⁹⁴ John Wilkinson, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 1 January 1819, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo. 1-2.

⁹⁵ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth of John Wilkinson, 1810, V18102243 1A.

⁹⁶ Ibid., Marriage for John Wilkinson and Ann Downs, 1815, V1815717 147B.

⁹⁷ John Wilkinson, Admitted to the Male Orphan School; op. cit.

⁹⁸ John Wilkinson, Request for Release, 30 August 1826, SANSW, Series: NRS 783; 4/333; Roll 2776, fo.91.

⁹⁹ Timothy Diggen, Admitted to Male Orphan School, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.3-4.

¹⁰⁰ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Death of Margaret Diggen, 1813, V18133093 2A

¹⁰¹ Op. cit., Death of John Diggin, 1814, V18143229 2A

¹⁰² Carol J. Baxter, *General Muster and Land and Stock Muster of New South Wales 1822* (ABGR, 1988), 133.

that care. His case exemplifies the largely unrecorded domestic absorption of orphaned children prior to institutional provision. The absence of documentation renders the scale of such informal care unknowable and highlights the need for a more formalised system for orphan boys.

Timothy's subsequent story also demonstrates that orphanhood was mediated through parental status. His stay at the MOI was brief; by September 1819 he was noted as 'Taken to Government House', though no explanation is recorded for the reason for this transfer or its duration.¹⁰³ In September 1821, when approximately thirteen years of age, he received a grant of 100-acres, annotated 'Parramatta. An orphan. Has some Stock and is son of an old soldier' and in 19 January 1822, Timothy was allocated a cow 'in consideration of him being an orphan boy and the son of an old soldier.'¹⁰⁴ These indulgences indicate that his father's military affiliation conferred a measure of state patronage. Diggen was therefore both typical and exceptional: typical in that his early orphanhood was absorbed into undocumented domestic arrangements, exceptional in that his father's imperial service later shaped his treatment.

In the absence of formal welfare structures, communities occasionally responded through acts of collective charity. In October 1803, for example, the goods of Elizabeth Faulconer were auctioned for the benefit of her orphaned infant, whose father had already departed the colony. Contemporary reports noted that the inhabitants purchased the items 'at considerably more than their value', raising nearly £64—an act of communal support that, while generous, remained ad hoc and contingent.¹⁰⁵ Beyond this moment of intervention, however, the record falls silent. No further references to Elizabeth or to the subsequent circumstances of her children have been identified, leaving their care and outcomes unknown. This absence is itself significant, underscoring both the episodic nature of such charitable responses and the lack of any sustained or systematic provision for orphaned children in the early colony at this time.

Taken together, these cases illustrate the complexity and instability of informal care arrangements. Children were commonly sustained within extended, improvised, and often subsidised networks of care—guardians, grandparents, step-parents, neighbours, and employers absorbing responsibility where biological parents could not. Such systems relied heavily upon personal relationships and the willingness of individuals to absorb additional dependants within already fragile domestic economies. Yet these arrangements were inherently precarious. Illness, death, mobility, and economic instability could rapidly dissolve such support structures, leaving children once again exposed to hardship. The fragmentary nature of the surviving records further obscures the full extent of these arrangements, reminding us that much of this early care operated beyond the formal structures of colonial administration.

¹⁰³ Timothy Diggen, Taken to Government House, SANSW, Riche 3307; 4/7208, fo.4. It is possible that Timothy acted as a servant in the governor's household.

¹⁰⁴ Timothy Diggen, On list of persons to receive grants of land in 1821, SANSW, Fiche 3266; 9/2652, fo. 68, 73.

Timothy Diggen, Cow issued to Diggin from Government Stock as orphan son of old soldier, SANSW, Reel 6033; X827, fo.35)

¹⁰⁵ "Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser." 16 October, 1803, p.4.

Establishing the Male Orphan Institution:

Informal provisioning therefore formed an essential but unstable foundation of early colonial child relief. The establishment of the Male Orphan Institution did not eliminate these arrangements but instead operated alongside them within a broader ecology of negotiated care. When the Male Orphan School opened in January 1819, it did so in premises previously occupied by the Female Orphan School (FOS). Likewise, the MOI was funded from one eighth of the monies 'set apart for the support of the Female Orphan Institution' with the aim of the 'furtherance of the benevolent Objects of these Institutions by extending Education, free of Expence [sic], to the poorer classes of this Community'.¹⁰⁶

In July 1818, Governor Macquarie circulated a request to clergy and magistrates, notifying them that a total of thirty boys would form the initial intake, and asking them to identify 'eligible objects' from their districts—'such boys...as may appear best entitled to be maintained and educated at the public expense.'¹⁰⁷ Guidelines for admission specified that 'no Boy will be admitted under 7 nor above 10 Years of Age or who has one Parent living and be able to support him.'¹⁰⁸ Robert Lowe replied that there were no orphans in the districts of Bringelly or Cooke requiring admission.¹⁰⁹ Responses from the Sydney, Hawkesbury River and Liverpool districts survive and provide rich insight into the backgrounds of the thirty-two boys proposed for the initial intake. These 1818 recommendations constitute the only substantial contextual evidence preserved for the boys admitted.

The nine Hawkesbury recommendations are particularly detailed. James Scott, for example, was described as aged six: 'Mother dead, father sent to the Coal River. A very nice boy but small for his age. Is quite destitute and a real object of charity. His mother died on her passage to this Country from Scotland following her husband who is a prisoner and the Father is recently sent to the Coal River for thieving'.¹¹⁰ Matthew Ralph was recorded as the son of Luke Ralph: 'Mother dead. Small for his age. Can tell his Letters. The Father a very old Man with 3 children off the Store, is a good parent & bring up his Children orderly & regular to Church.'¹¹¹

By the time admissions occurred some six months later, it was not seven-year-old Matthew Ralph who entered the institution, but his ten-year-old brother Christopher. The surviving record thus reveals that selection operated with discretionary flexibility. Luke Ralph—described as "a very old Man"—was in fact fifty-six at the time of his son's admission. A former soldier who had arrived in 1801 and later served in the Invalid Company,

¹⁰⁶ Fund appropriated for the Female Orphan Institution also to cover the Male Orphan Institution, 27 February 1819, SANSW, Reel 6048; 4/1742, fo.165-6.

¹⁰⁷ Circular re the establishment of Male Orphan Institution and requesting eligible candidates, 13 July 1818, SANSW, Reel 6006; 4/3498, fo.298-9. Whilst acknowledging differences in the administrative language of the period, the description of boys as 'eligible objects' nevertheless reveals a somewhat impersonal approach to child welfare.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Robert Lowe stating there are no orphans in districts of Bringelly and Cooke for admission to the Male Orphan Institution, 24 July 1818, SANSW, Reel 6047; 4/1740, fo.256.

¹¹⁰ James Scott, Recommended for the new orphan school, 25 July 1818, SANSW, Reel 6047; 4/1740, fo. 253-4.

¹¹¹ Ibid., Matthew Ralph.

he had fathered five children with his wife Mary before her death in 1813, possibly in childbirth.¹¹² The recommendations capture a moment of assessment; the admission register records only the outcome.

Sydney 11 August 1818.

*List of children proposed for admission into the Male Orphan House at Sydney
according to the tenor of the Secretary Campbell's circular, dated 13 July 1818.*

No.	Names of Children	Ages	Names of Parents	Present Residence	Remarks
1	James Flood	10 yrs	Joseph and Ann Flood	Parents both dead	He is with Sir Jeffrey, a poor man.
2	John Bourne	8 yrs	Mr. Carly and Bourne	Father left the colony, mother dead.	He is with Sir Jeffrey, a poor man.
3	John Murray	10 yrs	John Murray and Mary Campbell	Parents both dead	He is with Sir Jeffrey, a poor man.
4	John Green	7 yrs	Thomas and Catherine Green	Father dead, mother in Sydney, but very poor.	
5	Thomas Bowman	7 yrs	Thomas Bowman & Catherine Green	Father dead, mother in Sydney, but very poor.	
6	Henry Logan	7 yrs	Henry and Logan	Father dead, mother in Sydney, but very poor.	
7	James Chapman	8 yrs	William and Ann Chapman	Father dead, mother in Sydney, but very poor.	
8	James Horner	6 yrs	Richard and Mary Horner	Father dead, mother in Sydney, but very poor.	
9	Thomas Anderson	7 yrs	Robert and Mary Anderson	Father dead, mother in Sydney, but very poor.	
10	James Lees	6 yrs	Thomas and Emma Lees	Father dead, mother in Sydney, but very poor.	
11	George Smith	6 yrs	Thomas and Esther Smith	Father dead, mother in Sydney, but very poor.	
12	John Eddington	7 yrs	John and Grace Eddington	Father dead, mother in Sydney, but very poor.	
13	John Bailey	7 yrs	John and Elizabeth Bailey	Father dead, mother in Sydney, but very poor.	
14	Thomas Dawsey	8 yrs	Thomas Dawsey & Mary Butler	Father left the colony, mother dead.	He is in the Hospital.

William Campbell

John Thomas Campbell Esq. Secy. to the

Image 2: The list of children proposed for admission into the Male Orphan House at Sydney, 13 July 1818. ¹¹³

By the 1st January 1819, the thirty-two initial recommendations had been supplemented, bringing the first intake to a total of forty boys. A letter written in December 1818 by the governor's secretary to those responsible for nominating suitable candidates for enrolment requested that the boys be dispatched in time to arrive at Charlotte Square, Sydney on New Year's Day. The intake comprised of fourteen boys from Sydney, eight from Parramatta and nine each from the Hawkesbury and Liverpool, all to be placed in the Public School House under the supervision of the appointed master, Thomas Bowden.¹¹⁴ Bowden (1778–1834), an experienced schoolmaster and committed Methodist, had arrived in New South Wales in 1812, where he quickly established a reputation for efficiency and religious zeal in the colony's charity schools. In 1818 he was commissioned to design the framework for a male orphan institution, proposing a practical system that included apprenticeship

¹¹² NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Death of Mary Ralph, 1813, V18132982 2A

¹¹³ A list of children proposed for admission into the Orphan House at Sydney, 13 July 1818, Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Thomas Bowden, Re delivery of orphans to school, Charlotte Square, 19 December 1818, SANSW, Reel 6006; 4/3499, fo.212.

for older boys. Appointed master, Bowden opened the Male Orphan Institution on a salary of £100, with both his scheme and administration receiving official commendation and a bonus payment the following year.¹¹⁵

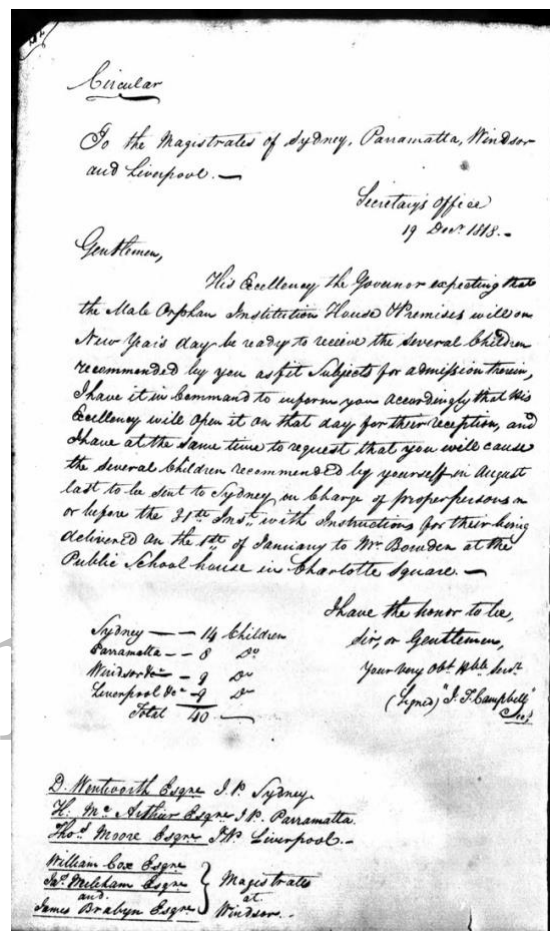


Image: 1 Letter from the Governor's secretary with instructions concerning the delivery of orphans to the Public School House on 1 January 1819.¹¹⁶

Four of the thirty-two recommended boys were not among those admitted when the institution opened in January 1819. Seven-year-old Matthew Ralph was referred but, as detailed above, it was his brother Christopher who was enrolled in his stead.¹¹⁷ Thomas Warrington was referred but did not enroll until April 1819. Also absent from the enrolments was ten-year-old John Murray, the son of John Murray and Mary Campbell, both deceased. At the time of his referral in 1818, John was living with 'Dennis McAnally', almost certainly Dennis McNeary.¹¹⁸ In 1820, McNeary memorialised Governor Macquarie for a land grant 'for the future subsistence of himself, wife and an Orphan Boy', indicating that Murray remained in his guardian's care.¹¹⁹ The 1818 recommendation for Murray's admission stands as the sole explicit acknowledgment of the McNeary's role as guardians and, as

¹¹⁵ V.W.E. Goodin, 'Bowden, Thomas (1778–1834)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, ANU, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/bowden-thomas-1809>, published first in hardcopy 1966, accessed online 28 April 2026.

¹¹⁶ Thomas Bowden, Re delivery of orphans to school, Charlotte Square, op. cit.

¹¹⁷ Matthew Ralph, Ibid.

¹¹⁸ John Murray, son of John Murray and Mary Campbell, in care of Denis McAnally, recommended for admission to Male Orphan Institution, 11 August 1818, SANSW, Reel 6047; 4/1740, fo. 257–8.

¹¹⁹ Dennis McNeary, Memorial, 1820, SANSW, Fiche 3027; 4/1825A, no. 561, fo. 213–214.

neither McNeary nor his partner, Mary McGowan, had colonial-born children, the surviving genealogical record offers little trace of them. This absence highlights the extent to which informal guardianship arrangements—despite their practical significance—were easily effaced within the colonial archive.

John Bailey, a twin, was referred because his father, John Eastwood, had died in May 1811.¹²⁰ His mother, Elizabeth Bailey, gave birth to the twins, John and Elizabeth, five months later.¹²¹ His referral for admission states that 'Mother in Sydney, but extremely poor.'¹²² By the time John was referred to the MOI, Elizabeth was in a relationship with John Welch and had two of his children. It is possible that, while Welch initially refused to parent John, this decision was reversed, for by the 1822 census the family is living together in Parramatta with Elizabeth's then seven children all referred to equally.¹²³

Rules of Admission:

Fey was admitted to the MOI, his mother Elizabeth was still alive. As demonstrated throughout the preceding examples of boys identified as orphans in the pre-institutional period, orphanhood in early New South Wales did not depend on the loss of both parents. Under common law, an orphan was formally understood as a child who was fatherless.¹²⁴ In practice, however, the MOI applied this definition with considerable flexibility, admitting children whose fathers were living as well as those who retained both parents. This distinction is significant given the prevalence of one-parent households during the period under study, and underscores the extent to which orphanhood functioned as an administrative category shaped by circumstance rather than strict legal definition.

Bubacz's research identified only 3 percent of children (1801–1833) as having one surviving parent at the time of admission.¹²⁵ In contrast, analysis of admissions to the Male Orphan Institution between 1819 and 1825 reveals that sixty-eight children (63.5%) had one living parent, including sixty-one with living mothers and seven with living fathers. This suggests that the institutionalisation of children in early New South Wales frequently occurred despite the continued presence of a parent. More significantly, it demonstrates how the reconstruction of individual family histories can reveal household structures that remain invisible within institutional records and are therefore absent from statistical analyses derived solely from those sources.

Children were typically admitted when they were deemed not to be appropriately 'maintained', or had been 'forsaken' by a living parent or parents.¹²⁶ In practice, destitution, illness, or the death of a parent were the most

¹²⁰ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Death of John Eastwood aged 46, V18112662 2A.

¹²¹ Op. cit., Birth of John Eastwood, 1811, V18112608 1A; Birth of Elizabeth Eastwood, 1811, V18112609 1A.

¹²² John Bailey, Ibid.

¹²³ Baxter, *General Muster and Land and Stock Muster of New South Wales 1822*, 22. (listed under the surname Barclay)

¹²⁴ Dianne Snow, "Family policy and orphan schools in early colonial Australia," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 22, no. 2 (1991): 262.

¹²⁵ Bubacz, "The female and male orphan schools in New South Wales 1801-1850," 195.

¹²⁶ Constitution and Minutes including the Rules and Regulations of the Male Orphan Institution, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, Short, 1-10.

common circumstances precipitating admission. The aim of the MOI, as stated in its constitution, was to offer assistance to 'poor unprotected Male Orphan Children...', indicating that it was the welfare of the child, rather than the death or absence of parents, that guided enrolment.¹²⁷ Admission guidelines stated that:

...no Child shall be received into the Institution who has both his Parents alive, or even one Parent capable of maintaining him, but, if it can be made properly clear to the satisfaction of the Committee that such surviving Parent does not possess the means of Maintaining his or her child, it shall be considered eligible for admission, and in particular cases of Male children being entirely forsaken and left by destitute by their unnatural Parents,¹²⁸ even when both may be alive.¹²⁹

These rules were, however, not consistently adhered to, nor were the age guidelines, which stated that:

No Child under seven, nor exceeding ten years of Age, shall be eligible for the Institution, nor be kept there after attaining the Age of fifteen years, at which time they are to be Apprenticed out to properly Qualified, sober, industrious Mechanics ...¹³⁰

Nicholas Creagan, who was amongst the very first intake of boys admitted to the newly opened MOI on 1st January 1819, was just four years of age. Admitted alongside his six-year-old brother Edward, the recommendation for admission recorded: 'Father's name Nicholas Creagan, dead. Mother's name Mary Creagan. Has 2 children in Distress and unable to support them.'¹³¹ Mary Creagan, or Kitty as she was known, worked as a washerwoman in an attempt to maintain her family, but was ultimately forced to seek charitable assistance and have her sons admitted to the orphanage.¹³²

Nicholas was not alone in entering the institution at such a young age. Thomas Williams, also aged four, was admitted in April 1822 after his mother, Ann, lost her 'loving husband' and 'tender father' of their six children, leaving her unable to support a household ranging in age from fourteen to two.¹³³ John Jones, aged four, was admitted in December 1823 with his nine-year-old brother James. Their sister, who had been caring for her younger siblings, was listed as their guardian.¹³⁴ James Murray, likewise aged four, entered the institution with brothers aged six and seven when both parents were declared insane.¹³⁵ In addition, seven boys aged five were admitted during the period under study. Together these cases demonstrate that, from the institution's earliest

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ It must be noted that an unnatural parent was one who went against the expected norms of parental affection and responsibility. This term was often applied to parents from the convict orders by those who regarded their well-established social norms as neglectful.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Note that it was Michael and Edward Cregan recommended for admission. Michael and Edward Cregan, Recommended for the new orphan school; as Cragan, Reel 6047; 4/1740, fo.255

¹³² Nicholas Creagan, Admitted to the Male Orphan School; Kitty Creagan his parent/guardian, 1 January 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.3-4.

¹³³ Thomas Williams, Admitted to the Male Orphan School; Ann Williams his parent/guardian, 28 November 1823, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.9-10.

"Barnard Williams, 1780-1822," Australian Royalty. A family tree of colonial Australians., accessed 8 November, 2025, <https://australianroyalty.net.au/tree/purnellmccord.ged/individual/16932/Barnard-Williams>

¹³⁴ John and James Jones, Admitted to the Male Orphan School; Mary Jones their parent/guardian, 1 January 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.3-4.

¹³⁵ William, Henry and James Murray, op. cit, 22 October 1823, fo. 9-10.

intake, the nominal age regulations were frequently overridden by necessity. The admission guidelines themselves acknowledged the challenges, noting that 'As it may happen occasionally that young Male Children may be left destitute by their unnatural Parents, under seven years of Age, such Children are also to be taken under the protection of the Institution...and put out to Nurse if too young to be taken into the Institution itself.'¹³⁶

These admissions were typically initiated through a petition submitted to the Committee:

stating the Grounds on which such Indulgence is solicited, specifying in the said Petition the Name and Age of the child and the Names of the Parents, together with Name and place of Residence of the Person who has then charge of such orphan...¹³⁷

Petitions were frequently refused. At the committee's second meeting of 1 September 1819, nine applications were either refused or deferred. In the absence of the original petitions—and the archival silences this produces—it is often impossible to determine the criteria by such decisions were made. What does become apparent, however, is how readily families' often desperate circumstances were reduced to short, sharp administrative notations. The curt notation '*Elizabeth Peake's application – not approved*' effectively effaces the circumstances of her recent widowhood.¹³⁸ Following the death of her husband John in May 1819, Elizabeth was left to support two young children, Robert (b. 1815) and Elizabeth (b. 1816), while heavily pregnant with a third (Sarah b. 1819)—circumstances rendered invisible in the official record-keeping. Her situation was further compounded by her youth. Elizabeth Alcock had married at thirteen and was widowed at twenty-two, with little prospect of independent subsistence.¹³⁹ Her repeated applications for her son's admission suggest an increasingly urgent attempt to secure institutional support at a moment of acute vulnerability. That her renewed request, considered on 10 January 1821, was deferred to the 'Magistrate or Chaplain at Parramatta' accentuates the extent to which maternal distress was subjected to external moral and administrative scrutiny before assistance might be granted.¹⁴⁰ High levels of rejection were also evident in the meeting of 12 April 1820, when another nine applications for admission were 'received, read, and deemed inadmissible according to the Rules of the Institution.'¹⁴¹ They are listed according to the name of the applicant with no details or reason for dismissal.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Constitution and Minutes of the Male Orphan Institution, 1 January 1819, fo.4.

¹³⁸ Elizabeth Peake, Application to the Male Orphan Institution not approved, 1 September 1819, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo.13.

¹³⁹ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Marriage of John Peake and Elizabeth Alcock, 1811, V1811506 147A.

Ibid., Birth of Elizabeth Alcock, 1797, V1797650 1A, daughter of Robert Alcock and Sarah Beecham.

¹⁴⁰ Elizabeth Peake, Petition to Male Orphan School read & referred to magistrate or chaplain at Parramatta, 10 January 1821, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo. 26.

¹⁴¹ Minutes of the Male Orphan Institution, 12 April 1820, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo. 16.

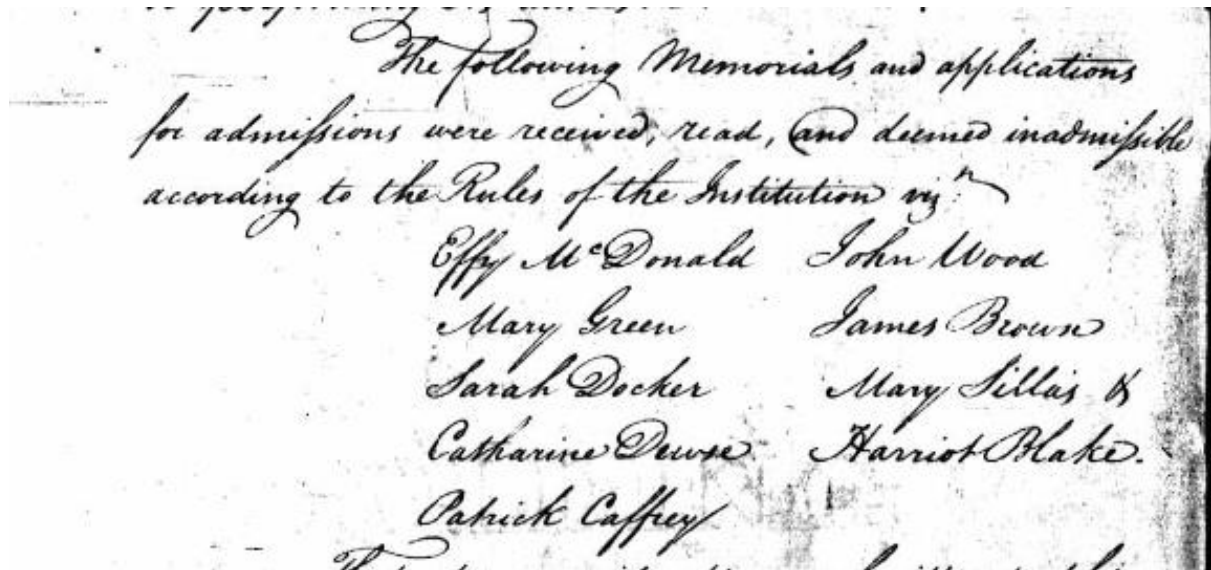


Image 3: List of applications 'deemed inadmissible' at the meeting of 12 April 1820.¹⁴²

Priscilla Devlin's application to the Male Orphan Institution was rejected as inadmissible on two occasions, in April and October 1821.¹⁴³ The records provide no explanation for the refusal and fail even to name the child for whom admission was sought, leaving both the rationale and the identity of the applicant's intended child uncertain. Priscilla, née Mason—born in the colony in 1792 to Elizabeth Mason and James Squire—had partnered in 1807 with Irish political prisoner Arthur Devlin, with whom she had six children. When Devlin died in November 1820, he left a 'disconsolate widow and six children', placing Priscilla in sole charge of a large and dependent family.¹⁴⁴ It is most likely that her application concerned Patrick Devlin, who had been born in December 1815, and was therefore of an age suitable for admission. Despite the evident pressures of widowhood and the burden of supporting six children, her request was refused. This highlights the selectivity of institutional admission. Even in circumstances of clear economic and familial strain, entry to the MOI was neither automatic nor guaranteed. Priscilla's subsequent remarriage in December 1821 may have alleviated her situation, but at the time of application she represents a case in which need alone was insufficient to secure institutional support.

