Ragged Schools:

Educational Opportunities for Destitute Children in 19th century England

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Beginning in the 1750s the industrial revolution changed the way in which many citizens lived in Britain. Before the Revolution, eighty percent of citizens lived in rural areas. However, due to agricultural advancements which allowed more food to be grown by less people this changed. As fewer people were needed on the farms, many migrated from their rural homes to the developing urban areas to look for jobs in factories and mines. The cities where these factories were located were rapidly built and little planning went into their design. This new urban working class lived in overpopulated, unsanitary parts of the cities and were also not guaranteed work once they moved to the city. Industrialization had its ups and downs and, therefore, so did the job market. Workers were constantly dealing with fluctuating employment. For those who could not find any work, they often resorted to begging, lying, and stealing as an alternative. Sadly, this was not a cross bared solely by the adults of the working class; many children also learned this way of life as well.

Many children in the most destitute areas lives revolved around begging, lying, and stealing to earn money and elude starvation. These children roamed the streets of London in rags, many not wearing any shoes, and covered in filth. Their parents were unable or unwilling to pay for them to go to school, and since going to church was more popular with the middle class and aristocracy many of these kids had barely been in a church except to receive charity. Due to these circumstances, these children lacked any kind of education, structure, or discipline. Reverend Thomas Guthrie gave a great visualization of one of these destitute children. "Poor fellow! It is a bitter day; he had neither shoes nor stockings; his feet are red, swollen, cracked, ulcerated with the cold; a thin, thread-worn jacket with its gaping rents, is all that protects his breast, beneath his shaggy bush of hair he shows a face sharp with want, yet sharp also with intelligence beyond his years. That poor fellow has learned to be already self-supporting. He has studied the arts,--he is a master of imposture, lying, begging, stealing; and small blame to him, but much to those who have neglected him, he had otherwise pined and perished." [1]

Reverend Thomas Guthrie gave this description in his book, *A plea for Ragged Schools; or, Prevention Better than Cure*. Guthrie and many others who witnessed these children in the streets could not believe that something so terrible existed in their great society. They wanted to find a way to help these children from the terrible future

[1] Reverend Thomas Guthrie, *A Plea for Ragged Schools, or, Prevention Better Than Cure* (Edinburg: John Elder, 1847), 9.

that was before them. The closest schooling and discipline that they had ever received was from the penal authorities. As is obvious from the title from Guthrie's book, he realized that the best way to prevent a large population of adults from being criminals and a burden to society was to prevent them from following that path while they were still young, rather than try to help them change their ways later in life. To achieve this, these children must be disciplined early in life by religious teachings from the Bible and be given a basic education so that they had the tools to live a good honest living for themselves. From the efforts from men like Guthrie and many others, ragged schools were established in London and other parts of the United Kingdom and thus a free education was offered to many children who otherwise would never have received any form of education. Many ragged schools would also later extend their services to not only educating destitute children, but also provided education and other charitable services to destitute adults. Even though the Ragged School Movement was short lived, it was a significant attempt at elevating the destitute population by teaching them how to support themselves in the new industrious society in which they lived in.

Reverend Thomas Guthrie from Edinburgh, Scotland was the most well-known man for popularizing the idea for ragged schools in his book, *A Plea for Ragged Schools, or, Prevention Better than Cure*, in 1847. He later wrote, *A Second Plea for Ragged Schools, or, Prevention Better than Cure*, in 1849 where he promoted all the benefits these schools would offer for the destitute children and the community. However, Guthrie was not the only man who promoted the establishment of ragged schools. In 1849, Thomas Beauchamp Proctor's, *Attend to the Neglected and Remember the Forgotten: An Appeal for the Ragged Schools* appeared. Proctor also agreed that an education was necessary to help reform the lives of these children who were so poverty-stricken that the only way they knew to survive was through a life of crime. Proctor proclaimed that not only would these schools better the lives of these children but that the money put into running these ragged schools would eventually lead to the community spending less money on the penal system because less people would be committing crimes. [2]

