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Reading in Pieces

Linking “Voices Through Time” at the London Foundling Hospital

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Contributor Statement

Like Coram’s “Voices Through Time: The Story of Care” campaign, this essay aims to engage interdisciplinary audiences. Within “Reading in Pieces,” I pair an analysis of early volunteer transcribing efforts with reflections about my experience participating in VTT in its final years. Both my overview of Coram’s campaign and its effect of reorienting our review of the London Foundling Hospital’s archive are likely to be of interest to everyday readers curious about the impacts of large, digitizing projects. The essay—which sits at the intersection of archival and affect theory—also enters scholarly conversations about the (re)appraisal of historical documents, the evolution of crowdsourcing campaigns, and the relationships between contemporary readers and texts from the long eighteenth century.

As I trace volunteers’ investigation into the maternal petitions of Mary Clarke and Mary Bentley, I am cognizant of recent research on digital archiving and affect in eighteenth-century studies.¹ By attending to the labors of VTT volunteers, I hope to demonstrate the diverse outcomes of “heritage crowdsourcing projects.”² Rather than merely regarding VTT volunteers as transcribers *or* researchers, I suggest that these individuals perform technical (tagging, transcribing) and curatorial (conceptually reorganizing documents) work. They illustrate how citizen scientists, or volunteer digital humanists, can drive research agendas and improve our understanding of historical materials. This research showcases the “interactivity” between VTT’s volunteers, archivists, and casual readers, and approaches questions of archival access and appraisal.³ I reveal how today’s readers are positioned to review maternal petitions with greater empathy and less of a desire to fixate on “perceived inconsistencies.”⁴

After offering a close reading of a discussion between two volunteers about Clarke and Bentley, I turn to an article about the mothers’ petitions. This piece, written by Isabel Barrow, draws on the transcribing work of the two volunteers and reframes the maternal petitions in explicitly affective terms. Accordingly, my essay closes with a

consideration of historical and contemporary affect, which aligns with the ongoing “affective turn” in eighteenth-century studies. It also resonates with existing scholarship on the hospital’s eighteenth-century archive and with our inclinations as readers to pursue “happy endings.”⁵

Reading in Pieces: Linking “Voices Through Time” at the London Foundling Hospital

In 1763, the London Foundling Hospital radically altered its admissions policies. Granted a royal charter by King George II in 1739, the hospital oversaw the care and education of impoverished children.⁶ It supplemented services available at parishes and workhouses, many of which suffered from “foul air” and high infant mortality rates.⁷ After a period of “General Reception,” the hospital lost crucial funding from the House of Commons and began requiring that mothers prove their status as “proper Object[s]” for charitable support.⁸ Where struggling mothers could once anonymously apply for the hospital’s services, they were now instructed to file formal petitions in order for their children to be admitted. Maternal applicants, often in coordination with hospital officials and community members, assembled petition billets that aimed to convey both their upstanding character and their desperate circumstances.

Every Wednesday at ten o’clock the hospital’s General Committee convened to examine the week’s petitions.⁹ Committee members assessed not only the urgency of a mother’s crisis, but also the likelihood that she and her child could be successfully rehabilitated. Such determinations, as historians of the hospital have noted, shifted in accordance with social anxieties about women’s ruin or fallenness.¹⁰ By the end of the eighteenth century, the hospital had clearly enumerated its moralistic priorities. The General Committee, Sir Thomas Bernard wrote in 1799, would read petitions with an eye to how the hospital could “rescu[e] the wretched mother from a course of infamy and prostitution” and enable her to return to a “means of honest industry.”¹¹ Mothers could reunite with their child if their conditions improved, but according to the hospital’s records, this outcome was a rare one.

Following their admission, *foundlings*—a historical term used to describe impoverished and/or illegitimate children—were promptly integrated into the hospital’s systems and ways of life.¹² To preserve their own and their mother’s privacy, these children were baptized under new names and assigned identifying numbers. As infants, they traveled to the countryside to live under the supervision of nurses and local inspectors. Then, at approximately five years old, foundlings returned to London to receive a basic education on the hospital’s grounds.¹³ Children worked toward the goal of completing an apprenticeship arranged by the institution. The hospital meticulously documented foundlings’ health, progress, and professional accolades. Because of the size and structure of the institutional archive, scholars widely acknowledge the difficulties of associating information about foundlings with their original petitions to the hospital.¹⁴

More than two centuries later, maternal petitions have found new and global audiences thanks to a five-year digitizing campaign, “Voices Through Time: The Story of Care.” Spearheaded by Coram, the UK’s oldest children’s charity, “Voices Through Time” (VTT) engaged nearly 6,500 volunteers—myself included—in an ambitious effort to transcribe records from the hospital’s eight-ton archive.¹⁵ Conservators and digital imaging workers at The London Archives served an early and guiding role in the project, readying the hospital’s most fragile documents for volunteers’ attention.¹⁶ Throughout this process, specialists repaired archival materials damaged by

historical bindings and generated high-quality images using BookDrive Capture software and digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) cameras.¹⁷

