Faith in Fostering:

Catholic Adoption and Boarding-Out in Depression-Era New York

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Abstract:

Catholic adoption and foster care practices have historically been shaped by the emphasis agencies placed upon the religiosity of substitute mothers. During the Great Depression, when fewer suitable women were available and more children were in need, the cultural and spiritual agendas of Catholic child-saving competed with the obligation to uphold professional standards of dependent child care. At the New York Foundling Hospital, officials compromised to some extent on secular aspects of substitute-mother fitness in order to sustain their religious mission of raising dependent children in the faith. Faithful Catholic substitute mothers who wished to adopt or foster children enjoyed unprecedented opportunities during these years, able as they were to negotiate with caseworkers from a position of strength and resist some of the agency’s demands regarding parenting styles and domesticity. Dependent children’s case records from the late 1920s through the early 1940s reveal how the pressures of faith-based child saving under dire economic conditions created space for improvisation between foster and adoptive mothers and the staff who assessed their worthiness. Sources also show the resourcefulness of agency workers in coping with problematic placements amidst a chronic foster home shortage.
Catholic homefinding was always a delicate matter because of the emphasis agencies placed on the demonstrable religiosity of foster and adoptive mothers—that they attend Mass each week, partake of the Sacraments regularly, and demonstrate piety in their parenting methods. Catholic instructive literature of the day celebrated the mother as the first catechist for her children, their guide through religious rites of passage and the mysteries of Catholic dogma. “You are the first one to fold his hands in pious prayer,” crooned one treatise on Catholic motherhood. “You are the one to answer the thousand and one questions that stir his juvenile mind.”

During the Great Depression, when fewer suitable women were available and more children were in need, the cultural and spiritual agendas of Catholic child saving competed with the obligation to uphold professional standards of dependent child care. Although leaders among Catholic welfare organizations had by then incorporated the tenets of modern child welfare into their discourse, the day-to-day practices at the casework level show agencies’ willingness to compromise on secular standards in order to sustain their religious mission of raising dependent children in the faith.

At the New York Foundling Hospital, a Catholic institution in Manhattan, adoptive and boarding mothers (known today as foster mothers) who were faithful to Catholic practice enjoyed unprecedented opportunities during these years, able as they were to negotiate with caseworkers from a position of strength and resist some of the agency’s demands regarding

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The following abbreviations are used in this essay: ASC: Archives of the Sisters of Charity of New York, College of Mount Saint Vincent, Riverdale, NY; NYFH: New York Founding Hospital, known early on as the Foundling Asylum of the Sisters of Charity and now known as the New York Foundling; NYFH CR: Case Record, Records Department of the New York Foundling, New York, NY; NYHS: New-York Historical Society, New York, NY; VFC: New York Foundling Vincent J. Fontana Center for Child Protection, New York, NY.

parenting styles and domesticity. Dependent children’s case records from the late 1920s through the early 1940s reveal how the pressures of faith-based child saving under dire economic conditions created space for improvisation between substitute mothers and the staff who assessed their worthiness.\(^2\)

Sources also show the resourcefulness of agency workers in coping with problematic placements amidst a chronic foster home shortage. Strapped by limited options, the staff painstakingly counseled recalcitrant children and substitute mothers to smooth over conflicts and minimize the disruptions and uncertainties that frequent transfers created. Caught amidst the tension between the professionalization of philanthropy and the traditional doctrines of Catholic benevolence, they cobbled together solutions to keep as many children as possible in adequate placements. In many cases, children benefitted from the more flexible application of professional ideologies; for others, the agency’s emphasis on the Catholicity of the home placed them at the mercy of substitute mothers’ ineptitudes.

Histories of child-saving during the Depression have typically focused on congregate orphanages, tracing the surging admissions of unadoptable inmates, persistent racial inequalities, dwindling private resources, and the greater role played by government agencies in funding and supervising child welfare services.\(^3\) This study shifts the focus from the institutional setting to home-based dependent child care, examining the added pressures faced by adoption agencies during the 1930s. In addition to weathering the same political, economic and social forces that battered orphanages, homefinders also had to contend with entrusting individuals to raise

\(^2\) The term “substitute mothers” refers both to adoptive mothers who offered children free permanent homes and to boarding mothers who cared for children in exchange for a stipend (known as foster care today). The term “foster mothers” was also used collectively in the first half of the twentieth century to mean adoption and boarding.

children outside of the agency’s immediate control. This factor, coupled with the exponential growth in substitute family solutions during the 1930s, make the boarding and adoption practices at the Foundling a critical area of study.

No less important is the Catholic component in the Foundling’s work. Studies of Catholic philanthropy have insightfully examined how professional social work was adapted in sectarian environments to accommodate Catholic principles. In *The Poor Belong to Us: Catholic Charities and American Welfare*, Dorothy M. Brown and Elizabeth McKeon note that Catholic women in social service “learned from the organized efforts of Protestant Women’s organizations and secular reformers, but their ‘maternal’ interests were shaped by a religious concern for saving souls and by their roots in the working class.” This essay applies Brown and McKeown’s insights to a close examination of practices at the Foundling, using heretofore unexamined case records, as well as published agency reports and conference articles by Catholic and non-Catholic authorities. These sources reveal that the Foundling upheld modern, rationalized standards of substitute home fitness only so much as they did not conflict with its mandate to reproduce Catholicity in future generations. The adjustments and compromises that ensued created a more flexible atmosphere for homefinding that inadvertently established broader notions of substitute parent fitness and the adoptable child.

**The New York Foundling Hospital and Catholic Child-Saving**

In 1869, the Foundling opened its doors in New York City amidst the economic and

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social turmoil of the post-Civil-War era. At St. Peter’s convent on Barclay Street, Sister Mary Irene Fitzgibbon of the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent DePaul was alarmed by the frequent abandonment of infants on the convent stoop and by the news reports of the “lengthened record of infanticide” committed against untold numbers of unwanted offspring. St. Peter’s was ill-equipped to care for babies, and there was no Catholic institution for foundlings in the city. Sister Irene imagined an asylum run by her co-religionists that would be a haven for “the innocent offspring of passion or poverty, for whom the door-step, the street, the sink, the river, the string, and knife presented each a means of riddance.” With a charter from the city commissioner, a small staff, and five dollars in cash, Sister Mary Irene took possession of a modest Greenwich Village brownstone on October 11, 1869. Following the French tradition of providing anonymous relinquishment for desperate mothers, the Sisters stationed a bassinette just inside the

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6 Sisters of Charity, "1871 Report of the Foundling Asylum of the Sisters of Charity, in the City of New York," Chap 1 (West Chester, NY: The New York Catholic Protectory, 1871), 3. The annual reports of the Foundling Asylum, later known as the New York Foundling Hospital, were inconsistently titled and attributed, and published irregularly. In the interest of clarity and simplicity, all subsequent reports will be cited as NYFH, Annual Report. Annual reports from 1871-1925 were available for loan on microfilm at the time of this research. Printed annual reports from subsequent years were accessed in 2008 when the Foundling’s historical administrative records were housed temporarily at VFC. They have subsequently been acquired by NYHS.

