

Researching Impoverished Ancestors in North America

Class 2: Cries for Reform: Quincy and Yates Reports

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Background

After the Revolutionary War, larger towns and cities began to notice an increase in poverty such as begging, vagrants, and poor on the street. Increased mobility after the war meant that people could more easily move seeking better opportunities. In addition, immigrants into seaport communities strained the systems that relied on individual or communal charity. Inadequately funded local systems became ineffective and raising taxes was not a popular option.

In 1819 a financial panic swept across the country. The growth in trade that followed the War of 1812 came to an abrupt halt. Unemployment grew, banks failed. Josiah Quincy was a member of the Massachusetts legislature between 1813 and 1828. During that time, he was outspoken against the conditions of the poor. In 1821 he sent surveys to all Massachusetts towns asking about how they cared for paupers. The results of the survey confirmed four principal methods of relief:

- Outdoor Relief: provides supplies, food, fuel, and/or cash to poor families in their own homes.
- Pauper Auction: provides for the poor by placing them in the homes of the lowest bidder within the town.
- Contract System: a town contract system where the poor are indentured, bound out, or contracted to different members of the community.
- Poorhouse or Almshouse

The report concludes that the patchwork system fosters mismanagement, waste, and abuse of power. Of concern to Quincy was the potential for fostering dependence and discouraging work. Auctions and binding out were seen as leading to abuses as the lowest bidder were often poor themselves. Quincy recommended almshouses as the least expensive and most efficient method of poor relief. And notes that many town returns decry alcohol abuse as a cause of poverty.

In 1822 the New York Legislature directed Secretary of State, John Yates to study poor relief. His report appeared in 1824. The methods of the Yates report were similar to the Quincy report (questionnaires to towns). It concluded that poorhouses or almshouses were the optimal method for poor relief.

These two reports marked a movement in funding away from local communities to larger jurisdictions such as county, state, or even federal responsibility for poor relief. And it coincided with an increase in charitable funding to fill the void left by the decline in town funding of poor relief. It also marked a movement toward institutional poor relief and away from outdoor relief. It began a period of recognition that different groups have different needs and circumstances such as children and the insane. And as part of the new moral tone of reform, work was emphasized. It would take zealous reformers several decades to realize that warehousing people was not the answer.

Immigration also affected the systems of poor relief. Immigration was steady in the early 19th century but as industrialization created job opportunities in America and war and famine affected millions in Europe, immigration saw a bump in mid-century. Many of these new immigrants were destitute and in need of temporary relief.

Public Poor Relief

Federal

Federal poor relief was categorical, that is, for specific, well-defined groups. Early federal relief programs included Revolutionary War pensions, yearly relief legislation for indigenous tribes, and establishment of hospitals for merchant seamen.

Revolutionary War pensions: In 1818 Congress passed a resolution granting pensions to veterans who were not disabled but were having financial difficulties. Service of nine months, or until the end of the war was required. This was a lifetime pension of half-pay, however, in 1820 a new act appeared. The 1818 act resulted in numerous applications, including possibly fraudulent ones, the 1820 act required certified inventories of pensioner's estate and income.

Relief for indigenous tribes: In 1800 Congress appropriated funds for rations, annuities, medical care, agricultural tools, and instructors for tribes; this support was renewed annually. By 1835, President Jackson in his State of the Union address noted that funds to "Indian poor" amounted to about \$30 per person annually.

Merchant Seamen: A merchant seaman spent much of his adult life at sea meaning that he had no opportunity to establish residency in a community. Established by Congress in 1798, the Marine Hospital Service, a precursor to the Public Health Service, was designed to relieve port cities of the expense of caring for indigent sick seamen who were not local residents. It was also intended to make service in the merchant marines more attractive by providing federal relief for seamen who could no longer work because of illness.

State and County Relief

There was a rapid growth in the number of almshouses after the Quincy and Yates reports. These new almshouses were full of early promise, but by 1850, bloom was off the rose. Most records for almshouses of this period will be in manuscript collections at local historical societies.

Private Poor Relief

The early 19th century saw a marked growth in private benevolent and charitable societies. Much of the growth was probably fueled by the Second Great Awakening of religious revival. The 2nd great awakening moved away from a belief in predestination toward individual free will and agency and individual salvation.

Several types of aid societies began in this period. Mutual aid societies were social insurance for specific groups and focused on providing services for the poor and sick as well as monetary assistance and banking services to members. Benevolent societies were almost exclusively female-managed. Society women used their connections to raise funds and support relief primarily for children and widows. And then there were the immigrant aid societies, which, just as their name suggests were to help newly arrived immigrants to find their way in a new country.