Mary Lillis' application was also amongst those deemed inadmissible. Mary arrived as a twenty-three-year-old under a seven-year sentence in 1818, and was accompanied by her two young sons, Edward aged two and James aged four.¹⁴⁵ On arrival, Mary and James were sent to the Female Factory in Parramatta, where they remained

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Priscilla Develin, Petition submitted to Committee of Male Orphan Institution, 11 April and 10 October 1821, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo.31, 35.

¹⁴⁴ Purnell, Marion. "Priscilla Mason 1792–1862", Australian Royalty. A family tree of colonial Australians., accessed 28 April, 2026, <https://australianroyalty.net.au/tree/purnellmccord.ged/individual/165984/Priscilla-Mason>

¹⁴⁵ Mary Lillis, BDA on-line, Accessed 2 February 2026.

until 1820.¹⁴⁶ In January 1820 Mary was sentenced to one year of secondary transportation to Newcastle¹⁴⁷ and it appears that it was this punishment that prompted the application for James' admission.¹⁴⁸ Because her request was deemed inadmissible, it is possible that James accompanied his mother to the Coal River. Upon completing her sentence, Mary returned to the Female Factory and, in October 1822, eight-year-old James was admitted to the MOI.¹⁴⁹ For children who accompanied a parent to a secondary settlement, the environment itself posed risks. Such establishments were characterised by corporal punishment, overcrowding and chronic insecurity. They offered little provision for schooling, moral instruction outside the penal framework, or sustained emotional care. Children raised in these settings were exposed to punitive cultures designed for adult recidivists and were vulnerable to neglect. Mary Lillis' disjointed paper trail—encompassing an initial MOI admission refusal, a likely but undocumented period in which her son accompanied her to Newcastle, and a belated admission into the MOI after years of exposure to the rigours of the penal system—illustrates how the colonial archive records institutional outcomes while leaving maternal strategy, interim care, and the lived precarity of convict children largely unspoken. Crucially, when admission was denied or delayed, families were forced to rely upon alternative arrangements for a child's care, whether through kin, neighbours, employers, or temporary custodians. It is these improvised systems of support that formed the wider networks of care within which institutionalisation operated.

3. Networks of Care outside the MOI:

Institutional admission emerged not as an automatic response to parental death or absence, but as one option within a wider ecology of improvised care. Institutionalisation typically followed only when such arrangements became economically unsustainable, when a child's age rendered them dependent rather than contributory, or when domestic reconfiguration strained already fragile households. The admission register records the child's entry into the institution, but not the circumstances and decisions that led to it.

This research demonstrates that experiences of orphanhood in early colonial New South Wales were far from uniform. Thomas Dansey (alias Dawcey), admitted in the first intake of January 1819, represents one such case. The admission register records his parents simple as 'None', a stark manifestation of the boy's orphanhood.¹⁵⁰ The 1818 recommendation is a little more informative: Parents 'Thomas Dawcey and Mary Bolger. Father left the colony, Mother dead, the boy in the general hospital.'¹⁵¹ What remains unclear is whether Thomas's

¹⁴⁶ Mary Lillis, On list of convicts disembarked from the *Elizabeth* and forwarded to the Factory, Parramatta; with male child, 25 November 1818, SANSW, Reel 6006; 4/3499, fo. 175. There is no information at all regarding her son Edward, whose absence in the records may indicate that he was fostered out after arrival.

¹⁴⁷ Mary Lillis, On list of prisoners to be sent to Newcastle, appears as Lilliss, 20 January 1820, SANSW, Reel 6007; 4/3501, fo. 197.

¹⁴⁸ Mary Lillis, Memorial re admission to the Male Orphan Institution deemed inadmissible; appears as Sillas, 2 April 1820, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo. 16.

¹⁴⁹ James Lillis, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 15 October 1822, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo. 7–8.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., Thomas Dawcey, son of Thomas Dawcey and Mary Bolger, fo.1-2.

¹⁵¹ Thomas Dawcey, Recommended for admission to Male Orphan Institution, 11 August 1818, Reel 6047; 4/1740, fo.257-8.

presence in the hospital reflected illness or the absence of any alternative care following his mother's death. Mary Bolger (alias Jane Williamson), an Irish convict transported in 1809, died in the general hospital in February 1818, and it appears that Thomas remained there in the months that followed.¹⁵² Beyond this, the record is silent. With no identifiable family, guardian, or community support, he appears to have moved directly from maternal loss to institutional dependency, via the intermediary space of the hospital. His circumstances highlight not only the limits of informal care, but also the urgency of institutional provision. The admission of thirty-two boys in the orphanage's initial intake suggests that such cases were not isolated, but indicative of a broader, unmet need within the colony.

In contrast to Thomas Dansey, whose circumstances reveal the absence of any identifiable network of care, other children were sustained within informal systems of support prior to admission. Six-year-old John Holmes, admitted to the MOI in April 1819 by Mary Druce, exemplifies this.¹⁵³ Little is known of his parents, John Holmes senior and Alice Grainger, and no substantive information survives regarding Druce herself. It appears, however, that Mary Druce had previously been supported as an orphan, with records indicating that her care was funded from the orphan fund between 1811 and 1815.¹⁵⁴ Although the details of John's circumstances remain obscure, this fragmentary evidence suggests that his care may have been assumed within informal networks that extended beyond immediate family. That his admission was arranged by a woman who had herself been the recipient of institutional or subsidised care points to the circulation of responsibility within marginalised communities, where former dependants could, in turn, become caregivers.

The Tollis brothers—Thomas (12), Samuel (5), and Nathaniel (3)—provide a further example of the varied experiences of orphanhood. On 18 August 1821, they were 'sent [to the MOI] by the order of His Excellency the Patron'.¹⁵⁵ As the youngest child was deemed too young for immediate admission, it was resolved that Elizabeth Fowler 'who has now the child in her charge, be allowed five shillings per week for its care & maintenance from the 18th August [1821] agreeable to the suggestion of His Excellency'.¹⁵⁶ The admission register lists Fowler as guardian, identifying the boys as 'three orphan boys of the late Corporal Tollis,' who had died in July 1821 aged forty-four.¹⁵⁷ His wife Ann (née Waters) had pre-deceased him only months earlier, leaving six children orphaned.¹⁵⁸ Elizabeth Fowler (née Hearson), who had arrived free in the colony in 1814, accompanied her convicted mother, Hannah, and was reunited with her transported father, George Hearson. Elizabeth partnered with William Fowler and had three children of her own before fostering the Tollis boys. The weekly allowance

¹⁵² Mary Bolger, BDA on-line, Accessed 12 January 2026.

¹⁵³ John Holmes, Admitted to the Male Orphan School; Mary Drew [Druce] his guardian, 12 April 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.3-4.

¹⁵⁴ Mary Drice, orphan, Paid from the Female Orphan Institution Fund, 11 September 1811 to 5 August 1815, SANSW, Reel 6038; SZ758, fo. 253, 351, 403, 459, 557 & SZ759 fo. 37, 97, 126.

¹⁵⁵ Tollis, Three orphan boys of Thomas Tollis sent to the Male Orphan Institution by order of the Governor, 10 October 1821, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo.34.

¹⁵⁶ Minutes of the Male Orphan School, 10 October 1821, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo. 34.

¹⁵⁷ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Death of Thomas Tollis, 1821, V18215168 2B. Aged 44 years.

¹⁵⁸ Op. cit., Death of Ann Tollis, 1821, V18215034 2B. Aged 32 years. Note a death of an infant, Eliza occurred shortly after Ann's death, suggesting that Ann died at childbirth, and that the infant died soon after. Op. cit., Death of Eliza Tollis, 1821, V1821489 2B.

of five shillings—approximately equivalent to the wage of an unskilled labourer—suggests that Nathaniel's placement was not purely charitable but state-subsidised.¹⁵⁹ Nathaniel remained with Fowler until January 1823, when he was admitted to the school.¹⁶⁰

Sarah Smith was likewise awarded 'a remuneration of five shilling per Week...for her attention to [John Warrington, during the time he has been under her care.]'¹⁶¹ Ten-year-old John Warrington was admitted to the MOI in July 1820, a year after his older brother Thomas.¹⁶² At first glance, these admissions appear unremarkable yet research reveals the Warrington family as a compelling example of structural fragility, economic precarity, and domestic reconfiguration that frequently followed paternal desertion. Thomas' recommendation for admission recorded: 'Father's name John Warrington Left the Colony, Mother's name Catherine Malone, resides in Sydney, has 4 Children and in great Distress.'¹⁶³

John Warrington (alias Worthington), a convict transported in 1806 under a seven-year sentence, disappears from the colonial record by 1814. He and Catherine had four sons—James (b. 1807), Thomas (b. 1809), John (b. 1811) and William Fry Warrington (b. 1812)—all of whom appear, by 1818, to have been placed in the care of others.¹⁶⁴ James, the eldest, stated in an 1824 petition that he was 'a Colonial youth, aged 19 years, eldest son of John Warrington of Sydney, but has lived with Mr. Moses Brennan, of the District of Appin, upwards of seven years.'¹⁶⁵ This suggests that James entered Brennan's household in 1812, the year that John Warrington 'Left the Colony.' Notably, James also asserted in 1824 that his father resided in Sydney, raising the possibility that John Warrington senior had returned and therefore complicating any narrative of permanent abandonment.¹⁶⁶ A referee confirmed that James was 'brought up chiefly in the family of Mr Moses Brennan', adding that James was a 'sober, industrious, honest and well-behaved youth.'¹⁶⁷ Thomas Warrington, admitted to the MOI in April 1819, was recorded as being under the guardianship of David Knowland of Airds, and upon discharge in 1826, his caregiver remained listed as David Knowland.¹⁶⁸ William Warrington adopted the surname Fry in

¹⁵⁹ "Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser." 3 November 1821, p.2. In a colony marked by high prices and economic volatility, the purchasing power of Fowlers allowance was limited. At this time, eggs were 1s 6d per dozen, fowls 4s a pair and wheat 10s per bushel.

¹⁶⁰ Nathaniel Tollis, To be admitted to the Male Orphan School, 8 January 1823, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo.53.

¹⁶¹ Sarah Smith, Re petition for John Warrington to be admitted to the Male Orphan Institution, 12 July 1820, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo.21.

¹⁶² Thomas Warrington, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 12 April 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.3-4.

¹⁶³ Thomas Warrington, Aged 8 years. Son of John Warrington and Catherine Malone in care of David Nowland of Airds, recommended for new orphan school, July 1818, SANSW, Reel 6047; 4/1740, fo.255.

¹⁶⁴ "Worthington Family – or should that be Warrington Family?," Gordon Family History, 2024, accessed 15 February, 2026, <https://gordonfamilyhistory.com.au/stories/worthington.html>.

¹⁶⁵ James Warrington, Employed by Moses Brennan of Appin. Memorial, 21 August 1824, SANSW, Fiche 3115; 4/1840A, No.1028, fo.139–42.

¹⁶⁶ See the debate about John's return to the colony at: Gordon, "Worthington Family – or should that be Warrington Family?."

¹⁶⁷ James Warrington, Memorial, 21 August 1824, op.cit. Referee report written by William Brown.

¹⁶⁸ Thomas Warrington. Admitted to the Male Orphan School; David Nowlan his guardian, 12 April 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.3–4.

Male Orphan School Roll Book, 1 January 1819 – 18 September 1848, State Library of New South Wales Mitchell Library, C 200, nQR2e6A1. Image 41.

acknowledgement of Samuel and Mary Ann Fry, who acted as his custodians.¹⁶⁹ By the time John entered the MOI in 1820, all four brothers were living apart, each sustained by different households. The departure of John Warrington senior—whether temporary or permanent—precipitated the progressive fragmentation of the family unit. The Warrington boys continued to acknowledge their father's identity even as their daily survival depended upon dispersed and improvised arrangements of care.

Networks of care also emerged within occupational communities, particularly in tightly connected urban neighbourhoods. Ten-year-old William Blake was admitted to the MOI in July 1822.¹⁷⁰ William's father had arrived in the colony as a free man in the service of Governor King and later married Harriet Edwards, a convict, in 1807. The couple operated an inn from their home near the hospital wharf in the Rocks district.¹⁷¹ Following William Blake senior's death in May 1817, Harriet continued working as a publican to support her family.¹⁷² Her death in June 1822 prompted the intervention of fellow publican William Kempton, who assumed care of the children. Kempton subsequently admitted William to the MOI while retaining responsibility for his sister Ann until her admission to the Female Orphan School in November 1823. The case illustrates how occupational networks within the tightly connected community of early Sydney, could function as informal systems of care for vulnerable children.

Publican John Cullan, whose inn was located in George Street, Brickfield Hill, acted as guardian for William Palmer, the son of fellow hotel-keeper Richard Palmer and his wife Elizabeth (née Titley).¹⁷³ William, aged eight, was admitted to the MOI by Cullan in December 1823.¹⁷⁴ He was one of eight children born to the Palmers, who had married in October 1810.¹⁷⁵ Between December 1818 and March 1820, the family suffered a series of devastating losses. The youngest child, Thomas, died in December 1818, followed by Richard's death in November 1819.¹⁷⁶ Three months later, Elizabeth (aged forty-two) also died, leaving seven children orphaned.¹⁷⁷ Yet William was not admitted to the institution at this point. Instead, his care appears to have been absorbed within local networks of support, including the guardianship of Cullan and, potentially, the assistance of older siblings. William's admission in December 1823—more than three years after the death of both parents—demonstrates that institutionalisation was neither immediate or inevitable. Rather it followed a sustained period during which informal and community-based care enabled him to remain within his familial and neighbourhood

¹⁶⁹ "The Four Worthington Boys," Christine's Compendium of Family History, accessed 16 February, 2026, <https://christinescompendium.com/worthington-byrne-ancestors/the-four-worthington-boys/>. William often cited his surname as 'Warrington Fry', his third child was registered under the surname Fry and his eldest child used the name Fry.

¹⁷⁰ William Blake, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, July 1822, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.7–8.

¹⁷¹ William Blake (senior), Memorial, 30 January 1810, SANSW, Fiche 3001; 4/1821, no. 23.

¹⁷² Harriet Blake, On list of applicants for beer licenses in Sydney, 16 February 1818, SANSW, Reel 6006; 4/3498, fo.63.

¹⁷³ "Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser." 9 June 1805, p.3; 19 January 1802, p. 2; 16 March 1811, p.1. The admission entry verifies that Cullan was a publican. Richard Palmer is stated as living at Brickfield Hill, where he not only operated an inn but grew and sold hop plants.

¹⁷⁴ William Palmer, Admitted to the Male Orphan School; John Cullen his parent/guardian, 6 December 1823, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7209, fo.9-10.

¹⁷⁵ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Marriage of Richard Palmer and Elizabeth Tetley, 1810, V1810971 3A.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., Death of Thomas Palmer, 1818, V18184169 2B.

Ibid., Death of Richard Palmer, 1819, V18194454 2B, aged 52.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, Death of Elizabeth Palmer, 1820, V1820229 8.

environment. His case therefore provides a clear example of the capacity of such networks to delay, and in some cases temporarily avert, institutional placement.

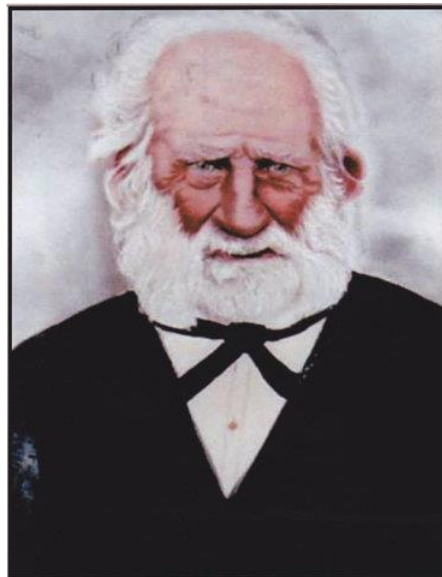


Image: 2 William Palmer, who was admitted to the MOI by John Cullen in December 1823.¹⁷⁸

Taken together, the cases of Tollis, Warrington, Blake and Palmer demonstrate that orphanhood in early colonial New South Wales did not immediately or uniformly result in institutional confinement. Children were frequently absorbed into improvised networks of guardianship, fosterage, and community and state-subsidised care, with institutionalisation occurring only when these arrangements faltered. This pattern aligns with Grace Karskens' analysis of the Rocks community, which shows that orphaned or abandoned Rocks children were not usually sent to the orphanage but were often fostered by neighbours within the local district.¹⁷⁹ Admission to the MOI was therefore often the final stage in a sequence of familial disruption rather than its beginning.

4. Patterns of Familial Disruption in Admission Records, 1819–1825:

Analysis of the 107 boys admitted to the MOI between 1819 and 1825 reveals recurring patterns of familial disruption. These categories are not mutually exclusive. A child might, for example, experience the death of the mother while also lacking paternal support through imprisonment, desertion, or illness. The figures therefore indicate relative prevalence rather than precise statistical distribution, offering a guide to the circumstances most frequent preceding institutionalisation. In many cases multiple pressures intersected within the same household, combining bereavement, economic hardship, and parental absence.

¹⁷⁸ William Palmer: 1815 to 1903, Geni, <https://www.geni.com/people/William-Palmer/6000000010614281428> (accessed 6 April, 2026).

¹⁷⁹ Grace Karskens, *The Rocks: life in early Sydney* (Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 1997), 53.

Circumstances associated with admission	Number of cases out of 107 admissions
Father deceased	34
Father absent (desertion 6, imprisonment 3, illness 7)	16
Mother deceased	12
Mother absent (desertion 1, imprisonment 2, illness 3)	6
Single mother (father not in colony)	15
Remarriage (child admitted due to remarriage)	14
Both parents deceased	18
Both parents alive but unable to care for child	7
Single father (no record of mother)	1
Unknown (unable to identify family)	5

These findings differ in some respects from the conclusions reached in other studies of the orphan institutions, particularly Beryl Bubacz's analysis of both the male and female orphan schools 1801–1833,¹⁸⁰ and Tanya Evans' study relating to the male and female schools during the period 1825–1833.¹⁸¹ Bubacz concluded that 19.5% of admissions between 1801 to 1833 resulted from maternal death, desertion, imprisonment or illness.¹⁸² Within that figure, 15.5 percent of mothers were deceased, 2.5 percent had deserted their children, and 1.5 percent were imprisoned or seriously ill.

By contrast, analysis of the MOI admission records between 1819 and the end of 1824 suggests that 14.5 percent of admissions resulted from these same circumstances. Of this figure, 9.5 percent were attributable to maternal death, 3 percent to maternal illness, 1 percent to maternal imprisonment and 1 percent to desertion. While these categories are grouped together in statistical summaries, they represent very different circumstances. Death and serious illness remove a mother involuntarily, whereas desertion implies deliberate abandonment. Secondary punishment, resulting in transportation to Newcastle or Port Macquarie, represents a distinct penal intervention altogether. What emerges most clearly from this analysis is that intentional maternal desertion was, according to the immediate indicators, an extremely rare contributor to boys' admission to the MOI during the period 1819 to 1825. Only one possible case appears in the records: Edward Edwards, aged seven, admitted in April 1820. Even this instance remains uncertain. Although the admission record notes that Edward's father was deceased, it makes no reference to his mother, who cannot be traced through genealogical reconstruction. In the absence of evidence confirming desertion, her status has therefore been classified as parental absence.

¹⁸⁰ Bubacz, "The female and male orphan schools in New South Wales 1801-1850."

¹⁸¹ Evans, *Fractured families: Life on the margins in colonial New South Wales*.

¹⁸² Bubacz, "The female and male orphan schools in New South Wales 1801-1850," 196.

This raises a broader methodological issue, namely that statistics derived solely from institutional records are likely to understate the extent to which maternal desertion contributed to orphanage admissions. While this study identifies a negligible proportion of boys as explicitly 'deserted' by their mothers based on the wording of the records, this figure reflects the limitations of the archive rather than the full range of maternal absence. Bubacz, for example, identifies ten children out of 200 (5%) as 'deserted' by their mother and, separately, five children whose fathers were dead and whose mothers had remarried, resulting in the child's placement in institutional care.¹⁸³ In this framework, remarriage is treated as analytically distinct from desertion. This study adopts a broader interpretive approach, treating the admission of children following maternal remarriage or re-partnering as a form of desertion, in which the child is effectively displaced from the maternal household as new domestic arrangements are prioritised.

This study reveals that 10.5% of boys were admitted to the orphanage because their mother re-partnered. In all cases of this kind, it was the mother who re-partnered and subsequently placed her child in institutional care. Notably, this percentage (10.5 percent) is more than double that identified in Bubacz's research (5 percent).¹⁸⁴ This variation likely reflects Bubacz's reliance on information explicitly recorded in institutional documentation, whereas the reconstruction of family histories undertaken in this study reveals circumstances that remain obscured within the administrative record. While the records from 1819 to December 1823 rarely directly acknowledge re-partnering as a contributing factor, genealogical research indicates that it nonetheless played a significant—though often obscured—role in shaping admissions to the institution. This being the case, a total of 25 percent of admissions of boys to the MOI between 1819 and the end of 1823 were the result of the mother's death, desertion, imprisonment or illness, with 10.5 percent due to re-partnering, 9.5 percent due to the mother's death, 3 percent due to illness, 1 percent due to desertion for other reasons and 1 percent due to imprisonment. This more nuanced analysis underscores the value of this methodological approach, facilitating a more realistic analysis of admission practices and providing a greater understanding of the broader social impact of remarriage in the colony during this period.

Institutionalisation was rarely the result of a single 'trigger' such as re-partnering. Rather, re-partnering itself often emerged from the economic and social pressures of colonial life, including the disruption of traditional family networks through transportation, poverty, low wages, high housing costs, and the stigma faced by unmarried mothers within the penal colony. The fact that 10.5 per cent of admissions coincided with maternal re-partnering exposes a contradiction at the heart of colonial assumptions about family stability. In theory, marriage conferred legitimacy, economic security, and moral order; in practice, re-partnering could destabilise existing maternal-child relationships, suggesting that changes in marital status could directly influence a child's fate.

¹⁸³ Bubacz, "The female and male orphan schools in New South Wales 1801-1850," 197.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

Maternal remarriage:

Remarriage did not necessarily strengthen a child's position within the household. For many women, re-partnering introduced a new male authority whose willingness—or obligation—to support non-biological children was uncertain. In such circumstances, sons from previous relationships could be perceived as economic burdens or as obstacles to the formation of a new household. It must be considered, however, that admission to the MOI in these cases may have reflected negotiation rather than neglect, with institutionalisation functioning as a compromise that enabled a marriage or partnership to proceed. Women's agency in such negotiations was often constrained by their precarious social and economic position within the colony. In some cases, mothers may have had little choice but to agree to the removal of a child; in others, admission to the institution may have been perceived as offering material and educational advantages during a period of domestic reconfiguration. In this context, the MOI functioned as a mechanism for managing the complexities of colonial family formation, absorbing children whose presence complicated the consolidation of a newly constituted household.

John Lane was admitted to the MOI in January 1819.¹⁸⁵ His biological father played no role in his life and, soon after John's birth, his mother Ann Lane formed a relationship with John Sherwood. By 1818, when Ann applied for John's admission to the orphanage, she and Sherwood had four children of their own. The recommendation for his entry is the only one in the records that hints directly at re-partnering as a contributing factor. It states: 'John Lane aged 8. No father, mother living. Married to John Sherwood, Richmond. The father-in-law has a large family but is industrious. The boy cannot tell his letters.'¹⁸⁶ The case is particularly striking given that the Sherwoods appear to have maintained a stable long-term relationship producing seven children between 1812 and 1826, a level of domestic stability that, in other circumstances, might have supported John Lane's continued inclusion within the household. The family were farming and, by 1814, Ann and her children were recorded as being off the government stores, suggesting a degree of financial stability.¹⁸⁷ As the only child from this blended household admitted to an orphan institution, John Lane's case cannot be explained by simple household incapacity. His placement, justified only obliquely through the reference to a large step-family, instead suggests the calculated removal of a child whose presence complicated the consolidation of a newly formed domestic unit.

Admitted on the same day as John Lane, and for the same reasons, six-year-old Edward Welsh arrived in the colony in August 1817. He accompanied his mother, Bridget Murray, an Irish servant transported for seven years.¹⁸⁸ On arrival, Bridget was sent to the Parramatta Female Factory, where Edward likely remained in her care. In June 1818, she married Felix O'Hare and, six months later, when the MOI opened in January 1819, Edward was included in the first intake of 'orphans'.¹⁸⁹ His admission therefore coincided closely with the

¹⁸⁵ John Lane, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 1 January 1819, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo. 3-4.

¹⁸⁶ John Lane, Son of Mrs John Sherwood, recommended for the new orphan school, 25 July 1818, SANSW, Reel 6047; 4/1740, fo. 253-4.

¹⁸⁷ Ann Lane, Population Musters, Dependent Settlements, 1814, SRNSW, NRS 1260; Reel 1252, fo. 242-243.

¹⁸⁸ Bridget Murray, ABD on-line, accessed 2 March, 2026.