Sister Mary Irene, aka Catherine Rosamond Fitzgibbon, was born in England on May 11, 1823. Both of her parents had Irish roots. When Catherine was nine, the family moved to Brooklyn, New York. Legend has it that as a young woman, Catherine came down with Asiatic cholera and fell into “a deathlike trance” that was so convincing she was prepared for burial by her family and placed in a coffin. Unable to speak or show signs of life, she prayed to God to save her from being buried alive. Just as the coffin was about to be closed she moved her eyelids, and then suddenly regained her powers of movement and speech. To the amazement of all who claimed to have witnessed it, “She arose to the touch of God and was restored to her wondering family.” She later revealed that while in the trance she had promised to “consecrate her life” to the service of God and in return had received a “vision” of “a multitude of children, some lying in cots, others playing joyously.” In 1850, she joined the Sisters of Charity and was soon sent out on mission to Saint Peter’s Convent where the seeds of her life’s work were planted. Sisters of Charity, The New York Foundling Hospital: Its Foundress and Its Place in the Community (New York: Sisters of Charity of Mount St. Vincent, 1944), 4-5.

7 NYFH, Annual Report (1873), 5. The Foundling soon tried to stem the tide of arrivals by requiring parties to speak to a staff member when relinquishing an infant and perhaps move into the maternity wing and nurse their baby plus one motherless child. Most refused, however, perhaps afraid of losing their jobs or put off by the regimented life inside the asylum. Women who left but insisted they would one day reclaim their offspring rarely managed it. Although some paid the small monthly boarding fee for a while, they typically disappeared after a time or signed a formal surrender. From the 1870s through the mid 1920s, the vast majority of Foundling inmates who survived through toddlerhood were placed out in Catholic homes.

8 Ibid., 12.
asylum’s door where babies could be placed “without inquiry or observation.” The relinquishing party tugged on a string to ring the nuns upstairs before slipping away. The system was so successful that babies “were left faster than cribs, clothing, and nurses could be obtained for them.”

The Foundling’s nurseries soon overflowed with children too young to survive in regular orphanages. Sister Irene employed a small army of outdoor wet nurses to feed infants in their tenement homes until they could be weaned and returned to the asylum. This method helped relieve institutional overcrowding, but it did not solve the other pressing problem: what to do with hundreds of homeless toddlers? Infants brought to the asylum were presumed to have Catholic mothers (unless a note left with the child or the child’s appearance indicated otherwise) and baptized accordingly. Sister Irene was determined to prevent them from winding up in the hands of Protestant welfare agencies that would disregard the children’s religious heritage.

From the early 1870s, finding enough Catholic couples to raise foundlings was one of the agency’s top priorities.

Beginning in 1873, Sister Irene adapted Charles Loring Brace’s migration program and began transporting toddlers on “baby trains” to Catholic communities in the South and West where they were matched with couples who had requested them. Local priests, acting as placement agents, prescreened applicants for Catholicity and good character and later sent back...
annual reports on children that found homes in their parishes. Later, the Foundling hired lay people to visit each child annually and assess the progress of the placement. By the turn of the century, what had begun as the Foundling Asylum of the Sisters of Charity of New York was transformed into the New York Foundling Hospital, the city’s premier private agency for receiving and treating abandoned infants, as well as for placing young children in a nationwide network of substitute homes.

In the early 1900s, Sister Irene’s successors began cultivating local adoptive placements in the New York metropolitan area. To these homes went babies that were too young for long-distance travel, as well as an increasing number of preschool-age youngsters in demand among urban Catholics who had caught on to the adoption trend. The Foundling gradually expanded its paid outdoor nursing program to include extended subsidized boarding care, where working-class women trained and socialized preschool children who were waiting to meet prospective adopters.  

By the 1920s, the Foundling’s homefinding mission expanded to include more long-term boarding homes for children with barriers to adoption such as behavioral problems, mental disabilities, or physical abnormalities. Boarding mothers were also expected to facilitate visits between foster children and their parents in hopes of an eventual reunion. In 1925, just before the economy began its precipitous decline, the Foundling placed over 700 children in free adoptive homes and paid boarding homes throughout the country, and monitored the ongoing welfare of 2,700 already living with substitute families.

Despite the popularity and much-touted success of long-distance placements by

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13 Ibid., 86. Most boarding mothers of the early twentieth century lived in the suburbs of Manhattan rather than in tenements like the wet nurses, and they fed babies from a bottle rather than the breast. Gradually, boarding mothers began taking older children as well. NYFH, Annual Report (1922), 31.

14 NYFH, Annual Report, (1926-1927), 16-17.
prominent agencies and their imitators, the professionalization of social work gradually ushered in new standards for record-keeping and supervision of dependent children that made migration programs like the baby trains seem outmoded and irresponsible. The Foundling’s director at the time, Sister Xavier Maria, visited children in their homes on a Western tour and decided they were better protected in nearby homes where the agency could visit them frequently. The Sisters sent the last trainload of toddlers in 1928, restricting future placements to a radius of 100 miles around New York City where staff could reach them by subways and commuter trains.15

Although there was never a surplus of ideal foster and adoptive parents in the metropolis prior to the Depression, Foundling homefinders and caseworkers were able to meet most of the agency’s standards with each placement or relocate the child. The Foundling worker was confident in her power to find satisfactory placements because most children were adoptable, and there were enough stable and competent substitute parent applicants to make up for those who fell short. Soon, however, the agency’s homefinding resourcefulness would be severely tested.

The Great Depression and the Dependent-Child Crisis

The galloping unemployment rate in Depression-era New York, estimated to have climbed as high as one-third, put hundreds of thousands of children at risk for hunger, homelessness, abuse, and exploitation.16 “The plight of children,” mourned the Catholic opinion journal Commonweal in 1933, is “so grave, so unparalleled, that it is a constant and unforgettable

challenge to anyone attempting social thinking.” As poverty, illness, and death disintegrated households, parents struggled to find homes for the children they could no longer manage or support. Many turned to child-care agencies as temporary solutions; others surrendered their offspring altogether.

New York City’s welfare community—although located in one of the five richest states—was hit particularly hard by demands to accommodate homeless children. At the high tide of requests for assistance in 1931, over 16,000 children were presented to welfare agencies by their parents for care away from home, but the city only accepted 6,000. Even after emergency relief and work programs were enacted to stabilize families, private agencies serving the city continued to grapple with excessive child intakes for the remainder of the decade.

