

## Ebenezer Wright (1830/31 - 1900)

Ebenezer Wright was born in either 1830 or 1831 in Ludlow, Massachusetts to Rev. Ebenezer and Harriet (Goodell) Wright.<sup>1</sup> He was the second of four children born to the couple.<sup>2</sup> Ebenezer, Jr. was baptized on May 15, 1831 by his father, who was a practicing minister in Ludlow at the time.<sup>3</sup> Following a period of ill health, Rev. Wright officially left his position at the parish in 1835, where he had preached for sixteen years. In 1840, the Wright family relocated to Norwich, which is in the west-central part of Massachusetts.<sup>4</sup>

By 1850, a twenty-year-old Ebenezer Wright had left home and now lived in Hadley, Massachusetts, where he worked as a clerk.<sup>5</sup> By 1855, Wright lived and worked at the State Almshouse in Monson, Massachusetts.<sup>6</sup> His father served as the chaplain, while he worked as a bookkeeper.<sup>7</sup> Opened in 1854, the State Almshouse in Monson “provided residence for paupers without settlement [legal residence] in the Commonwealth [of Massachusetts] from 1854 to 1872.”<sup>8</sup> Additional almshouses were created in Bridgewater and Tewksbury at the same time, each with a superintendent and three inspectors, “who could bind out minors as apprentices.”<sup>9</sup> Wright’s work at the Almshouse was similar to what he would eventually do for the New York Juvenile Asylum.

On November 15, 1860, Wright married Mary Dickinson Cowles in Amherst, Massachusetts.<sup>10</sup> The couple had eight children (Charles, Frederic, Albert, Mary, Jessie, Robert, Edward, and Harry), only four of whom survived to adulthood. At the time of their marriage, Wright lived in New York City and worked as the superintendent of the New York Juvenile Asylum’s House of Reception, located at 71 W. 13<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>11</sup> He continued to live there for at least the next three years.<sup>12</sup> The couple’s first child, Charles, was born in either 1861 or 1862.<sup>13</sup> Their second son, Frederic (Freddy) arrived on August 31, 1864 in Amherst, Massachusetts.<sup>14</sup> At the time of Frederic’s birth, Wright worked as a teacher at the Massachusetts State Primary

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<sup>1</sup> “The remains of Ebenezer Wright,” *Pantagraph*, January 16, 1900, 5; “Massachusetts Births and Christenings, 1639-1915,” FamilySearch; “North America, Family Histories, 1500-2000 for Ebenezer Wright,” Ancestry.com.

<sup>2</sup> 1850 U.S. Census, Ancestry.com.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Noon, *The History of Ludlow Massachusetts*, Springfield, MA: Springfield Printing and Binding Company, 1912, 152-155; “Massachusetts, Town and Vital Records, 1620-1988 for Ebenezer Wright,” May 15, 1831, Ancestry.com.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Noon, *The History of Ludlow Massachusetts*, Springfield, MA: Springfield Printing and Binding Company, 1912, 152-155.

<sup>5</sup> 1850 U.S. Census, Ancestry.com.

<sup>6</sup> 1855 Massachusetts Census, Ancestry.com.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Sally Neal, “Almshouse and State Primary School in Monson, MA – Historical Notes,” [http://www.poorhousestory.com/MA\\_Hampden\\_Monson\\_RECORDS.htm](http://www.poorhousestory.com/MA_Hampden_Monson_RECORDS.htm).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> North America, Family Histories, 1500-2000 for Ebenezer Wright,” ancestry.com; “Massachusetts Town Clerk Vital and Town Records, 1626-2001,” FamilySearch.org.

<sup>11</sup> “Massachusetts Town Clerk Vital and Town Records, 1626-2001,” FamilySearch.org; 1860 U.S. Census, Ancestry.com.

<sup>12</sup> “U.S., Civil War Draft Registrations Records, 1863-1865 for Ebenezer Wright,” Ancestry.com.

<sup>13</sup> 1865 Massachusetts Census, Ancestry.com.