¹⁸⁹ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Marriage of Felix Hare to Bridget Murray, 1818, V18182208 3A.

formation of Bridget's new household and the early stages of the formation of a new family.¹⁹⁰ Edward's removal at this moment of domestic reorganisation suggests that his institutionalisation formed part of the practical negotiation of a newly constituted household. A similar pattern is evident in the case of Thomas Leonard, aged seven when admitted to the MOI in April 1822. The admission register records only his age, his mother's name, and her residence in Parramatta, reducing his admission to a bare administrative notation that obscures the circumstances that led to it.¹⁹¹ Thomas had accompanied his mother, Caroline Leonard, to the colony in 1817. In 1821, she married William Wilson, the couple already having a child together.¹⁹² Although the records are silent on the reasons for Thomas's admission, its timing suggests that, as in Edward's case, his placement may have been associated with his mother's remarriage.

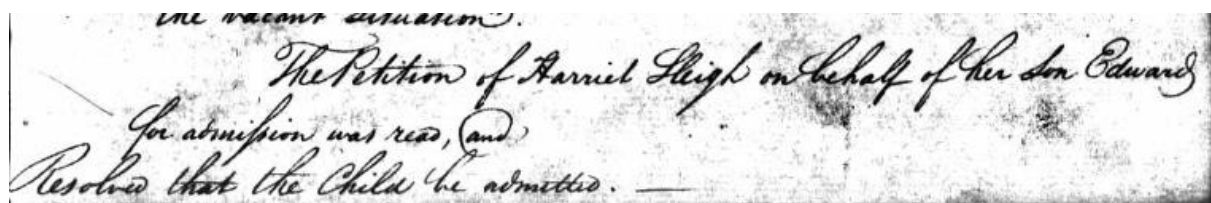


Image 4: Request made for the admission of Edward Sleight to the MOI, 10 July 1822.¹⁹³

A snippet of a printed admission register. It shows a table with columns for name, date, parent, and occupation. The entry for Edward Sleight is highlighted. The text is: "Edward Sleight 1 April 1812 Harriet Sleight 46 Philip Street Washerwoman". There is a large, faint watermark in the background that says "Narissa Phelps".

87	Edward Sleight	1 April 1812	Harriet Sleight	46 Philip Street	Washerwoman
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Image 5: The admission data on Edward Sleight, 10 July 1822.¹⁹⁴

Edward Sleight was ten years old when admitted to the MOI in July 1822.¹⁹⁵ He and his brother James had accompanied their convicted mother, Harriet, to the colony in December 1818. By 1821, Harriet had formed a relationship with George Kennewell, giving birth to his daughter in 1822.¹⁹⁶ Although Harriet first applied for permission to marry Kennewell in May 1822, the marriage did not proceed until December.¹⁹⁷ It was during this prolonged period of uncertainty—when the formation of a new household was anticipated but not yet sanctioned—that Edward was admitted to the orphanage. His removal was therefore shaped by the instability inherent in the reconfiguration of the family. The admission documentation (above) provides only the scantest detail—recording Harriet's address as 46 Philip Street, Sydney, and her occupation as a washerwoman.¹⁹⁸ While

Edward Welsh, Admitted to the Male Orphan School; Bridget Murray his parent, 1 January 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.1-2.

¹⁹⁰ Two other children were born to Bridget and Feliz O'Hare circa 1819 and 1821.

¹⁹¹ Thomas Leonard, Admitted to the Male Orphan Institution on petition of mother, 17 April 1822, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo. 39.

¹⁹² NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Marriage of William Wilson and Caroline Leonard, 1821, V18212678 3B.

¹⁹³ Edward Sleight, Admitted to the Male Orphan School on the petition of mother, 10 July 1822, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo.43.

¹⁹⁴ Edward Sleight, Admitted to the Male Orphan School; Harriet Sleight his parent, 10 July 1822, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.7-8.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Birth of Elizabeth Kenniwell, February 12 1822. Ancestry.com. *Australia, Births and Baptisms, 1792-1981* [database online]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2014.FHL Film number: 993949.

¹⁹⁷ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Marriage of George Kenniwell and Harriet Sleight, V1822249 8.

¹⁹⁸ Edward Sleight, Admitted to the Male Orphan School; Harriet Sleight his parent, op. cit.

both pieces of information are vital, they do little to inform meaningful analysis without genealogical reconstruction to situate the admission within its familial and temporal context.

Alexander Honeyman, aged eight, was admitted to the MOI in April 1823.¹⁹⁹ No reason for admission was recorded in the institutional documentation, an omission that reflects the frequent silences within the MOI records. The timing, however, is striking. In 1822, Mary Jean Honeyman arrived in the colony with her children intending to reunite with her convicted husband, only to learn that he had died the previous year.²⁰⁰ Within months she remarried, and Alexander was admitted to the orphanage just two days after the wedding. The register records him in the most personal terms: a child with grey eyes, light hair, uneven bad teeth, straight nose, arched brows and a freckled forehead.²⁰¹ While the record remains silent on the circumstances prompting his admission, the proximity of the event to his mother's remarriage strongly suggests that the formation of the new household played a decisive role.

Thomas McGrath was also admitted to the MOI in 1822 as a consequence of his mother's new relationship.²⁰² His birthfather, Michael McGrath, had been transported to Newcastle in 1820 for the term of his natural life.²⁰³ His mother, Elizabeth McGrath, born in the colony in 1796 to convict parents, had five children with McGrath between 1812 and 1818. By 1822, she was living with John Frazier and had two children with him. The McGrath children appear to have been deliberately excluded from the newly formed family: Thomas (b. 1815) and his sisters Mary Anne (b. 1812) and Margaret (b. 1813) were placed in orphan schools, while Ann (b. 1817) and Michael (b. 1818) were fostered by Elizabeth's twin sister, Phyllis. The selective distribution of Elizabeth's children suggests that maternal responsibility was actively renegotiated as a result of remarriage, yet it nonetheless resulted in the effective desertion of her earlier children, with some of them absorbed into kin networks while others were consigned to institutional care.

Not all requests for admission associated with maternal repartnering were accepted, however. In the absence of surviving admission petitions, the precise grounds on which the children were accepted or refused admission remains unknown. Euphemia McDonald applied for her sons, John and Lloyd Pugh to be admitted on 12 April 1820.²⁰⁴ The two boys had arrived with their mother in January 1820 and, on 3 April 1820 McDonald applied for permission to marry Isaac Howarth.²⁰⁵ It appears that McDonald sought to have the boys admitted before her

¹⁹⁹ Alexander Honeyman, Admitted to Male Orphan Institution, 17 April 1823, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.10.

²⁰⁰ "Foster and Honeyman family in Tasmania," 2019, accessed 9 November, 2025, <https://boobookbacktracks.blogspot.com/2019/10/foster-and-honeyman-family-in-tasmania.html>.

²⁰¹ Alexander Honeyman, Admitted to Male Orphan Institution, op. cit..

Alexander Honeyman, Description, Digital summary of Male Orphan School Roll Book, 1 January 1819 – 18 September 1848, https://acms.sl.nsw.gov.au/_transcript/2012/D14546/a4656.htm

²⁰² Thomas McGrath, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 10 May 1822, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.7–8.

²⁰³ Michael McGrath, To be transported to Newcastle for life. In reports of prisoners tried at the Court of Criminal Jurisdiction, June 15 to August 5 1820, SANSW, Reel 6023; X820, fo.15.

Michael McGrath, On list of priosners transported to Newcastle, 22 September 1820, SANSW, Reel 6007; 4/3502. fo.272.

²⁰⁴ Constitution and Minutes including the Rules and Regulations of the Male Orphan School, 12 April 1820, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo. 16.

²⁰⁵ Effy McDonald, Re permission to marry at Parramatta; listed a Uther Macdonald, 3, 8 April 1820, SANSW, Reel 6007; 4/3501, fo.331.

marriage, which took place on the 24th April of that same year.²⁰⁶ Her application was declined as 'inadmissible'. Caroline Wright (née Lavender) applied for the admission of her five-year-old son, Thomas, on 1 September 1819.²⁰⁷ Thomas' father, Thomas Wright Snr., appears to have had little to do with his son, having departed for Hobart in 1816. In this same year, Caroline partnered with Thomas Riley at the Hawkesbury and by 1818 had her first child by Riley. Her application for admission was refused and, whilst no detail was provided, it seems likely that the committee judged the household financially capable of supporting the child.²⁰⁸

These cases demonstrate that maternal remarriage did not operate uniformly as a trigger for institutionalisation. Rather, admission reflected a complex negotiation between household restructuring, economic capacity, and the discretionary judgement of the orphan school committee. The MOI therefore functioned not simply as a refuge for destitute children but as an institutional mechanism through which the pressures of colonial domestic reorganisation were managed.

Paternal desertion:

While maternal remarriage reshaped households through the formation of new partnerships, paternal desertion fractured families through absence. Analysis of the 1819–December 1823 MOI records reveal that paternal desertion accounted for approximately 9.5 per cent of admissions. The circumstances of these absences varied considerably. Some fathers departed with military regiments or maritime vessels; others voluntarily abandoned the colony; and still others were removed through secondary transportation to penal settlements such as Newcastle and Port Macquarie. Although the mechanisms differed, the outcome was similar: households already operating near the margins of subsistence lost their principal male provider, leaving women to negotiate survival through precarious labour or informal networks of support. When these arrangements failed, institutionalisation became the final recourse.

The departure of military regiments from the colony, including the 73rd Regiment of Foot in 1814, produced a cohort of children who were not technically orphaned, yet were rendered effectively fatherless by imperial military mobility. In a colony where 'orphan' commonly signified the loss or absence of a father rather than the death of both parents, regimental rotation carried immediate domestic consequences. Military regulations limited the number of wives and children permitted to accompany departing units, leaving many women and children behind. Partners in informal unions had even less protection, possessing no recognised entitlement to support or passage. The withdrawal of military personnel therefore removed a critical source of economic provision from households already operating at the margins of subsistence. Later admissions to the orphan schools reflect this structural dislocation. The children of soldiers who departed the colony occupied an

²⁰⁶ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Marriage of Isaac Howart and Uther Macdonald, 1820, V1820957 147B.

²⁰⁷ Caroline Wright, Memorial re Male Orphan Institution refused, 1 September 1819, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400. Fo.13.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, fo. 13.

Interestingly, Thomas does not appear in the census records of 1822, 1825 or 1828 at all, and certainly not with Caroline, her husband Thomas Riley and their two children. He appears to disappear entirely from the record and from the newly created family.

ambiguous position: legally legitimate, yet economically destabilised; socially acknowledged, yet administratively vulnerable.

George Coleson junior, born in October 1815 to George Coleson senior and Jane Hay (alias Jannet Gardner), belonged to a family that exemplified the inherent instability of colonial relationships and its impact on children.²⁰⁹ His mother, Jane Hay, arrived in the colony in March 1803 and soon after gave birth to John Kellick, fathered by a marine gunner aboard her convict transport, *Glatton*.²¹⁰ The gunner remained with his ship and played little role in the child's upbringing. Jane subsequently formed a partnership with William Cocket, and their son, James Cocket, was born in September 1805.²¹¹ William's death in Sydney in April 1807 left Jane solely responsible for two young children.²¹² Her final colonial partner was George Coleson, transported in 1799 under a seven-year sentence. Together they had five children: Elizabeth (1809), Mary (1810), Jane (1813), George (1815) and Isabella (1818). By 1804, Coleson was working as a seaman, engaged in both overseas voyages and coastal trade, an occupation that rendered paternal presence intermittent and support uncertain.²¹³ The precise chronology is unclear, but Jane died in May 1818, around the time of Isabella's birth, leaving seven children—aged between fifteen and newborn—without maternal protection. By November 1821 it was reported that George Coleson senior had '[gone] home several years ago from Norfolk Island', suggesting his departure broadly coincided with Jane's death.²¹⁴

The children had been left doubly bereft: of their mother through mortality and of their father through desertion. It was under these circumstances that George junior was placed in the care of Jane Dew, a washerwoman, and in January 1822 admitted to the MOI.²¹⁵ By this time, the domestic structure into which he had been born had fractured. That his admission was authorised by a female guardian of limited means underscores the cumulative instability of his early life. George's case illustrates the inherent instability of colonial relationships, with his childhood shaped by occupational mobility, economic precarity, and the ever-present risk of desertion or death. For George, 'home' was less a fixed site of security than a shifting arrangement, vulnerable to sudden rupture. As for many colonial children, identity and belonging were formed not within a continuous

²⁰⁹ Ancestry.com. *Australia, Births and Baptisms, 1792-1981* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2014. FHL Film number 993949.

²¹⁰ NSW Regsitory of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth for John Kellick, 1804, 791/1804 V1804791 4. Born 3 July 1803.

²¹¹ Ancestry.com. *Australia, Births and Baptisms, 1792-1981* [database on-line]. Op. cit.

²¹² St Philip's Church of England, Sydney NSW: Church Register, Burials, 1788-1831; ML Reel SAG 90; Volume entry number: 1424.

²¹³ "Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser," 22 April 1804, p.1; 3 August 06, p. 1.

George Coulson, Unable to attend muster because employed on boat, 1814, SANSW, Reel 6044; 4/1730, fo.438. Coulson was employed on a boat plying between Sydney and the Hawkesbury.

²¹⁴ George Coulson, Enquiry to William Hutchinson, Principal Superintendent of Convicts requesting information as to present situation of, 24 November 1821, SANSW, Reel 6008; 4/3504A p.93. Reply, 24 November 1821, Reel 6052; 4/1751 pp.38-9.

²¹⁵ George Coleson, Admitted to the Male Orphan School; Jane Dew his guardian, 2 January 1822, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.7-8.

In September 1826, George's half-brother, John Kellick, applied to the MOI for George's release to him on the grounds that he was 'a Carpenter by Trade and am willing to learn him that business.' The request was approved. George Coulson, Application for Removal, 28 August 1826, SANSW, NRS 783; 4/333; Roll 2776, fo.89

domestic narrative but within a series of interruptions. His experience therefore illuminates a broader colonial dynamic: family life operated under structural pressures that rendered intimacy fragile and childhood uncertain.

Ten-year-old William Anderson, admitted to the MOI in April 1819, was likewise born into a maritime household, and the chain of familial disruptions that led to his admission mirrored the complex trajectory evident in the case of George Coulson junior. MOI records list William's mother as Sarah Curran, a washerwoman of Cumberland Street, Sydney; no father is recorded.²¹⁶ Genealogical reconstruction, however, reveals that William's mother was Sarah Anderson, the wife of convict Thomas Anderson. She arrived in the colony as a free woman in 1806 accompanied by two young sons, James aged three and Thomas aged one. Thomas senior does not appear in the early musters, suggesting that he died either during the voyage or soon after arrival, leaving Sarah a widow with small children. William Anderson, born 1808, was the son of marine Overend, a mariner. On 25 August 1810 Sarah Anderson appeared before the Bench of Magistrates to seek enforcement of maintenance orders for her 'illegitimate infant male child', William.²¹⁷ In her deposition, Sarah swore to paternity, identifying Bryan Overend, Master of the vessel *Lady Nelson*, as the father.²¹⁸

The absence of any reference to William's paternity in the MOI admission records suggests that Overend no longer exercised any recognised paternal role in William's life. Given Sarah's earlier need to obtain and enforce maintenance orders through the Bench, paternal responsibility appears to have been asserted in court but absent in practice.²¹⁹ The father of Sarah's later children, John Curran, died in April 1820, leaving her widowed with three young children: John aged eight, Sarah aged five and Mary Ann a newborn.²²⁰ In November 1821 her son John joined his step-brother William at the orphanage.

Sarah Anderson's experience, like that of Jane Hay, the mother of George Coleson, illustrates the structural contingency of colonial relationships rather than a simple narrative of personal misfortune. Widowed by the death of her convicted husband, Sarah was left alone to parent her two eldest sons. Her relationship with Overend, whose occupational mobility rendered fatherhood episodic and materially unreliable, destabilised her familial position even further. Her repartnering with John Curran represented a pragmatic recalibration, aimed at increasing her financial and personal stability. His death demonstrated how quickly domestic equilibrium could collapse and how institutional care operated as a reluctant but necessary supplement to private provision. Taken together, these episodes reveal a pattern of cyclical instability shaped by penalism, maritime labour and high mortality. Colonial households were fluctuating units, repeatedly reorganised in response to desertion, death, and economic precarity. The resulting familial stresses—maternal anxiety, repeated attachment and

²¹⁶ William Anderson, Admitted to the Male Orphan School; Sarah Curran his parent, 12 April 1819, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo. 3-4.

²¹⁷ Sarah Anderson, the mother of an illegitimate infant male child. Bryan Overend, master of the 'Lady Nelson', is sworn to be the father of the child, Bench of Magistrates 1788–1820, 25 August 1810, SANSW, INX-11-59, Reel 658, COD 233.

²¹⁸ Ibid. She stated that she had previously 'obtained an order from the Court' requiring him to pay 15s per week from 10 July 'for the support of two children of which he was sworn by her to be the father.' By August, however, one of those children, Elizabeth, had died. Overend was ordered to pay £4 10s in arrears and thereafter 7s 6d per week for William's maintenance, to which he consented.

²¹⁹ Bryan Overend and Sarah Curran's relationship ended in 1810 when Overend married Catherine McNulty.

²²⁰ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Death of John Curran, 1820, V18204631 2b.

separation, and the fragmentation of siblings—were therefore systemic rather than exceptional, embedded in the structural conditions of early colonial life.

Nine-year-old Richard Gardiner was admitted on 1 January 1819. The request for admission states ‘No Father, Mother living, Parent Sophia Gardiner, Richmond, A smart shrewd boy. The Father went to Ceylon with the 73rd Regiment, the Mother a good character but very poor (cannot read).’²²¹ At the time of admission, the mother is recorded as Lucy Gardiner, a washerwoman residing in George Street, Sydney.²²² Richard’s baptism, recorded on 4th October 1812, lists his birth as 3 October 1809 and his parents as Richard Gardiner and Lucy Gardiner, his wife.²²³ The 73rd Regiment of Foot departed Sydney for Ceylon in 1814, leaving mother and child dependent on a washerwoman’s income and exposing the household to the economic precarity that frequently precipitated institutional admission. This was not an isolated incident.

Nine-year-old Francis Stewart and his mother, Rose Stewart, also experienced financial hardship when Francis Stewart senior departed with the 73rd Regiment. As a result, Francis was admitted to the orphanage on 1 January 1819.²²⁴ On the same day, eight-year-old John Pounds was admitted. The recommendation for admission, displaying the characteristic brevity and omission of vital facts typical of the MOI records, lists John as the son of ‘McCarty and Pounds, Father left the Colony Mother dead, The boy with the Widow Shrieves, poor.’²²⁵ John’s father, John McCarthy, had likewise served as a soldier and departed with his regiment, while his mother, Frances Pounds, a convict who arrived in 1801 under a life sentence, had died in July 1816. Her death effectively left John an orphan at the age of six.²²⁶

Voluntary departure from the colony:

While military service and maritime labour removed some fathers through occupational mobility, other desertions occurred through voluntary departure. In a society characterised by fluid population movement and limited mechanisms of enforcement, some men simply abandoned their families and disappeared from the colonial record. These departures were not always the result of sudden crises; rather, they often followed financial failure, personal conflict, or the opportunity to escape colonial obligations altogether. For the families left behind, however, the consequences were immediate. The loss of a male provider frequently precipitated economic collapse, forcing mothers to seek institutional support for their children.

²²¹ Richard Gardiner, Son of Sophia Gardiner, recommended for admission to the Male Orphan Institution, 13 July 1818, SANSW, Reel 6047; 4/1740, fo. 254.

²²² Richard Gardiner, Admitted to Male Orphan School, 1 January 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo. 1–2.

²²³ "Australia, Births and Baptisms, 1792 to 1981", *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XTCX-4BF> : Wed Mar 05 19:59:49 UTC 2025), Entry for Richard Gardiner and Richard Gardiner, 4 Oct 1812.

²²⁴ Francis Stewart, Admitted to the Male Orphan School; Rose Stewart his parent/guardian, 1 January 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo. 1–2.

²²⁵ John Pounds, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 1 January 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, FO. 1–2.

John Pounds, Son of Pounds and McCarty in care of Widow Shrieves; recommended for admission to the Male Orphan Institution, 11 August 1818, SANSW, Reel 6047; 4/1740, fo. 257–8.

²²⁶ Baxter, *Musters of New South Wales and Norfolk Island 1805–1806*, 86. The census lists Frances Pounds as arriving on the vessel Earl Cornwallis, a prisoner with a Ticket of Leave, residing with John McCarthy, soldier.

George Wall was admitted to the MOI in July 1820 by his mother Mary, the de facto wife of William Wall who abandoned his family.²²⁷ William was a First Fleet convict sentenced to seven years transportation for theft. Mary McGuire was William's third colonial partner, the couple having three children—George, Edward and Rhoda—between 1809 and 1813. This was a period of great stability for the family, as William was, at different times, a landowner, government storekeeper, police constable, overseer of women prisoners and a volunteer in the Loyal Sydney Association.²²⁸ That stability was disrupted in 1816, when William was dismissed from his position of Government Storekeeper and, a year later, announced his separation from Mary.²²⁹ In January 1819 William applied for permission to depart the colony for England, leaving in March of that year.²³⁰ His departure left Mary without paternal support for her three children, circumstances that led to the admission of both George and Rhoda to orphanages. The ease with which such permissions were granted suggests that little meaningful consideration was given to the welfare of dependent families, effectively sanctioning a form of state-endorsed desertion.

Perhaps one of the saddest instances of paternal desertion concerns the Gregory brothers—Edward aged eleven, Charles aged ten, and George aged six—admitted to the MOI in September 1819 after their mother, Henrietta Gregory, died the previous month.²³¹ Henrietta, transported for fourteen years, had arrived in 1814 accompanied by her children. Her husband, Edward Gregory Senior, travelled separately as a free settler, also arriving that year.²³² On 23 July 1819, mere weeks before Henrietta's death, Edward Gregory Senior departed the colony, abandoning his family and, in all likelihood, a gravely ill wife.²³³ Following the boys' admission, the 'effects of the absconded father and deceased mother' were sold, and the proceeds—£60 10s 4d—invested for the children's eventual benefit.²³⁴ The circumstances surrounding the Gregory brothers' admission is significant on two levels. Firstly, it exposes the compounded familial vulnerability produced by paternal flight and maternal mortality. Secondly, it highlights a structural weakness of the colonial system, whereby men could depart the colony with government approval, leaving families behind and shifting the burden of care onto orphan institutions.

John Prosser was admitted to the MOI by his mother, Ann Prosser, in November 1822.²³⁵ John's father, Thomas Prosser—an Irish political prisoner who arrived in 1800—had a history of attempting escape from the colony,

²²⁷ George Wall, Admission of George Wall, son of the late William Wall, into Male Orphan School requested by Committee, 17 July 1820, SANSW, Reel 6050; 4/1747, fo.88-90.

²²⁸ "William Wall (alias Harding), Alexander.," Fellowship of First Fleeters, 2006, accessed 25 November 2025, https://www.fellowshipfirstfleeters.org.au/william_wall.htm

²²⁹ William Wall, Re dismissal of Wall as Storekeeper for malpractice, 19 February 1816, SANSW, Ree4l 6004; 4/3494, fo.377.

²³⁰ William Wall, Memorial for passage to England, 25 January and 22 March 1819, SANSW, Reel 6020; 2/8130, fo. 383-90.

²³¹ Edward, Charles and George Gregory, Parent/guardian went to England, per "surrey", 1819. Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 15 September 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.3-4.

²³² Jeffrey Hart Bent journal of a voyage performed on board the ship Broxbornebury, Captain Thomas Pitcher from England to New South Wales, 19 February 1814-28 July 1814, MAV/FM3/21. State Library NSW. Entry for 26 March 1814. Before arriving in the colony, Edward Gregory Snr. was described as a fairground entertainer, a talent evidently shared by his family: one son reportedly 'entertained passengers with acrobatic tricks' during the voyage to the colony, boasting that he 'could tumble while on horseback.'

²³³ "Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser." 19 June 1819, p.3.

²³⁴ Ann Bushel, Receipt of payment by Male Orphan Institution, 8 October 1823, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo. 59.

²³⁵ John Prosser, Admitted to the Male orphan School, 22 November 1822, SANSW< Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.7-8.

firstly in 1801 and again in 1807.²³⁶ In punishment, he was shipped to Norfolk Island (1802) and, in 1807, was sentenced to 200 lashes and three years hard labour in Tasmania.²³⁷ In 1812, after his return to the mainland, he married Ann Biggers, who had been born in Sydney in 1796 to convict parents.²³⁸ Granted an absolute pardon in 1812, Thomas became an officer and bailiff for the Provost Marshall, and the family settled in Windsor.²³⁹ Daughter Elizabeth was born in 1814 and John in 1815. It appears that by the time John was born, Thomas had departed for Tasmania. There he received a land grant at Port Dalrymple before stowing away in March 1817 on a vessel bound for Batavia, a free man apparently 'trying to elude his creditors.'²⁴⁰ On 22 November 1822, Jacob Josephson petitioned the MOI seeking admission for John Prosser on the grounds that 'the Mother [was] an abandoned Woman, and the Father not being in this Country.'²⁴¹ Several references to Ann provide an insight into her attempts to remedy her increasingly perilous situation. In 1819 an advertisement appeared announcing that 'Mrs. Ann Prosser and Child [were] intending to proceed to Batavia in the ship *Mary*.'²⁴² This suggests that Ann may have been attempting to reunite with Thomas, although if she did depart, she later returned to the colony. In the years following Thomas's disappearance, Ann repeatedly sought to establish a new household, lodging several applications for permission to marry between 1823 and 1825.²⁴³ These efforts suggest a sustained attempt to restore domestic stability after her husband's abandonment.