With wrenching irony, the economic downturn increased the population of dependent children while decreasing the number of homes available to accept them, particularly in minority ethnic communities such as those served by the Foundling. Upward mobility was halted, and many newly-risen, middle-class families found themselves slipping back down “to smaller apartments, to poorer neighborhoods; to old-law tenements without heat or hot water or private toilets; to basements … to homes of relatives and friends.” Although the Irish who dominated Catholic New York had made impressive socioeconomic gains by the turn of the century relative to native-born Americans, the Depression brought an abrupt decline of Irish Democratic power, and thus a decline in Catholic fortunes generally. Unskilled laborers—predominantly Catholic Poles and Italians—were most at risk for unemployment and poverty. A survey in 1932 found

nearly half of the households in Manhattan’s Little Italy had no wage-earning adult. The Archdiocese of New York reported that half of those employed by city work projects were Catholic. Homes receiving work relief or other forms of welfare were not eligible to adopt, and most could not afford to support an extra child anyway.

The lack of qualified adopters took its toll at the Foundling. In 1928, 223 Foundling inmates were legally adopted. That tally slipped each year until, by 1934, the Foundling received 391 adoption applications but approved only 60. Most children given over to agencies during the Depression had not been permanently surrendered by their parents, but at the Foundling there were still abandoned infants to place and plenty of youngsters whose mothers had given up trying to reclaim them. To qualify more homes for these children, the Sisters adjusted their policies by dropping the minimum annual household income below the state requirement of $3,000 and extending the probationary period during which couples were expected to complete the legal adoption from six months to two years. The directors of the Placing-Out Department even overrode the advice of the agency’s own professional homefinders to approve applicants that had initially been rejected, much to the consternation of state inspectors.

In the meantime, the number of children in subsidized care rose dramatically. In 1923, 30 percent of foster children in the United States lived in boarding homes; by 1931 that figure

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21 Binder and Reimers, 178.
22 Brown and McKeown, 153.
23 Bureau of Investigations, "Report of Inspection of New York Foundling Hospital Placing-out Department," (New York: New York City Department of Public Welfare, 1936). The Foundling’s experience was echoed across the city. The Department of Public Welfare noted an increase in the number of adoption applications, attributing it to the stress of the times that prompted people to reassert the “spiritual values of home life” as a means of comfort. All the more reason, the department cautioned, for “careful study” of applicants to avoid sentimental, ill-advised placements. New York City Department of Public Welfare, "Annual Report," (New York: Department of Public Welfare, 1937), 21.
25 NYFH, Annual Report (1927), 16-17.
had soared to 74 percent.\textsuperscript{26} The ratio of boarding to adoptive homes at the Foundling was inverted in even less time. Between 1927 and 1930, the number of boarding children among all Foundling placements increased from 15 percent to over 60 percent, while the number of children in free homes pending adoption dropped 45 percent. By 1932, the number of children in subsidized boarding care topped 3,000 with over 1,400 Foundling boarding homes on the payroll.\textsuperscript{27} Meanwhile, welfare officials in the city encouraged agencies to reunite parents with their children whenever possible; they prohibited the adoption of foundlings less than one year old, as well as any child who had been visited by a parent during the previous year.\textsuperscript{28} As a result, the Foundling’s placing-out staff ballooned from only three women and a small clerical pool in 1928 to over 40 personnel three years later. In 1934, a separate boarding department was created.\textsuperscript{29}

The new staff had their work cut out for them. They conducted aggressive recruitment campaigns by word-of-mouth and on the radio to find new parents who understood that taking a boarding child would be a financial burden, not a boon, since New York City paid only $25 per month per child with no clothing allowance.\textsuperscript{30} They also struggled to maintain boarding homes already on the payroll. In 1932, there were 748 boarding homes “discontinued permanently.”\textsuperscript{31} The following year, the staff’s report likewise lamented that “many boarding mothers of long standing” had dropped from the payroll.\textsuperscript{32} Most were lost due to the boarding mother’s illness or

\textsuperscript{26} Ashby, 108.
\textsuperscript{27} NYFH, Annual Report (1928-1931), 82.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{32} NYFH, "Report of the Boarding-out Department," (1933), 1.
her husband’s unemployment. Boarding mothers also gave up care voluntarily when they moved or when they changed their minds about keeping the children of strangers in their homes. The disparity between the growing number of children needing homes and the shrinking number of decent, competent Catholic boarding mothers who were available profoundly affected placement practices.

National trends in Catholic welfare practice also influenced how agencies conducted their work at the ground level. As the authority of professional social work increased, the Foundling came under scrutiny by secular officials who inspected and measured its adherence to modern standards of philanthropy. Although Catholic experts in dependent child welfare prided themselves on embracing new developments in the field, they were quick to defend their religious mission as equally respectable. The potential for conflict between the two was never greater than during the Depression.

**Catholic Casework and the Professionalization of Adoption and Foster Care**

In the early years of the twentieth century, Catholic charities resisted the notion of training workers in secular social welfare theories and practices. Their work focused on relief (a role suitable for earnest women religious and lay volunteers) more than prevention (which called for academic knowledge of psychology, sociology, and modern organizational methods). Professional social workers faced such long odds in trying to establish themselves among their coreligionists that many sought jobs at non-Catholic agencies.  

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In the 1920s, as the first graduates emerged from Catholic social service schools, attitudes began to shift.\(^{34}\) The discourse at conferences and in the pages of Catholic social welfare journals began to emphasize the professional nature of Catholic charity alongside its distinctive spiritual characteristics.\(^{35}\) At the 1926 National Conference on Catholic Charities, a professor at Catholic University commended the adoption of standardized record-keeping, the growing number of formally trained workers, and “the absorption into our social service of the result of thought and of experience in the fields of psychology, industry, medicine, public health, office administration and in the work of relief and prevention.”\(^{36}\) Catholic colleges trained students to assume the stance of “partner” and “servant” to their clients rather than older model of “inspector” or “dictator.”\(^{37}\) It seemed that rationalized philanthropy and Catholic doctrines had formed a “happy union of the best in motive with the best in method.”\(^{38}\)

By the 1930s, authorities in Catholic child placing were eager to show that they, too, embraced academic training to enhance the worker’s Christian approach. As the director of the Catholic Welfare Bureau in Los Angeles proclaimed in 1931, the “supernatural motive” that drove Catholic charity was no substitute for “painstaking care” and “thorough going methods…”\(^ {39}\) Selection of a good Catholic home for a dependent child was no longer enough. Professional foster care supervision now required “the adaptation of the child to the home, and


\(^{36}\) Louise McGuire, "Let Us Look at the Record," The Catholic Charities Review 17 (1933): 140.