With so many people noticing the need these schools would fulfill, ragged schools began opening in many impoverished areas where schools were not previously found. The name branded to these schools characterize the type of children who were admitted into these school, those in rags; the poorest of the poor. These schools were to help these children learn to live a more stable life. The Ragged School Movement was influential in England from about 1840-1870. The two men most credited for this movement were John Pounds and Lord Shaftesbury. Pounds has been honored as being the man who starting the idea of ragged schools. Pounds not only made his own living making and fixing shoes, but he also volunteered his

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[2] Thomas Beauchamp Proctor, *Attend to Neglected and Remember the Forgotten: An Appeal for Ragged Schools* (London: Charles Haselden, 1849), 3-4.

time to the poor children living near him by giving them a basic education and also teaching them skills. Pounds brought these children to his tiny workshop that was 6 feet by 16 and taught them reading, writing, and math. Pounds not only volunteered his time to help educate these children, but he also donated clothes for them to wear to Sunday school and held plum-pudding feast every Christmas Day. Pounds kept up this work until his death on January 1, 1839. It was said before he died, Pounds had saved no fewer than five-hundred children. Many of what Pounds hoped to teach his students are also what Lord Shaftsbury and the Ragged School Union founded in 1844 hoped to achieve as well. [3]

Lord Shaftesbury had already made a name for himself in social reform before founding the Ragged School Union. Since his childhood, he had seen how strained the relationship was between employees and their employers. Shaftesbury, known then as Lord Ashely, had spent his entire life helping the poor be less oppressed by the men for whom they worked for. Shaftsbury assisted in legislations that resulted in work reforms for factories and mines. He remained the leader of the Ragged School Union for about 40 years, which was formed in hopes that ragged schools would turn into a free school system funded by individual donations or government grants. [4]

None of these ragged schools were one in the same. There were schools before the 1840s that could be classified as ragged schools, such as Pound's school in his personal workshop. There were also ragged schools in the late 1830s to early 1840s which were opened by members of the London City Mission started in 1835. These, however, were merely Sunday Schools which were only held on Sundays, primarily in the evening, some in the afternoon, but very few were held in the morning. The ragged Sunday schools strived to instill Christian values into these destitute and criminal bound children. However, starting in the late 1840s and early 1850s, many began to look to Pounds as an example, realizing that these children needed much more than Bible study alone. Bible study was made difficult when the teachers continuously read aloud to the children because most if not all the children were illiterate. Those involved in the ragged schools concluded that not only did these students need to be taught Christian values, but that they also needed a basic education and skills to be able to someday live an honest living. Ragged schools started opening during the weekdays and evenings. Since these schools relied on the time and money donated by volunteers and others, their supplies were at times minimal. [5]

Ragged schools offered these students an education without charging them any money, therefore all the money to help these schools function came from the volunteers of the ragged schools' own pockets or from donors. These volunteers,

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[3] Guthrie, *A Plea for Ragged Schools,* 9-10; C.J. Montague, *Sixty Years in Waifdom; or, The ragged school movement in England history* (Montclair, N.J.: Patterson Smith, 1970), 36-41.
[4] Imogen Lee, "Ragged Schools," *British Library,* accessed March 15, 2017, http://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/ragged-schools; Montague, *Sixty Years in Waifdom,* 1-13.
[5] Montclair, *Sixty Years in Waifdom,* 36-37; 101.

such as reformers Mary Carpenter, who had opened a few of her own ragged schools, would purchase a place to hold the school and purchased whatever supplies that they could afford. Despite their best efforts many of these volunteers were not adequately trained nor had the manpower to handle and teach large groups of disadvantaged children. Ragged schools were run independently with no ties to the government including funding, and some volunteers preferred to keep it that way. Many like Mary Carpenter believed that government assistance would greatly improve the conditions of these schools. At first the schools were excluded from the National Grant, distributed by the Committee of Council for Education, but after witnessing the benefits of the ragged schools it was eventually agreed in 1853 that they should no longer be excluded from the grant. [6]

Given financial restraints, these schools were in worn-down buildings. The smaller schools were normally held in little rooms in buildings with cheap rent. Many children crammed into these small spaces for their lessons. Larger schools were held in buildings like barns, stables, cowsheds, covered-in railway arches, or disused store rooms. Rent was not usually an issue for the teachers in ragged schools. For seats, they had planks lying across bricks and had some candles for light. These were not the most ideal resources for running a school, but it was what these volunteers could offer. Besides the financial difficulties facing those running a ragged school, these volunteer teachers were also faced with the difficult behavior from their students. [7]

