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Without a male breadwinner: “deserted wives” seeking poor relief from the Destitute Board, Adelaide, South Australia, 1855-1856

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ABSTRACT: When destitution reached its peak in South Australia in 1855-1856, “deserted wives” became the focus of the Destitute Board, Adelaide’s attention. Left behind by their husbands in favour of the Victorian gold diggings, these women were subsequently publicly censured in the government and national press.

The present study sought to establish a demographic and destitution sketch of these destitute women and their families; to explore the factors that influenced their destitution; and, to discover what happened to them after the mid-1850s. The usefulness of the Destitute Board’s admissions register for genealogists was also evaluated.

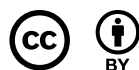
Using matched record linkage and family reconstitution methods, evidence was found that challenges the Destitute Board’s discourse. Only about one-half of absent fathers were recorded at the gold diggings, while about one-third of families experienced temporary desertion. Examination of these findings within the social and economic contexts of the period offers a unique view of the deserted families and provides a useful foundation for further research. Evaluation of the Destitute Board’s admissions register demonstrates its value to the genealogical community, despite a few limitations.

Introduction

This article will explore the “deserted wives” of mid-nineteenth century South Australia. In this context, deserted wives were destitute women whose “natural protectors” were absent at the Victoria gold diggings and evading financial responsibility for their families.¹ As McCarthy and Sendziuk (2018)² pointed out, from the South Australian perspective the issue of deserted wives has received brief academic attention. Rather, the phenomenon has featured more broadly in general social welfare texts, such as, Dickey’s (1986)³ history of social welfare in South Australia from 1836 to the 1970s, and Geyer’s (2008)⁴ concise overview of the female residents of the Destitute Asylum from 1852 to 1918.

A successful example of planned colonisation?

The Province of South Australia was established in 1836⁵ and founded upon the theoretical principles of Edward Gibbon Wakefield’s vision of systematic colonization.⁶ The sale and utilization of land coordinated with the introduction of carefully selected migrants who were provided with free passages funded from the profits of land sales was at the heart of its design.^{7,8} The most sought-after classes of migrants were rural labourers and domestic servants who would provide the labour force for the capitalist investors and landowners⁹ (for example, Figure 1). As well as the incentive of a free or subsidised passage, potential migrants were offered other inducements including guaranteed and flexible employment, high wages, and the opportunity to purchase land at a future date.¹⁰ This model of settlement was designed to avoid the economic and social difficulties experienced by existing colonies, such as those associated with convict transportation and penal settlements.¹¹



FREE EMIGRATION
TO
PORT ADELAIDE,
South Australia.

An opportunity now offers itself to all **MARRIED** persons, of useful occupations, particularly to **AGRICULTURAL LABORERS, CARPENTERS, BUILDERS, STONEMASONS, SHEPHERDS, and BLACKSMITHS,** of obtaining a

FREE PASSAGE
TO
PORT ADELAIDE,
IN
South Australia,

A FREE COLONY, where there are no convicts sent, and where every person who emigrates is as free as he is in this country.

Besides the classes of persons enumerated above, Bakers, Blacksmiths, Braziers and Tinmen, Smiths, Shipwrights, Boat Builders, Wheelwrights, Sawyers, Cabinet Makers, Coopers, Curriers, Farriers, Millwrights, Harness Makers, Boot and Shoemakers, Tailors, Tanners, Brickmakers, Lime Burners, and all persons engaged in the erection of buildings are always in great request. The applicants must be able to obtain a good character as honest, sober, industrious men. They must be real laborers going out to work in the Colony, of sound mind and body, not less than 15 nor more than 30 years of age, and married. The rule as to age is occasionally departed from in favor of the parents of large families. As a general rule, each child is considered as extending the age one year. The sisters of married applicants are allowed to go free, if of good character.

The province of South Australia is a delightfully fertile and salubrious country, in every respect well adapted to the constitution of Englishmen, and is one of the most flourishing of all our colonies. *It is well watered,*—and there have never been any complaints from the colonists of a want of this valuable element; on the contrary, the letters from Cornishmen who have written home are very satisfactory on this point. It should be borne in mind that complaints of a scarcity of water do not relate to Port Adelaide, but to other settlements not connected with *South Australia.*

Emigrants wishing to obtain a free passage this year may now have that opportunity if they apply **IMMEDIATELY** to

Mr. I. LATIMER, Truro,
who is empowered by her Majesty's Colonization Commissioners to engage for that fine first-class teak-built ship the

JAVA, of 1200 TONS.

This ship's accommodations are unusually spacious and lofty, and are so arranged as to insure the comfort of all the passengers. She will carry *two Surgeons*, and *two School-masters*, the latter of whom will be regularly employed in teaching the emigrants and their children. The vessel will call at **PLYMOUTH**, to take in Cornish passengers, on or about the 16th of OCTOBER; but in order to ensure a passage, application should be made forthwith. Every kind of information, and the necessary papers may be obtained of Mr. Latimer.