Once the hospital's documents were prepared for transcription, the campaign welcomed "everyone" to participate, no matter their professional "background, training or expertise."¹⁸ VTT attracted a diverse group of volunteers that included care-experienced individuals, historians, students, and interested users. Their contributions, as in several recent digitizing campaigns, occurred within the expanses of the Zooniverse.¹⁹ Self-described as a haven for "people-powered research," the Zooniverse site hosted archival images and transcriptions in progress, as well as "Talk" forums for VTT volunteers to reflect on their findings.²⁰ At the project's conclusion in 2024, Coram announced that volunteers had digitized "[n]early 100,000 pages," or 23 percent of the hospital's total archive. Among these "pages" were 115 volumes of petitions for hospital services and details about more than 22,000 children.²¹

When I stumbled upon VTT in December 2022, its Zooniverse was bustling. I had just read my first petition to the hospital, struck by the intimate and curatorial labors that mothers performed to secure their children's admission. And I was delighted to find that, although I was an ocean away from the London Archives, I could leaf through petitions and other hospital documents, provided that I could also transcribe them. It seemed like more than a fair trade. Following the examples of longtime volunteers, I read maternal petitions throughout the day, filling up those stray hours that Clay Shirky describes as a productive, "cognitive surplus" and that I generally regarded as my coffee breaks.²²

I joined a campaign designed to integrate volunteers into various aspects of the digitizing process. When active on the Zooniverse site, we were never far from a tutorial that summarized transcription protocols and offered tips. Volunteers were assigned the next available document in the bundle of archival materials that VTT was digitizing. In a split-screen presentation, we viewed an image to be transcribed (left) and a window (right) in which we could insert our transcription and note whether text was "unclear," "insert[ed]," or "delet[ed]."²³ As volunteers, we interacted with materials that ranged from Sub-Committee minutes and Nursery Lists to maternal petitions, the latter of which scholars have compared to "institutional palimpsest[s]" and "self-contained archives."²⁴ In addition to transcribing these complex documents, we were encouraged to create tags that identified maternal applicants and topics discussed within the texts. This "collaborative tagging" activity, as Mark Hedges and Stuart Dunn outline in their study of crowdsourcing in the digital humanities, can reveal patterns and "assets that have particular significance" for large-scale archiving projects like Coram's.²⁵

But the more time I spent in the VTT Zooniverse, the more I realized that what Coram's campaign accomplished was greater than widespread archival access or the preservation of historical documentation. In this essay, I argue that as volunteers transcribed maternal petitions, they simultaneously re-constellated the hospital's eighteenth- and nineteenth-century archive of petitions. First, I analyze a byproduct of this transcription process, which volunteers repeatedly referred to as the work of "piecing...together" documents to illuminate mothers' life stories.²⁶ Ultimately, I suggest that VTT volunteers enacted a review process uniquely capable of acknowledging and *feeling with* mothers' petitions.

"A Glimpse of a Life Otherwise Forgotten"

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault writes that the archive “emerges in fragments, regions and levels.” You cannot, he explains, “describ[e] [it] in its totality,” but you know that the archive is there.²⁷ His is a theory of an expansive, but hard-to-see, collection that I suspect most VTT transcribers would quickly recognize from experience. Throughout Coram’s campaign, volunteers patiently sifted through thousands of written testimonies, tattered love letters, and external character references. In the case of one box of petitions from 1811-1813, literal fragments of mothers’ handwriting were all that remained for digitization.²⁸

These archival fragments, as VTT volunteer Julie Membrey contends, can nevertheless lead us to fuller understandings of their historical creators. In a blog post for *Coram Story*, Membrey writes that “[o]ne of the many benefits” of the transcription process was the opportunity to “piec[e] together... information, relating to the individual Foundling pupils.”²⁹ By reading across various “levels” and subsections of the hospital’s archive, Membrey and other volunteers developed a practice of connecting narrative details that had long existed in isolation. Through conversation and subsequent investigation, these volunteers strove to “catch a glimpse of” lives that, while materially documented in the hospital’s vast archive, were “otherwise forgotten” in public discourse or memory.³⁰ Along the way, volunteers worked to balance their own affective responses to maternal petitions with an underlying desire to center, but not distort, women’s life stories.³¹

To observe this “piecing,” or re-constellating, work in action, we can turn to the case study of Mary Clarke and her daughter. Although I primarily focus on how volunteer transcribers engaged with the relevant maternal petitions, I begin by providing a bit of biographical information about mother and daughter. Not only will this context affirm the historical significance of Mary’s case, but it will also allow us to interpret transcribers’ comments more easily, as they tend to refer to the hospital’s documents and its petitioners in abbreviated terms.