Analysis of the Warrington family has already highlighted the complexity of alternative networks of care available to colonial children. Thomas and John Warrington were admitted to the MOI in April 1819 and July 1820 respectively, following their father's departure from the colony and their mother being left, as records note, 'in great distress.'²⁴⁴ Their father, John Warrington alias Worthington, a convict transported in 1806 under a seven-year sentence, disappears from the colonial record by the end of 1814. His last documented appearance identifies him as the defendant in a civil action for a debt of sixteen pounds sterling on a promissory note dated 5 January 1814. On 2 August 1814, judgement was entered against him, with damages amounting to

²³⁶ Anne-Maree Whitaker and Anne-Marie Whitaker, "Swords to Ploughshares? The 1798 Irish Rebels in New South Wales," *Labour History: A Journal of Labour and Social History*, no. 75 (1998): 15-16.

²³⁷ Purnell, Marion. "Thomas Prosser", Australian Royalty. A family tree of colonial Australians., accessed 25 November, 2025, <https://australianroyalty.net.au/tree/purnellmccord.ged/individual/I2865/Thomas-Prosser>

²³⁸ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Marriage of Thomas Prosser [sic] and Ann Biggers, 1812, V18121434 3A.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ John Prosser, Petition of Jacob Josephson re admission of John Prosser to the MOI, 22 November 1822, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo. 50.

²⁴² "Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser," 10 July 1819, p.2.

²⁴³ John Prosser later attempted to claim his father's 50-acre land grant in the Macdonald Valley and, in the evidence provided during the ensuing court case, descendants claim that testimony was made regarding Thomas' death in Batavia and Ann's death in the Benevolent Asylum, presumably soon after she signed deeds of release on the land in 1831

"John Prosser, 1815," WikiTree, updated 3 June 2024, accessed 18 February 2026,

<https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Prosser-2412>

Ancestry.com. *New South Wales, Australia, Land Grants, 1788-1963* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2014, Original source *Copies of Deeds of Grant to Land Alienated by Grant, Lease or Purchase 1840-48 No. 56, Land Grants*, <https://www.ancestry.com.au/search/collections/5117/records/285467?tid=&pid=&queryId=ec56c732-580c-422f-b7c3-d5cf903a2c55&phsrc=VOJ9146&phstart=successSource>

²⁴⁴ Thomas Warrington, Aged 8 years. Son of John Warrington and Catherine Malone in care of David Nowland of Airds, recommended for new orphan school, July 6 1818, SANSW, Reel 6047; 4/1740, fo. 255.

£15.15.4d.²⁴⁵ The absence of subsequent records pertaining to Warrington suggest that he was either unable or unwilling to satisfy this debt and removed himself from the jurisdiction. In practical terms, his disappearance constituted both economic and paternal desertion, precipitating the fragmentation of the Warrington household.

Collectively, these cases reveal that voluntary departure functioned as a distinct mechanism of paternal desertion within the colonial environment. Unlike military transfer or maritime employment, these departures were frequently deliberate acts of withdrawal from familial responsibility. Yet the colonial administration rarely intervened to prevent them. In practice, the mobility that characterised early New South Wales allowed some men to escape financial or domestic obligations entirely, leaving women and children to navigate the consequences. Institutional care therefore operated not only as a response to poverty or bereavement, but also as a safety net for families abandoned through male mobility.

Secondary transportation of fathers:

While some fathers abandoned their families through voluntary departure from the colony, others were removed through the penal system itself. Secondary transportation to settlements such as Newcastle and Port Macquarie frequently separated men from their families for years, producing a form of state-imposed desertion that likewise destabilised colonial households.

Three boys were admitted to the MOI following the secondary transportation of their fathers to the penal settlements of Port Macquarie or Newcastle. One of these was James Scott, aged seven, admitted on 1 January 1819 by his guardian, Thomas Matcham Pitt.²⁴⁶ As discussed earlier, Scott's admission followed the death of his mother and the removal of his father to Newcastle in June 1818.²⁴⁷ The Scott children— James, Margaret, and William—had already entered the care of Thomas Matcham Pitt and his wife Elizabeth, yet only James entered the institution.²⁴⁸ There is no evidence that James's father played any further role in his life after his transportation, though the absence of documentation is not conclusive. James's admission illustrates the destabilising effects of secondary punishment on colonial families. Bereft of maternal care and separated from his father through penal removal, James was further divided from his siblings through institutional placement. His early colonial childhood was therefore shaped by a succession of enforced disruptions: maternal mortality, paternal punishment, and finally the fragmentation of the sibling household.

Secondary transportation, conceived as a mechanism of deterrence, entailed the removal of re-offending prisoners to harsher and more remote penal settlements such as Norfolk Island, Newcastle and Port Macquarie. While directed at punishing the individual offender, its repercussions were more broadly experienced. It

²⁴⁵ "John Worthington," Christine's Compendium of Family History, accessed 18 February, 2026, <https://christinescompendium.com/worthington-byrne-ancestors/john-worthington/>.

²⁴⁶ James Scott, Admitted to the Male Orphan School; Mr Pitt his guardian, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.3-4.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., Mother dead, father at Coal River. Recommended for the new orphan school, Reel 6047; 4/1740, fo. 253-4.

²⁴⁸ Sadly, Thomas Matcham Pitt died in 1821, and in a twist, his wife Elizabeth married William Scott who had worked as a property overseer for the Pitt family. <https://marymatchampitt.wordpress.com/thomas-pitt-and-family/>

compounded the disruption already occasioned by conviction and primary transportation, frequently converting precarious households into untenable ones. When a parent such as James Scott senior was transferred to a secondary punishment settlement, children were abruptly deprived of their principal wage-earner or caregiver, often in circumstances where no extended familial network existed to support them. In such cases, children were dispersed informally among neighbours, placed into service at an early age, or admitted to orphanages. These were not incidental outcomes but structural consequences of a penal regime that prioritised discipline over domestic stability, fractured family units and entrenched cycles of poverty and institutionalisation.

Robert Brierty's admission appears as a standard case: father a Prisoner at the Coal River, mother deceased, child received.²⁴⁹ The register records little beyond age, parent, and discharge notation. The reality is far richer. Rather than an absent recidivist father, family reconstruction reveals a man attempting to reclaim paternal legitimacy. Robert Brierty, aged just five, was admitted to the MOI in August 1820 on the petition of James Howarth of Windsor.²⁵⁰ His father, Owen Brierty, had arrived in 1809 under a seven-year sentence, 'opening a shop in Sydney' after obtaining his freedom in 1815.²⁵¹ In 1816 he was convicted of theft from the stores²⁵² and sentenced to fourteen years, which he 'served in various conditions of suffering from that time...at Newcastle and Port Macquarie.'²⁵³ Appealing for mercy, he described the sentence as 'heartrendering [sic] to his disconsolate Wife and two helpless but unoffensive children.'²⁵⁴

Although his reoffending and secondary transportation were central to the family's dislocation, the surviving record suggests sustained paternal concern. Robert's mother appears to have died in 1820, necessitating his admissions to the orphan school. A decade later, in 1830, Owen wrote to inform the committee that his son had recently been removed from the orphan school into the service of Mr McLaren and that it is his intention 'to have him apprenticed to some trade'.²⁵⁵ Whilst respecting the need for the orphan school committee to be aware of his intentions, he acknowledges his parental duty, stating that 'it becomes a parent to doo [stet] the best for his Child.' This was more than a statement of affection. It was an assertion of paternal authority and responsibility, a claim that despite penal reoffending and prolonged absence he retained both the right and the obligation to determine his son's future. In invoking what 'becomes a parent', Owen positioned himself as a morally accountable father seeking to re-establish control over his child's future through apprenticeship and

²⁴⁹ Robert Brierty, His father a prisoner at the Coal River. Admitted to the Male Orphan School, August 1820, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.5-6.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., Memorial of John Howarth, on behalf of Bryty [sic], to the Male Orphan Institution, referred to the Governor, 12 July 1820, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo.21.

²⁵¹ Owen Brierty, Petition for mitigation of sentence, 6 April 1824, SANSW, Fiche 3239; 4/1872, fo. 13.

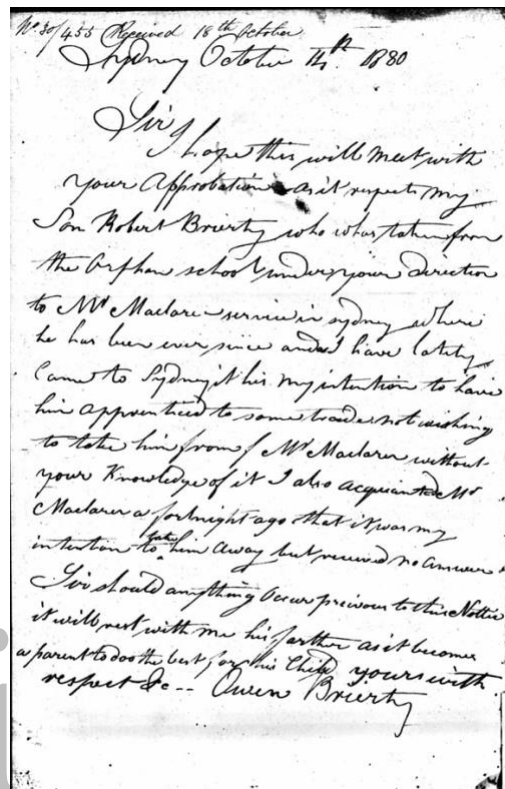
²⁵² Ibid. Brierty stated that he continued uninterrupted working in his shop 'until 1816 when a Steward of a ship lying in the harbour came and offered and sold to petitioner as his own property some shirts and trousers which caused him to be taken up, committed, tried and convicted before the then acting Judge (Garling) and the ship having left the Cove on the day of receiving the said clothes was sentenced to 14 years transportation.'

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Owen Brierty, Petition for mitigation of sentence (as McBrianty), 16 October 1816, SANSW, Fiche 3173; 4/1849, fo. 59.

²⁵⁵ Owen Brierty, Application for Removal, 1830, SANSW, NRS 783 [2]; Reel 2777, fo. 141-2, no. 30/455. Applications for children out of Orphan Schools.

trade. Despite his penal relapse and prolonged absence, Owen continued to regard fatherhood as an enduring responsibility — one that neither transportation nor institutional intervention had extinguished.



No. 455 Received 16th October
Sydney October 14th 1830
Sir,
I hope then will meet with
your approbation and request my
son Robert Brierty who is at the orphan
school under your direction
to Mr. MacLaren in Sydney where
he has been ever since and has lately
come to Sydney, it is my intention to leave
him apprenticed to some trade, not wishing
to take him from Mr. MacLaren without
your knowledge of it I also acquainted Mr.
MacLaren a fortnight ago that it was my
intention to take him away but received no answer.
If should anything occur previous to this letter
it will rest with me, as it becomes
apparent to do so, but for this time, I
respect &c -- Owen Brierty

Image: 3: Owen Brierty's letter regarding his son, Robert, 1830.²⁵⁶

The Cassidy family, discussed in greater detail later in this paper, also illustrates the consequences of secondary transportation. Elizabeth Cassidy (née Mountford) was keeping a public house at the Rocks when her seven-year-old son, Edward Cassidy, entered the Male Orphan Institution in April 1822.²⁵⁷ Transported to the colony in 1804 under sentence for life, Elizabeth subsequently formed a partnership with Michael Cassidy, with whom she had seven children between 1805 and 1818. In 1819 Michael was sentenced to two years' confinement at Newcastle, where he died around 1821.²⁵⁸ His secondary transportation operated, therefore, not merely as a sentence directed at the offender but as a form of collateral punishment that impacted on the entire Cassidy family. Its practical effect was to extend the reach of the penal state into the intimate sphere of family life, subjecting spouses and children to enforced separation, material deprivation, and the progressive erosion of household stability.

These cases illustrate that paternal desertion in early colonial New South Wales rarely followed a single pattern. Fathers disappeared through multiple mechanisms: imperial military rotation, maritime labour, voluntary

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Edward Cassidy, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 11 April 1822, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo. 7-8.

²⁵⁸ Michael Cassidy, On list of prisoners sent to Newcastle per "Princess Charlotte", 22 October 1819, Reel 6006; 4/3500, fo. 319.

departure from the colony, and the punitive regime of secondary transportation. While the immediate causes differed, the consequences for colonial families were strikingly similar. Households already operating at the margins of subsistence lost their principal male provider, leaving women to negotiate survival through precarious labour, informal guardianship networks, or institutional relief. In this context, admission to the MOI functioned not simply as a response to parental neglect but as a structural outcome of colonial mobility, penal discipline, and economic fragility. Orphanhood, in this sense, emerged not primarily from individual abandonment but from the broader social and institutional forces shaping early colonial life.

Secondary Transportation of mothers:

Like fathers, women who reoffended could be removed to secondary punishment settlements such as Newcastle or Port Macquarie. For mothers, however, this punishment had immediate implications for dependent children who lost their primary caregiver. Female convicts sent to Newcastle were received into a depot on Gaol Hill before being either confined and employed in the gaol, assigned as servants to early settlers or employed in government labour.²⁵⁹ Between 1804 and 1822, approximately 1,600 women were sent to the Hunter region, including three of the 'orphan' boys' mothers, Margaret Roach, Mary Lillis and Catherine Kelly.

James and Edward Roach were admitted to the MOI by their father, Edward Roach senior, in 1822.²⁶⁰ His 1825 petition to Governor Brisbane requesting mitigation of sentence for his wife survives only because it was preserved among the Colonial Secretary's papers rather than the orphanage records themselves. This document therefore provides rare contextual insight into the circumstances of the boy's admission, revealing that Edward Roach senior had:

met with the visitation of a paralytic disease, has been for a good while back, incapable of exerting himself for his own support, or for that of his family, which a wife and three helpless children compose: That she, being incautiously led to violate the laws of the country, has been sentenced five years to New Castle; four of which are now expired. That his children's situation in consequence of the absence of their mother excite the most painful feelings in his mind...'²⁶¹

This is a somewhat tragic and complex story, demonstrating the diverse personal and social influences which all too often brought about the institutionalisation of a child. Margaret Roach twice petitioned to have her daughter admitted to the Female Orphan Institution (May and August 1821) and, on both occasions the admission was declined.²⁶² The records of the FOI are, like those of the MOI, perfunctory. Committee meeting minutes for 9

²⁵⁹ "Sent to Newcastle," Female Convict Research Centre Inc. Researching female convicts of Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania), 2021, accessed 25 February, 2026, <https://femaleconvicts.org.au/convict-institutions/punishments?view=article&id=409:sent-to-newcastle&catid=69>.

²⁶⁰ Edward Roach, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 22 November 1822, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.9-10. James Roach, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 10 July 1822, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo. 9-10.

²⁶¹ Edward Roach, Paralytic in Benevolent Asylum. Petition to have son Edward admitted to the Male Orphan Institution, 22 November 1822, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo. 50.

²⁶² Margaret Roach, Petition to the Female Orphan Institution dismissed, 9 May 1821, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/403, fo.70. Margaret Roach, Petition for her daughter Margaret to be admitted to the Female Orphan Institution, 7 August 1821, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/403, fo.74.

May 1821 state 'The petition of Margaret Roach was read, and dismissed.'²⁶³ In August 'the Petition of Margaret Roach was reconsidered on behalf of her daughter Margaret when the child was ordered to be admitted if her age does not much exceed eight years.'²⁶⁴ Given Margaret was born in 1808, her age precluded admission. Two weeks after the second application, Margaret was indicted for the theft of 'sundry articles of wearing apparel,' and sentenced to five years transportation to Newcastle.²⁶⁵

In her evidence to the court, Margaret stated that:

she has suffered most severely from...an afflicted mind, Having Three Infant Children absolutely destitute of both food and wearing apparel, Her Husband being a Cripple and has been so this Three Years and is now supported by the Charitable society, at Sydney. That Prisoner has during the three Years Her Husband has been a cripple...has Conducted herself in an Honest and Industrious manner having supported her small Family by Her own hard labour. Prisoner has worked for the Reverend Mr Cowper, Major Antill & Mr Oxley, Surveyor General of this Colony, none of which Gentlemen ever had the slightest charge against Prisoner. Prisoner has not the means to employ Council and has not any person whatever to look into Her affairs.'²⁶⁶

Margaret's testimony reveals a household pushed beyond its capacity by prolonged illness, poverty, and absence of institutional support. For three years she had sustained her family through her own labour while her husband, incapacitated by stroke, relied on charitable assistance. Her statement is particularly striking in its emphasis on character: she emphasises her industry and respectability, noting that she had worked for prominent colonial figures including Reverend Cowper, Major Antill, and Surveyor General John Oxley, none of whom had ever made complaint against her. This appeal to reputation is significant. It situates Margaret not on the margins of colonial society, but within recognised networks of labour and patronage, highlighting that her offence did not arise from habitual criminality but from acute and sustained distress. Her inability to secure legal representation further highlights her vulnerability within the colonial justice system. In this context, her crime appears less as an expression of criminal intent than as a desperate response to structural hardship, where industry and respectability proved insufficient to shield her family from destitution. Two months later, the consequences of this crisis manifested in the admission of Margaret's daughter to the FOS, 'to remove her from her present dangerous situation.'²⁶⁷ Interestingly, when his son was ordered for admission to the MOI in January 1822, Edward senior refused to allow him to leave him.²⁶⁸ This action bears testimony not only to the parental anguish accompanying the relinquishment of children to orphanages, but also to the moment when forces beyond a family's control overwhelmed even the strongest determination to keep children at home.

²⁶³ Margaret Roach, Petition to the Female Orphan Institution dismissed, 9 May 1821.

²⁶⁴ Margaret Roach, Petition for her daughter Margaret to be admitted to the Female Orphan Institution, 7 August 1821.

²⁶⁵ "Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser." 25 August 1821, p. 3.

²⁶⁶ The King against Margaret Roach and Catherine Clarkson, 7 August 1821, SANSW, 22/05/1996 Reel 1975, fo.797 - 807

²⁶⁷ Margaret Roach, To be admitted to the Female Orphan Institution, 17 October 1821, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/403, fo.76-7

²⁶⁸ Edward Roach, Refused to allow his son, ordered to be admitted to the MOI, to leave him, 7 April 1822, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo. 39.

Mary Lillis was sentenced to Newcastle in 1820. Mary arrived in 1818 accompanied by her two young sons, Edward aged two and James aged four. On arrival, they were confined to the Parramatta Female Factory,²⁶⁹ where they remained until 1820 when Mary was sentenced to one year of secondary transportation to Newcastle.²⁷⁰ Following her return, Mary and James appear to have resumed residence at the Female Factory and, in October 1822, James, now aged eight, was admitted to the MOI.²⁷¹ Despite her reputation as a rebellious woman,²⁷² Mary sought to maintain proximity to her son. In 1822 and 1823 she secured employment at the orphanage as a washerwoman, enabling continued contact with him.²⁷³ In 1823 she married William Sadler,²⁷⁴ an emancipist who, like Mary, worked at the MOI. He subsequently petitioned the orphan school committee twice for James's release into his care so that he might 'learn him a useful Trade'.²⁷⁵ Although the committee refused the request on the grounds that James was 'too young & not sufficiently forward', the persistence of these petitions demonstrates sustained attempts to re-establish familial authority over the child's future.²⁷⁶ By 1828, James—then aged fifteen—had left the institution and was residing with his emancipated mother at her Pitt Street property in Sydney.²⁷⁷ His eventual return to the maternal household suggests that institutional placement did not necessarily sever familiar bonds, but could function as a temporary response to circumstances beyond a parent's control. The efforts of Mary and William Sadler were not unique; other families likewise sought to maintain contact with children placed in the orphan schools, a pattern that will be explored in greater detail later in this paper.

Edward Kelly was only five when he was admitted to the MOI in September 1820.²⁷⁸ He had arrived in the colony in 1817 with his mother, Catherine Kelly, an Irishwoman sentenced to fourteen years' transportation when aged just nineteen.²⁷⁹ Within eight months of arrival, Catherine sought permission to marry William Goodere, but the marriage did not proceed before she was transferred to Newcastle in August 1818 to serve a two-year secondary sentence.²⁸⁰ The record is characteristically silent on Edward's circumstances during this period. He may have

²⁶⁹ Mary Lillis, On list of convicts disembarked from the *Elizabeth* and forwarded to the Factory, Parramatta; with male child, 25 November 1818, SANSW, Reel 6006; 4/3499, fo. 175..

²⁷⁰ Mary Lillis, On list of prisoners to be sent to Newcastle, appears as Lilliss, 20 January 1820, SANSW, Reel 6007; 4/3501, fo. 197. At this time Mary applied unsuccessfully to have James admitted to the MOI. It appears likely that James therefore accompanied her to Newcastle.

²⁷¹ James Lillis, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 15 October 1822, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo. 7–8. There is no further reference to Edward.

²⁷² I have labelled Mary Lillis a 'somewhat rebellious woman' because, in 1822, Mary was shackled in punishment 'for running away' and for 'misconduct'. It appears that she was not entirely compliant during her service, and may well have been sent to Newcastle for similar non-compliance.

Mary Lillis, Complaints of treatment in the Factory; appears as Lillas, SANSW, Reel 6056; 4/1763, fo. 301.

²⁷³ Mary Lillis, Washerwoman, re payment of wages, April & July 1823, SANSW, Reel 6021; 4/7079, fo.45a, 87, 113, 137

²⁷⁴ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Marriage for William Sadler and Mary Lillace, 1823, 293/1823 V18232938.

²⁷⁵ James Lillis, Application for Removal, 13 September 1825, SANSW, NRS 783; 4/333; Roll 2776, fo.15.

²⁷⁶ Op. cit., 30 September 1826, fo.123.

²⁷⁷ State Records Authority of New South Wales; Kingswood, New South Wales, Australia; 1828 *Census: Alphabetical Return*; Series Number: NRS 1272; Reel: 2555

²⁷⁸ Edward Kelly, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 1820, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.5-6.

²⁷⁹ Catherine Kelly, BDA on-line, accessed 7 February 2026.

²⁸⁰ Catherine Kelly, Re permission to marry at Parramatta, 6,9 April 1818, SANSW, Reel 6006; 4/3498, fo.135.

Ibid., On list of prisoners to be sent to Newcastle per 'Lady Nelson', 11 August 1818, Reel 6006; 4/3499, fo.13.

accompanied his mother to Newcastle, only entering the MOI at the conclusion of her secondary punishment, but this remains unrecorded.

Catherine's repeated applications to marry suggest a strategic pursuit of stability within the constraints of the convict system. A further, unsuccessful application followed in February 1820.²⁸¹ By 1821, however, she had formed a partnership with John Bruce—significantly, a fellow-transportee who had arrived on the same vessel and had also been sent to Newcastle. Their son, Robert Bruce, was born in February 1822.²⁸² Fellow Newcastle transportee Mary Lillis acted as the child's sponsor at his baptism. These overlapping connections point to the formation of social and familial networks grounded in shared experiences of transportation and secondary exile, networks that could be mobilised in the pursuit of stability and support.

The cases of Margaret Roach, Mary Lillis and Catherine Kelly illustrate the varied consequences of maternal secondary transportation for colonial families. When mothers were removed to punishment settlements, children were often deprived of both economic support and their primary caregiver, a rupture that frequently precipitated institutional admission. In other instances, however, it appears possible that children accompanied their mothers into secondary exile, remaining within the orbit of maternal care, albeit under penal conditions.

These cases also suggest that separation did not necessarily foreclose efforts to maintain connection. Some mothers and their partners sought, where possible, to re-establish or sustain familial ties, indicating that institutionalisation could function as a provisional response to disruption rather than a permanent severance. At the same time, the unevenness of the archival record cautions against assuming continuity of contact in all cases.

The Female Factory and child separation:

Colonial institutions could themselves generate the circumstances that led to the admission of children to the MOI. One of the most significant mechanisms through which this occurred was the confinement of women within Parramatta Female Factory. When mothers were imprisoned, awaiting assignment, or otherwise confined within the Factory system, their children were frequently dispersed through informal care arrangements or removed to orphan institutions. In this sense, orphanhood in the early colony could be administratively produced rather than simply the result of parental death or abandonment.

Like secondary transportation, the Female Factory functioned not merely as a site of punishment but as a mechanism through which the colonial state reorganised families. John Thomas was admitted to the MOI in January 1819.²⁸³ His mother, Elizabeth Thomas, arrived in the colony in 1814 under a life sentence.²⁸⁴ Accompanying her was three-year-old John, who appears to have remained with his mother at Parramatta until

²⁸¹ Catherine Kelly, Re permission to marry at Parramatta, 7, 17 February 1820, Reel 6007; 4/3501, fo.256.

²⁸² NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth of Robert Bruce, 1822, V1822208 128.

²⁸³ John Thomas, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 1 January 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.1-2.

²⁸⁴ Elizabeth Thomas, BDA on-line, Accessed 3 February 2026.