\(^{37}\) Florence A. Murray, "Adjusting the Child in Home and Neighborhood" (paper presented at the National Conference of Catholic Charities, New York City, October 1-4, 1933), 270.


the more intensive training of the foster parents to meet the particular needs of the children in their care,” both of which necessitated a staff of educated workers versed in efficient and effective case management techniques.40

Catholic agencies also followed the national trend that was shifting homefinding from finding the right child for the adoptive parents to finding the right parents for the child.41 In addition to moral and spiritual qualifications, each substitute home was to possess “character, intelligence, experience, training, ability, income, environment, sympathetic attitude.”42 Professional homefinders sought women of cheerful and calm dispositions, “anxious to understand with sympathetic heart”, who would train children to clean habits and good manners without overreacting to annoyances or shortcomings.43 Income requirements helped to prevent neglect and exploitation of children due to financial pressures on the household. Neither boarding nor adoptive mothers were allowed to work for pay outside of the home. Even more important to professional caseworkers than material prosperity were the skills of the foster mother as a housekeeper. While making allowances for lower incomes during the Depression, visitors still expected a modest dwelling to reflect middle-class values of cleanliness and order, with tasteful décor that was not overly ethnic.

The absorption of these ideals among Catholic agencies was especially evident in New York City where the Catholic welfare community, heavily subsidized by city funds, provided a sizeable share of child welfare work.44 One official of the New York Archdiocese publicly

40 Evelyn Murphy, "The Role of the Foster Home" (paper presented at the National Conference of Catholic Charities, Cincinnati, Ohio, October 7-10, 1934), 117.
41 Herman, Kinship by Design: A History of Adoption in the Modern United States, 184.
44 The constant influx of Catholic immigrant poor, first from Ireland and Germany then later from Italy and Poland, disproportionately burdened the city’s welfare services beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1940,
praised the New York School of Social Work’s guide to foster home selection, which advocated “decent environment, moral, mental, physical, and economic stability, good religious standard, intelligent constructive thought and a spirit of service.”

Likewise, the Foundling began overhauling its Placing-Out Department in the 1930s to comply with the recommendations of state inspectors. The inspection report of 1932 noted that a new staff had been hired, including a professional homefinder, and that casework was better organized—thanks in part to an efficiency expert that had spent several weeks evaluating the staff’s operations.

Yet, even as the Sisters revamped their operations, they never wavered in their adherence to Catholic values. The selection and supervision of Catholic substitute homes were calculated to insulate children within a segregated cultural space where—they could absorb the faithful Catholic upbringing provided by their foster parents. Agencies sought substitute mothers who would “not only profess the Catholic faith” but also provide “that distinctive atmosphere that marks the true Catholic home”, including “a true sense of religious values” that “gives meaning to what otherwise would be a maze and a mystery.” Caseworkers expected mothers to have religious articles about the home such as crucifixes, rosaries and holy pictures, to see that foster children regularly attended mass and Sunday school, and to train them in daily prayer, communion and confession. Habits of

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The number of Catholic dependent children being supported by city funds outnumbered Protestant and Jewish children combined by nearly two to one. New York City Department of Public Welfare, "Annual Report," (New York: Department of Public Welfare, 1939-1940), 142.


Patrick O'Boyle, "Theory and Practice" (paper presented at the National Conference of Catholic Charities, Cincinnati, OH, October 7-10, 1934), 133.

McEntegart, "Religious Standards for Family Homes of Children under Public Care", 154.
practical Catholicity were to be instilled as young as preschool to ensure success.50 Workers noted approvingly when youngsters first learned to make the sign of the cross, recite the Hail Mary, and memorize simple Bible stories.

This duality of secular and Catholic ideals regarding foster home quality became a source of tension when the bottom dropped out of the applicant pool in the 1930s. As it became increasingly difficult to find homes that measured up to secular standards, the Foundling remained committed to finding a faithful Catholic home for each child in need. “While financial security must necessarily be considered,” the Boarding-Out Department stated in its 1935 report, “emphasis in the evaluation of a home is based largely on the religious and moral aspects…”51

The Foundling was willing to risk criticism for retaining substandard homes that demonstrated earnest Catholicity. Criticism was forthcoming; state inspections of the agency’s adoption department turned up children living in crowded, low-income homes with adoptive parents who were considered too old or lacking in basic skills and who received few visits and little instruction from the agency. Several homes had been selected without a thorough inspection or interviews, resulting in the neglect of children. The Foundling did remove some children from questionable placements, but defended others as adequate and necessary.52 Ultimately, the agency retained control over its methods and choices despite greater state oversight—but not without internal struggles over the welfare of children in borderlines placements.

50 LeRoy Callahan, "Providing Religious Training for Children in Foster Homes" (paper presented at the National Conference of Catholic Charities, New York City, October 1-4, 1933), 217.
Problem Placements and the Caseworker’s Dilemma

Torn between pleasing state inspectors and the day-to-day realities of casework during the Depression, the Foundling’s staff struggled to retain challenging foster parents when possible, to find replacement homes when necessary, and to constantly recruit applicants for the ongoing stream of new inmates.

Ideal foster parents were few and far between; most fell short in one capacity or another. Workers tried to focus on each home’s positive aspects, reconsidering flaws that might have disqualified some applicants in the 1920s. One boarding mother’s “nervous and worrisome” manner was reinterpreted to be a hyper awareness of her responsibility toward the child. Her apartment was “rather dark”, the child’s room “quite small”, and the mother’s housekeeping standards only average, but the worker judged the home to be “cozy and well-lived-in.” She also overlooked the couple’s advanced age and limited income, noting that they were financially stable and seemed to be getting younger all the time as they doted on their foster daughter.53 In some cases, the Foundling retained boarding homes that were receiving relief, allowing many to keep their foster children so long as they seemed reasonably healthy and loved.54

Caseworkers were also challenged by the increasing influence of boarding and adoptive mothers over the placement and approval process. During the baby-train era, Western priests had recommended potential foster mothers based primarily on their Catholicity and willingness to raise a child. In the early twentieth century, the implementation of more exacting criteria along with the increased popularity of adoption among Catholics diminished the power of a woman’s religious piety. Caseworkers, imbued with new authority, were less likely to overlook other

53 NYFH CR, 46936.
54 NYFH CR, 31472.
shortcomings, such as low financial status and questionable parenting skills. Once the Depression set in, however, staff had to think twice before removing a child for whom there were few other placement options, and bargain with substitute parents from a position of considerably less strength than they had enjoyed in better times. Women who adhered to the imperatives of practical Catholicism could make demands of their own and resist the more invasive aspects of the secular, professional homefinding process that they experienced as arbitrary and unjust.

Caseworkers’ diplomatic skills were frequently put to the test when foster mothers with unrealistic expectations expressed frustration and disappointment. They complained when children were slow to learn proper behaviors, when they disobeyed, or when they were dishonest. Boarding mothers were much more likely than adoptive mothers to receive children with persistently troublesome habits. Perhaps because these women were also keenly aware of how little they were being compensated and how much they were needed, they were quickest to complain when a child required more effort than they had anticipated. It was not uncommon for a woman to demand an exchange for a child that was easier to manage.