Mary passed away in 1774, shortly after giving birth to a daughter named Sarah. Though Sarah would be the subject of a petition to the London Foundling Hospital, Mary’s archival presence was ill defined at best. In place of a routine application from a mother, we instead locate a charged petition letter from the Committee of the Governors of the City Lying-in Hospital in the Parish of Saint Luke Middlesex, where Mary gave birth.³² The letter was far from complimentary of Mary’s character, accusing her of misrepresenting herself as a married woman to receive support services. Mary’s “false Oath” was of particular importance to the Lying-in Hospital because, in the absence of a father, her child would have become a financial responsibility and “a Brethren of the said Hospital.”³³

“Mary,” the Lying-in Hospital representatives wrote, “spontaneously owned” her lie and accepted its fatal consequences. She apparently “died with remorse” and without any resources that could be diverted to her infant. The Lying-in Hospital’s “pray[ers] that the said Child may be received into the Foundling Hospital” were granted on June 1, 1774.³⁴ Sarah, like those foundling children who came before her, was assigned a “Foundling No” and a new name.³⁵ Upon her admission to the hospital, she was baptized and henceforth known as “Mary Bentley” (Foundling No. 16,906).

In 1797, twenty-three years after her arrival at the hospital, Mary Bentley returned, seeking out a familiar type of care.³⁶ In a “Humble Petition” signed with her mark, she requested that her young daughter be received by the ospital.³⁷ Mary reported that she, “a foundling” herself, “[was] in great Distress Deluded by a Young Man who left her destitute” before physically leaving her on one of the King’s ships.³⁸ In a note synthesizing personal information provided by Mary, a hospital official deemed her “an object of compassion” for having survived an apprenticeship with a “Wicked moral old Wom[a]n,” who likely set a poor “example.”³⁹

Mary's maternal petition was followed by a second in November of 1799, a rarity for foundling mothers. For after that period of early and "indiscriminate" admissions, it was not guaranteed that the hospital would accept multiple children from the same mother.⁴⁰ This policy would be specified in the hospital's printed "instructions" to maternal petitioners in 1813.⁴¹ Mary acknowledged this fact in her petition, remarking that "[a]lthough this [was] [her] second misfortune still [she] ha[d] hopes that the gates of Charity w[ould] not be shut gainst [her]."⁴² By transcribing petitions like Mary's and her mother's, volunteers had already collated a "rich historical resource for research into the lives of working-class women," as Coram advertises in a press release for the overall project.⁴³ However, engagement with Mary's story did not conclude with this archival intervention.

Volunteer transcribers discussed Mary in a VTT forum called "Individual Stories," where I first came across the mother's petition. Here, as in other "Talk" sections of Zooniverse campaigns, participants were invited to "ask questions, interact with researchers and fellow volunteers" via subthreads.⁴⁴ In other words, "Individual Stories" provided a space for VTT volunteers to emotionally and organizationally process the materials they were digitizing. Subthreads posted to this forum facilitated conversation between volunteers and Coram archivists, often revolving around the history of the hospital or period-specific vocabulary. Importantly for this essay, subthreads also occasioned more thorough inquiries into the experiences of maternal applicants and their foundling children.

Volunteers' investigative instincts were particularly on display in the subthread that detailed Mary's two maternal petitions. In what follows, I trace how two transcribers, @User1 and @User2, worked to "piec[e]... together" Mary's life story across various sections of the hospital's archive. Their pursuit, like so many others in the "Individual Stories" forum, was spurred by a single comment. On October 17, 2021, @User1 launched the "Mary Bentley" subthread:

"Mary Bentley is the child of Mary Clark(s or e), the unfortunate woman who died in childbirth...Mary Bentley in 1797 is petitioning to have her own child admitted to the FH...It would be fascinating to see what happened to her in the intervening 23 years."⁴⁵

While I first resonated with @User1's "fascinati[on]" when I wandered into her post, I was also impressed by her scholarly generosity. Over the course of a few sentences, she shared a great deal of information with fellow volunteers. @User1 highlighted a connection between Mary Bentley and Mary Clarke that she had identified throughout her transcribing work.⁴⁶ All the while, she gestured to a line of research that, if undertaken collectively, could potentially account for Mary Bentley's changing life circumstances, or those "intervening 23 years." @User1's "fascinati[on]" was subjunctive, and it awaited the response of a peer.

Another volunteer transcriber soon matched @User1's enthusiasm. @User2 responded to the initial post: "I just posted about Mary Bentley's petition for 1799- hadn't looked properly that you have also mentioned her in 1797."⁴⁷ After pausing to situate the two petitions, which are filed volumes and years apart, @User2 continued to reflect on the documents. "In the last petition," she wrote, "[Mary] referred to her child being her 'second misfortune' (see 692202647)...I think your 1797 is the first child (her misfortune). How fascinating..."

