

Bioarchaeology and Social Theory

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Meredith A. B. Ellis

The Children of Spring Street

The Bioarchaeology of Childhood in a
19th Century Abolitionist Congregation

 Springer

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*This book is dedicated to Eliza Crowley
Jackson (2006–2008), my sweet niece and the
inspiration for this research.*

Foreword

Readers are in for a treat with this volume on the trials and tribulations of being a child in the 1800s in a New York City enclave of the Spring Street Presbyterian Church 8th Ward. This book forgoes a more traditional walk through skeletal data collection and analysis and uses a format that is driven by interpretations of the skeletal remains in conjunction with a wide range of other sources. This approach has allowed for the study to develop ideas more fully theorized and contextualized while still drawing the reader in with an inspiring and compelling interpretation of data derived from the skeletonized remains of these historic children.

This book models how bioarchaeologists can engage with a broader audience.

The study examines the literal embodiment of social identity through reconstructing the lived experience of infancy and childhood in historic New York City. While data derived from skeletal remains are at the heart of this study, the focus is more on the interpretation than on the presentation and analysis of the data. This makes the flow of the narrative accessible to those who know nothing about bone analysis. Yet it is there, as the central feature upon which the additional forms of information are woven together such as excerpts from personal diaries and letters, archival information, and ethnohistoric documents.

One of the goals of this book series, *Bioarchaeology and Social Theory*, was to demonstrate the many ways that the reading of the bones can bring a deeper understanding to the biological dimensions of poverty and social change by integrating biology, culture, and environmental variables. This is becoming more and more apparent with studies that demonstrate the ways that human biology is affected by factors such as the control, production, and distribution of resources (e.g., food, shelter, potable water, and healthcare) through power relations. In particular, metabolic disorders such as rickets, scurvy, and osteomalacia are due more to social processes than to problems with the availability of food. The results of a restriction of food sources for children are seen in disrupted bone growth and altered bone formations (rickets), shorter stature, increased diseases and fractures, and an overall higher risk to early death.

This study integrates bone disease, social history, and cultural landscapes in a detailed and rich narrative. Most importantly, we come to understand children as social agents of the church and the specific ways that the social becomes biological. Using embodiment theory to bridge the body-society divide, the author shows how ideology and powerful controlling forces shaped several generations of children's health. Detailing the ways that the body was a site of reformation and control by the Church, she finds the cult of domesticity, forms of temperance, and body reforms to have instigated dangerous practices that harmed children in a number of specific ways.

The web of social factors emanating from the urban setting; the mix of middle class, working poor, and servants; the normality of child labor in the working class and poor; the control by the church of dietary practices (i.e., no meat, hot food, or beverages and one meal a day); the encouragement of harsh punishment for children; and the industrial pollution worked to make children's lives one of suffering and early death for some. The book reveals the ways that belief systems shape health and gives us a glimpse into power relations. The bodies of the children show how ideology about how to behave, when to work, what to eat, where to live, and how to parent gets under the skin and written in the bones. All of the major findings in the book are relevant for issues in child health today in many places throughout the world. Finally, this work shows the importance of anthropology in stitching together a wide range of culturally specific factors that directly affect health.

Bioarchaeology and Social Theory,
Las Vegas, NV, USA

Debra L. Martin

Acknowledgments

No research or writing is done in isolation. This monograph is the culmination of a decade of work, first as a graduate student at Syracuse University, and then as Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Florida Atlantic University. During that time, my work was guided, assisted, and influenced by the creative minds around me. At Syracuse, I am indebted to the many individuals, listed at the end of these acknowledgments, who worked on the skeletal analysis. In particular, I am indebted to Corrie Maddox and Sarah Heins Ledogar, who worked on the analysis of the subadult remains with me. The data presented here are from their hands as well as mine. I am particularly grateful to my dissertation committee, who shaped my thinking and writing in previous iterations of this work: Douglas Armstrong, Jane Eva Baxter, Carol Faulkner, and Theresa Singleton. The initial research for this project was supported by funding from the Department of Anthropology and the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University, and by an American Dissertation Fellowship from the American Association of University Women.

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I also continue to be guided, mentored, and inspired by Jane Eva Baxter, whose groundbreaking work in the archaeology of childhood opened the doorway for projects such as these. The influence of her ideas can be felt throughout these pages.

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Contents

| | | |
|----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 1 | Introduction | 1 |
| 1.1 | The Schoolroom at Spring and Varick Streets | 1 |
| 1.2 | Researching Childhood | 7 |
| 1.3 | Children at the Spring Street Presbyterian Church | 13 |
| | References | 14 |
| 2 | A Sketch of a City | 17 |
| 2.1 | Introduction | 17 |
| 2.2 | A Walk Down Spring Street | 18 |
| 2.3 | The People of the Spring Street Presbyterian Church | 23 |
| 2.4 | The Ideology of the Spring Street Presbyterian Church | 26 |
| | References | 29 |
| 3 | Hearth and Home: Infants, Birth Through 1.5 Years of Age | 31 |
| 3.1 | Introduction | 31 |
| 3.2 | Hearth | 37 |
| 3.3 | Home | 47 |
| 3.4 | Conclusion | 52 |
| | References | 53 |
| 4 | Exposures: Toddlers and Younger Children, 1.5–4.5 Years of Age | 57 |
| 4.1 | Introduction | 57 |
| 4.2 | Education | 62 |
| 4.3 | Embodying <i>the Habitus</i> | 66 |
| 4.4 | Conclusion | 77 |
| | References | 79 |
| 5 | Restless Youth: Older Children, 4.5–9.5 Years of Age | 83 |
| 5.1 | Introduction | 83 |
| 5.2 | Restless Youth | 87 |
| 5.3 | Health and Morality | 92 |
| 5.4 | Conclusion | 105 |
| | References | 107 |

- 6 Transitioning: 9.5–14.5 Years of Age** 109
 - 6.1 Introduction 109
 - 6.2 The “City Child” 113
 - 6.3 Presences and Absences 119
 - 6.4 A Postmortem Postscript 125
 - 6.5 Conclusion 128
 - References 128

- 7 Deconstructing Childhood** 131
 - 7.1 Community 131
 - References 137

- Index** 139

About the Author

Meredith A. B. Ellis holds a PhD in Anthropology from Syracuse University. She also holds Master's degrees in Anthropology and English Language and Literature. She is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Florida Atlantic University. Her research interests include social bioarchaeology, the bioarchaeology of childhood, the nineteenth-century United States, and health and inequality. She has worked on the Spring Street Presbyterian Church collection, the China Gulch faunal collection, and the Donner Party Alder Creek Campsite collection.