Many teachers who instructed at the ragged schools faced behavioral challenges daily from their pupils. These children had been brought in from the streets where they had the freedom to move around as they pleased, which made behaving properly in a classroom very difficult. Mr. Phelps, the first master at the Bristol Ragged School, kept a dairy recording the experiences he had with the student at the school. On August 17, 1846, he recorded an incident that happened that day at the school. A group of large boys had done everything they could to disrupt the class and at one point succeeded in throwing each other over the forms. Phelps eventually retained order. The next entry written on August, 19, recorded that day Phelps had nearly reached his breaking point and even contemplated passing the school off to someone else. That was until a pupil referred to as P, reminded him why he started to do this line of work in the first place. "This is a trying day to me, and several times I had resolved to give up the school into others hands, To-day I saw P., the outcast of society, with a clean shirt, clean face and hands, seated beside his own father, hard at work, putting a lady's shoe into welt. Did not my heart leap for joy to see one, forsaken by all parties, one who had been in prison, one from many long months had never slept in a bed, and who, as I was informed, the very night he went home was to have

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[6] Mary Carpenter, "On Educational Help from Government for the Destitute and Neglected Children of Great Britain," *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* 32, no. 1 (March, 1861): 28, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2338409.

[7] Montague, *Sixty Years in Waifdom,* 42-3.

been taken up for sleeping on the stairs." The students at these schools were very different from the students found in the city and private schools in London, resulting in difficulties for teachers in ragged schools. Nonetheless, the teachers at ragged schools saw the potential in their pupils and knew with the right teachings they could be viable members of society. Along with teaching their students lessons from the Bible and lessons in basic education, many teachers also wanted to instill self-responsibility and self-confidence into their pupils. [8]

In addition to the normal teachings in the ragged schools, they also attempted to teach the children how to take better care of their physical appearance the best they could, believing that what showed from the outside would thus reflect their character on the inside. The importance of cleanliness was constantly taught. Some ragged schools even taught students of both genders, how to make and repair their own clothing so that they could replace the rags they wore and could better take care of the ones they had. A journalist, at the festival where many ragged school children assembled on Christmas day reported about the impressive appearance of these destitute children. "The general appearance of the children was such as, at first sight, to make us doubt if they were of the class for whom the school was intended." It was believed that the improvement in these student's appearance would teach these children the values of self-responsibility and improve their self-esteem. These values would then be perceived by others and allow more doors to be open for them in the workforce. These are just a few of the many teachings and assistance these ragged schools hoped would allow them to elevate the lives of these destitute children. But to be able to help as many children as possible they had to give them incentive to attend their schools. Starving children do not want to risk losing the chance to eat because they were attending school. Food was their priority before earning an education. [9]

Going back to Pounds example, many of the children he taught were not forcibly pulled to his workshop. Instead Pounds is reported persuading these children to go to his workshop with a potato. Keep in mind that many of these children had to spend their days begging or stealing to avoid starvation. Therefore, going to school and missing the opportunity to eat was not an option. Reverend Guthrie described in his first book, *A Plea for Ragged Schools, or, Prevention better than Cure*, a conversation between a gentleman and a young ragged boy he met on the street. The man asked the boy, "Would you go to school, if, besides your learning, you were to get breakfast, dinner, and supper there? It would have done any man's heart good to have seen the flash of joy that broke from the eyes of one of the little boy, -- the flush of pleasure on his cheeks, -- as, hearing of three sure meals a day." The food was of course of the cheapest variety, but it was the start of the ragged schools to not only assist these children in earning an education, but also helping these children receive necessities

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[8] Mary Carpenter, *Ragged Schools: Their Principles and Modes of Operation* (London: Partridge and Oakey, 1850), 15.
[9] Ibid.,41.

that were hard for them to obtain. One ragged school in London that fulfilled this need and much more was the Field-Land Ragged School. [10]