In such cases, workers resorted to a range of strategies to preserve the placement, from flattery to scolding. Those who complained immediately about a child’s flaws were asked to be patient and give the child time to adjust to his surroundings. A worker flattered one woman who expressed dismay at a boy’s poor performance in school by saying “it would be difficult to find a good home like hers.”55 Shaming the complainer was another effective strategy. Another worker responded to a boarding mother’s consternation that the boy in her care masturbated and wet the

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55 NYFH CR, 42666. The worker’s efforts were in vain. With every visit, the mother continued to enumerate the boy’s failures to measure up to her cultural standards and be a fit companion for her own son. She relinquished the child after six months.
bed by pointedly stating that she had raised him for the past two years and therefore bore sole responsibility for any problem behaviors he manifested.\textsuperscript{56}

In many cases, however, a transfer was the only solution. The tenacity of caseworkers in the face of multiple transfers is admirable, especially when they succeeded in finding a loving home for a child against the odds. One child who had been starved of affection in one home, rejected by her second boarding mother because of her swarthy Polish coloring, and relocated from her third home when the boarding mother had to have a surgery, finally found the parents of her dreams in a fourth placement.\textsuperscript{57} These were triumphs worthy of celebration.

Nevertheless, in case after case Foundling workers were confronted with an exasperating irony: Just as they were acquiring the tools of professional authority, the Depression arrived and turned the tables. Suddenly, the women who were taking in homeless children had new clout of their own. Faced with a surge in admissions that threatened to undermine the Foundling’s Catholic mission, the agency had little choice but to accommodate faithful substitute mothers whenever possible—even if doing so meant disregarding the very tenets of professional homefinding that they had hoped would dispel entrenched notions of Catholic welfare work as antiquated and amateurish. Unbeknownst to them, however, the long-term effects of compromise would modernize dependent child care in unexpected ways.

\textsuperscript{56} NYFH CR, 42227.
\textsuperscript{57} NYFH CR, 42228. Boarding parents, like adoptive couples, often preferred a child that could pass as their own in order to minimize awkward questions in public; thus, the increase in the number of African American and Puerto Rican inmates at the Foundling posed additional placement challenges for caseworkers. When they were able to find boarding homes to accept non-Caucasian children, they had to contend with boarding mothers’ fears that the children would draw unwanted attention. One woman insisted she could not be seen with her Puerto Rican foster son in the neighborhood and that his presence might incite a “race riot.” NYFH CR, 42661. To avoid such conflicts, the city’s Catholic Charities Guidance Institute recommended matching foster parents and children according to nationality. William M. Doody, ”Mental Health Considerations in a Child Placement Program” (paper presented at the National Conference of Catholic Charities, New York City, October 1-4, 1933), 328. However, this was rarely possible for the Foundling that accepted children of all races, including those from newly arriving immigrant groups that had yet to establish stable communities where boarding homes might be found.
Substitute Mothers’ Influence over Placement Decisions

Substitute mothers sensed how much they were needed and the advantages they had. The case files illustrate the ways in which they could wield influence for their own advantage in the placement and caretaking processes. Although the circumstances of each Foundling case were somewhat unique, consistent patterns are evident, such as the abrasive ways that many women reacted to inspections and directives, how they employed the caseworker as an intermediary between themselves and the children, and the how the agency compromised to maintain placements in faithful Catholic homes even when boarding and adoptive mothers flouted secular standards of substitute parent fitness.

An adoptive mother had to meet the agency’s highest standards since she would eventually raise her child without agency supervision. On the other hand, since she offered the most desirable placement opportunity, she was the most secure in her position as an applicant, potentially able to exert the greatest leverage when it came to conflicts with the agency worker over the material conditions of her home or her parenting style. The story of Mrs. O’Brien shows the clout enjoyed by women who provided free homes when the city’s budget for dependent child care was stretched to the breaking point.

Mrs. O’Brien and her husband were working-class Irish immigrants who wanted a son to complete their boisterous brood of three girls. They were, in the words of the Foundling’s Placing Out Department, “plain and unpretentious … home-staying people.” Mrs. O’Brien’s maternal aptitude was evident in the warm relationship she shared with her daughters. Mr. O’Brien supported the family as a unionized nightshift fireman in a milk pasteurization plant. As with many Irish-American, working-class families, Mrs. O’Brien’s diligent thrift had enabled
them to purchase their home on Mr. O’Brien’s modest wages of $36 a week, a sum that fell just short of the agency’s minimum annual income requirement for adopters. Nevertheless, to the caseworker, Miss Brady, they seemed “sincere, honest parents.” The Foundling matched them with a toddler named James whose single mother had surrendered him.

Despite the O’Briens’ positive traits, Miss Brady noted her doubts about the couple’s fitness. She complained that they were “somewhat old” (in their forties) with limited education. Mrs. O’Brien apparently lacked any sense of domestic style. The house in which James occupied a small, dank bedroom was crammed with battered furniture, making it “drab” and “cheerless.” Mrs. O’Brien’s housekeeping skills were as poor as her taste in décor. She never assigned chores to her daughters—not even making their beds—and when rowdy neighborhood children and the family dogs upended her dowdy kitchen, she hardly seemed to notice. Her sensible management of money could be downright miserly at times; Miss Brady complained that James wore “disreputable” mismatched outfits too small for him, and he was entirely bereft of store-bought toys. Even the family’s Christmas tree came under fire for being sparse and “unattractive” with “only a few ornaments and a string of homemade lights.”

Miss Brady cast her eye beyond the family’s material conditions to broader lifestyle issues as well. The O’Brien’s neighborhood, in her indignant estimation, was becoming “more colored all the while.” Even more troubling was James’ behavior. He performed poorly in school and acted out at home, breaking glass panes in the French doors to his bedroom during the night and setting small fires. He also seemed confused about where he lived, always approaching

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58 NYFH CR, 39999.
59 Family casework almost exclusively involved women: the foster mother, the female caseworker, and occasionally the female foster agency supervisor. Fathers were noted mainly for their capacity as sober, respectable providers. In his brief blip on Miss Brady’s radar, Mr. O’Brien ranked as even more laissez-faire toward parenting, dismissing James’ poor school behavior as typical boyhood antics; yet, it was Mrs. O’Brien’s measure as a mother that really mattered.
adults he met—particularly the milkman—and asking them to take him “home.” She disparaged his “ragged little suit” and dirty ears, the “great number of flies” in Mrs. O’Brien’s kitchen, the “definite foul odor” throughout the house, her indifference to middle-class domesticity, and her tendency to let James wander out of her sight.60

Mrs. O’Brien did not share the caseworker’s concerns. She had her own trumps to play, and she knew it. Her religious habits, though not outstanding, met the minimum requirements for practical Catholicism. The boy’s behavioral problems worked in her favor as well, making him a less desirable commodity on the adoption market; the longer he stayed, the more reluctant the Foundling was to relocate him. Her confidence in the pending adoption showed in her daily interaction with Miss Brady. She rebuffed the caseworker for dropping by unexpectedly and refused to keep herself and her home in a constant state of readiness for inspection. She bristled at suggestions and persistently asserted contrary notions of maternal and domestic fitness, placing Miss Brady on the defensive.