E. HEARD, PRINTER, BOOKBINDER, &c., BOSCOWEN-STREET, TRURO.

Figure 1. Poster advertising free emigration to South Australia aboard the *Java*, 1839. State Library of South Australia, D 6029(L).¹²

Despite these incentives, less than twenty years into the settlement of the new colony destitute individuals and their families were seeking poor relief from the South Australian government.¹³ Aside from the systematic planning that went into the design of the colony, various unanticipated events had a detrimental effect on the numbers of destitute poor seeking relief,¹⁴ as demonstrated by the peak in recipients in the years 1855-1856. For instance, by 1855 3,027 destitute people were receiving poor relief compared with 464 individuals in 1853.¹⁵ The Destitute Board acknowledged that the poor harvest of 1854 had negatively impacted "...certain classes of Colonists, such as newly-arrived immigrants, ...widows left with families and families whose fathers are at the diggings."¹⁶ Despite this understanding, it saw fit to publish the latter group's personal details and circumstances, extracted from the *Register of cases of destitution, Destitute Board. Circa 1846 to 1857 (Register)*,¹⁷ in the government press^{18,19,20,21} to "...check the evil..." of desertion.²² That this group of women and their families were singled out motivated the desire to find out who they were and what had influenced their destitute, deserted circumstances.

Poor relief provision

The English Poor Laws influenced the ways in which poor relief was conceived and delivered in the colony in the 1800s.²³ The prevailing belief was that it was the legal responsibility of family members to support one another.²⁴ Simultaneously, it was recognised that assistance must be provided to those in need.²⁵ As in England, a dominant concern within the Australian context was that undeserving or able-bodied people would take advantage of government or private relief funds.²⁶ At the same time, it was recognised that the provision of relief needed to be tailored to local circumstances and conditions.²⁷

In the years immediately following the arrival of the first generation of settlers in South Australia, a centralised government funded and controlled system of providing work, shelter, rations and medical assistance emerged, which laid the foundations for the administration of social welfare in the colony.²⁸ The unified nature of social welfare in South Australia was sanctioned with the enactment of the *Maintenance Act 1843*,²⁹ itself grounded in the amended English Poor Law of 1834. As with the English Poor Law, the new Act provided

for the maintenance and relief of destitute persons, and included provisions for seeking maintenance from husbands, fathers and direct relatives of destitute persons.

In addition, by the beginning of the 1850s, various government initiatives had been established to relieve the poor. These included a Destitute Board to administer resources, a Destitute Asylum in Adelaide that offered indoor relief, and a system of outdoor relief for the destitute, which extended beyond the city to encompass the whole colony.³⁰

Deserted wives

With the exception of unmarried mothers, women who sought poor relief tended to be dependents of men.³¹ Accordingly, it has been argued that the key reason for the destitute circumstances in which women and their families found themselves was due to the absence of a male breadwinner, either through death or desertion, or the loss of domestic service work.³² The desertion of women and their children by heads of families was exacerbated by the colonial gold rushes of the mid-1850s, particularly those located in neighbouring Victoria.³³ For unemployed males, the lure of work and perceived wealth proved irresistible and an exodus of labourers to Victoria ensued.³⁴ Since there are no statistics for family desertion, Twomey (2002) argued that, in the colonial Victorian context, male absence may have been temporary, rather than actual desertion; it was common for colonial men to search for seasonal or casual work away from home.³⁵ Although, employment prospects may not have been the only reason that some husbands rushed to the goldfields. It has also been suggested that leaving the family was a husband's response to marital difficulties, such as their spouses' adultery, or to avoid their financial responsibilities towards their wives and children.^{36,37}

While deserted mothers were regarded with sympathy owing to the perceived failure of their husbands to provide for them, which men were required by law to do, barriers to employment reduced the options for married women's independence.^{38,39} And, since many early migrant families had no extended family in the colony, support from that quarter was not always an option.⁴⁰ Although the *Maintenance Act 1843*⁴¹ legislated for women to claim maintenance from absconded husbands, in practice this was difficult to enforce.⁴² Therefore, as a last resort, it fell to the Destitute Board to provide relief. However, the Destitute Board's provision of relief to deserted mothers was unenthusiastic.⁴³ Indeed, to counteract the issue, they deemed it appropriate to publish the mothers' personal details and circumstances in the South Australian Government Gazette,^{44,45,46,47} and, subsequently, in the national press.