As the subthread unfolded, @User1 redirected her interlocutor to another document, one that I reference in my biographical introduction to Mary Clarke's petition. @User1 addressed @User2:

"Have you read the letter written by the city lying-in hospital?...From memory the officials wrote a very pert letter to the FH as she had lied and only told the lying-in hospital on her deathbed- it's linked somewhere. About to walk dog."⁴⁸

Invoking a “lin[k] somewhere,” @User1 captured the sometimes-dizzying experience of transcribing maternal petitions on Zooniverse. There were many, many layers of links to manage. To navigate this challenge, volunteers like @User1 flagged their investigations in the “Individual Stories” forum in the hope that peers could connect them with materials. Outside of the “Mary Bentley” subthread, volunteers announced parallel searches for relational linkages. They were “Looking for Luke Knowler or Knowles,” “Looking for Robert Jardine,” and studying individuals such as “Ann Lyon 69 Year Old Former Foundling.”

At the same time, @User1 casually illustrated how the work of volunteer transcribers frequently transcended the copying of historical materials and permeated their everyday activities. Throughout one October week and at least one dog walk, @User1 and @User2 elucidated relationships between the hospital’s documents and their historical petitioners that had gone largely unnoticed. In fact, Mary Clarke’s name was not even listed in Mary Bentley’s Nursery records, which solely attributed her admission to the City Lying-in Hospital. Due to variations in spelling, Mary Bentley was likewise disconnected from the records of her first child, who would be baptized as “Phillis Harrison” on May 6, 1797.⁴⁹

Drawing on the research of Kate Theimer, an early advocate for crowdsourcing campaigns like VTT, I propose that we regard @User1 and @User2 as jointly performing the duties of the contemporary archivist or editor. These individuals “[are] presumed to be... more active participants in articulating new research paradigms” than their “preservation-only” predecessors.⁵⁰ In this spirit, the volunteer transcribers “active[ly]” accumulated and conceptually reordered documents about Mary and her mother within their “Individual Stories” subthread. Their connective work sparked an enduring “hope” that they could “follow this [case study] through to see what happened to the children.”⁵¹ Organizers of the VTT campaign would later celebrate the volunteers’ ability to transcribe so that “all the pieces...[were] fit[ting] together.”⁵²

Months after @User1 and @User2 corresponded about Mary Bentley, @CoramArchive weighed in. “Thanks for highlighting Mary’s story,” an organizer wrote, explaining that they would “add this to the Research Volunteers list of stories to investigate further.”⁵³ This follow-up “investigat[ion]” underscored the transcribers’ influence on Coram’s research priorities. Similar to the first volunteer review, it would look substantially different from those investigations conducted when mothers originally submitted their petitions to the hospital. Where eighteenth- and nineteenth-century enquirers were once tasked with identifying “perceived inconsistencies” in a mother’s application, the campaign’s transcribers and researchers instead approached petitions as the seeds of affecting stories.⁵⁴ In their examination of materials submitted by mothers, volunteers lingered with small moments of intimacy, “snapshot[s]” of petitioners’ daily lives.⁵⁵ As is portrayed throughout volunteer blogs and subthreads to “Individual Stories,” VTT participants opted to read maternal petitions relationally, not judgmentally.

By November of 2022, archival inquiry by @User1 and @User2 had led to a fully-fledged article on Coram’s website. Volunteer Isabel Barrow published “Mary Bentley’s Story: Falling in Her Footsteps...,” which “explore[s] the true story of two ‘fallen’ women” from the hospital’s archive.⁵⁶ In line with her stated subject, Barrow focuses heavily on the social “isolat[ion]” endured by the maternal petitioners. Mary Clarke, she writes, was characterized as a “friendless servant maid” in the hospital’s archive, while Mary Bentley reportedly had “not one friend on the face of the earth” when she submitted her second petition.⁵⁷ As Barrow’s discussion of the mothers’ “distress[ing]” conditions winds down, though, her tone noticeably shifts. She closes her article with a call for today’s readers to connect with the petitions of the historical mothers. Readers are positioned to *feel with* and beyond Mary Clarke and Mary Bentley.

Somewhat in alignment with the review of Mary Bentley's first petition, Barrow frames the mothers as true "object[s] of compassion."⁵⁸ These maternal petitioners lacked sufficient community support and material resources. And so, Barrow writes, they effectively embody "the struggles of single mothers in a world where society's perceptions mean everything."⁵⁹ She implies that after reading Mary Clarke's and Mary Bentley's petitions, readers will feel immense compassion for the historical mothers. In conjunction with these sympathies, Barrow adds, readers will presumably reckon with the reality that "even [hospital] support only extended so far."⁶⁰ After all, a child's admission to the hospital could do little to ensure that they would enjoy a certain quality of life in their mother's absence.

Once readers accumulate this deep well of feeling, Barrow encourages them to distribute their sentiment widely and transhistorically. They can "take the compassion [they] feel for [Mary Bentley] and consider" contemporary mothers, who continue to face the derision of public evaluators, whether those are "[t]abloid newspapers" or patriarchal government officials. The campaign thus cultivates a volunteer collective that, as Hedges and Dunn write, is positioned to "carry out some interesting or valuable work that may go beyond what was envisaged by the project."⁶¹ VTT's campaign to transcribe—and then make publicly accessible—the historical archive of the hospital comes to generate virtual community among transcribers, transferable "compassion," and another way to listen to mothers' personal narratives.