Caseworkers like Miss Brady were typically wage-earning women of immigrant stock, occupying a tenuous economic and professional space themselves. Miss Brady was relatively well educated; she was a high school graduate who had taken the two-year course in social work at Fordham University. She also had three years’ experience in the field before joining the Foundling in 1929.61 Yet, her authority did not extend to removing James from the O’Brien’s home. Instead, she could only report her concerns to Sister Ligouri, head of the Foundling’s adoption department.

Sister Ligouri’s background was in education rather than social work. She had a master’s degree from Fordham, and had come straight from her job as a Catholic high school principal to

60 NYFH CR, 39999.”.
take over the agency’s Placing-Out Department in 1934. She was still taking the Fordham course herself when she came upon James’ case.\textsuperscript{62} It is easy to see why state inspectors complained that Catholic institutions such as the Foundling lagged behind the rest of the child welfare community in social welfare training and professionalism.

Yet, Sister Ligouri’s handling of James’ case reveals her common sense approach to dependent child placements and her dedication to keeping Foundling children in Catholic homes. She did not allow Miss Brady’s unrelenting disapproval to hinder the O’Brien’s application. The boy had already been passed over by one adoptive couple because he was too blonde for their tastes, and removing him might have further exacerbated his behavioral quirks. Sister Ligouri gambled on a confrontational approach, asking Mrs. O’Brien point blank whether the boy was welcome in her home or should be removed. Mrs. O’Brien “seemed surprised, as well as hurt, that we would even think that he was not happy,” and the entire family rallied to protest the insult. Confiding in her case notes that “anxiety felt on previous visits was cured,” Sister Ligouri pronounced James “buxom and happy with a fine coat of tan.” He was “devoted to the O’Briens as they are to him” and enjoyed being “the center of thought with his three sisters who seem to surround him as a body guard.”\textsuperscript{63} She endorsed the adoption, and in 1936, James Patrick Dunny officially became Robert James O’Brien.

Clearly, class was a sticky issue when trying to balance material standards against the reality of how most Catholics lived in 1930s New York. In the twentieth century, the Irish-American bourgeoisie had endeavored to provide an ethnic identity that combined white, American, middle-class norms with Irish sensibilities for the working classes to emulate in the hopes of constructing an “all-class ethnic and religious alliance” that would advance the entire


\textsuperscript{63} NYFH CR, 39999.
Irish-American community. The mostly Irish-American staff at the Foundling incorporated this earnest agenda into assessments of would-be substitute mothers, whether Irish or not. Yet time and time again, they were forced to make allowances for working-class lifestyles by depicting them as merely circumstantial and not an indicator of poor character. A background check of one Italian would-be adoptive mother revealed that she had once worked as an operative, which might have suggested an unrefined woman with coarse manners. The caseworker noted reassuringly, however, that the applicant was “of the better, refined Italian type” who was not akin to “the general run of people working in a factory”, having managed to keep herself “above its influences.” Other welcome signifiers of middle-class sensibilities included curtains in the home, which displayed the mother’s good taste and commendable preference for privacy, even when they were worn and dyed with tea. The display of religious objects was also appreciated, so long as it was not garish or excessive. The woman who worked in the factory, for example, received additional praise for having a simple crucifix on her wall, and "no evidence of extravagance."

As the O’Brien case also shows, the condition of the surrounding neighborhood was also important in adoption cases. Visitors calculated the distance to the nearest church and parochial school and evaluated nearby residents. They were quick to raise concerns about applicants living alongside non-white, non-Catholic minorities. Racial encroachment into Catholic neighborhoods—an increasingly frequent occurrence since the Great Migration of African Americans to the urban north—was particularly unwelcome. Local pastors who did not stand fast

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65 NYFH CR, 37920.
66 Ibid.
against black interlopers were mocked for allowing their parish to “go to the dogs.”

Caseworkers sometimes suggested relocation for adoptive and boarding families. One competent and devoted Italian couple who had provided excellent care to their boarding daughter for eight years was asked to move because their “very attractive” neighborhood had become less so after “the colored people began to move in.” Catholics living among Jews raised similar red flags.

Nevertheless, there were simply not enough quality boarding and adoptive applicants available in the 1930s to let racial geography hold sway. The boarding parents living alongside black neighbors explained matter-of-factly that they would only relocate when they could be assured of a fair price for their home. The caseworker let the matter drop, realizing that the depressed real estate market constrained the agency’s ability to control children’s racial and religious environment beyond the walls of their foster homes.

Compared to adoptions, boarding placements presented a whole new set of quandaries to complicate the relationship between the caseworker and the substitute mother. Typically, the boarding mother received less deference from the agency because she collected a monthly stipend, making her an employee of the agency. The agency held in highest esteem those who seemed to labor out of love rather than economic gain, taking full responsibility for their foster children’s welfare and behavior as they would their own biological offspring. Although by the 1920s, many boarding mothers had come to “feel themselves honorable members of a semi-professional group”, most agencies still viewed them as dependent, wage-earning women who

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67 Catholic immigrant groups had invested more heavily than non-Catholic arrivals in home ownership, creating a “cultural ghetto” of educational, social, and religious institutions. This self-imposed segregation “strengthened individuals while occasionally becoming rallying points for bigotry.” While Catholic theologians rejected notions of a biblical curse on the black race, they were hesitant to pronounce racial segregation as either “immoral” or “uncharitable.” John T. McGreevy, Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 5, 36.

68 NYFH CR, 36986; NYFH CR, 37937.
required close, regular scrutiny. As the caretaker of a child that remained a ward of the Foundling, the boarding mother never shrugged off the yoke of agency supervision. When the child arrived as a baby or toddler, the Foundling sent a nurse to monitor the woman’s competency and dictate the terms of care, from the child’s toys to early religious training. Later, the nurse was replaced by a lay caseworker who assisted with discipline, acted as a liaison to the child’s teachers, arranged medical appointments and social services, counseled the child, and handled delicate matters such as tactfully explaining illegitimacy or the facts of life. She also advised the boarding mother on her own life, suggesting relocation to a better apartment, encouraging her to apply for citizenship and take English-language classes, and recommending that she have her union blessed by a priest if she had been married outside of the Church. The caseworkers’ regular supervision allowed the agency to employ women who were widowed, advanced in age, or possessing only average skills, so long as the worker exercised “steady watchfulness” over the home.

In addition to being an employee, the boarding mother was also the child’s benefactor. This allowed her to regain some of the power lost by her wage-earning status. Knowing that agency sought to preserve placements rather than recruit new boarding parents, women who felt overwhelmed and underpaid did not hesitate to pass some of their labor back to the caseworkers, or simply demand replacements for the children who disappointed them.