Destitution records in South Australia

The availability of online digitised sources means that genealogists in South Australia, where the earliest and only surviving census return is from 1841,⁴⁸ can carry out meaningful research using alternative sources, such as destitution records. The State Records of South Australia archive provides digitised indexes online, and registers relating to destitution in the colony available via FamilySearch.⁴⁹ While incomplete, the digitised registers contain name-identified genealogical information, including some or all of the following: age; last known address and occupation; nationality; religion; length of time in the colony; name of ship the individual migrated on; and, details about destitute circumstances.⁵⁰

In terms of the value of such sources to the genealogical community, although there are no scholarly accounts of the destitution records created in South Australia, there are several works on similar sources in Britain that highlight their importance. For instance, Blake claimed that, where available, records relating to the poor provide a rich amount of information about individuals and their families that extends beyond the episode of poverty that brought them into contact with the authorities in the first place.⁵¹ He further suggested that the most valuable and helpful records are the workhouse admission and discharge registers.⁵² Indeed, Levine-Clark's (2000) research demonstrated the value of workhouse records in terms of understanding why women sought poor relief in England, and what type of relief they may have received.⁵³ Since the legislation in South Australia was based upon the English Poor Laws of 1834,⁵⁴ and the Destitute Asylum, Adelaide was managed, and functioned, along the lines of an English workhouse,⁵⁵ it is anticipated that the South Australian records could be equally as useful for genealogists and family history researchers.

Drawing on themes of migration, destitution and poor relief, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

- Who were the publicly named families who received poor relief in South Australia in 1855-1856?
- What factors influenced destitution of these families in mid-1850s South Australia?
- What became of these families after 1855-1856?
- How useful is the *Register* for genealogists and family historians?

Method

This study employed matched record linkage by combining information related to the same individual from two or more sources.⁵⁶ Taking the Destitute Board reports of 1855 and 1856 as a starting point, a dataset was constructed for the deserted wives. For each woman, publication of their personal details included:

- given name
- surname
- age
- the name of the ship on which they had arrived in South Australia
- the number of children they had
- their place of residence (street or suburb)
- the reason for their destitute circumstances.

Data were transcribed, standardised and collated into an Excel spreadsheet.

To establish a snapshot of the deserted women and their families, quantitative and qualitative data were collected from the *Register*.⁵⁷ The *Minutes of the Special Meeting held on Wednesday the 24th October 1855 to take into consideration the destitute circumstances of families whose heads are at the diggings (Minutes)* were also consulted.⁵⁸ The choice of variables was dictated by the implicit structure of the *Register* and included:

- age
- residence
- number of children
- years in the colony
- trade
- reason for desertion
- length of desertion
- money received from husband
- type of relief
- country of origin
- religion.

The categories for the residence variable were established from a plan of the city of Adelaide c. 1850⁵⁹ and a map of the country sections of South Australia c. 1850.⁶⁰ The groupings for the length of desertion variable were based upon the regulations for relief recorded in the *Minutes*.⁶¹ All other quantitative variable categories were based upon the data.

Sample pages from the *Register of cases of destitution, Destitute Board. Circa 1846 to 1857. GRG 28/4*. State Records of South Australia can be found in the family search archives at: <https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/2649145?availability=Family%20History%20Library> .

Record linkage was achieved through matching personal identifiers, that is, family name, age, years in colony and the name of the ship on which they arrived in South Australia. Where there was more than one entry in the *Register*, demographic details were combined. For example, if an age appeared in one entry but not in another, this was used for the final dataset. If a given name was missing from one entry, it was collected from another entry or one of the other primary sources. In this way, the complete set of data for each woman may have been constructed from more than one primary source.

Fifteen women were randomly selected for case study treatment. Using family reconstitution, a destitution and genealogical profile was assembled for each individual to ascertain the factors that influenced their families' deserted and destitute circumstances. Vital records were collected from online databases including Ancestry,⁶² Findmypast⁶³ and Genealogy SA.⁶⁴ Unlike the birth, marriage and death (BMD) indexes in England and Wales, the equivalent databases at Genealogy SA offer generous information about an individual. For example, an indexed marriage record usually includes the bride's and groom's surnames, given names, ages, marital status and father's names, plus, the full date, marriage place and marriage district. Other primary and secondary sources, depending on each women's particular set of circumstances, were also searched including passenger lists, England census returns, probate records and obituaries. Data were transcribed and collated into a destitution and genealogical profile for each case study.

The *Register* did not record the exact date of a woman's arrival in South Australia. For the case studies, therefore, this event was calculated from other information. The number of years in the colony was deducted from the date of presentation to the Destitute Board for relief.

This resulted in an approximate year of arrival. By consulting the *Index to ship's arrivals in South Australia 1836-1900* series⁶⁵ and cross-referencing the name of the ship with the year of arrival it was possible to ascertain the exact date of a woman's disembarkation in the colony. This enabled access to the correct passenger list if it had survived.

To provide a demographic sketch of the group of women publicly identified, descriptive statistics and frequencies were calculated for the age, number of children and years in colony variables. Frequencies were also generated for each of the other eight categorical variables, residence, trade, reason for desertion, length of desertion, money received from husband, type of relief, country of origin and religion. Data from the case studies was analysed using inductive thematic analysis to identify and report on patterns across the women's destitution and genealogical profiles. Thematic analysis was employed as a constructionist method to examine the ways in which the events, realities and experiences of the case study women were the outcomes of a range of discourses operating within mid-nineteenth century colonial South Australian society. Six phases of analysis were undertaken as charted by Braun and Clarke (2006).⁶⁶ To appraise the value of the *Register* for genealogists and family historians, the source was assessed against the evidence analysis principles outlined by Devine (2001)⁶⁷ and Shown-Mills (1999).⁶⁸

Who were the deserted wives seeking poor relief?