1819. Elizabeth was in the old female accommodation, located above the Parramatta gaol. There, up to 150 women and 70 children worked, and those with no outside accommodation also slept there.²⁸⁵ Conditions were crowded, and securing suitable accommodation near the factory was often perilous.²⁸⁶ After 1821, the regulations changed, allowing children to remain with their mothers only up to the age of three or four, after which they were removed to the orphanages.²⁸⁷ An entreaty written in August 1827 by Ann Joyce Kelly reveals the harsh reality of this policy in practice. She writes:

That Memorialist has a child in the orphan Establishment...who was wrested from Memorialist without her consent and placed there in 1823, when Memorialist was in her Servitude, and was unable to resist the measure ...'²⁸⁸

Kelly's petition is particularly valuable because such expressions of maternal resistance rarely appear within the institutional records themselves. The admission registers record the removal of children but seldom preserve the voices of the mothers from whom they were taken. Although policy allowed children to remain with their mothers prior to 1821, the admission of boys to the MOI before that date indicates that women were nonetheless pressured to relinquish their children. Samuel Marsden stated that :

Many of [the women] pay four shillings per week for their lodgings and fire; they have no means but theft and prostitution to obtain this sum, and these vices are become so common and habitual, that the women will tell the magistrate that they have no other means to supply their necessities.²⁸⁹

In such circumstances, the institutionalisation of children was less an act of maternal abandonment than the consequence of conditions that made continued care untenable. The removal of children therefore compounded the trauma of transportation itself, producing a form of enforced maternal loss.

There is repeated evidence that the institutionalisation of boys during periods of crises did trigger maternal distress. In 1822, six-year-old William Carter arrived in the colony with his mother, Jane, a servant sentenced to fourteen years' transportation.²⁹⁰ Jane was immediately confined to the Parramatta Female Factory, while William was admitted to the MOI.²⁹¹ Two months later, a surviving letter from the factory records an unusual intervention: the doctor at the 'New Gaol Factory', noting Jane's good behaviour, requested that William be permitted to travel from Sydney to visit his mother.²⁹² Such medical advocacy appears rare within the surviving documentation and stands in contrast to the orphanage's general practice of maintaining separation between

²⁸⁵ Samuel Marsden, Letter to his Excellency, 15 July 1815, 'Minutes of Evidence taken before SELECT'; House of Commons, 'Report from the Select Committee on the State of Gaols &c. (12 July 1819) in House of Commons, Selection of Reports and Papers of the House of Commons 51: Prisons (House of Commons, 1836), 82.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ "Parramatta Female Factory," Parramatta, City of Parramatta Council, 2025, 2025, <https://atparramatta.com/discover/history-and-heritage/historical-places/parramatta-female-factory>.

²⁸⁸ Mary Ann Joyce, Applications for Removal, 26 August 1827, NRS 783; 4/333; Roll 2776, fo.301.

²⁸⁹ Marsden, Short Letter to his Excellency, 15 July 1815, 'Minutes of Evidence taken before SELECT'; House of Commons, 'Report from the Select Committee on the State of Gaols &c. (12 July 1819) in House of Commons, Selection of Reports and Papers of the House of Commons 51: Prisons (House of Commons, 1836), 82.

²⁹⁰ Jane Carter, ADB on-line, accessed 3 February 2026.

²⁹¹ William Carter, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 15 October 1822, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.7-8.

²⁹² Jane Carter, Recommended that she be allowed a visit by her son, at the Factory at Parramatta, 9 December 1822, SANSW, Reel 6054; 4/1757, fo. 180.

admitted children and their parents. The request therefore offers a rare glimpse of the emotional consequences of penal policy, revealing a moment when maternal suffering became sufficiently evident to prompt intervention.

The Female Factory therefore functioned simultaneously as a penal institution and a mechanism of family disruption, punishing women while limiting their capacity to maintain maternal authority over their children. The new factory, opened in February 1821, was heavily influenced in its operational strategies by the Reverend Samuel Marsden. His beliefs were twofold: the shaming and institutionalisation of immoral convicts and the removal of children from their 'shameful' mothers.²⁹³ Jan Mason and Tobia Fattore stress that the children of women from the factory were perceived as targets of colonial policies which inculcated them in 'values their mothers were considered lacking.'²⁹⁴ The goal was to rescue convict-order children from perceived moral 'impurities,' thereby undermining the legitimacy of convict motherhood itself.²⁹⁵ Eleanor Casella concludes that 'the role of 'caregiver' was itself precarious as female convicts struggled to assert their basic right to mothering.'²⁹⁶ The institutional archive, however, rarely records these struggles directly. The removal of children appears in the documentation as administrative routine, while the maternal distress accompanying such separations must be reconstructed from scattered petitions, letters, and incidental references in the broader colonial record.

The stresses of transportation were compounded when women such as Jane Carter were forcibly separated from their children. Ellen Mahoney arrived in the colony in January 1822 and was immediately confined to the Parramatta Female Factory. Her ten-year-old son Jeremiah, who had endured the same voyage and dislocation, was admitted to the Male Orphan Institution only a month later.²⁹⁷ For transported mothers, the shock of arrival was therefore often compounded by the sudden institutional separation from children who had travelled with them. Conviction, transportation, confinement, and the removal of a child unfolded in rapid succession, producing a profound rupture in the maternal relationship at precisely the moment when both mother and child were confronting the uncertainties of an unfamiliar colonial world. Mahoney's experience was not unique. Sarah Corbyn, a forty-three-year-old widow when indicted for stealing in 1820, was transported for seven years,

²⁹³ Jan Mason and Tobia Fattore, "Shame, social orders and the governing of women and girls through institutions in New South Wales," *Emotions: History, Culture, Society* 1, no. 2 (2017): 140.

²⁹⁴ Mason and Fattore, "Shame, social orders and the governing of women and girls through institutions in New South Wales," 141.

²⁹⁵ Eleanor Conlin Casella, "The Materiality of Yearning: An Archaeology of Carceral Motherhood in Nineteenth-Century Van Diemen's Land, Australia," in *Mothering and Archaeology* (Routledge, 2025), 197.

²⁹⁶ Casella, "The Materiality of Yearning: An Archaeology of Carceral Motherhood in Nineteenth-Century Van Diemen's Land, Australia," 197.

²⁹⁷ William Mahoney, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 23 February 1822, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo. 7-8.

Admitted to the Male Orphan School from the Factory; appears as Mehoney, 10 April 1822, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo. 38.

bringing with her ten-year-old Henry.²⁹⁸ Four months after arrival, Henry was admitted to the MOI.²⁹⁹ In October 1822, ten-year-old Charles Myers was admitted to the MOI while his mother remained at the Factory.³⁰⁰ Rebecca Myers arrived in the colony in May 1822, accompanied by three children; Charles (born 1812), Matilda (1817) and Sarah (1819).³⁰¹ A London-born seamstress, Rebecca was sentenced to 14-years transportation for forgery. Later in 1822 she married Charles Bradburn and, by 1828, all three children were reunited and living in the Bradburn household in Castlereagh Street, Sydney with an additional child Henry Bradburn, aged four.³⁰²

John Brannon was admitted to the MOI in October 1822, at the same time as Charles Myers and under similar circumstances.³⁰³ His mother, Irishwoman Margaret Brannon (Brennan), had arrived in the colony in 1821 under a seven-year sentence and was immediately placed in the Parramatta Female Factory, where John initially remained with her.³⁰⁴ Margaret appears to have sought marriage as a means of restoring a household in which her son might remain under her care. In February and again in May 1822 she requested permission to marry Michael Kiernan.³⁰⁵ Although both applications were approved, the marriages did not proceed and, five months later, John was admitted to the orphanage. Margaret's subsequent actions suggest that remarriage remained central to her strategy for reclaiming her child. By 1823, she had moved to Bringelly and formed a relationship with Peter Byrne, a servant to John Campbell (Secretary to Governor Macquarie). Margaret herself soon entered Campbell's service and, in September 1823, sought permission to marry Byrne, the marriage taking place later that year.³⁰⁶ The formation of this new household appears to have enabled John's discharge, for by 1825, he was residing with his mother.³⁰⁷

This pattern reflects a broader dynamic within the colony. As Carol Liston has shown, one of the most effective means by which a child might be reclaimed from an orphanage was through a respectable marriage, with

²⁹⁸ Sarah had appealed for clemency in an attempt to escape transportation. The document states that this is her first offence; her former employers will provide character references; her brother, a farmer in Somerset, will take in her and her son.

Sarah Corbyn, widow with a 10 year old son; Criminal Petitions for Clemency, May 1821, The National Archives, Kew; HO 17/25/4.

²⁹⁹ Henry Corbyn, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 29 April 1822, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo. 7-8.

The 1822 census reveals that Sarah was assigned as a servant to the Judge Advocate's clerk, James Mordaunt, and later moved to the Argyle district as a servant to James Styles, a landholder in Bungonia. This was the district in which Henry too eventually settled, becoming a landholder and pound keeper at Jerarra.

³⁰⁰ Charles Myers, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 15 October 1822, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.7-8.

³⁰¹ Clementia / Clementine Rebecca Meyers, DBA On-line, Accessed 3 February 2026.

³⁰² NSW Regsity of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Marriage of Clementia Rebecca Myers and Charles Breadburn, 1822, V18223154 3B

³⁰³ John Brannon, Son of Margaret Brannon, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 15 October 1822, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.7-8.

³⁰⁴ Margaret Brennan, Convict Records, <https://convictrecords.com.au/convicts/brennan/margaret/135799>

³⁰⁵ Margaret Brennan, Permission to marry in the Roman Catholic Church at Sydney, 4 & 6 February 1822, SANSW, Reel 6008; 4/3504A, fo.401; 10 & 1 May 1822, Reel 6009; 4/3505, fo.263.

³⁰⁶ Margaret Brennan, Permission to marry at Castlereagh, 1&3 September 1823, SANSW, Reel 6011; 4/3509, fo.182.

NSW Regsity of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Marriage for Peter Byrne and Margaret Brenan, 1823, V1823219 155. This marriage was registered at the Castereagh Church of England. Byrne and Brennan were Roman Catholic, and the marriage index indicates they married again in 1825 at St Mary's Roman Catholic Church, Sydney.

³⁰⁷ Home Office: Settlers and Convicts, New South Wales and Tasmania; (The National Archives Microfilm Publication HO10, Pieces 5, 19-20, 32-51); The National Archives of the UK (TNA), Kew, Surrey, England, Fo. 51.

stepfathers typically required to apply formally for release and to provide character references.³⁰⁸ Yet such outcomes were not guaranteed. Where authorities doubted the stability of the household, apprenticeship rather than parental restoration was often preferred, and children in step-parent families could still be classified as vulnerable.³⁰⁹ In this way, remarriage functioned ambivalently: it could provide the conditions for familial restoration, as in Margaret Brannon's case, but could equally contribute to ongoing or renewed institutional intervention.

Taken together, these cases illustrate that the colonial government's attempts to reform convict women through confinement and moral regulation frequently came at the cost of maternal separation. In this way, colonial institutions did not merely respond to family breakdown but actively produced circumstances that led to the institutionalisation of children. The population of the orphan schools therefore emerged not solely from parental failure, but from the structural consequences of penal policy.

Parental Death:

While the confinement of women within the Female Factory could forcibly separate mothers from their children, institutionalisation was also frequently precipitated by death within fragile colonial households. Mortality rates in the early colony remained high, and the loss of a parent—particularly a father whose labour underpinned the household economy—could quickly render a family incapable of maintaining its children. In such circumstances the orphan institutions functioned as a form of emergency relief, absorbing children whose domestic support structures had collapsed through bereavement rather than abandonment. Bubacz's research indicates that 12.5 percent of the children in her study had no surviving parents as a result of death or desertion. By contrast, analysis of admissions to the MOI between 1819 and December 1823 suggests that 27.3 percent of the boys had no surviving or traceable parents for the same reasons. This disparity indicates that parental death and desertion may have played a more significant role in the institutionalisation of boys in early New South Wales than has previously been recognised.

James Lees (born 1806) was admitted in the first intake of January 1819, following the death of his father, Thomas Lees in September 1817.³¹⁰ A month later, Emma Lees gave birth to the couple's seventh child, leaving her a widow with six living children to support on her meagre wage as a washerwoman. Thomas and Emma Lees, both convicts, had married in 1803. Thomas, who was described as 'an industrious inhabitant of the Colony', supported his growing family working as a blacksmith from his large landholding in King Street, Sydney.³¹¹ Thomas's death abruptly reversed the financial and familial stability the couple had built. James was the first of

³⁰⁸ Carol Liston, "Convict women in the female factories of New South Wales'," *Women Transported, life in Australian's convict female factories* Parramatta Heritage Centre and University of Western Sydney (2008): 56.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ James Lees, Admitted to Male Orphan Institution, 1 January 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208 fo.2

³¹¹ *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser (NSW : 1803 – 1842)*, Saturday 4 October 1817, p. 3, nla.news-page493520. Courtesy of National Library of Australia via Trove.

Michaela Ann Cameron, "Elizabeth Lees: Departed Innocence," *St. John's Online*, (2021) <https://stjohnsonline.org/bio/elizabeth-lees>, accessed 10 November 2025. Cameron states that the family were acknowledged as holding all of King Street, between Pitt and Castlereagh Streets, where 'Lees Court' can still be found today.

the couple's children to be admitted to an orphanage, but historian Michaela Cameron believes that daughters Betsy (born 1809) and Mary (born 1811) could also have been sent to the female orphanage at about the same time.³¹² Ann, the eldest child (born 1804) was placed in service and Thomas (born 1814) was admitted to the MOI in August 1824 aged eight.³¹³ By 1824, only the youngest child, Hannah (born 1817), remained with her mother, and the family unit was effectively shattered.

Ann Chapman née Marsh was a businesswoman who unsuccessfully attempted to avert financial ruin after the death of her partner, William Chapman, in 1810. Ann's colonial life was a convoluted but interesting one, given that she had three colonial relationships before partnering with Chapman, a plumber and glazier.³¹⁴ Her son, James Chapman, was the youngest of nine living children to her four partners.³¹⁵ When he was admitted to the MOI in January 1819, the admission recorded 'Father dead, Mother in Sydney, but poor', listing Ann as a baker of New Street, Sydney.³¹⁶ Historian Michael Flynn describes Ann Marsh as 'a capable and enterprising woman,' who, from the 1790s operated her own passenger and goods boat service between Sydney and Parramatta.³¹⁷ She was literate, and ran a business large enough to employ others. In partnership with Chapman, she also operated a general store, butchery, bakery and tavern, holding the liquor license for the King's Head in her own name.³¹⁸ Once Chapman died however, she experienced financial difficulties, being forced to sell the tavern, but continuing the operation of her boat service.³¹⁹ With such a large family, not even a woman of Ann's business acumen could overcome the financial challenges resulting from the death of her partner.

The circumstances surrounding the admission of six-year-old John Green to the MOI in January 1819 further illustrate the destabilising impact of paternal death on colonial families. As in many cases, the admission records note the death of John's father and his mother's resulting poverty.³²⁰ Catherine née Delaney arrived from Ireland in 1803 under a seven-year sentence, and soon formed a relationship with Thomas Green.³²¹ Green died in May 1815 after disappearing while crossing the Blue Mountains during an expedition with Governor Macquarie.³²² His death left Catherine to support their five children without the income he had earned as a constable and gaoler, plunging the family into immediate financial hardship. In November 1815, she received £5 from the police fund as 'the Widow of the late Thomas Green left in destitute circumstances'.³²³ Despite this assistance, Catherine was unable to sustain the family through her work as a washerwoman, and the family began to

³¹² "Elizabeth Lees: Departed Innocence". Op.cit.

³¹³ Thomas Lees, Re his admission to the Orphan School, 16 August 1824, SANSW, Reel 6013, 4/3512 fo.195

³¹⁴ Flynn, *The Second Fleet: Britain's Grim Convict Armada of 1790*, 429–30. Her first relationship was with Richard Alley, the surgeon on her transport vessel and the second to emancipist surgeon John Irving, who died in 1795. She then married Robert Flannagan in 1796 and, after his disappearance from the colonial record, partnered with Chapman.

³¹⁵ A tenth child died as a newborn in 1791.

³¹⁶ James Cahpman, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 1 January 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.1-2.

³¹⁷ Flynn, *The Second Fleet: Britain's Grim Convict Armada of 1790*, 430.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ John Green, A List of Children proposed for admission, Sydney, 11 August 1818, SANSW, Reel 6047; 4/1740, fo. 257–8.

³²¹ Catherine Laughlin [McLaughlin/Delaney], DBA On-line, accessed 4 March 2026.

³²² Catherine Delaney, Biographies from the 1788–1820 Pioneer Association website (now closed). The copyright passed to BDA 2017. Edited by Malcolm Sainty 2021. <https://www.bda-online.org.au/mybda/search/expanded-biographical-item/91041042601/910410426?f=catherine&l=delaney&ol=&i=3&s=&p=>

³²³ Mrs Catherine Green, Paid from Police Fund, 11 August 1815; 4 November 1815, SANSW, Reel 6038; SZ759, fo. 153.

fragment. John was admitted to the MOI in January 1819, followed by his six-year-old brother Thomas, in 1822.³²⁴ Thomas' admission record lists Catherine as residing in the Benevolent Asylum, revealing the cumulative consequences of a household progressively destabilized following the loss of its primary breadwinner.

Thomas Bowman's familial circumstances echoed those of John Green, and the boys were admitted on the same day. Like Catherine Green, Catherine Bowman née Connelly was a washerwoman, the admission recommendation stating that 'Father dead, Mother in Sydney, very poor and bad character.'³²⁵ Connelly was eighteen when convicted in Dublin and sentenced to seven years' transportation, arriving in the colony in 1811.³²⁶ Soon after her arrival she formed a relationship with Thomas Bowman senior, and their son was born circa 1812. Very little is known of Thomas senior, apart from his arrival aboard the *Calcutta* in 1803 via Tasmania; he died in January 1816 aged forty-two.³²⁷ After Bowman's death, Catherine worked as a servant before forming a partnership with John Barfoot.³²⁸ The characterisation of Catherine as of 'bad character' warrants caution. Such judgements, frequently applied to convict women, often collapsed poverty, informal relationships, and survival strategies into moral deficiency. In Catherine's case, the surviving evidence is limited, but it is clear that she was left to raise her child following her partner's death while supporting herself through labour. In this context, the label reveals less about her conduct than about the interpretive framework of those recording her circumstances. After her partner's death, Catherine worked as a servant before partnering with John Barfoot.

Like several of the women discussed above, James Martin's mother, Mary Allen, supported her family through her work as a washerwoman. In her case, she successfully kept her family together for more than six years following the death of her partner, John Martin, in 1812.³²⁹ Allen, who had arrived with the First Fleet aged twenty-two under a seven-year sentence for theft, formed a series of colonial partnerships and bore eight children between 1790 and 1812, six of whom survived.³³⁰ At the time of James's admission, Mary Allen was approximately fifty-six years old. The recommendation for his admission describes Allen as 'aged', reflecting not simply her chronological years, but the cumulative effects of a long and arduous colonial life: transported as a young woman, shaped by her convict existence, and challenged by years of labour and widowhood in supporting her family.³³¹ In this light, the label 'aged' reads as a testament to Mary's endurance. Yet the same record describes James as 'a very fine boy' who 'can read his letters' indicating that, despite Allen's background and economic hardship, his early upbringing had included a degree of care and instruction.³³² This evidence of

³²⁴ John Green, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 1 January 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.1-2.

Ibid., Thomas Green, 15 January 1822, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.7-8.

³²⁵ Ibid., Thomas Bowman, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 1 January 1819.

Thomas Bowman, Son of Thomas Bowman, deceased, and Catherine Connelly. Proposed for admission to the Male Orphan House, 11 August 1818, SANSW, Reel 6047; 4/1740, fo.257-8.

³²⁶ Catherine Connelly, BDA-Online, accessed 4 March 2026.

³²⁷ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages, Death of Thomas Bowman. 1816, V18163516 2B.

³²⁸ Catherine Connolly, NSW Settler and Convict List, 1816, The National Archives, England, HYO 10/4, fo. 28-29.

³²⁹ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages, Death of John Martin, 1812, V18122865 2A. Aged 40.

³³⁰ Gillen, *The Founders of Australia*, 5-6.

³³¹ James Martin, Son of Mary Allen, of Windsor; aged 7, Recommended for admission to the new orphan school, 25 July 1818, SANSW, Reel 6047; 4/1740, fo.253-4.

³³² Ibid.

competent parenting is significant. It suggests that Allen's decision to seek institutional support did not arise from neglect, but from the cumulative strain of prolonged responsibility following John Martin's death, which had removed the family's primary source of support and set in motion the conditions that ultimately led to James's admission.

When Thomas Anderson was recommended for admission to the orphanage in August 1818, it was on the grounds that his father was dead and his mother, living in Sydney, was 'very poor.'³³³ The admission register adds that Mary Anderson worked as a baker of Cumberland Street, Sydney.³³⁴ Thomas's father, Robert Anderson, had been convicted of desertion from his Royal Artillery unit in 1805 and transported for life.³³⁵ Mary followed him to the colony in 1808 as a free woman, leaving their children behind in Nova Scotia. In the colony, the couple had two further surviving sons, Thomas (born March 1811) and George (born July 1813).³³⁶ Robert's death in 1816 removed the family's primary source of support, leaving Mary to sustain two young children through her own labour.³³⁷ While she appears to have maintained the household for a time, the demands of single parenting ultimately resulted in poverty and Thomas's admission. A comparable pattern is evident in the case of James Horner, admitted on the same day. The recommendation for his admission similarly recorded that his father was dead and his 'Mother in Sydney but very poor.'³³⁸ Mary Horner worked as a washerwoman from premises at 16 Pitt Street, Sydney.³³⁹ James's father, Richard Horner, was an apothecary and surgeon who arrived in 1804 under a seven-year sentence for obtaining goods by false pretences.³⁴⁰ He formed a de facto relationship with Mary Tyrrell, an Irishwoman who arrived under a seven-year sentence, and the couple had four children. His death in March 1816 left Mary with four dependants aged between seven and newborn.³⁴¹ Although she appears to have sustained the family for over two years—likely with the assistance of informal community support—the cumulative strain of widowhood ultimately necessitated James's admission.

The experiences of these families demonstrate how paternal death could rapidly transform relatively stable households into situations of acute vulnerability. In such circumstances, the loss of male wages was often compounded by structural pressures within the colonial economy, including high rents, insecure employment, and the limited earning capacity available to women. William Ward aged eight, and John Ward aged seven, were admitted to the MOI on the same day as John Green.³⁴² The recommendation for the admission of the Ward brothers stated:

³³³ Thomas Anderson, Son of Mary and Robert Anderson, Recommended for admission to Male Orphan Institution, 11 August 1818, SANSW, Reel 6047; 4/1740, fo.258.

³³⁴ Thomas Anderson, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 1 January 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.1-2.

³³⁵ Robert Anderson, ADB On-line, accessed 4 March 2026.

Robert Anderson, *Convict Records*, <https://convictrecords.com.au/convicts/anderson/robert/107729>

³³⁶ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages, Birth of Thomas Anderson, 1811, V18112400 1A; Birth of George Anderson, 1813, V18133092 1A.

³³⁷ Ibid, Death of Robert Anderson, 1816, V18163512 2B. Aged 45.

³³⁸ James Horner, Recommended for admission to the Male Orphan Institution, 11 August 1818, SANSW, Reel 6047; 4/1740, fo.257-8.

³³⁹ James Horner, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 1 January 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.1-2.

³⁴⁰ Richard Horner, BDA on-line, accessed 24 January 2026.

³⁴¹ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages, Death of Richard Horner, 1816, V18163547 2B, aged 43.

³⁴² A third brother, James aged 10, was also nominated for admission.

The mother a very bad character and the children been much neglected. The eldest can tell his letters the others cannot. The youngest is a fine open countenanced youth and we recommend the two youngest if an objection is made to so many of a family.³⁴³

As in many cases, the orphanage records attribute the boys' admission to maternal neglect, yet surviving family evidence suggests that economic hardship following their father's death was the more significant factor. Mary Long, the boys' mother, arrived aboard the Second Fleet in 1790. In 1804 she had a son, Thomas, with Thomas Petree, and later formed a relationship with James Ward.³⁴⁴ Their first child, James, was born in December 1806, followed by William in 1809 and John in 1811.³⁴⁵ A petition written by James Ward senior in 1810 provides insight into the family's circumstances. Ward explained that he had been granted eighty acres at the Cow Pastures by the interregnum government (1808–1809) and sought ratification of that grant, noting that 'I and wife and family are greatly distressed by paying over fifty shillings P [per] Acre for the farm I rent.'³⁴⁶ In 1811 he again petitioned the governor, stating 'That your Petitioner has a Wife and four Children and Rents a piece of land at a very heavy Rent so that he finds it hard to get a Maintenance for his large family...'³⁴⁷ James Ward, died of snakebite in 1812, before the eighty-acre grant was ratified.³⁴⁸ The 1814 census describes Mary as a single woman residing in the Windsor district with five children, all 'off stores', indicating that she was supporting the household without government rations.³⁴⁹ The orphanage admission record later describes Mary as a landholder at Wilberforce, suggesting that she continued farming—possibly under the burden of high rental costs—for some years after Wards' death.³⁵⁰

The historical record contains a series of damning moral judgements concerning Mary Long Ward's character. While serving time on Norfolk Island (1790 to 1801), she was described by diarist Lieutenant Ralph Clarke as 'a most abandoned woman as is on the island',³⁵¹ and in 1794, she was tried and severely punished for 'improper language'.³⁵² Such descriptions, echoed in the admission recommendation that labelled her 'a very bad character' and her children as 'neglected', reflect the entrenched cultural stereotyping applied to convict women, in which sexual transgression, disorderly conduct, and maternal failure were routinely conflated.³⁵³ These characterisations reveal as much about elite perceptions as they do about Mary Long herself. As Grace

³⁴³ Mary Ward, her sons James, William and John recommended for admission to the new orphan school, 25 July 1818, SANSW, Reel 6047; 4/1740, fo. 253-4.

