

**January 2018**

### **Inmates and Orphans: really?**

Until Massachusetts passed a statute allowing for legal adoption in 1851, adoptions were generally informal agreements between families and/or individuals, perhaps facilitated by a doctor or church official. Although other states quickly copied Massachusetts' law, informal adoptions continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The lack of legal documentation for older adoptions, as well as sealed records for more recent adoptions, can make genealogical research on adoptees very challenging. And sometimes the terminology on official documents can be ... confusing.

If you think an adoptee may have lived in an orphanage, a good way to start your research on Ancestry.com is to go to the CENSUS & VOTER LISTS INDEX. Enter the person's name; then in the KEYWORDS field add "orphan" or "orphanage". That may bring up the name of the institution where he/she was placed. Do not be concerned if you see the individual referred to as an "inmate": on older censuses, that is the term used for children living at orphanages. It's not an indication of criminal proclivities!

Be aware that even the word "orphan" has changed meaning slightly. Until the mid-1800s, "orphan" denoted a child whose father had died, even if the mother was still alive.

In a similar vein, if you see "Sole Surviving Parent" on a Petition to Adopt, you might think that the adoptee had only one (surviving) parent. Not necessarily. If the adoptee's parents were unmarried, the Petition might list the mother as the sole surviving parent, even if the father was alive and known. In fact, some states went so far as to mandate that the father's name not be listed on a child's birth certificate if the parents were not married: statutes required that "legally omitted" be written instead on the line for the father's name.

If you are lucky enough to have a birth certificate for the person you are researching, keep in mind that birth certificates can be amended, and an amended birth certificate may not reveal that the information has been changed from the original. Not only the parents and child's names, but sometimes even the birth date and birth place may have been altered.

What you see is not always what you think you see...