

The Eighteenth-Century Records
of the Boston
Overseers of the Poor



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ISBN 978-0-9620737-4-8
Printed from the Income of the Sarah Louise Edes Fund

The Almshouse Admissions

THESE TRANSCRIPTIONS OF THE ALMSHOUSE ADMISSIONS AND DISCHARGES constitute the greater part of the surviving eighteenth-century manuscripts of the records of the Boston Overseers. They are also important for the way they identify the thousands of people who passed through the institutional authority of the Overseers of the Poor. The Almshouse was a rest home for the elderly, a refuge for the “deserving poor,” individually or as families who might be homeless, a “lying in” hospital for single pregnant women, an orphanage, and a haven for the infirm and mentally ill.

The manuscripts reflect the work of a variety of clerks, whose handwriting and editorial habits resulted in shifting standards of recorded information and style presentation. Some of the entries were collected and listed after the fact and some were ordered by column and others by line entry. There are clear omissions of births, deaths, runaways and discharges, and these data are underreported in the records. But the admissions appear to be complete or nearly complete for the period, judging from the sequential dates and given the Almshouse’s residential capacity. The transcriptions have been organized into four chronological sections to reflect the historical context of Almshouse life. The subdivision of the record in this way will allow for the matching of Almshouse admissions to events and change.

Almshouse Admissions 1758–1774: The period from the French and Indian War to the Coercive Acts and the military occupation.

Almshouse Admissions 1775–1788: The War for Independence, and the debate over the Constitution dominated this period.

Almshouse Admissions 1788–1795: From the creation of the national government to the second Federalist administration.

Almshouse Admissions 1795–1800: The rise of the Republican Party and the election of Thomas Jefferson as President in 1800 are important national developments, and improved economic conditions, population growth and rising transiency in Boston put pressure on the Overseers and the Almshouse facilities as the number of poor appears to increase.

These transcriptions are from the registers located in Box 9, folders 1, 2, 3, 4 and Box 11, folder 1 in Overseers Records at MHS. Please consult the “Guide” to Editorial Apparatus, as well as the descriptions of the Admissions Registers, pp. 105–107. The notes are recorded as endnotes at the end of each of the four Admissions sections.