³⁴⁴ Flynn, *The Second Fleet: Britain's Grim Convict Armada of 1790*, 408.

³⁴⁵ Ibid. Petree married another woman in September 1806.

³⁴⁶ James Ward, Memorials, 30 January 1810, Fiche 3010; 4/1822, fo. 325

³⁴⁷ James Ward, Memorials, 5 January 1811, Fiche 3010; 4/1822, fo. 325

³⁴⁸ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages, Death of James Ward, 1812, V18122951 2A.

³⁴⁹ New South Wales Government. Secretary to the Governor. Population musters, New South Wales mainland [1811–1819]. SANSW, NRS 1260 4/1224–25, 4/1227, fo. 51.

³⁵⁰ William and John Ward admitted to Male Orphan School, 1 January 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo. 3-4.

³⁵¹ Ralph Clark, *The Journal and letters of Lt. Ralph Clark 1787–1792. Volume 1. (Electronic version)* (Sydney: University of Sydney Library, 1981). <https://digital.library.sydney.edu.au/nodes/view/11247#idx302040>. Friday 4th February, 1791, p. 181 (electronic page 175).

³⁵² Flynn, *The Second Fleet: Britain's Grim Convict Armada of 1790*, 408. Long received 100 lashes, had her hair shaved and was sent to Cascade, another settlement on Norfolk, in punishment.

³⁵³ For discussion of this in greater detail see: Narissa Phelps, "Maligning Molly Morgan: A convict woman of 'dominant influence', sexualised and stereotyped," *Journal of Australian Colonial History* 21 (2019).

Karskens argues, women like Mary Long were precisely those whom 'elite men' such as Clarke had in mind: women who, as residents of the Rocks district, frequently appeared before magistrates for drunkenness, riot and prostitution, yet also 'typically confounded her educated betters'.³⁵⁴ Long embodied this contradiction. She was described as uninhibited in her sexuality and drinking, yet also as an independent woman who produced 'fine children for whom she obviously cared a great deal, striving to keep them together, living near them, petitioning on their behalf and defending her right of authority over them.'³⁵⁵ Later evidence reinforces this more complex interpretation. In the 1828 census, Mary Ward is recorded as a laundress in Sydney, residing with three of her four sons—Thomas (aged 25, a mariner), James (aged 22) and John (aged 18).³⁵⁶ Despite earlier judgements about both her morality and her mothering, the continued co-residence of her adult sons suggests the persistence of close and enduring familial bonds, challenging the reductive association between convict women's perceived immorality and maternal neglect.

Paternal death combined with high property rental costs also contributed to the admission of four-year-old Michael Urey to the MOI in July 1822. Although the lost admission petitions obscure the precise circumstances of Michael's placement, it is recorded that Michael's nominated parent was his mother, Mary Urey, a washerwoman living in Cockle Bay.³⁵⁷ Mary née Handley, an Irishwoman transported in 1813 under a seven-year sentence, married Michael Urey in November 1818.³⁵⁸ The couple had two children—Michael, born in April 1818, and Mary, born in October 1821. One month after Michael junior's admission to the orphanage, Mary submitted a memorial to Governor Brisbane requesting the grant of an allotment of ground in Sydney. In that memorial she explained:

That Michael Ury [sic] the husband of the memorialist departed this life on the sixth day of May last and left with her three children to provide for which endeavours to do by her labour in working. That your memorialist is much distressed by a heavy weekly rent she is a free woman and therefore humbly solicits your Excellency in your Great Humanity to Grant her an allotment of ground in the town of Sydney wherein she will build a residence for herself and her small orphan children... Mary Urey 11 Aug 1822.³⁵⁹

³⁵⁴ Karskens, *The Rocks: life in early Sydney*, 108, 10.

³⁵⁵ Karskens, *The Rocks: life in early Sydney*, 110.

³⁵⁶ New South Wales Government. 1828 Census: Household returns [Population and Statistics, Musters and Census Records, Census, Colonial Secretary]. SANSW, Series 1273, Reels 2551-2552, 2506-2507.

³⁵⁷ Michael Urey [Ury], Re admission to the Male Orphan Institution, 10 July 1822, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.7-8; Reel 6040; 4/400, fo. 44.

³⁵⁸ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages, Marriage of Mary Handley to Michael Eary [sic], 1818, V18182285 3A.

³⁵⁹ Mary Urey, Widow of Michael Urey. Memorial, 11 August 1822, SANSW, Fiche 3055; 4/1832, fo. 396.

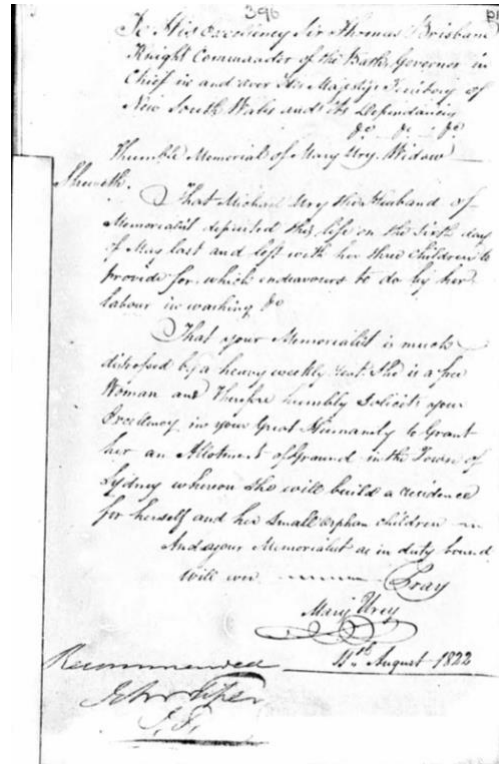


Image 6: The memorial of Mary Urey, 11 August 1822.³⁶⁰

As with the Ward family, Mary Urey had been 'greatly distressed' by the high rents levied on their Richmond Hill farm, compounding the economic consequences of paternal death. By 1828, Mary had applied to the Female Orphan School for the admission of her daughter Mary, explaining that 'the father of the child is dead and your Petitioner was left with two Children, one of whom, a Boy, is now in the Male Orphan School.'³⁶¹ In a personal petition attached to the application she further stated that 'Petitioner is a poor Woman and not able to support her and give her Education suitable to direct her future conduct through life.' A note accompanying the application recorded that Mary was lodging in the home of Mrs Harrington of Kent Street, Sydney.³⁶² The evidence suggests that, without her husband's financial support, Mary was unable to sustain her children on the wages of a washerwoman or maintain independent housing in a high-rental economy. The result was a family placed under acute strain, fractured despite her evident efforts to support and house her children. At the same time, Mary petition suggests that institutional care offered practical advantages: admission to orphan schools promised education and, in the case of the MOI, the prospect of apprenticeship. For women such as Mary Urey, institutionalisation may therefore have represented not only an act of desperation but also an attempt to secure a more stable future for her children.³⁶³

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ Mary Urey, Application for admission, 22 April 1828, SANSW, Fiche 2776; 4/330, fo. 207. William Cowper addended a notation on the application stating that 'The child seems to be about seven years old, but it does not appear that she was ever christened. Born 23rd October 1821.

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ Karskens, *The Rocks: life in early Sydney*, 110.

Margaret Cogan faced similar circumstances following the death of her fifty-five year old husband, Richard Fry, in January 1816.³⁶⁴ Unable to support her sons John and Richard through her work as a seamstress, they were admitted to the MOI in January 1819 after Thomas Moore, J.P., recorded that their mother was 'in great Distress, and unable to support them.'³⁶⁵ Esther Merriman, the mother of George Garland, experienced comparable hardship following the death of her partner, James Garland, aged thirty-four, in August 1818.³⁶⁶ Esther had already endured the deaths of three of her five children before James himself died, compounding the instability faced by the family.³⁶⁷ George was admitted to the MOI the following year, suggesting that Esther attempted to maintain her household before seeking institutional assistance. Cases such as those of Margaret Cogan and Esther Merriman demonstrate how paternal death could rapidly destabilise colonial household economies. In a labour market where women's wages were rarely sufficient to sustain large families, institutional care often became one of the few viable means of securing children's subsistence and future prospects.

Esther Stubbs (née Spencer) worked as a dealer in Sydney when her eight-year-old son George was admitted to the MOI in January 1819.³⁶⁸ Dealers participated in informal trade within the convict economy, bartering goods outside the government's regulated supply system. Despite this work, Esther was unable to maintain her large family of eight surviving children, the youngest just two and the eldest eighteen.³⁶⁹ The surviving evidence suggests that Esther was a resourceful woman, even if some of the survival strategies she adopted appear extreme by modern standards. A year after Thomas Stubbs's death she received approval for a grant of eighty-acres of land on the grounds that she was 'A widow with large family.'³⁷⁰ Although the land at Minto was formally granted to Hester Stubbs in January 1818, Esther—almost certainly out of necessity—had negotiated its sale in December 1816, demonstrating a degree of economic agency rather than helplessness.³⁷¹

Notwithstanding the proceeds of the land sale, the July 1818 recommendation for George Stubbs's admission simply stated: 'Father dead. Mother in Sydney but poor', noting that the family resided in Phillip Street.³⁷² Still struggling to balance the demands of work and a large family, Esther applied for the admission of a second son to the orphanage on 1st September 1819, although this request was refused.³⁷³ The application most likely concerned her youngest son, John, born in 1812. As an alternative to institutional admission, Esther appears to

³⁶⁴ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages, Death of Richard Fry, 1816, V18163504 2B.

³⁶⁵ John and Richard Fry, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 1 January 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo. 3–4. John and Richard Fry, Recommended for the new orphan school, July 1818, SANSW, Reel 6047; 4/1740, fo. 255.

³⁶⁶ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages, Death of James Garland, 1818, V18181112 148.

³⁶⁷ Purnell, Marion. "Esther Merriman". *Australian Royalty: Genealogy of the Colony of NSW*. Accessed 4 March 2026, https://australianroyalty.net.au/tree/purnellmccord.ged/individual/I8632/Esther-Merriman#tab-personal_facts

³⁶⁸ George Stubbs, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 1 January 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo. 1–2.

³⁶⁹ Susannah Fitz, the eldest was not married until 1816.

³⁷⁰ Hester Stubbs, On list of persons to receive grants of land in 1816, 16 January 1816, SANSW, Fiche 3266; 9/2652, fo. 28.

³⁷¹ Hester Stubbs, Registers of Land Grants and Leases, SANSW, NRS 13836; 7/448, Reel 2561.

Unknown, *Thomas Curran – Bunburry Curran, c. 1815–1822*. <https://bonesinthebelfry.com/ifonly/p1ch3d.html>. Accessed 16 December 2025.

³⁷² George Stubbs, Recommendation for admission to the Male Orphan Institution, 11 August 1818, SANSW, Reel 6074; 4/1740, fo. 257–8.

³⁷³ Constitution and Minutes including the Rules and Regulations of the Male Orphan School, 1 September 1819, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo.13.

have encouraged her children to leave home as early as possible, in order to secure employment or marriage. Her son Thomas left the colony at the age of ten to join the British army.³⁷⁴ Cecilia travelled to India at fifteen with her mother's consent, accompanying Richard Williams, whom she later married.³⁷⁵ Mary Ann, Elizabeth and Ann all married in their mid-teens. Although employment at ten and marriage at fifteen were legally permissible and socially recognised in many early nineteenth-century colonial societies, in the Stubbs family these decisions were almost certainly shaped by the economic pressures of sustaining a large household on a single income.

When nine-year old John Hatfield was admitted to the MOI in January 1819, his mother Amelia Hatfield was attempting to support four children through her work as a washerwoman. The admission record states 'Father's name John Hatfield, dead. Mother a prisoner has 4 children in great distress and unable to support them.'³⁷⁶ The brevity of this entry masks the complexity of the Hatfield family's circumstances, illustrating the broader archival silences that surround many MOI admissions. John Hatfield senior had died, aged thirty-one, of consumption in March 1817 leaving Amelia to support the family while still serving her fourteen-year sentence.³⁷⁷ Over the following years the Hatfield children became dispersed across a range of institutional and household arrangements. By 1822 Amelia's daughter Harriet was in the Female Orphan School, John was in the MOI, and another son, Thomas, was residing with a family at Windsor.

Amelia's response to this domestic upheaval was to pursue re-partnering as a means of stabilising her household. This was not merely a search for security, but a strategic response to acute crisis in which marriage functioned as a mechanism of survival. Following her husband's death, she applied unsuccessfully for permission to marry two men before eventually marrying John Cook in 1820, underscoring both the urgency of her circumstances and the constraints governing women's ability to reconstitute households.³⁷⁸ Yet this strategy proved short-lived. By the following year she was recorded in the Female Factory rather than living with her husband, and by 1822 she had formed another de facto partnership, revealing the fragility of marriage as a solution and the necessity of continual domestic reconfiguration.

Despite these disruptions, Amelia continued to seek contact with her children. In March 1828 she petitioned the MOI committee requesting the release of her son Thomas, stating that it was now 'in my power to provide well for his future'.³⁷⁹ Although he was not released until 1831, her petition demonstrates that maternal claims to authority and responsibility persisted even after prolonged family separation. The Hatfield family illustrates how

³⁷⁴ Graeme Skinner (University of Sydney), "Thomas Stubbs and his descendents", *Australharmony* (an online resource toward the early history of music in colonial Australia): <https://sydney.edu.au/paradisec/australharmony/stubbs-thomas-and-descendents.php>; accessed 16 December 2025

³⁷⁵ Walker, June (2010), email to Marion Purnell, Cecilia Stubbs, 1805–1896, *Australian Royalty: Genealogy of the colony of New South Wales*, accessed 17 December 2025, https://australianroyalty.net.au/tree/purnellmccord.ged/individual/I66416/Cecilia-Stubbs#tab-personal_facts

³⁷⁶ John Hatfield, Son of John and Amelia Hatfield. Recommended for new orphan school, July 1818, Reel 6047; 4/1740, fo. 255.

³⁷⁷ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages, Death of John Hatfield, 1817, V18173721 2B.

³⁷⁸ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages, Marriage of John Cook and Amelia Hatfield, 24 April 1820, V182023528 3A. Heather Stevens, "Amelia (Cole) Cook: Bef 1791 to 1841", WikiTree, updated December 2025, accessed 18 January 2026, <https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Cole-5825>

³⁷⁹ Thomas Hatfield, Application for Removal, 10 March 1828, SANSW, NRS 783; 4/333; Roll 2776, fo. 355.

widowhood, penal constraints and unstable partnerships could gradually disperse children across institutions and households. Such fragmentation was not necessarily the result of parental neglect but rather the cumulative consequence of the structural pressures facing convict families in the early colony.

Maternal death could likewise result in children's admission to the orphan institution. In a colony where extended kin were frequently absent, the loss of a mother's care often resulted in hardship. Richard Podmore was admitted to the MOI in January 1819 by his father Richard Podmore senior, a settler of Botany Bay.³⁸⁰ The recommendation for admission recorded simply that the mother 'Phebe Podmore, [was] Dead, Father in great Distress.'³⁸¹ Phoebe Flaherty, aged fifteen, arrived in the colony aboard the First Fleet under a seven-year sentence, while Richard senior arrived free as a soldier in 1792. The couple had at least five children between 1799 and 1815 before Phoebe's death in January 1817.³⁸² The family suffered further loss the following year with the death of six-year-old Elizabeth. In this instance, maternal death not only removed the primary caregiver but also intensified the economic and domestic pressures faced by a father responsible for several young children.

Nine-year-old Christopher Ralph also enrolled at the MOI on 1 January 1819.³⁸³ The recommendation for admission states: 'Father living mother dead, Luke Ralph, Royal Veteran Co. Windsor...The father a very old man with three children off the store is a good parent and bring up his children orderly & regular to Church.'³⁸⁴ Such favourable comments are notable given that official records were often sharply critical of parental conduct. In this instance the authorities explicitly acknowledge Luke Ralph as a conscientious father who had raised his children well. Christopher's mother Mary Ralph—who had arrived free in the colony—died aged thirty-six in January 1813, most probably following childbirth, leaving five children in Luke Ralph's care.³⁸⁵ Despite years of managing the household alone, the strain eventually proved too great. By the time Christopher was admitted to the MOI, his father, aged fifty-six, was no longer able to maintain the household. A former soldier who had arrived in 1801 and who later served in the Invalid Company, he was finally forced to surrender his son to institutional care. This admission reflects not parental neglect but the cumulative strain placed on an ageing widower attempting to raise a large family alone.

Thomas Tyrrell was admitted to the MOI in November 1821, aged eight, five months after the death of his mother, Ann Sandell (alias Sutherland).³⁸⁶ Ann had arrived in the colony in 1801 and formed a relationship with

³⁸⁰ Richard Podmore, Admitted to the Male Orphan School; Richard Podmore his parent, 1 January 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.3-4.

³⁸¹ Ibid., Son of Richard and Pheby Podmore. Recommended for the new orphan school, July 1818, Reel 6047; 4/1740, fo.255.

³⁸² Gillen, *The Founders of Australia*, 128-9.

³⁸³ Christopher Ralph, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 1 January 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.1-2.

³⁸⁴ Luke Ralph, His son Matthew [it was Christopher who was enrolled] recommended for the new orphan school, 25 July 1818, SANSW, Reel 6047; 4/1740, fo. 253-4.

³⁸⁵ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages, Death of Mary Ralph, 1813, V18132982 2A.

³⁸⁶ Thomas Tyrrell, Admitted to the Male Orphan School; Listed as Tyrrell, 3 November 1821, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.5-6.

William Tyrrell in 1806.³⁸⁷ Tyrrell, a First Fleet convict, was by this time an emancipist farming land at Kissing Point. Between 1807 and 1814 the couple had four children.³⁸⁸ When Ann died in June 1821 at the age of fifty, she left children ranging in age from sixteen to eight.³⁸⁹ The admission records in Thomas Tyrrell's case are strikingly sparse. No parent or guardian is listed—only his admission date, date of birth and an address in Pitt Street, Sydney, with no indication of whose address this might have been. The omission is particularly notable given that the names of the parents, and identity of the person responsible for his admission, could easily have been recorded or obtained from the child himself. Without family history reconstruction, therefore, Thomas' case would have no context, no explanation for his admission, and no trace of the family circumstances that preceded it. He appears in the institutional record as a solitary figure rather than the member of a family. It is most likely that the Pitt Street address belonged to his step-sister, Elizabeth Sandell, who had married in Sydney at the age of fifteen, and who may have briefly assumed responsibility for the younger children following their mother's death.³⁹⁰

Two related cases are included in this section because they reveal the burden often borne by siblings following a mother's death. Even when fathers remained alive, the care of younger children frequently fell to older brothers and sisters, and this responsibility could continue after the father's death until institutional assistance was sought. Three brothers—Samuel (aged ten), David (aged eight), and Jeremiah Ogden (aged 5)—were admitted to the MOI on 6 November 1820 by their older brother, Thomas Ogden. The enrolment record states only that Thomas Ogden was a Settler from the Northern Boundary, leaving the circumstances behind the boys' admission, and Thomas' role in the family, largely obscured.³⁹¹ Their father, James Ogden, had arrived with the First Fleet at the age of nineteen.³⁹² In January 1800 James married Elizabeth Kelsall [Kelso], who had arrived in 1798 under a seven-year-sentence. The couple later settled at The Ponds, about three-miles east of Parramatta, where they purchased a fifty-acre farm.³⁹³ Seven children (six surviving) were born between 1801 and 1815, the youngest, Jeremiah, on 22 May 1815, the day his mother's died.³⁹⁴ James appears to have continued raising the children after Elizabeth's death, most likely with the assistance of the older siblings. When he died in September 1820, responsibility for the younger boys briefly fell to their elder brothers, before they arranged their admission to the MOI two months later.

Such arrangements highlight the extent to which responsibility for younger children could fall upon older siblings in families already strained by parental death. A similar pattern is evident in the case of brothers George (aged

³⁸⁷ Gillen, *The Founders of Australia*, 365.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.* It must be noted that William had one son, George (1790) to his wife Ann Ward, and Ann Sandell had a daughter, Elizabeth, born 1805, by Thomas Mansfield.

³⁸⁹ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages, Death of Ann Sandall, 1821, V1821542 8.

³⁹⁰ *Op. cit.*, Marriage of Thomas Burns and Elizabeth Sandall, 1820, V18202483 3A. Elizabeth was born on 24 January 1805, the daughter of Ann Sandall [sic] and her first recorded colonial partner, Thomas Mansfield.

³⁹¹ Samuel, David and Jeremiah Ogden, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 16 November, 28 December 1820, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.5-6.

³⁹² Gillen, *The Founders of Australia*, 267.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, 267-8.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 268.

ten), Thomas (aged 9) and Samuel Freeman (aged seven), who were admitted to the MOI by their nineteen-year-old brother, James Freeman, a cooper of Windsor.³⁹⁵ Their father, William Freeman, had arrived in the colony under a seven-year sentence in 1792. He later partnered with Elizabeth Chaffrey, an Irishwoman who arrived in 1796 at the age of sixteen, also under a seven-year sentence.³⁹⁶ Between 1797 and 1811 the couple had eight children before Elizabeth's death aged thirty-six in February 1816.³⁹⁷ As in the case with the Ogden brothers, the MOI records preserve no account of the circumstances preceding the boys' admission, failing even to specify that James Freeman was their brother rather than their father. Following Elizabeth's death, responsibility for the younger boys would likely have been shared between William and the older siblings. Lucy, born in 1804, may have played a particularly important role in domestic labour as the only daughter in the household. When William died in August 1820, aged fifty, the family appears to have attempted to maintain the household for several months before arranging the admission of the three younger boys to the MOI in January 1821.³⁹⁸ Together, the Ogden and Freeman families demonstrate how sibling care could serve as a temporary strategy to sustain the household and delay institutionalisation, while ultimately underscoring the central role mothers played in maintaining family cohesion.

These cases illustrate how the death of a parent frequently precipitated a cascade of economic and social consequences that fractured colonial families. In a society where male wages formed the principal foundation of household stability, paternal death often plunged families into immediate financial insecurity. Maternal death, however, removed the central figure responsible for domestic care and child-rearing, creating a different but equally destabilising crisis. The prevalence of such cases suggests that the institutionalisation of children in early colonial New South Wales was driven less by moral failure than by the combined effects of mortality, economic vulnerability, and limited avenues of familial support, realities that are only partially visible in the surviving record.

Strategic Institutionalisation:

Not all boys admitted to the MOI had lost their parents or been abandoned. In a number of cases both parents were living, yet one child was placed in institutional care while siblings remained within the household. Such admissions suggest that the MOI could function as a supplementary form of family support rather than solely as a refuge for destitute or parentless children. Illness, disability, economic strain, or the logistical challenges created by penal mobility could compel families to make calculated decisions about the placement of individual children. These admissions illustrate the pragmatic and adaptive strategies employed by colonial families seeking to preserve household stability under conditions of acute vulnerability.

³⁹⁵ George, Thomas and Samuel Freeman, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 1, 10 January 1821, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.26.

³⁹⁶ Purnell, Marion. "William Freeman, 1770–1820". Australian Royalty: Genealogy of the Colony of NSW. Accessed 6 March 2026, <https://australianroyalty.net.au/tree/purnellmccord.ged/individual/162206/William-Freeman>

³⁹⁷ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages, Death of Elizabeth Chaffery, 1816, V18163538 2B.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., Death of William Freeman, 1820, V18204765 2B.

John Andrews, for example, was admitted in April 1822.³⁹⁹ The admission record provides almost no detail beyond naming his mother, Ann Andrews, as the applicant. As in many cases, the loss of the original admission petitions leaves the reasoning behind this decision only partially visible. His father, James Andrews—who arrived in 1799—had been convicted in March 1822 of receiving stolen goods and sentenced to seven years' transportation to Port Macquarie.⁴⁰⁰ Ann Andrews née Gibson, an emancipist who arrived in 1806 under a seven-year sentence, received permission in April 1822 from the Colonial Secretary's Office to accompany her husband.⁴⁰¹ In that same month, eight-year-old John was admitted to the MOI. John was one of three children, and the only one placed in institutional care. William (aged ten) and Charlotte (aged three), accompanied their parents to Port Macquarie.

This selective admission is initially difficult to reconcile. It invites scrutiny not only of the MOI committee's willingness to accept John's placement, given that he remained part of a functioning family unit, but also of the assumptions we bring to such decisions. While this study has shown that the institutionalisation of children was often a reluctant and calculated response to acute familial crisis, the placement of a single child within a family complicates that interpretation. Given the distance between Port Macquarie and Sydney, there was little realistic prospect of familial reunion. Although the sanctioned presence of families at such settlements suggests an administrative intent to preserve cohesion, John's exclusion from that arrangement raises the possibility that his placement was not merely strategic, but may have constituted a form of abandonment.