Private funding also provided support for institutional care. In fact, the first orphanages and institutions for the insane were privately funded.

Resources

Quincy and Yates Reports

Quincy Report viewed at https://www.primaryresearch.org/pr/dmdocuments/ootp_quincy_report.pdf.

See also "Quincy Report." 1821. Report of the Committee on the Pauper Laws of This Commonwealth. *Reprinted in The Almshouse Experience: The Historical Record*, ed. D.J. Rothman. New York: Arno Press and New York Times, 1971.

Yates, J. 1824. Report of the Secretary of State in 1824 on the Relief and Settlement of the Poor. Reprinted in *The Almshouse Experience: The Historical Record*, ed. D. J. Rothman. New York: Arno Press and New York Times, 1971.

Federal Programs

For military pension research, check either fold.3.com or Ancestry.com.

To find Merchant Marine records, use FamilySearch.org catalog and a keyword = "Marine hospital" Also check the National Archives.

Frank M. Loewenberg, "Federal Relief Programs in the 19th Century: A Reassessment," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*, 1992; Vol 19(3): 121-136. Available at:
<https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol19/iss3/8>

Almshouses and other Institutions

Background

Michael B. Katz, "Poorhouses and the Origins of the Public Old Age Home," *Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly*, 1984, vol 62(1): 110-140. Accessed June 2023 <https://www.milbank.org/wp-content/uploads/mq/volume-62/issue-01/62-1-Poorhouses-and-the-Origins-of-the-Public-Old-Age-Home.pdf>

Charles Lawrence, *History of the Philadelphia almshouses and hospitals from the beginning of the eighteenth to the ending of the nineteenth centuries* (Philadelphia, 1905). Accessed at HathiTrust <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008977180>

Resources

ArchiveGrid <https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/>

UMass Lowell Digital Collections, "Tewksbury Almshouse Intake Records, 1854-1884"
<https://tewksburyalms.omeka.net/>

FamilySearch.org

Check using the catalog and search by county, town or city.

For example, South Carolina, Charleston, Charleston leads to the Charleston Poorhouse records at
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/3559084>

Philadelphia Almshouse Records Admission records, ca. 1783-1835 -
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/992800?availability=Family%20History%20Library>

Philadelphia Almshouse Admission records, ca. 1834-1904, -
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/83804?availability=Family%20History%20Library>

Philadelphia Almshouse Daily Occurrence Docket and Day Books 1787-1917 -
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/590077?availability=Family%20History%20Library>

Boston society for the care of girls : asylum records, 1800-1866 -
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/189332?availability=Family%20History%20Library>

FamilySearch books

Fifty years of work among the poor of Philadelphia : historical sketch of the first half century of The Union Benevolent Association, 1831-1881



<https://www.familysearch.org/library/books/viewer/804758/?offset=18#page=1&viewer=picture&o=&n=0&q=>

A century of progress : a study of the development of public charities and corrections, 1790-1915

<https://www.familysearch.org/library/books/viewer/161789/?offset=34#page=1&viewer=picture&o=&n=0&q=>

Ancestry.com (\$)

New York, U.S., Orphans Placed in the New York Foundling Hospital and Children's Aid Society, 1855-1925 <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/61639/>

New York, U.S., Census of Inmates in Almshouses and Poorhouses, 1830-1920
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1083/>

New York, New York, U.S., Almshouse Ledgers, 1758-1952
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/62048/>

New York, U.S., Hebrew Orphan Asylum Records, 1860-1934
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1611/>

Web: Chester County, Pennsylvania, U.S., Poor House Admissions Index, 1800-1910
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/70834/>

Web: Chester County, Pennsylvania, U.S., Poor School Children, 1810-1841
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/70794/>

Outdoor Relief

Continue to check the town and other records for your ancestors location at FamilySearch.org

For digitized books see:

- Hathitrust.org
- Archive.org
- FamilySearch.org books

Search town or county name. Add one or more of following terms, poor, selectmen, overseers, almshouse, poorhouse. Experiment with search strings.

Check local historical societies who may have digital collections such as:

Massachusetts Historical Society, "Boston Overseers of the Poor Records,"

<https://www.masshist.org/collection-guides/view/fa0144>

Charitable and Benevolent Societies

To find the names of charitable and benevolent societies operating in your ancestors community in the early 19th century, try newspapers such as the “Early American Newspaper Series,” at American Ancestry External Databases or Newspapers.com

Ancestry.com (\$)

New York, U.S., Emigrant Savings Bank Records, 1850-1883

<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8760/>

U.S, Boston Arrivals of Jewish Immigrants from HIAS Records, 1882-1929

<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1361/>