The tedious nature of maintaining contentious placements is illustrated in the case of Mrs. Sheehan, a boarding mother from Queens, who repeatedly tested her caseworkers’ patience and resourcefulness. She had raised her boarding daughter, Victoria, for thirteen years, from the time the child was five. On the plus side, her home was comfortable and the child enjoyed many

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70 Ibid., 87.
luxuries. Mrs. Sheehan was also “quite vigilant with regard to Victoria’s religious practices,” according to the case notes. On the other hand, she was “haughty”, perceiving herself to be “above the other foster mothers” and desperately needing to “keep up with the Joneses.” One worker complained that the boarding mother “must have serious doubts as to her own worth since she feels that people like her only for impressions she can give regarding her material possessions.”

The relationship between Victoria and Mrs. Sheehan was rocky from the start. The boarding mother’s personal insecurities were manifested in her constant criticism of Victoria for always “doing the wrong thing” and being “ungrateful.”71 Year after year, caseworkers intervened to smooth things over. Some noted with concern the psychological damage Mrs. Sheehan was inflicting. She had even lied to the girl, saying she was supported entirely at the boarding mother’s expense, and warned her not to tell the neighborhood children that she was a charity case if she wanted to have any friends.

Victoria could not be shown to adoptive couples because her biological mother had retained her custody rights and had specifically requested that Victoria stay with Mrs. Sheehan until she could arrange to reclaim her daughter—however unlikely this scenario seemed. Owing to the mother’s wishes and the desperate state of homefinding during the Depression, the agency decided to cooperate with Mrs. Sheehan. Nevertheless, as Victoria grew to adolescence, her conflicts with Mrs. Sheehan became more heated and difficult to mediate. The caseworkers reassured themselves in the notes that the girl had grown accustomed to fine clothes and material comforts and would therefore have difficulty adjusting to a less prosperous boarding home. Yet, their regretful comments also betray an ongoing sense of unease toward the pattern of conflict in the home.

71 NYFH CR, A37295.
The pattern was not an unfamiliar one. Workers frequently placated cantankerous boarding mothers by counseling the child to behave. One worker advised a girl whose boarding mother clearly did not feel any affection toward her to nevertheless appease the woman until the girl came of age. “It would be better not to talk back,” the worker suggested, “but rather say a little prayer.” Clearly, the unfavorable circumstances that limited the placement prospects for dependent children were favorable ones for boarding mothers, particularly those who met the agency’s requirements for religiosity and attended conscientiously to the child’s spiritual training, as Mrs. Sheehan did.

Other boarding parents who cared for unadoptable wards used their influence to try and adopt rather than control the children. Prior to the 1930s, the Foundling had not considered boarding parents as adopters; most did not meet the income requirements, and their homes usually lacked some other critical qualifying feature, such as the couple having been married in the Church or being of childbearing age so that they mirrored the child’s own biological parents. Besides, the agency relied on boarding mothers to help adoptable children win over prospective parents by training them to be cheerful and outgoing toward strangers, as well as to broker visits with biological parents to expedite other children’s return to their own families. The agency needed boarding mothers to remain on the payroll and available through one placement after another, not retire to raise a child of their own.

By the 1930s, these strictures were weakening in some cases. Many boarding parents—who must have sensed the potential for leverage—persisted in the adoption even if the agency discouraged it. One couple with a highly rated boarding home was eager to adopt the boy they had raised for five years. They applied once his mother had decided to permanently surrender

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72 NYFH CR, 31461.
73 Ibid.
him due to her declining health. Due in large part to the child’s age at the time of surrender, the Foundling approved their application rather than try to find a more prosperous couple that might also choose an older boy over an infant or toddler.\textsuperscript{74} In other cases, the passage of time revealed physical, intellectual, or emotional problems that discouraged the Placing Out Department from showing the child to adopters. If the boarding arrangement seemed stable, the Foundling would suggest adoption in the hopes of turning a subsidized home into a free, permanent placement. It was precisely this type of circumstance that finally allowed one couple to adopt their boarding daughter who had been placed with them in the early 1930s. So sure were they of one day adopting that they had concealed her status, telling her she was their biological child. Their hopes were realized when the girl’s mother withdrew all claims after marrying a man who wanted nothing to do with his wife’s illegitimate daughter. By then the child was nine years old and learning impaired. In light of the “fine care and excellent spiritual training” the boarding parents had provided, the agency decided that their advanced age and precarious economic condition "might well be over-looked" in order to save the cost of boarding the unadoptable girl for another decade.\textsuperscript{75}

Conversely, some boarding parents felt so secure in their position as in-demand service providers that they resisting adoption when it was offered to them. The boarding stipend and free medical care provided by the agency were attractive perks that discouraged many boarding parents from offering an unsubsidized home. One Long Island couple refused the agency’s request to adopt their foster son because he had undergone a surgery to remove a cyst on his leg, leaving him with a shortened limb and the prospect of ongoing medical care. So long as he remained a ward of the agency, his surgeries and treatments were provided free of charge. He

\textsuperscript{74} NYFH CR, 15138.
\textsuperscript{75} NYFH CR, 40014.
did, in fact, have subsequent operations and lengthy hospital stays. The agency paid his medical
bills and when the convalescent episodes retarded his progress in school, they paid the boarding
parents for two additional years of care after he turned eighteen so he could continue to work
toward his high school diploma and take a vocational course, which was also provided free of
charge.\textsuperscript{76} Adoption was refused by other top-notch boarding couples for other reasons as well,
such as fear of interference by a child’s biological relatives who had become acquainted with the
boarding home and who might later contest the legal transfer of custody.\textsuperscript{77} Therefore, even when
the caseworker seemed to hold the most desirable card in her hand—permission for a boarding
mother to adopt—the agency might still be thwarted.

It is important not to exaggerate the amount of influence substitute parents gained during
the Depression. Many boarding parents who wanted to adopt were refused and counseled to
think of the child’s future and how much brighter it would be in someone else’s home. Not
surprisingly, many women found this a hard pill to swallow. When informed that her boarding
son was going to be shown for adoption, one boarding mother was “quite shocked at the thought
that she might have to give Charles up.” After “a severe crying spell” over her limited financial
resources that had kept her from adopting the boy, she reluctantly agreed to prepare him for the
transition.\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{76} NYFH CR, 45476. His boarding parents later chose to adopt a younger girl they had also fostered. This
was perhaps an unwise choice because the boy grew resentful of his favored foster sister. His relationship with his
boarding parents became strained, especially when he learned they were receiving money for his care. Although the
caseworker tried to smooth things over by offering to give the boy information on his background, he continued to
withdraw. During one outburst he cried, “I don’t know who I am and I don’t know who my parents are or anything
else.” By the time he turned twenty-one in 1956, he had secured a full-time job and was paying his boarding parents
rent each month. He was also dating a Baptist girl (much to the dismay of his boarding mother and caseworker), and
planning to move out of his boarding home as soon as possible.