The total number of women seeking poor relief, whose personal details and circumstances were made public between 1855 and 1856, was 114 (main sample). Most of the women ranged in age from 17 to 53 years ($M = 32.7$; $SD = 6.9$; Figure 2). The 17-year-old, reported as a wife in the press was, in fact, the eldest daughter of a head of household who had deserted his family, and whose mother had subsequently died; she was looking after her five younger siblings.

The majority of women lived in either the city of Adelaide ($n = 66$) or in the immediate surrounding countryside ($n = 44$; Figure 3). Three families were recorded as residing at the Destitute Asylum, intimating that all other means of support had been exhausted; indoor relief in the Destitute Asylum would have represented the "refuge of last resort".⁶⁹ The length of time that each woman had been in the colony ranged from five weeks to 18 years ($M = 6.07$; $SD = 5.08$). Many women had migrated from England ($n = 62$), with one-fifth from Ireland ($n = 20$) and the remainder from Scotland, Wales and Germany (Figure 4). Around one-half of women ($n = 56$) were religiously classified as Church of England (Figure 5).

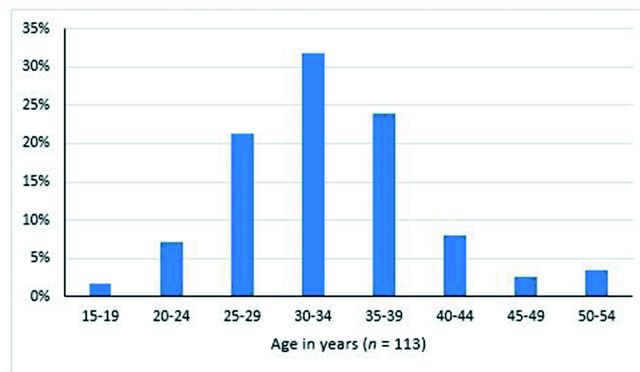


Figure 2. Age range of women in the main sample (%).

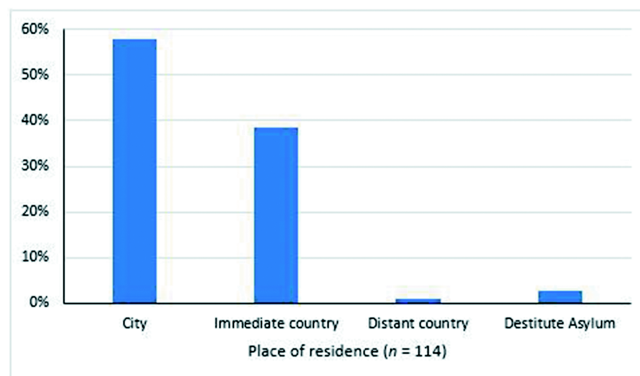


Figure 3. Residence of families in the main sample (%).

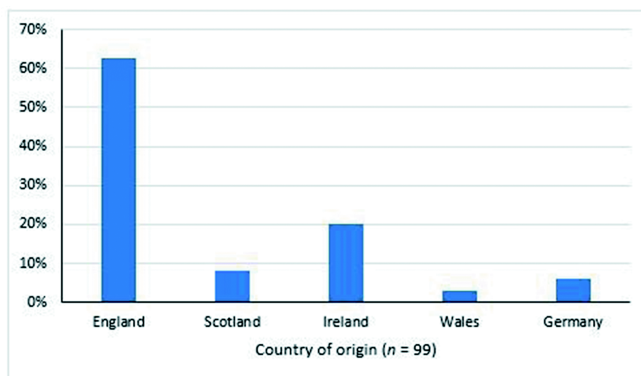


Figure 4. Country of origin of women in the main sample (%).

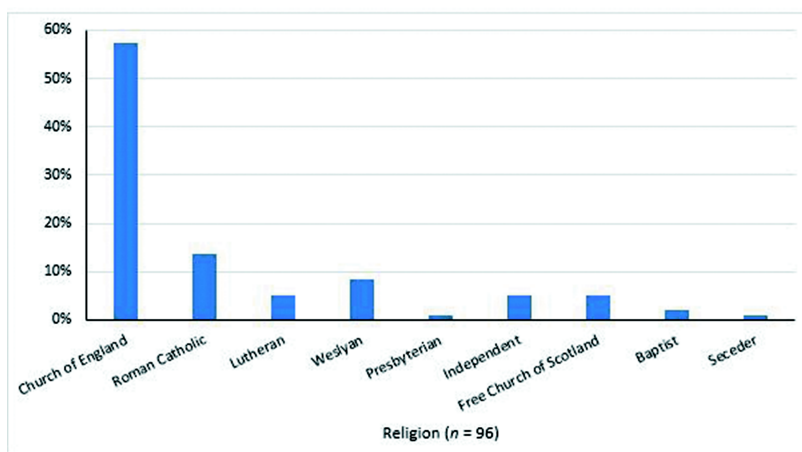


Figure 5. Religious affiliation of women in the main sample (%).