<sup>14</sup> “Massachusetts Births and Christenings, 1639-1915,” FamilySearch.org.

School for Dependent Children in New York.<sup>15</sup> A year later, Wright and his family were living in Huntington, Massachusetts, where he was listed as working as a lawyer.<sup>16</sup>

The New York Juvenile Asylum (NYJA) was founded in 1851 by a group of prominent businessmen and professionals concerned about homelessness among low-income children in New York City. To some, these children were seen as a moral hazard, because they might turn to crime or prostitution in order to make their way in the world. In order to protect the children from the dangers of the city (and to also protect society from vagrant children), the Asylum, like similar institutions at the time, was “designed to house, educate, reform, and find placement for the numerous homeless and runaway boys and girls found daily on the streets of New York.” Children would be trained in useful skills in employable trades such as cooking, housekeeping, woodworking, shoemaking, sewing, tailoring, and even telegraphy. The children were also taught how to maintain an honorable life, which “thereby would diminish the sources of pauperism and crime.”<sup>17</sup> The founders of the Asylum conceived of it to be a place for non-delinquent children—an alternative to the House of Refuge, which was a reformatory for young criminals.<sup>18</sup>

Children were admitted to the Asylum for a variety of reasons. Many of the children lived on the streets or had committed petty theft, and were brought in by the police. Others were removed from their homes because those homes were deemed unfit. Additionally, quite a few children were surrendered by parents or relatives who were not physically or financially able to care for them. There were also even a few cases where the children themselves asked for shelter with the Asylum.<sup>19</sup>

Whatever the cases may have been, when the children first arrived, they were sent to the House of Reception on West 13<sup>th</sup> Street (where Wright worked for several years). Upon their arrival, each child was assigned a case number. After a few days of assessment, staff sent appropriate cases uptown to the Asylum, where children received six hours of schooling a day as well as moral, religious, and vocational training to prepare them for their new homes.<sup>20</sup> “Without the preparation of a good training-school, they would not be tolerated, nor would they stay in decent homes, but would quickly return to their old haunts and ways.”<sup>21</sup> In 1881, children spent an average of seventeen months in the training school.<sup>22</sup>

Some of these children were sent west via the railroad, nicknamed “orphan trains.” It was thought that sending the children west would be better for them, both physically and morally. The children that were sent from the Asylum were indentured to farmers. From 1855 to 1898, the Asylum exclusively sent children to Illinois, which was the only state at the time that accepted

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<sup>15</sup> “Births Registered in the town of Amherst,” FamilySearch.org; Gridley; “Western Agency, N.Y. Juvenile Asylum,” December 31, 1899, 10.

<sup>16</sup> 1865 Massachusetts Census, Ancestry.com; “Massachusetts, Town and Vital Records, 1620-1988 for Ebenezer Wright,” 1865 & 1866, Ancestry.com; Apparently Wright attended Columbia University Law School in New York City, but was listed as a non-graduating member of the class of 1864, Email correspondence between Nancy Miller and Jocelyn Wilk, University Archivist at Columbia University, September 6, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> “Western Agency, N.Y. Juvenile Asylum,” December 31, 1871, 6.

<sup>18</sup> “New York Juvenile Asylum records (Children’s Village), 1853-1954,” Columbia University Libraries Archival Collection, [http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/archival/collections/ldpd\\_6909466/](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/archival/collections/ldpd_6909466/); Rochelle Gridley, researcher notes on Ebenezer Wright and The Orphan Train.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid; New York Juvenile Asylum Report, 1.

<sup>20</sup> “New York Juvenile Asylum records (Children’s Village), 1853-1954.”

<sup>21</sup> “Western Agency, N.Y. Juvenile Asylum,” December 31, 1871, 6.

<sup>22</sup> “Apprenticing Agency of the New York Juvenile Asylum,” December 13, 1881, 3.

indentures.<sup>23</sup> The Asylum had a permanent agent stationed in Illinois to assist in placing children with families. That agent, was Ebenezer Wright.