Other cases of selective placement are less stark, and may be more readily understood within the broader context of household negotiation. Decisions about which child to admit were likely shaped by age, gender, and perceived vulnerability, with younger or less economically productive children were more likely to be placed, while older children contributed labour or care within the household. Moreover, admission to an orphanage may not always have been understood as permanent separation, despite regulations to the contrary which stated that 'once admitted ...the Parents or Guardians of such Orphan are to have no Control whatever over him, nor be at liberty to remove him from thence, nor from his apprenticeship, until after he has attained his Twenty first Year.'⁴⁰² The retention of siblings within the household can therefore, in some cases, be read as evidence of continued parental attachment and responsibility. More broadly, such cases underscore the fragility of colonial family life, in which mobility, military service, maritime employment, and penal intervention routinely forced families into difficult and often imperfect decisions.

³⁹⁹ John Andrews, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 25 April 1822, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo. 7–8.

⁴⁰⁰ "Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser." 22 March, 1822, p.2.

James Andrews, To be transported for seven years. In reports of prisoners tried at Court of Criminal Jurisdiction, February-March 1822, SANSW, Reel 6023; X820 fo.43

⁴⁰¹ James Andrews, His wife Ann permitted to proceed to Port Macquarie by the first opportunity to join him there, 25 April 1822, Reel 6009; 4/3505 fo.194

⁴⁰² Constitution and Minutes including the Rules and Regulations of the Male Orphan School, 1 January 1819, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo.4-5.

Grizel Eddington was working as a fisherwoman when she admitted her eldest son, John to the MOI in January 1819.⁴⁰³ John—her only child to her first partner, Adam John Eddington⁴⁰⁴—was admitted to the orphanage, while the three children she had with John McFarlane remained with her. The recommendation record states simply: 'Father dead, Mother in Sydney but extremely poor.'⁴⁰⁵ Adam Eddington had died in 1818, although Grizel had been in a relationship with John McFarlane since 1813. Whilst the admission record itself offers no indication of these dynamics, it is apparent that the description of Grizel as 'extremely poor' indicates that economic hardship was a decisive factor in John's admission. It also raises the question of whether Adam Eddington had contributed to the maintenance of his son prior to his death. If so, the loss of that support would have further strained an already precarious household economy. The selective admission of John Eddington therefore points to the significance of paternal maintenance in sustaining children outside formal marriage. Its absence—whether through death or neglect—could have immediate consequences for family stability, prompting decisions to place individual children in institutional care.

Tina Picton Phillips' analysis of the Bench of Magistrates documentation relating to 'Bastards, 1810–1814',⁴⁰⁶ reveals that courts could enforce maintenance payments from absent fathers, while private arrangements for voluntary support also existed.⁴⁰⁷ Phillips found that, in the majority of cases brought before the Bench, fathers who failed to contribute to the maintenance of their children were soldiers, mariners, seamen, merchants and ship owners, rather than convicts.⁴⁰⁸ This pattern reflects the military and maritime character of New South Wales, rather than reinforcing historiographical portrayals of convict men as 'rotten partners and irresponsible fathers'.⁴⁰⁹

Phillips also observed that, in the absence of paternal support, women could apply to have their children placed 'on the stores', providing a form of public relief. At the same time, she concluded that most children in her study 'were in no need of public support', as 'their needs were typically met—possibly by their natural fathers' or, as Karskens suggests, through the 'blending' of children into a new household following re-partnering.⁴¹⁰ Such arrangements, however, did not guarantee security for all children. Within blended households, children from earlier relationships may have occupied a more precarious position within the domestic economy. The death of Adam Eddington therefore removed not only a biological father but also a potential source of financial support specifically associated with John, leaving him more vulnerable within the reconstituted household.

⁴⁰³ John (junior) Eddington, Admitted to the Male Orphan School; Grizzle McFarlane his parent, 1 January 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo. 1-2

⁴⁰⁴ Adam John Eddington was a fisherman, and this is obviously where Grizel learnt her trade.

⁴⁰⁵ John (junior) Eddington, Son of John and Grace Eddington, recommended for admission to the Male Orphan Institution, 11 August 1818, SANSW, Reel 6047; 4/1740, fo.257-8.

⁴⁰⁶ These records form part of a larger document series, SANSW, SR 5/1153, Bench of Magistrates 1801–1814.

⁴⁰⁷ Tina Phillips, 'Family matters: bastards, orphans and baptisms - New South Wales, 1810-1825. [This article was originally given as a paper 'Escape from the historians' at the 'Escape' Conference, Tasmania, 2003.], " *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 90, no. 2 (2004): 124–25.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 125.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid*.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid*, 130–131.

Karskens, *The Rocks: life in early Sydney*, 111.

Other families faced challenges not of their choosing—particularly illness, disability, and the competing demands of labour—that could necessitate selective placement of children into the MOI. Nine-year-old William Davis junior was admitted in January 1819.⁴¹¹ The recommendation for admission states:

William Davis, aged 9, Father living but blind. Mother living. William Davis (senior), South Creek. A sad subject of charity & can read. The father has 7 children three of whom are younger than this (all off the Store).⁴¹²

At this time, the youngest of the Davis children was two, although two more children were subsequently born—one in the year of William's admission and another in 1820. William Davis senior had arrived in the colony in 1799 under a seven-year sentence for a felony committed when aged sixteen. His partner, Margaret Malone/y, arrived in 1800, and the couple appear to have maintained a stable relationship despite the considerable strain that William's blindness placed on a large and growing family. Similar pressures shaped other admissions. John Cloudesly Price was admitted to the MOI in 1822 while his mother was confined in the Female Factory, leaving his father unable both to maintain his employment as a servant for Major Antill at Liverpool and to care for his children.⁴¹³ Eight-year-old James Quigley was admitted in 1823 after his father became bedridden.⁴¹⁴ William Quigley, an Irish weaver aged thirty, had arrived in 1800 under a seven-year sentence. By 1814 he was listed as being on charity, and by 1822 as an invalid.⁴¹⁵ James's mother, Mary Murray, who arrived in 1810 under a seven-year sentence, worked as a servant in order to support the family and was therefore unable to provide full-time care for her children.⁴¹⁶ In such cases, admission to the MOI functioned as a pragmatic response to working and living arrangements that rendered the care of children impracticable.

A similar pattern is evident in the admission of nine-year-old Patrick Cosgrove, who arrived with his convicted father, David Cosgrove, in March 1822.⁴¹⁷ His mother, Celia, travelled separately as a free woman, but did not arrive until the following year.⁴¹⁸ The admission records list David as the admitting parent and give his address as Carters Barracks on Pitt Street, which housed convict gangs employed as carters on the brickfields.⁴¹⁹ Neither the nature of David's work nor the conditions of barracks accommodation permitted the presence of a child, and Patrick was admitted to the MOI in April 1822 as a matter of practical necessity. By early 1823, David had become a watchman at the barracks, suggesting increased trust and stability, and by July 1825 he had been assigned to

⁴¹¹ William Davis, Admitted to the Male Orphan School. William and Margaret Davis his parents, 1 January 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.1-2.

⁴¹² Ibid., Recommended for the new orphan school, 25 July 1818, Reel 6047; 4/1740, fo. 253-4.

⁴¹³ John Price, Husband of Elizabeth Price; servant of Major Antill at Liverpool. Son John Cloudesly Price admitted to Male Orphan School, 23 February 1822, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo. 7-8.

⁴¹⁴ James Quigley, Admitted to the Male Orphan School on petition of his father, William, 8 January 1823, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo.53.

⁴¹⁵ William Quigley, BDA on-line, accessed 6 March 2026.

⁴¹⁶ Carol J. Baxter, *General Muster List of New South Wales 1823, 1824, 1825* (Australian Biographical & Genealogical Record for the Society of Australian Genealogists, 1999). Book entry number: 34154
Census of NSW November 1828, published in "1828 Census of New South Wales", ed. Malcolm Sainty & Keith Johnson (Sydney: Library of Australian History, 2008). Book entry number: M3656

⁴¹⁷ The convict indents and census details list both David and Patrick Cosgrove as arriving on the vessel Southworth. David Cosgrove, BDA on-line, accessed 4 April 2026.

Patrick Cosgrove, BDA on-line, Op. cit.

⁴¹⁸ Celia Cosgrove, BDA on-line, Op. cit. Celia arrived per ship Woodman in 1822. Came free.

⁴¹⁹ Patrick Cosgrove, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 29 April 1822, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.7-8.

his wife at their home at the Brickfields.⁴²⁰ In 1826, Patrick was released from the institution and returned to his father as an apprentice. His four-year period in the MOI reflects a temporary and strategic adjustment, enabling the family to accommodate the constraints of convict labour and housing until circumstances allowed for reunification.

Like Patrick Cosgrove, George Sladen was institutionalised because colonial labour arrangements made family care impossible. He was admitted to the MOI in November 1821, his separation from his mother resulting from Rachel's assignment into domestic service.⁴²¹ The admission record itself provides no explanation for this separation, leaving the circumstances to be reconstructed from a later petition in which Rachel sought a Ticket of Leave. This reveals that soon after her arrival in 1815 she had spent time in the Female Factory with her sons, Robert and George, before being assigned to Simeon Lord. By the time of George's admission she was 'in the employ of Deputy Commissary General, Frederick Drennan Esq.'⁴²² As Kirsty Reid has observed, the children of convicts in service were 'increasingly viewed as problematic', with employers reluctant to accept female servants accompanied by children.⁴²³ Rachel's circumstances illustrate how the penal system itself generated institutionalisation: maternal assignment created conditions in which children could not be accommodated within a servant household, leaving institutional care as the only viable solution.

William King's admission on 18 September 1820, records his mother as Eliza King, a washerwoman of the Rocks.⁴²⁴ The minutes of the MOI committee for October of that year note that his was considered an urgent case 'recommended by the General Committee of the Female Institution', arising from 'the Sickness of the Mother, Eliza King, who has three children.'⁴²⁵ A later annotation in the orphan school roll book, recording William's apprenticeship in 1827, lists his parent' as George and Mary King a washerwoman of the Rocks. This apparent inconsistency suggests either a clerical error or the use of interchangeable names, but in either case reinforces that the family's economic survival depended on the labour of William's mother well into the 1820s.

⁴²⁰ David Cosgrove, On list of prisoners assigned, 11 July 1823, SANSW, Fiche 3290; 4/4570D, fo.22.

⁴²¹ George Sladen, Admitted to the male Orphan School, 3 November 1821, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.7-8.

⁴²² Rachel Sladen, Servant of Frederick Drennan, Petition for Ticket of Leave (as Slading), 25 January 1822, SANSW, Fiche 3226; 4/1867, fo.73.

⁴²³ Kirsty Reid, *Gender, crime and empire: convicts, settlers and the state in early colonial Australia* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2007).

⁴²⁴ William King, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 18 September, SANSW, Reel 3307; 4/7208, fo.5-6.

⁴²⁵ William King, Constitution and Minutes including the Rules and Regulations of the Male Orphan School, 11 October 1820, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo.22.

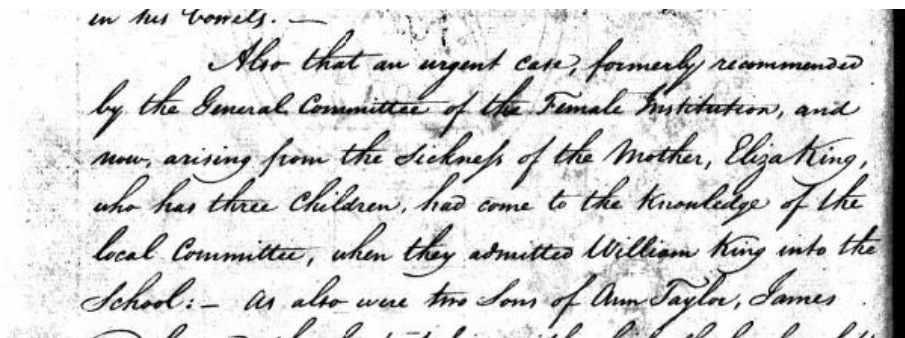


Image: 4 Entry in the MOI Minute Book of 11 October 1820 regarding the urgent admission of William King.⁴²⁶

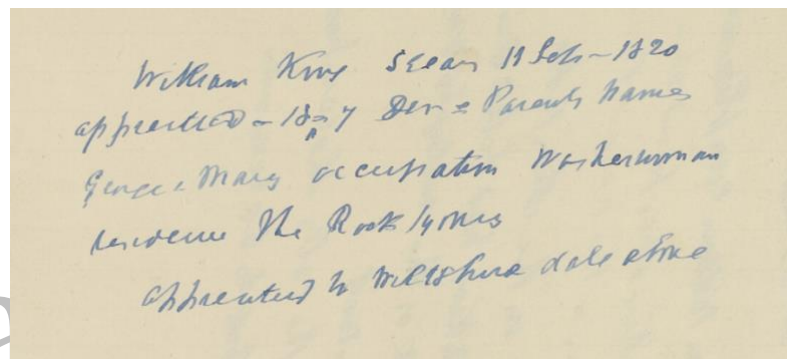


Image 5: Notation at the back of the MOI Roll Book regarding William King.⁴²⁷

William, born circa 1815, was the son of George King, who arrived in the colony in 1811 under a life sentence, and Eliza or Mary, who appears to have been his de facto partner. George's intermittent presence—evidenced by his participation in John Oxley's exploratory expeditions in 1817 and 1819—likely limited his capacity to provide consistent support.⁴²⁸ In this context, Eliza's illness assumed crucial significance. With the household reliant on her earnings as a washerwoman, her incapacity would have immediately undermined the family's ability to sustain itself. William's admission therefore reflects a strategic response to acute maternal illness within a fragile domestic economy, in which the temporary loss of a significant income earner necessitated recourse to institutional care.

Simon Watling's admission in January 1819 appears to have been shaped by the demands placed upon his single mother, Ann Watling, who was required to balance childcare with the operation of a small shoemaking business.⁴²⁹ Arriving in the colony in June 1815 under a seven-year sentence, Ann came as a single mother with a four-year-old child and no evident support network.⁴³⁰ Initially sent to the old Female Factory, Simon remained with her until she later established her home and business in George Street. While this transition suggests a

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ William King, Notation at the rear of the Male Orphan Institution Roll Book, SANSW, Reel 3307; 4/7208. At rear of roll book, no page number.

⁴²⁸ George King, Member of John Oxley's expedition, 1817, SANSW, Reel 6068; 4/1814, fo.35.

Paid from the Police Fund as donation for services on Oxley's expedition of discovery, 10 June 1819, SANSW, Reel 6038; SZ1044, fo.54.

⁴²⁹ Simon Watling, Admitted to the male orphan school, 1 January 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.1-2.

⁴³⁰ Ann Watling, Female convict who arrived on board the "Northampton"; with son Simon, aged 4, 19 June 1815, SANSW, Reel 6045; 4/1732, fo.157, 173-4.

degree of economic initiative, it also likely imposed significant pressures. The need to maintain a business, combined with the uncertain and often limited returns of such labour, would have made it difficult to provide both income and care. In this context, Simon's admission can be understood as a strategic adjustment to the competing demands of survival, in which institutional care offered a means of stabilising the household while enabling his mother's continued economic activity.

Henry Brown's admission in January 1819 appears to have resulted from overlapping domestic and economic pressures, including his mother's unstable relationship and the demands of her employment. At the time of his admission, Eliza Brown was working as a servant at Kerry Lodge in the Nepean district, a form of labour that likely limited her capacity to care for a young child.⁴³¹ Eliza, a prostitute at the time of her arrest for pickpocketing in December 1810, was transported to the colony in 1811, giving birth to Henry aboard the transport *Friends* en route.⁴³² Within weeks of arrival, she entered into a strategic marriage with Elias Ingram.⁴³³ Although this union appears to have endured formally, the couple were living apart by 1819, with Elias in Sydney and Eliza in Nepean. In 1818, Elias petitioned for a Ticket of Leave to enable him to cultivate his land grant at Hunters Hill, framing the request in terms of supporting 'himself & wife'.⁴³⁴ Notably, no mention is made to Henry in the petition, a silence that is striking given that his inclusion may have strengthened the application. This omission, while not conclusive, suggests that Henry did not form part of the household unit at this time. In this context, Henry's admission can be understood as a strategic response to overlapping pressures: a fragmented parental relationship, the demands of maternal service, and the absence of consistent paternal support. Institutional care thus functioned as a practical solution within a household unable to accommodate the combined demands of labour and childcare.

When John McKay was admitted to the MOI in January 1819, the admission record provided no explanation for his placement, obscuring the prolonged circumstances that led to it.⁴³⁵ The timing, however, suggests that his father's illness was a decisive factor, as Daniel McKay died, aged fifty, only days after John's institutionalisation.⁴³⁶ The family had endured years of instability prior to this point. In 1805 Daniel McKay was tried on a charge of rape; the case was dismissed, and the *Sydney Gazette* reported that the prosecution appeared intent on framing an innocent man.⁴³⁷ His circumstances deteriorated further during the administration of Governor William Bligh, when McKay—formerly a goaler—was himself imprisoned after refusing to surrender the so called 'Black Books' to William Gore.⁴³⁸ Contemporary correspondence from surgeon John Harris described McKay as in debt and

⁴³¹ Henry Brown, Admitted to the Male Orphan School; Elizabeth brown his parent, 1 January 1819, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.1-2.

⁴³² Old Bailey Proceedings Online, December 1810, Trial of Elizabeth brown (t18101205-98). Available at <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/record/t18101205-98?text=Brown>

⁴³³ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages, Marriage of Elias Ingram and Elizabeth Brown, 1811, V1811306 3A.

⁴³⁴ Elias Ingram, per "Indian", labourer at Lane Cove, Petition for Mitigation of Sentence, 1818, SANSW, Fiche 3187; 4/1855, fo.145.

⁴³⁵ John McKay, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 1 January 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.1-2.

⁴³⁶ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages, Death of Daniel Mc Kay, 1819, V18194202 2B.

⁴³⁷ Trial of Daniel McKay, Judge Advocate's Bench, 17 August 1805, SRNSW, R 656, 601.

"Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser." 18 August 1805, p.1.

⁴³⁸ *Historical Records of New South Wales, King and Bligh, 1806, 1807, 1808*, ed. C. Potter, vol. 6, Historical Records of New South Wales, (New South Wales Government, 1898). John Harris to Mrs King, 25 October 1807, p. 345–346. While there is

confined by order of the Governor.⁴³⁹ The family's position continued to decline in the following years. By 1811 much of their property and household goods had been sold, and further seizures of land and assets occurred in 1812 and 1813.⁴⁴⁰ These cumulative legal and financial setbacks had already undermined the family's stability by the time of Daniel's death in 1819, leaving his partner, Judith Quinlan—the mother of his children—unable to maintain the household. While two children—Louisa (born 1807) and Hugh (born 1814)—remained with their mother, John's admission to the orphan institution marked the culmination of prolonged legal, economic, and personal hardship that had gradually eroded the household's capacity to remain intact.

William Gammage was admitted to the MOI in January 1819, most likely due to his deafness and ill-health. He was one of four children born to James and Jane Gammage (née Appleton) between 1805 and 1811.⁴⁴¹ William's father, James Gammage, worked as a baker, and following his death in 1814 Jane continued in this trade.⁴⁴² In this instance, her decision to place William in the MOI appears to have been shaped by the practical challenges of caring for a child with a disability while maintaining the bakery and managing an expanding household. Although Jane remarried in 1815 and the family regained a breadwinner in the stonemason William Chandler, William Gammage's particular needs continued to set him apart within the household economy. That Jane remained closely invested in her son's welfare is evident in her later actions. In November 1822 she applied to the MOI to have William apprenticed to his stepfather, stating that 'she was anxious to have him under her own care...owing to the extreme deafness and other infirmities of the Boy.'⁴⁴³

The circumstances surrounding Thomas Broughton's admission in 1820 are unusually opaque, signaled only by the MOI committee's approval of his entry on 12 April 1820 under 'peculiar circumstances' detailed in a memorial submitted by Joseph Low.⁴⁴⁴ No further explanation survives. The admission register adds that Thomas' mother was Mary Stafford of Bunbury Curran, near Campbeltown, offering little insight into the factors precipitating his placement.⁴⁴⁵ Subsequent records, however, allow partial reconstruction. Thomas, born in August 1810 at Windsor, was the son of Mary Stafford, a Welsh convict transported in 1808, and Thomas

no reference to what the Black Books were, they may have contained information on illicit trading and the economic activities of the NSW Corps and local settlers.

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁰ "Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser." 16 March 1811, p.1; 26 March 1811, p.1; 16 May 1811, p.1; 1 July 1811, p.2; 15 July 1811, p.2; 2 May 1812, p.2; 24 July 1813, p.2.

⁴⁴¹ Jane also had children to other fathers, namely an older son, James Young was born in 1803, and Jane later had two children (1815 and 1817) with William Chandler.

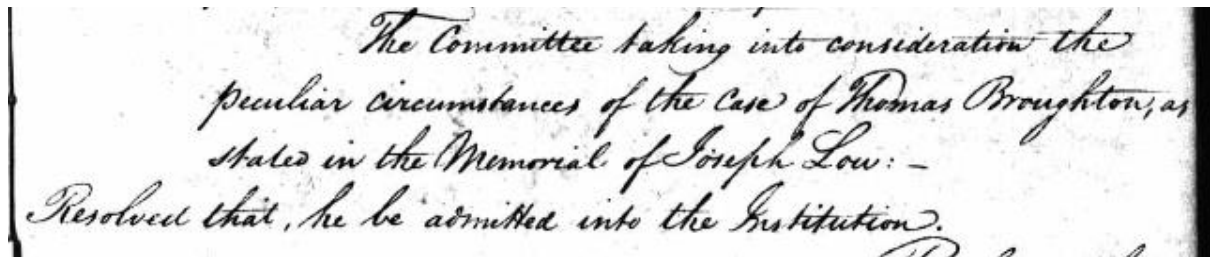
⁴⁴² William Gammage, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 1 January 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo. 1–2. Admission documents identify Jane's occupation as a baker.

⁴⁴³ Board of the Male Orphan School, Minutes of Meetings, 22 November 1822, CSC R6040 4/400, p.52.

⁴⁴⁴ Thomas Broughton, To be admitted to the Male Orphan Institution on memorial of Joseph Low, 12 April 1820, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo.15.

⁴⁴⁵ Thomas Broughton, Admitted to the Male Orphan School; Mary Stafford his parent, 12 April 1820, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.5-6.

Broughton senior, himself a convict likely to have arrived in the colony in 1799.⁴⁴⁶ Their relationship appears to have been brief. In 1813, Mary married Thomas Hoadley, and Broughton senior died in 1815 aged thirty-seven.⁴⁴⁷



Thomas Broughton junior's later life stands in marked contrast to these uncertain beginnings. He went on to become a tailor, grazier, politician, and magistrate, and his entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* reflects his success and substantial landholdings.⁴⁴⁸ Yet, as was typical of mid-twentieth-century biographical writing, his origins are disguised. The ADB records that he was born on 10 August 1810 at Windsor to 'Thomas Broughton, a clerk in the Audit Office, and his wife Mary, née Stafford', noting his apprenticeship and subsequent commercial success, but omitting any reference to his parents' convict origins or the brevity and instability of their relationship.⁴⁴⁹ This selective representation is revealing. It reflects a broader tendency to recast colonial lives in ways that privilege respectability and obscure convict ancestry, particularly where individuals achieved social and economic prominence. In Broughton's case, the exclusion of these early circumstances not only sanitises his biography but also obscures the conditions that shaped his admission to the MOI.

The ADB further states that 'at 9 he was apprenticed to a Sydney tailor', a claim that obscures this period of his life.⁴⁵⁰ Boys admitted to the Male Orphan Institution typically received basic education and industrial training within the school and were not formally apprenticed until their mid-teens, when they were bound by indenture to a master. In Thomas's case, the orphan school records indicate that he was discharged to a tailor in 1827, when he was approximately seventeen.⁴⁵¹ It is therefore unlikely that he was apprenticed at the age of nine. Rather, his early years were spent within the institution, where he may have received preliminary training in a trade before formal placement. This reframing is significant. By representing institutionalisation as early apprenticeship, the ADB erases Thomas's years within the orphan school, reflecting a broader tendency to obscure both the institutional experience and the social conditions that necessitated it. Acknowledging the reality of these formative years spent in the MOI, however, renders his later success all the more remarkable,

⁴⁴⁶ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages, Birth of Thomas Broughton, son of Thomas and Margaret (Stafford), 1810, V18102487 1A.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., Marriage of Thomas Hoadley and Mary Stafford, 1813, V18131467 3A.

Ibid, Death of Thomas Broughton, 1815, V18153372 2B.

⁴⁴⁸ Helen Bowd, "Thomas Stafford Broughton (1810–1901)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, 1969). <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/broughton-thomas-stafford-3072>

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ Thomas Broughton, Admitted to the Male Orphan School; Op. cit.

highlighting the extent to which his achievements were forged not from advantage, but from conditions of early instability and institutional care.

The immediate circumstances of Thomas's admission centre on Joseph Low, who petitioned for his placement. Low, likely a convict himself who arrived in 1819 under a life sentence, was transported to Newcastle on the day following Thomas's admission to the MOI.⁴⁵² While the precise relationship between Low and the Broughton family is unknown, the timing strongly suggests that he had been acting as Thomas's guardian, and that his removal from the district precipitated the boy's admission. In this light, the 'peculiar circumstances' noted by the committee can be understood as the convergence of multiple destabilising factors: the earlier death of Thomas's father, the apparent fragmentation of his family, and the sudden loss of an informal guardian. Why Mary Stafford was unable to care for her son at this point remains unclear, but the surviving evidence suggests that his admission was not the product of a single crisis, but of cumulative pressures acting upon an already fragile domestic situation. Thomas's case therefore illustrates how institutionalisation could function as a strategic response to compounded instability. It also underscores the extent to which both the archival record and later historical accounts obscure the contingencies that shaped such decisions.

