

This is one of the first documented cases of child abuse in the United States.

Mary Ellen's Story

Mary Ellen's case took place in 1874. Her spirit remains with us because her case is generally regarded as the beginning of public concern for the plight of abused and neglected children.

Mary Ellen was a child whose father was dead and whose mother could not care for her because she was destitute and had to work full-time. The New York Commission of Charities and Correction placed Mary Ellen with Mary McCormack Connolly and her husband, who were to care for her and report each year on her progress.

Instead, Mrs. Connolly abused her. She beat Mary Ellen, locked her in a room, rarely allowed her outside, and did not provide adequate food or clothing.

Upset by the child's screaming, a neighbor told a mission worker about Mary Ellen. The mission worker could find no one to intervene; at the time, laws protecting children were not systematically enforced.

The mission worker finally appealed to Henry Bergh, the founder and president of the ASPCA, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. He took up Mary Ellen's cause and was able to persuade a judge to hear her case.

Mary Ellen was carried into the courtroom wrapped in a blanket. This is what the newspaper reported that she told the judge:

My father and mother are both dead. I don't know how old I am ... I call Mrs. Connolly mamma. I have never had but one pair of shoes, but I cannot recollect when that was ... My bed at night has only been a piece of carpet stretched on the floor underneath a window ... Mamma has been in the habit of whipping and beating me almost every day. She used to whip me with a twisted whip – a raw hide ... She struck me with the scissors and cut me; I have no recollection of ever having been kissed by any one – have never been kissed by mamma ... Whenever mamma went out I was locked up in the bedroom ... I do not want to go back to live with mamma because she beats me so.

Mary Ellen was removed from the people who had mistreated her. Her case stirred public attention, and complaints began to pour in to Henry Bergh. So many cases of child beating and cruelty to children came to light that citizens called a community meeting and formed an association "for the defense of outraged childhood." That association gave rise to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, which was formally incorporated the year after Mary Ellen's situation came to light.