\textsuperscript{77} NYFH CR, 45661.
\textsuperscript{78} NYFH CR, 45481.
The Foundling also terminated many placements. In 1932, the agency transferred over 1,300 children from one boarding home to another. Although some of these transfers occurred because the boarding mother gave up care, many were to take children away from incompetent boarding mothers. The most common reason for firing a boarding mother was poor parenting skills, usually attributed to the woman’s low intelligence or unassimilated habits. Italian boarding mothers in particular were accused of pampering their charges and failing to prepare them for adoptive placement. One little girl was so attached to her Italian boarding mother that she protested her way through four failed meetings with adoptive couples by displaying “fits of anger” whenever she was brought in for viewing. "She hangs onto the boarding mother's lap and crushes her clothes," the frustrated caseworker observed. “It is not fair for the child to have lost very good homes because of her constant screaming and sour disposition.” The Foundling’s Placing-Out Department wanted children with winsome personalities who would charm applicants, such as one little girl who actually sang songs when she met potential adopters. The caseworker futilely admonished the Italian boarding mother to instruct the child to be “friendly” and “agreeable.” Eventually, the agency transferred Sophia to a native-born boarding mother, exceptional for her kindness and competence, who trained the child “very nicely” to be “well behaved and quiet.” Sophia was selected and subsequently adopted by, ironically, an Italian couple—but one that Foundling had deemed “of the higher type.”

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80 NYFH CR, 37920.
Conclusion: The Significance of Substitute Mother Autonomy

In the stories of Mrs. O’Brien and Mrs. Sheehan, and those of countless other Foundling cases during the Depression, there are no obvious persecutors or victims. While some caseworkers used their position to bolster their own authority, they were, in fact, following established protocols in their effort to find suitable homes for needy children. And while some foster mothers resisted what seem like rational suggestions, they were understandably irritated by the intense scrutiny that biological parents were not forced to endure, as well as the arbitrary and superficial criteria sometimes used to evaluate an applicant’s fitness. One can sympathize with Miss Brady’s dismay at the squalor she perceived in Mrs. O’Brien’s home and share her concern for James’ disturbing behaviors while also understanding Mrs. O’Brien’s indignation at having her life placed under scrutiny and her competency as an experienced parent called into question. Likewise, even as Victoria’s caseworkers astutely pointed out the belittling effects of Mrs. Sheehan’s haughty comments, they were forced to admit that the girl thrived upon the material benefits and religious education that Mrs. Sheehan’s home provided. Their concerns about the child’s mental health were well placed, but the boarding mother’s proficiency in some regards was beyond question. In each case, the ultimate choice to maintain the placement was conflicted, due in no small measure to the pressured atmosphere of dependent child welfare in the 1930s.

If we focus on assigning blame or assessing the worthiness of these individuals, we miss the real story—the one about the Depression as a time of tremendous flux that inspired creative

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81 A survey of Protestant New Yorkers’ attitudes toward adoption in 1938 revealed that adopters saw professional agencies as barriers to acquiring the children they sought, rather than as knowledgeable facilitators. Herman, Kinship by Design: A History of Adoption in the Modern United States, 138. The annoyance of adoptive mothers reported in the Foundling’s records reflects similar perceptions among Catholics.
flexibility and opened the doors to change. The agency and the substitute mothers each employed
negotiation and improvisation to turn need into opportunity. When faced with a changing
population of both inmates and substitute parents, the Foundling modified its expectations and
practices, prioritizing religiosity over other qualifications and compromising to maintain the
homes it had. Substitute mothers recognized their advantage and seized the chance to exert
greater influence upon the homefinding process—and ultimately the agency’s notions of proper
motherhood. As a result, women that would have otherwise been rejected became substitute
mothers, adoption became accessible to a more diverse applicant pool, and children who might
have remained displaced found permanent homes. These changes planted the seeds for greater
flexibility in the future, such as placing more children—such as those with lower intelligence,
mild physical disabilities and behavioral problems—in families rather than institutions.

The effects of these adaptations upon dependent children were, of course, mixed. In some
cases, more elastic standards regarding domesticity of the substitute mother were beneficial.
After James’ adoption was finalized, Mrs. O’Brien kept up periodic contact with Sister Ligouri,
proudly writing that he was “growing up to be a fine boy.” The scant references in the case
record to James’ later life reveal that he secured a job in the defense industry by the time he was
a teenager and apparently did not become a wandering hobo, a habitual glass breaker, or—as
Miss Brady particularly feared—a “firebug.”82 Although the reports provided by Mrs. O’Brien
were one-sided, many mothers who had discipline problems with their adopted children were
quick to contact the agency for help, even if the adoption had occurred years before. James’
record shows no indication that his behavior or adjustment within his adoptive family were
problematic.

82 NYFH CR, 39999.
For other children, however, the agency’s preoccupation with their spiritual health, combined with an acute shortage of homes, put them at risk for abuse or neglect at the hands of selfish and unskilled substitute parents. Clearly, caseworkers with such concerns felt anxious about their own lack of power. It is likely that at least a few pondered the wisdom of allowing a boarding mother like Mrs. Sheehan to keep Victoria, even if she was growing up as a proper Catholic girl. Although a substitute mother’s faithful adherence to her religious duties was but one factor in the agency’s evaluation of her, it had the clout to override concerns about other shortcomings, some of which should have been prioritized to better safeguard the child’s welfare.

In the larger context of adoption and foster care history, these cases demonstrate the influence of religious ideology on foster care and adoption, shaping standards and practices by resisting professional notions of modern philanthropy. For example, the history of the Foundling as a temporary way station for infants and toddlers on their way to Catholic homes, coupled with the make-do sensibilities of the Depression era, opened permanent placements to Catholic children with mild disabilities. Not until after World War II would adoption professionals come out for more liberal definitions of adoptability that included special-needs children.\(^\text{83}\) The Founding cases of the 1930s thus reveal a fluidity of standards regarding maternal fitness, child welfare, and placement parameters that would not become apparent in professional discourse until the second half of the twentieth century.

Whether that fluidity was for better or worse can only be determined case by case. Overall, however, the survey of records for this study suggests that the staff who managed the Foundling’s adoption and boarding services were generally successful in securing adequate homes by the professional standards of the day, even if many children had to be transferred

multiple times before finding a long-term placement. Without their earnest efforts, tens of thousands of Catholic poor would have been left critically underserved during the worst economic crisis in the nations’ history. Significant credit for this achievement must also go to the substitute mothers who insisted, directly and indirectly, on assessing themselves as worthy of raising a homeless child. Although some were more competent than others, their refusal in varying degrees to passively receive the caseworker’s judgment and directives forced the agency to reconsider their heretofore unyielding notions of maternal and feminine aptitude, as well as adoptability in children. Ultimately, it was this elasticity—however unwillingly adopted—that allowed the Foundling to sustain its mission of finding homes of faith for Catholic children adrift in Depression-era New York.