Taken together, these cases demonstrate that admission to the MOI did not necessarily signal parental absence or neglect. Rather, institutionalisation could form part of a broader repertoire of family strategies, enabling households to respond to illness, disability, penal mobility, labour constraints, and economic instability. The selective placement of individual children reveals the extent to which colonial families actively negotiated institutional structures in order to preserve household stability. In this sense, the MOI functioned both as a refuge for the destitute, and as an adaptive resource within the fragile and often precarious economy of colonial family life.

5. Maintaining Familial Bonds:

Petitions requesting the release of children from institutional care frequently contain fuller accounts of family circumstances than the admission records themselves. Preserved within the archives of the colonial secretary, these petitions illustrate how parents continued to negotiate with institutional authorities long after their children had been admitted. At the same time, they reveal how the circumstances surrounding admission could be reshaped or simplified in the course of later appeals.

In 1824, Margaret Fry wrote to the Colonial Secretary, Frederick Goulburn, requesting that her son John be returned to her 'instead of proceeding to the Orphan School Farm', explaining that as a 'a Widow...he would be of great Service' to her now that he was fourteen years of age. The request was annotated with the comment that 'the woman is of bad character. Another son is apprenticed to Mr Hazard and goes on badly.'⁴⁵³ Margaret

⁴⁵² Joseph Lowe, On list of priosners transported to Newcastle per "Elizabeth Henrietta", 13 April 1820, SANSW, Reel 6007; 4/3501, fo.342.

⁴⁵³ John Fry, Held at the Male Orphan Institute, SANSW, Reel 6062; 4/1781, fo.402.

renewed her appeal in April 1825, stating that John was ‘fast approaching 15 years of age and would be more useful to Petitioner than by continuing burthensome to that benevolent institution [orphanage].’⁴⁵⁴ A character reference from Henry Fulton J.P., who had known her for over twenty-five years, directly contradicted the earlier judgement, asserting that Margaret had ‘behaved always honestly.’⁴⁵⁵

When this petition also failed, Margaret wrote again in 1826, this time to the Archdeacon of New South Wales, requesting that her son not be ‘bound to the sea service, in consequence of his ill health and bad sight’, instead proposing placing him in a trade apprenticeship.⁴⁵⁶ Her memorial was supported by John White, a Castlereagh Street tailor, who offered to take the boy as an apprentice.⁴⁵⁷ Despite these efforts, records indicate that John was ultimately assigned to a shipping firm—the outcome Margaret had sought to avoid. Her repeated petitions demonstrate sustained maternal advocacy, as she continued to intervene in decisions affecting her son’s labour, health, and future livelihood even after his admission.

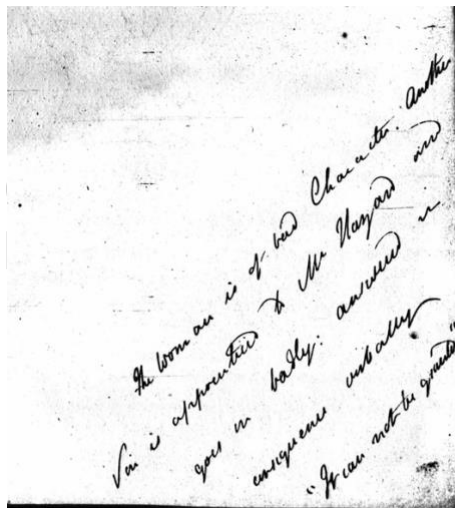


Image 7: Addendum to the letter written by Margaret Fry requesting the release of her son, John, from the MOI. ⁴⁵⁸

In seeking to demonstrate improved circumstances or renewed parental capacity, petitioners often explained the crises that had originally compelled them to surrender their children to institutional care. These documents therefore provide valuable insight into how families understood and represented their circumstances over time. It must also be recognised, however, that because such petitions were often written several years after admission, the context of institutionalisation could be simplified, reframed, or selectively recalled in hindsight. This is evident in the case with Elizabeth Cassidy (née Mountford), a publican at the Rocks when her seven-year-old son Edward Cassidy, was admitted to the MOI in April 1822.⁴⁵⁹ Having arrived in 1804, Elizabeth formed a

⁴⁵⁴ John Fry, Application for removal, 1825 and 1826, SANSW, NRS 783; 4/333, Roll 2776, fo.77.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁶ Margaret Fry’s concern that her son would be ‘bound to the sea service’ followed his recommendation as a possible apprentice to Jones & Walker. Their request for apprentices was expressed in a letter to Archdeacon Scott dated 10 August 1826.

Application for Removal, 10 August 1826, SANSW, Series: NRS 783; 4/333; Roll 2776, fo.65–66, 75.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid, fo. 73.

⁴⁵⁸ John Fry, Held at the Male Orphan Institute, 1824.

⁴⁵⁹ Edward Cassidy, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 11 April 1822, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.7-8.

long-term partnership with Michael Cassidy, with whom she had seven children. In 1819, Michael was sent to Newcastle under a seven-year sentence and in 1825, after reoffending, he was transported to Moreton Bay for life, effectively severing his role within the family.⁴⁶⁰ In December of that year, Elizabeth petitioned the orphan school for Edward's release, stating that she had been obliged 'on the death of her husband about six years ago to place him in that school being unable at that time to provide for 5 children left without a father.'⁴⁶¹ This account simplifies the circumstances surrounding Edward's admission. In practice, Michael Cassidy's violence and secondary punishment had already undermined the family's stability well before his death. In 1818 Elizabeth testified in the Criminal Court that he had repeatedly assaulted her, left her crippled, stolen her property, and 'left me and my five children destitute.'⁴⁶² The petition thus recasts a prolonged history of violence and instability into a more legible narrative of bereavement and hardship.

In her petition for release, Elizabeth stated that she wished to have Edward 'under her own protection' owing to his 'very weakly constitution,' and so that he might attend 'school at Sydney, for 2 or 3 years, preparatory to putting him apprentice to some light trade.'⁴⁶³ Supporting her application, William Cowper observed that 'Elizabeth Cassidy is a householder in Sydney - her circumstances are not affluent - she is considered as a person of moral character.'⁴⁶⁴ Cowper's description of Elizabeth as a 'householder' suggests residential stability and a degree of agency in maintaining her own household. His observation that her circumstances were 'not affluent', points to a condition of precarious respectability rather than simple poverty, a status reinforced by his assessment of her as 'a person of moral character'. Overall, the petition and its supporting testimony suggests that Edward's admission was not the act of abandonment, but of necessity following the disruption caused by his father's violence and secondary transportation. Elizabeth's language of protection, education and apprenticeship underscores that institutionalisation did not sever familial bonds; rather, it functioned as a temporary expedient within a broader framework of maternal care and aspiration.

Like Edward Cassidy, Thomas Palfrey was also released from the MOI on appeal by his mother. Thomas had been admitted in November 1821 by Ann Palfrey, a widow whose husband of eleven years had died in 1820.⁴⁶⁵ Unlike the majority of 'orphans', he remained at the orphanage for only two months. In January 1822, the minute book of the MOI reveals that a memorial had been received from 'John Jones, now the husband of Ann Palfrey...praying that her son, recently admitted, might go out of the school. It was resolved that Thomas Palfrey

⁴⁶⁰ Michael Cassidy, To be transported to Newcastle for seven years. In reports of prisoners tried at the Court of Criminal Jurisdiction, 22 November to 14 December 1820, SANSW, Reel 6023; X820, fo.27.

Michael Cassidy, Convicted of larceny and putting in bidily fear; sentence of death commuted to transportation to Moreton Bay for life. On return of prisoners tried and sentenced by the Supreme Court, 7 December 1825, SANSW, Fiche 3298; X730, fo.27.

⁴⁶¹ Australian Royalty: Genealogy of the colony of New South Wales, Edward Cassidy 1815–1891, Applications and Admissions to Orphan Schools 1817–1833, Applications for removal 1826, <https://australianroyalty.net.au/tree/purnellmccord.ged/individual/X16099/Edward-Cassidy>.

⁴⁶² Karskens, *The Rocks: life in early Sydney*, 100. Citing the Petition of Elizabeth Mumford (Mountford), 22 September 1819, with papers from the trial of Michael Cassidy, SANSW, CCJ COD 448, p.54.

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁵ Thomas Palfrey, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 3 November 1821, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.7-8.

be assigned to John Jones.⁴⁶⁶ Ann's swift action suggests that admission to the institution may have been intended as a temporary measure, with release pursued as soon as her circumstances changed through remarriage. In this case, remarriage did not precipitate further fragmentation, as in other examples discussed, but instead facilitated the reconstitution of the family unit and the restoration of maternal custody. The case therefore illustrates how institutional placement could be reversed when familial support structures were not only re-established but strengthened.

James, George and John Taylor were admitted to the MOI by their mother, Ann Taylor following the death of their father, James Taylor senior, in September 1820. James and George, aged nine and seven respectively, were admitted in September 1820, whilst John, aged eight, followed in April 1822.⁴⁶⁷ At the time of their admission Ann was a washerwoman living in Pitt Street, Sydney, her earnings insufficient to support her sons. In June 1825, Ann unsuccessfully memorialised the Colonial Secretary, Frederick Goulburn, requesting their release.⁴⁶⁸ Her memorial is significant for the insight it provides into both the circumstances that precipitated admission and the altered situation of the memorialist at the time of her appeal. Ann explained that 'your Memorialist was left a Widow in the year 1820, with four small Fatherless Children,' and that the MOI 'were pleased to receive under their care John, James and George Tailors [sic].' She then emphasized her changed circumstances, stating that she 'is now a Married Woman and has Launched into trade, and is daily being plundered of her Little Substance for the want of a trusty Servant', framing her request not only as a maternal appeal but as an economically rational one. She concluded by 'most humbly' begging that the committee 'will be pleased to restore to Memorialist her three Fatherless children.' Appended to her memorial was a note made by Henry Colden Antill, soldier and settler and member of the MOI Committee who affirmed:

I attended the Petitioner a considerable time as a Member of the Benevolent Society and always can attend her as a sober, Industrious Character & therefore recommend her care for the favourable consideration of the Committee.⁴⁶⁹

Antill's endorsement is striking. As a committee member and a figure associated with both the Benevolent Society and the colonial establishment, his attestation to Ann's sobriety and industry affirmed her conformity to the standards of respectable widowhood and remarriage that underpinned claims to maternal competence. That such validation accompanied her petition highlights the extent to which maternal authority in the colonial context required male corroboration. It is unlikely, therefore, that Ann's request was refused on grounds of character. Rather, the decision points to the priorities of the MOI itself. By 1825 the Institution appears to have operated as more than a temporary refuge for destitute children; it functioned as a mechanism of social discipline and labour formation. To release three boys of working age to a remarried mother engaged in small

⁴⁶⁶ Thomas Palfrey, allowed to be assigned to John Jones, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo. 36.

⁴⁶⁷ James & George Taylor admitted to the Male Orphan Institution, 11 October 1820, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo.22.

John Taylor, admitted to the Male Orphan Institution on petition from Ann Taylor, 10 April 1822, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo. 38.

⁴⁶⁸ John, James and George Taylor, Application for Removal, 30 June 1825, SANSW, Series: NRS 783; 4/333; Roll 2776, fo. 7–8.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid.

trade would have deprived the Institution of apprentices-in-training and undermined its claim to paternal oversight.

Ann's persistence is evident in a further petition of May 1826. While couched in the expected language of supplication, the tone quickly shifts as she reminds the committee that a 'long time' has 'elapsed since my Children where [sic] placed under your care' and emphasises that they were 'now of Proper age to be Apprenticed'.⁴⁷⁰ Ann did not simply request her sons' discharge; she presented a concrete plan for their future, arranging apprenticeships with the architect and builder Mr Cooper, who would 'free of every expence...learn them the Trade of a Carpenter & Joiner.' By this time the boys were aged between twelve and fifteen years old. When no reply was forthcoming, Ann wrote again in June 1826, reiterating her desire to make her sons 'Good Tradesmen' and once more requesting their release to Mr Cooper.⁴⁷¹ Her repeated petitions represent sustained maternal agency, expressed through the idiom of deference yet underpinned by deep determination and careful preparation for her sons' economic independence.

Ann's plea was not granted until October 1826, when James and George were discharged to their mother.⁴⁷² Despite her improved circumstances, remarriage, detailed planning and external validation from a respected committee member, her pleas were not addressed in a timely manner. The delay reflects the asymmetry of power between impoverished mothers and colonial welfare authorities, and underscores the limited weight afforded to maternal recovery once children had been absorbed into institutional care. Ann's petitions nevertheless demonstrate her continued assertion of maternal responsibility and her determination to reclaim her sons at the earliest moment she believed herself capable of providing for them.

Brothers, John and Charles Jones, were admitted to the MOI in January 1819 by their mother, Mary Jones, a sempstress of Macquarie Street, Parramatta.⁴⁷³ John, aged three, and Charles, aged one, had accompanied their convicted mother to the colony in 1811 and remained with her at the Female Factory until their admission to the orphanage. In September 1820 Mary married emancipist Joseph Day.⁴⁷⁴ Two years later, in November 1822, she unsuccessfully petitioned for the return of her sons, stating that 'she [was] able to support them.'⁴⁷⁵ In December 1826, she wrote to Charles Cowper, Clerk to the Corporation, requesting that Charles be released in order to undertake an apprenticeship with a tailor.⁴⁷⁶ She explained that she wished to place him with 'an acquaintance who is a very respectable man of the same business,' and asked that he be assigned to her for that

⁴⁷⁰ John, James and George Taylor, Application for Removal, 29 May 1826, op. cit., fo. 41-2.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., 20 June 1826, op. cit., fo.55-56. Her letter as notated with a request for information on the boys and the instruction that a letter was to be written to Mr Cooper 'to learn if he will take Jas & George Taylor.'

⁴⁷² John Taylor, Application for Removal, 23 February 1827, op. cit., fo.219. In February 1827, Ann recommenced the process, in this instance for the release of her youngest son, John, who she wished 'to look after her little affairs' given that 'at this present memorialist enjoys very indifferent health.' She had greater success this second time, with her son released in March 1827.

⁴⁷³ Charles and John Jones, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 1 January 1819, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.3-4.

⁴⁷⁴ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Marriage of Joseph Day and Mary Jones, 1820, V18202603.

⁴⁷⁵ Mary Day, Petition to have her two boys removed from the Male Orphan Institution rejected, 22 November 1822, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo.50.

⁴⁷⁶ Charles Jones, Application for Removal, 13 December 1826, op. cit., fo.159.

purpose. Emphasising her altered circumstances, she noted that she was now 'married to Joseph Day, keeper of the Parramatta Toll Gate, Windsor Road.' Her petition was annotated with a request for further details regarding the nominated tailor's identity and character references.⁴⁷⁷ Mary's appeals, which reflected sustained maternal advocacy and a determined process of negotiation, appear to have borne fruit. Charles was released to Mr Booth of Parramatta, most likely Joseph Booth, a tailor operating in Parramatta who arrived in the colony in 1818.⁴⁷⁸

The case of Catherine and Patrick Foley underscores the enduring significance of parental attachment despite institutional separation. Their son Thomas Foley was admitted to the MOI in May 1824, as his mother, Catherine, was confined in the Female Factory and his father was in service.⁴⁷⁹ A letter penned in January 1827 by the couple's employer, Nathaniel Norton, noted that Patrick was free by servitude and that Catherine's sentence would expire in March 1827. Norton further stated that the Foleys 'are desirous of having their son Thomas...assigned to them.'⁴⁸⁰ The orphanage records indicate that Thomas was released 'to his Parents by order of the Corporation' on 17 January 1827, just a week after Norton's letter was received.⁴⁸¹ The speed of this decision is striking. In contrast to many parents whose petitions languished or were denied, the Foleys' request was granted with unusual expediency, suggesting that employer advocacy could materially strengthen parental claims.

Yet the significance of the letter lies not only in its outcome, but in its form. Unlike many petitions examined in this paper, it was not a private parental appeal couched in the language of humility or maternal supplication. Instead, it assumed an administrative tone, conveyed through the hand of an employer rather than the parents themselves. This mediated appeal is therefore particularly revealing. By entrusting their case to Nathaniel Norton, the Foleys effectively extended their claim beyond the confines of the family into the sphere of colonial authority and respectability. Their separation from Thomas had become sufficiently recognised that their employer was prepared to intervene on their behalf. In this sense, the letter reflects a shared and socially validated claim to their child. Underwritten by character, employment stability, and employer endorsement, it carried a weight that solitary petitions—however heartfelt—often lacked. The Corporation's swift response suggests that such mediated appeals could prove more effective than even the most persistent private memorial.

Family members other than parents also sought to repair the fractures created by institutional admission. In November 1823, brothers John Barnard Williams (aged six) and Thomas George Williams (aged four) were enrolled in the MOI, having been admitted by their widowed mother, Ann Williams of Sydney.⁴⁸² On 18 December 1827, Ann Howe petitioned the Orphan School Corporation for the release of her brother, Thomas Williams. She identified herself as the wife of William Howe, 'a native of the Colony,' and described her brother

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁸ Charles Jones, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 1 January 1819, Op.cit. Remarks.

⁴⁷⁹ Thomas Foley, Ibid, fo.9-10

⁴⁸⁰ Nathaniel Norton, Application for Removal, 8 January 1827, op. cit., fo.179.

⁴⁸¹ Thomas Foley, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, op.cit., fo.9-10. Remarks.

⁴⁸² John and Thomas Williams, Admitted to the Male Orphan School, 28 November 1823, op.cit., fo.9-10.

as ‘aged Ten Years, an inmate of the Male Orphan School for about four Years.’ Ann asserted that she was now ‘well able to provide for his future Maintenance and Education.’⁴⁸³ The petition was annotated ‘ordered’, and Thomas was released later that month. Notably, despite Ann being both the author of the petition and the architect of her brother’s release, the records state that Thomas was discharged into the care of ‘Mr Wm Howe his Bro. in Law, Sydney.’ The formal attribution of custody to her husband reflects the gendered assumptions embedded within colonial administration: while women frequently initiated petitions and articulated familial claims, legal and institutional authority was routinely vested in male household heads. The record thus preserves the formal authority of the male household head while obscuring the female agency that made the release possible.

Thomas Long was admitted to the MOI on 18 April 1822 by his sister, Mrs Roberts.⁴⁸⁴ The institutional record is strikingly sparse: although both parents are noted as deceased, their Christian names are left blank, effectively consigning them to anonymity.⁴⁸⁵ Behind this archival silence lies a narrative of sustained kinship and intervention. Thomas’ sister, Elizabeth Roberts (formerly Elizabeth Long alias Tidd), arrived free in 1814 and married William Roberts in May 1818. Evidence suggests that Thomas and Elizabeth were the children of Jane Long, a free woman who died in Sydney on 22 April 1822 aged forty-three,⁴⁸⁶ and Thomas Long senior, a convict who likely arrived in 1814 aboard the *Somersetshire* and died in July 1817 aged fifty.⁴⁸⁷ William Roberts, an emancipist jeweller of Sydney, twice petitioned for Thomas’ release. On 6 March 1828 Roberts he expressed his ‘particular desire’ to remove the boy from the orphan school, stating that it was his intention ‘to place him for a short period to a private school and afterwards to Apprentice him to some respectable business.’⁴⁸⁸ When his application was refused, he wrote again on 23 March, expressing ‘surprise, and regret’ at the decision. Citing ‘seventeen years residence in this Colony’, he asserted that his character was ‘irreproachable’, that he supported himself ‘respectably by my trade, that of a Jeweller’, and denied any ‘impropriety’ in his household. His letters articulate a structured plan: to place Thomas in ‘a good school for two years to finish his education, and then put him to a trade.’⁴⁸⁹ Character references further attested that Roberts was ‘deserving of any indulgence.’⁴⁹⁰

Despite these representations, Thomas had already been discharged on 17 March 1828 into the care of Mr Allen of Argyle. The institutional record of removal gives no hint of refusal, contest or negotiation. Only the petitions preserved within the Colonial Secretary’s correspondence reveal that Thomas’s discharge was preceded by a failed attempt by family to reclaim guardianship and assert their right to determine his educational and economic future. What appears in the register as a routine administrative discharge was, in fact, the outcome

⁴⁸³ Thomas Williams, Application for Removal, 18 December 1827, SANSW, NRS 783; 4/333; Roll 2776, fo.347.

⁴⁸⁴ Thomas Long, Admitted to the Male Orphan School; Mrs Roberts his parent/guardian, 18 April 1822, SANSW, Fiche 3307; 4/7208, fo.7–8.

⁴⁸⁵ Thomas Long, Admitted to Male Orphan Institution, 17 April 1822, SANSW, Reel 6040; 4/400, fo.39.

⁴⁸⁶ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Death of Jane Long, 1822, 5381/1822 V18225381 2B.

⁴⁸⁷ St Philip’s Church of England, Sydney: Church Register – Burials – 1788–1831; ML Reel SAG 90; Volume entry number: 603.

⁴⁸⁸ Application for Removal, 6 March 1828, SANSW, NRS 783; 4/333; Roll 2776, fo.353. No name provided on the application, so unlisted entry.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 23 March 1828, fo. 357.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

of a contested claim to familial authority. The archive does not simply omit this conflict; it suppresses it, rendering institutional power invisible through procedural brevity.

These petitions of release reveal that institutional admission did not signify the abandonment of familial responsibility. Rather, the evidence suggests that many parents and relatives regarded institutionalisation as a temporary expedient during periods of acute crisis. When circumstances improved—through remarriage, employment, the expiration of sentences, or the support of kin—families frequently sought to reclaim children and reassert their authority over their upbringing. At the same time, these documents expose the limits of the institutional record itself. While admission registers reduce complex family circumstances to brief administrative entries, petitions preserve traces of ongoing negotiation, conflict, and aspiration that would otherwise remain obscured. The petitions therefore reveal a tension at the heart of colonial child welfare: while families viewed the orphan institutions as provisional support, the institutions themselves increasingly exercised enduring control over children's futures.

6. Conclusion:

Narratives of abandonment have long shaped interpretations of children admitted to the Male Orphan Institution. Yet the evidence presented here reveals a far more complex reality, in which institutionalisation was only rarely attributable to abandonment and more often the product of structural pressures. The reconstructed biographies of the boys and their families show that institutionalisation most often emerged from cumulative difficulties associated with death, penal transportation, labour mobility, maternal confinement, remarriage, illness, and acute economic instability. In this context, the orphan school functioned not merely as a charitable refuge, but as part of a broader repertoire of survival strategies through which families attempted to stabilise fragile households.

These pressures were not exceptional but structural. Early colonial New South Wales was a society defined by mobility and displacement, in which convicts, soldiers, administrators, and settlers circulated between the colony and the wider world, frequently leaving behind spouses, children, and kin. Within such a context, the fragmentation of families and the institutionalisation of children were predictable consequences of colonial conditions rather than signs of familial failure. Decisions to place children in institutional care were therefore acts of negotiation, shaped by constrained choices and competing demands, rather than evidence of indifference or abandonment.

At the same time, institutional admission did not sever familial bonds. Parents and relatives continued to intervene in children's lives through petitions, appeals, and informal networks, seeking to reclaim custody, direct apprenticeships, and influence their future livelihoods. These efforts reveal institutionalisation as a temporary and often contested arrangement, situated within ongoing processes of familial negotiation rather than marking a definitive break from family life.

Crucially, this study also exposes the limitations of the colonial archive. Admission records reduce complex domestic crises to sparse administrative entries, while the loss of petitions requesting admission silences the voices of families at the point of greatest vulnerability. Without reconstruction through family history methodology, these children appear as isolated figures, detached from kinship networks and social context. This study draws on the reconstruction of the lives of 107 boys admitted to the institution between 1819 and December 1823, with only a small number excluded where common names render definitive identification impossible.⁴⁹¹ Read against the grain, however, the surviving evidence reveals a far more complex reality—one characterised by conflict, negotiation, and sustained familial engagement. The archive does not simply omit these dynamics; it obscures them, presenting institutionalisation as routine while effacing the contested processes that produced it.

Reconstructed in this way, the category of the “orphan” is fundamentally destabilised. Far from denoting parental absence, it frequently masked the presence of living, engaged, and resourceful families navigating conditions of profound instability. The Male Orphan Institution thus emerges as an institution embedded within a wider system of care, constraint, and adaptation.

Ultimately, these histories reveal less about abandonment than about the fragility, resilience, and strategic adaptability of colonial families. To read the archive at face value is to mistake administrative brevity for lived reality.

⁴⁹¹ The boys who could not be confidently traced include:

Joseph Davis, aged 10 when admitted in 1823 by William Davis. This Joseph does not appear to be the brother of Charles and Philip Davis who were admitted in July 1824, but I cannot identify William Davis with any certainty.

William Jones, aged 8 when admitted in August 1821 was the son of Thomas Jones, a servant. The commonality of the surname makes William’s family circumstances impossible to trace given the inadequate admission information provided. Note that William Jones was listed as having run away from the MOI.

William Jacques was nine when admitted to the MOI in July 1821. His mother (?) was listed as Mary Wilson and her residence was listed as Tahiti. Family sources can add little to enlighten the background of this family.

John and Michael Clarke were admitted by their mother, Elizabeth Clarke in January 1819. The 1828 census identifies their father as Thomas Clarke. I have been unsuccessful in confidently identifying this family.