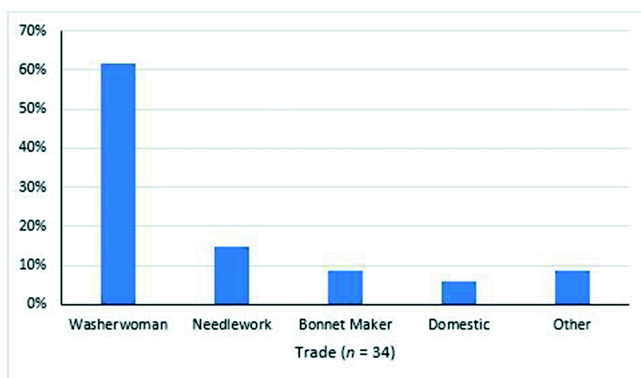


Figure 6. Trades of women in the main sample (%).

Working as a washerwoman was the most common form of employment (Figure 6). Such work reflected the feminine ideal regarding a women’s behaviour that saw their lives centred around the home, family and domestic responsibilities.⁷⁰ Household occupations, such as washing and needlework, were popular with dependent women; they were socially acceptable since mothers could earn an income without leaving the home and still look after their children. In the example of Margaret Young (17 years), whose father had been at the diggings for two years and whose mother had just died,⁷¹ she and her sister, Mary (bap. 1840),⁷² were recorded the following year as able to “take in needlework and have a mangle”.⁷³ Together with rations from the Destitute Board and relief from other sources, this enabled them to support themselves and their four younger sisters, Ruth (b. 1842),⁷⁴ Agnes (b. 1845),⁷⁵ Eliza (b. 1848)⁷⁶ and Jemima (b. 1850), without the need for

indoor relief.⁷⁷ In 1855, the Destitute Board's daily standard rate for rations for a family of four (father, mother, two children) was: "20 oz bread, 8 oz meat, 2 oz sugar, 1 oz soap, ¼ oz tea."⁷⁸

Where a woman's admission record noted the type of relief provided, the majority ($n = 30$) received outdoor relief; the remainder were provided with indoor relief in the Destitute Asylum. For instance, in 1855, Rebecca Myers (37 years) presented to the Destitute Board for relief with three children, one under seven and two over.⁷⁹ She had been in the colony for nine years, her husband was in gaol, and she was out of work. The Destitute Board granted the family indoor relief in the Destitute Asylum.

A total of 361 children were left destitute. Of these, 225 were under the age of seven; family size ranged from zero children to eight ($M = 3.2$; $SD = 1.7$). While the issue of destitute children had by the mid-1850s come to the attention of the authorities, it did not appear on the South Australian government agenda for another ten years or so.⁸⁰ In addition, the case studies indicated that some women were pregnant at the time of desertion by their husbands. For instance, when Margaret Benson (39 years)⁸¹ sought relief for herself and her family of four children in April 1855, she had been in the colony for three years. Her husband had been absent at the gold diggings for 13 months and their youngest son, Benjamin, was about four months old.⁸² The prospect of an additional mouth to feed, combined with the consequences of the poor harvest of 1854, lack of employment opportunities and local recession,⁸³ may have driven out-of-work fathers to leave their families in search of work outside the colony.

Factors that influenced the deserted wives' destitute circumstances

Settler status

Analysis of the case studies indicated that, upon presentation for relief, the women's settler status ranged from early pioneer (arrival within the first 10 years of the colony's settlement⁸⁴) to recent migrant (arrival five weeks prior). That the case study women represented both pioneer and newly arrived migrants suggests that factors other than time spent in the colony might be responsible for these mothers finding themselves destitute. With the exception of Mary Donnelly (27 years),⁸⁵ a "free by servitude" ex-convict from Van Diemen's Land,⁸⁶ the women and their families had arrived in the colony under government subsidised passages anticipating flexible and guaranteed employment, high wages, and the opportunity to purchase their own land.^{87,88} Nevertheless, within less than twenty years of arrival, they were seeking poor relief from the Destitute Board and branded deserted wives. As an example of a recent migrant, Margaret Price (29 years) and her three children, two under seven and one over, had been in the colony for five weeks prior to her presentation to the Destitute Board for relief in May 1855.⁸⁹ The family had arrived as government-funded migrants⁹⁰ and her husband, a Labourer, was "away seeking work."⁹¹ Evidently, the promised employment opportunities together with elevated remuneration had not materialised.