On June 24, 1867, Wright was made the Western Agent in Chicago, Illinois, and was in charge of the children as they were sent west.<sup>24</sup> In addition to his work with the Asylum, Wright also worked as an insurance agent in Chicago.<sup>25</sup>

After only about four years in Chicago, Wright and his family relocated because the Great Chicago Fire of October 8-10, 1871 had decimated the city. Though his home was not destroyed by the fire, Wright lost the lease on it and needed to find a new location to set up operations for the Western Agency of the Asylum. Most likely because of the fire and the significant amount of damage done to Chicago, Wright looked outside the city for a new location. He chose to relocate his family and the Agency to Normal, Illinois in 1872. According to newspaper accounts of the time, it was reported that Wright chose to move his family to Normal because of the educational advantages available to his own children. Wright and his family settled in a house on the south side of Willow Street, out of which he operated the Agency for the next eighteen years.<sup>26</sup> The Agency leased its headquarters for a year before purchasing it. The house was located on several acres of land and improvements were made on the home including a two-story addition (so that it could accommodate both Wright and his family, and children who were waiting placement) and a furnace. Additionally, Wright wrote in his 1873 annual report that this new location, “near the geographical center of the State” and close proximity to a railroad center, was good for the Agency.<sup>27</sup>

Children who were sent to Illinois by the Asylum were indentured to a “guardian.”<sup>28</sup> But the children were not placed with just any family. It was Wright’s opinion that “homes should be selected with careful discrimination.”<sup>29</sup> The guardian taking in the child was known as the employer, the child was the apprentice, and the two entered into a contract or indenture. Typically, the contract stipulated that the child must attend school at least four months of the year, be clothed properly, and attend church and Sunday school on a regular basis. At the age of majority (21 for boys/18 for girls), the young person was given a specified amount of money (\$100 for boys and \$50 for girls) and a new suit of clothes.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, “in case of dissatisfaction, change of circumstances or death of the employer, the apprentice may be returned to the Asylum” and “in case of neglect of duty, abuse, or nonfulfillment of the contract, the Asylum may remove the apprentice.”<sup>31</sup>

The children were first placed with a guardian on a trial basis and were sometimes removed based on changing circumstances (death of employer or loss of job, for example).<sup>32</sup> The trial period was originally two weeks, but was extended to three weeks in 1882.<sup>33</sup> Some children were

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<sup>23</sup> Gridley; “Western Agency, N.Y. Juvenile Asylum,” December 31, 1872, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Summary; “Western Agency, N.Y. Juvenile Asylum,” December 31, 1871, 3.

<sup>25</sup> 1870 U.S. Census, Ancestry.com.

<sup>26</sup> “Death of Mr. E. Wright,” *Pantagraph*, January 15, 1900, 5; “Western Agency, N.Y. Juvenile Asylum,” December 31, 1872, 1.

<sup>27</sup> “Western Agency, N.Y. Juvenile Asylum,” December 31, 1872, 2.

<sup>28</sup> Gridley.

<sup>29</sup> “Western Agency, N.Y. Juvenile Asylum,” December 31, 1873, 3.

<sup>30</sup> “Western Agency, N.Y. Juvenile Asylum,” December 31, 1871, 4; “Western Agency, N.Y. Juvenile Asylum,” December 31, 1873, 1-2.

<sup>31</sup> “Western Agency, N.Y. Juvenile Asylum,” December 31, 1873, 2.

<sup>32</sup> “Western Agency, N.Y. Juvenile Asylum,” December 31, 1871, 5.

<sup>33</sup> “Western Agency, N.Y. Juvenile Asylum,” December 31, 1882, 5.

removed from homes multiple times before they were “permanently settled.”<sup>34</sup> Wright visited the children once every two years. However, he favored increasing visitations, arguing that this monitoring was necessary, otherwise “suffering, mischief, and irreparable evil would result.”<sup>35</sup>

Wright’s 1874 report stated that groups of 20 to 40 children traveled from the Asylum in New York City to Illinois at an agreed upon location that was advertised for several weeks in advance.<sup>36</sup> A total of 150 children arrived from the Asylum between February and October of that year.<sup>37</sup>

