

# REDISCOVERING LOST INNOCENCE



ARCHAEOLOGY AT THE  
STATE HOME AND SCHOOL

E. PIERRE MORENON

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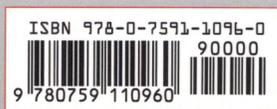
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In the first half of the nineteenth century, responsibility for child care primarily rested with families. Needy children were often cared for by community-sponsored efforts that varied widely in quality, as well as by benevolent organizations dedicated to children's welfare. The late 1800s were marked by major social service infrastructure construction and development. During this period, guided by progressive concerns about the state's role in responding to societal changes resulting from urbanization and industrialization, Rhode Island took on a more active statewide role in public education, sewers, parks, prisons, and child welfare systems. New ideas about civil rights extended to race, women, labor, and children. Old institutions, such as town almshouses and poor farms, were replaced with state institutions, such as the State Home and School for Dependent and Neglected Children, which opened in 1885.

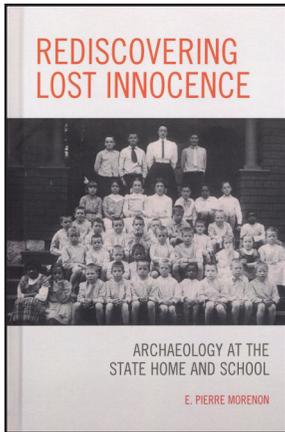
One might expect to find a huge record for custodial children well embedded in regional literatures or social science and history texts; yet this is not the case. The State Home Project began in 2001 with no evocative life histories and no local or regional childhood narratives about the former residents of the State Home upon which to build. However, varied narratives about custodial children developed as researchers dug into the soils, read unexamined case histories, and talked with former residents. The State Home remains an important place because thousands of children and citizens lived portions of their lives there. Documenting children's educational, social, and health experiences is not inconsequential. Archaeology offers the possibility of recovering lost and missing details and, in collaboration with other disciplines, creates a rich narrative of a place. These experiences were significant in our past, and they are important to us in the present and future generations; they demonstrate our common history.

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Cover image: Isabella Armstrong's middle-grade class on the front steps of the State Home schoolhouse on April 7, 1909. (Courtesy of Louis McGowan, Biology Department, RIC)



## Rediscovering Lost Innocence: Archaeology at the State Home and School

E. Pierre Morenon. 2018. [Rowman & Littlefield Publishers](#). 328 pp., 51 figures, 19 tables. \$95.00 (Hardback) \$90.00 (E-book).

*Reviewed by Jane Eva Baxter, Department of Anthropology, DePaul University*

*Rediscovering Lost Innocence* offers a rich and multi-faceted interpretation of the Rhode Island State Home and School that opened its doors in 1885 and continued as a residen-

tial facility for children under various iterations until 1979. The physical remains of this institution are located on the grounds of Rhode Island College in Providence. In 2001, the college became the center of an interdisciplinary, collaborative effort to investigate the material and architectural remains of the various institutions that had operated there, to bring together the diverse documentary record of these institutions, and to record the memories and stories of former residents. Certainly, there is a significant amount of work published about the archaeology and history of institutions in America, including residential institutions for children, but a monograph-length publication such as this allows a more in-depth presentation of the archaeological methodologies and findings, the contents of oral histories, and the rich documentary sources that are often incorporated into such studies. The strength of this monograph is the extended presentation of an interdisciplinary project, which illustrates how these various sources can be combined to connect tangible and intangible heritage in a more nuanced narrative of place. The blending of sources in this work also uniquely redress some of the collective forgetting that often surrounds residential institutions in America. Because residential institutions were such a widespread phenomenon from approximately the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, this book is a useful comparative piece for those working on institutions anywhere in the United States, including the Midwest. This detailed and particularistic study comes with some significant limitations, however.

The author wrote this book largely in a first-person, reflective voice, as the journey of an archaeologist trained in prehistory experiencing interdisciplinary, collaborative, community-based historical archaeology as new. This personal journey is interwoven with a description of the trajectory of the project that highlights the development of questions, the assembling of interdisciplinary partnerships, the development of relationships with former site occupants, the methodological and ethical considerations of the project, and the project outcomes. Unfortunately, this journey does not include an engagement with decades of published works that are considered foundational and essential in contemporary archaeological practice and/or which are central to the topical areas that frame this inquiry. This lack of engagement with the significant work that has been done in similar

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areas of archaeology isolates this work intellectually, and misrepresents the work as breaking new ground that is in fact, well trodden.

For example, this work does not include most of the literature on the history and archaeology of institutions, and does not engage many important published works in Historical Archaeology on orphanages and state homes or other institutions for children, such as Indian boarding schools. This omission resulted in the exclusion of many of the important interpretive frameworks used in the archaeology of institutions such as the theoretical dimensions of domination and resistance that framed institutional sites ideologically and shaped the daily life of residents. There are also many missed opportunities for connecting this study to well-founded methodologies, as many projects, including those focused on Indian boarding schools and Japanese Internment Camps, have involved former site residents and have addressed the ethics and practice of working with people who experienced sites as children, and for whom sites may be places of trauma.

The writing style of this book suggests that other archaeologists may not be the intended primary audience, and that the personal discoveries of the author are intended to lead a reader from outside the field on a journey of new understandings about archaeological scholarship and practice. In this context, the omission of significant literature is not benign as it misrepresents how archaeology is commonly practiced and silences the voices of so many scholars who have actively published in similar areas. The chapter, "Do Archaeologists Ignore Children," for example, diminishes a bibliography of hundreds of potential sources to a small handful, and presents this project's emphasis on children as relatively new and novel. As such, the work perpetuates a very tired and inaccurate narrative that children are ignored or unstudied by archaeologists and historians, rather than drawing on an array of published works that would have enhanced interpretations of material culture, play, work, and institutional life particularly as they relate to children. Another recurring theme of the book is the presentation of the collaborative, community-engaged ethos of this project, which is done with few references to the thousands of existing examples of collaborative, public, and community archaeologies that can be found in peer-reviewed published works, on project websites, and in countless blogs and newsletters. Again, the failure to connect to a very large body of literature by a large, diverse community of scholars, gives the impression that the collaborative, engaged archaeology conducted as part of this project is novel rather than a widespread, normative practice for much of our discipline. For these reasons, I'd be very leery to assign this book to students or to recommend it for non-professionals, as the bibliography does not steer the reader to appropriate sources or adequately present archaeological scholarship and practice in 2018.

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