Without natural protectors

Over one-half ($n = 61$) of the 114 women stated that they had been without a head of household for one year or more (Figure 7). According to the *Register*, at the time of presentation for relief, less than half ($n = 47$) reported that their husbands were at the diggings (Figure 8). Rather, for half of the main sample, the reason given for a husband's absence was "away". This finding is also reflected in the case studies, where about one-half of husbands were reported as being "away". What being "away" meant to either the informant or the record-keeper is unclear from the *Register*. Whether or not this term did, in truth, include families whose fathers were at the diggings or looking for work elsewhere, the reason given for the deserted families' destitute circumstances in reports and public notices published by the Destitute Board clearly stated that the fathers were at the Victoria diggings.^{92,93,94} Regardless of the reason given in the records, the early phases of gold mining in the 1850s required little financial outlay⁹⁵ and the lure of the Victorian goldfields may have suggested a viable means of income for unemployed men with families to support.⁹⁶

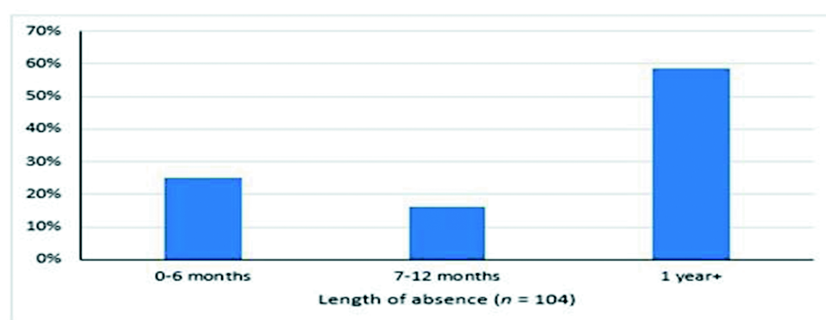


Figure 7. Length of absence of head of household for families in the main sample (%).

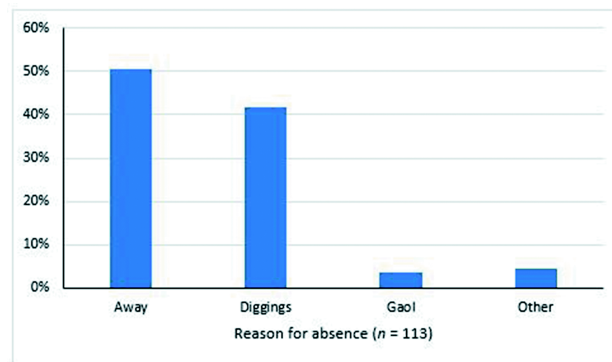


Figure 8. Reason for head of household absence in the main sample (%).

Analysis of the case studies offered further understanding about the lack of a male breadwinner. This indicated that most of the families were without fathers for two to three years or more, with recurrent destitution experienced by some. Furthermore, the destitution experienced by the case study women was not due to their husband's absence alone, whether at the gold fields or elsewhere. Other factors, such as lack of employment opportunities, personal or family illness, crime and bereavement also impacted their destitute circumstances. For instance, Mary Donnelly's record of June 1851 noted that she, together with two children under seven, had been deserted by her husband.⁹⁷ A General Servant in the colony for seven months, she had travelled to the city of Adelaide from Kapunda, 84 km north of the capital,⁹⁸ to seek employment. The family was given indoor relief in the Destitute Asylum until Mary could find work. As another example, Elizabeth Hendrickson (45 years),⁹⁹ a Bonnet Maker who had been in the colony for 15 years and whose husband was "away", applied to the Destitute Board for relief in March 1854.¹⁰⁰ Her four children were ill, the implication being that she could not work to support the family as well as parent sick dependents.

The Destitute Board described the "heartlessness" of fathers at the diggings who "neither return, write, nor send the means to support their families".¹⁰¹ One-fifth ($n = 25$) of the main sample did receive money from their absent husbands at some point during their destitution. For instance, it was recorded in the *Minutes* that the husband of Hannah Petty (28 years)¹⁰² had been away "about two and a half years" and had "sent £50 altogether."¹⁰³ Similarly, the *Minutes* recorded that Grace Shorter's husband had been away about three years, and she had "received £14 eighteen months ago." That the absent fathers sent money at all suggests an awareness, on some level, of their familial and financial responsibilities. However, such ad hoc contributions would not have been enough to maintain their families in their absence; £50 in Australia in 1855 was equivalent to \$4260 in 2023.¹⁰⁴

Whatever the reason for the deserted wives' destitute circumstances, the crux of the matter is that these families were left behind in South Australia without a male breadwinner, the person legally responsible for their economic welfare.¹⁰⁵ The women suddenly found themselves in the position of lone parents responsible for providing for themselves and their families.¹⁰⁶ However, in the absence of their husbands, and with sole responsibility for raising their children, these women had limited options for employment as noted above.¹⁰⁷ These limitations reflected the inequalities inherent within the marriage relationship itself, as well as the social and economic ideologies of the period, which were characterised by female dependence on male providers.^{108,109}

What became of the families after 1855-1856?