Even though starvation was the biggest problem facing these children, it was not their only problem. Many of them also lacked a home and good parental guidance. Some ragged schools offered charities to assist children and their families with these issues as well. The ragged school best known for assisting destitute children and others living in poverty was Field-Lane Ragged School in London. This ragged school opened around 1846 and started out as an ordinary ragged school. However, as time passed and more people began to donate to the institution it began expanding its charities. Not only did it offer free education to children who could not afford to pay for it, but it also offered other charities that helped relieve children and the grown men and women in that community. By the 1850s, it had two night schools, one of which was for adult men, as well as parental lessons for mothers and Bible Study on the weekend. The Field-Lane Ragged School also extended itself to become an institution where these children and others in need could have a place to sleep at night. Afterwards the school was commonly referred to as The Field-Lane Ragged School and Night Refugee for the Homeless. Here, homeless children and others could find shelter at night and be offered bread to eat before bed and again in the morning. This charity offered food and shelter which was in great need for some in the metropolises. However, the Night Refuge part of the institution was not without hardships. [11]

The Field-Lane Night Refuge was separated into two sections, one for men and boys and the other for women and girls. In the extreme desire to help as many people during the night as physically possible, those in charge would allow too many people in and the dormitories would become overcrowded. Though this was done with good intentions, it proved to be dangerous. In the early spring months of 1852, there was an outbreak of typhus in the institution. An Officer of Health went to inspect what had caused the outbreak and reported that even though the authorities of the school had done their utmost best to ensure that the institution was clean and well ventilated, the overcrowding was what caused the outbreak of the disease. The Officer of Health offered suggestions on how to prevent this from happening again in the future. One suggestion was of course to restrict the number of people allowed to sleep in their dorms per night. Though this restriction was made to protect the well-being of the visitors and staff, it did cause heartache in the years later to come.[12]

For instance, in the winter of 1858, temperatures dropped to 10 degrees

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[10]Guthrie, *A Plea for Ragged Schools,* 13; Montague, *Sixty Years in Waifdom,* 40.

[11] Anonymous, "Charitable Contributions," *Times* (London), Jan. 13, 1859, The Times Digital Archives; Anonymous, "Court of Common Council.-Yesterday a meet-," *Times* (London), June 1, 1866, The Times Digital Archives; Anonymous, "The bitter frost from last week must have added," *Times* (London), Dec. 20, 1859, The Times Digital Archives; Anonymous, "The Homeless Poor in London, -On Wed-," *Times* (London), April 3, 1857, The Times Digital Archives.

[12] Anonymous, "City Sewers," *Times* (London), April 29, 1852, The Times Digital Archives.

below freezing and many attempted to stay at the Night Refuge to avoid the bitter cold. Unfortunately, the school could not allow everyone seeking shelter to take refuge there without risk of overcrowding and had to turn away many. After this incident, the institution called to the public for donations so that they might better be able to help those in need and many donors eagerly gave to the school. Afterwards the school could assist people better during these difficult times. During the year of 1859, 30,302 lodgings were made available to 6,785 men and young boys and could supply 101,193 loaves of bread, 6 to 8 ounces each to feed them, while at the same time 10,028 lodgings were included to assist 840 women who on average would stay at the institution for 11 days straight and consumed 14,755 loaves of bread that year. The building was, of course, nothing fancy and was not what one would call inviting, but for many these charities gave at least temporary relief from their suffering. [13]

During the winter the institution admitting people in to stay the night at 5 p.m. and 7 p.m. during the summer months. When admitted, guest was given bread and a cup of coffee before bed and then another piece of bread and water in the morning. With the great amounts of assistance, the institution received from the public the school was also able to find other ways to help the poor. The institution could give those who needed new clothing which finally allowed them to discard the worn-down rags they had been wearing too long. The women it seemed were guaranteed a new article of clothing and were assisted in finding continuous work after they left, either as needlewomen, servants, or something of the sort. This was probably an attempt to prevent these women from prostitution, which was very common at the time. For boys, industrial classes were held during the day which taught them skills such as tailoring and shoemaking and at night classes to teach them reading, writing and ciphering. Ragged schools like the Field-Lane Ragged School in London not only helped these people with temporary relief from poverty, but they also helped them find some form of employment so that they could better support themselves. [14]