Looking for Mary Bentley

Following along with @User1, @User2, and Barrow inspired me to reflect on my own relationship to the hospital's archive of petitions. Where I once considered my role straightforwardly as a transcriber of these historical documents, I have since taken on another layer of what Membrey describes as archival "detective work."⁶² I now flip between nursery notes and hospital registers, hoping that by reading in "pieces" I might encounter a fresh view of a petitioner's life. In doing so, I retroactively join the scores of volunteers who populated VTT's "Individual Stories" forum with optimistic subthreads. We are a group that seeks details about struggling mothers, narratives about their lives and those of their children that have been previously overlooked or bureaucratically separated.

As I feel with, and read for, petitioners like Mary Bentley in the hospital's archive, I am increasingly aware that I enter a tenuous and promising space. It is something like what, in a recent issue of *Scholarly Editing*, Mich Ling has called the generative "gap between 'looking for' and 'collaborating with'" an archival creator.⁶³ Much can be learned by stitching together the previously siloed "pieces" of Mary's history in the hospital's files. By expanding the inquiry of @User1 and @User2, I discover that long before Mary "humbly beg[ged]" for the "assistance" of the General Committee, she was a young child treated for "weakness."⁶⁴ She "deserv'd encouragement" for her sewing prowess, which would eventually earn her the hospital's coveted "Silver Thimble Award."⁶⁵ She was taught the "business of household work" by a milliner after having been "turned over to a new master."⁶⁶ Mary's final archival traces live on in a petition to send her second child to the hospital in 1799, wherein she pledged to maintain a "determined resolution" and an "honest livelihood" if she could be protected "for this once."⁶⁷

We cannot rewrite Mary's "distress'd situation" or the hospital's conditional neglect of her second "misfortune."⁶⁸ But what I have realized, as I have collaborated with VTT volunteers—and by extension, with Mary and her dear friend "Mrs Williams," who initially helped her to assemble her petition—is that today's readers

can meaningfully rearrange “pieces” of the hospital’s holdings.⁶⁹ We can look for petitioners like Mary within large, institutional archives, where their stories have been historically segmented or discounted by contemporaneous investigators. By emulating the careful examinations of VTT volunteers, we might even be drawn to imaginatively accompany or to develop compassion for maternal petitioners. At the least, as current readers of the hospital’s digital archive, we can practice a less rigid type of petition review, one that offers a different kind of care than “what was envisaged by” the hospital’s General Committee and its waves of enquirers.⁷⁰ Through the transcribing and re-constellating labors of VTT participants, we are given a reminder of how a historic archive can continue to live.

1. One digitization campaign with specific relevance to eighteenth-century studies scholars is the *Bentham Project*, which aimed to transcribe and edit the writing of philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Based out of University College London, the *Project* “successfully blend[ed] user engagement and high scholarly standards,” as Kenneth Price reflects amidst a consideration of scholarly editing practices. See Kenneth M. Price, “Social Scholarly Editing” in *A New Companion to Digital Humanities*, ed. Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth (Wiley-Blackwell, 2016): 228, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118680605.ch10>. The study of affect has deep roots in the eighteenth century, from the focus in Enlightenment philosophy on sympathy to the proliferation of the sentimental novel. For additional discussion see Wendy Anne Lee, *Failures of Feeling: Insensibility and the Novel* (Stanford University Press, 2018) and Julie Murray, “Sensibility: Passion, Emotion, Affect” in *The Cambridge Companion to Eighteenth-Century Thought*, ed. Frans De Bruyn (Cambridge University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139998383.010>. ↵
2. Melissa Terras, “Crowdsourcing in the Digital Humanities,” in *A New Companion to Digital Humanities*, ed. Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth (Wiley-Blackwell, 2016): 593, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118680605.ch29>. ↵
3. Sarah Kenderdine, “Embodiment, Entanglement, and Immersion in Digital Cultural Heritage,” in *A New Companion to Digital Humanities*, ed. Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth (Wiley-Blackwell, 2016): 61, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118680605.ch2>. ↵
4. Jo Blyghton, “Petition Letters in the Foundling Hospital Archive,” *Coram Story*, September 21, 2021, <https://coramstory.org.uk/explore/content/blog/petition-letters-in-the-foundling-hospital-archive/>. ↵
5. Taylor, ““Received, a Blank Child,”” 342. ↵
6. After seventeen years of advocacy by Thomas Coram—and thanks to the support of twenty-one ladies of “quality and distinction,” who signed his petition—the London Foundling Hospital was granted a royal charter on October 17, 1739. To learn more about King George II’s motivations for issuing this charter see Ruth K. McClure, *Coram’s Children: The London Foundling Hospital in the Eighteenth Century* (Yale University Press, 1981): 7; see also “Ladies of Distinction,” *Coram Story*, accessed June 26, 2026, <https://coramstory.org.uk/explore/content/article/ladies-of-distinction/>. ↵