Reunited with their heads of households

Tracing the genealogical and destitution profiles for the case study women indicated that at least four of them were later reunited with their husbands. For example, Margaret Benson gave birth to Thomas, in Adelaide, South Australia in August 1857; her husband was named as the father on the birth record.¹¹⁰ On her husband's death in Victoria in 1884, Margaret and one of her other sons were granted probate.¹¹¹ While four years after Hannah Milley's husband, Daniel, had gone to the diggings, they had a third son in 1859, in Dunolly, Victoria.¹¹² In 1888, when Daniel died, Hannah was granted probate.¹¹³ When Maria Harriden's husband died in Hay, New South Wales in 1886, she was named as the informant.¹¹⁴ And, for Elizabeth Isbell, her relocation to Victoria was corroborated by her son Robert's obituary, which stated "The deceased was a native of Adelaide, and came over to Victoria in 1862 with his mother, to join his father, who had settled at Great Western when the Wild Cat rush broke out.¹¹⁵ The obituary also confirmed that "Mr Isbel [*sic*; senior] went out to the Mount William rush and subsequently purchasing [*sic*] Mr W. H. Grano's farm at Concongella, settled there".

That these wives were reconciled with their husbands challenges the Destitute Board's reports of the men's actions as "evil",¹¹⁶ and the families' status as "deserted"¹¹⁷ and "abandoned".¹¹⁸ This discourse, and the publication of the women's personal details and circumstances in the national press, may have reflected a moral panic of the time. Certainly, Twomey (1997) noted that the gold rushes in nineteenth century Australia deepened prevailing concerns about male abandonment of dependent women and children, which, in turn, generated wide public commentary on the incidence and unacceptability of wife desertion.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, these case studies highlight the value of using genealogical research methods to understand the phenomenon of deserted wives that go far beyond the individual episodes of destitution that initially brought these families into contact with the government.¹²⁰

Temporary absence becomes permanent desertion?

It has been suggested that a temporary absence from home by unemployed colonial men in search of work was not unusual; however, such an arrangement could extend into genuine abandonment.¹²¹ This seems to have been the situation for Elizabeth Hendrickson. She died in South Australia in 1875, "A colonist of 36 years' standing".¹²² Her husband, on the other hand, owned property and land, and died in, gold rush country in Victoria.^{123,124,125,126}

Whether or not the remaining wives became permanently deserted has not been ascertained. However, women experiencing domestic violence may have felt better off without their husbands in terms of financial and emotional security.¹²⁷ Such as Caroline Naughton (bap. 1820),¹²⁸ whose husband "took an iron bar and threatened to kill her"¹²⁹ and "once set the chimney on fire by throwing the furniture of the room into the fire-place"¹³⁰ or Rebecca Myers whose "husband was a drunkard and beat her".¹³¹

Two of the case study women, both recorded as widows, were remarried in South Australia. Hart (2009) suggested that many widows in colonial Australia, compared with widowers, found themselves in difficult financial circumstances. Whatever the situation for Caroline Naughton¹³² and Mary Ann Jones,¹³³ remarriage may have offered a potential economic solution to poverty.¹³⁴ Margaret Young, who was not actually a deserted wife, but a 17-year-old deserted eldest daughter, may have married for similar reasons. She wed in South Australia in 1858, aged 20, when her younger sisters ranged in age from eight to 18.¹³⁵ Despite extensive searches, evidence to demonstrate if these women were reunited with their heads of households prior to marriage or remarriage has not been located.

It is not known if the children of the permanently deserted families were reunited with their fathers, either. However, a number of them relocated from Adelaide to Victoria. For instance, Hannah Petty's surviving children were all married in Victoria.^{136,137,138} In addition, when Elizabeth Hendrickson's eldest son was 16 years old, he went to Bendigo, Victoria with the gold rush.¹³⁹ After returning to South Australia, followed by some time spent in the Northern Territories, he returned to Victoria where he died in 1918.¹⁴⁰

Recurrent destitution

While a temporary absence from home by unemployed colonial fathers in search of work was not unusual during the mid-1850s such an arrangement could extend into genuine abandonment.¹⁴¹ For example, Mary Donnelly and her children appeared to be in destitute circumstances on and off for at least eight years, suggesting recurrent desertion. She presented to the Destitute Board with two children under the age of seven for relief in June 1851,¹⁴² with five children in April 1855,¹⁴³ and six children in June 1856,¹⁴⁴ December 1856¹⁴⁵ and June 1859.¹⁴⁶ Mary's destitution profile suggests that by the late 1850s the family had been permanently deserted. Mary Howell may also have experienced recurrent destitution. In 1901, aged 79 years, she was admitted to Adelaide Hospital on the recommendation of the "Destitute Board Office".¹⁴⁷ While this does not necessarily mean that she was receiving destitute relief per se, it does establish that she approached the Destitute Board when she was sick. Though the *Maintenance Act 1843*¹⁴⁸ allowed for wives to petition for financial support from their husbands, in practice, this was difficult to enforce.¹⁴⁹ In the case of absent fathers, and those away at the diggings, to take advantage of the legislation meant that, first, the men had to be located and, second, willing to attend court.