Field-Lane Ragged School also motivated their students by giving away prizes to students who had a good long-standing attendance and proper behavior. For example, a boy could receive the prize of 10 shillings and a card testifying good character for his continuous attendance and good behavior at Field-Lane Ragged School for one year. These methods worked well to motivate the students, but it was discussed in March 1860 that the regulations for prizes needed to be reformed. Going back to the prize mentioned above, the next year if the same student continued to regularly attend the school and show good behavior than they would be rewarded 5 shillings and the next year was rewarded nothing. Many agreed this needed to be reversed and that the prizes rewarded should get bigger the longer the students attend and not the other way around. It was also discussed that they should be eligible to win

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[13] Anonymous, "The bitter frost."

[14] Anonymous, "Charitable Contributions,"; Anonymous, "The Homeless Poor,"; Anonymous, "The bitter frost."

prizes up until they were age 18 instead of 17. These changes would reassure the staff that their student would constantly be motivated to attend the school and be on their best behavior for a longer period. [15]

Starting in 1866, the Field-Lane Ragged School and Night Refuge added another branch to their institution. This new branch was titled, "Field-Lane Youths' Institute." This new addition was created to benefit the youth who had already completed their time at the school and now had found work during the day. Its goal was for these youths to have some form of sophisticated and intelligent entertainment once they got off work and would prevent them from going to places such as penny gaffs which were a lower-class theatre, low chanties, and dance-rooms. Instead, for the cost of a penny a week for membership fees, they could frequent the Field-Lane Youths' Institute where they could enjoy the commodities of a well-lit reading room and the free use of a restroom. For an extra charge, tea and coffee as well as rolls with butter would be supplied. In the winter, many gentlemen offered to hold lectures at the institute. This addition to the Field-Lane Ragged School was made to reassure that the work put into these youths as students did not fall apart once they had left and helped keep them stay on the right track. [16]

Ragged schools like the Field-Lane Ragged School in London had achieved many great things to help improve the lives of these poverty-stricken children and their families, but no matter all the good one does in the world there will always be individuals who criticized their efforts. As early as 1850, Lord Shaftsbury was combating attacks from agitators who criticized the ragged schools and called them "reformatory institutions." In a meeting held on May 2, 1850, Lord Shaftsbury claimed that these accusations held no substance and that the schools had been tried by a merciless standard of perfection. This of course was impossible recalling how difficult it was, especially when the schools were first beginning, to teach these children who had no kind of discipline or stability in their lives. [17]

However, the way Lord Shaftsbury saw it was "if they can save 10 out of 100, they ought to rejoice that they had been called to such a work." Many children could transfer to other, better established schools after attending Field-Lane Ragged School. The Ragged School Union at times, were updated on the lives of former students after they left the ragged schools and many were evidence of their great success. One young man who had transferred to another school in London after attending Field-Lane Ragged School told in a message that he was now properly employed in one of the colonies. Other triumphant stories from former students were received by the Ragged School Union about the jobs they had landed and how substantial the help from the

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[15] Anonymous, "FIELD-LANE RAGGED SCHOOL. A meeting of the..," *Times,* (London), March 29, 1860, The Times Digital Archives.
[16] Anonymous, "Field-Lane Ragged Schools and Refuges-," *Times* (London), Oct. 4, 1866, The Times Digital Archives.
[17] Anonymous, "FIELD-LANE RAGGED SCHOOL. Last evening the..," *Times* (London), May 2, 1850, The Times Digital Archives.

ragged schools was at improving their lives. [18]

Former students were not the only ones impressed by the work done by the ragged schools. Charles Dickens had visited what was presumed to be the Field-Lane Ragged School in 1843. After his visit, he wrote a letter to one of his friends named Angela Burdett-Coutts, who was at the time the richest heiresses in England. Dickens is pleased with the work that the school was doing, but was concerned with the school's physical condition and its lack of funding, which was why he wrote to Ms. Burdett-Coutts. In his letter, Dickens explains to Ms. Burdett-Coutts the poor condition the school is in and the struggles the teachers and students face as well as their dedication to prayer and the knowledge of God in hopes that he could persuade her to donate money from the school. Even Dickens supported the ragged schools, not only financially but in his writings as well. His visit to a ragged school was a direct influence in his book *A Christmas Carol*, where poverty and education was part of the books central theme. [19]