7. In her foundational account of the London Foundling Hospital McClure discusses the poor living conditions at workhouses, many established in the 1720s. These circumstances, in addition to personal sightings of impoverished children in the streets of London, inspired Thomas Coram to campaign for the creation of the hospital. As McClure and other historians note, similar institutions existed in Paris, Lisbon, and Rome. See McClure, **Coram's Children,** 114; see also R.H. Nichols and F.A. Wray, *The History of the Foundling Hospital* (Oxford University Press, 1935), 13. ↵
8. Phrases that characterize a mother's fitness for support evolved alongside the hospital's petitioning procedures. Many eighteenth-century applicants—like Martha Faulkner, whose 1778 petition—asserted that they were “proper Object[s]” for charitable attention. This language became particularly relevant when the House of Commons discontinued its financial support of the hospital's “General Reception” as of March 25, 1760. For a history of the hospital's admissions policies see McClure, *Coram's Children*, 114. ↵
9. Thomas Bernard, *An Account of the Foundling Hospital, in London, for the Maintenance and Education of Exposed and Deserted Young Children* (T. Jones for the Hospital, 1799): 7, 8, 63. ↵
10. Scholars debate the level of autonomy that mothers showcased in crafting their hospital petitions, many recognize an incentive for petitioners to draw on sympathetic tropes of “fallen[ness]” or “seduction.” See Virginia Grimaldi, “The Chosen Ones: A Revisionist History of Paternalism, Admissions, and Maternal Agency at the London Foundling Hospital (1739-1869)” (PhD diss., University of York, 2024), 281, <https://hdl.handle.net/10315/42472> and Tanya Evans, *Unfortunate Objects: Lone Mothers in Eighteenth-Century London* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 135. For a discussion of petitioners' uncertain “narrative opacity” see Kristen Renzi, “Archival Seduction: The Discursive Challenges of Reading Sex Crimes in the London Foundling Hospital Mothers' Petitions, 1807-1827,” *Feminist Formations* 30, no. 1 (2018): 118-46, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2018.0021>. ↵
11. Bernard, *An Account of the Foundling Hospital*, 7-8. ↵
12. The Foundling Museum in London reminds visitors that “foundling” is somewhat of a “misnomer” when the term is used in reference to the hospital, as mothers were required to petition for their children's admission. The figure of the orphaned “foundling” appears widely in contemporaneous literary works by authors like Eliza Haywood and Charles Dickens. See “What is a Foundling?,” Foundling Museum, accessed June 26, 2026, <https://foundlingmuseum.org.uk/our-story/what-is-a-foundling/>. ↵
13. McClure, *Coram's Children*, 46-7. ↵
14. Hilary Wyss, in her reflections on VTT, observes that the “newly digitized archive” stands to streamline research “about the [foundling] child, her parents, and her circumstances. See Hilary E. Wyss, *The London Foundling Hospital and Eighteenth-Century Objects of Charity: Recovering the Digital Archive* (Cambridge University Press, 2025). ↵

15. “100,000 Pages of Records from Coram’s Foundling Hospital Archive Made Available Online to Public,” *Coram Story*, accessed June 26, 2026, <https://coramstory.org.uk/explore/content/news/100000-pages-of-records-from-corams-foundling-hospital-archive-made-available-online-to-public-for-first-time/>. ↵
16. Nella McNicol and Aimy Stevens, hosts, *Outside the Box*, podcast, season 2, episode 6, “Voices Through Time, the Story of Care,” Archives and Records Association Explore Your Archive, January 26, 2024, <https://www.exploreyourarchive.org/podcast-the-people-who-work-in-and-with-archives/>. In her podcast appearance, Voices Through Time archivist Beck Price noted that “the earliest and most fragile records” in the hospital’s archive were slotted for digitization in the campaign. ↵
17. To learn more about approaches to restoring and digitizing bundles of archival documents see blog posts by specialists at the London Archives and Coram. Rosemary Coppel, “Conserving Petition Letters,” *Coram Story*, February 2, 2021, <https://coramstory.org.uk/explore/content/blog/conserving-petition-letters/>; see also Dominique Russell, “Digitising Documents from the Foundling Hospital Archive,” *Coram Story*, May 12, 2021, <https://coramstory.org.uk/explore/content/blog/digitising-documents-from-the-foundling-hospital-archive/>. ↵
18. “Join us for Transcription Tuesday,” *Coram Story*, January 25, 2021, <https://www.coram.org.uk/news/news-join-us-transcription-tuesday-help-bring-story-care-life/>. ↵
19. VTT launched in a period that saw a rise in what Melissa Terras refers to as “[h]eritage crowdsourcing,” the collaborative transcribing of historical materials by both field experts and public participants. Other campaigns hosted by the Zooniverse platform include: “Shakespeare’s World;” the “Anti-Slavery Manuscripts Project;” and the “Maria Edgeworth Letters Project.” Outside of the Zooniverse site, “Transcribe Bentham” is another noteworthy example of a large crowdsourcing project. See Melissa Terras, “Crowdsourcing in the Digital Humanities,” 593. ↵
20. “About the Zooniverse,” Zooniverse, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.zooniverse.org/about>. ↵
21. “Foundling Hospital Archive,” *Coram Story*, accessed June 26, 2026, <https://coramstory.org.uk/the-foundling-hospital-archive/>. ↵
22. In his 2010 TED talk, Clay Shirky defines “cognitive surplus” as those “one trillion hours of leisure time humans collectively accumulate each year,” which can be dedicated to “large-scale” creative projects. See Clay Shirky, “How Cognitive Surplus Will Change the World,” TED@Cannes Cannes, France, June 2010, 12 min., 50 sec., https://www.ted.com/talks/clay_shirky_how_cognitive_surplus_will_change_the_world. For a discussion of how projects like Zooniverse allow folks to put these hours to use see Samantha Blickhan, Chris Lintott, Laura Trouille, and Victoria Van Hyning, “Transforming Libraries and Archives through Crowdsourcing,” *D-Lib Magazine* 23, no. 5/6 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1045/may2017-vanhyning>. ↵
23. Though VTT’s site is no longer active to visitors, Molly O’Doherty and Jo Blyghton describe the transcriber experience in *Who Do You Think You Are? Magazine*, a UK-based family history publication. See Molly