How Useful is the Register for Genealogists and Family Historians?

There is no doubt that the *Register* offers great potential for genealogists and family historians. In the present study, it provided name-identified information, which proved useful for tracing case study women and their families across five jurisdictions (South Australia, New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania, and England and Wales) in the majority of case studies, a bonus given the absence of census data in South Australia.¹⁵⁰ As well, the *Register* recorded the name of the ship on which an individual or family migrated to South Australia. As an explicit identifier,¹⁵¹ this information proved invaluable for identifying additional primary sources, which related to the biography of specific individuals such as Mary Howell's hospital records.¹⁵² Another useful aspect of the *Register* was the implied information it offered, that is, it was possible to establish with near accuracy the year of an ancestor's arrival in the colony. Such information is essential for anyone tracing migrant individuals back to their origins.¹⁵³

An evaluation of the *Register* suggests that it is an original source, and that the women informants were in a position to relay primary information, which provided direct evidence regarding their destitute circumstances.¹⁵⁴ It is worth noting that there was one member of the Destitute Board who “had reason to think that all the husbands were not at the diggings but some are in this Colony”.¹⁵⁵ Conversely, the credibility¹⁵⁶ of the women’s circumstances concurs with known historical, economic and social events of the period, as evidenced by the literature.

The information contained in the *Register* was deemed to be relevant to the research question.¹⁵⁷ However, the adequacy of the recorded information was not always sufficient to answer the question.¹⁵⁸ For example, some women could not be traced prior to their arrival in South Australia. In addition, Margaret Price, who had been in the colony only five weeks, could not be traced beyond her first presentation to the Destitute Board in May 1855, when her husband had been away since landing looking for work.^{159,160} An absence of records within South Australian databases suggested the possibility that her husband, a Labourer, had found employment elsewhere and that the family had relocated to another colony. Further research is required to corroborate this possibility.

Notwithstanding the usual discrepancies one would expect with historical records, such as, age inaccuracies, name variations and misspellings, and missing or contradictory data, the *Register* contained omissions. For example, in many instances a woman’s surname or age was not recorded. Furthermore, in some entries, recorded information was minimal (e.g., “Petty’s 3”).¹⁶¹ That said, it was possible to address the issue of missing information through data triangulation¹⁶² using alternative sources (e.g., Destitute Board reports). In addition, some individuals were omitted from the companion index, an aid, paradoxically, created to help search the *Register*. This meant it was necessary to examine the *Register* page-by-page in order to trace a woman’s destitution history.¹⁶³ Despite these shortcomings, the *Register* demonstrated its value to the genealogical community, on condition a circumspect approach was adopted.

Conclusion

Destitution in the newly established colony of South Australia reached its peak during the years 1855-1856. An emergent group, according to the Destitute Board, was the deserted families of men who had gone to the Victoria goldfields. In an attempt to shame absent gold-digger fathers into returning to their families, the Destitute Board published the women’s personal details in the government and national press. That this group of women was selected for public censure inspired the present study.

Utilising both quantitative and qualitative data, the findings provided a broad demographic and destitution sketch of 114 deserted families at a specific point in time. This included the finding that 361 children were left destitute. A thematic analysis of the destitution and genealogical profiles of selected case studies ($n = 15$) produced a more nuanced perspective. For about half of families, the *Register* recorded that their fathers were at the diggings. For the other half, their fathers were documented as “away.” Furthermore, while temporary absence may have turned into permanent desertion for some, over one-quarter of the case study women were reunited with their husbands in Victoria. These findings challenge the Destitute Board’s judgements that the families had been abandoned or deserted and that the fathers were evil. The Board’s management of these destitute families was likely influenced by the dominant discourse of the mid-nineteenth century, which deemed family desertion as undesirable. Moreover, these findings add to the gap in existing knowledge about deserted wives from a South Australian perspective.

The present research demonstrated the value of using the *Register* to genealogists and family historians. At the individual level, it provided name-identified information that could be used to make links with other sources to chart women and their families across two continents. It also provided migration information, essential for tracing an individual back to their native roots. More broadly, the value of the Destitute Asylum records for understanding why women sought poor relief in South Australia and the factors that contributed to their destitute and deserted state was established. In common with English workhouse records, the sources consulted in this study provided valuable details about the deserted wives and their families that transcended the episode of destitution that resulted in their initial application to the Destitute Board.

While it may not be possible to generalise these findings to the broader population, due to the unrepresentative sample size, the results of this study offer a unique basis from which to further research the deserted families whose circumstances were published by the Destitute Board. These women experienced a double injustice. Not only were promises of a better life in the new colony of South Australia not realised for these women and their families, but they were also publicly named and censured for finding themselves destitute. The findings of this study demonstrate that to understand the individual circumstances of the deserted wives and their children in this period of colonial migration and settlement necessitates an appreciation of the wider social and economic contexts within which they lived and raised their families. An awareness of which is as applicable to the dilemmas experienced by lone mothers today as it was then.

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