

# Wayward Girls – A Context Case Study



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Young women who rebelled against nineteenth-century moral conventions were deemed delinquent or, worse, labeled a prostitute. New York was the site of vigorous female activism and for many, seeking social independence resulted in a sentence to one of the state’s reformatories. Both working- and middle-class girls engaged in this reinvention of female adolescents, yet it was usually girls of low status who suffered the repercussions.

“Wayward Girls” looks at the broad context of the girl problem and delves into individual inmate files.

## *Historical Context*

As genealogists we understand that the records we locate for our research subjects, must be viewed through the historical, political, social, cultural, setting at the time they occurred – to reach sound conclusions. We give voice to the records of our ancestors or research subjects. If taken at face value records can deceive.

## *Developing and Organizing Context*

- Identify themes, concepts, geography, or chronological period.
- Standard # 12 – Broad Context

“When planning research, genealogists consider historical boundaries and their changes, migration patterns and routes, and sources available for potentially relevant times and place. They also consider economic, ethnic, genetic, governmental, historical, legal, linguistic, military, paleographic, religious, social, and other factors that could affect the research plan and scope.”<sup>1</sup>
- Collect and analyze information pre and post your target to make connections to other eras (analysis of background context).
- Visual aids can be useful in identify gaps in our extent of research and historical context.

Individual	Micro
Group	
Crowd	Meso
Organization	
Local subculture	
City	
Nation	Macro

<sup>1</sup> BCG, *Genealogy Standards*, 2d edition revised (Nashville: Ancestry, 2021), Standard 12 at 12.

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*“For much of recorded historical time, women have been deprived of their history.”*

*Gerda Lerner, author, Living with History/Making Social Change*

### Standard 73 – Biographical Information

“Genealogies, pedigrees, lineages, and most other genealogical writing include descriptive biographical narrative besides any vital statistics. These details include sufficient information about each person’s or family’s activities, residences, circumstances, contributions, and lifestyle to identify them uniquely within the context of their historical era, society, and geographic place.”<sup>2</sup>

- Biographical sketches rich with social history and background context bring our research subjects to life!
- Understand social norms; ideology vs. reality: just because it was the law, doesn’t mean there was conformity.
- Let women speak for themselves - use direct quotes from women; add well documented stories to your narrative.

### *Resources*

Alexander, Ruth. *The “Girl Problem” Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900-1930*. Ithaca, New York & London: Cornell University Press, 1995.

Beach, Norma. *In the Eyes of the Law: Women, Marriage, and Property in Nineteenth-Century New York*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982.

Bowler, Anne E. “What Shall We Do with the Young Prostitute? Reform Her or Neglect Her? ”: Domestication as Reform at the New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford, 1901–1913, *Journal of Social History*, Volume 47, Issue 2, Winter 2013, Pages 458–481.

Freedman, Estelle. *Their Sisters’ Keepers: Women’s Prison Reform in America, 1830-1930*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press (1981).

Hare, Alison. “The Time of Cholera: A Case Study about Historical Context.” 20 July 2021. *Legacy Family Tree Webinars*. <https://familytreewebinars.com>.

Jones, Thomas W. “Using ‘Correlation’ to Reveal Facts that No Record States.” 30 June 2020. *FamilySearch*. <https://www.familysearch.org/en/help/helpcenter/lessons/using-correlation-to-reveal-facts-that-no-record-states> .

Lerner, Gerda. *Living with History / Making Social Change*. The University of North Carolina Press. Kindle Edition.

Newby, Jennifer. *Women's Lives: Researching Women's Social History, 1800–1939*. Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Family History, 2011.

Odom, Mary E. *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press (1995).

Schrag, Zachary M. *The Princeton Guide to Historical Research*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2021.

Sochen, June. *Herstory: A Woman’s View of American History*. New York: Alfred Publishing Co., 1974.

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<sup>2</sup> BCG, *Genealogy Standards*, 2d edition revised (Nashville: Ancestry, 2021), Standard 73 at 40.