The Western Agency’s headquarters in Normal was not meant to serve as a “depot” for children arriving in Illinois or waiting for a home.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, dissatisfied employers regularly sent children there, or children would arrive at the Agency’s headquarters looking for refuge—57 children total in 1873.<sup>39</sup> By 1875, the number of children visiting the Home was 70, with an average of three to four children staying there at any given time that year.<sup>40</sup>

The Asylum intentionally moved children into Protestant Christian homes in Illinois’ rural communities, regardless of the child’s religious affiliation. Wright concluded his 1874 report by saying that, “nowhere else can a greater number of elevating influences be brought to bear upon an individual child than in a well-ordered Christian family, where it is also surrounded and acted upon by the industrial and educational forces of a cultivated community.”<sup>41</sup> Additionally, Wright responded to criticisms about the fact that the Asylum almost always placed children with farm families. In his 1880 report, he wrote that:

*“...it is rare that anything more favorable for health, and the symmetrical development of body and mind during the plastic period of childhood, can be provided than country life and farm work. It secures a sound physical basis, a pure and sturdy character, and a knowledge of the material world, which together constitute the best possible outfit for a young person to start with, whatever business may afterward be decided upon.”*<sup>42</sup>

Wright emphasized the need to visit each child at least once per year, but he lamented that he was not able to achieve that goal because of additional strains on his time and attention.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, a staff member (Mr. O.B. Galusha of Normal) was hired on November 24, 1873 to act exclusively as a “visitor.”<sup>44</sup> However, by the end of 1874, general visits were suspended due to lack of funding exacerbated by the railways elimination of reduced rates.<sup>45</sup>

Much of Wright’s time was spent preparing paperwork. He answered letters and wrote detailed monthly and annual reports for the Asylum. The annual reports also included letters

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<sup>34</sup> “Western Agency, N.Y. Juvenile Asylum,” December 31, 1871, 5.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> “Western Agency, N.Y. Juvenile Asylum,” December 31, 1874, 1.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>38</sup> “Western Agency, N.Y. Juvenile Asylum,” December 31, 1873, 5.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid; “Amanda Lyon,” *Pantagraph*, September 5, 1881, 3.

<sup>40</sup> “Western Agency, N.Y. Juvenile Asylum,” December 31, 1875, 2.

<sup>41</sup> “Western Agency, N.Y. Juvenile Asylum,” December 31, 1874, 6.

<sup>42</sup> “Apprenticing Agency of the New York Juvenile Asylum,” December 31, 1880, 3-4.

<sup>43</sup> “Western Agency, N.Y. Juvenile Asylum,” December 31, 1873, 6.

<sup>44</sup> “Western Agency, N.Y. Juvenile Asylum,” December 31, 1875, 4; “Western Agency, N.Y. Juvenile Asylum,” December 31, 1873, 6.

<sup>45</sup> “Western Agency, N.Y. Juvenile Asylum,” December 31, 1874, 4.

from the apprentices. They were distributed to all of the children and served as the “Facebook” of the day, allowing them to follow the lives of their siblings or former friends.<sup>46</sup>

Additionally, Wright himself shared success stories of children who were placed by the Asylum. One such success story Wright recounted was how he had met a gentleman at dinner in an unnamed hotel he was staying at in 1873 (the names of people and places were often left out in his reports to protect the privacy of individuals the Asylum served). The man began to engage Wright in conversation about the Asylum, and from the intimate knowledge the man had, Wright realized that he had once been a pupil at the Asylum. Indeed the man had been in 1860. After removing to a private room, the man stated that he felt that the work Wright had done and continued to do was “noble work.” The man told Wright that his parents had died and left him “friendless and homeless,” wandering about the streets of New York. The man stated that he soon fell into a group of boys that led him into a life of “pilfering and thieving.” On one such instance of trying to take a pair of shoes from a wagon, the man was caught by a police officer and brought to the Asylum. The man stated that was the most fortunate day of his life. He remained at the Asylum for a year until he was apprenticed to a farmer in Illinois. After serving in the Army during the Civil War, the man obtained employment as a clerk in a store, and eventually became a partner in the prosperous business, along with having a wife and child too. He proclaimed that full credit should be given to the Asylum for how successful his life turned out to be.<sup>47</sup>