The cause of the end of ragged schools started in 1870, after the passing of the 1870 Education Act proposed by Mr. W.E. Forster. The 1870 Education Act purpose was to put elementary schools in all areas that had children to teach, whether rich or poor. These schools would provide compulsory elementary education to all classes, and it aimed to compel all children and their parents to make sure they frequented one of the elementary schools near them while between the ages of 5-13. Ragged schools still existed into the twentieth century, but after the 1870 Education Act, many started to disappear as new government schools were built. [20]

Even though ragged schools disappeared long ago, they have not been forgotten. One school still stands today honoring the ragged school legacy. The Barnardo's Copperfield Road Free School, founded by Thomas Bernardo in 1867 still exists, where he offered a free basic education to tens of thousands of children during the course of thirty-one years. Bernardo had originally moved from his home in Dublin to London to train as a doctor in preparation for missionary work in China. Once in London, however, Barnardo saw a city where poverty and overcrowding were problematic, disease was found everywhere, and the educational opportunities to the poor were absent. The school closed in 1908, at which time enough government schools had opened in the area and the need for Barnardo's ragged school diminished. The building that Barnardo's school was located was then used for numerous industrial purposed throughout the twentieth century until it was open as turned into

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[18] Ibid.

[19] "Letter from Charles Dickens on ragged schools, from the Daily News," *British Library,* accessed February 2017, http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/letter-from-charles-dickens-on-ragged-schools-from-the-daily-news; Ian Dooley, "Charles Dicken Describes a Ragged School to Angela Burdett-Coutts," *Cotsen Children's Library*, published on June 3, 2016, https://blogs.princeton.edu/cotsen/2016/06/the-ragged-school-a-letter-from-charles-dickens-to-angela-burdett-coutts/.

[20] Montague, *Sixty Years in Waifdom,* 306-7.

The Ragged School Museum in 1990. [21]

Before the introduction of ragged schools many children lived impoverished lives, relying on begging, lying, and stealing to earn money and food. Education was not easy for them to obtain. The parents of these children either could not or did care to pay for their education and the schools that were around were not keen on trying to teach to the ragged and filthy class of children. Thankfully, certain members of society started to realize the future consequences facing these children and their society if someone did not step in and help these children. John Pounds was the first to establish a ragged school in his workshop. Thanks to Pounds, many impoverished children in his area were able to learn skills in industries so that they could work and better support themselves. Afterwards, many Christian missionaries in London started opening ragged schools just for Sunday school education so that they could instill good Christian morals in hopes it would make these children less likely to grow up to be criminals. However, even though many believed that teaching these children about the Bible was important in refining their lives, more was needed so that they could one day support themselves.

Therefore, starting in the 1840s, many schools included teaching them the basics: reading, writing, mathematics, industrial skills, and more. These schools were placed in the poor areas where others schools were not located in the city and offered children an education free of charge. Many who opened these schools were people volunteering their time and money to offer these children the best education they could offer. As time went along, more and more schools were opened and expanded their charities no only to helping children, but even offering help to adults in a variety of ways. The Field-Lane Ragged School offered many with a basic education and skills in industry. The establishment also offered food, shelter, clothes, and job opportunities to many in the area. The Field-Lane Ragged School even found ways to motivate their students to keep attending school with good behavior by offering prizes and opened a Youths Institute so that these children stayed on the right track once they were done with school. The ragged schools helped elevate many individuals from their destitute lives and gave them a better chance at surviving in the new industrial world which not only helped the impoverished but the community as a whole. By providing a free education to destitute children and teaching them how to better support themselves, it would make it less likely for them to need to commit crime to survive and would create a more skilled and disciplined workforce for the newly industrialized world.

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[21] "School and Museum, "*The Ragged School Museum,* accessed April 26, 2016, http://www.raggedschoolmuseum.org.uk/school-museum/