O'Doherty and Jo Blyghton, "Transcription Tuesday 2021: Voices Through Time," *Who Do You Think You Are? Magazine*, January 6, 2021, <https://www.whodoyouthinkyouaremagazine.com/feature/transcription-tuesday-2021-voices-through-time>. ↵

24. Taylor, "'Received, a Blank Child'," 295; Maria Zytaruk, "Caught in the Archive," 41. ↵
25. Stuart Dunn and Mark Hedges, *Crowd-Sourcing Scoping Study: Engaging the Crowd with Humanities Research*. Arts and Research Council (2012): 22, https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/5786937/Crowdsourcing_connected_communities.pdf. ↵
26. @User1, post to "Voices Through Time: The Story of Care Talk," Zooniverse, October 29, 2021. Because Zooniverse usernames frequently include individuals' full names, I have chosen to anonymize the two volunteers' titles as "@User1" and "@User2." ↵
27. Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2002), 138. ↵
28. Coram Foundling Hospital, "Petitions Admitted, 1811-1811: Fragments of Petition Papers," CFH/A/08/001/002/020. ↵
29. Julie Membrey, "James Butler's Story," *Coram Story*, November 5, 2021, <https://coramstory.org.uk/explore/content/blog/james-story/>. ↵
30. Julie Membrey, "James Butler's story." ↵
31. Bourne Taylor, in her study of the hospital's archive, admits the temptation for contemporary readers to "piec[e] together, from different parts of the archive, those rare instances" when mother and child are reunited. Bourne Taylor, "'Received, a Blank Child': John Brownlow, Charles Dickens, and the London Foundling Hospital—Archives and Fictions," 342. ↵
32. Coram Foundling Hospital "Petitions Admitted to Ballot, Volume 5: 1774," CFH/A/08/001/001/005/053. ↵
33. In the Lying-in Hospital's petition, the governors referenced "An Act for the Better Regulation of Lying-in Hospitals" (1773), which outlines that "no Bastard born in any such Hospital, House, or Place" will be eligible for parish relief. See *An Act for the better regulation of Lying-in Hospitals, and other places, appropriated for the charitable Reception of pregnant women; and also to provide for the settlement of bastard children born in such hospitals and places*, 1773, c.82. ↵
34. Coram Foundling Hospital, CFH/A/08/001/001/005/053. ↵
35. Coram Foundling Hospital, "Billet Book, Volume 183: Foundling Numbers 16900-16999," CFH/A/09/001/183/017. ↵
36. Henceforth, I refer to Mary Bentley as "Mary" and Mary Clarke as "Mary Clarke" to avoid confusion. ↵