However, not every case Wright dealt with was a success. One of the lowest points in Wright’s career with the Asylum occurred in September 1882. A young indenture, Amanda Lyon (who was sixteen years old at the time), had been staying with the Wrights as she waited for placement again. While she stayed with the Wrights, Lyon accused Ebenezer’s elder sons, Charles and Frederic, of violating her and causing her to become pregnant.<sup>48</sup> According to Lyon, she told a reporter from the *Chicago Tribune* that, while Ebenezer was away in New York on business for the Agency, his wife Mary discovered that Lyon was pregnant and panicked.<sup>49</sup> She then stated that Mary took her to Chicago where she intended to dispose of her at some other asylum. Lyon stated that Mary first took her to Mercy Hospital, where she was refused admission.<sup>50</sup> Next, she took Lyon to Good Shepherd, a Catholic Institution. However, Lyon could not be admitted without regular commitment papers from the courts and it was too late in the day to try and procure them from the proper authorities. Not knowing what to do, Mary took Lyon to the Home of the Friendless on Wabash Avenue, and abandoned her there at 5 o’clock in the evening. Mary then returned to Normal on the evening train because she had responsibilities to attend to.<sup>51</sup>

Word of this incident spread through the Chicago newspapers, which in turn was picked up by local newspapers such as the *Pantagraph* and the *Weekly Leader* in Bloomington. A reporter from the *Pantagraph* interviewed Mary a few days after the incident occurred. Mary admitted it was wrong of her to leave Lyon in Chicago on her own, but stated that she did not know what else to do because Lyon was a handful and had been behaving very badly.

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<sup>46</sup> Gridley.

<sup>47</sup> “Western Agency, N.Y. Juvenile Asylum,” December 31, 1873, 8.

<sup>48</sup> “Amanda Lyon.”

<sup>49</sup> “It Needs Investigation,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 2, 1881, 8.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> “Amanda Lyon.”

According to newspaper and eyewitness accounts, Lyon had a very checkered past. She had been passed on to the New York Juvenile Asylum from another institution because she was disobedient and would not stay in the homes she was placed at in New York City. She was twelve years old when she arrived in Normal and bounced around from home to home. From the time she was twelve, until the time of the incident, she had been placed in six homes, some of them twice. Many of her guardians complained about her dishonesty, bad language, and disobedience. Lyon herself admitted to Chicago authorities that when she wanted out of a place, she would behave very badly so her guardian would send her away. But she also said she acted that way because she objected being made to work for no pay.<sup>52</sup>

Mary Wright strongly denied the accusations Lyon made against her sons. She stated that there was no way that her sons could have committed such a crime. Mary stated that the girls who stayed at their home slept in the third story of the residence and were locked in at night. She was the only one who had a key to where the girls stayed. And furthermore, she stated her sons and other boys slept over the office in a separate building some distance away.<sup>53</sup>

Newspaper accounts of whether or not Lyon was indeed pregnant also varied. One account claims that she was examined by a doctor in Chicago who determined she was not pregnant, but was instead suffering from an extreme inflammation of that region.<sup>54</sup> Another account reported that Lyon had partially admitted to “criminal intimacy” while she was living with a family in Southern Illinois. When she returned to Normal, it was found that she was possibly suffering from a miscarriage.<sup>55</sup> And in still another account, Lyon herself stated that she told Mary she was pregnant and that Mary gave her a medicine with creosote in it to induce a miscarriage.<sup>56</sup> So, it is unknown whether or not Lyon was ever pregnant, or that the medicine she claimed Mary Wright gave her caused her to miscarry.

Either way, the incident came to a close on September 19, 1881, when a committee met to investigate the treatment of Lyon and the charges she made against the Wrights and their sons. Lyon was not present at this hearing, nor was there a judge to preside over this event. It was the opinion of the committee (which was made up entirely of men) that the charges Lyon made had no foundation, and that “Amanda Lyon [is] unworthy of belief in any particular.” Furthermore, the committee found that Mary Wright had “acted as she thought right and proper” in taking Lyon to Chicago while Ebenezer was gone. It was the opinion of the committee that “every member of the Wright family” should be exonerated in the strongest possible language.<sup>57</sup> What really happened to Amanda Lyon may never be known.

It does not seem that this incident tarnished the reputation of Ebenezer Wright at all. He continued to serve as the Western Agent for the Asylum for another nineteen years, nine of those being spent in Normal. Wright and his family continued to live at the Agency’s headquarters on Willow Street until 1890. After 1890, he and his wife appear to have returned to Chicago, where he continued to operate the Western Agency until shortly before his death in 1900.<sup>58</sup> It is unknown why he moved back to Chicago.

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<sup>52</sup> “Amanda Lyon;” Gridley.

<sup>53</sup> “Amanda Lyon.”

<sup>54</sup> “Imported Paupers,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 8, 1881, 6.

<sup>55</sup> “An Unfounded Libel,” *Weekly Leader*, September 8, 1881, 8.

<sup>56</sup> “It Needs Investigation.”

<sup>57</sup> “Mr. E. Wright Exonerated,” *Pantagraph*, September 22, 1881.

<sup>58</sup> “Death of Mr. E. Wright,” *Pantagraph*, January 15, 1900, 5; *Bloomington-Normal City Directory, 1873, 212*; *Bloomington-Normal City Directory, 1874-75, 208*; *Bloomington-Normal City Directory, 1876-77, 208*; *Bloomington-Normal City Directory, 1878-79, 196*; *Bloomington-Normal City Directory, 1880-81, 204*; *Bloomington-Normal City*

In his final report for the Asylum, Wright reflected back on his thirty-three year career with the Asylum. In it, he reported that of the 6,055 children placed by the Asylum in Illinois from 1855 until 1899, all but about 500 of those children had been supervised by him. He was proud of the fact that the Asylum was the only “child saving” institution that maintained an agency in the west, and that the Asylum actively followed the careers of the children on a somewhat systematic basis.<sup>59</sup> He stated that the majority of these children were properly guided through their “critical adolescent years,” and were given the tools that prepared them for successful careers in their adulthood. He concluded his report by stating that he felt he had reached the age “when it seem[ed] expedient for” him to retire from service, which he did.<sup>60</sup>

Ebenezer Wright passed away at his home at 645 W. 61<sup>st</sup> Street in the Englewood neighborhood of Chicago on January 14, 1900.<sup>61</sup> His death was caused by a “stroke of apoplexy” that struck suddenly in the afternoon.<sup>62</sup> After only two hours, he died around six o’clock in the evening at the age of 69.<sup>63</sup> The Board of Directors of the New York Juvenile Asylum remembered Wright after his death. They declared that they needed a man of force like Wright, who was also of “sound judgement and determination” to carry out their “placing out work.” Wright’s diligence, his attention to detail, his fidelity and steadiness, along with his personal interest in the welfare of the children of the Asylum “were all highly appreciated by the Directors.”<sup>64</sup> His body was brought back to Bloomington for burial, and he was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to two of his children.<sup>65</sup>

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*Directory, 1886, 382; Bloomington-Normal City Directory, 1887, 556. Bloomington-Normal City Directory, 1885, 408; Bloomington-Normal City Directory, 1889, 561.*

<sup>59</sup> Gridley.

<sup>60</sup> “Western Agency, N.Y. Juvenile Asylum,” December 31, 1899, 1 and 5.

<sup>61</sup> “Death of Mr. E. Wright,” *Pantagraph*, January 15, 1900, 5; “The remains of Ebenezer Wright,” *Pantagraph* January 16, 1900, 5.

<sup>62</sup> “Death of Mr. E. Wright.”

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> “Western Agency, N.Y. Juvenile Asylum,” December 31, 1899, 12

<sup>65</sup> “Death of Mr. E. Wright.”