37. This petition was written from the perspective of Sarah Noble, who “address[ed] [the General Committee] in Behalf of Mary Bentley.” After “enquiry,” a hospital official highlighted Sarah’s endorsement of Mary’s petition. See Coram Foundling Hospital, “Petitions Admitted to Ballot, Volume 22: 1797,” CFH/A/08/001/001/022. ↵
38. Coram Foundling Hospital, CFH/A/08/001/001/022. ↵
39. Coram Foundling Hospital, CFH/A/08/001/001/022/075. ↵
40. “Illegitimacy and the Foundling Hospital,” *Coram Story*, accessed June 26, 2026, <https://coramstory.org.uk/explore/content/article/illegitimacy-and-the-foundling-hospital/>. See also John Brownlow, *The History and Design of the Foundling Hospital: With a Memoir of the Founder* (Warr, 1858), 17. ↵
41. Coram Foundling Hospital, “Petitions Admitted, bundle 22: 1813,” CFH/A/08/001/002/022/01. ↵
42. Coram Foundling Hospital, “Petitions Admitted to Ballot, Volume 24: 1799,” CFH/A/08/001/001/024/045. “Misfortune,” as Tanya Evans reminds, was an eighteenth-century term that could “describe the consequences of women participating in illicit sex” or the “bastard birth,” itself; see Evans, *Unfortunate Objects*, 135. ↵
43. “100,000 Pages of Records,” *Coram Story*. ↵
44. Blickhan et al., “Transforming Libraries and Archives.” ↵
45. @User1, post to “Voices Through Time: The Story of Care Talk,” Zooniverse, October 17, 2021. ↵
46. According to her Zooniverse “Collections,” @User1 was the volunteer who transcribed the petition to admit Mary Clarke’s child, later named Mary Bentley. @User1, “1774 Mary Clarks (deceased) City of London Lying In Hospital (3),” Zooniverse, accessed June 26, 2026, <https://www.zooniverse.org/collections/valthomas/1774-mary-clarks-deceased-city-of-london-lying-in-hospital>. ↵
47. @User2, post to “Voices Through Time: The Story of Care Talk,” Zooniverse, October 29, 2021. ↵
48. @User1, post to “Voices Through Time: The Story of Care Talk,” Zooniverse, October 29, 2021. ↵
49. Coram Foundling Hospital, “Billet Book, volume 196: Foundling Numbers 18331-18460,” CFH/A/09/001/196. Nearly four months after her arrival in Chertsey, Phillis Harrison tragically died on September 2, 1798. See Coram Foundling Hospital, “General Register, volume 5: Foundling Numbers 17287-21812, 7 January 1778-7 December 1880,” CFH/A/09/002/005. ↵
50. Tarez Samra Graban, Alexis Ramsey-Tobienne, and Whitney Myers, “In, Through, and About the Archive: What Digitization (Dis)Allows,” in *Rhetoric and the Digital Humanities*, ed. Jim Ridolfo and William Hart-Davidson (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 233-44. ↵

51. @User1, post to “Voices Through Time: The Story of Care Talk,” Zooniverse, October 29, 2021. ↵
52. @CoramArchive, post to “Voices Through Time: The Story of Care Talk,” Zooniverse, March 9, 2022. ↵
53. @CoramArchive, post to “Voices Through Time.” ↵
54. Blyghton, “Petition Letters.” Kate Theimer, paraphrased by Graban, Ramsey-Tobienne, and Myers, expects that “users and creators” will hold distinct “motivations” for “approach[ing] the archaic space,” particularly when consulting digital collections that can “accommodate a broad host of them.” See Graban, Ramsey-Tobienne, and Myers, “In, Through, and About the Archive,” 235. ↵
55. Julie Membrey, “Uncovering Sophia Foster’s Story from Australia,” *Coram Story*, June 3, 2021, <https://coramstory.org.uk/explore/content/blog/uncovering-sophias-story/>. ↵
56. Isabel Barrow, “Mary Bentley’s Story: Falling in Her Footsteps...,” *Coram Story*, November 3, 2021, <https://coramstory.org.uk/explore/content/blog/falling-in-her-footsteps/>. ↵
57. It should be noted that Mary Bentley does qualify this statement, praising the friendship of Mrs. Williams, who agreed to “explain any particulars” of Mary’s case to the committee members. See Coram Foundling Hospital, CFH/A/08/001/001/024/045. ↵
58. Coram Foundling Hospital, CFH/A/08/001/001/022/075. ↵
59. Barrow, “Mary Bentley’s Story.” ↵
60. Barrow, “Mary Bentley’s Story.” ↵
61. Dunn and Hedges, *Crowd-Sourcing Scoping Study*, 21. ↵
62. Julie Membrey, “Uncovering Sophia Foster’s Story.” ↵
63. Mich Ling, “Looking for Merle: Participatory Archiving as Bridge Work,” *Scholarly Editing: The Annual of the Association for Documentary Editing* 42 (2025): 14, <https://doi.org/10.55520/FP4F1MYJ>. ↵
64. Coram Foundling Hospital, CFH/A/08/001/001/024/045. For context about Mary’s weakness, see Coram Foundling Hospital, “Sub-Committee Minutes, volume 17, 29 March 1783-29 September 1784,” CFH/A/03/005/017/063. ↵
65. Coram Foundling Hospital, “Sub-Committee Minutes, volume 18, 2 October 1784-20 May 1786,” CFH/A/03/005/018/227. See also Coram Foundling Hospital, “Sub-Committee Minutes, volume 19, 27 May 1786-26 January 1788,” CFH/A/03/005/019/005. ↵
66. Coram Foundling Hospital, “Sub-Committee Minutes, volume 20, 2 February 1788-June 1792,” CFH/ A/ 03/ 005/020. ↵

67. Coram Foundling Hospital, CFH/A/08/001/001/024/045. ↩
68. Coram Foundling Hospital, CFH/A/08/001/001/024/045. ↩
69. Coram Foundling Hospital, CFH/A/08/001/001/024/045. See also Membrey, “James Butler’s Story.” ↩
70. Dunn and Hedges, *Crowd-Sourcing Scoping Study*, 20. ↩